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Comprendre la culture dans l'apprentissage des langues étrangères

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Understanding culture in FL Learning

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Abstract:

Our intervention will focus on the place of English in the current linguistic market to show that this place of choice is the result, among other things, of the efforts made in the dissemination of this language throughout the world. We will also discuss the main lines of cultural programs that allow the learner to grasp cultural differences as opposed to content programs that are limited to teaching-learning structures out of context. We will end our intervention by evoking the quality of the instruction in the teaching of English in Algeria by evoking the attitude of the Student and that of the Master concerning this language.

Keywords:

language, English, learning, student, teaching.

Comprendre la culture dans l'apprentissage des langues étrangères

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Résumé :

Notre intervention portera sur la place de l'anglais dans le marché linguistique actuel pour montrer que cette place de choix est le résultat, entre autres, des efforts consentis dans la diffusion de cette langue à travers le monde. Nous évoquerons également les grandes lignes de programmes culturels qui permettent à l'apprenant de saisir les différences culturelles par opposition aux programmes de contenu qui se limitent à l'enseignement-apprentissage de structures hors contexte. Nous terminerons notre intervention en évoquant la qualité de l'instruction dans l'enseignement de l'anglais en Algérie en évoquant l'attitude de l'Elève et celle du Maître concernant cette langue.

Mots-clés :

langue, Anglais, apprentissage, élève, enseignement.

The issues addressed in this paper concern primarily the understanding of the Target Language Culture (English, in this

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case) and how the current syllabus hinders its understanding and learning. This will contribute, we hope, to the debate on Language and Alterity that this conference is about.

We shall first refer to the place of pride the English Language has in the current linguistic market which is due to the efforts dedicated primarily by language policy makers, educationalists, text-book writers, in Britain and the US. We shall also touch one or two aspects concerning the learner's awareness of cultural differences in classroom settings in Algeria. Then, we shall draw an overall comparison between the entry profile and the exit profile of a BA holder in English prior to the eighties and after. Finally, we refer to the quality of instruction, whether and how FL culture is taught in Algerian universities and what the Learner's and the Teacher's attitude (s) are towards the English Language in an Algerian educational setting.

Many EFL educators seem to take for granted the fact that the teaching and learning of culture is directly or indirectly part of the reading of texts and literature of the target language. Classroom activities such as written expression - with the teaching of particular transitional expressions, the use of the modals, cause-and-effect reasoning (which may not necessarily be identical in sentence structure to those of L1), achieving sentence clarity, chronological order, and the like - are often cited as sound grounds for acquiring the target culture. Conversation activities - with dialogues including idiomatic expressions and conversation in context, role-playing, mimicry, etc. - are also suggested as activities dealing in one way or another with L2 culture. Other teachers prefer light verses and sayings to introduce the students to L2 culture. Finally, Lab. Sessions - tapes and videos - are sometimes used to this end. Curriculum wise, modules such as Brit. Civ. & Lit., Am. Civ. & Lit., Third World Lit. etc. represent the official facets of cultural learning to be studied. These are spelt out in the official syllabi in Algeria.

Our observation of classroom activities indicates that there are cases where the student is sometimes made aware of cultural learning. As a matter of fact, one teacher started the classroom warm up with the cultural meaning of 'shaking hands' for English people and how it differs from the typical everyday shaking of hands of most Mediterranean countries. Some teachers use reading and listening comprehension teaching aids such as "Making America: the society and culture of the United States (1992), or "Landmarks of American Language & Linguistics", or even "Are You Listening" to develop their activities on L2 culture.

Culture teaching and learning may also be present in physical activities such as theatre plays. This takes place if time and space allow it. The overloaded teaching programs and the absence of theatre facilities are often cited as the main causes for the lack of such activities. Some teachers are so strongly motivated for such cultural activities that they go beyond the bureaucratic and logistic hurdles and organise these cultural events even in the open air. Nevertheless, our interviews with practitioners demonstrate that even if all these pedagogical activities are well conducted, it still remains unclear to them just how cultural learning and acquisition could be achieved and what impact this has on their classroom practice. Such a reaction from the teachers is proof enough that they are all aware of the issue at stake. We shall see below that as long as the learner does not have a face-to-face contact with the natives of L2, nor does he perform actual cross-cultural communication, his motivation for culture learning may not be very strong. He often ends up as holder of a "Licence d'Enseignement de l'Anglais" who is neither competent in the actual use of English nor is he competent - culturally speaking - in L2. This is the situation of English in Algeria where contact with natives of English has been virtually nil for the past decade or so. Similarly, institutions representing L2 in the country such as the British Council, the Afro-American Council, ESP centres and the like have moved house. The satellite

dish is not the answer to cultural contact and understanding, as it stands as a passive or uni-directional contact with the foreign culture.

The presence of culture in writings is as old as the written scripts go back in history. It is through symbols and writings on stones that we learn about ancient cultures. The Egyptian hieroglyphs are a good example. Recently, the pattern is more evident: people learn a foreign language in order to read and study its literature. The Grammar Translation Approach was one of the most widely used methods and approaches to achieve this aim. The best authors were selected and their writings were studied through compositions.

