Cultural Awareness in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the role of cultural awareness in foreign language teaching and learning. It traces the historical development from culture being regarded as an additional dimension of the language taught to being seen as an integral part of it. After a short historical overview, the chapter presents the shift of cultural focus caused by the introduction and the development of the term communicative competence in foreign language teaching. Major contributions to the field are discussed, including definitions and models which have had a great impact on the teaching of culture. Related aspects such as cultural knowledge, literature teaching and dialogue, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), and human rights teaching are dealt with briefly. Certain more recent views and concepts are then presented, including transnational views on culture. The chapter looks at cultural content in the foreign language classroom as well as learning processes, especially related to working with literature. The problem of assessing cultural awareness is also discussed. Which aspects of the concept can possibly be evaluated? In this context, self-assessment tools developed by the Council of Europe are briefly mentioned. In the final section, the chapter puts forward aspects of cultural awareness and language teaching which are likely to be addressed in the near future, trying to point out important areas for decision makers and teachers alike.

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Introduction

This chapter discusses the development of the role that culture plays in foreign language teaching and learning, mainly in Europe. Over the past 20–30 years, the emphasis on cultural competence and intercultural awareness has increased. This heightened focus is largely the result of work instigated by the Council of Europe and the influence on foreign language teaching of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001).

Despite the vast influence of the *Framework* on curriculum development and teaching, different traditions related to cultural awareness in European language teaching can still be seen: on the one hand, the originally German concept of *Bildung* as an overall aim of education, on the other hand, a tradition that focuses more on skills and competences. The former reflects a philosophical view of cultural relationships in which the roles of self and other take center stage. The latter is based on a more instrumental and utilitarian view of foreign language learning with an emphasis on skills. In most European countries, national curricula reflect both these traditions, often with the former as a general aim for all subjects. Recently also a third direction can be distinguished: the development of cross-cultural didactics and a transnational perspective on language and culture teaching (Risager 2012).

Culture is a complex concept and different approaches to studying culture have influenced language teaching. Risager (2003, p. 84) distinguishes between three main categories of the concept: the individual, the collective, and the aesthetic, all of them relevant to foreign language teaching. Research on culture has concentrated on anthropological approaches because these are primarily concerned with the collective and because of their focus on the other (p. 89). Foreign language teaching today, however, also emphasizes the individual aspect. According to the phenomenologist Peter Berger, culture "is at base an all-embracing socially constructed world of subjectively and inter-subjectively experienced meanings. Culture must be constructed and reconstructed as a continuous process" (Berger in Wuthnow et al. 1984, p. 25). Here culture is defined as both dynamic and dialectic, in other words, learners are influenced by a culture, but they also influence that culture.

This chapter discusses the transition from regarding cultural awareness in the classroom as an addition to foreign language teaching to seeing it as an integral part

of language learning. It is a matter of learning *through* culture as well as learning *about* it. Only by gaining insight into the other can learners gain an outside view of themselves.

As with any culture teaching and learning, this chapter is influenced by the writer's own background. One's own culture shapes the way one experiences the outside world, it is the glasses through which one sees things. Thus it also shapes the arguments in an article.

Early Developments

Culture has always played an important part in foreign language teaching, especially at higher levels of education. Historically, the focus was mainly on knowledge of the target culture: society, history, geography, institutions, and literature. At lower school levels, cultural knowledge included knowledge of everyday life, focusing on home, school, and spare time. At university level, the subject area is still referred to as *background*, *civilization*, or *Landeskunde*. It provides a backdrop to language learning and is regarded less as an integral part of it. This view of culture and language is largely based on the eighteenth-century German new humanist ideal of *Bildung*: the broadly and well-educated citizen who could read and write foreign languages. The methods for teaching modern foreign languages were similar to the philosophy behind the teaching of Latin and classical Greek. The view of culture in foreign language learning was elitist and regarded culture as a static entity.

