

Cultural content and the teaching of literature

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Abstract:

Language does not develop in a vacuum. A language is "part of the culture of people and a chief means by which the members of a society communicate. A language is both a component of culture and a central network through which the other components are expressed" Lado (1964:23). There can be no real learning of a language without understanding something of the patterns and values of the culture of which it is part: "To deal with the culture and life of a people is not just an adjunct of a particular language course, something alien and apart from its main purpose, to be added or not as time and convenience may allow, but an essential feature of every stage of language learning" Fries (1955:14). In essence, the success in foreign language learning depends largely on a sympathetic orientation towards the foreign culture. As argued by Lado (1964) : "Every time that the teacher describes or refers to something that the student does not understand culturally or misunderstands because its cultural content differs from his native patterns, there is immediate need to deal with the cultural differences involved" Lado (1964: 149).. This need is present even if teachers teach the language exclusively as a tool and not as a complete educational experience. This is significant since language and culture constitute "a simple universe or domain of experience."(Kramsch, 1991: 271).

The question is not whether we can tackle cultural content or when we should tackle it, since we must come to grips with it from the beginning. The question is according to Lado (1964) one of determining what the learning problems involved are and how we may teach an understanding of one culture to another. In fact, "differences in the purpose for which the language is taught influence the cultural content of the course" Lado (1964:150). The present paper will therefore, consider the foreign language as part of the general education of students, as a stepping stone to a foreign literature and seeks therefore to provide answers to the following questions:

How to teach cultural content and when? How do we teach one culture to understand another? Where do we begin?

Key Words:

Culture - Cultural Content - Foreign Language Teacher -Foreign Language Learner- Language Literature.

1- Introduction.

A language, therefore, is both a component of culture and a central network through which the other components are expressed. A literary piece as claimed by Lado (1964) represents a unique, esthetically notable expression of some content through language. For him a piece may achieve the esthetic level of literature through the qualities of its expression and the significance of its content, or both.

2- Cultural content and Literature: What should we teach as cultural content?

As argued by Lado, 1946: "Every time that the textbook or the teacher mentions a word or describes or refers to something that the Algerian student does not understand culturally or misunderstands because its cultural content differs from his native patterns, there is immediate need to deal with the cultural differences involved"

Lado (1964:149). This need according to him is present even if we teach the language exclusively as a tool and not as a complete educational experience.

Thus one may say that the main goal of learning the foreign language have to do with the non-native learner interest in the target language itself and his enthusiasm to know about its people, behaviours, beliefs, traditions, values and thinking. In other words, to know about *the culture* of the native speakers of the foreign language. To attain such goal and as assumed by Lado (1964), one is to consider the following:

a- Elementary meaning units It is essential to understand the cultural units of meaning attached to units of expression such as words, idioms and proverbs. These elementary meaning units (EMUs) differ from culture to culture and therefore from language to language. Therefore, the cultural content and the connotations of the words and idioms selected for teaching will have to be made clear to the student to avoid misunderstanding.

b- False clichés or Stereotypes. It is important not only to reject false clichés but to learn instead cultural content that is authentic.

c- Great achievements The purpose of studying a foreign language has changed from the narrow one of coming in contact with great literature only, to the broader one of coming in contact with the members of other cultures as well as with their literature, art, science, technology, and language. The cultural stream of the classics of literature has expanded to include great achievements in other fields.

3- Learning Cultural Content: *How can it be achieved?*

According to Lado (1964:30) learning cultural content can be achieved in addition to other components (such as visual aids) through:

a- Influence of Native Culture The student learns the target culture not from scratch as he learned his native one, but with the experience, meanings, and habits of his native culture influencing him at every step.

b- Target Language Versus Native Language The learner merely learns about the target culture in terms of cultural categories of his native culture. Furthermore, learning cultural content through the target language will not only identify the elementary meaning units EMUs of the target culture but will give the student freedom to extend his understanding of the target culture independently, according to his interests.

4- General Recommendations: *How to Teach Cultural Content and When?*

To provide answers to the above questions one need to understand the following:

a- Cultural notes When a word or expression must be taught that differs in cultural content from the roughly equivalent term in the native language, the teacher may explain its meaning as a cultural note or an aside without going into the entire structure of the culture.

b- Contextual areas Careful selection of contextual areas for the reading material permits full use of the language in limited areas early in the course. Pictures, slides, or films may help significantly to provide cultural content for observation by the students.

c- Cultural topics as content When the students have reached an intermediate level of mastery of cultural items they have already learned, the teacher can switch emphasis and use the language to teach cultural matters.

d- Experiencing the culture Much can be done to understand the target culture through the study of the language. Full experience, however, is difficult if not possible without living in that society for at least one year.

(Lado (1964:152/153))

5- Conclusion

In short, it is important for the foreign language teacher to understand the intimate relationship between language, literature and culture when teaching the foreign language. The learner cannot understand a language or a literary piece without understanding at least some of the distinct cultural meanings expressed through it. Thus, it is unquestionable to disassociate cultural content from the teaching of the foreign language and its literature.

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