Cultural Situations for Intercultural Understanding

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> It is impossible to understand why millions of people (...) must learn two or three foreign languages, only a fraction of which they can make use of later. (... They) must be tormented for nothing and made to sacrifice valuable time.
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> Adolph Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 1923

This quotation would not be so disturbing if we knew that no one feels that way today, but no doubt many of our secondary, preparatory and, yes, even university EFL students share this same sentiment. Somehow, the excitement which learning a foreign language in primary school once elicited has slowly been eroded only to be replaced by an inflexible memorization of grammar rules and patterns. The result is a student who knows "about" the language, but whose lack of awareness of cultural registers and styles of discourse has resulted in negative impressions of the language and of the native speakers with whom he may come in contact. The "knowledge" of a language includes much more than being familiar with the grammatical code. Accurate communication also involves a knowledge of the culture of the target country/countries; therefore, the study of the culture must be integrated with the linguistic study if the student is to acquire any benefit from his/her EFL experience.

Cross-cultural awareness is one of the most difficult goals to attain in any EFL class. It is possible to become knowledgeable about world affairs, but it is quite different to truly understand a foreign culture. Many English teachers in Mexico mistakenly believe that being situated so close to the United States and with the probability that our students will come into direct contact with Americans whether it be with tourists on vacation trips or through movies and television, they only need to prepare students linguistically and the inevitable contact between our societies will lead to an intrinsic understanding of the target culture. Let us consider anew several questions concerning English teaching and culture before attempting to reach such a conclusion.

What is our goal?

Do you as an English teacher in Mexico expect as a goal for the learners you teach a "minimal linguistic competency" in the language or is your objective a "complete mastery" of the target language? You may be surprised to learn that depending on which author you are consulting, both extremes could be considered to be definitions of "bilingualism." In fact, dialectical variations of the same language may also be included in the definition. For example, Taylor (1976: 239) defines bilinguality as the ability to speak two or more "languages, dialects or styles of speech that involve differences in sound, vocabulary and syntax."

Having now determined that by definition (or lack of it) the goal for all EFL teachers is some degree of bilingualism, it should be noted that according to Hornby (1977: 3-8) the deciding factor in which bilingualism *par excellance* can be distinguished from "minimal linguistic competence" is the degree of cultural variation between the two linguistic codes. Thus, the degree of biculturalism possessed by an EFL learner is a major factor to consider in determining a goal.

The relationship of linguistics and culture has been a point of study since the 1960s when the field of sociolinguistics began to be explored more in depth (Omaggio 1986: 359). Language teachers have since become more concerned with the manner in which language is used for communication within particular social groups for various situations and settings. Sociolinguists tell us that higher levels of second language proficiency require an understanding of the most effective (linguistic) and the most appropriate (cultural) means to communicate with native speakers within different social settings and circumstances. Through the sue of the newer communicatively-based textbooks emphasizing the notions and functions of language, students are learning and using the culturally and linguistically accepted formulae for expressing different social amenities. However, the sense of register or level of language has been placed to one side in hopes that the students will "acquire" this on their own.

In its simplest form, register is the style of speaking that involves the correct choice of topic, vocabulary and linguistic patterns appropriate to communicate an attitude that the speaker wishes to convey. This choice is based on the audience and setting in which the speaker finds himself. Mixing registers or discourse styles can give the English speaker an unfavorable impression of the

non-native speaker and his culture. A student who may use a correct linguistic pattern could unknowingly cause a misunderstanding or be offensive in a given situation because he/she has not been adequately shown the way language register changes according to the audience and cultural situation.

What is culture?

Culture as a word eludes a specific definition. Its meaning is broad and includes all concepts that are embraced by a society and which makes it different from another. Culture influences our habits, our beliefs, our customs, our values and our ideas and notions of beauty and politeness. Culture is what we do and what we do **not** do. We are not overtly taught our own culture; it is assimilated unconsciously by living within it. Most aspects of culture are directly related to language. Language is both a component and a product of culture. It transmits and molds culture; but, language is not culture. It only represents the culture. Neither language nor culture can exist independently; but they are not the same.

