

Teaching Culture in Language Classes: One Approach

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Learners who have spent most of their lives in a single cultural environment, and who are then immersed in a different culture, start to see their own ideas, beliefs, behaviors, and values as being culturally determined, and not as fixed, universal givens. In fact, it is only by seeing how others view and do things, and becoming aware of what they know by being members of a different culture, that we can become fully aware of the cultural basis for our own ways of doing, seeing, and knowing. It is an on-going learning process that surrounds us every day in this field; it happens to everyone from the young Salvadoran refugee in high intensity ESL classes in a Washington, DC junior high to the recent Japanese college graduate enrolled in summer language classes in Hawaii. The approach presented in this paper attempts to put aspects of that process at the center of language teaching and learning activities.

In the summer of 1989, under a grant from the Soros Foundation, 45 Hungarian secondary and university teachers of English attended a 5-week session at the University of Pennsylvania. The objective of the entire summer program was to introduce these EFL teachers to American life and culture.

To meet this goal of introducing the teachers—very few of whom had even visited the United States before—to American life and culture, the official summer program made arrangements for attendance at numerous evening and weekend concerts, activities, and sporting events; hosted formal and informal social gatherings; set up trips to New York, Atlantic City, and Washington; and sponsored a weekend homestay for all participants. In addition, all participants attended morning lectures by distinguished authorities on a wide array of social, cultural, political, and educational topics. The lectures were followed by language classes, and the afternoons were set aside for the students to conduct independent research about American life and culture.

The key components of the approach to the language class were making observations and conducting interviews with informants

about social or cultural phenomena; recording personal notes about interviews and observations; collecting or writing case histories or "people's stories" which illustrate specific social or cultural phenomena; reflecting afterward about observations, experiences, incidents, interviews, and cases; and lastly, assigning and talking about cultural meanings.

The Framework for the Language Course

The class was grounded in two central features: keeping course notebooks and conducting field visits as cultural investigations.

The Course Notebook

The teachers kept notebooks following these suggested guidelines. In the first section of the notebooks, the participants made daily field notes—descriptions of events, people, behavior, and things they observed about American society and culture. Teachers were advised that these field notes were only for them; only they needed to understand the entries. (I suggested they try to make better sense out of their notes by thinking about them, reorganizing them, or talking about them later with their classmates and me, rather than worrying about using them for formal descriptions.)

In this first section, teachers also wrote down people's stories—that is, cases. Each time they went out to interview or observe, one of their goals was to come back prepared to tell someone's story which illustrated what they had seen or learned. Cases did not need to be too elaborate or formal since the teachers told people's stories in their own words, or in the words of the people they had interviewed. The cases were, however, an important part of our classroom discussions throughout the course. The teachers also recorded in the first section any interesting, illustrative, or technical language or terms they came across in various situations.

The second part of the notebook included participants' own questions and comments about the things they observed and recorded. This section was more exploratory than expository—a chance for the teachers to engage in active reflection about observation and experiences.

Finally, the teachers assigned meaning to the things they saw. They reported evidence of cultural rules, norms, attitudes, values, and beliefs in the behavior, interactions, events, and cases they observed and described. The teachers who went on each of the field visits also discussed what they had anticipated finding on the visit and what they actually found.

The overall goal of this reflection and discussion about meanings was to encourage the participants to think about aspects of American culture as they are seen and understood by us, and in doing so to make cross-cultural comparisons about Hungarian and American life.

Field Visits as Cultural Investigations

To begin their cultural investigations, the course participants conducted field visits. The teachers visited various sites and met with people to talk about their work, their program, or some facet of American life. These visits were related to the topics of program lectures as often as possible.

Not everyone had to, or could, attend every field visit. The teachers signed up for the visit(s) they were interested in or willing to make. However, the group was asked to be sure all visits were covered. Teachers also made suggestions for other observations or interviews throughout the course.

