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## *Culture in the foreign language classroom*

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In this article, the important role culture has in the foreign language classroom is explained by means of a reflection on the way teachers deal with culture and how it can be used as a tool to teach grammar and show cultural differences. Also the reflection shows how educators and students can avoid stereotypes and become real cultural apprentices making of everyday an opportunity not only to learn structures but also a way to learn about places and people.

For many years the role of foreign language learning has had different approaches depending on the way teachers, language researchers, and linguists, among others, perceive it. For example, some people think that learning a language is a way to acquire a set of rules, to do business, or to learn survival expressions for travel. However, regardless of the need for a foreign language, educators must bear in mind that they are not only teaching a language but they are also teaching a culture, and as a consequence language teaching is a form of education (Brumfit, 1979), in this case cultural education.

When teaching grammar as culture its traditional role of a set of rules changes and becomes more functional. Students are more aware about the target culture and of their own. They are able to convey meanings, to know what people imply with certain behavior and to discover the nature of a country. As a result students go beyond the classroom to discern the implications of language as a way of viewing life.

According to Brown (1980: 139) the acquisition of a second language is often the acquisition of a second culture. This is evident when every day, just by listening to some expressions; students can identify implicitly how other people react to different situations. It means that culture will not necessarily be a fifth skill but a concept that

is attached to the four skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking). As a result, every time students do any exercise they can compare and contrast to their own culture to see what is accepted or not in the new one. Tang (2001), states that language is culture by itself. The idea is right in the sense that the foreign language shows aspects of the people who use it; for example by doing a simple lesson about buying clothes students observe weather vocabulary as well as how weather conditions affect the lifestyle of any community. However, many teachers are not always aware of this situation and do not make the most of it. Brown and Tang show how language is linked to culture and how easy it is to understand that language functions in a cultural context, a fact that educators should not forget when planning a class.

Culture is something inherent to the language. In fact, language changes according to the different cultures. In this sense what teachers need to know is that language implies different meanings to different people in different places. Thus, language varies from place to place, from user to user. For example in the south of the United States the word “Y’all” and in the north “Youse Guys”, the word “pail” compared to “bucket”; the word “soda” and “pop” or even “coke” to any kind of soda; or in Spanish the word “gaseosa” or “refresco” for soda. For some teachers this concept could be quite obvious, but how much time are they devoting “explaining” these cultural differences? It is known that during the past years teachers have placed a lot of attention on the communicative competence but now it is time they move to the cultural competence: “ there are some deeply ingrained beliefs as to the nature of language learning and teaching – beliefs that determine methodology as well as content of the foreign language curriculum - which have gradually and insidiously, contrived to undermine the teaching of culture” (Thanasoulas, 2001:5). In other words the concept of language as mere grammar explanations has changed to include variations in cultural context. Teachers now move from a communicative competence to a cultural competence.

As a result language cannot exist without culture and culture cannot exist without language. To be part of the culture means to share the propositional knowledge and rules of inference necessary to understand whether certain propositions are true (given certain premises) (Duranti, 1997: 28-29, cited in Thanasoulas, 2001: 8). This shows how language is



clearly immersed in a set of cultural variables and in order to be successful with any language we need to know how those variables affect language or how language affects culture. As a consequence not because both people from Spain and Mexico speak Spanish or because people from California and Virginia speak English could it be said that the language is used the same way.

Nonetheless, if someone asks for a definition of culture it would not be possible to give just one answer. Based on the examples given above, culture can be defined as what a society does and thinks (Sapir, 1921: 21, cited in Thanasoulas, 2001: 10) which is true if one considers that the language will imply a meaning for the people who use it and that meaning will show what people think. In this respect Lado (1957) states that culture will be the ways of being. Getting this concept to the class will let students know that there are not better people, behaviors or even countries, just different people, different behaviors and different countries. Also, for some other people culture represents all the art and literature of a country. As a consequence, each country has a variety of expressions of culture.

