

## ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING WITH INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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### Rezumat

Articolul ia în vizor perspectiva interculturală în predarea limbii engleze ca limbă străină și consecințele aplicării acestei perspective.

Deoarece cultura este un component major în învățarea unei limbi străine, iar predarea acesteia rămâne „insubstanțială” în procesul educațional contemporan, autoarea analizează dificultățile ce apar în predarea interculturalității la orele de limbă străină și prezintă, în acest sens, unele tehnici importante atât pentru profesori, cât și pentru studenți.

### Abstract

This paper focuses on an intercultural approach to the teaching of English as a foreign language and its consequences. As teaching culture is considered important by most teachers but it has remained "insubstantial in most language classrooms", the author presents some of the difficulties involved in teaching intercultural awareness and a range of practical techniques that they can be successful TFL and some tips that can help to make the teaching of culture a better experience for both English teachers and students.

Culture has become an increasingly important component of English language teaching in recent times. There are a number of reasons for this related to a view of language that incorporates a wider social and cultural perspective, and to the increasingly multicultural use of English. Teaching culture is considered important by most teachers but it has remained "insubstantial and sporadic in most language classrooms"<sup>1</sup>. A. Omaggio-Hadley gives several reasons for this including lack of time, uncertainty about which aspects of culture to teach, and lack of practical techniques. In this paper, we will present some of the difficulties involved in teaching cultural awareness and will present a range of practical techniques that we have found to be successful in culture-based courses and some tips that can help to make the teaching of culture a better experience for both English teachers and students.

Culture has traditionally often been taught through transmission of facts about the culture in different courses. These courses have been concerned with presenting information about the target culture such as history, geography, institutions, the arts, traditions and way of life<sup>2</sup>.

The word "culture" is an extremely loaded word, weighed down with many connotations. Michael Harris, an American culturologist, writes that many people's first thoughts when they hear this word is of "high culture": classical music, poetry, theatre, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Wagner, Bach and from "high" culture one's next association is perhaps anthropological - Aboriginal culture in Australia, Hottentots in Africa, Maya Indians in Mexico etc.

We often forget how *our own* culture influences us, and the assumptions, values, beliefs and customs that underpin everything we do. We forget that our personal way of looking at the world as well as our way of behaving is largely a product of the culture in which we have been brought up in. As Kaplan points out, "we do not have good definitions for either culture or language; because we are enmired in both, it is hard to get outside them enough to try to define them"<sup>3</sup>.

The reason for this is that culture involves *ideology* (history/world view/beliefs/values and religion), *socialization* (upbringing, habits, and lifestyles) and *forms of discourse* (both verbal and non-verbal) (see at Scullion R., Wong Scullion S.). A clear way of seeing this is through the analogy of an iceberg; some manifestations of culture are visible and explicit, whilst others are implicit or below the surface.

However our view of culture has broadened to include a more interpretive approach towards culture<sup>4</sup>. Instead of just being concerned with the facts of one culture the emphasis has moved towards interpreting culture based on cross-cultural understanding, involving comparisons and

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<sup>1</sup>Omaggio-Hadley, 1993, p. 357.

<sup>2</sup>Tomalin *et alii*, 1993, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Kaplan, 1986, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup>Kramsch, 1993, p. 24.

contrasts with a learners' native culture and the culture of the language they are studying. Researchers Dunnett S., Dubin F. and Lezberg A. suggest six aspects of culture that learners and teachers should be familiar with:

(1) Languages cannot be translated word-for-word. (2) The tone of a speaker's voice (the intonation pattern) carries meaning. (3) Each language-culture employs gestures and body movements which convey meaning. (4) Languages use different grammatical elements for describing all parts of the physical world. (5) All cultures have taboo topics. (6) In personal relationships, the terms for addressing people vary considerably among languages.

Teachers and learners should be aware of these features and be prepared to analyse both their own culture and the target culture according to above-mentioned criteria. Applying these criteria to the Moldovan context it is possible to identify a number of areas for productive cultural comparisons:

(1) Languages cannot be translated word for word. As Dunnett et al. stress individual words have idiomatic uses and connotations that go beyond the individual word itself. If we take the English word "serious" the list of connotations for a Moldovan/Russian are very different to the average native speaker.

(2) The intonation pattern carries meaning. The Romanian language is a tonal language and so the intonation patterns are very different to the English language.

(3) Languages and cultures use non verbal communication which conveys meaning.

(4) Languages use different grammatical elements for describing the physical world. Romanian/Russian and English grammars are very different in a number of areas such as subject use, tense and aspect, inflections and word order. These can at times cause communication problems at a semantic level. Even when learners understand them, they may find them cumbersome and avoid using them.