Figure 1

Observation/interview/visit schedule

DATE	SITE AND DESCRIPTION
7/6	Berlitz—Private language school
7/7	Mayor's Council on Literacy—Adult literacy
7/8	Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts—Artists' lives
7/10	Drexel University—Computer-assisted language learning
7/11	City Commissioner's Office—Elections
7/13	Germantown Friends—Basketball and reading clinic
7/14	Temple University—Women's athletic conditioning coach
7/19	Genesis II—Drug rehabilitation program
7/20	Philadelphia University of the Arts—Admissions office
7/21	Youth Freedom Theatre—Community theater group
7/25	City Hall—Local government workers
7/27	Blackwell Center—Women's health center
7/31	Ryerson Steel—Office and factory workers
8/1	Afro American Cultural Center—Story telling
8/2	Balch Institute—Ethnic studies

Over the summer, the teachers themselves began to arrange cultural investigations and set up interviews. Subsequently added to the list were visits to a newspaper, a local elementary school, a day care center, a church, and an interview with Penn's track coach. Another course instructor arranged a visit to a criminal trial. It was not possible to arrange all requested field visits, such as a meeting with an architect. The teachers did, however, end up going on an architectural tour of Philadelphia's colonial neighborhood, Society Hill, with a local group.

Magda's Notes: A Case Study of A Program Participant

The following represent a sample of the work completed by one of the participants, Magda. Magda was a university-level EFL teacher

in her early 30s. She was unmarried and lived alone in a small apartment in Budapest. Like many English teachers in Hungary, she taught privately at night to supplement her modest teaching salary. She was a last-minute replacement for a teacher who could not attend. As a result, she was especially enthusiastic about having a chance to participate. Magda was intense, articulate, and dedicated to teaching. She was uncertain about the impact of political change on Hungary's future, but she was a vocal advocate of that change. This was her first visit to the United States.

Though examples of one student's notes cannot recreate the class discussion these ideas engendered, they can help illustrate the kind of discussion that took place. It should be reiterated that these notes were meant only for the student herself. They were a kind of preclass preparation for discussion or a postclass sorting out of ideas and themes. They were not formal presentations in any way.

These are her thoughts early in the summer after leaving the confines of the predominantly white university area for the first time and getting lost in West Philadelphia.

Case/Observation

We lost the way and ended up walking along 52nd Street through West Philadelphia. Just horrible! Messy. Shabbiness. Why Only black people? Underclass?

Reflections

Two communities—one white, one black—seem to live beside each other. Maybe they cooperate in economic fields—but very much apart in every other aspect—each having its own hierarchy, own views, own leaders.

Rule

Even if there's a certain amount of cooperation between black and white communities, segregation is present in lots of fields, like housing and social life.

One distinct advantage of this field visit approach is that it fosters seeing everyday experiences as parts of larger social patterns and therefore as important topics for reflection, analysis, and discussion. This is clearly illustrated in Magda's notes, for example in this recounting of an occurrence in her dormitory.

Case/Observation

A nice young woman from the neighborhood dropped in one afternoon, and we had a pleasant conversation with her. She told us she was going to Mexico for holiday with her girlfriend and said she would like to find a beach where she could sunbathe topless. After she left, I asked my friend why the girl had to go to Mexico to enjoy sunshine topless. Aren't there

beaches where it is not prohibited in the US? My friend said it is usually only allowed at private beaches. I was pretty surprised to hear that.

Rule

Not being able to sunbathe topless is not a rule I agree with, but it seems it is a rule that really works in the US. It is prohibited as it may hurt other people's feelings at a public place. Privately you may do what you want! Once your freedom hurts other people's feelings—you can't do what you wish.

Individual, minority, and majority rights in the United States were recurring themes for Magda throughout the summer. After attending the program lecture on the topic of AIDS and then visiting a women's health center, Magda wrote this entry in her course notebook.

Reflections

People in the U.S. seem to be tolerant of minorities—let them be sexual, ethnic, or any other kind. Are they really, or do they just look that way? I don't know. But if a problem—in this case, AIDS, comes up—even if the mainstream of society tends to blame these people for their disease—they are still able to organize themselves, or an organization to help them is almost immediately set up—to defend their interest, to fight for their rights! And they are able to think of a more sophisticated and humanistic way of dealing with these people than just excluding them from society. It may be a struggle—but as there is a struggle—it can be won! Contrast this with the Cuban situation of excluding HIV positives in quarantine! Without any opposition—with one single order on behalf of the government—and without proper or sound grounds—they found themselves treated as if they were not citizens and had no civil rights. That's some difference!

In one of the later entries in her notebook, Magda made observations about children at a museum, described their activities, and then offered this meaning of what she saw.

Rule

Teaching through practice is much more accepted in America. Or is it better to say the normal way of learning in America is through experience? First, they look at the things closely and find out how they really work, and it is only then that they formulate principles and come to conclusions. Perhaps that's why people here are so practical and realistic.

What had been only a museum visit was transformed into a another opportunity to see cultural norms in action. In fact, Magda's comments about her observations that day could have been a fitting summary of the way the course attempted to introduce this particular group of EFL teachers to American life and culture.