During the first half of the twentieth century, new methods of foreign language teaching were introduced, primarily at early stages of language learning. The direct method was prevalent in textbooks for beginners and the view of culture in language learning changed. With the widespread introduction of the audio-lingual method after World War II, foreign language learning became accessible to large numbers of learners and it was no longer just the "culture of the elite" or "big C" culture which was interesting but also the "culture of the people" or "little c" culture (Kramsch 2006, p. 13). Gradually traveling became one reason for learning languages and there was a shift from emphasizing only knowledge of the target culture to also including cultural competence: being able to act in the foreign culture.

In the 1970s, a paradigmatic change in foreign language teaching occurred, from behaviorist, audio-lingual teaching to communicative language teaching. Chomsky's theories of language and meaning and his distinction between linguistic competence and performance were important contributions to this change. Hymes opposed Chomsky's narrow definition of linguistic competence as it "left a major gap in not dealing with the issue of appropriacy" (Spolsky 1989, p. 139) and introduced the term *communicative competence* to allow for sociocultural factors (Hymes 1972, 1985). Although Halliday rejected the term competence, his linking of the meaning of language to the social and situational contexts also strongly influenced

communicative language teaching (Halliday 1979). In his book *Scope* (1986), van Ek defined what he calls *communicative ability* as consisting of the following components:

- Linguistic competence
- Sociolinguistic competence
- Discourse competence
- Strategic competence
- Sociocultural competence
- Social competence

In addition to these, he stated another aim for language learning: *optimal development of personality*, which consists of two components: cognitive and affective development.

Foreign language curricula in Europe changed radically within a fairly short period of time to include van Ek's definition of communicative competence. Knowledge of the target language culture was no longer the sole cultural focus in the foreign language classroom. Through communication-gap exercises, role-plays, and other simulated activities, students were in addition required to develop sociocultural competence.

Up to this period, the main focus in the classroom had been on reading and writing, not on speaking. Gradually the focus on cultural knowledge, including the role of literature, decreased and foreign language classrooms became the playground for oral activities centered around acting out every-day situations and dialogues: visits to shops, restaurants, simulated phone calls, arguments with parents, etc., situations learners could identify with and which they might need when traveling.

Textbooks during the 1980s and early 1990s reflected this view of foreign language learning. At lower school levels, they had previously contained constructed texts written by source culture authors, reflecting specific language problems. With the increased focus on communication, textbooks now contained constructed dialogues as examples of what people might say in specific situations.

Another aspect of the communicative approach, which took longer to appear in textbooks, was the emphasis on authentic texts. Teachers and textbook authors treated these texts mainly with the aim to teach language and not as representations of culture, but gradually the view that authentic texts represent the voice of a culture gained ground in the classroom. As far as literary texts are concerned, however, Kramsch's view that "language teachers seem constrained to teach these texts for their information value only" (1993, p. 8) is still predominant.

The introduction of sociocultural competence as an aspect of communicative ability was the start of regarding culture not only as "information conveyed by the language" but "as a feature of language itself" (Kramsch 1993, p. 8). Changing foreign language classroom practice, however, takes time.

Major Contributions

In an attempt to define and clarify the concept of sociocultural competence in education, Byram presents the following categories of what has been termed intercultural communicative competence:

> *savoirs*: **knowledge** of self and other; of interaction: individual and societal
> *savoir comprendre*: **skills** — interpret and relate
> *savoir être*: **attitudes** — relativising self, valuing other
> *savoir apprendre/faire*: **skills** — discover and/or interact
> *savoir s'engager*: **education** — political education, critical cultural awareness. (Byram 1997a, p. 34)

These five categories show a shift of focus from teaching to learning and from declarative to procedural knowledge. It is no longer just a matter of aims but also how the learner is going to achieve these aims.