Bringing this cultural analysis to the classroom could be difficult. Many teachers have to cover specific grammar topics and they worry so much about it that they forget the importance of culture in foreign language acquisition/learning. As a result many of them devote more time doing grammar activities than culturally based activities in which culture could be integrated or at least touched upon. Consequently it should be considered that everyday, in an unconscious way, teachers provide a lot of input about the target culture. If teachers only focus attention on the target grammar or on the target culture there is a high risk that students only accept the alien culture. All in all, culture is something teachers are dealing with everyday without realizing how important it is.

As a matter of fact, the necessity of doing different activities to start getting a close look at cultures comes from this concept. Teachers can not teach the culture itself, but they can present language activities in which culture is discussed and structural goals are met. By providing elements of the target language, teachers highlight elements of the target culture while making students more aware of their own culture.

As a result, students will be aware that there is no such a thing as a better or stronger culture but every culture is different.

Students need to know about their own traditions. The foreign language classroom should become a place where all kinds of events of any culture are welcome. Brown (1980: 144) states that teachers need to know what is common in two languages so that they will be able to talk about their differences. In other words, being able to understand one's own culture allows educators and apprentices to accept a new one, to compare and contrast, and to understand different views of life around the world.

Consequently, being successful in the classroom when dealing with culture demands a lot of preparation on the teacher's part. It is impossible to educate students in culture if educators are not prepared. Taking into account the fact that books almost always show general aspects of a culture without focusing on the differences for specific groups of people, which leads to misconceptions or overgeneralizations, teachers should not continue believing in everything they read in a textbook. Teachers have to find out variations from place to place, from culture to culture.

Teachers also need to fight against their own preconceptions. It is very common and easy to create stereotypes mainly when some educators build their conceptions based on the input they have and as a consequence they can have erroneous ideas. In order to avoid stereotypes, teachers need to get informed about other places and their own culture. One of the best ways to do it is by being in touch with the foreign culture. One of the easiest ways to find out about other places is by talking to international teachers and students or by writing emails to people or schools from other countries. Having guest speakers in the classroom is also a good idea and the speaker does not have to be necessarily a native one; it can be someone who has traveled abroad and can tell and share all kinds of experiences. Another good idea is to have a pen pal program with people from other countries and from different cities. Also the teacher can start a program where students have to search about their cultural roots. As a way of example, students could explore on the Internet to find the origins of some traditional games in their own culture or even the origin of traditional music. As it can be seen, the educator needs to become an active and curious



individual who is always trying to find out about the target culture by exploring all kinds of sources, not only the text book, and by fighting against his/her own stereotypes.

Teachers “cannot go about teaching a foreign language without at least offering some insights into the speaker’s culture” (Thanasaulas, 2001:12). If teachers just show some grammar concepts without explaining how they work in the target culture, the learning of the target language will not have any meaning. Therefore an attempt to integrate grammar and culture may be done by means of different strategies or activities that teachers can use to deal with culture.

Through exposure to the foreign culture students draw their own conclusions. For example, students watch a TV program and analyze what is happening on it. The analysis involves what people do in terms of verbal (slang), and non verbal behaviors (gestures); also what is appropriate or inappropriate for certain cultures can be analyzed. Another possible activity is to ask students to select any topic they would like to talk about (music, clothing, food) and make comparisons and contrasts between the target and own culture. Internet is a good source in order to get all kinds of information. Students can search and come with some ideas to the class or the teacher can do it by him/herself.

By way of conclusion, teachers need to be cultural educators too. By being a cultural teacher, students get the most out of learning languages. Although foreign language teachers handle culture every day, they have to be more conscious about the importance of this fact in the students’ daily lives and the implications learning of a foreign language has in foreign culture. They will be able to understand that meanings are different and that any teacher needs to learn a language to convey culture.

To make classes meaningful and be more successful teachers one should consider culture. It means that teachers not only need to find out about the target and home culture but also they need to avoid cultural stereotypes. Lessons should be based on cultural activities in which structure is implied. All in all, everything teachers do to integrate grammar and culture will be meaningful for students and will last forever.

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