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The place of culture in the language classroom for student technicians

How many times have you heard your students asking the question, “why don’t they say it like we do?”, when stumbling across an idiomatic form of vocabulary or an unfamiliar syntactic structure which they find difficult to understand. There is a multitude of examples: simple prepositional differences such as “on the plane” or “on the TV” are obvious ones. Some of the differences are purely structural, such as the lack of plural markers on such terms as “information”, “luggage”, “furniture” or “people”. Others are obviously cultural such as the metaphorical difference in the expression “to have a frog in one’s throat”. In both cases, however, we detect in the students’ surprise a lack of cultural awareness which can be a partial block to acquisition of vocabulary.

Teachers of students from the secondary industrial sector are often confronted directly, in such instances, with the cultural element in language teaching which they have, even if with a measure of guilty feelings, eliminated from their teaching programme for lack of time. In recognition of the fact that the questions posed by our students have a major cultural component should we, therefore, spend more time teaching culture within our already shrinking time schedules and if so what types of cultural elements should we teach or introduce into our curriculum?

An aborted encounter with Berkeley linguist Claire Kramsch set in motion our reflection on the cultural component in the educational process of language instruction. Her paper¹ at the plenary meeting of the tenth World Congress of the International Association of Applied Linguistics, which was held in Amsterdam, 12 August 1993, laid the foundations for further theoretical reflection on the teaching of language as culture. There she suggested that we lack serious theoretical foundations for linking language learning and the teaching of culture. However, she proposes that, contrary to traditional approaches to the teaching of culture, we can best find the tools and methods we need in the cognitive and affiliated sciences such as in social psychology, social linguistics, ethnology or anthropology and social semiotics. These are the sciences that study the cognitive processes of culture and language, of which we are more or less aware, and which result in a particular expression which gives meaning through language or through a cultural act.

An application of particular interest in language instruction is the concept that Kramsch borrows from Bhabha, “the social process of enunciation”. It suggests that in human communication there is a point of rupture between the hypothetical language of the language learner and the expectations of his native

¹ KRAMSCH, Claire. (1995). La composante culturelle de la didactique des langues. *Le Français dans Le Monde*, n° spécial.

interlocutors. Beyond this point of rupture is of course the point of incomprehension that exists in any social enunciation due to the ambivalence of all linguistic signs. We see here that the cognitive approach combines language and culture in the sense that cultural phenomena are treated equally with language as coded messages to be understood by an interlocutor. Kramsch suggests that the learners, though they are out of their element in the target language, must use the elements of language structure, code and usage they master to adapt them to their needs to negotiate understanding. The very fact of becoming aware of this negotiated process, she hopes, will open their eyes to processes in their own language, which in return changes their “attitude” towards the target language.

Theoretically, Kramsch says, the most evident and basic role of the language teacher’s approach to culture should be to help students avoid stereotypes. Nevertheless the problem that most of our students encounter with culture and language does not come from the stereotypes they have of the target culture but from their general lack of awareness of cultural diversity. Our problem therefore is to get the students to understand that there is a cultural element behind all forms of information that they process, be it about another culture or within their own culture. This implies helping them understand that there are not only cultural differences from one language to another, but also differences from one level or register of language to another. Thus, in our concern for teaching about cultural diversity, we should provide the students with notions of the linguistic aspects of social variation and the different levels of language. This implies teaching them about inter-cultural diversity and multi-cultural diversity.

The use of inter-cultural awareness is something we all do to make our instruction more interesting and because it has its very practical side. Inter-cultural information is of the type that allows language learners to learn more about the people of another country, their customs, institutions and history. Kramsch indicates that a minimalist approach allows us to teach appropriate behaviour necessary to live in another country or, we might add, at least to communicate in the specialised contexts of technicians in the target country. In our context of limited contact with the students we should not neglect the use of inter-cultural materials to provoke the learner to question his own culture. It is essential that in becoming aware of cultural difference the learner is helped to understand that this means his or her culture is not better or worse than other cultures simply because it is different.

The use of multi-cultural materials, that is materials for the learning about the cultural diversity within one’s own culture, has for language instruction been largely based on the major cultural categories such as race, class, gender or ethnic differences. For our students these differences are only of marginal interest in as much as they present elements which enable them to take a certain distance from their culture. What we find more necessary is an awareness of the

different registers and levels of language that the students themselves need to master to be perfectly integrated into their own culture. The differences between slang, argot, dialect as well as familiar, professional, technical, formal, polite forms of language are often ignored. Fewer and fewer students today realise fully that there are appropriate contexts for the use of each. That there is confusion about the origins of incorrect usage is indisputable. Our standard methods of teaching have paid too much attention to the correctness of particular lexical or syntactical elements, whereas use in inappropriate contexts, or mixing of elements from one or more contexts, are more often ignored although they are useful in promoting cultural awareness. In fact, our students lack ways for talking about and understanding cultural differences within their own culture. This promotes necessarily a general misunderstanding of cultural difference, but above all it is a psychological block to integrating the unfamiliar.