The focus on *savoir être* and *savoir s'engager* has greatly increased over the past few decades. Before this relatively late emphasis on individual involvement and awareness, teachers, curricula, and textbooks seem to believe that getting rid of stereotyped views and prejudice is an automatic result of foreign language learning that positive attitudes and tolerance develop alongside knowledge and competence. According to Allport, prejudice is "an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization" (1954, p. 9). Developing intercultural awareness means to fight the human tendency to simplify by overgeneralizing (p. 13). It requires encountering the other, not only at the group level but also as individuals. Stereotyped attitudes and beliefs have to be expressed and consciously worked on in the foreign language classroom; they do not automatically occur as a result of language learning and knowledge about the foreign culture.

Byram's categories have been further developed and form part of the classification used in the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR). Unfortunately, the 2001 edition of the *Framework* presents the *savoirs* under the heading of "general competences" and not as an integral part of language learning, as follows:

> *savoir* — declarative knowledge, which includes: knowledge of the world, socio-cultural knowledge, intercultural awareness
> *savoir faire* — skills and know-how, which includes practical skills and know-how and intercultural skills and know-how
> *savoir être* — 'existential competence'
> *savoir apprendre* — ability to learn. (CEFR 2001, pp. 101 ff)

In the *Framework*, the concept *cultural* has been replaced by *intercultural*, both relating to skills and awareness. Based on a constructivist view of learning and the realization that the foreign language learner encounters the target culture from a stance founded on his or her cultural capital, the term intercultural has gradually

replaced the term cultural in foreign language teaching. The learners encounter the foreign cultures as members of their own cultural community, and the encounter thus implies at least two cultures.

The development from cultural to intercultural shows a development of the view of culture in foreign language learning away from a focus solely on the target culture towards regarding it as an interrelationship between two cultures: one's own and the other. In order for learners to step back and reflect on a culture different from their own, they have to be consciously aware of the culture of which they are an integral part. Awareness of differences as well as of similarities between the native culture and the target culture is essential for the development of intercultural awareness. While learning a foreign language, the learner brings his own culture into the communication process with the foreign culture. Intercultural awareness can consequently "be seen as an interdependent relationship between cultures which constitutes a dynamic enrichment for Self as well as the Other" (Fenner 2000, p. 149). Communication is an open-ended process dependent on the context and the situation in which the communication takes place. Without knowledge and understanding of both native and target cultures, intercultural communication is hardly possible.

Communicating with the other means entering into a dialogue where one has to be willing to adjust one's own attitudes and perspectives to understand the other, even if a complete understanding can never be achieved. Bakhtin defines dialogue as follows: "To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth" (Bakhtin 1984, p. 293). It is this type of dialogue that is required in the classroom if intercultural awareness is to develop.

Intercultural encounters can be seen as negotiating meaning in a process where meaning "is constructed between [the participants] as a kind of ideological bridge, is built in the process of their interaction" (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1985, p. 152). In order for the participants to understand each other, or at least establish what they do not understand, openness towards the other is necessary. Discussing ideological bridges, Kramsch argues that "[w]hat we should seek in cross-cultural education are less bridges than a deep understanding of the boundaries" (1993, p. 228). Building ideological bridges in the Bakhtinian sense, however, does not mean blurring differences but attempting a temporary, contextual understanding of both self and other. Both cultures in the encounter must also be regarded as dynamic and polyphone; any culture is "a living mix of varied and opposing voices" (Bakhtin 1984), and learners have to acknowledge this also when it comes to their own culture.

According to Ricoeur, it is through interaction with others that we experience our own identity, not through introspection. The aim of *savoir être* can only be achieved through a learning process based on reflection on and understanding of the other as well as of self. This requires personal engagement or *savoir s'engager*. It is an ongoing process where students develop not only as language learners but as human beings.

Byram and Zarate (1997) introduce the concept "intercultural speaker" or "locuteur culturelle" to describe foreign language learners as "interlocuters involved in intercultural communication and action" (Byram 1997b, p. 4), stating

the importance of developing critical thinking "about one's own and other cultures and their taken-for-granted values and practices" (p. 10). Developing critical thinking is dependent on reflection, a meta-level of language learning, which is often sadly lacking in many classrooms where the focus of teaching is solely on language skills.

