

# TEACHING CULTURE OR TEACHING ABOUT CULTURE?

## KULTŪROS MOKYMAS AR MOKYMAS APIE KULTŪRĄ?

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### Summary

The paper deals with one of the most important issues in modern Foreign Language Teaching Methodology – the integration of culture in the process of teaching a foreign language.

The relationship between language and culture is deeply rooted. Language is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. Different ideas stem from differing language use within one's culture and the whole intertwining of these relationships start at one's birth. The competent speaker of a foreign language should acquire at least a minimum knowledge of the culture of target language speaking countries. It can help to reduce the culture shock – feelings of discomfort, fear, or insecurity experienced by a person who moves to live, work in a foreign country or during foreign travels. In the process of teaching FL teachers' job is to introduce learners to the complexities of the real world which students will have to face in the future together with various linguistic

structures and units. Therefore, linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners to be competent in that language.

**Key words:** *language and culture, cultural competence, implementing popular culture, the competent speaker of a foreign language, culturally appropriate.*

## Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojamas vienas iš svarbiausių klausimų šiuolaikinėje užsienio kalbos mokymo metodikoje – kultūros integravimas į užsienio kalbos mokymo procesą. Kalbos ir kultūros ryšys yra labai gilus. Kalba naudojama siekiant išlaikyti ir perduoti kultūrą ir kultūrinius ryšius. Kompetentingas svetimos kalbos vartotojas turėtų įgyti bent minimalių žinių apie svetimos šalies kultūrą. Tai žmogui, atvykusiam į svetimą šalį gyventi, dirbti ar tik keliauti, gali padėti sumažinti kultūrinį šoką – diskomfortą, baimę ar nesaugumo jausmą. Mokant užsienio kalbos, mokytojų užduotis yra supažindinti studentus ne tik su įvairiomis kalbinėmis struktūromis, bet ir realiu pasauliu, su kuriuo jie susidurs ateityje. Siekiantiems gerai valdyti užsienio kalbą, vien tik kalbinės kompetencijos nepakanka.

**Esminiai žodžiai:** *kalba ir kultūra, kultūrinė kompetencija, populiariosios kultūros įgyvendinimas, kompetentingas užsienio kalbos vartotojas, kultūriškai priimtina.*

## Introduction

Foreign language teaching does not take place in a purely linguistic vacuum involving only a myriad of formal, boring grammar rules, isolated sentences, and structures. This process consists of different important components which play a crucial role in the successful realization of foreign language acquisition. In modern FLT methodology a well-established goal is to develop skills for fluent, spontaneous and effective communication in spoken and written forms. More and more language teachers have committed themselves to the objective of bringing students to the point where they can effectively communicate in the

target language. Effective communication requires skills and competencies. Among linguistic, communicative competencies, cultural competence – the knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs and systems of meaning of another country, is gaining utmost importance in the era of globalization, when people who come from many very different countries with various cultural backgrounds have to exchange a broad spectrum of legal, social, cultural and political views while covering such spheres of life as business, education, science, diplomacy, medicine and others (Jojua, 2012, 64-68).

## **The Relationship Between Language and Culture**

A foreigner may encounter difficulties in entering into communication with people whose history, customs and habits, their institutions are unknown even when he can use their language fluently. For many people, language is not just the medium of culture but also its inseparable part. It is quite common for immigrants to a new country to retain their old customs and to speak their first language amid fellow immigrants, even if all present are comfortable in their new language. This occurs because the immigrants are eager to preserve their own heritage, which includes not only customs and traditions but also language. This is also seen in many Jewish communities, especially in older members: Yiddish is commonly spoken because it is seen as a part of Jewish culture. Linguistic differences are also often seen as the mark of another culture, and they very commonly create divisiveness among neighboring peoples or even among different groups of the same nation. A good example of this is in Canada, where French-speaking natives of Quebec clash with the English-speaking majority. This sort of conflict is also common in areas with a great deal of tribal warfare. It is even becoming an issue in America as speakers of standard American English - mainly whites and educated minorities observe the

growing number of speakers of the black English vernacular. Debates are common over whether it is proper to use “Ebonics” in schools, while its speakers continue to assert that the dialect is a fundamental part of the “black culture”. Also the so-called “Spanglish” arose in the US on the basis of English and Spanish, which is a sort of dialect often spoken by Hispanics in the US (while they usually know standard English and standard Spanish). The understanding of a culture and its people can be enhanced by the knowledge of their language. One can see that learning a new language involves the learning of a new culture (Allwright & Bailey, 1991, 79). Consequently, teachers of a language are also teachers of culture (Byram, 1989, 59-62). The question is: how do we teach it in such a way that our students’ language skills are really culturally appropriate. The subject we teach is called English (or any other second or foreign language). Language teachers’ education in most cases does not involve any (or involves too few) academic courses dealing with culture. So the language teacher’s qualifications are really too low to “teach culture”.