Pedagogically speaking, one may look at the 60's as a starting point where textbook writers and syllabus designers introduced culture learning as part of EFL programs. This was the era where the audio-lingual method took place of pride in language teaching. Stress on the spoken form of language as a dynamic representation of L2 culture has somehow overridden the static written form of language. The TV that invaded most homes is a significant factor for this change of attitude from the "book"' to the "look". Hymes' communicative competence of the 70's and Labov's study of language in its social context are among those who put greater emphasis on communication, context and social environment in L2 teaching. The most significant aspects of L2 culture were introduced in the curricula. The communicative approach and the debate on "language use" and "language usage" led to various frameworks based essentially on communicative competence. The gap widened between a communicative approach and a grammar-based approach. The latter was considered as less integrating of language and culture (grammatical structures in isolation). Culture teaching and learning were based on the principle that communication must be in its cultural context. The objective being to prepare learners for meaningful culture learning. Culture teaching and learning

have thus become an important field in applied linguistics with a profusion of publications in this vein (Cargill, 1987, Harrison, 1990, Higgs, 1990, etc.).

Every society orchestrates its ways of life and beliefs, which in turn have an impact on form and function as used by natives of a particular language. Our main concern in teaching a foreign language must not be with grammatical input only. The fact remains that what's output in the syllabus in terms of structures, units, etc. does not necessarily go in as input in the learners' mind. Remedial work is one of the ways to check out whether what's output in the syllabus is input in the learner's cognition. This still has to be demonstrated as fossilised errors have often proved this not to be the case. As native learners, we acquire language together with the paralinguistic heritage of our own culture. This should be applied to an FL setting. The fact is that language codes cannot be taught under the form of units in isolation (which seems to be the general tendency in our classroom practices in Algeria). The processes of "sociocultural transmission" are triggered as soon as language teaching starts. When your student asks you what "haggis" means, no need to compare it to "عصبان" (a variety of mince meat, bowels, etc. with dry raisins) as one teacher did it willingly during our class observations. Although the food may taste somehow the same, the environment and the social event where these seemingly similar varieties of food are prepared remain totally different.

One often hears "Language Teaching is Culture Teaching". Our role as educators is to teach the culture of the foreign language whether it is included in the official syllabus and ordered through ministerial instructions or not. McLeod says in this respect: "by teaching a language... one is inevitably already teaching culture implicitly" (1976: 212). The contents in which the language exercises are worked out and the teacher's attitudes towards L2 culture are paramount factors in EFL. This does not seem to be the case in our schools and universities. We thus need

to go beyond a mere monitoring the linguistic forms that our learners produce and become more aware of the complex processes of intercultural mediation that our learners undergo.

In the area of foreign language instruction and culture in Algeria, the "Licence d'Enseignement de l'Anglais" per se is a good starting point for culture understanding and learning which should take into account the learners motivation in the first place. We shall draw, for this purpose, a comparison between the students' motivation for FL culture in the 80's and today's students who do not seem to 'worry much' about FL culture as much as they do for an overall average mark of 10 out of 20 (or a pass equivalent) in the exams.

Prior to the 1980s, the student's entry profile was that of a baccalaureate holder with an above average mark in English and a strong motivation to learn this language and its culture. Socially, the father was a skilled worker living in an urban area. Some of the freshers came from mixed secondary schools. Their motives for English language studies were more integrative and cultural than vocational. They were dictated somehow by the environment in the city (American and English folksongs, films, the British Council, the Afro-American Institute, etc.). The teaching staff was partly national and partly expatriate (UK, US, Australia, New Zealand, India and Pakistan). Algeria was then a promising oil and gas producer heading for socio-economic prosperity.

In the 1980's, a massive program for higher studies abroad (mainly in the UK) was launched. The aim was to provide qualified national teaching personnel with higher degrees (Master, Ph. D.). This did not last long. A drastic reduction in the foreign teaching staff took place partly because of the crash in oil prices of 1986. At the same time, new approaches and teaching methods instructed via ministerial notes (the Communicative Approach) have taken aback most teachers who were neither prepared nor trained for this sudden change in

teaching practices. The communicative approach which advocates the teaching and learning of language and culture in context was limited to a ministerial instruction that the teachers did not actually apply for the simple reason that they were neither aware of the literature behind this approach nor were they trained for it. The teaching of English and other foreign languages in Algeria boiled down to individual initiatives with the material available on the spot. Even within the same department, the same module is taught differently from one teacher to another.

This is still the case today with a learner's entry profile that differs from that of the 80's. The student comes from a mixed urban/rural background. In most cases, the students are weak in English and almost ignorant of the culture of this language. The motives for a BA in English have become more instrumental than cultural. The teaching staff is fully national and trained locally and on the spot.

