

Teaching Elements of Culture and Civilisation in the Foreign English Classroom

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Abstract

My paper will talk about the importance of incorporating cultural elements in teaching a foreign language. I will demonstrate that effective communication requires communicative competence as well as cultural competence. Next, I will talk about different approaches to teaching culture over the years and then I will enlarge upon some techniques and activities used for teaching culture. Finally, I will give some examples of practical activities that teachers can use to foster cultural awareness and communicative insight into the target civilization. The conclusion drawn will be that cultural competence is indisputably an integral part of foreign language learning.

Keywords

transcultural, foreign language teaching, cultural islands, assimilators

Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted... Culture... is the foundation of communication. [5, p. 14]

A greater understanding of other cultures is one of the expressed goals of any foreign language program. For scholars and laymen alike, cultural competence, i.e., the knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of another country, is indisputably an integral part of foreign language learning, and many teachers have seen it as their goal to incorporate the teaching of culture into the foreign language curriculum. Language and culture are in close relationship: the development of language skills gives access to another culture and culture shapes the development and use of language.

Few parents, students or teachers would argue that culture is unimportant, but often we assume that because language instruction is taking place, the cultural insight is bound to be transmitted, more or less automatically. It is certainly true

that ‘language is the first and most important representation of culture’ [3, p. 12], the reflection of how speakers of that language view the world. At the same time, it is the culture within which the language is spoken that determines what meanings are being exchanged. Without cultural insight and skills, even fluent speakers can seriously misinterpret the messages they hear or read, and the messages they intend to communicate can be misunderstood. In fact, the more fluently a speaker appears to deal with the language, the higher may be the expectations for appropriate cultural understanding and behavior on the part of the native speaker. Thus graduates of a long-sequence FLES program, who frequently have developed strong language skills, are likely to encounter very high expectations of cultural proficiency.

The increasingly complex, global, and interdependent world of the twenty-first century will require citizens who can communicate effectively in at least one other language and who have related cultural insights, skills, and understanding. Foreign language school programs have the potential for preparing citizens to be functionally bicultural as well as bilingual, but in order to realize this potential, culture must be fully integrated and systematically planned for as a major focal point of the curriculum.

In the history of culture teaching different approaches can be noticed. The approaches can be classified in different ways. In very broad terms, they can be divided into two: those which focus only (or mostly) on the culture of the country whose language is studied (the mono-cultural approach) and those which are based on comparing learners’ own and the other culture (the comparative approach).

The so-called mono-cultural approach is considered inadequate nowadays because it does not consider learners’ understanding of their own culture. The comparative approach, on the other hand, emphasizes that the foreign culture should be related to the learners’ own. Instead of providing learners with a one-way flow of cultural information, they should be encouraged to reflect on their own and foreign country. The comparative approach draws on the learner’s own knowledge, beliefs and values which form a basis for successful communication with members of the other cultures.

Comparison gives learners a new perspective of their own language and culture and questions their ‘taken-for-granted nature’ [2, p. 6]. Through comparisons, learners discover both similarities and differences of their own and other countries. This, in turn, can lead to increased knowledge, understanding and acceptance.

Risager [4, pp. 243-252] describes four approaches to the teaching of culture, two of which – the intercultural and the multicultural – include a considerable element of comparison.

Though the focus is on the target language, the intercultural approach deals with the relations between the learner's own country and the country/countries where the language is spoken. The aim is to develop the learners' intercultural and communicative competences which would enable them to function as mediators between the two cultures. The approach has become increasingly recognized since the 1980s. However, Risager [4, p. 246] considers it inadequate as it is 'blind to the actual multicultural character of almost all existing countries or states' and suggests that teachers should use the multicultural approach. This approach includes a focus on the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the target country/countries as well as on the learners' own. As in the intercultural approach, comparison is important. The third approach suggested by Risager is the transcultural approach. The basic idea behind this is that in the modern world cultures are interwoven due to extensive tourism, migration, world-wide communication systems, economic interdependence and globalization. The transcultural approach, therefore, deals with the foreign language as an international language. Its main aim is to teach learners to use it for international communication. The mono-cultural approach in Risager's list is represented by what he calls the foreign-cultural approach. It is based on the concept of a single culture and focuses on the culture of the country where the language is spoken. It does not deal with the learners' own country and the relations between the two. The teaching aim is to develop the so-called native speaker communicative and cultural competence. The approach was dominant until the 1980s and is criticized nowadays because of the lack of relationships between cultures.

In addition to the above discussed approaches, there are a number of various approaches that are centered around various aspects of a given culture and concentrate on developing certain skills in learners. The following approaches concentrate on both giving knowledge and understanding of the country's culture and encourage students to compare it with their own.

The theme-based or thematic approach to the teaching of culture is based around certain themes, for example, symbolism, value, ceremony, love, humour, honour, beauty, intellectuality, the art of living, common sense, family, religion, patriotism and education which are seen as typical of the culture.

Though mono-cultural by nature, it tries to show the relationships and values in a given culture and, therefore, helps learners to understand it better. However, it is sometimes thought that the theme-based approach provides learners with a segmented view of the target culture. It might be difficult for them to see individual people and understand social processes and values from this perspective and could lead to stereotyping.

