

Integrating Cultural Activities in the Foreign language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Due to the inseparable nature of language and culture and the complexities of intercultural communication the foreign language classroom has become the best place to help students develop cultural understanding and intercultural skills. Once foreign language teachers have accepted responsibility for preparing today's students for tomorrow's complex world, they need to increase their understanding of two related questions: firstly, what training is necessary for the process of learning about a culture; secondly, how to teach culture by gradually building up skills. This article discusses the need for teachers to take into account both the process itself and the development of a meaningful cultural curriculum. Therefore practical activities will be presented which can help both to prepare students for cultural tolerance and to integrate skill-building activities into Foreign Language Teaching.

KEY WORDS: Foreign language, Culture. Cultural understanding, Intercultural skills, Intercultural communication

RESUMEN

La naturaleza inseparable de lengua y cultura junto con la complejidad de la comunicación transcultural convierten el aula de lenguas extranjeras en un lugar idóneo para la enseñanza cultural. Este enfoque renovador reta a los profesores de lenguas extranjeras a ampliar sus conocimientos en dos áreas irrelacionadas: 1. la preparación psicológica del estudiante para iniciar el proceso de aprendizaje cultural, y 2. la aplicación de un método para el desarrollo de destrezas transculturales. Este artículo pretende reorientar a los profesores tanto en el proceso de aprendizaje como en el diseño de un syllabus cultural. Para ello se presentan actividades diseñadas con un doble objetivo: preparar al estudiante para el entendimiento cultural y fomentar las destrezas transculturales en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Lengua extranjera, Cultura, Aprendizaje cultural, Destrezas transculturales, Comunicación transcultural.

I. INTRODUCTION

Research and classroom experience have long supported the concept of cultural integration (Hymes 1964, Byram 1989, 1991). The integration of culture in the second language curriculum has become prevalent in recent years, particularly if the course is following the current guidelines for a more communicative language learning. For years now, language teachers have striven to increase their students' cultural understanding, helped by the groundwork done by Jarvis (1974), Nostrand (1974) and Seelye (1987) for meaningful culture study in the foreign language classroom.

Though teachers are aware of the fact that both language and culture learning are a process of accepting a foreign way of thinking and behaving, they have not paid enough attention to students' own culture-bound behaviour or to the preparation required for opening students' minds to new experiences.

This article will discuss the need to help teachers to restructure their views of the culture teaching/learning process. In order to prepare students to learn a culture teachers need to be aware of the results of research on the role of attitudes and the process of acculturation. Teachers not only need to help students revise their linguistic and cultural patterns but also to prepare students for acculturation.

Laying this groundwork requires an understanding of a necessary psychological preparation and of how meaningful culture teaching can be integrated into the foreign language classroom. Thus, this article suggests some practical activities designed to prepare students for the acceptance of new patterns of behaviour, including the need for readiness and for self-awareness, as well as the relativization of cultural norms. When culture is presented, it must be addressed in a gradual way, and articulated and coordinated across levels. This gradual approach means that a culture learning programme recognizes the necessity of starting with an awareness of one's own patterns of behaviour and proceeds from there to the examination of foreign patterns of behaviour. Such a programme will help students build a cultural framework and extend the new understanding to cultural differences. Following these steps taken for cultural tolerance, we will present practical activities dealing with skill-building culture teaching in the foreign language classroom.

II. ATTITUDES AND ACCULTURATION

A number of studies confirm the theory that students' attitudes towards both the language and its culture are closely related to how well they succeed in

acquiring a second language (Gardner et al. 1978, Gardner 1985). Positive attitudes towards the target language, the speakers and culture of the target language, the teacher and the class and language study in general have been consistently identified as important in research (Gardner and Smythe 1975, Gardner 1985) on foreign language teaching.

