

SZEMLE: IDEGEN NYELVŰ KÖZLEMÉNYEK**DARASELIA, MAYA – YOJUA, TAMAR–TSONTIASHVILI, ZAZA****Cultural Issues in Language Teaching Curricula**

The article deals with one of the most important aspects in L2 teaching methodology: the importance of cultural issues in language teaching curricula. Most attempts to set out the aims of Foreign Language Teaching include among the goals of a cultural component. ‘How should I include culture into teaching a language?’ - a language teacher asks. There is one main answer, and all the minor answers derive from that: use authentic materials. It is difficult to escape teaching culture if you use authentic documents. As soon as language learners come across something they do not understand – not linguistically, but from behavior viewpoint – the teacher has to explain the cultural background to provide deep understanding. By teaching about cultures we do not mean “lecturing” in a dull way about some events, places and people our students probably do not care about. We mean to apply active, interesting activities centered on being correctly understood.

1. The concept of culture as one of the goals of the modern foreign language teaching methodology

Many official educational documents have already incorporated cultural issues as part of language teaching curricula. Thus, for instance, “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment” states:

In recent years the concept of plurilingualism has grown in importance in the Council of Europe’s approach to language learning. Plurilingualism differs from multilingualism, which is the knowledge of number of languages, or the co-existence of different languages in a given society. Multilingualism may be attained by simply diversifying the languages on offer in a particular school or educational system, or by encouraging pupils to learn more than one foreign language, or reducing the dominant position of English in international communication. Beyond this, the plurilingual approach emphasizes the fact that as an individual person’s **experience of language in its cultural contexts** expands, from the language of the home to that of society at large and then to the languages of other peoples (whether learnt at school or college, or by direct experience), he or she does not

keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact. Among obligatory competences of language learning is sociolinguistic competence. It refers “to the sociocultural conditions of language use. Through its sensitivity to social conventions (rules of politeness, norms governing relations between generations, sexes, classes and social groups, linguistic codification of certain fundamental rituals in the functioning of community), the sociolinguistic component strictly affects all language communication between representatives of different cultures, even though participants may often be unaware of its influence” Common European Framework, (2001:4-13)

Most attempts to set out the aims of Foreign Language Teaching include among the goals, a cultural component. But what does the concept of culture point to? Barbara J. King (*King*, 2001: 441-443) writes: “Many cultural anthropologists ... now urge abandonment of the culture concept because they see it as hopelessly essentialized and politicized when applied to human groups. That is, they reject the idea that discrete human groups have a distinct, bounded set of identifiable ideas, beliefs, or practices, and they worry that claims for such sets of bounded ideas, beliefs, or practices are too often made by suspect nationalist movements”.

2. Cultural Insight in Language Courses

At the very least, culture is a difficult notion to grasp - and yet many language teachers find themselves constrained to include a cultural component without ever having been offered the opportunity to thoroughly analyze what it is they are supposed to be doing. This can lead to trivialization, to exoticism, or to seeking refuge in Great Books and Great Art. According to Mason (*Mason*, 2001), language teachers do not necessarily have any special insight into the cultures which the languages they teach use. Most of us, he says, have not majored in cultural anthropology. We can only agree with him that much of what passes for cultural insight in language courses is anecdotal, outdated and superficial. Often enough, cultural prejudices are simply reinforced. French teenagers are often given the impression that the USA is founded on Disney and the KKK - what do American adolescents learn about French culture?

How, then, a language teacher asks, should I include culture into teaching a language? There is one main answer, and all the minor answers derive from that:

use authentic materials. It is difficult to escape teaching the culture if you use authentic documents. As soon as language learners come across something they do not understand – not linguistically, but from behavior viewpoint – the teacher has to explain the cultural background to provide deep understanding.

Mason's (Mason, 2001: Messages to FL Teach) recommendation is "if I were a teacher [of French] in America, and I wanted to find a way into this question, I might start by looking at the contributions that France has made to American culture, and by the traces that the French have left in the United States and, of course, on your great neighbour to the North. One might, for example, do some research on the Statue of Liberty; who made it, why they made it, its grounding in an artistic tradition and so on. The possibilities here are vast. Or one could look at the contribution that Louisiana has made to the American musical tradition, and the Creole input into that, and to see whether one can follow elements of that tradition back across the Atlantic to France (look to the accordion)". And he gives a very interesting reason for such an approach: marking the difference, without taking the common ground into account, only reinforces prejudice and stereotype.

Teach about culture in a non-judgmental way (bullfighting in Spain, fox hunting in England, etc.). For this purpose a text telling about the history of bullfighting and a text similar mass performance in other countries is better than just its description which will only trigger judgment of cruelty.

Teaching about culture is basically motivating, but what if not? Korean adults who want to be able to use English for business purposes may not be interested in British or American culture.

