# Communication, culture and language teaching

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### Abstract

This article describes the factors that are necessary for an efficient cross-cultural communication. It makes reference to the relationship that exists between language and culture, the importance of including culture as part of the second language teaching curriculum, and the problems teachers face when trying to include cultural aspects in their classes. It also discusses different approaches and techniques proposed for the systematic introduction of cultural aspects in second language teaching.

Key words: Communication, culture, crosscultural communication, second language teaching, approach.

### Resumen

Este artículo describe los factores necesarios para una eficiente comunicación entre culturas. El mismo hace referencia a la relación existente entre el lenguaje y la cultura, la importancia de incluir el factor cultural en el currículo de enseñanza de una segunda lengua, y de los problemas que los profesores de lengua enfrentan al tratar de incluir aspectos culturales en sus clases. Se discuten además algunos métodos y técnicas propuestos para la inclusión sistemática de aspectos culturales en la enseñanza de una segunda lengua.

Palabras clave: Comunicación. cultura. comunicación entre culturas, enseñanza de la segunda lengua, método.

*"... to know another's language and not his culture is a very good way to make a fluent fool of one self."*

Winston Brembeck

## INTRODUCTION

Today's world is tremendously different from that of five decades ago. At that time, most people were born, lived, and died without having too much contact with people from other geographical areas, races, and cultural backgrounds. But that condition no longer prevails in the world. The era of computers, satellites, and worldwide communication along with the increases of travel for business and pleasure, among other reasons, heightens people's awareness for understanding other cultures.

In a world involved in a process of internationalization, the political and economical interdependence of countries is a matter of extreme importance. Therefore, the ability to communicate efficiently with people from other societies becomes an urgent issue. Human beings are distinguished from other animals because of their capacity to create culture. However it is important to highlight the fact that the development of human culture is possible due to communication, a process in which language plays the main role.

Culture and communication are intertwined so closely that both linguists and anthropologists maintain that one depends on the other, In other words, "...we communicate in the way we do because we are raised in a particular culture and learn its language, rules and norms" (Gudykunst and Young, 2002: 4). The acquisition of culture, however, takes place at a very early age, and average people do not usually understand the way it influences people's behavior, and particularly the communication process.

This article examines aspects related to the process of communication and its relationship to culture. In addition, the importance of including the cultural aspects in the classroom is described, along with the problems language teachers face in approaching culture in their classes. Also, methods and techniques for assisting culture teaching are discussed. In order to provide a better comprehension of the subject, this article has been divided into five sections: 1. The process of communication,

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2. Conceptualizing culture, **3.** Language teaching and the cultural component, 4. Teachers' problems in approaching culture in the ESL classroom, and 5. Systematizing culture teaching: what and how.

## THE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION

To conceptualize communication, it is necessary to understand the nature of such process. The first thing we need to know is that communication involves the use of symbols -things used to stand for or represent something else (Yule, 2000). Communication, therefore, is a complex process inasmuch as it involves not only the use of verbal symbols –arbitrary combinations of sounds– but also other symbolic elements that people use to transmit messages (paralinguistic features, gestures, body movements, distance maintenance, and pictographic signs). Up to this point, it is important to consider that symbols have particular referents because a group of people conventionally agree to have them as such (Ibid).

It is of extreme importance to understand that the connection symbols have with their referents is totally arbitrar~that is, there is no natural connection– and that such circumstance is culturally-conditioned. Therefore, if a person is out of the group consensus or social convention regarding communicative symbols, she/he is not going to be able to communicate with the people who share the meaning of such symbols (Brain, cited by Gudykunst and Young, 2002). In other words, the development of language and the possibility to deal with relationships among people and objects, even when they are absent, is possible due to the human ability to use symbols.

Another important aspect to take into account is that communication involves transmitting and interpreting messages. Transmitting messages implies using a way for making our thoughts, attitudes, or feeling recognizable for other people. In order to transmit a message, a person may use different symbols. On the other hand, interpreting messages is the process of decoding the stimuli (symbols) and making sense out of them (giving them a meaning). Both processes, transmitting and interpreting messages, are influenced by culture. Consequently, people from different cultures transmit and interpret messages in different ways. When a person does not know the way people from other cultures transmit and interpret messages, she/he usually relies on her/his own coding system, incorporating her/his own cultural patterns in the transmission and interpretation of messages. In such cases, the meaning of what is transmitted or interpreted is usually defective or biased (Gudykunst and Young, 2002).

