

THE CULTURAL ELEMENT IN TEACHING ENGLISH

ELEMENTUL CULTURII ÎN PREDAREA LIMBII ENGLEZE

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Rezumat

Articolul analizează rolul culturii și de ce ar trebui să se pună atât de mult accent pe acesta atunci când se predă limba engleză ca limbă străină. Pentru a răspunde la întrebare se evidențiază legătura dintre cultură și limbă și aspectele competenței interculturale care pot fi explorate și valorificate în timpul unei lecții de limba engleză sunt menționate. De asemenea, sunt discutate câteva tehnici eficiente care ar putea avea rezultate în procesul de includere a culturii în predarea englezei.

Cuvinte-cheie: cultură, limbă, competență interculturală, aspecte culturale.

Abstract

The article looks at the role of culture and why so much emphasis should be put on it when teaching English as a foreign language. In order to answer the question the link between culture and language is pointed out and the aspects of the intercultural competence that can be explored and valued during an English language lesson are mentioned. There are also discussed some effective techniques which could bare results in the process of including culture in English teaching.

Key-words: culture, language, intercultural competence, cultural aspects.

The language becomes almost useless if it does not have a size and a cultural relevance. And yet, the concept of teaching culture in a foreign language class remains elusive. Although in teaching it is accepted that language means culture as well, there is no consensus on what and even less how to teach it. Unlike grammar and vocabulary, which have a concrete content, culture is fluid, amorphous and difficult to define. A first step is to establish the relationship between language and culture and to understand the interdependence between them. How are culture and language bound?

1. Language expresses cultural reality (with words people express facts and ideas but also reflect their attitudes).

2. Language embodies cultural reality (people give meanings to their experience through the means of communication).

3. Language symbolizes cultural reality (people view their language as a symbol of their social identity) [1, p. 566]

Culture is all around us, but especially within our being. As human beings, belonging to a certain cultural environment, we are conditioned by it in everything we do, are and have. Each of us is, in one way or another, culturally constructed, meaning that most of our values and goals have a cultural dimension. As a result, we must give culture its rightful role in our lives and education. [10]

Every ethnic and cultural society, in the process of communication, uses an inventory of signs, each of them belonging to a system and having, within this system and that community, a certain interpretation. Objects inherent to the normal course of life - clothing, constructions,

objects of material culture, containers / units of measure, etc. - they belong to the given semiotic system and naturally correlate with the rest of the elements, but only in this culture, in this epoch. The inventory of primary semiotic systems, which is constituted in the process of forming an ethnic group, is completed, in the history of human civilization, by other systems, equally important in communication. Primary semiotic systems are related to realities inherent in community life even in the primitive era. These systems of object-signs target various spheres of primitive human activity and serve, in parallel with verbal language, for information. The tangible and intangible components of a culture are: everyday living (e.g. food and drink, holidays and working practices); living conditions (e.g. housing conditions); interpersonal relations (e.g., class structure, family structures and relations between generations); values, beliefs and attitudes (e.g. social class, wealth, regional cultures, minorities and arts); body language (gestures, mimics); social conventions (punctuality, dress and behavioral and conversational conventions); ritual behaviours (e.g. birth, marriage and death) [9, p.68].

We often tend not to give due importance to culture - but we should do it because culture is like an iceberg, with only 10% being visible, while the remaining 90% is hidden and needs to be discovered. Therefore, the teacher must make a sustained effort to instil in students a desire to study and an appetite for culture. The study of culture has multiple values and develops life skills essential to the 21st century, tolerance and acceptance being among them [7, p. 169].

The idea that language teaching has a cultural dimension is not new. In the history of language teaching, connections have been established between language and culture, and in our age it is expected that language teachers will integrate cultural components in the instructional-educational process. The structure of the language and the way it is used reflect the norms and values of the members of a culture. It also determines how these norms and values are shared because language is the means by which culture is transmitted. Whether it is taught separately, through a specially designed course, or whether we teach it integrated into the language course itself, culture is part of our language, present and past [8, p.78].

