

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Abstract: Nowadays foreign language practitioners can no longer approach teaching practice without adopting an intercultural perspective. Recent studies acknowledge the inseparable link between language and culture and admit that culture plays an important role in the process of successful and effective communication.

The current paper is built around the idea that the communicative approach to English language teaching/learning can turn into a first cultural experience for learners, particularly in specialized environments like engineering. The English language class with communicative methodology and practice can contribute to creating the premises for 'intercultural' education where intercultural communication skills can be acquired.

Keywords: language classroom, communicative approach, education, intercultural perspective.

Why an intercultural approach in teaching?

The 21st century world has turned into an intercultural communication network in which professional or personal interaction with other people calls for the understanding of implied meaning which “*is by no means guaranteed because conversants share the same dictionary*” (Barnlund, 1994 in Samovar & Porter, 1994:27). Attribution of meaning at either end of the communication channel depends not only on the language used but also on the individuals' knowledge of the world or frame of reference which is culturally determined. Thus, effective communication is as much conceptual as linguistic, because encoding or decoding a message depends on the cultural context and the schemata of the parties involved in the act of communication. Such an insight challenges the traditional belief that linguistic competence alone can enable learners to communicate successfully outside the classroom. Therefore, teaching English as a foreign language (FL) must make room for the integration of an explicit cultural dimension that can lead to enhanced competence when communication takes place across cultural boundaries. The language-culture relationship is essential to what goes on in the FL class and “the field of English-language teaching not only accepts that language and culture are inseparably related, but also recognizes that culture plays an important role throughout the process of language teaching and learning” (Baxter 1983:251). Examining information about and making contrastive comparisons between the students' (home) and foreign language (target) culture is likely to provide the learners with a greater degree of understanding of other people as well as with a self-awareness of themselves as individuals belonging to a cultural group. In such an approach, “culture” teaching becomes a joint teacher-student interpersonal process, in the sense that teachers themselves go through the experience of discovering ‘culture’ together with their learners. Since the foreign language is the medium of talking about culture, the lessons will reflect the inseparable link between language and culture in building the “thresholds” for cultural awareness that learners cross towards understanding, being tolerant and accepting ‘otherness’ when interacting and communicating with other people.

The Specific Context and its Cultural Dimensions

In spite of all winds of change and European perspectives, the academic engineering environment still remains traditional in form and essence, that is teacher-centred: subject teachers are the only competent authority in class. This usually makes communication one-way since lectures are delivered by professors, students do not play an active role, they do not frequently ask questions, they are told ‘what’ and ‘how’ to do. Thus, in terms of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, the academic context in which English as a foreign language is taught can be said to display *Large Power Distance*, *Collectivism*, *Formal Harmony* and *High Uncertainty Avoidance*, which promote a certain learning culture.

Given the fact that, since the 1990’s, English has been taught communicatively, these cultural norms change in the foreign language class. This change is possible because of the specific context of the language class within which there are two key players: the communicative methodology and the parties involved, teacher and learners.

On the one hand, the methodology used makes the language class learner-centred. The learners have an active role being responsible for their own learning, they are involved in an interactive process of communication. Learners are invited to express personal opinions and are taught to respect their peers’ opinions and actions. They learn to study the foreign language in a different way, namely by cooperating with each other in pairs and groups in a spirit of positive competition. Their relationship with the teacher becomes a two-way partnership in communication.

On the other hand, the learners themselves contribute to this change. The students, who attend English classes, most of them for their first year of study according to the university’s curriculum, are young adults who are mature and knowledgeable enough to cope with culture-bound concepts, i.e. stereotypes, or make comparisons and contrasts between their own and other people’s culture. Then, their level of proficiency in English is generally intermediate which permits a more relaxed approach to language teaching/learning and allows for a broadening of focus by integrating other elements into language teaching, e.g. professional communication skills and cultural aspects. Then, it is the students’ complex motivation to learn English which becomes an actual support for a change of focus. They enjoy movies and songs, they watch documentaries on the Discovery Channel or simply browse the Internet. Our students travel a lot, as simple tourists or as part of programmes such as ‘Erasmus’ or ‘Work and Travel’. The English language provides access to information, professional development, job opportunities, immigration and leisure activities. This is the reason why Romanian learners in general are open to adapt so easily to the cultural norms of interaction promoted in the learning of English.

