

CULTURAL AWARENESS AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Education for the awareness of cultural diversity is not to be taken merely as a passing fad. It is perhaps one of the most important issues facing educators today. All societies have become, or are in the process of becoming, multicultural, and it is important to prevent social conflict and misinterpretation of intentions through education that fosters understanding and respect for cultural diversity, as well as communication and cooperation between people of different origins.

We may begin by asking exactly what is *culture*? There are as many definitions of culture as experts on the subject, but perhaps we could take that given by HERSKOVITS (1948, p. 17): "Culture is the man-made part of the human environment", a formula that applies to the physical, social and symbolic aspects of our surroundings. We should also note that no culture is ever static but is subject to change, especially when representatives of different societies and groups come into close contact. The impact of social and cultural change on individuals, often referred to as psychological acculturation, is itself a specialized area of study, including all the phenomena of interaction between individuals of different cultural backgrounds.

Individual behaviour is determined at least partly by culture, which is itself an adaptive response at the social level to ecological, socio-economic and historical conditions. The processes involved in acculturation are particularly interesting from our point of view. The individual is gradually led to restrict his behaviour to that which is judged adequate by the surrounding society. Among the set of biologically possible types of behaviour only a small subset is socially acceptable in a given community at a particular time. The voluntary and conscious attempts to influence the individual to conform to group norms is usually referred to as *socialization*, whereas all the unconscious influences form part of *enculturation*. For example, a child can be stimulated to value reading simply through the presence of many books in the environment (enculturation), or his parents can actively encourage him to read as an alternative to watching television (socialization). For someone born and brought up in a particular society without ever leaving it, and without having any contact with people from outside, it would be impossible to realize that the behaviour, role models and values typical of his surrounding social environment are not the only possible ones. Enculturation and socialization enable life to go on harmoniously within a social group, and they make the behaviour of others understandable and predictable, but at the same time these processes encourage ethnocentric tendencies, so characteristic of all human individuals and groups. With regard to overcoming the ethnocentric aspect, TRIANDIS (1990: 36) writes:

It is very difficult to think about behaviors that are different from the ones we are used to and not judge them as wrong. Difference invites comparison and evaluation.

Yet, if we see the ecology of the other culture is different from our ecology (e. g. a difference in population density), we can find the difference understandable and even say to ourselves: "If I lived in that ecology I would probably do exactly the same". That can lead to tolerance of other cultures.

As we have already noted, culture is relative, in that each society has designed its culture as an adaptive response to surrounding conditions. There is, therefore, no reason to evaluate different cultures, especially not in comparison with one particular culture taken as a model. This respect for diversity should not prevent us from identifying with a specific social group, or from accepting its particular system of values, but it should keep us from imposing it on others. One of the most difficult tasks for the foreign language teacher is to overcome his or her own ethnocentrism, and this applies to both native and non-native teachers. The understanding of one's own enculturation plays a fundamental role in this respect. It is only through contact with the outside, through struggling with what appears to be foreign or strange, or at best a misguided viewpoint, that it becomes possible to place in the right perspective one's native society, its institutions and one's own personal prejudices.

Just as each individual is born and brought up in a particular society, the social sciences and psychology were born in Europe and have grown up here and in North America. This means that they are enculturated in a specific, Western, urbanized, industrialized society, with its particular system of values. Psychologists have in the past tried to establish general laws of human behaviour, assumed to be universal, but which in fact have been established on a very narrow empirical basis, with very restricted and largely non-representative samples, very often undergraduate university students. The choice of topics studied also reflects the dominant values of urban Western society.

The way in which school subjects are taught in different societies is influenced by that society's values. In geography, Western Europe sees itself as the centre of the globe, due to the conventional *mapamundi* representation of the planet. European schoolchildren tend to forget, for example, that Alaskans and Siberians are close neighbours, with common ancestors and traditions, since they see them at opposite ends of the globe. (Indeed, the very expression "opposite ends of the globe" implies a rectangular view of the world instead of a more tolerant spherical view of our planet.) Similarly, we tend to consider the northern hemisphere as the standard, whereas in the southern hemisphere everything is *up-side-down* (where going north means getting warmer, going south colder; the seasons have the opposite characteristics of those of the northern hemisphere, Christmas is in the middle of summer, etc.).