The topic-based approach concentrates on more general and cross-sectional topics which involve various cultural issues. It deals with key elements of current British life, such as class, education, health, not in isolation, but within a series of unifying contexts. Most textbooks are based around certain topics and there is no need for any fixed list or fixed order how the topics should be taught.

No matter what approach is used, it is important that the teaching of culture ‘never loses sight of the individual’ [6, p. 135]. Seelye (ibid.) goes on to say that the focus should be on ‘how societal values, institutions, language, and the land affect the thought and lifestyle of someone living in the culture we are studying’. Second, comparison of one’s own and the other culture is important

There is a great variety of techniques and activities developed for integrating culture into language teaching. Different scholars group them according to different principles (if any). The following list of techniques and activities is compiled from various sources [9, 10] and are mostly meant to be used in class.

Cultural Islands

From the first day of class teachers should have prepared a cultural island in their classrooms. Posters, pictures, maps, signs, and realia of many kinds are essential in helping students develop a mental image. Assigning students foreign names from the first day can heighten student interest. Short presentations on a topic of interest with appropriate pictures or slides add to this mental image. Start students off by making them aware of the influence of various foreign cultures in this country. Introduce students to the borrowed words in their native language or the place-names of our country. This helps students to realize they already know many words in the target language (i.e. computer, job, trend). Some of the foods they eat are another example of the influence of foreign cultures (i.e. hot dog, hamburger, sandwich). A good introductory activity is to send students on cultural scavenger hunts to supermarkets and department stores and have them make lists of imported goods.

Culture Capsules (developed by Taylor & Sorenson, 1961)

Culture capsules are generally prepared out of class by a student but presented during class time in 5 or 10 minutes. The concept was developed by Taylor & Sorenson (1961). A Culture capsule consists of a paragraph or so of explanation of one minimal difference between a Romanian and an American's custom along with several illustrative photos and relevant realia. Miller (1974) has developed well-defined culture capsules into classroom activities.

Culture capsules are one of the best-established and best-known methods for teaching culture. They have been tried mostly in classes for foreign languages other than English. Essentially a culture capsule is a brief description of some aspect of the target language culture (e.g., what is customarily eaten for meals and when those meals are eaten, marriage customs, etc.) followed by, or incorporated with contrasting information from the students' native language culture. The contrasting information can be provided by the teacher, but it is usually more effective to have the students themselves point out the contrasts.

Culture Clusters (developed by Meade & Morain, 1973)

A culture cluster is simply a group of three or more illustrated culture capsules on related themes/topics (about the target life) + one 30 minute classroom simulation/skit that integrates the information contained in the capsules (the teacher acts as narrator to guide the students). For example, a culture cluster about grades and their significance to university students could contain the capsule about how a grade point average is figured plus another about what kind of decisions (such as being accepted in graduate study, receiving scholarships, getting a better job, etc.) are affected by a person's grade point average.

Culture capsules and clusters are good methods for giving students knowledge and some intellectual knowledge about the cultural aspects being explained, but they generally do not cause much emotional empathy.

Culture Assimilators (Developed by Fiedler et al., 1971)

The culture assimilator provides the student with 75 to 100 episodes of target cultural behavior. Culture assimilators consist of short (usually written) descriptions of an incident or situation where interaction takes place between at least one person from the target culture and persons from other cultures (usually

the native culture of the students being taught). The description is followed by four possible choices about the meaning of the behavior, action, or words of the participants in the interaction with emphasis on the behavior, actions, or words of the target language individual(s).

Students read the description in the assimilator and then choose which of the four options they feel is the correct interpretation of the interaction. Once all students have made their individual choices, the teacher leads a discussion about why particular options are correct or incorrect in interpretation. Written copies of the discussion issues can be handed out to students although they do not have to be. It is imperative that the teacher plan what issues the discussion of each option should cover.

Critical Incidents/Problem Solving

Critical incidents are another method for teaching culture. Some people confuse them with culture assimilators, but there are a couple of differences between the two methods. Critical incidents are descriptions of incidents or situations which demand that a participant in the interaction make some kind of decision. Most of the situations could happen to any individual; they do not require that there be intercultural interaction as there is with culture assimilators.

Generally, the procedure with a critical incident is to have students read the incident independently and make individual decisions about what they would do. Then the students are grouped into small groups to discuss their decisions and why they made them the way they did. Then all the groups discuss their decisions and the reasons behind them. Finally, students have to be given the opportunity to see how their decision and reasoning compare and contrast with the decisions and reasoning of native members of the target culture. If the ESL class is occurring in an English-speaking environment, students can be assigned to go out and survey native English speakers about how and why they would solve the problem or make the decision required by the critical incident. Reports on the reasoning and the differences can be made in a following class session. If the class takes place in an EFL environment, the native speaker information would have to be gathered by the teacher from reading or from contact with expatriates. Sometimes advice columns like the "Dear Abby" or "Ann Landers" columns, can provide teachers both with critical incidents or problems to be solved and with information about what native speakers would do and why.