However, the integration of a cultural element in the language class in the given learning context faces some problems and challenges. First, the learners are monolingual and monocultural. This does not cater for interaction and communication across cultures. Secondly, owing to their previous educational background, the students perceive ‘culture’ in terms of elitist ‘high culture’, i.e. the art, literature, music, institutions and so on of a group or nation. The main challenge lies in the different meaning that is given to ‘culture’ within an intercultural approach, i.e. ‘low culture’ which means access to the world view and communication style of other people who come from different cultures. Another important issue is the decision on whether to focus on the target language culture or to be culture-

general. Most engineering students are most likely going to use English as a means of international communication due to the heterogeneous nationality of the people who do business in and with Romania. Most probably, the learners will function in a broad multilingual and multicultural context, not necessarily British or American. This means that the expected goal of culture teaching is not ‘knowing about’ a certain culture but coping with language and culture in any academic or professional encounter, which basically means that learners should develop appropriate communication skills, strategies and awareness of ‘otherness’.

The new ‘culture’ proposed by the English language class arises from the intimate relationship between communication, language and culture. As some writers say “... every cultural pattern and every single act of social behavior involves communication in either an explicit or implicit sense...” (Sapir 1931 quoted in Kim, 1988:47). Thus, the cultural dimensions of the English language teaching/learning context derive from the training for communication the learners are urged to become part of.

The Relationship between Language and Culture in the Communicative Class

Like any other approach, the approach to ‘culture’ teaching should be tuned to the specific needs of the educational context in which it is applied. A basic need remains the one that learners need to expand their knowledge of the English language. Therefore, the integration of a cultural element into language teaching should start from and with language work. The learners learn the language to communicate. The language class is not an abstract vacuum but a concrete reality where “language must be studied in relation to its role in human communication” (Brown, 1986:135). The learners’ traditional *linguistic competence*, i.e. knowledge of the language, the system of rules enabling the learners to produce and understand an indefinite number of sentences, is expected to turn into *communicative competence*, the ability to produce and understand sentences which are appropriate to the context in which they occur (Crystal, 1985). Thus, communicative competence subsumes the social determinants of linguistic behaviour including such contextual matters as the relationship between speaker/writer and listener/reader and the influencing factors, which stem from the time and place of communication. As mentioned earlier, we believe that the essential impact of the communicative methodology on the Romanian learners is their ‘training’ for communication which is likely to make some changes in their communication culture. Language expresses culture; this means that, at every stage of dealing with the language, there must be a cultural load attached to the language, which awaits to be revealed. Thus, we can postulate the proposition that communicative competence becomes linked to *cultural competence*, i.e. the knowledge of how to behave verbally and nonverbally in a particular cultural setting. For instance, one of the main features of the communicative approach is that learners are taught to value the role of *context in communication*, i.e. the contextual features surrounding the use of the text by both the encoder and decoder, knowledge of the topic, situation and participants supported by background knowledge, sociocultural knowledge and schematic knowledge.

There has been much research and debate on finding the best ways to teach ‘culture’ in the language class. For example, Baxter (1983) finds fault with both “*the linguistic competence*” for its omission of the ability to use language in specific contexts and “*the*

communicative competence” for its ignorance of the necessary knowledge and behavioural skills required for communications in intercultural context. Based on the measurement of appropriate language in terms of its suitability in intercultural contexts, and not according to NS (native speaker) standards, the researcher suggested a model for teaching English – EIL (teaching English as an International Language). Baxter’s EIL tries to make up for the limitations of a communicative competence approach since English is seen as a “lingua franca”. In this line of thought, Baxter argues that, although the use of English is culture-bound, the English language is free of any specific culture or political system. In this way, Baxter strongly supports the idea that intercultural communication skills can be taught in the English language classroom.