Among other problems linked with teaching language & culture are:

- As there are so many historic events, geographic places, holidays and traditions, what are the criteria of their selection to make up an optimal culture-linked program?
- Many events are viewed differently, so which view(s) should we give? E.g., the glorious war between the North and the South is viewed by some people as a horrible massacre
- Age limitations: some topics are too difficult to perceive until one is off age
- Cultural practices can change quickly
- Language teachers and course book authors, then, should be trained in such sophisticated matters

Some specialists of language teaching put up the following arguments against teaching culture:

- “Culture” is too vague and wide
- There is cultural variation
- Teaching culture will not, unfortunately, prevent racism, ethnocentrism, or all the other naughty 'isms' you can think of. This is because many cultural practices are at the least questionable; polygamy, dog-walking without a scooper, using the klaxon in town-centres to express annoyance, impatience or high-spirits ... one could go on
- Attitudes, typical behaviours and mentality are things too difficult to define
- You can't “teach” it, language learners have to work it out for themselves (that's why student projects are so useful)

3. Culture – based Topics

If we want to teach a language in a culturally-sensitive way, the culture-based topics to be included in language teaching should involve:

- Everyday living, e.g.: food and drink,; public holidays; working hours and practices; leisure activities (hobbies, sports, reading habits, media)
- Living conditions, e.g.: living standards (with regional, class and ethnic variations); housing conditions; welfare arrangements
- Interpersonal relations (including relations of power and solidarity), e.g., with respect to: class structure of society and relations between classes; relations between sexes (gender, intimacy); family structures and relations; relations between generations; relations in work situations; relations between public and police, officials, etc.; race and community relations relations among political and regional groupings
- Values, beliefs and attitudes in relation to such factors as:; social class; occupational groups (academic, management, public service, skilled and manual workforces; wealth (income and inherited); regional cultures; security; institutions; tradition and social change history, especially iconic historical personages and events; minorities (ethnic, religious); national identity; foreign countries, states, peoples; politics; arts (music, visual arts, literature, drama, popular music and song); religion; humor
- Body language (posture, eye-contact, mimics, gestures)
- Knowledge of the conventions governing such behavior from part of the user/learner's sociocultural competence
- Social conventions, e.g. with regard to giving and receiving hospitality, such

- as: punctuality; presents; dress; refreshments, drinks, meals; behavioural and conversational conventions and taboos; length of stay; leave-taking
- Ritual behaviour in such areas as:; religious observances and rites; birth, marriage, death; audience and spectator behavior at public performances and ceremonies; celebrations, festivals, dances, discos, etc. (Common, 2001:102-103)

According to Mason (Mason 2001), these topics should/may include:

- heroes and famous people – it is useful to read/speak about them not only because it provides background knowledge, but also because you step by step learn to understand what is there so special about them that makes them popular in the given culture;
 - history, geography
 - literature, art
 - gestures and their meaning
 - holidays and traditions
 - food and dress

Mason's (*Mason 2001*) comment about the "insides" of the topic (not just about heroes, but also why these people are viewed as heroes, what values made them perceived as heroes) is essential. Generally, issues of values, attitudes and norms of politeness are more important than factual knowledge like history and geography which is too vast to be included in any course and can be done only in a fragmentary way.

When viewing the above issues, it is essential to do cross-cultural comparisons. For example, as Mason (*Mason,2001: Messages to FL Teach*) mentions, there are tremendous differences in:

- the sports that we play and the way we play them
- the families that we form and the ways we form them
- the various ways in which we court our spouses
- the friends we make and the way we make them
- the tools we make and how we use them
- the languages we invent and the way we speak them
- the food we eat and how we eat it
- the religions we form and how we practice them
- the laws and customs we make and how we observe them.

4. Language Skill Levels and Cultural Competences

Such a long list of topics, naturally, cannot be covered in a short period of time. Selection of topics, width and depth of their coverage depend on language learners' age and language level. While national curricula of teaching a particular language may mention the list of topics taught at each grade at school, "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages" (*Common*, 2001: 122) mentions at which language skill level students have to possess which cultural competences:

A1: Can establish basic social contact by using the simplest everyday polite forms of: greetings and farewells, introductions, saying please, thank you, sorry, etc.

A2: Can handle very short social exchanges, using everyday polite forms of greetings and address. Can make and respond to invitations, suggestions, apologies, etc.

Can perform and respond to basic language functions, such as information exchange and requests and express opinions and attitudes in a simple way.

Can socialize simply but effectively using the simplest common expressions and following basic routines.

B1: Can perform and respond to a wide range of language functions, using their most common exponents in a neutral register.

Is aware of the salient politeness conventions and acts appropriately.

Is aware of, and looks out for signs of the most significant differences between the customs, usages, attitudes, values and beliefs prevalent in the community concerned and those of his or her own.

B2: Can with some effort keep up with and contribute to group discussions even when speech is fast and colloquial.

Can sustain relationships with native speakers without unintentionally amusing or irritating them or requiring them to behave other than they would with a native speaker.