Mini-Dramas (Gorden's prototype minidrama, 1970)

Mini-dramas consist of three to five brief episodes in which misunderstandings are portrayed, in which there are examples of miscommunication. Additional information is made available with each episode, but the precise cause of the misunderstanding does not become apparent until the last scene. Each episode is followed by an open-ended question discussion led by the teacher. The episodes are generally written to foster sympathy for the non-native of the culture the “wrong” that is done to him or her by a member of the target culture. At the end of the mini-drama, some “knowing” figure explains what is really happening and why the target culture member was really not doing wrong.

Cultoons

Cultoons are like visual culture assimilators. Students are given a series of (usually) four pictures depicting points of surprise or possible misunderstanding for persons coming into the target culture. The situations are also described verbally by the teacher or by the students who read the accompanying written descriptions. Students may be asked if they think the reactions of the characters in the cultoons seem appropriate or not. After the misunderstandings or surprises are clearly in mind, the students read explanations of what was happening and why there was misunderstanding.

Media/Visuals

Magazine pictures, slide presentations, and/or videos are among the kinds of media/visual presentations which can be used to teach culture. Usually with this method, the teacher presents a series of pictures or slides or a video with explanation of what is going on and what it means in terms of the target culture. Many aspects of culture, such as appropriate dress for activities, kinds of activities students participate in or the weekend, public transportation, etc., can be effectively presented with such visuals. Media/visuals are usually very good at giving information and intellectual understanding, but, like several other methods of teaching culture, they do not cause students to understand the emotion which is involved with so many cultural issues.

Kinesics and Body Language

Culture is a network of verbal and non-verbal communication. If our goal as foreign language teachers is to teach communication, we must not neglect the most obvious form of non-verbal communication which is gesture. Gesture, although learned, is largely an unconscious cultural phenomenon. Gesture conveys the “feel” of the language to the student and when accompanied by verbal communication, injects greater authenticity into the classroom and makes language study more interesting. Gerald Green in his book “Gesture Inventory for Teaching Spanish” suggests that teachers use foreign culture gestures when presenting dialogues, cueing students’ responses, and assisting students to recall dialogue lines. At the beginning of the year, teachers can also show foreign films to students just to have them focus on body movements.

Cultural Consciousness-Raising

Attitude is another factor in language learning that leads to cross cultural understanding. Helen Wilkes believes that the totality of language learning is comprised of three integrated components: linguistic, cultural, and attitudinal. As foreign language teachers, we all teach the basic sounds, vocabulary, and syntax of the target language.

Most foreign language teachers would agree that positively sensitizing students to cultural phenomena is urgent and crucial. Studies indicate that attitudinal factors are clear predictors of success in second language learning. However, effecting attitudinal changes requires planned programs which integrate cultural and linguistic units as a means to cross-cultural understanding. The following method for effecting attitudinal changes is adapted from Helen Wilkes’ article “A Simple Device for Cultural Consciousness Raising in the Teenaged Student of French.” The organization of the notebook can be a useful tool in any discipline, but it can be of special importance in the foreign language classroom as a cultural consciousness raising tool. Helen Wilkes suggests that from the very first day of school the foreign language teacher should have students begin organizing their notebook. The notebook should be divided into four sections: Vocabulary, Maps, Grammar, Symbols. Each section of the notebook will have an illustrated title page.

Celebrating Festivals

Celebrating foreign festivals is a favorite activity of many students. Even though this activity takes a lot of planning, it works well as a culminating activity. This kind of activity enables student to actively participate in the cultural heritage of the people they are studying.

Needless to say, I have mentioned only a few of the most common techniques and activities used for teaching aspects of culture and civilization and I would like to end the present paper by presenting some useful tips that can help to make the teaching of culture a better experience for both you and your students.

- Provide a wide array of cultural information in different formats, including DVDs, music, readings, online programs, guest speakers, literature and newspapers. This helps ESL students learn about a culture from a variety of viewpoints and provides a broader perspective of this culture.
- Ask your students to point out the things they notice about cultural information they learn in class, whether from a written description, picture, or video. Have them mention the differences they observe between their own cultures and the culture that they are studying, using the instructional material as a reference point.
- Assign research papers or projects on topics pertaining to the culture being studied and tell the students to choose a subject within the culture that interests them. Have each student present what he learned to a group of students or to the class, speaking in English, and including a questions and answer session.
- Place students in pairs and ask them to explain to one another their understandings of a particular reading or assignment. This activity is known as reformulation and can help ESL students make sense of what they have learned about the English-speaking culture in question.
- Quiz your students, testing them on the cultural information they've recently learned or help them learn new information. For example, use true or false questions about Australia, if this is where the ESL class is being taught, and have the students guess at the correct answers, if they do not already know them.
- Add fun activities to your culture curriculum such as games, short plays, debates, songs and field trips to help keep students' attention and engage their interest.

In conclusion there is no question that the successful integration of culture and language teaching can contribute significantly to general humanistic knowledge, that language ability and cultural sensitivity can play a vital role in the security, defense, and economic well-being of any country, and that global understanding ought to be a mandatory component of basic education.

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