Another researcher, Murphy (1988) constructs four models of FLT methodology which assign a particular role to the cultural dimension. Her approaches are more complex than Baxter’s as she considers all the elements that contribute to teaching “culture”, such as cultural input, role of learners, type of competence as well as the language-culture relationship. Relevant to our discussion is her second model, the Communicative Model. Although the model maintains the stress on linguistic objectives, there is a change of emphasis in the sense that the concept of culture acquires the meaning of verbal behaviour and becomes “culture” with a small “c”. Murphy calls communicative competence “le savoir-faire”, i.e. the knowledge of what to do as cultural behaviour is implemented in a set of skills and strategies. We believe that such a model opens a way to reconsidering the place and role of the cultural dimension in FL teaching. As far as the Romanian context is concerned, the communicative method has become a culture-carrying framework built upon the cultural values and dimensions transmitted and practiced in the English language class. The “culture” of the FL class strikes a different note within the culture of the institution because it changes some essential dimensions such as Power Distance, Individualism – Collectivism or Uncertainty Avoidance (Hofstede 1986, Goodman 1994). The students’ original educational culture, which is hierarchical, collectivist, role-governed and assertive becomes egalitarian, individualist, less rule-governed and more quality-of-life for everybody in the language class due to the communicative approach.

The English Language class fosters its own ‘culture’ which can be similar to Holiday’s “small culture” (1999:237) defined as the culture displayed and formed in a small social grouping or activities wherever there is cohesive behaviour. This “small culture” springs from the techniques, tasks, working formats, roles of teachers and learners promoted by the communicative approach to language teaching/learning. Such a belief finds further support in the statement that “*Culture is learned, not inherited. It derives from one’s social environment, not from one’s genes...*” (Hofstede, 1994:5).

The social environment is the classroom in which the learners learn the language by thinking, behaving and reacting in a different way from their specialist subject classes. To continue along this line of reasoning, we can say that a process of ‘acculturation’, i.e. the process of second culture learning, takes place in the FL class, while the learners are subject to the cultural influences associated with the language they are learning. We would like to take just a few examples which can uphold this assumption.

Communicative English Language teaching endorses the culture of *learner-centredness* in which the learners are treated as independent individuals who take initiative in

communication, have their own opinions and assume responsibility for their learning. The pattern of the learners' dependence on the teacher reflecting large power distance is superseded by a relationship of interdependence between teachers and learners. The teacher is no longer 'a guru' who transfers personal wisdom; teachers become facilitators, monitors, experts who share their knowledge with the students. If we consider the techniques of *predicting* or *guessing unknown words from the context*, we can assume that the learners' original low tolerance of ambiguity is affected. *Brainstorming* encourages the free association of concepts, ideas, facts or feelings related to a context without evaluating the merits of a thought. Thus, among other cultural values such as initiative, respect for and tolerance of difference, non-judgemental behaviour is developed. All these strategies increase trust in one's own ability and promote a higher self-esteem which are new cultural values to our engineering students. Overall, the communicative methodology shifts the focus from performance to competence in the sense that the students learn how to learn. The learners are guided to find their own paths by capitalizing on their existing knowledge and experiences. We tend to believe that this is a piece of learning that transcends the limits of the language classroom and makes the learners part of a new learning culture. Another argument comes from the use of cooperative working formats. According to Cushner & Brislin (1996) group dynamics can be regarded as intercultural or 'multicultural', i.e. culturally diverse interaction. The explanation to such a view is justified by the opportunity the learners get to experience a variety of view points and verbal behaviours which are influenced by each group member's *idioculture*, the individual unique level of culture, and communicative competence. Although the learners belong to the same culture and speak the same language, they come from various walks of life, they have their own social and educational backgrounds, their experiences, world views and lifestyles are different. It is obvious that learners themselves represent an example of a certain degree of individual and societal multiculturalism:

"We consider most people to be potentially multicultural, as we are all socialized by many different groups that influence our behaviours and thought patterns, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic state and religion (Cushner & Brislin 1996:5)

To make a long story short, we can say that group work in the FL class plays the role of 'a dress rehearsal' of a real life encounter between cultures. From a 'culture' learning perspective, the working format trains the learners how to negotiate, how to work in a team and how share responsibility. The emerging cultural values, such as team spirit, flexibility, tolerance, cooperation and responsibility become incorporated into the 'small' culture of the language class, which definitely reshapes the general culture dimensions of the educational context. Thus, while the learners are learning the foreign language they develop a new mode of thinking, feeling and acting, they modify their existing 'cultural baggage' (Byram 1989). In other words, the learners modify their concepts and schemata so that new cultural learning can take place.

Byram (1989) provides an intercultural approach model which makes a clear distinction between 'cultural information', i.e. factual data about a culture and 'cultural knowledge', i.e. data plus understanding the explanation of why it is the way it is. According to the researcher, plain 'cultural information' makes learners culture-outsiders, with a

consumer-tourist competence which does not enable them to understand or empathize with the target culture. The major limitation of this approach is that the cultural learning is passive, static and does not develop any skills for real communications.

On the other hand, learners can be taken over the tourist-competence threshold and offered the perspective of ‘insiders’ who can build a participant-type intercultural competence. The learners develop their ‘cultural information’, the ‘what’ of culture into the ‘why’, which should provide them with deeper understanding that is likely to lead to ‘cultural knowledge’. This can be achieved through a process of cultural awareness raising and training. The concept of “awareness” i.e. thinking about, reflecting on, is a key element in Byram’s model based on four quarters: language learning, language awareness, cultural awareness and cultural experience. The researcher divides cultural awareness into two processes: cross-cultural awareness and inter-cultural awareness. He argues that a cross-cultural approach is limited because it reinforces stereotyping through focus on boundary-marking phenomena, i.e. separate identity of a culture. He further pleads for an intercultural awareness approach based on a generalized view of the full range of cultural complexity exhibited by any culture. This position, which has some common points with Baxter’s and Murphy’s models, would promote a learner-focused approach in which the learners can develop an openness to different cultural value systems.

The models referred to above prove that much thought has gone into finding a suitable approach to teaching ‘culture’. We strongly believe that there are no recipes. A good approach is the one which is adjusted and tuned to the specific needs of the particular educational environment where it is used.

Final Remarks

Reiterating the idea expressed throughout this paper regarding the fact that the communicative approach to foreign language teaching/learning makes a first cultural experience for our learners, we would like to highlight some points of the discussion. First, there is an obvious need to attach an open cultural dimension to language teaching if we wish our learners to be efficient communicators in the ‘global village’ we all live in nowadays. Secondly, in specific non-native context where language learning is still a priority, language and culture should be approached as equal contributors to the learners’ competence to communicate in the foreign language. The main rationale is that learners are expected to acquire the competence of ‘le savoir-communiquer’, that is the ability to cope with real life communication through certain skills and strategies as well as through understanding and accepting “otherness” (the existence of other cultures than one’s own). Thus, taking advantage of the ‘small culture’ of the English Language class, our teaching of ‘culture’ shall strike a balance between the development of both English language skills and other skills such as critical thinking, interpreting, reasoning skills which foster (or at least, are expected to) flexibility, tolerance, understanding and awareness of otherness.

To conclude, we can say that the English Language class in our university has developed its own *modus vivendi and operandi* - its own ‘culture’, free of any ethnic, institutional or national values. The ‘small culture’ is a mélange of local educational cultures, learners’ and teacher’s cultures which combine with the cultural values associated with the language taught and the methodology used. All these will prompt cohesive group activities

which build up into a particular socio-cultural framework that will promote language and ‘culture’ learning through developing skills and abilities to attribute meaning to both linguistic and cultural experiences.

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