Due to our total involvement with one culture, there is a tendency to envision it as the "universal" one and for this reason, we are only aware of cultural differences when we meet people from other countries. When this contact occurs, both people tend to evaluate the other through heir own cultural "filter." This filter accepts, rejects or colors behaviour according to one's own culture. If a foreigner visiting a country where he must speak the foreign language makes a grammatical error in that language, it can be easily excused since most people can accept that "He speaks poorly." But, if the same tourist makes a cultural mistake, it is not as easily forgiven because it is thought, "He behaves poorly." Our cultural filter judges this type of error much more severely than simple grammatical mistake. Native speakers can make a grammatical error when speaking or writing, but cultural mistakes are not made unless the speaker does it intentionally to elicit a reaction. Because of each person's belief in his "universal" culture, an error of this sort can not be viewed as leniently as a grammatical error. Thus, you have "your society" (the culturally correct one) vs. the "others" who are obviously "uncultured."

This is the primary reason for cross-cultural awareness activities in our EFL classrooms. If we are to admit that the members of the other societies are also cultured, then the strangeness of their customs must become less strange, in fact

believable. We must enter their heads and look at the world through their eyes. Of course, this is the optimum, but there are lesser degrees of cross-cultural awareness that we can attain within our classrooms that may help open the doors.

Another equally important reason stems from sociolinguistic and bilingual research which has found strong empirical evidence that it the native and target languages and cultures are valorized during the learning process then the linguistic code is acquired with better results. Acculturating our students to use the code in culturally approved ways will produce a student who does not condemn or laugh at the target culture and its "strange" traits, but who will, at least, try to understand the differences.

Why is culture difficult to teach?

There are several reasons why language teachers do not include culture systematically in their courses. the most common is that the course curriculum we are given to teach is so overtly-crowded with the grammatical and lexical features of the language that we tend to put off culture until the student has mastered the "more important" linguistic areas. Unfortunately for most of our learners, the second half of this "language-first and culture-later" sequence never materializes. Many of our students leave our programs never as completely prepared linguistically as we would like and convinced that the language is boring and believing all the stereotypes about the culture of the foreign language society. Obviously, this teacher never considered teaching the linguistic elements of the language through the culture in an integrative fashion.

Many teachers also shy away from teaching culture because they do not know enough about it. Here in Mexico as in all the world, the foreign language teacher is usually a non-native speaker of the language being taught. This factor, together with the above-mentioned, over-crowded curriculum provides little time and no place for the investigation of culture. Seelye (1984: 156) argues that even if the teacher has only limited knowledge in this area, his role is not simply to impart facts but, instead, to help the students to obtain the necessary skills to recognize cultural differences and to make sense out of the differences that they find during their study of the culture.

Another point is that teachers, especially those having been inadequately trained or not trained at all for the teaching of culture, are lacking in strategies to integrate culture with the language. Teachers are confused about which aspects of the culture should be taught. They lack an organizational scheme around which the cultural aspects and the linguistic elements could be integratively chosen. Many teachers attempting to include culture in their programs tend to select their topics from a pre-prepared list for a sporadic lecture. These lists could include some of the following topics: Eating habits, special foods, folk dances, concept of time, international policies, life styles or some other topic that can be sharply contrasted between the two cultures. It is this type of activity, for which there is no attempt at explanation, that confirms the students' belief that the target culture is "strange."

Lastly, we need to mention that the students themselves may feel threatened by the new culture. They can think that their own identity and culture are at risk if the new language and culture are presented as being superior to their own. These feelings of anomie are prevalent in bilingual communities where a dominant language and culture are causing a gradual shift to that language. Here in Mexico, we have seen the opposite. The English language is seen as a status symbol which could eventually result in another kind of shift; from a monolingual society to a bilingual one. But, we must always be aware of the possibility that some of our students may feel threatened. For this reason, we must make it clear from the beginning that even though all languages and cultures differ from one another, no one culture or language is superior to another.

How should culture be taught?

As previously mentioned, children learn their own culture at the same time that they learn their native language. A person can learn another culture in a similar way and at the same time that he/she learns another language. Learning the culturally approved ways of using the foreign language is partly what is meant by the term communicative competence. However, we EFL teachers have all seen that a sporadic exposure of our students to the foreign culture is not sufficient for them to understand it.