Moreover, average people are not usually aware of the implicit theories that guide communicative behavior. These theories are the "…unconscious, taken-for-granted assumptions about communication" (ibid,: p. 10) that steer the way we communicate with our in-groups. These theories, according to Wegner and Wallacher (quoted by Gudykunst and Young, 20002: 10) "…have all the features of the formal theories constructed by scientists. They employ concepts and relationships derived from observation; they provide structured thought through which social reality is observed; they enable [us] to make predictions about how other people will communicate with us." We acquire these cultural presuppositions during our growing process, but common people are not often aware of them; consequently, we do not usually question them and tend to assume that everybody follows the same communicative processes we do. Such assumptions lead to the beliefe that the predictions we make about others' behavior are accurate. Then, when facing new or novel communicative interactions with people from other cultures, our routine interaction is broken. If we feel that we do not match within the interaction taking place, our chance to communicate efficiently decreases.

One factor that is important to consider is that as soon as a we feel the interactional mismatch, we will experience high levels of uncertainty and anxiety. Uncertainty refers to the inability to predict or explain other's behavior, feelings, attitudes or values. Anxiety, on the other hand, is the feeling of tenseness, worry, or apprehension about what might happen in the interaction (Gudykunst and Young, 2002). These factors, if not controlled, may lead to feelings of uneasiness, discomfort or even rejection toward target the culture or the person with a different culture.

## CONCEPTUALIZING CULTURE

Culture has been defined in many different ways. In the field of language teaching, "Many teachers have been slow to accept culture as a broadly defined concept. For much of the profession culture has been defined almost exclusively in terms of the fine arts, geography and history" (Seelye, **1993:** 15). However, anthropologists have conceptualized culture in other terms. In order to do so, they have taken into account the study of people's social organization, considering that culture has to do with it, essentially in the way human activity is coordinated and organized. Social organization is related to ordering. Therefore, we find different types of orders as there are different societal organizations. These orders depend on the conventional behavior of the group of people. That is, different levels of social ordering occur

because people have patterned behavior through time. Also, throughout the process of social ordering, societies develop sets of syrnbolic ideas associated with such process; this is what is called cultural ordering (Parrott, 1980).

Culture, then, is conceptualized as a way of life, including a people's distinctive set of custorns, beliefs, values, norrns, ways of speaking, and social institutions that characterize each separate society and that have been conventionally ordered through time. It is the way people see and perceive the world. Culture sets the rules that establish the functioning of a group of people, their behavior and their cornrnunication, which is treated as "socially acquired knowledge" (Yule, 2000: 246).

The view of culture that all rnernbers of a society have regarding culture itself is not exactly the sarne. However, the culture background that all rnembers of society share has a unique influence on the collective activities of the people, guiding thern in their interpretation of social life. That is, "there is an overlap in the implicit theories of cornrnunication the rnernbers of the sarne group use to guide their behavior" (Gudykunst and Young, 2002: 17). Every culture has a systern of knowledge which allows thern to know how to cornmunicate arnong each other, and how to interpret their behavior; this system is rnade up of cultural standards. These standardized features are reflected on every routine activity, including the use of language.

## LANGUAGE TEACHING AND THE CULTURAL COMPONENT

Considering the importance of culture in the cornrnunication process, it becornes evident that when teaching a language, it is necessary to become acquainted with the corresponding culture. Every second language learner should be aware of the existing differences regarding the transrnission and interpretation of messages, as well as the feelings that rnay affect a person who does not have awareness of the communicative behaviour of the members of the target culture.

Frorn the anthropological point of view, culture is the totality of the ways of life of a language cornrnunity. Therefore, language becornes the essential medium for cultural transrnission. Then when teaching a language, culture should be autornatically taught since language per se (vocabulary and grarnmar) is not enough if sociolinguistic cornpetence (Hyrnes, cited by Hinkel: 1999) –the ability to use language under different contextual circumstances– is the goal of instruction. It is irnportant to consider that there are other aspects that foster cultural insight, narnely paralinguistic features, gestures,

body movernents, and the distance rnaintained by the speakers, arnong others. Learning a language communicatively requires developing the ability to recognize such differences, and be able to adapt to the social circumstances under which interactions take place.