Our experience as teachers of student technicians in chemical engineering and industrial process engineering has led us to believe that the role of language learning in our context is much the same as that of learning maths and physics or computer processing. That is we believe that our job is not to teach the general fundamentals of language communication in the English language but to provide our students with methods and tools of expression necessary for functioning in their professional careers. We believe that we are teachers of a chemical engineering content and so we pay particular attention to the necessary linguistic features of the texts we use so as to train the students in the specific uses of language that are indispensable for functioning in their field. Therefore, we must determine what the relevant cultural needs of our students are.

Since we do not consider ourselves as generalists but as specialists, we do not believe that we must concern ourselves with culture with a capital C. It is to be hoped that, before they start their university studies, most of the students will have been exposed to the literature, art and institutions which are the underpinnings of the general language and the framework in which it is transmitted and maintained. We may want to teach the functional categories that are appropriate for our students, but we are not interested in teaching culture through various functional categories which would acquaint the students with what is exotic or interesting in the target culture. Though such instruction has an important role as a means of motivating the students through stimulating their curiosity, we are obliged by the limited contact we have with the students to motivate them through the utility of the knowledge we dispense. We consider that, however incompletely our students have learned the practical notions for doing and expressing daily activities, we can only allocate very little time to the limited few which are indispensable to their functioning in the world of work (telephoning, giving and receiving directions, interviewing, letter writing, etc.).

Why then, if we have too little time to dedicate to cultural phenomena, do we still consider culture as important? And, if so, what are we proposing as a cultural element to be developed in the context of language instruction for

technicians in the secondary industrial context? Let us return to the question asked by our students. Behind the difficulty they have encountered with an unfamiliar form and their astonishment at the solution, there is more than just a question of linguistic structures. Kramsch reminds us that the simple acquisition of linguistic systems, lexical or grammatical, is not a guarantee of comprehension. Even in highly specialised language the cultural element can be of importance. Here we find a difference with the general understanding of culture. We are faced with the reality that culture is not simply a medium for the acquisition of language but is an integral part of language itself. To what degree can we get the students to integrate the conventions of the target language and the interpretative norms of its native speakers? The least that we can ask of ourselves in giving the students the necessary tools and methods for using the target language correctly, as technicians, is to teach them a higher degree of cultural awareness.

Practically speaking, exercises that make students think about cultural differences and the cultural element in language (*e.g.* Kitao *et al.*, and particularly Kajiura²), are useful for those who have little time to devote to cultural phenomena. Our particular desire to prepare the students to function in semi-autonomy from teacher and dictionary in the lexical domain has led us to develop the acquisition of the methods and tools for analytical and contextual solutions to their vocabulary problems. We feel that this is all the more important in the vast domain of culture where we cannot possibly teach the totality of the cultural significance attached to a language. The most basic of tools of cultural awareness is that of making them aware of their own culture and above all that their culture is not universal. When we prepare our students to carry out various tasks in an industrial or business setting (*i.e.*, the job interview, the description and/or presentation of an industrial process, letters of complaint and requests), attention should be paid to cultural differences between the target language and their own.

In the ordinary lexical work we do, we include exercises which develop awareness of language registers and levels through dictionary work or through specially arranged lexical studies such as that of Aimée Blois in the *Cahiers Pédagogiques de LAIRDIL*³ where cultural elements such as the metaphor are shown to be important in the development of technical terminology. In other words, we ask students to seek the cultural explanations behind the terminology. Above all, the students need to be told clearly the objectives of the language programme and the methods and tools to be used to achieve them and we need to develop the language tools for them to talk about cultural difference in ways that will facilitate their overcoming cultural blocks to language acquisition.

² *The Internet TESL Journal* 2:4, April 1996.

³ BLOIS, Aimée. (1996). Vocabulaire technique et apprentissage des langues de spécialité. *Les Après-midi de LAIRDIL* 1.