(5) Cultures have taboo topics. Many of the taboo topics of English and Romanian culture are the same. Nevertheless there are a number of topics which are perhaps a more acceptable choice of topic in Romanian than in English. Moldovans are often quicker than a native English speaker to move the conversation on to family matters, in particular why someone is unmarried, or why they do not have children.

(6) The terms for addressing people vary considerably among languages. This is another area of difference between English and Romanian.

English researchers Halliday and Hasan have changed our view regarding the position of language to include the wider context of culture and socio-pragmatics. Their socio-semiotic view of language emphasizes the social meanings that language both represents and shapes. "The social structure is not just an ornamental background to linguistic interaction...It is an essential element in the evolution of semantic systems and semantic processes"<sup>5</sup>. Therefore every language will reflect the values, beliefs and assumptions of the culture it came from. Thus learning a language will also involve learning the culture the language expresses.

"Communication does not take place in a vacuum. All communication takes place in a social setting or environment. We call this the context because the setting is never neutral; it always has some impact on how the participants behave. The classroom environment is one of these settings that specifically influence intercultural interaction. The rules, assumptions, values, customs, practices, and procedures of a given culture strongly affect the conduct of classroom activity"<sup>6</sup>.

Having analyzed the experience in teaching English as a foreign language in Moldovan schools we observed that every teacher has his/her own style of teaching, there are different national and cultural academic traditions, and there are often cultural differences in pedagogy. But regardless of styles, traditions and cultures, all good teaching anywhere in the world consists of one thing - making connections.

If we consult some books in psychology, we should say that cognitive neuroscience, educational psychology and our years of practical teaching experience tell us that good teaching consists of

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<sup>5</sup>Halliday *et alii*, 1984, p. 114.

<sup>6</sup>Samovar *et alii*, 1998, p. 13.

bringing about knowledge and skills in students by making connections between the new things that we are trying to teach them and their existing information base and repertoire of skills. In a Piagetian perspective “students build and expand upon schemas through accommodation and assimilation”. And, from L. Vygotskii’s point of view, “students advance fully into their zone of proximal development through the assistance of parents, teachers and peers”<sup>7</sup>.

Let us try to answer the question: Do we really need Cognitive, Motivational & Behavioral Supports? Effective teaching requires the use of cognitive, motivational and behavioral supports. And where the language of instruction is the students’ second (or third if we are talking about bilinguals) language, good teaching also requires considerable linguistic supports as well. Teachers must utilize and build these supports into their courses, methods of classroom instruction and overall interaction with students.

For example, *linguistic supports* consist of an adjustment of the teacher’s language which includes slowing down the pace at which you explain material, simplifying your English a little and keeping away from slang, jargon and idiomatic expressions, and in general controlling your vocabulary and keeping to familiar words which you have already defined. It is also helpful to either preview key vocabulary before a lecture or unit or else to stop and define words as you go along. When you are lecturing or explaining it is a good practice to constantly repeat, sum things up and then repeat them again. And lastly it is important to ensure that the volume of your voice is loud enough for students to hear.

*Cognitive supports* consist of providing the students with adequate cognitive frameworks upon which the new information and skills can be attached in their minds. This includes the use of advance organizers such as outlines, models, concept maps and other graphic organizers whether they are in the form of handouts, overhead transparencies or just writing and drawing on the board. It also includes making things more concrete in the beginning and then moving toward the abstract, and this is greatly facilitated by using more audiovisual elements for teaching. Movies, slides, textbook illustrations, photographs and CD-ROMs are very effective. We must know our students’ fields of experience, locate their experiences relevant to what we are teaching and then make the necessary connections through our teaching. From a strictly verbal perspective, there is nothing more important for effective teaching than a good example or good story that illustrates what it is we are trying to get our students to understand or serves as a heuristic that furthers their understanding. A picture is worth a thousand words and a good story can paint a picture in the minds of your students. You must be tuned into the lives of your students in order to know which examples and stories will be most effective. Some stories are quite universal and can be understood by students worldwide no matter what culture they are from, but other stories may need more cultural backgrounding for them to be effective.

*Motivational supports* are also important. We must build students’ success and self-esteem into our course structures and classroom methods. We need to be interesting and instill excitement about what we’re teaching. We need to be relevant and connect to the reality of students’ lives and experiences. We need to demonstrate a purpose to learn besides just passing the course because it is a requirement. And lastly we need to show students a little fun and enjoyment.

And then there are *behavioral supports*. We must structure our courses and classroom methods to provide maximum shaping and patterning of the requisite behaviors such as reading, writing, note-taking, studying, test-taking, asking questions, discussion and debate, and getting to class on time or getting to class at all. With regard to behavior modification, positive reinforcements (rewards) and negative reinforcements (removal of unpleasant stimuli) work better than punishments (giving unpleasantness).

