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Edukacja - Technika - Informatyka 2/1, 306-312

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2011

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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## **Teaching Culture In The Foreign Language Classroom**

Foreign language learning is comprised of several components, including grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, as well as a change in attitudes towards one's own or another culture. For scholars and laymen alike, cultural competence, i.e., the knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of another country, is indisputably an integral part of foreign language learning, and many teachers have seen it as their goal to incorporate the teaching of culture into the foreign language curriculum. It could be maintained that the notion of communicative competence, which, in the past decade or so, has blazed a trail, so to speak, in foreign language teaching, emphasising the role of context and the circumstances under which language can be used accurately and appropriately, 'falls short of the mark when it comes to actually equipping students with the cognitive skills they need in a second-culture environment' [Straub 1999: 2]. In other words, since the wider context of language, that is, society and culture, has been reduced to a variable elusive of any definition-as many teachers and students incessantly talk about it without knowing what its exact meaning is-it stands to reason that the term communicative competence should become nothing more than an empty and meretricious word, resorted to if for no other reason than to make an „educational point". In reality, what most teachers and students seem to lose sight of is the fact that 'knowledge of the grammatical system of a language (grammatical competence) has to be complemented by understanding of culture-specific meanings (communicative or rather cultural competence)' [Byram, Morgan et al. 1994: 4].

However, as the use of language in general is related to social and cultural values, language is considered to be a social and cultural phenomenon. Since every culture has its own cultural norms for conversation and these norms differ from one culture to another, some of the norms can be completely different and conflict with other cultures' norms. Consequently, communication problems may arise among speakers who do not know or share the norms of other culture.

To solve the communication problems in the target language in the EFL classrooms the learners need to learn the target culture within the syllabus, and

the teachers should be sensitive to the learner's fragility so as not to cause them to lose their motivation.

Traditionally, culture was understood in terms of formal or „high” culture (literature, art, music, and philosophy) and popular or „low” culture. From this perspective, one main reason for studying a language is to be able to understand and appreciate the high culture of the people who speak that language. The pop culture is regarded as inferior and not worthy of study.

In this view, language learning comes first, and culture learning second. Students need to learn the language in order to truly appreciate the culture, but they do not need to learn about the culture in order to truly comprehend the language. This understanding can lead language teachers to avoid teaching culture for several reasons:

- They may feel that students at lower proficiency levels are not ready for it yet.
- They may feel that it is additional material that they simply do not have time to teach.
- In the case of formal culture, they may feel that they do not know enough about it themselves to teach it adequately.
- In the case of popular culture, they may feel that it is not worth teaching.

In contemporary language classrooms, however, teachers are expected to integrate cultural components because language teaching has been influenced by a significantly different perspective on culture itself.

In EFL classrooms, as we teach the language, we would automatically teach culture. The forms of address, greetings, formulas, and other utterances found in the dialogues or models our students hear and the allusions to aspects of culture found in the reading represent cultural knowledge. Gestures, body movements, and distances maintained by speakers should foster cultural insights. Students' intellectual curiosity is aroused and satisfied when they learn that there exists another mode of expression to talk about feelings, wants, needs and when they read the literature of the foreign country. For depth of cultural understanding it is necessary to see how such patterns function in relation to each other and to appreciate their place within the cultural system. If language learners are to communicate at a personal level with individuals from other cultural backgrounds, they will need not only to understand the cultural influences at work in the behavior of others, but also to recognize the profound influence patterns of their own culture exert over their thoughts, their activities, and their forms of linguistic expression.

It is also known that the students, who are in need of developing cultural awareness and cultural sensitiveness, are normally those who are least disposed toward these goals. Teacher's task is to make students aware of cultural differences, not pass value judgments on these differences. Students learning a foreign language have to assimilate many new categorizations and codifications if they are to understand and speak the language as its native speakers do. This does not

mean that the native language of the students could not have established such distinctions for them. All languages which have been closely studied seem to possess the potentiality for expressing all kinds of ideas and making all kinds of distinctions [Rivers 1981]). Learners should be exposed to these distinctions as much as possible in the foreign language teaching classrooms. Therefore, the reasons for familiarizing learners with the cultural components should be to:

- understand the linguistic and behavioral patterns both of the target and the native culture at a more conscious level,
- develop intercultural and international understanding,
- adopt a wider perspective in the perception of the reality,
- make teaching sessions more enjoyable to develop an awareness of the potential mistakes that might come up in comprehension, interpretation, and translation and communication.

According to Straub [1999], what educators should always have in mind when teaching culture is the need to raise their students' awareness of their own culture, to provide them with some kind of metalanguage in order to talk about culture, and 'to cultivate a degree of intellectual objectivity essential in cross-cultural analyses' [ibid.: 5]. What is more, another objective permeating the teaching of culture is 'to foster...understanding of the target culture from an insider's perspective—an empathetic view that permits the student to accurately interpret foreign cultural behaviors' [ibid.]. Prior to considering some concrete techniques for teaching culture in the foreign language classroom, it is useful to attempt an answer to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter by providing some guidelines for culture teaching (most of the discussion that ensues is mainly based on Lessard-Clouston, 1997).

First, culture teaching must be commensurate with the dynamic aspects of culture. As Lessard-Clouston (1997) notes, students will indeed need to develop knowledge of and about the L2 or FL culture, but this receptive aspect of cultural competence is not sufficient. Learners will also need to master some skills in culturally appropriate communication and behaviour for the target culture... Cultural awareness is necessary if students are to develop an understanding of the dynamic nature of the target culture, as well as their own culture.