Very young children in a completely bilingual school situation with enough exposure to a native English teacher can, over the years, implicitly acquire the target culture in order to be able to choose the culturally correct topics for

discussion and deliver them in the correct register according to the setting. Nevertheless, expecting our "older" learners to do this when their exposure and study time and our teaching time are at a minimum, seems unrealistic. Implicit learning entails that the learner with sufficient exposure to the language and culture must go through an internal hypothesis formation and hypothesis-testing procedure which requires more time than our students have available. Most EFL teachers would agree that this is the best procedure to learn, but many would also agree that for the majority of our individual situations, this is not possible.

Assuming that we agree on the desirability of teaching culture more explicitly to our students while integratively teaching the linguistic elements, the obvious question is how can we achieve our goal without falling into the "sporadic lecture" about the extreme contrasts between the cultures? This author has used Adler's (1972: 6-21) definition of cross-cultural learning experience upon which to partially base an answer.

> A cross-cultural learning experience can be defined as a set of circumstances involving intercultural communication in which the individual, as a result of the experiences, becomes aware of his own growth, learning and change. The cross-cultural learning experience, additionally, takes place when the individual encounters a different culture and as a result (1) examines the degree to which he is influenced by his own culture, and (2) understands the culturally derived values, attitudes, and outlooks of other people.

Another important concept for teachers to consider is the following model by Hanvey (1979: 8-12) of levels of cross-cultural awareness that students will pass through as they become more culturally "aware".

Level 1: At this level the student sees the foreign culture superficially through stereotypes. The L2 culture is perceived as unbelievable and bizarre while the people of that culture are seen as rude and ignorant.

Level II: Included in this level are those students who can only contrast the extremes of the second culture with theirs. They are still irrational in their view of the country, its people and culture and frustrated that the members of the target culture can feel and believe the way they do.

Level III: At this level the learner begins to analyze intellectually the traits of the other culture and can perceive that there are logical reasons why the target

members behave as they do. Those at this level may not adopt all the traits of the foreign culture, but at least, they have attained a level of cognitive believability.

Level IV: At this point, the learner can view and understand the second culture from the inside. Total acceptance of its customs has been achieved.

According to this model, an "understanding" is achieved only at the third and fourth levels. Most readers will probably feel that reaching Level IV is an unrealistic goal for us and for our students, but if we can implant a seed of empathy in our students for the second culture then, hopefully, this seed will be activated later and blossom into a mature understanding at Level III or IV.

According to the quotation by Adler, we must provide the experience or circumstances that our students will use to encounter the target culture, objectively contrast the experience to their own culture and finally begin to see the reasons behind the values and attitudes of the "others." In order to obtain this goal, the teacher should also consider the following points when developing culture lessons for use in the classroom.

1. The cultural element must be taught only in English; thus, giving importance to the language.

2. All four skills must be involved in the activities.

3. Since grammar, vocabulary and other linguistic elements can be taught/acquired by the student through the culture lesson, teach them in unison.

4. Cultural aspects to be explored can be found in abundance in literature written in the target language.

5. Make the student an active participant in his own learning. Let the student conduct interviews wherever possible. Form "brainstorming" groups in the classroom for topic exploration. Small group or pair work is good for preparation of dialogues after a cultural topic has been presented. And, of course, role play the topic in different cultural settings.

6. However, the most important consideration of all is that you as the teacher must be flexible and understanding.

Following is a sample lesson that the author would like to offer for any interested readers to try in their classes. The activities are to be used in the order in which they appear. The first, *Culture Eliciting Questions,* is meant for

brainstorming in small groups and then in the class as a whole. The second is a sample dialogue which provides a linguistic and a paralinguistic focus for the teacher and students to use. This dialogue is full of culturally embedded information for further discussion. The *Points for Cultural Analysis* are to help students to better understand what happened in the dialogue and the *Extension Activities* will provide further activities. Following the sample lesson is a list of areas and sub-areas around which more lessons can be developed. The sub-area *Conversation Topic--Money* is the focus of the culture lesson in the example.