Seeing intercultural awareness as an integral part of foreign language learning indicates that one of many aims is the development and enrichment of the student's identity. This is a dynamic process. When learning a foreign language, the learner brings his own culture into the communication process with the foreign culture, whether it is in reading a foreign text or in speaking to a representative of that particular language community. It is not only a matter of negotiating meaning but of interpretation in the hermeneutic sense. Interpreting the meaning of texts or personal encounters also means interpreting oneself: ". . . in the hermeneutical reflection – or in the reflexive hermeneutic – the building of the self and the meaning (*sens*) are simultaneous" (Ricoeur 1992, p. 55). It is a dialectic and dialogic process where the learner is influenced by the foreign culture at the same time as he or she is influencing that culture. This cannot be done passively or by the teacher presenting learners with knowledge about the foreign culture. Foucault states that

> [t]he idea that the other can simply reveal or disclose itself to us, without any work whatsoever on our part, is ultimately unintelligible. There can be no access to the other without our actively organising the other in terms of our categories. (Foucault in Falzon 1998, p. 37)

Reorganization of categories entails change and developing identity in the learning process. Developing intercultural awareness means being confronted with one's own as well as the foreign culture, and, in Kramsch's words, the goal of developing such awareness "is not a balance of opposites, or a moderate pluralism of opinions but a paradoxical, irreducible confrontation that may change one in the process" (Kramsch 1993, p. 231).

Work in Progress

In 2006 Risager introduces the term *languaculture* and discusses it "in three interconnected dimensions: the semantic-pragmatic dimension, the poetic dimension, and the identity dimension" (Risager 2012, p. 151). The first one is linked to linguistic anthropology, the connotations of utterances in use, and to cross-cultural semantics. The poetic dimension relates to the aesthetic uses of language and includes the study of literature. The third, the identity dimension of language, is a research area within sociolinguistics and deals with the relationship between language and identity, how one by the means of utterances chooses to identify oneself. By introducing the concept *languaculture*, Risager emphasizes the individual aspect of language and culture learning as well as the interdependency of the mother tongue and the foreign language to be learnt.

Another fairly recent development related to cultural awareness, which concerns English as a foreign language, is the debate on what is termed international English. There is a strong linguistic and educational movement towards removing the language from its cultural roots and regarding it as a globalized lingua franca. Up until now, research carried out on cultural awareness has been based on the interrelationship between language and culture where culture and language cannot be regarded as separate. Risager sees a much more complex relationship between language and culture: "language *practice* can have a thematic (cultural) content, 'the language', on the other hand, is a discursive construction and can, consequently, have no thematic content" (Risager 2003, p. 422).[1]

Foreign language teaching and learning has been mainly bilateral. English as a foreign language has been linked to the cultures of the countries where the language is spoken, primarily Great Britain and the USA. This narrow view of English-speaking cultures has been extended to also include Australia and some African and Asian cultures. However, English is the most widely spoken lingua franca and is thus transnational. This does not mean that it should be taught as culturally neutral but that its cultural aspects are much wider than only national ones and transnational aspects of language and culture also have a place in teaching English as foreign language.

Related to Byram's concept *political education*, *critical cultural awareness*, in his model of intercultural communicative competence (1997a), another fairly recent development is citizenship education, expressed mainly through content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and human rights teaching. Although human rights have been a part of curricula in many subjects in some countries, there is a need to focus on these areas also in foreign language learning. Such subject matter can only emphasize the importance of content in the process of developing intercultural awareness as well as emphasizing the interdependence of language and culture. The aim of teaching and learning through discussing human rights extends the development of self to include the development of communities. Human rights education almost ironically reflects the opposite of what Foucault calls the oppressor' role (Falzon 1998): "Learning a new language gives access to potential new identities. This challenges any notion of citizenship as associated primarily with monolithic national identities" (Starkey 2005, p. 66).