The difficulty in learning a foreign language and culture. in acquiring new ways of perceiving, thinking and feeling can quite often be a frustrating experience for students. Since students have to deal with their own linguistic and culturally-induced behaviour. they might suffer a culture shock, described by psychologists (Foster 1962, Adler 1972 quoted by Brown 1986) as an identity conflict. Brown (1986) points out that learners with a fragile ego will develop a defense mechanism to avoid the apparent threat to their ethnic identity. According to Guiora (1972). our language ego, the personal egoistic nature of language learning, plays a major role in students' ability to adopt new forms of behaviour. As linguistic and cultural adaptation involves the acceptance of different norms of behaviour, students might feel compelled to establish a new set of linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour. Students may try to prevent these feelings, devaluing the foreign culture, approaching it with prejudices, stereotyped information and ethnocentrism. Thus, negative attitudes emerge from the fear of losing one's identity and are translated into inadequate ideas about the target culture.

These negative attitudes also become part of the acculturation process described by Hanvey (1975). During the first stages of this process the learner sees the culture in a stereotyped, superficial manner. Growing a more ample experience of the foreign culture leads to the before mentioned culture shock, the learner becomes frustrated with his inability to adapt. Only if the learner is willing and has the opportunity to establish new cultural patterns which help him to overcome the frustrations will he be prepared to accept the cultural event as an alternative behaviour. Thus. teachers have to play a therapeutic role in helping learners to move through stages of acculturation. The teachers' understanding of the process, as well as their willingness to work through students' rejection, can help them move through the levels of cross-cultural awareness. If teachers are to restructure their students' cultural conceptions they need to recognize that these cultural attitudes play a paramount role in that restructuring. Brown (1986) extends the teacher's role further, to helping the students deal with the surprising emotional involvement that the acculturation process entails.

II.1. THE NEED FOR READINESS AND SELF-AWARENESS

The relationship between attitudes and culture-learning is one of the points emphasized by the recent tendency to include cultural aspects in FL teaching. Due to the need for cultural tolerance for the student's linguistic and psychological adaptation, these studies (Seelye 1987; Byram 1989) suggest a psychological preparation that enables students to assimilate cultural knowledge. It is obvious that teachers can no longer rely on the traditional method of teaching culture, limiting it to fine arts, geography and history. They must begin to teach about daily patterns of life, including the values and beliefs of the target culture, in a way that encourages students as far as possible to accept the new cultural experience as an alternative way of living.

Much work has been dedicated to implementing this broader definition of culture. Seelye, among others, has helped teachers apply the earlier studies of Freeman (1968) and Nostrand (1974) to new cultural materials. Robinson (1976), Pusch (1979) and Crawford-Lange and Lange (1987) among others, have contributed to identifying problems associated with acculturation and methods used to direct culture-learning.

One of the problems in the acculturation process lies in the obstacle of the students' lack of understanding about culture in general, their unawareness of how much their own behaviours are constrained by their own culture. Since all learners' interpretations of cultural expression will necessarily depend to a great extent on their previous experience, they need to acknowledge their own beliefs and behaviour in order to progress to a tolerance of cultural differences. Therefore, self-awareness must serve as the core of a programme designed for attitude readiness.

II.2. CULTURAL RELATIVITY

The major obstacle to applying principles of cultural understanding lies in the assumption of the exclusive validity of one's own culture, rejecting any other cultural alternative from this position of superiority. It is only possible to effect a change of unfavourable attitudes by guiding students towards the similarities of values between their own and the foreign culture. The concept of cultural relativity, proposed by Seelye (1987), implies the development of cultural sensitivity based on a process of relativization:

- a) to make students aware of their own culture,
- b) to draw parallels with the foreign culture,
- c) to assess both cultures with relative criteria.

Students' progress towards cultural awareness relies on their readiness to adopt a critical point of view that allows them to consider themselves within their cultural context from a certain psychological distance. This critical attitude will emerge from the analysis of behaviour, awakening their awareness that each culture entails a range of values and options to satisfy the psychological and physical needs of their members. Once students are able to accept the relative validity of any culture, they might also understand that our perception and criteria are influenced by our social, ethnic and moral upbringing. It follows that, the achievement of cultural relativity is actually based on the awareness of cultural constraints and in overcoming these limitations in an attempt to open students' minds towards the tolerance of cultural otherness. The second step in this process of relativization should provide students with cultural information about foreign norms of behaviour and values similar to their own, so that they start to experience the validity of both cultures for their members. Therefore, critical integration within the process of cross-cultural acceptance becomes the main objective for teachers of a foreign language. How these major objectives can be achieved will be explained in detail along with the methodology, the goals and the goal-related activities.

