مجلة حوليات التراث
ADP
REVUE ANNALES DU PATRIMOINE
ISSN 1112-5020

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Questions de culture dans ELE vers la promotion de la conscience interculturelle

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Publié le : 1/3/2006

05
2006

To cite the article :
✳ Souryana Yassine: Culture issues in FLT towards the fostering of intercultural awareness, Revue Annales du patrimoine, University of Mostaganem, N° 5, March 2006, pp. 49-58.

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http://annales.univ-mosta.dz

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Revue Annales du patrimoine, N° 5, 2006, pp. 49 - 58
ISSN 1112-5020

Culture issues in FLT towards the fostering of intercultural awareness

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Abstract:

The teaching of foreign languages always brings to the front the issue of culture teaching especially when this teaching takes place in a context multilingual. The curriculum and textbook designers are often divided between a desire for enculturation because anxious to preserve the national identity of the learners and a desire to open up to the other culture and therefore to advocate interculturality. This dilemma characterizes the various textbooks designed for teaching the English language in Algeria.

Keywords:

languages, plurilinguism, interculturality, textbooks, English.

Questions de culture dans ELE vers la promotion de la conscience interculturelle

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Résumé :

L'enseignement des langues étrangères pose toujours le problème de la culture surtout quand cet enseignement intervient dans un contexte plurilingue. Les concepteurs de programmes et de manuels scolaires sont souvent partagés entre un désir d'enculturation car soucieux de préserver l'identité nationale des apprenants et un vouloir s'ouvrir à l'autre culture et donc de prôner l'interculturalité. Ce dilemme caractérise et se retrouve dans les différents manuels conçus pour l'enseignement de la langue anglaise en Algérie.

Mots-clés :

langues, plurilinguisme, interculturalité, manuels, Anglais.

Culture in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) materials has often been subject to discussion among professionals and teachers for many years because it involves the "uncomfortable" question of the relation of the Self to the Other. In many

Publié le : 1/3/2006
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contexts, the intricate relationship between language and culture does actually stand as a problematic issue that determines and shapes the design of teaching materials. If designers hardly disagree about the importance of culture as a component of FLT materials, they do not always agree about which culture best fits as a context of introducing a new language mainly at the early stages of this process. And often, the choice of the cultural content both reflects and results on attitudes hold towards the target culture whether assumed or only implied.

The recent trends in FLT - informed by the worldwide developments in matters of globalisation, cross-cultural exchanges and the laws of international communication - are orientated towards an intercultural perspective. The claim is for an Intercultural Learning that would foster and help to increase international and cross-cultural tolerance and understanding.

Our aim in this paper is to examine the developing attitudes of Algerian English textbook designers towards the target culture and to show how the teaching materials step towards fostering and developing learners' intercultural awareness. Sharing H. E. Palmer's view that "it is the early lessons which are going to determine the eventual success or failure of the course" (Palmer 1995: 52) we have opted for the analysis of two textbooks meant for Algerian learners at their first years of English study; Spring One and Spotlight on English.

These two textbooks mirror the changing and developing attitudes hold by the Algerian designers towards both the national and the target cultures. These attitudes seem to range from reluctance to acceptance of interculturality. In others words, the designers seem to gradually move towards an intercultural perspective that takes care of the local culture and the foreign ones as well departing from the previously held tendency that translated a kind of reluctance towards the foreign culture.

1 - Culture interculturality and intercultural awareness:

All of the concepts of culture, interculturality and cultural awareness are of great relevance when dealing with FLT materials. In fact, language is a cultural phenomenon that is best understood and transmitted within the scope of the culture that shapes it.

1. Culture:

Culture is a concept that requires delicate delimitation for it means different things for different people. It is often seen as mere information conveyed by the language, not as a feature of language itself. For instance Claire Kramsch conceives culture as "a membership in a discourse community that shares a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and action" (Kramsch, 1998: 127). While Goodenough suggests that: A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for anyone of themselves. That knowledge is socially acquired; the necessary behaviors are learned and do not come from any kind of genetic endowment. (Goodenough cited in Wadhaugh 1992: 216).

If, as shown in these two definitions, culture for Kramsch and Goodenough involves acceptable interaction within the group it defines, for Chris Rose (2004) it is rather what makes this group. In her terms, culture is a way of life, a set of social practices, a system of beliefs and a shared history or set of experiences.