## **Some Problematic Aspects in Teaching Culture to EFL Students**

In our opinion what is even more important is the fact that “teaching a second / foreign culture” (probably) without a person’s will is against any legislation, against human rights. A person who learns a second / foreign language as a school / university subject just does so because it is a subject in the curriculum or because she / he would like to communicate in that language. As for assimilation / integration into another culture, most learners never conceive of such purposes. Even when language-teaching starts early (at the age of 5 or 6), the child is already a carrier of her / his own culture and we have no right to impose another culture on the child. To inform him / her of another culture in order to make the teaching interesting in order to achieve a

high quality of comprehension in the process of intercultural communication – yes, but to “teach another culture” to change the person’s native culture – no!

We believe that the phrase “to teach culture” that appears in most publications we have viewed is just professional jargon, for the purpose of brevity and – God save us – for the purpose of cultural harassment, if it is possible to say so. In most cases the phrase really means introducing politeness rules and explanation of connotation, dealing with the corresponding country’s history, famous people, traditions, etc., i.e. nothing harmful.

However, there are teachers (especially, native speakers of that language) and scholars who think that bringing their (as they believe, more “cultural”, more sophisticated) language to other countries is synonymous to changing the local culture (raising it to a higher level). These people think they are linguistic and cultural missionaries.

Sometimes in “teaching culture” this just happens in a thoughtless (and harmless enough) way, because teachers (naturally) loving the language they teach are so enthusiastic that it seems that they view the corresponding culture as something perfect, and, correspondingly, better than theirs.

Tove Skutnabb-Kanngas writes about the danger of linguistic genocide (!) through globalization and language teaching policy. She views facts of not only less developed African countries, but also of quite developed European countries such as Sweden, whose culture is endangered because of the role that the English language has occupied in their society. She tells us about a very serious generation gap of grandparents and grandchildren who do not understand each other linguistically. Parents, wanting the benefit for their children (getting a good job or any job at all), send them to a school where education is carried out in English. As a result, all their children can do in a native tongue is just “hello-how-are-you-thank-you-type” everyday conversation. They think in English, they behave “in American” (Skutnabb-Kanngas, 2000, 150-156).

Language has always been essential for self-determination. You are, first of all, part of the culture in the language which you speak as your first language. Language is very sensitive towards mentality. If mentality is sexist, ageist, racist, nationalistic, so is the language people speak. Making English (or any other “big” language) the language children in another country think in, we, willy-nilly, use a more psychological form of ethnical destruction, of ethnical conquering, than is invading the country and conquering it by force. But it is a way of conquering. And, we believe, language teachers should have nothing to do with it.

Thus, in our opinion, we should teach about cultures, teach to notice culturally specific meanings, teach to be polite and tolerant (Jojua, 2012, 70-75).

## **Integrating Cultural Activities in the EFL Classroom**

By teaching about cultures we do not mean “lecturing” in a dull way about some events, places and people our students probably do not care about. We mean to apply active, interesting activities centered on being correctly understood.

Some publications focus on classroom practice. Barry Tomalin and Susan Stempleski talk about culture as incorporating products such as literature, art and artifacts; ideas, such as beliefs, values, and institutions; and behaviors, such as customs, habits, dress, foods and leisure. They present a series of lesson plans that explore the relationship between the language taught in the classroom, and the products, ideas and behavior that impact upon its meaning. The cultural products, ideas and behaviors are presented primarily as a means of motivating language use (Tomalin, Stempleski, 1993, 7-8).

It is a great idea to organize learner projects on topics dealing with culture as he believes, culture cannot be taught and can only be learned. Students may write essays, find materials on the

Internet, compile albums, carry out presentations, hold concerts, performances and competitions, work on a wall newspaper, etc.

In a student-centered teaching systems, a great idea is to carry out a students' needs analysis: hand out a questionnaire on culture-linked topics they would like to read / listen / speak / write about. Popular culture such as music, movies, and television should be used as additional "text" in the language arts classroom to build stronger connections with traditional literature and aid in teaching other important skills and concepts within the curriculum. The author offers advice for implementing popular culture and provides specific examples of its application in the classroom (Day, 2006).

One challenge facing many high school language arts teachers is poor student motivation and performance when it comes to the literature and composition requirements of a traditional curriculum. Although many literary anthologies employed in secondary schools have added more women and minority writers along with a writing curriculum that includes more creativity and variety in forms of written expression, the average teacher still views these new resources and ideas as ancillary to formal composition and the established literary canon (Lane, 2001, 1-3).