III. INTEGRATING CULTURAL INSTRUCTION IN THE FL CLASSROOM

Naturally, teachers who instruct with specific student objectives in mind are more successful in achieving their goals. Furthermore, students take class instruction more seriously when they are held accountable for their learning. It makes sense that teachers need to specify their culture-learning goals and objectives in the same way as they set other goals for their classes and evaluate students' progress towards them.

III.1. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Dickinson (1987) offers a framework for the teacher's role in FLL whose main aspects cover the methodological approach of culture teaching here suggested. Two essential functions are attributed to the teacher: to help students develop their communicative competence and their competence as learners. The development of students' communicative competence is closely related to culture teaching, since cross-cultural understanding must necessarily rely on communication. The communicative methodology is based on two main principles: language is mainly understood as a vehicle of communication, so that the importance of message and content are emphasized; the selection of content

requires taking a decision on the semantic fields involved and real contexts where communication takes place, as well as on the specific functions of communication (Sánchez 1987). Thus, communicative competence is built on the understanding of the socio-cultural contexts where the foreign language is spoken. Seen in this way, the link between language and culture impels the application of the communicative methodology to the integration of culture in the FL classroom. The selection of topics and activities that pertain directly to students' needs and interests, as well as students' active participation in the lessons are two further points that relate the communicative methodology to culture teaching. The latter aim includes psychological and methodological preparation, which consists in developing students' metacognitive self-confidence and their training for the use of learners' strategies. Obviously, this psychological approach can be applied and widened to students' attitudes towards the foreign culture.

Taking into account both the psychological preparation and the communicative methodology as guidelines for culture learning, three initial steps in teaching cultural concepts are presented (Seelye 1987). First, teachers must identify the skills involved in cross-cultural understanding and communication. These skills become the goals of cultural instruction. The second step consists of the development of performance objectives that are goal-related and, finally, goal-related learning activities for cultural instruction are to be integrated in the FL classroom.

III.2. GOALS

Seven goals identified by Seelye have been ordered according to our prior criteria of a psychological introduction followed by the combination of linguistic and cultural objectives. These goals are:

- I. Attitudes towards other societies: students will be guided to experience intellectual curiosity about the target culture and empathy towards its people.
- II. The functionality and relativity of culturally conditioned behaviour: students will acquire an understanding of the causes of their own and foreign behaviour.
- III. The interaction of language and socio-cultural variables (age, sex, social class ...): students will become aware of socio-cultural restrictions upon the use of language.
- IV. Cultural connotations of words and phrases: students will develop an awareness that cultural images are associated with common words.

V. Conventional behaviour in common situations: students' understanding of conventions constraining how people act in common situations in the target culture will be developed.

VI. Evaluating statements about a culture: students' ability to make, evaluate and refine generalities concerning the target culture will be enhanced.

VII. Researching another culture: students show that they have developed skills needed to locate and organize information about the target culture.

The activities are described in the context of teaching English as a foreign language and aimed at students of an intermediate level of language proficiency.

III.3. GOAL-RELATED ACTIVITIES

According to our first goal, the following activities are examples that can be given to language learners as they begin their emotional journey of acculturation.¹ These activities should precede classroom activities that provide target culture similarities and differences. The first basic purpose must imply a restructuring of students' attitudes and world view. C. Mantle-Bromley (1992) suggests several lessons meant to help students achieve pertinent knowledge assumed by further cultural study. The first step consists of guiding students towards self-awareness. As they learn to understand how culture both guides and constrains their behaviour, they will be able to view another culture as an alternative way of living and will be more willing to adopt different perspectives.