History is also viewed from the particular point of view of its effects on a specific society. The *heroes* of one cultural group can often be considered *enemies* by a neighbouring group, simply because of the outcome of wars or disputes and the consequences of certain events. *Heroic seafaring conquerors* bringing home tons of gold and treasure are referred to as *pirates* in the culture from which the treasures were stolen. Even mathematics and science have their Western European bias, basing themselves on the theories formulated by members of

this society, often disregarding earlier discoveries and inventions recorded by members of other cultures.

Languages and their native speakers do not escape ethnocentrism. DE SAUSSURE (1987: 233) reminds us of this fact:

Cada pueblo cree en la superioridad de su idioma. Un hombre que habla otra lengua suele ser fácilmente considerado como incapaz de hablar.

The average speaker tends to value his own language far above all others, mainly because it is the one he is obviously most familiar with, and because it is the one in which he was taught to think and react to all external stimuli. When an adult speaker encounters the intricacies of a foreign language for the first time, he tries to apply the rules of his own system, and frequently finds them inoperable. His first reaction is one of ethnocentric shock: "How can the speakers of this foreign language get by without expressing ideas in the same way as I do?" he may ask. As a makeshift remedy, the foreign language learner often develops a kind of interlanguage, which includes elements from both languages, constantly groping for equivalents where they may often not exist. JAMES (1986: 27) gives us an example of a foreign language learner's performance and his appraisal of the situation:

To the Telugu speaker (in Southern India) the English pronoun system is crude and unsubtle, and he will try and remedy it by adopting circumlocutions of one kind or another. Conversely, the English speaker of Telugu is apt to find the nuances of pronoun usage very difficult, to make mistakes, and to sound unpolished and unsophisticated.

Everything, then, is relative, and a speaker's judgements are inevitably influenced by his native language and previous experience. When university level foreign language students study literary texts in the foreign language, they may well think they understand the language used, and they are helped to appreciate the style, the use of metaphors and other elements used by the author to convey meaning. They may also be helped to see the historical and social context in which the literary text was formulated, but there may often be references which escape superficial explanation because they belong to the author's and the native reader's joint cultural heritage. Without further help, the non-native student will be unable to unravel the psychological implications of a term or reference based on cultural background knowledge. Hence the importance of cultural studies in the foreign language curriculum.

Classrooms vary widely with respect to what is taught in the name of *culture*. Some teachers present culture in terms of the fine arts, geography and history, others focus on sociological behaviour, values and attitudes, while others emphasize patterns of verbal and non-verbal communication. We believe that students need some knowledge of all these factors, but more than *knowledge* for its own sake, we propose encouraging *cultural awareness*, which is a much broader concept. We prefer to emphasize the development of cultural awareness skills, rather than the mere transmission of cultural facts.

As we observed earlier, no culture is static, since patterns of behaviour and other cultural aspects of a society change continuously and evolve under the impact of events and as a result of closer contacts with other societies and their cultures. We need to foster skills that enable students to sort out cultural facts for themselves and deal more adequately with the cross-cultural situations they encounter. As well as acquiring the intellectual capacity for discovering, analyzing and classifying cultural patterns, students need opportunities to recognize and explore their own culturally influenced values and behaviour. Yet, since so much cultural input is perceived on a *subconscious* level, the *conscious* observation of cultural facts or the thoughtful examination of the students' own values and experience is not an automatic process, and may need to be actively encouraged by the teacher. Self-reflection and criticism of what has, until that moment, seemed to be the norm, can be a difficult skill to acquire.