When we speak of overcoming cultural blocks we may; at its simplest, be talking about encouraging open minds. Along this line we are reminded that Kramersch found that the teacher's basic role was to help the students to question stereotypes. Here we think that progress can be made by helping the students to differentiate between stereotype and generalisation which is partly a lesson in language structure, partly a question of semantics. Starting from a list of stereotypes, which are really over-generalisations, like "(all) Americans are sports fanatics", the students can be asked to transform the phrase in a manner which expresses a more accurate generalisation. An appropriate answer might be, "sports play an important role in the lives of many Americans". Once the idea has taken hold that stereotypes are often based on an-over simplified use of language, students can be given lists of generalisations about a culture—some of which are true and some of which are false. To such a list the students can be asked to say if they think the statements are true, false or that they don't know. They should justify their answers and state what information they need in order to answer those questions they were unable to reply to. Such exercises are included in a number of resource books for teachers, such as *Cultural Awareness*, by Tomalin and Stempski.⁴ Talking about stereotypes gives students the opportunity not only to confront their preconceived ideas about other cultures with other students, but also to discover that their own culture receives the same treatment and even that they may have developed their *own* stereotypes about their *own* culture.

Among other quick methods of getting students to start thinking about culture, besides showing videos which illustrate cultural phenomena or developing discussions based on lists of cultural generalizations such as suggested above, we have developed the idea of giving a short culture quiz. The quiz could be of the multiple choice type which would take less time, but makes the preparation important. The quiz should include questions based on general cultural phenomena (food for example). The possible answers would include generalizations from the students' own culture, along with stereotypes from the target culture and other cultural realities from that culture, which may be less known to the student (neutral answers should be included as well to prevent the quiz from becoming too "politically correct"). The students would be asked for example to tick off all the answers which would seem normal in the target culture. How many students would know that beyond MacDonald's and fries, for some Americans, a traditional meal might include turkey and yams, chicken and dumplings or ribs and greens? Who would think that steak and fries is not fare which most Americans would find traditional? Who knows that most of the so-called Mexican food that is now being consumed all over France has long been traditional American food and was essentially developed in the Southwest culture of the United States?

⁴ TOMALIN, Barry & STEMPLSKI, Susan. (1993) *Cultural Awareness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The quiz is a good place to introduce such concepts as ethnocentrism by including what would be said in certain situations, such as the famous European “bon appétit”, expressed universally before a meal, where the Anglo-Saxon culture says nothing at all. Appropriate language levels can also be illustrated in this type of exercise, such as the difference between, “I’ve had enough”, “I’m fed up”, and “I’ve had it up to here”!

The reasoning behind the use of the quiz, with its multiple-choice questions, is simply to provide a tool for getting the students to open their minds by talking about how they see others and how they see themselves. There are, of course, even simpler and more direct ways to get students to talk about cultural phenomena, for example through brainstorming on a selected number of cultures which can lead to cultural comparison. Asking the students to name or describe cultural elements from different target cultures and to talk about what is the same as or different from their own culture is a good way of bringing out the stereotypes that they have integrated into their beliefs. Another simple way to get the students to think about cultural relativity is to study the values expressed by proverbs used in the culture. Looking at proverbs from one’s own culture can sometimes also make the students aware of cultural change in their own culture as values are abandoned, which is another road to an open mind.

Since we are concerned about illustrating the importance of cultural understanding for linguistic understanding it is important to illustrate critical incidents where communications have broken down because of cultural differences. Video illustrations are useful but it is not impossible to create from experience short scenarii with questions about what has gone wrong. Role play by the students gets them active in the process of illustrating the point that more was necessary for the persons in the scenario to understand each other than the words that were pronounced. Simple incidents of this type have been provided in *Cultural Awareness*, such as the teacher who finds his or her praise seemingly rejected by the Asian student who, out of respect, rather than thanking the teacher insists on his or her poor capacity.

Starting from cultural incidents that result from such breakdown in the act of social enunciation, illustrated through video,⁵ students can be asked to compare how they think target culture persons would react with how they, themselves, would react (or French speakers in general, as they begin to see their own culture more objectively). To put into practice the same kind of reflection about other cultures a video can be shown without sound and the students can be asked to make the commentary themselves.

Finally, what interests us the most in the context of teaching specialised vocabulary is to concentrate, at the word level, on the mismatches between cultural and linguistic meaning, for example, in such expressions as “How are you?”—which is not really a question asking for information—also “of course”

⁵ Tomalin & Stempleski provide a list of specialised videos but we have seen many possibilities from the television or from feature films which could provide for discussion of this type.

and “bon appétit”. The word chase proposed in *Cultural Awareness* is also ideal in preparing students for the mental gymnastics necessary for them to become semi-autonomous learners. Word associations starting from a cultural item reinforce their awareness of the relationship between language and culture and provides the opportunity to discuss stereotypes and false generalisations, as well as, to make comparisons with other cultures.

To sum up our position on the place of culture in the language classroom for student technicians, we believe that much can be done to get students talking about language and culture. Nevertheless, since culture is not our primary objective, we think that we must create, in the first place, an awareness that a problem exists and help the students to open their minds, as the best tool to learning language correctly for the greatest number of cultural contexts.

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