In English language classes, especially English, we focus on English-speaking culture and civilization. We refer here to the cultural inheritance of English-speaking countries, starting with those of reference such as the United Kingdom or the United States of America and reaching those where English is one of the official languages (India, Canada, Australia etc.). The legacy of the former British Empire has been felt in vast territories around the world, and then it is relevant for all those who are learning English today as a foreign language to understand it in the cultural context that generated it. Thus, the teaching of the English language acquires a complete meaning only by referring to the values, customs, attitudes and behaviours of the peoples who speak it. All these aspects help non-native speakers to better understand the structures of the language they are studying. Researchers in the field agree that intercultural communication is an essential component of culture. That is why culture is a key element in language teaching. We learn a language in order to be able to communicate, to function in a given cultural space, to carry out tasks in a cultural context [8, p.79].

On this basis, Byram deems it 'essential' to equip foreign language learners with information about the people of the target country, about their routines and rituals, and about their attitudes and beliefs, so that they might reflect upon their own position and handle successfully communicative interactions. [2, p.168] Following this line of thought, Cortazzi and Jin affirm that a cultural focus does not only have communicative ends, it may also

encourage the development of one's sense of self, and awareness of one's own as well as of the other's identity [5, p. 219].

The importance and use of language can be better understood if it is seen in correlation with culture, understood as the distinct characteristic of each social community. The connection between the culture and the language we teach is so linked that we cannot find out the true meaning of certain words or expressions if we do not know enough about the culture in which those words and phrases are used [5, p.211].

The aims of introducing culture into a class are the following:

1. Knowledge about the target culture.
2. Awareness of its characteristics and of differences between the target culture and the learner's own country.
3. A research-minded outlook.
4. An emphasis on the understanding socio-cultural implications of language and language use. [2, p.168]

Approaches to the teaching of culture are:

- the intercultural approach – comparison of the target and the learners' own culture, main focus is on the target culture;
- the multicultural approach – a focus on the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the target country, but also on the learners' own culture;
- the trans-cultural approach – a foreign language is an international language, so that it is not necessary at all to link the foreign language to any specific culture;
- the foreign-cultural approach – focuses on the target culture and neither takes the learners' own culture into consideration nor does it compare the two cultures together [7, p. 166].

The teaching of a foreign language is intercultural par excellence, since it presupposes the contact of two cultures - that of the student and that of the studied language. The situation is complicated by the languages that are spoken, as state languages, in several countries: the study of the language will also involve the culture of the respective states, sometimes quite diverse. This is the case for English (UK, USA, Australia, Canada, etc.), French (France, Belgium, Canada, etc.), Spanish (Spain and most Latin states), German (Germany, Austria, Switzerland, etc.), and .a. Obviously, we cannot expect the cultural peculiarities of all the target language-speaking states to be studied separately within the limits of the school year. However, it is necessary for students to be aware of the diversity of the areas of functioning of the studied language [3, p.11].

The traditional approach to language teaching focuses on language and literary skills; when working with a culture, it is often an approach based on standardized information, a critical moment in modern didactics, because it does not contribute to building a personalized understanding of the target culture, but only promotes and consolidates stereotypes. Those who learn a foreign language need intercultural skills to become tolerant of the cultural differences to which they are exposed. Language learning will focus on, among other things, subjects such as social justice, human rights and other concepts in civic education, in order to emphasize universal ethical values [8, p. 79].

Therefore, in addition to vocabulary and grammar, the student will accumulate information about the country (or countries) where the language studied is spoken, its

geographical position and relations, historical and current, with neighbours, cultural values and literature, cinematography, etc.

Why is it not enough to learn vocabulary and grammar, to know how to construct sentences properly, to understand by listening, to be able to sustain a dialogue? Because the rational and functional practice of a language presupposes, among other features, the adequacy of the discourse to the communication situation, i.e. the matching of the content, the lexicon, the chosen tone to the real or simulated context. The linguistic and cultural details that develop this competence gradually arrive, as the intercultural competence of the vocabulary in the foreign language is enriched and the range of knowledge about the society where the language is spoken is widened. [7, p. 168] Thus, it is irresistible that at the initial stage of studying the language of the students to be presented with a single set of elementary formulas to facilitate everyday communication - a single option to say "Thank you", "Sorry", "Goodbye" and so on. But along the way, they learn that, from texts, from video spots, from other sources, that in the studied language, English in our case, as in the mother tongue, the same thing can be expressed differently. Just as the student who is more or less fluent in English realizes the siliceous difference between "Bye", "Goodbye", "See you", "See you around" and so on, they will know, already at the A2 level of learning English, several variants of social formulas of this kind. Their adequacy to the context is a manifestation of intercultural competence. It is not enough for the student to memorize the formulas by heart, to pronounce them correctly and to place them in context, they must understand the cultural laws and conventions in environments where the specific language is practiced naturally [9, p. 71].