The Role of the Teacher

Making arrangements for interviews, visits, and more formal observations was clearly seen as the course instructor's responsibility, at least in the initial stages of the course. Within the class, the teacher was expected to assume the role of facilitator of discussion. Both of these aspects of the teacher's role were consistent with the participants' learning style preferences as well as with the overall course design.

The only area of conflict was that at times the class members expected the teacher to settle disagreements about issues or cultural meanings. The temptation to do this can be very strong; however, it runs directly counter to this approach to teaching about culture in a language class.

The central purpose of such a course is to help visiting teachers become better observers of American social life and cultural patterns and for them to formulate their own ideas about the meanings of their observations and experiences. To accomplish this goal, it is critical not to shape participants' perceptions about social and cultural phenomena prior to the cultural investigations. The course instructor needs to avoid becoming the sole arbiter of issues regarding American values or do for the students the work they are in the United States to do, namely, investigating and forming ideas about American life and culture.

This conflict can be resolved in a variety of ways: (a) by encouraging greater student description of phenomena prior to discussing meanings; (b) by asking that the student(s) who conducted an interview or made a visit/observation assume the task of leading the discussion in class for that day; (c) by trying to summarize and restate as questions for further exploration the gist of their preceding discussion when asked about opinions; and (d) by waiting as near to the end of class as possible before actually entering into the discussion, and then by trying to enter in as an equal, not as an expert.

However, an expert or insider's knowledge of the target culture is useful in being able to raise questions about stereotypical or biased perceptions about American life and culture which are presented in class discussions. Furthermore, an insider's knowledge of the culture enables the instructor to respond to or clarify issues that arise out of the more formal sessions.

One other role for the teacher of the course is resource. The teacher can encourage extra reading and provide relevant background information, such as articles from newspapers, magazines, and journals which relate to topics of participant interest or investigations. The participants can then share such information with others in the class discussions.

Advantages

There are some important reasons for adopting this approach to language instruction, or at least incorporating elements of it into classes to supplement existing courses. It can be not only employed to meet the goal of learning about a target culture for nontraditional students, such as these Eastern European teachers, but adapted to meet the speaking, listening, reading, and writing objectives of more traditional language learners as well.

First, this approach is strongly learner-centered. ESL teachers are able to design learning activities and goals consistent with students' own preferences. Through this approach, a wide range of classroom arrangements and student learning styles can be accommodated. Furthermore, the approach makes learners active partners in developing and conducting a language course. While such learner-centered instructional design considerations are especially important for adult and nontraditional language learners, self-motivated -directed learning is a valuable goal for all second language learners. An analysis of learner characteristics of the Hungarians makes clear that as learners they had a great deal in common with students in other ESL contexts. And, the Hungarians' success with the approach indicates that learners with similar characteristics would benefit from its use, too.

For instance, even though the participants in the Hungarian program were EFL teachers, their language fluency and proficiency varied tremendously. This was true of vocabulary and pronunciation features as well as pragmatic use of the language. Many of the teachers had never really used language to interact with native speakers on an in-depth basis. Several lacked confidence in their abilities. Moreover, despite living in an English-speaking country for the summer, the teachers lived in a dorm together, spoke in their native language during much of their time away from their classes, and had few opportunities to talk with and get to know Americans outside of the program. Thus, these learners, like other L2 learners, had limitations as well as strengths. And, each participant, like most ESL or EFL students, had language development as a definite part of his or her personal learning agenda. One distinct characteristic of the approach is that it makes the use of participants' own language and ideas (interviews, preparation for interviews, conversations, questions, cases, notes, reflections, presentations, analysis of interviews and observations) the central component of classroom language. This feature indicates the approach is applicable to other ESL/EFL teaching and learning contexts.

Second, the approach helps students become more cognizant of their own culture as well as the target culture. Though not as clearly reflected in Magda's notes, analysis of and lively exchanges about Hungarian values, norms, and beliefs—often in the context of cross-

cultural comparisons of behavior and beliefs—played a central part in much of the classroom discussion. Such growth of awareness about students' own culture and opportunity to make cross-cultural analyses are goals of many ESL programs, not just those for advanced students. This approach provides another way to realize them.

While all ESL students might not be able to adapt to this approach quite as easily as the Hungarian EFL teachers did, and even though the course does necessitate a great deal of prior planning, the results of this approach to learning language by learning about a target culture are, I believe, worth the effort it takes for teachers and learners to make it work. ■

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