Over the past decade, research on literature teaching in relation to intercultural competence has been given increased emphasis (Bredella 2006, 2012; Thyberg 2012; Hoff 2016). There has been a clear move from using literature in the classroom with only a focus on linguistic aspects or to provide examples of cultural content to including the reading process itself, with a focus on the learner's interpretation of the text. Bredella (2006) discusses multicultural literary texts in order to improve the students' openness towards other cultures and to promote empathy. In her doctoral thesis, Thyberg (2012) emphasizes dialogue in the classroom and how intersubjective processes may influence the formation of values and democratic thinking.

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[1]My translation from Danish.

Focusing on the learners' involvement and reflection when reading novels can clearly be linked to Byram's *savoir s'engager* and what he terms political education.

Cultural pedagogy can easily be criticized for emphasizing harmony rather than conflict. Both Byram's model and the *European Framework*, which have had a tremendous influence on culture teaching over the past decades, have harmony and agreement between intercultural speakers as their final aims. An understanding of and training in intercultural communication have over the past decade influenced business communities (Feng et al. 2009), where harmony is important in order to yield practical results. However, from learning theories we know that challenge and confrontation can be equally important for learning. In her work, Hoff challenges the harmony aspect of Byram's model and "addressess the need to reformulate a theory of intercultural competence to include conflict, ambiguity and difference as stimulation for learners' critical engagement" (Hoff 2014).

Problems and Difficulties

Interestingly, the *Framework* includes intercultural awareness in the first category, *savoir* or knowledge, and lists *savoir être* or existential competence as a separate concept. One can always hope that this will lead to an increased focus on intercultural awareness, although it is more difficult to implement in teaching programs than the other components, as it is not something that can be taught and as it is difficult to assess. That it now appears in a category with components that can be taught, may, however, cause a problem, because teachers as well as learners might revert to the old misconception that developing intercultural awareness will be an automatic result of gaining cultural knowledge rather than a learning process that requires conscious reflection upon such knowledge, in other words, a meta-level of knowledge. Developing awareness is an aspect of foreign language learning which the learners have to take charge of themselves. But teachers are of vital importance when it comes to organizing learning situations and mediating the individual's learning processes in order for the learner to develop intercultural awareness.

There is, however, another possible reason for intercultural awareness having been placed in the *savoir* category. In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on assessment and testing in foreign language learning; one can almost talk about an assessment and test culture developing with a large number researchers involved. It is, consequently, important to ask what is possible to test in the foreign language classroom. Although it is relatively easy to teach and test knowledge and skills, it is far more difficult, if not impossible, to test awareness. Do we, for instance, want attitudes and values to be tested?

As stated before, developing accepting attitudes towards other cultures is a vital part of language learning. Working in the classroom on stereotyped views, getting learners to express these, to work on them, and to challenge them, is one of the foreign language teacher's tasks. This involves encounters with the other as an individual, not only as a group, for instance, through literature. But teachers have

no guarantee that stereotyped views will disappear. In many classrooms, teachers never offer scope for learning processes that include personal interpretation, reflection, and discussion. If the focus is merely on teaching knowledge and skills and not on the learner' awareness, learning processes that challenge the students' views of their own and the target cultures will not take place.

The difference between learning foreign languages in the classroom and acquiring language outside school lies in the fact that the teacher can mediate the learning processes, including the development of attitudes and values. Outside the classroom attitudes develop accidentally, based on personal experience, whereas inside the classroom attitudes can be challenged through a number of cognitive processes like comparing, contrasting, problem solving, etc. Through an educated choice of texts and tasks, discussions, and reflection, the teacher can mediate dialogues between the source and the target cultures as well as between learners (Fenner 2001, 2005). Through such classroom dialogues the learners' attitudes can develop and change, but it requires the teacher being acquainted with the individual learner's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978) and it requires training in intercultural mediation (Zarate et al. 2004). It also requires time, as attitudes are not changed overnight.