Concerning this issue, Seelye (1993: 4) argues that "culture should be taught when we have students to teach." There is a need for second language learners to develop crosscultural awareness -"the recognition that culture affects perception and that culture influences values, attitudes, and behaviour" (Gaston, 1984: 2)- and crosscultural understanding -the capacity to understand that people's behaviour differ because they have different worldviews that have been influenced by their contextual reality and, therefore, their culture. According to Nostrand (cited by Seelye, 1993) these abilities are necessary if language learners pretend to be able to solve intelligently any crosscultural interaction.

The problern, however, rernains on the fact that a language cornrnunity rnay be cornposed by a large number of subcultures. Therefore, approaching the teaching of a culture rnay be perceived as a difficult task. In order to solve this problem, linguists suggest approaching what they call cultural standards -the general cultural insights which are shared by the rnernbers of the different subcultures within a culture. But there is also a questioning point regarding such issue. If there are different language cornrnunities who speak the sarne language and whose standards differ, what aspects of these cultures should be taught?

Brown suggests that the culture to be taught should be that whose social distance -"the cognitive and affective proxirnity of two cultures which come into contact within an individual" (2000: 175)- is the srnallest in relation to the native culture. This argurnent has been based on Schurnann's (cited by Brown, 2000: 176) research regarding social distance, whose conclusions state that,

> "the greater the social distance between two cultures, the greater the difficulty the learner will have in learning the second language, and conversely, the smaller the social distance (the greatest the social solidarity between two cultures), the better will be the language learning situation."

Therefore, it is necessary to analyze consciously the culture of the peoples who speak the foreign language, and rnake a relationship between these cultures and the learner's native culture. That would be the basis for choosing the appropriate culture to focus on in the teaching of the second language.

## TEACHERS'PROBLEMSINAPPROACHING CULTURE IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

Day after day, more language teachers recognize the urgent need to include cultural aspects in the language teaching curriculum in order to improve the students' communicative competence. However, as Donald K. Jarvis puts it, "Unanimity on the value of culture should not be allowed to obscure the fact that, for most language teachers, culture is still a serious issue" (1988:1).

In a study carried out in the area of Occidente (San Ramon de Alajuela and surrounding towns), González, Valverde, and Zúñiga (2003) found out that there are several problems faced by language teachers in approaching culture in their classes:

a. Teachers feel they cannot approach culture because the time given for language teaching is not enough, and they cannot spare it in an already overcrowded curriculum. Teachers usually feel comfortable by thinking that students will be exposed to cultural material later in their leaning process. But such exposure never seems to come for most students. Consequently, teachers should understand that teaching a language along with the culture of the speakers of that language should be an integrative process. This means that language teachers have to plan both language and cultural activities and integrate them into their lesson plans. These activities should use a variety of techniques for teaching culture involving the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

b. Most teachers feel afraid of teaching culture considering that their own knowledge is insufficient and that their training is limited to the target language lexicon and grammar. However, even if the teachers' knowledge is fair regarding cultural aspects, they have to understand that their role is to help their students to attain the skills necessary to make sense of the facts students themselves may discover when studying the language and the target culture. Students need to be trained to understand sociocultural aspects that take part in the process of communication, in order to develop the ability to react appropriately in any crosscultural situation they may face, including situations that have not been previously discussed in the classroom.

c. Teachers also deal with students' negative attitudes toward strange ways. Many students often assume that the target culture patterns can be understood by using their own cultural framework. When they perceive that the cultural phenomena differ, they often react negatively, perceiving the phenomena as a conflict. Language instructors, therefore, need to revise the fact that culture influences our attitudes, emotions, beliefs, and values –our general behaviour– and that it is dangerous to project one's own frame of reference on that of the target culture under study. Making the students construct a new frame of reference may be accomplished by helping them understand their own cultural reference. After that, with the guide of the teacher, students can explore the target culture, trying to be empathetic towards the dissimilarities found.

d. One more problem teachers face in teaching culture is that most of them have not been adequately trained (if done) in such task. They seem to disregard the strategies and goals that might help them to organize instruction around cultural topics. In this case, teachers should remember that their task is not only limited to guide the students in the learning process but to be researchers of the processes needed to improve it. Therefore, they have to have the will to get started in a new learning facet: learning about the target culture and how to teach culture.