2. Interculturality:

Interculturality is best conceived as an active process of interchange, interaction and cooperation between cultures emphasising the similarities and considering the cultural diversity as an enriching element. It promotes the coexistence between several groups of different cultures. Wolfgang Welsch (2000) when dealing with the notion of interculturality in his article "Transculturality - the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today" rather

emphasizes the ways in which cultures get on with, understand and recognize one another.

Taken in the field of language teaching, interculturality allows for the development of the learners' intercultural awareness, which is considered by recent pedagogy of paramount importance to successful learning.

3. Intercultural Awareness:

Intercultural awareness can be viewed as the process of becoming more aware of and developing better understanding one's own culture and others cultures all over the world. It aims mainly to increasing international and cross-cultural understanding. Considered and better thought of as a competence in itself, intercultural awareness is a whole set of attitudes and skills among which Chris Rose (2004) lists the following:

Observing, identifying and recording
Comparing and contrasting
Negotiating meaning
Dealing with or tolerating ambiguity
Effectively interpreting messages
Limiting the possibility of misinterpretation
Defending one's own point of view while acknowledging the legitimacy of others
Accepting difference.

Seen as a competence, intercultural awareness is more than a set of knowledge about various and distinct cultures that language learners need to master. It is rather "an attribute of personal outlook and behavior… it emerges as the central but diversely constituted core of integrated curriculum". (Crawshaw: 2004).

2 - Culture Issues and FLT materials:

Teaching materials cannot be value-free or neutral. They too often reflect on their designers' assumed or implied attitudes towards cultural content. Furthermore, they provide insights

about the ideologies and the paradigms that underlie the choice of a specific approach to FLT. The set of social and cultural values which are inherent to the make-up of teaching materials and which are sometimes only indirectly communicated by them is what Cunningsworth (1995) refers to as the "Hidden Curriculum".

The notion of "Hidden Curriculum" is of paramount importance in the analysis of teaching materials and mainly textbooks. The impact of this "hidden Curricula" is too significant to be skipped out. "Hidden curriculum" which forms part of any educational programme, but is instated and undiscovered. It may well be an expression of attitudes and values that are not consciously held but which nevertheless influence the content and image of the teaching material and indeed the whole curriculum. A curriculum (and teaching materials form part of this) cannot be neutral because it has to reflect a view of social order and express a value system, implicitly or explicitly. (Cunningsworth, 1995: 90).

When aiming to depict this hidden curriculum, the study and analysis of teaching materials, hence, can provide valuable information about the designers' attitudes towards the national and the target cultures. In what follows, we are going to attempt the analysis of two Algerian English textbooks in order to sort out the different attitudes they enclose and to see how these attitudes develop.

3 - Algerian English textbooks:

As demonstrated above, textbooks can inform about the ideologies and the paradigms that underlie teaching approaches choice. In fact, "Foreign language teaching textbooks no longer just develop concurrently with the development of foreign language pedagogy in a narrow sense, but they increasingly participate in the general cultural transmission with the educational system and in the rest of the society". (Risager in Cunningsworth 1995: 90).

Thus aiming to examine the development of Algerian textbook designers' attitudes towards the inclusion of foreign and cultural components as parts and contexts of the teaching / learning process, we are interested in two English textbooks: Spring One and Spotlight on English. As stated in the introduction, we have opted for these textbooks mainly because they are meant for beginners believing that the early contact with the foreign language is of determinant consequences to the success of any language course.

1. Description of the Textbooks:

Here are broad descriptions of Spring One and Spotlight on English that constitute the main materials of our study.

1 - Spring One:

Spring One is the English textbook conceived for the beginners and issued in (1900). It is intended for all the pupils in their first year of English language study in the Basic School. It contains twenty units. The texts of the units are presented in forms of dialogues, interviews and personal accounts. Different sorts of activities and practices are related to these texts. Through the twenty units Rafik, the main character, is presented in different situations though constantly evolving in a typically Algerian context.

The content is organized around six main language functions: Description, Narration, Socializing, Instructing, Questioning, and Planning. Each unit comprises seven sections: Input, Communicate, Consolidate, Read, Understand, Write, and Relax.

The chief aim of the textbook being to develop the communicative abilities of the pupils and make them fluent in English.

2 - Spotlight on English:

Spotlight on English is the official textbook designed by the Ministry of Education for the pupils in their first year of English study in the Middle school. The manual is a pedagogical

document that handles the new official syllabus adopted within the framework of the recent Education Reform.