Cultural awareness skills can find support in the use of audiovisual material, both the kind specially made for foreign learners, though this often presents an idealistic view of society, as well as authentic material produced for native speakers. Viewing news bulletins, documentaries and general interest programmes recorded from satellite broadcasts is the next best thing to experiencing situations in real life. The realistic nature of this medium helps to overcome cultural numbness by allowing students to witness more directly the lives and experiences of people in authentic environments. Other materials which can be used for promoting cultural awareness include audiocassettes of original literary texts, if possible read by professional actors or even the authors themselves, radio broadcasts, specialized textbooks dealing with cultural aspects of life, clippings, cartoons and letters from newspapers and magazines, brochures, and all kinds of realia (postage stamps, coins, bank notes, greetings cards, etc.) However, little cultural awareness will result from merely displaying a cultural object in class, or by simply pointing out that "Americans / the British do this / believe that". Students need to learn to look beyond the easily *observable* expressions of culture (i. e. language, literature, customs, traditions, artifacts), and seek out the hidden or *unobservable* values, beliefs and attitudes which underlie cultural manifestations, and examine these ideas in the light of the culture that produced them, and in comparison with their own cultural experience.

Rather than a receptive, but passive, attitude to cultural awareness, it would be preferable to encourage an active search for facts and the reasons behind them. This can be achieved by cooperative learning tasks in which students work together in small groups to gather precise pieces of information, then share and discuss what they have discovered in order to form a more complete picture. Finally, they interpret the information, when necessary with help from the teacher, within the context of the target culture, basing their interpretation on the underlying attitudes which produce the observable facts. In this way, students focus on skills which will enable them to extract significant information in the light of their own culturally-based feelings and values. STEMPLESKI (1993: 11) reminds us that:

Becoming culturally aware is a two-sided process. It involves not only intellectual activity, but a whole set of feelings about what is involved. It goes without saying that

developing cultural awareness requires sensitivity on the part of the teacher to the cultural attitudes of the students.

Cultural awareness and appropriate studies in the university curriculum are necessary to complement the linguistic and literary components. But what, we may well ask, is the direct effect of cultural awareness on linguistic competence in the foreign language? MERRILL VALDES (1986: 2) reminds us of the following:

A native culture is as much of an interference for second language learners as is native language. Likewise, just as similarities and contrasts in the native and target languages have been found to be useful tools in language study, so cultural similarities and contrasts, once identified and understood, can be used to advantage ... After the learners are guided to a recognition of the cultural base of their own attitudes and behavior, they are ready to consider others in a more favorable light. Through this process, what has seemed quaint, peculiar, or downright reprehensible becomes more reasonable and acceptable. Once a second language learner comes to understand the behavior of the speakers of the target language, regardless of the original motivation for study, the task of adding the language becomes far simpler, both through acceptance of the speakers of the language and through increased knowledge of what the language means, as well as what it says.

The research of GARDNER and LAMBERT (1972) determined that *integrative motivation* (becoming part of the target culture as well as speaking the language) resulted in more effective language learning than did *instrumental motivation* (learning the language to serve a purpose, such as getting a job, with no wish to mix socially with the speakers). There can be no doubt that a positive attitude is a boon to any learning situation, and comprehension of a people's behaviour patterns and their underlying values clearly gives a more positive attitude to the person who is trying to learn the foreign language.

The vocabulary and structures of a language are closely associated with the culture it tries to represent. Words are obviously suited to the environment in which they are used: Eskimo languages have a large number of words for snow, languages in wet climates have several words for types of rain, desert people distinguish more tonalities in certain colours than city dwellers do, etc. Translation of written texts poses problems when equivalents are hard to find. A literal translation may be true to the form of the original, while free translation departs from the text to find expressions that fit the tone and meaning in essence but not exactly in the language. The degree of formality in which a work is written can be translated into another language, but the cultural and linguistic influence that resulted in that formality in the original work is lost in the translation. Formality affects thought, and thought is affected by culture.

The beliefs, values, attitudes, aspirations, fantasies and reactions of a people are studied closely by advertisers the world over. Their aim is to find the basis for the concepts and language that will inspire the people of any given place to buy the product of one manufacturer rather

than that of another. What sells in New York may also sell in Paris, Helsinki, or Tokyo, but not through the same language of advertising. Specific cultures must be taken into account.

MERRILL VALDES (1986: 4) explains that language, thought and culture are interwoven, with each of the three influencing and being influenced by the others. Indeed, none can survive without the others.

Second language learners must not only be aware of this interdependence, but must be taught its nature, in order to convince them of the essentiality of including culture in the study of a language which is not their own.

Elizabeth Woodward Smith
University of La Coruña

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