e. Finally, two more difficulties teachers face are the numbing overchoice of which aspects of target culture to teach, as well as the poor assistance of the textbooks used in language teaching. The language educator has to understand that it is impossible to teach every single cultural feature. He/she has to understand that it is only possible to teach certain cultural standards that may lead the student to the development of skills that may allow them to test hypothesis regarding cultural behaviour. The teaching of culture, therefore, should be approached as a process, and not as the inclusion of isolated bits of information. There is a good body of frameworks that have been proposed during the last decades that might be very useful to achieve the knowledge required to perform the teaching of cultural aspects satisfactorily. Regarding textbooks, the teachers should be able to evaluate the content of them by using a feasible checklist, including aspects such as attractiveness, cultural content authenticity, cultural acceptability, stereotype free, cultural unification, among others. If the cultural content of the textbooks is not adequate, such materials should not be used, or they would have to be complemented (Artavia, Gonzalez, Rojas and Valverde, 2002).

What is more, Gonzalez, Valverde and Zuñiga (2003) also found out that the graduating students from Sede de Occidente, UCR, even though exhibiting a high level of

linguistic proficiency, face serious problems regarding their knowledge of target cultural aspects about geographical pararneters of the target culture, contributions of the target culture to the world's society, way of life cornrnon to the target society, standard patterns of etiquette exhibited by the rnembers of the target society, and the target culture's unfamiliar conventions. Such findings make "evident that there are irnportant weaknesses in the EFL teaching major concerning the degree of cultural elernents included in the teaching-learning process students go through when learning the foreign language" (Ibid: 64)

## SYSTEMATIZING CULTURE TEACHING: WHAT AND HOW

Inculcating in students that learning about cultures is necessary if awareness of the fact that rnan's interaction with the environment and historical events have produced specific and dissirnilar societal orderings, which in turn have produced differences in overt cultural behavior, should be one of teaching goals in second language classes.

In addition, when thinking about the inclusion of cultural aspects in the language classroom, two important aspects should be considered carefully: 1. what to teach and 2. how to teach.

Regarding the first point, Finnochiaro and Bonorno (1993) highlight three irnportant aspects to consider:

a. Human beings around the world share a nurnber of traits in common. Therefore, it is a good idea two dwell with both cultural sirnilarities and differences, in order to rnake students aware of the universality of culture.

b. Cultural aspects should be chosen in a way that they allow the students to explore their native culture and, at the sarne time, get insights into the target culture.

c. Cultural aspects should be taught as early as possible. During this process, it is essential to include within the list aspects considered as taboo topics in the target society. By doing this, way students are going to becorne aware of the things they rnay be able to talk about freely and those they cannot.

Additionally, Finnochiaro and Bonomo (1993: 170) argue that the cultural topics selected have to serve two major purposes:

" 1. They should contribute to the intellectual, social, moral, civic, and emotional development of the individual.

2. They should provide the individual with insight into another way of life, not only as a means of neutralizing possible prejudices through understanding and appreciation but also as a way of developing a fuller, more complete knowledge of their own culture."

In an attempt to improve the approaching of the cultural elernent in the language classroorn, Gonzalez, Valverde and Zuñiga designed a prograrn whose rnain purpose is "to introduce the students to the study of general target cultural patterns as well as the strategies necessary to continue their own learning about different aspects related to the foreign culture" (2003: 69).

This proposal is mainly based on three methodological rnodels:

a. Donald K. Jarvis's (1988) theory on objectives for learning about culture. This theory underlines that educational objectives for the teaching of culture should emphasize three categories: Cognitive (knowing facts), skill (doing), and affective (feeling). For the researchers, this particular three-part taxonomy is appropriate for the purpose of the prograrn proposed.

b. Nelson Brooks' (cited by Valdes, 1986) theory on culturally-focused courses content. Brooks provides a list of topics which rnay be considered as iterns that can be introduced to the students in the language classroorn, and which are directly related to cultural elernents.

c. Ned Seelye's (1993) theory on the teaching of culture. Seelye argues that the language teacher should consider certain goals when introducing culture in the language class. Seelye's theory has been also influenced Jarvis, since the goals proposed by the forrner author are directed toward the accornplishrnent of cognitive, procedural, and affective skills.

Following, the author provides a detailed description of the three rnain aspects of the proposal, namely the objectives, the content, and the rnethodology:

### I. Objectives

General objectives:

- To ernphasize the irnportance of developing cultural knowledge and its effects in cornrnunication when learning a foreign or second language.