The societal pressure that drives many high school language arts teachers is that they must produce capable students with proficient skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking (Buckingham, 1992, 8-13). They have traditionally sought to accomplish this goal by utilizing a curriculum that focuses exclusively upon literature that the typical high school student dismisses as dull and almost foreign (Hobbs, 2001, 45-46). Students today live in a culture saturated by music, movies, television, video games, cartoons, teen magazines, and the Internet. Most have no natural interest in the works of Shakespeare, Hawthorne or Chaucer. They may balk at the very notion of composing a five-paragraph literary analysis that must then be edited for run-on sentences. Academic activities of this kind do not

stimulate today's typical high school students because these printed texts and writing tasks are so far removed from their language, experience, and culture (Idem, 47). Even the most competent and creative efforts on the part of the language arts teacher to implement student-centered activities, to stimulate prior knowledge, and promote active reading may fall short of sparking a student's genuine interest in the material.

Meeting the needs of today's students will require adjusting the traditional high school language arts curriculum and broadening perceptions of what is considered "text" as a teaching tool (Stevens, 2001, 548-555). Instead of viewing popular culture as a distracting rival of the literary canon, language arts teachers can learn to embrace it as an invaluable resource. Popular culture can be used as a teaching tool in the same way as a novel, poem, or textbook to teach essential language arts skills and concepts (Lane, 2001, 4). James Berlin argues, "Our historicist perspective on current English Studies hierarchies enables us to regard all manners of discourse as worthy of investigation, including film, television, video, and popular music" (Berlin, 1996, 16). This shift in the paradigm of what constitutes "text" worthy of literary locus does not suggest the demise of traditional literature and composition, but instead aims to construct and sustain a more comprehensive and meaningful connection between the texts that high school students experience and the world in which they live.

Language arts education at the high school level is only just beginning to adapt to the vast multicultural and technological changes that are taking place in American society. As a result of the call for "back to basics" education during the 1980s, language arts curricula have remained true to "obscure books and the culture of print" despite the changing face of American student populations and the multitude of available texts that surpass the printed page. Teachers have continued to employ the time-honored great works of the literary canon as the only text worthy of investigation and discovery in the process of



analyzing literature (Lane, 2001, 5-8). Secondary language arts teachers have traditionally viewed popular culture as the enemy. Language arts curricula of the past have clung to printed text as the only means of educating students, but “modern literacy involves diverse combinations of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, moving, thinking, and representing strategies and skills” (Pailliotet et al., 2000, 210). In this age of ipods, portable DVD players, and every cable channel imaginable, the common assumption amongst most language arts teachers is that they must compete against hours of popular culture consumption on a daily basis. They feel that the value of the sound byte and notions of instant gratification propagated by the popular culture of today create barriers to the patience and critical thinking involved in the comprehension and analysis of literature.

Language arts teachers have enjoyed the use of various instructional methods as a means of building a bridge for students to better relate to reading and writing tasks. Free-writing and brainstorming have been commonly utilized in the classroom as ways of generating ideas for writing (Skinner and Policoff, 1994, 21-24). Likewise, teachers have employed activities such as advance organizers to aid students in thinking and connecting with issues related to literature (Snapp and Glover, 1990, 266-271). Methods such as these remain effective to an extent in helping students relate to the curriculum better.

Implementing popular culture in the classroom derives from the idea that teachers must build connections between the printed texts of the literary canon and the background knowledge of students (Flood et al., 2005, 351-353). Language arts teachers must contend with the realization that their students cannot relate to the literary canon and lack the internal motivation or interest in reading and analyzing such literature (Hobbs, 2001, 8). Popular culture offers a way for language arts teachers to bridge that gap. When utilized appropriately and consistently, popular culture becomes a powerful tool to “activate student schema, scaffold

learning, engage students, and connect learning environments” (Pailliotet et al., 2000, 214). Implementing popular culture will enable students to better understand the historical and underlying concepts of the literature they are reading, which will foster the motivation and ability to analyze a wide variety of literary elements.

Hobbs recommends showing specific movie scenes in the language arts classroom to compel students to observe details closely. This activity serves a dual purpose: first, it provides a model for the importance of including interesting detail in the writing process; second, it teaches students to look closely at the amount of detail that goes into character development, which improves their analytical skills in reading. The process of noting details in short movie clips could also be applied to other areas of literary analysis such as setting, point of view, and tone. “From there, students can employ the same comprehension strategies using literary forms” (2001, 49-50).

Lane (2001, 9-11) asserts that various forms of popular culture may be utilized to establish the important relevance of the historical context of a literary work. In a language arts curriculum that includes great works of American literature, teachers could illustrate the characteristics of different literary periods with movie clips that depict traits from that time period, instilling a stronger connection with the literary work and creating meaning that goes beyond the surface.