FIRST GOAL: Changing Attitudes Towards Other Societies

First activity: Defining Culture. Students will be presented with ten examples of culture-bound behaviour and ten examples of individual behaviour. Their tasks consist of studying the examples and defining -according to the Concept Attainment Model (Joyce and Weil 1980 quoted by Mantle Bromley 1992)- the concept by looking for patterns in the culture examples. Students will also try to determine whether other examples belong to the concept of culture or not. After having given several examples of the culture or individuality students will list the characteristics of the culture examples and try to provide other

¹ Since most of the activities heavily rely on class discussions as well as on the development of students' communicative competence, they will be carried out with language learners of an intermediate level

examples of behaviour, deciding whether it is cultural or individual. This activity will be continued until the students are able to define the concept of «culture» from their list of characteristics and until a definition is agreed upon by the teacher and the class. With this activity the students will actively participate in achieving a consensual definition of culture and they will understand that the behaviour of all of us is culturally conditioned. Another activity that furthers students' awareness of their own culture has been suggested by Heusinkveld (1985).

Second activity: Cultural Awareness. Students are asked to brainstorm elements of their native culture. In small groups students then have to complete two tasks: a) continue to record as many examples of Spanish culture as they can in about eight minutes and b) decide on 15 to 20 topics that would be relevant in a short course for foreign students learning about Spanish culture. As a whole class the lists will be discussed, contrasting similarities and diversities.

Third activity: Eliciting Stereotypes. This activity for the understanding of culture-bound behaviour and the existence of stereotypes is presented by C. Mantle-Bromley (1992). The teacher will elicit commonly held target-culture stereotypes and help students determine their origin and the degree to which these stereotypes represent the overall population. Then, students are asked to collect examples that reinforce stereotypes: in newspapers and magazine advertisements. The whole class will discuss how these stereotypes are reinforced by society and why they are difficult to eliminate.

Fourth activity: Ethnocentric Awareness. The notion of ethnocentrism can be introduced by asking questions about common behaviour: What is the adequate behaviour when you are introduced to a relative? What is the proper behaviour in a restaurant? (Mantle-Bromley 1992) Then the discussion will move to generational differences, so that the students become aware of how common it is for different groups to think their way is the best. On this basis the term «ethnocentrism» can be presented and students will be guided to look for their own ethnocentric views. Thus, they will be able to extend their own communication problems with parents to different cultures. This activity will help them see that any kind of intolerance can hinder communication.

Activities to improve negative attitudes or strong ethnocentric beliefs can be used with an attitude-readiness programme easily adaptable to the language

classroom (Triandis 1971; Zimbardo et al 1977). These lessons include three types of activities:

Fifth activity. Providing discrepant information: students are to examine the truth of stereotypes held of their own culture and then transfer the analysis -reading articles, gathering information- to stereotypes of the target culture. As students learn to observe **individuals**, they will learn that generalizations about an **entire group** are usually inappropriate.

Sixth activity. Behaving in an inconsistent way with one's attitudes: after discussing a particular cultural difference, students should brainstorm the advantages of each way of perceiving the world. Then, students are assigned to different «**sides**» and should debate which behaviour is most advantageous. Thus, they will understand how there are advantages and disadvantages to every culture-bound behaviour.

Seventh activity. Direct exposure. Determine what information the students are interested in learning from a guest student of the target culture. Topics that are directly related to their needs and interests will increase their motivation. Students will discuss the topic before inviting foreign exchange students to help them recognize their current beliefs and determine appropriate questions. Discuss the students'chosen topics with the guest in order to help him **feel** more prepared for the questions.

There are differing views on presenting the culture learner with both differences and similarities. **Culture** relativity as the core of cross-cultural understanding can be introduced with the following activity:

Eighth activity: Cultural Relativity. Present a short list of universal needs of societies to the students, such as: housing, clothing, food, love, faith etc. Divide the class into **small groups**, asking them to complete the list of physical and psychological needs. As a whole class the lists will be discussed until the major universal needs are being agreed upon. Then, students are asked to gather examples of how these needs are satisfied in their own and in the target culture. The teacher will help students analyse the motives for the similarities and differences between both cultures. Thus, students will understand that each culture offers a range of options for the satisfaction of these needs depending on historical, geographical and demographical **factors**. This activity is meant to

develop students understanding of the relative validity of each culture for its members.