- To prornote cornprehension, tolerance, empathy and acceptance toward the differences that the source culture and the target culture rnay exhibit.

- To promote the development of the strategies for cultural awareness and understanding.

Specific objectives:

- To identify different definitions of the term "culture".

- To show understanding of the definitions of the term culture.

- To understand the importance of cultural knowledge in the learning of a new language.

- To recognize images and symbols common to the target culture.

- To establish similarities and differences between the source culture and the target culture.

- To understand the reasons why there are cultural differences.

- To make students aware of the importance of cultural knowledge in social interactions.

- To integrate the cultural knowledge into communicative situations.

## 2. Content

In order to accomplish the objectives of the course, several topic areas to include in the program are proposed. The topics chosen have been carefully analyzed in order to assure that they will follow a systematic study of culture as well as the development of the strategies for cultural awareness.

The topic areas are the following:

- Different definitions of the terms "culture"

- Relationship between culture and language

- The process of learning a foreign culture

- Cultural awareness and cultural knowledge

- Interacting with strangers

- Exploring the target culture

- Cultural variety in the target culture

- The historical-geographical parameters of the target culture

- Images and symbols within the target culture

- Patterns of living of the target society.

- Cultural behavior of the target society

- Values and attitudes within the target culture

- Stereotypes and ethnocentrism.

- How to compare two cultures

Here, the author, based on Nelson Brook's Primary Message System (PMS) model (cited by Valdez, 1986) provides a general list of topics that may be included

in the curriculum is presented. These topics, of course, should be narrowed by the teacher according to his teaching needs (some examples of possible subtopics for each category are provided in parentheses):

- The school (behavior, opportunities, courtesy, addressing, goals, activities)

- The house (rooms and their use, furnishing, safety)

- The family (members, relationship, chores, communication, activities)

- The community (services, facilities, recreational places, education)

- Social relationships (behavior patterns in different situations, courtesy, regret, surprise, complaints, taboo)

- Moral and spiritual values (human dignity, rights, responsibility, courtesy)

- Symbolism (national symbols, art forms, literature, landmarks)

- Geography (locations, natural resources and environment, weather, seasons)

- History (national heroes, historical events, laws, contributions to worldwide civilization)

- Miscellaneous (expressions of time, days of the week, routine)

## 3. Methodology

"The cultural mazeway: six organizing goals" (Seelye, 1993: 26) is the methodology proposed for approaching the teaching of cultural aspects in the EFL classroom. This framework presents six instructional goals for the teaching of culture: 1. Attitudes toward other cultures and societies, 2. Interaction of language and social variables, 3. Cultural connotations of words and phrases, 4. Conventional behavior in common situations, 5. The sense or functionality of culturally conditioned behavior, 6. Evaluating statements about a society and researching other cultures.

The techniques suggested by Seelye to teach culture are numerous. However, it is important to underline the fact that these techniques should be as authentic as possible, aiming to make the students go through a meaningful learning process of the target cultural aspects. Among those techniques, the author lists the ones that deserve special attention:

- Cultural capsules and clusters

- Cultural assimilators

- Critical incidents

- Cultural episodes

- Cultural mini-dramas
- Media/ visuals music, newspapers, magazines
- Discussion
- Role-play, dramatization, and simulation
- Researching the target culture

## CONCLUSIONS

Effective communication requires more than mastering a language's lexicon and grammar. It is a process that requires knowledge of the socio-cultural patterns that allow people transmit and interpret messages. Therefore, culture becomes an important part of the dynamics of the teaching process in all language classrooms.

English as a second language programs that are solely language oriented cannot fully assist students to understand important cultural insights necessary for appropriate communication. Teachers, however, face several problems when trying to include cultural aspects in the classroom inasmuch as they do not have time, proper training, or the motivation to make the cultural aspect a part of their classes.

Different approaches, methods and techniques have been suggested to assist the teaching of culture in the second language classroom. They might differ in their features, but their purpose is always the same: the systematic approach for culture teaching in the language classroom. A concrete proposal based on the reality faced by teachers and students may provide clear strategies for operationalizing such models, taking into account the needs and límitations the subjects involved in the teaching-learning process have.

Further research can be done regarding the limitations faced by teachers concerning the issued here discussed. It would be valuable to do experimental research to assess the functionality of the models proposed for approaching the teaching of culture in the EFL classroom.

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