Robert McParland advocates the close examination of music and song lyrics to parallel the skills required to analyze poetry. Because “poetry and song share qualities of meter and rhythm, use of metaphors, and imagery,” language arts teachers can use popular music in the classroom to tap into students’ interests and experiences and practice the same analytical skills required when searching for a deeper understanding of poetry (McParland, 2000, 30). Once students have mastered the art of analysis with popular music and developed an appreciation for it, translating

the same skills to the study of poetry becomes a much easier task. Music can also establish important links to other literature. McParland writes that “musical genres can offer greater depth, meaning, and relevance to literature [...] often concerning human relationships” (Idem, 27). If used as a hook, popular music can guide students to evaluate the emotions conveyed by a variety of familiar songs and later draw parallels with literature that might otherwise be difficult to connect with an emotional level (Idem, 28-30). Nola Kortner Aiex suggests organizing brainstorming sessions for the development of writing topics around themes associated with popular movies (Aiex, 1988, 1-3). This kind of activity offers students the chance “to synthesize, analyze, evaluate, and argue – to engage ideas actively and write substantively about them” (Pailliotet et al., 2000, 216). Aiex also recommends television news programs as a model for persuasive writing and the need to provide adequate support and detail when developing an argument (Aiex, 1988, 4-7).

Popular culture can be used to engage students in critical thinking and writing about other media and the culture we live in. “By learning to ‘read’ media and popular texts, students learn about the construction of writing and how writing, consciously or unconsciously, reflects and produces specific values and points of view” (Lane, 2001, 11-14). This kind of visual literacy forces students to choose their own perspective on an issue, examine relevant texts, and then produce writing that supports, scrutinizes, or expands upon those ideas. Movie clips, news programs, magazine advertisements and even music videos can be used to elicit the same kind of critical thinking that students must employ when writing a research paper or engaging in a debate. Though many students may struggle with the mechanics of writing, Milford Jeremiah argues that rap lyrics can be used to teach various technical aspects of composition such as sentence structure and variety, verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, usage, and negation (Jeremiah, 1992, 98-102). In addition to grammar mini-lessons,

language arts teachers have the opportunity to utilize rap music during the editing stage of the writing process to make grammar instruction more interesting. Before peer editing begins, teachers can invite their students to bring in non-explicit versions of their favorite rap songs or other music to practice making corrections.

It is important to realize that developing this library of resources does require a great deal of time and effort on the part of the teacher, but the amazing results are well worth the effort. In accordance with copyright law, teachers may use materials such as DVDs, videotapes, recorded television programming, and music in the classroom for educational purposes (Davidson, 111-115). Due to time constraints within the curriculum, showing only two or three scenes at most from a movie or television show will suffice, but the ultimate decision about which sections to show will depend on the instructional purpose.

Going deeper than dealing with culture-linked topics (which is more appropriate to language teaching), we need to deal with the issue what is or isn't appropriate linguistic behavior in the given culture. For example, is it appropriate to address your teacher as "John" or is it necessary to say "Mr. Smith"? Is calling a feminine flight attendant a "stewardess" sexism or just old-fashioned? After giving some information on such issues (they are practically absent from language course books, so probably, until they are available, the teacher should do it) tasks like "read the text and edit it in such a way that it no longer looks sexist" or "why did everybody perceive N.'s speech impolite" will be really useful.

The goals of cultural tasks will normally involve a combination of intercultural exploration and linguistic development. E.g., finding out relationships of men and women through the given text (the task is "Read the text and pay attention to what seems unusual for you in men / women relations. Mention how it is expressed"). Another goal may be to interpret body language of communicators (this can be done on the basis of video or textual materials).

Activities: collecting information, discussing the given information, discussing personal experiences, assessing observations, presentations, dialogues, role play, etc.

Learner's role: increasing their language skills' level. Making discoveries, observing communication rules.

Teacher's role: qualified informant. While the educational process goes on, the teacher's role as an informant decreases and his / her role as negotiator and mediator increases.

Settings: individual / pair / group work.

## **Conclusion**

1. It is easy to see how these two concepts – language and culture – are interwoven and interdependent. Then, naturally, the conclusion is: to use a language for communication adequately, it is necessary to take into consideration the culture part which constitutes it.
2. Our deep belief is that we should teach about culture and not pretend to be linguistic missionaries teaching an alien culture. It is essential that language teachers, before they “teach culture”, should have it explained how to do so in a way benefiting understanding of both cultures, native and that of the second / foreign language under study, how not to hurt anybody's feelings and thus, how to promote a better understanding between nations.
3. The goals of cultural tasks should involve a combination of intercultural exploration and linguistic development. Input should mostly be authentic. Teachers may provide some explanation / interpretation, if necessary.

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