Attitude and motivation towards the target language (English in this case) have changed substantially in the past twenty years or so. Attitude here refers to the general state of apprehension in the student towards the target language and culture. The students' attitude towards the English language and culture is characterised by a mixed reaction to the language in terms of structural difficulties and apprehension towards its speakers. Globally, English is regarded as a necessary "open window" to the West. Some closely link it to computing, science and technology. Others are keen to open-heartedly absorb the culture and customs of the English people without necessarily knowing why. Others still, insist on the fact that English must not "disconnect" them from "their culture" and "their language" which they say is Classical Arabic, "a language of a major tradition", they maintain. This is probably due to the general apprehension that French tried to do the same earlier by pushing Classical Arabic to religious spheres and the Mosque.

Cultural understanding and learning is in a vacuum in our classrooms because motivational props at the family and university levels are scarce for the student nowadays. This appears in his basic need in ELT, i.e., to get a degree for a teaching job or any other job for that matter. It is clearly summarised in expressions used among students and produced in the mother tongue. These may be translated as: "I want to *lock* the module" (I want to get a pass mark), "I only need half a point to close my module", "I don't think I'll be able to close the module this year".

These characteristics of the student are closely linked to environmental characteristics for ELT. On the whole, direct contact with the native speaker does not exist. Programs such as "Follow me" and "On we go" that used to be shown on Algerian TV have disappeared from the screen. This may be due to a shortage of supplies in the series. It may also be the result of a dictated language policy. The only contact then, remains through networks via the satellite dish, the Net, and through the written literature available on the spot, i.e. in our university libraries and perhaps in some bookshops in town. Both the TV channels and the book represent a uni-directional contact that is not always very motivating for the student to learn about culture.

Another aspect of this lack of culture understanding and learning in our universities is the teacher himself. The teacher who used to be a model for English language and culture doesn't hold that place of pride anymore. His teaching has become routine work with the same modules being taught over the years without keeping on a par with new theoretical trends. This is mainly true for content modules. Even the topics in oral expression, reading comprehension and listening comprehension are the same year in year out. The lack of teaching material, documented literature, teacher training courses, adequate teaching programs etc. does not help to overcome this vacuum where social tensions undermine the teaching itself. In fact, the

whole question on the teacher's attitude to English and his motivation towards teaching a foreign language remains open to debate.

When the student reaches university, he comes with a cultural background in his own language (Arabic, Berber...), perhaps some cultural knowledge in French and a rather poor knowledge of English language and culture. This background knowledge made of a mixture of Arabic (including Berber) culture and French culture constitutes the common layer on which his learning is based.

The question remains as to how and what should we teach our students in the "Licence". As it stands, the quality of L2 instruction is not effective enough to achieve an adequate teaching/learning that not only allows the student to cultivate himself for a better cross-cultural communication but also to preserve his own "forces propres" and cultural identity. No adequate responsive educational or pedagogical programs have been suggested this far. The BA curriculum dates back to the 1980s (perhaps prior to this date) and no substantial amendments have been made in spite of the drastic changes in the social-economic picture of the country. The teacher lacks qualified ELT professionalism despite new ELT methodologies and approaches that proliferate in the market. The teaching is often conducted hastily with no suitable teaching material or adequately trained instructors. EFL methodologies and approaches are often made available to the teacher once they are outdated and they most of the time leave him confused if not intimidated in his task. We have this far failed to develop appropriate curricula that encourage culture understanding and learning. As teachers, we still use English as an educational end (i.e. leading to a BA degree). We do not always see it as a means to an end, i.e., a language that opens up ways to global communication and modernity. The question often raised is where does the problem actually lay? Some teachers and course

designers see it in the dissimilarity that exists between L1 and L2 which affects language instruction, while they agree that the cultural background (Arabic/French) of the learner may help bridge this gap. Others see the "cloisonnements universitaires" and the "malaise social" as the prime factors that hinder the development of a proper English language curriculum where culture understanding and learning should be implemented. Others still blame the student himself whose motivation has become purely instrumental. But in any case, they all agree that the lack of internal support (governmental funds) and external material and moral support have a direct impact on the quality of L2 instruction in Algeria.

Notes:

1 - Whether cultural learning should start at the Middle school, the Secondary school or in Tertiary education is another issue that has to be debated. We suggest it should be introduced right from the start as in Spotlight on English (1 and 2), the newly distributed textbooks on English (September 2003) based on a Competency-based approach.

2 - Most of the time the teacher has the manual, the well off students may have it, but definitely not the whole class.

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9 - H. Stern: Foreign Languages in Primary Education, London (Quoted from Theo van Els, Theo Bongaerts, Guss Extra, Charles van Os, Anne-Mieke

Janssen-van Dieten, 1984): Applied Linguistics and the Learning and Teaching of Foreign Languages, translated in English by R. R. van Oirsouw, Edward Arnold, London, p. 171.

10 - Recorded Selections from the English Teaching forum for Listening Practice: Are You Listening. Published by the English Language Programs division, Bureau of educational and Cultural Affairs, United States Information agency, Washington, D.C. 20547.

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