Sample Lesson: Focus on choosing (or avoiding) topics during a conversation)

A: Culture Eliciting Questions (Brainstorming)

1. Within your own culture when you do not know someone well, what kinds of topics do you choose to discuss?

2. What do you **not** discuss? Why?

3. Are there any topics that you have found that people from other cultures and/or countries initiate conversations with you about? How do you feel about this?

4. What would you do if a person from another culture began discussing with you a topic that made you uncomfortable or that you did not want to talk about?

B: Dialog

Linguistic Focus: Greetings, clarifying information, exaggeration, differences between formal writing and informal speech, culturally accepted names, perfect tenses, restating information.

Paralinguistic Focus: Choice of topics, what to do when you don't want to continue with a topic.

Brandy: Hi, Claudia. What 'ya been up to?

Claudia: Hi, Brandy. (pause) I'm sorry, but I didn't understand your question. Could you repeat it please?

Brandy: Oh, sure. I said "What 'ya been up to?" That means, "What have you been doing recently? Have you been doing anything new?"

Claudia: Now I understand. I don't think I'll ever learn all your expressions in English. To answer your question, "No, I've not done anything new or different. Everything is the same: School, studying and learning English."

Brandy: Don't worry; you're doing great in English! I wish I spoke Spanish so well! Look at what I just bought. I saw these red shoes in the store window and just **had** to have them! I really shouldn't have.

Claudia: (*I wonder why she said she "shouldn't have? She's not married. She has no one to be mad at her for doing it.)* They're beautiful! How much did they cost?

Brandy: (pause) Well, more than I can afford. I probably won't **eat for a week now** but I really liked them.

Claudia: Were they really **that** expensive? *(they don't look so expensive. I wonder why she said that?)* What was the price? How much were they?

Brandy: No. I'm only exaggerating, but they were expensive. Well, have to go now. See 'ya. Bye.

Claudia: Bye. *(I wonder why she left so quickly.)*

C. Points for cultural analysis

1. Pick out all the expressions that Brandy used for exaggerating her point. What did she really want to say? How would Claudia have communicated the same idea in Spanish?

2. What question did Claudia ask that Brandy did not answer? Why do you think she did **not** answer?

3. Why do you think Brandy ended the conversation so abruptly? What was her impression of Claudia?

4. How did Claudia feel? What is her impression of Brandy now?

5. Could this conversation have occurred in your culture and language? How would it change?

6. What can you deduce about the culture of the USA?

D. Extension Activities

1. Have two of your students act out the dialogue in class, but changing the ending. For example, Brandy explains to Claudia why she won't answer or Claudia asks for clarification of the problem.

2. You as the teacher choose a "to-be-avoided topic" from the list provided (or others that you choose) and the students in pairs or groups write a short dialogue which can be acted out in class later.

3. Students choose a "to-be-avoided topic" in Mexico and reverse the situation.

Examples of culture topics to be expanded into lessons

Names:

• Calling people you have just met by their first names, even bosses. Is this rude?

• For example, teachers, older men or women?, mothers-in-law or fathers-in-law, a person who is called in to do a special job (i.e., plumber, TV repairman, etc.).

Conversations:

• Making the first move to meet someone even if you have never been introduced.

• Introducing yourself to the person you wish to know.

• Starting a conversation with a complement.

• Interrupting a speaker: should it be done? With whom and in what situations. Should children do it?

• Should children talk a lot or ask many questions?

• Topics that are **not** acceptable to discuss with someone you do not know well: age, physical appearance, politics, religion, money, etc.

Feelings and emotions:

• How many times should you apologize for something?

• What do smiles mean? Do you ever smile when you do not need it?

• With whom can you **not** express anger or sadness? People that you know well, casual acquaintances, someone you do not know well (janitor, repairman, etc.)

• Whom would you feel comfortable asking "What's wrong?"

Body language:

• With whom do you shake hands? Under what circumstances do you do it?

• Kissing as a greeting? When and with whom?

• How far do you stand from the person you are speaking with? Do you stand further from some people than from others? Why?

• When do you make direct eye contact when speaking? Do you consider it disrespectful or do you get nervous or uncomfortable when a certain group of people makes eye contact with you?

Other ideas:

• From a comment by a native speaker, from a passage you find when reading a novel or even a question asked by a student, more ideas for culture lessons such as these can originate.

You only need to try. Good Luck!

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