We draw the following aspects (the list is not exhaustive!) of intercultural competence (with the cultural component), which can be explored and valued in English language lessons.

The student:

- will distinguish between verbal etiquette formulas appropriate to various contexts, lexical taboos, slang and other aspects of the English vocabulary;
- will recognize, as appropriate, the major social and regional accents of the target language, as well as some dialectics;
- will be up to date with the common cultural experience of the target language speakers
 - children's poems, folklore, proverbs and sayings, quotes with phraseological value, etc .;
- will focus on literary history and contemporary writers in the target culture;
- will have an idea about the phenomena of contemporary culture (pop) in the target country (TV, cinema, music, etc.);
- will know basic data from the history and geography of the target country;
- will be up to date with the police organization and major police events in the target country;
- will focus on traditional cuisine and clothing, other ethnographic elements;
- will be able to present Moldova and Moldovan culture in the target language, in a speech adapted to the mentality of the interlocutor, in an accurate and appropriate manner;
- will be able to have a conversation about the culture of Moldova and the target country;
- will focus on stereotypes, prejudices, clichés existing in the target country [9, p.73].

Going from the general to the particular and reaching the narrow space and time of the class of students, how can we try to bring culture within reach of students through language?

Whether we practice individual skills (writing, speaking, reading, listening) or integrated, culture will always be in the background, giving our approach a meaningful content. We can choose culturally relevant texts and excerpts. We can do the same with listening passages, as the online environment offers a wide range of downloadable sources. The recommended on-line courses and sites are Coursera, Future Learn, National Geographic, ESLvideo.com, Vimeo, ELLLO, YouTube, TedTalks. A good source can also serve social networks such as Facebook, Tweeter, Instagram and Telegram.

Vocabulary exercises can also be chosen in a way that is relevant to the culture in terms of content, or ideas and topics for class discussions and debates can have cultural messages as a starting point. We can ask our students to research certain cultural aspects and carry out later group projects or to argue their opinions and opinions in writing, with reference of course to cultural values and attitudes that bring us closer and separate us from English-speaking culture. What is certain is that through such an approach to language, students learn from school that cultural differences bring us closer, not divide us, that knowing other cultures not only languages is an added value for each of us in the century of globalization [8, p. 79].

Some of highly effective techniques to be used in the classroom in order to develop the intercultural competence are presented below: [4, p.34].

- The Venn Diagram
- Mind Mapping
- Intensive reading
- Double-Entry Journal
- The Cube

A **Venn diagram** is used to visually represent the differences and the similarities between two concepts. Students could be given the task to find what festivals and holidays Moldovans and British people both celebrate and which ones are particular to each culture.

Mind Mapping – minmeister.com MindMeister is an online collaborative, knowledge-based mind mapping tool that students can use to understand and make connections between concepts, ideas, and information. Mind maps help users collect ideas and facts based on a given topic.

Intensive reading is not about reading a text but a picture or an image, with the help of which we can learn about important elements of a certain period and place. The steps to follow are:

- Examine the picture.
- Determine the place and time (pictured here).
- Give answers to the questions:
- What memories does this picture evoke in your memory?
- How do you feel about this image?
- What colours are dominant? Why?
- What details are important?
- Give a title to the picture.

The Cube: the technique is one of examining a subject/topic, of organizing the knowledge on a subject/topic. It is recommended for writing, but once assimilated, it is also suitable for oral communication, when we intend to examine a problem thoroughly.

- Describe/Define
- Compare
- Associate
- Analyze
- Apply
- Assess/Prove

The Double-Entry Journal strategy enables students to record their responses to a text as they read. Students write down phrases or sentences from their assigned reading text and then write their own reaction to that passage. The purpose of this strategy is to give students the opportunity to express their thoughts and become actively involved with the material they read.

Language and culture are two inseparable entities. Learning a language involves learning a culture and vice versa. In order to communicate successfully, it is necessary to associate other culturally determined behaviours with language. Otherwise, we are dealing with superficial and meaningless learning, which lacks substratum and durability [6, p. 23].

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