How about reaching students? For language teachers reaching students can at first be difficult because they lack an understanding of their student’s culture and hence a large part of their students’ lives. While most teachers learn quickly about their students, some others do not and for them this lack of cultural understanding can lead to frustration, negative stereotyping, anger and

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<sup>7</sup>Hall, 1961, p. 19.

ultimately failure as a teacher. And this in turn can have psychological effects such as low self-esteem and motivation for the students being taught by a foreign teacher.

Now let us think about the *Intercultural Approach* in teaching English as a foreign language. The intercultural approach to communicating can work for people on both sides of an international fence. Methods of intercultural communication and interaction can assist people from individualistic and nuclear-family oriented Western cultures coming into collectivistic extended-family oriented cultures, as in the case of Americans, Australians or Europeans teaching in the Pacific. These methods can also assist people from collectivist cultures coming into individualist cultures, as in the case of Pacific Island students going to Australia, New Zealand or the United States to attend college or in the case of Moldovan students coming to the US colleges applying to FLEX programme. And, in general, better intercultural understanding and communication skills by everyone involved in intercultural interactions contributes to happier and more productive people.

The work of anthropologist Edward T. Hall was pivotal in the development of cross-cultural communication studies in the United States. Hall's research into cultural differences in verbal and non-verbal communications and conceptions of time and space was utilized by the U.S. Department of State through its Foreign Service Institute to assist in the training of American Foreign Service diplomats who would be stationed overseas. Two of Hall's books, "The Silent Language" (1961) and "The Hidden Dimension" (1966) are still widely read and relevant today in the field of cross-cultural communications. Hall's work demonstrated the value of applying anthropological concepts to the practical task of training people to work in other cultures. As Hall stated in a landmark 1955 article in "Scientific American" on the "anthropology of manners":

"The role of the anthropologist in preparing people for service overseas is to open their eyes and sensitize them to subtle qualities of behavior - tone of voice, gestures, space and time relationships - that so often build up feelings of frustration and hostility in other people with a different culture. Whether we are going to live in a particular foreign country or travel in many, we need a frame of reference that will enable us to observe and learn the significance of differences in manners"<sup>8</sup>.

The field of intercultural communication is a hybrid offspring of the social and behavioral sciences, particularly social-psychology, sociology and cultural anthropology. It shares the strengths of the scientifically developed concepts, knowledge, analytical procedures and data that have been well tested. It also shares some of the weaknesses. The social and behavioural sciences, while able to explain and predict a lot about humans, are also sometimes limited and inexact. The inexact nature of the social and behavioural sciences is due to the complexity of human individual and collective thoughts, emotions and behaviors. When discussing and analyzing a culture we out of necessity deal in generalizations stereotypes. But they are generalizations and stereotypes that have been proven to be statistically valid when applied to large populations of people over time, but to which nonetheless there are always exceptions and variations in individual and collective behavior.

The same thing applies to our classes of students. We can successfully generalize and predict certain student thought, emotion and behaviour patterns but there will always be exceptions to any rules we might formulate. There are always a complexity of variables at work such as student and instructor age, gender, race and ethnic group, culture, first language, second language, appearance, personality, the semester and time of the year, the subject matter, the size, lighting and ventilation of the classroom, the time of day, the weather and many other tangible and intangible factors.

Some scientists are skeptical of the value of improved intercultural communication. For example, there was a "rather ethnocentric person who worked in Micronesia for several years as a journalist and was continually frustrated due to her lack of cross-cultural understanding. She could never "figure out the locals" because she never made an effort to understand and respect their culture. Her cultural values and ways were right and theirs were wrong. Before finally

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<sup>8</sup>Hall, 1966, p. 45.

leaving the region she suggested that Micronesian cultures should be “codified” and written in a book so that her and other expatriates could understand the rules of behavior better”<sup>9</sup>. We found this example at Hall’s but we can remember another similar case according to our country and misunderstanding between people that belong to different cultural groups (Russians, Moldavians, Ukrainians, Gagauz, Bulgarians etc).

Thus, cultures cannot be “codified” but they can be explained in both general and specific terms that apply most of the time to a wide range of the population in question. Our culture goes unspoken of because its influence on us is largely at the unconscious level.

Culture consists of well-established cognitive networks that frame and guide our thoughts, emotions and behaviors without us much noticing the process very much. Culture is also dynamic, with some parts changing and other parts remaining the same depending on a host of variables. Cultures also have room for individual variation, with everyone in a culture not necessarily being the same. Cultures are not written into codes, but culturally prescribed values and norms are always embedded in our social institutions and unwritten rules of discourse and interaction that we learn through the socialization and internalization processes. Learning another culture is a fairly straightforward proposition. The right attitude, a few communication concepts and some time spent as a participant observer is all it really takes.

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<sup>9</sup>Hall, 1966, p. 24.