Second, it is important to eschew what Lessard-Clouston (1997) calls 'a laissez-faire approach', when it comes to teaching methodology, and deal with culture teaching in a systematic and structured way. Third, evaluation of culture learning is a necessary component of the „foreign culture curriculum,” providing students with feedback and keeping teachers accountable in their teaching. A fourth point is made by Cruz, Bonissone, and Baff (1995) pertaining to the express need for linguistic and cultural competence as a means of achieving and negotiating nations' political and economical identities in an 'ever shrinking world', as they put it.

Apparently, culture can become a third (or second, for that matter) „superpower” dispensing justice and helping maintain stability and equilibrium if need be.

The use of role-play in EFL classrooms can help students to overcome cultural "fatigue" and it promotes the process of cross-cultural dialogues while at the same time it provides opportunities for oral communication. Numerous other techniques -readings, films, simulation, games, culture assimilators, culture capsules and culturgrams can be used for language teacher to assist them in the process of acculturation in the classroom [Chastain 1988].

In addition to these techniques, teachers can play a therapeutic role in helping learners to move through stages of acculturation. If learners are aided in this process by sensitive and perceptive teachers, they can perhaps more smoothly passthrough the second stage and into the third stage of culture learning and thereby increase their chances for succeeding in both second language learning and second culture learning. While teaching culture through the language teaching Seelye [cf. Rivers 1981: 323–4], suggests that students should be able to demonstrate that they have acquired certain understandings, abilities, and attitudes:

- That they understand that people act the way they do because they are using options the society allows for satisfying basic physical and psychological needs.
- That they understand that social variables as age, sex, social class, and place of residence affect the way people speak and behave.
- That they can demonstrate how people conventionally act in the most common mundane and crisis situations in the target culture.
- That they are aware that culturally conditioned images are associated with even the most common target words and phrases.
- That they are able to evaluate the relative strength of a generality concerning the target culture in terms of the amount of evidence substantiating the statement.
- That they have developed the skills needed to locate and organize material about the target culture from the library, mass media, and personal observation.
- That they possess intellectual curiosity about the target culture and empathy toward its people.

The literature on culture teaching methodology is vast and a great many techniques have been employed, in an attempt to strip away the layers of obfuscation the term culture has been cloaked in, and show that ‘a basic competence in the English language proper, with a minimum of cultural references’ [Bessmertnyi 1994], not only is of little value but can also lead to misunderstanding, culture shock, even animosity among nations. What should be made explicit is that the „cultural references” Bessmertnyi alludes to can only act as facilitating devices, so to speak, in the process of socialisation into the target community. Knowing a second or foreign language should open windows on the target culture as well as on the world at large.

The other issue that should be focused is that before learning about culture, students must be receptive to the concept of learning about cultures other than their own. To achieve culture goals, often teacher has to play a role in breaking down cultural barriers prior to initiating teaching-learning activities. One way to begin teaching culture on a positive note is to emphasize similarities between people. Such a beginning should be followed by a discussion of differences between members of students' family, between families, between schools and between cultures.

Moreover, the topics to be used to teach the target language should be presented in the contexts accompanying the native ones.

In doing these activities, the aim is to increase students' awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own, helping them to make comparisons among cultures. The comparisons are not meant to underestimate any of the cultures being analyzed, but to enrich students' experience and to make them aware that although some culture elements are being globalized, there is still diversity among cultures.

This diversity should then be understood, and never underestimated.

In developing cultural awareness in the classroom it is important that we help our students distinguish between the cultural norms, beliefs, or habits of the majority within the speech community and the individual or group deviations from some of these norms. Students should be enabled to discuss their native culture with their foreign-speaking friends at the same time that they are provided with a real experiential content.

They can make use of their knowledge of the foreign language. There should also be presented, discussed, or merely alluded to in two parallel streams.

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### **Abstract**

Culture has taken an important place in foreign language teaching and learning studies. It has been widely recognized that language is used as a main medium through which culture is expressed. Most frequently confronted that students to a great extent know the rules of language, but are not always able to use the language adequately as it requires since they are not knowledgeable enough about the target culture. The aim of this article has been to provide necessary information for the foreign language teachers and learners so that they can establish a good connection with the target language and its culture.

**Key words:** culture language, IT, language training, courses.

### **Преподавание культуры в классе иностранных языков**

#### **Резюме**

Культура занимает важное место в обучении иностранному языку. Было широко признано, что язык – главное средство, через которое культура выражается. В большинстве случаев студенты знают правила иностранного языка, но не всегда могут использовать его адекватно, так как они не осведомлены достаточно о целевой культуре. Цель этой статьи – дать необходимую информацию для преподавателей иностранного языка и учеников таким образом, что они могут осознать связь с изучения иностранного языка и культуры.

**Ключевые слова:** язык и культура, IT, язык обучения, курсы.

### **Uczenie się kultury na lekcjach języka obcego**

#### **Streszczenie**

Kultura zajmuje ważne miejsce w nauczaniu języków obcych i studiowaniu różnych kierunków studiów. Powszechnie akceptowanym poglądem jest ten, że język jest używany jako główne medium, poprzez które wyrażana jest kultura.

Najczęściej mamy do czynienia z sytuacją, w której uczniowie w dużym stopniu znają zasady języka, ale nie zawsze są w stanie odpowiednio posługiwać się językiem, ponieważ nie mają wystarczającej wiedzy o kulturze reprezentowanej przez ten język. Celem tego artykułu jest przedstawienie niezbędnych informacji dla nauczycieli języków obcych i uczniów, tak aby mogły one stworzyć dobre połączenie znanego języka obcego i jego kultury.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kultura języka, TI, kształcenie językowe, kierunki studiów.