As the importance of previous knowledge in processing new information is widely recognized, it makes psychological sense that teachers will start with the familiar, the similarities. Robinson (1976) strongly believes that rather than teaching the uniqueness of a given culture, we need to begin by examining how similar two cultures are. In this context, the activities suggested are mainly designed to emphasize the underlying similarities between cultures and are based on the students' active participation in order to involve students both cognitively and affectively in the culture-learning process.

SECOND GOAL: The Functionality And Relativity Of Culturally Conditioned Behaviour.

The unifying aim underlying the following activities is the goal of increasing sensitivity to culturally different ways of behaviour. If learners of English are to communicate successfully with individuals from English-speaking cultures, they need to recognize the different cultural patterns at work in the behaviour of people from English-speaking countries.

First activity: Answering Real Questions.

Material: Large sheets of paper.

Preparation: Bring to the class large sheets of paper for each English-speaking country. At the top of each sheet of paper write the name of each of the countries

In class: Divide the class in as many groups as countries are represented on the sheets. Each group is to move from paper to paper and write the questions they wish to ask about each country. Students may write as many questions as they like. Then, each group will represent one of the countries. The papers with the questions are distributed and a period of time assigned to each group to answer the questions written about the country they represent. Tell the groups to meet outside the class to plan their presentations. Explain that they are not to write out a speech: they may use notes, but they are to speak spontaneously. Over several class periods, groups take turns to make their presentations. After all the presentations have been made, the teacher should conduct a whole-class discussion on the following questions: What did you learn about the countries represented by the people in your class? In what ways, if any, did this activity change your opinion about any of the countries?

Second activity: Cross-cultural Role Plays (B. Tomalin and S. Stempleski 1993).
Preparation: Prepare a brief description of an incident that happened to you and led to a cross-cultural misunderstanding.

In class: Explain to the students that most of us have been involved in situations that have led to cross-cultural misunderstandings. Describe a cross-cultural incident in which you were involved. Divide the class into groups of three or four. Individual students can write up incidents that happened to them, and place their description in a box. Small groups of students can select an incident from the box and act it out. This can be followed by a whole-class discussion of each incident and its cross-cultural implications.

THIRD GOAL: Interaction of Language and Socio-cultural Variables

This performance objective related to the interaction of language-social variables is exemplified by an activity prepared by P. Aurensanz, H. Bals and E.S. Rife, under the supervision of M.A. Cooke (1984), presented by Seelye (1987).

Activity: This activity consists of a series of dialogues that are either acted out or taped and illustrated by filmstrips. The dialogues will show how language and gestures are influenced by the age, sex, social class, place of residence and relationship of the speakers. After listening to and observing the four dialogues students will carry out two of the following activities:

- a) The students will be asked to recall what happened.
- b) Given dialogue statements, they will identify the relationship of the speakers.
- c) Given similar circumstances and a dialogue statement, the students will be able to vary appropriately the expressions and gestures used in greeting a relative of the same sex, a friend of the same age, etc.
- d) Students present a similar dialogue of one or more circumstances portrayed in these examples.

FOURTH GOAL: Cultural Connotations of Words and Phrases

An approach to cultural connotations is illustrated by an English unit based on an activity designed by C. Larson, J. Lopas, D. Klein, C. Amelung and M. Kent (1985).

First activity: Cultural Connotation of «tea».

Preparation: present a popular saying «That's not my cup of tea», an example of English literature: O. Wilde's play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, English advertisements, a political cartoon and a short skit and provide an assortment of English teas in the class.

In class: Students will indicate the cultural meanings of the word «tea» in the target culture by carrying out all the following activities.

- a) Students will point out the importance of the word tea in popular sayings and in literature.
- b) Students will point out the role of tea in the English society. examining the advertisements and the cartoons.
- c) Students will list examples of the relationship between tea and culture upon witnessing a short skit.
- d) Students will learn to identify sorts of tea by taste and name.