The syllabus is communicatively oriented and thematically organised. It is developed through a pre-file followed by seven files: Hello, Family and Friends, Sports, In and Out, Food, Inventions and Discoveries, Environment. Each file is presented with varied colourful illustrations.

The pre-file entitled "You know English" includes some basic notions and terms in English. The rest of the files is made up of the following sequences: Listening Scripts, Learn about Culture, Check and Your Project.

2. The Textbooks' Cultural Contents:

The evaluation of the textbooks cultural content is based on Ferit Kilickaya's (2004) "Guidelines to Evaluate Cultural Content in Textbook" (see appendix 1). A contrastive study of the two textbooks reveals many results that are summed up in the following.

1 - Analysis Results:

The designer's notes: the designers' fore word in Spring One consists of a short text in English that describes the objectives of the textbook. It does not include any explicit or implicit reference to the manual's cultural content. There is no indication to the way the textbook would be used. On the contrary, in Spotlight on English the fore word consists of a relatively long text in Arabic addressed to the learners explaining to them their active role in the learning process. It overtly deals with the notion of culture setting it within an intercultural perspective.

2 - Culture:

While Spring One includes exclusively national culture in Spotlight on English the perspective is rather one of intercultural scope. In the first manual all the settings and characters are made up Algerian. There is hardly a reference to a foreign character. But Spotlight on English adopts an intercultural perspective. Reference is made both to the learners' first culture

and to a set of other foreign cultures. It points to the parallels that are to be drawn among various world cultures. International communication too is present through Internet chat.

Types of Activities: Spring one includes sets of drills generally taking the forms of dialogues to memorise and to practise by repetition. Although claiming to follow on the communicative approach the linguistic content and the types of activities tend more towards a structural audiolingual methodology. Whereas, Spotlight on English designed along the principles of the Competency-based approach offers through the projects more opportunities to the learners to interact using the English language.

3 - Supporting Texts:

The authentic texts in Spring One are rare and generally related to scientific subjects or to introduce prominent scientists. They try mainly to present specific subjects the learners study elsewhere so as to felicitate their understanding. The aim of such texts is mainly to reinforce the idea of studying English as a means to gain access to scientific content. However, in Spotlight on English the authentic texts deal with a varied set of topics related to different cultural facets such as music and food. There are also portraits of artists.

4 - Discussion:

The analysis of the explicit and the implicit content of these textbooks would sort out which values they hold. It hence, explains the implied and unjustified fear from the learners' acculturation if exposed to the foreign culture translated by an open rejection of all that comes from the other culture in Spring One. It further reveals negative attitudes towards cultural content resulting in a kind of over "instrumentalization" of the English language.

The latter is almost reduced to a set of structures and the learners nearly never know when, where, how and with whom to use this new language they are taught. What is illustrated by the

choice of authentic scientific texts assuming that in multilingual context where many national varieties are at use, the foreign language is merely meant as a means to access scientific and technological advances. K. Taleb Ibrahimi (1997) reaches the same conclusion in her study of the Algerian sociolinguistic scene. These negative attitudes are also the result of different and often conflicting social projects that are trying to influence the curricula. The debate is one of political interests and reflects the sociolinguistic reality where the status and the place of foreign languages in general and that of English in particular are far from being settled.

However, the change in the adopted paradigm in the context of the recent Educational Reform can explain the emerging of positive attitudes towards the foreign culture which is no longer seen as a threat. The move from a structural approach to a communicative and even to competency-based paradigms can account for fostering of a certain intercultural awareness.

In fact, the competency-based teaching relies basically on project works, problem-solving situations and task-based-teaching or practices that require more interaction and call for cultural competencies to cope with new situations and negotiations. It is then for the sake of intercultural awareness that Algerian textbook designers have included an important amount of the national culture besides to the others cultures within the materials for the teaching of foreign language. This may explain the recent "culture-sensitive" approach to ELT which needs ethnographic action research to be successful.

Throughout the analysis of the two textbooks and the examination of their hidden curricula it comes clear that the attitudes towards the foreign culture are becoming more positive. More important than this, it stands plain that the perspective is one of fostering intercultural awareness. The pupils are guided towards this intercultural perspective in order

to gain self-esteem and to learn the respect of the others, in other words, to be more tolerant.

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