Over the last years, work by the Council of Europe has focused on how to assess intercultural awareness (Lazar et al. 2008) and this assessment has caused debate. Various forms of self-assessment have been discussed and have resulted in two self-assessment portfolios: the *European Language Portfolio* to be used by learners and the *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages. A reflection tool for language teacher education* (Newby et al. 2007). Both tools can promote an awareness of the individual's cultural competence and perhaps this is as far as one should go.

Placing intercultural awareness as a subcategory of knowledge is no solution, it can only serve the purpose of confusing it with cultural knowledge. Defining *savoir être* as existential competence and not as attitudes might blur the whole concept, especially in learning cultures where views on language learning are mainly instrumental and where the development of self is not explicitly expressed as an overall aim of foreign language learning.

Future Directions

The two educational traditions, on the one hand, a tradition where personal development is an overall aim of learning, especially of language learning, on the other hand, a tradition where skills and testing are more heavily emphasized, will influence the views on cultural or intercultural awareness and its place in foreign language teaching in the coming years. These are matters for policy makers and are, to a certain extent, dependent on educational policies. A shift in political direction will influence the emphasis between utilitarian and instrumental aims of language teaching and long-term general educational aims. Short-term aims for the business community will also

influence the focus in the foreign language classroom. International trade needs competent foreign language speakers who know how to behave in a foreign culture.

Although it is not easy to predict how intercultural awareness will develop in the foreign language classroom, some major trends can be pointed out. The first of these is the role played by literature. This chapter has not discussed the cultural content of foreign language teaching and learning, except by briefly mentioning "high" culture versus "low culture." With the demand of authentic texts, nonfictional texts fairly quickly appeared in textbooks. In recent years, literature seems to have edged its way back into foreign language classrooms not only at higher-school levels, but also at lower levels.

Along with a shift of focus from teaching to learning came a shift in literary theory towards receptionist theory and the learner's text. This has resulted in an altered attitude to teaching literature in the classroom. From methods largely based on New Criticism and structuralism, the focus in many classrooms has shifted to approaches based on hermeneutics and the individual's interpretation of the literary text as a basis for classroom reflection and discussion. With the view that the aim of reading literature is not only to discover the author's intention or the accepted meaning of a literary artifact or even the teacher's interpretation of it, the literary text has again become important in foreign language teaching and learning. Teachers cannot compete with the cultural influences learners are exposed to outside the classroom, like music, television, films, and, most of all, social media. For the development of cultural awareness, it is important that teachers do not feel they have to compete but can use and add something to the outside influence. Many young people do not read extensively outside the classroom, and hence foreign language education can assist the enhancement of the learners' cultural capital by spending more time on reading, reflecting on, and discussing literature as the personal voice of a culture (Fenner 2001) in the foreign language classroom and thus develop the learners' cultural awareness and identity.

A second fairly recent development is citizenship education, expressed through CLIL, as discussed above. Both national and international projects are carried out, some mainly to promote the learning of foreign languages by giving language learning more lessons and some to promote links between culture and language by focusing on a much wider scope of content. In the transition from authoritarian states to democracies, human rights teaching, for instance, play an important role.

Thirdly, there is no doubt that multicultural and transnational aspects of language teaching will be important in the years to come (Risager 2012). Students travel more and they have access to a globalized world through the Internet and social media. Regarding the foreign language also as a lingua franca will be a great challenge to foreign language teachers. It means redefining the relationship between language and culture, and it also means redefining language learning in many countries as a national educational project to see it as part of a globalization process (Risager 2003, pp. 48–49). Teaching and learning language as separate from its cultural roots and not as integral part of cultures of a specific community seems an almost impossible task.

Cross-References

▶ Critical Multilingual Language Awareness and Teacher Education
▶ Knowledge About Language and Learner Autonomy
▶ Knowledge About Language in the Mother Tongue and Foreign Language Curricula

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

Hilary Janks: Language and Power in the Classroom. In Volume: Language Policy and Political Issues in Education
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