Second activity: Answer, add and ask. In this activity, prepared by B. Tomalin and S. Stempleski (1993), students will have the opportunity to carry on a conversation in the British manner.

Preparation: prepare a taped or written dialogue for the class.

In class: Explain to the students that in typical British conversation, participants usually practise the three 'A's: answer, add and ask. You will read the conversation out (or project it with an overhead transparency). Students will identify the various stages where each of the Three 'A's occurs. Then, they will write down one open-ended question on a controversial issue to ask another student. Elicit questions from the students and write them on the blackboard. Ask the class to vote on the questions they wish to discuss. Divide the class into pairs. Student A will ask B the question. B will answer, add some information, then ask A a related question. A will answer, add information, ask another related question, etc.

FIFTH GOAL: Conventional Behaviour in Common Situations.

Activity: Culture Capsule.

Preparation: Culture capsules are generally prepared outside of class by a group of students but presented in class time in five or ten minutes at the end of the period. A culture capsule consists of a paragraph of explanation of one minimal difference between the native and the target custom, along with

several illustrative photos or relevant realia. The subject matter can be quite varied,- they are not merely disassociated fragments of the life of society.

Material: A short video sequence

In class: Ask the students to take a sheet of paper and divide it with a line into two halves: «same and different». Tell the students that you are going to play a video sequence which contains information about the target culture. Their task is to find three things that are the same in their country and three things that are different. After they have watched the sequence twice, divide the students into small groups to discuss the similarities and differences they have observed. Ask each group to prepare on their own a culture capsule about one of the differences observed.

SIXTH GOAL: Evaluating Statements about the Target Culture.

Activity: Culture Assimilator. Several social psychologists have developed a programmed technique to facilitate the adjustment to another culture (Fiedler, Mitchell and Triandis 1971, quoted by Seelye 1987). This technique provides the students with several episodes of target cultural behaviour. Each episode describes a critical incident of cross-cultural interaction, a situation the native speaker finds puzzling or which he/she is likely to misinterpret, and a situation that can be interpreted in a fairly unequivocal manner.

Material: A task sheet for each student.

In class: Divide the class into small groups. Hand out the task sheet and explain the task to the students. They are to work together, discussing the situations and deciding what they would do in each situation. After the students have completed the task sheet, a volunteer from each group summarizes the group's discussion and answers. Then, distribute the answer key and have the students continue their discussion in small groups, comparing their own answers with those in the answer key.

SEVENTH GOAL: Researching another Culture.

An effective approach to teaching cross-cultural research skills, applicable in the FL classroom, has been prepared by E.L. Rock (1983). Students are not given information on the topics; rather, they are guided through a series of «prerequisite activities» to finding the information themselves. A number of creative activities are suggested for each topic to interest students in using their newfound information.

Activity: British Universities.

Prerequisite activities: The students are asked to

- a) consult English magazines and newspapers in the library;
- b) interview English exchange students;
- c) write to an English university for copies of schedules and curricula;

- d) contact the British Council for posters, flyers etc., relating to English students' life;
- e) consult reference work (f.i. civilization books) containing information on British education.

Creative activities:

1. Students will present a skit of a classroom situation in British university life.
2. The students might make a notebook of newspaper articles on British academic life.
3. Students should prepare a discussion on student organization at British universities.
4. Students are asked to write a paper contrasting requirements for a university degree in Britain and in Spain.

These have been some examples of goal-related activities that combine the development of cultural skills with the practice of the four skills: listening and reading comprehension as well as speaking and writing expression, in the FL classroom. However, effective use of these activities requires careful planning by the teacher. Once language teachers understand how they can teach for progressive skill acquisition in culture, teachers will pass on their knowledge in an organizational framework to their students. As I reminded my readers a little earlier, students must be prepared to convert cultural information into cultural tolerance and knowledge. This psychological and methodological approach will allow students to make the knowledge of the foreign language class applicable to their cross-cultural experiences.

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INTEGRATING CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

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