Can express him or herself appropriately in situations and avoid crass errors of formulation.

C1: Can recognize a wide range of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms, appreciating register shifts; may, however, need to confirm occasional details, especially if the accent is unfamiliar.

Can follow films employing a considerable degree of slang and idiomatic usage.

Can use language flexibly and effectively for social purposes, including emotio-

nal, allusive and joking usage.

C2: Has a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms with awareness of connotative levels of meaning.

Appreciates fully the sociolinguistic and sociocultural implications of language used by native speakers and can react accordingly.

Can mediate effectively between speakers of the target language and that of his/her community of origin taking account of sociocultural and sociolinguistic differences.

5. Intercultural Awareness

According to “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages” (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2001), intercultural awareness deals with the below issues:

Knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities and distinctive differences) between the “world of origin” and the “world of the target community” produce an intercultural awareness. It is, of course, important to note that intercultural awareness includes an awareness of regional and social diversity in both worlds. It is also enriched by awareness of a wider range of cultures than those carried by the learner’s L1 and L2. This wider awareness helps to place both in context. In addition to objective knowledge, intercultural awareness covers awareness from the perspective of the other, often in the form of national stereotypes.

Sociolinguistic competence deals with linguistic markers of social relations, such as:

- use and choice of greetings
- introductions
- leave-taking
- use and choice of address forms (formal/informal; polite/intentionally rude)

It also includes politeness conventions, such as:

- “positive” politeness (showing interest, sharing emotions, etc.)
- “negative” politeness (avoiding direct answers, expressing regret)
- deliberate impoliteness (expressing dislike, anger, asserting superiority)

The subject we teach is called English (or any other second or foreign language). Language teachers’ education in most cases does not involve any (or involves too few) scientific courses dealing with culture. So language teacher’s qualification

is really too low to “teach culture”. What – in our opinion – is even more important is the fact that “teaching a second/foreign culture” (probably) without a person’s will is against any legislation, against human rights. A person who learns a second/foreign language as a school/university subject just does so because it is a subject in the curriculum or because she/he would like to communicate in that language. As for assimilation / integration into another culture, most learners never conceive of such purposes. Even when language teaching starts early (at the age of 5 or 6), the child is already a carrier of her/his own culture and we have no right to impose another culture on the child. To inform him/her of another culture in order to make the teaching interesting, in order to achieve high quality of comprehension in the process of intercultural communication – yes, but to “teach another culture” to change the person’s native culture – no!

We believe that the phrase “to teach culture” that appears in most publications we have viewed is just a professional jargon, for the purpose of brevity and – God save us – for the purpose of cultural harassment, if it is possible to say so. In most cases the phrase really means introducing politeness rules and explanation of connotation, dealing with the corresponding country’s history, famous people, traditions, etc., i.e. nothing harmful.

However, there are teachers (especially, native speakers of that language) and scientists who think that bringing their (as they believe, more “cultural”, more sophisticated) language to other countries is synonymous to changing the local culture (raising it to a higher level). These people think they are linguistic and cultural missionaries.

Sometimes “teaching culture” this just happens in a thoughtless (and harmless enough) way, because teachers (naturally) loving the language they teach are so enthusiastic that it seems that they view the corresponding culture as something perfect, and, correspondingly, better than theirs.

It is essential that language teachers, before they “teach culture”, should be explained how to do so in a way benefiting understanding of both cultures, native and that of the second/foreign language under study, how not to hurt anybody’s feelings and thus, how to promote a better understanding between nations.

Skutnabb-Kanngas (*Skutnabb-Kanngas* 2000) writes about danger of linguistic genocide (!) through globalization and language teaching policy. She views facts of not only less developed African countries, but also of quite developed European countries such as Sweden, whose culture is endangered because of the role that the English language has occupied in their society. She tells us about a very

serious generation gap of grandparents and grandchildren who do not understand each other linguistically. Parents, wanting the benefit for their children (getting a good job or any job at all), send them to a school where education is carried out in English. As a result, all their children can do in a native tongue is just “hello-how-are-you-thank-you-type” everyday conversation. They think in English, they behave “in American”.

Language has always been essential for self-determination. You are, first of all, part of culture in the language of which you speak as your first language. Language is very sensitive towards mentality. If mentality is sexist, ageist, racist, nationalistic, so is the language people speak. Making English (or any other “big” language) the language children in another country think in, we, willy-nilly, use a more psychological form of ethnical destruction, of ethnical conquering, than is invading the country and conquering it by force. But it is a way of conquering. And, we believe, language teachers should have nothing to do with it.

By teaching about cultures we do not mean “lecturing” in a dull way about some events, places and people our students probably do not care about. We mean to apply active, interesting activities centered on being correctly understood.

Thus, in our opinion, we should teach about cultures, teach to notice culturally specific meanings, teach to be polite and tolerant.

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