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Culture Bound

Bridging the cultural gap in language teaching

Edited by

Joyce Merrill Valdes

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For Renny and Zorn
who have obliged me by turning out
just the way I always hoped they would

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Preface

When a baby is born it is slapped on the back and made to cry – this much is virtually universal; but from that point on each person's life, attitudes, creeds, religion, politics (in a broad sense) – indeed, most of his world view – are shaped largely by his environment. Each person, wherever he dwells, is an individual, but an individual influenced by family, community, country, and even language. Certainly no culture is composed of herds of clones who have been defined by their environment; nevertheless, each culture is fashioned by pervading and prevailing tenets – whether they are conscious or subconscious, spoken or tacit. When a person who has been nurtured by one culture is placed in juxtaposition with another, his reaction may be anger, frustration, fright, curiosity, entrancement, repulsion, confusion. If the encounter is occasioned by study of another language, the reaction may be all the stronger because he is faced with two unknowns simultaneously. Such a predicament may be very threatening, and until the threat is removed, language learning may be blocked.

How such blocks can be removed is problematical. What does seem clear, however, is that the language learner must first be made aware of himself as a cultural being. Paradoxically, most people, of whatever nation, see themselves and their compatriots not as a culture but as "standard," or "right," and the rest of the world as made up of cultures, which are conglomerates of strange behavior. Once people are disabused of this notion and recognize that they are, truly, products of their own cultures, they are better prepared and more willing to look at the behavior of persons from other cultures and accept them nonjudgmentally, if not favorably. Along with this acceptance of a people comes acceptance of their language and a greater willingness to let go of the binding ties of the native language and culture – a willingness to enter, at least to a degree, into what can be the exciting adventure of another language and culture.

It is the responsibility of foreign and second language teachers to recognize the trauma their students experience and to assist in bringing them through it to the point that culture becomes an aid to language learning rather than a hindrance. What teachers need in order to achieve

this result is a perspective of how language and culture affect one another in the human mind, considerable knowledge of cultural differences per se, specific traits of several different cultures, and some background and insight on how to use all of this in the classroom and in the teacher–student relationship. The greatest challenge no doubt exists in classes of mixed language backgrounds in which the target language is the language of the community. The variety of cultures represented in this classroom results in a miscellany of values, attitudes, and reactions in contrast to the more nearly solid cultural block of the class of students of a single background studying a foreign language in their own linguistic environment. For the former group, much more cultural detail is essential to their well-being for survival in the community and in the classroom than for the latter group, who are comfortably ensconced in their own environment. I recall, not without nostalgia, the days when I taught English to classes of freshman foreign students who were just off the plane from home – not fresh from an intensive English program in which they had been taught the ways of the world to which they had been transplanted. On the first day of classes, according to the customs of their own schoolroom experience, they would rise when I entered the classroom. I confess that it was always with a pang that I told my students that in future they need not stand when I entered. Seeing all those students rise to attention invariably made me feel that I was dressed in full academic regalia, and I allowed myself a mental toss of the tassel on my mortar board before I made the announcement. The sophomore foreign students that I now teach have reached an almost lamentable stage of cultural sophistication (particularly in such matters as how to beat the computer in registering for closed sections), yet they still have much to learn in this course in American life through literature. While cultural instruction may be less important to the survival of the foreign language student in his own environment, it is still essential to any depth of understanding of the language, to the motivation and attitude of the student, and to the interest of the course.

Most teacher-training programs for foreign and second language teachers recognize the need for supplying their prospective language teachers with a background in culture and provide courses, under a variety of titles, on culture as it affects the language learner, the language teacher, and therefore the language curriculum; those that do not offer specific courses devote a significant amount of consideration to the subject in courses with more general content, such as methodology or second language acquisition.

It goes without saying that the present enlightenment did not spring fully formed from the conglomerate head of applied linguistics; it has evolved from the work of many anthropological and sociological linguists to bring first awareness and then perception to that area of applied

linguistics centered on second language study. Even a fifty-year-old French grammar on my shelf (Barton and Sirich 1933) contains in each lesson a reading that has a French setting and is designed to reveal some facet of French life – "Arrivée à Paris," "Dîner à l'hôtel," "A la terrasse d'un café" – and this book was certainly not an innovator in this regard. However, it should be recognized that the text was written for Americans who were studying French because a foreign language was required for graduation or because of a desire to make some claim to that other kind of Culture, the kind with the upper-case "C," and that the author's insertion of French scenes and situations was prompted by an inclination to motivate students who would be difficult to entice solely with such lesson titles as "The Partitive Construction" and "*Avoir* and *Etre* as Auxiliary Verbs."

While encompassing the motive of the venerable French grammar, the current view of the place of culture in language learning is far more sophisticated and is both deeper and broader in scope, including theories of language acquisition in both the affective and cognitive domains; the selection of culture concepts and practices to be presented to language learners in general; specific areas of cultural importance to learners from specific cultural backgrounds; and a multiplicity of ideas, convictions, notions, and fancies as to how culture should be presented.

The complexity of this current view of culture in language learning necessitates some sorting out to facilitate the work of the teacher. There are already numerous articles on one facet or another of this massive canvas; sections of books (e.g., "Language and Culture" in Brooks 1964); and whole books, such as Dell Hymes's impressive tome *Language in Culture and Society* (1964), which covers almost all theory up to the time of publication, but does not address the subject from the point of view of the language teacher who needs to know what to incorporate into the curriculum and how to treat it once it is incorporated, H. Ned Seelye's work *Teaching Culture: Strategies for Intercultural Communication* (1984), and Gail Robinson's presentation of the current trends in *Issues in Second Language and Cross-cultural Education: The Forest Through the Trees* (1981).

This book attempts to bring together representative theoretical and practical material of the last ten to fifteen years by a variety of scholars and teachers in the field, to serve as a guide to the teaching of culture in the foreign and second language classroom. Among the things it does not purport to do is to lay out a curriculum for the teacher, as there are many variations of viable content according to the levels of proficiency, backgrounds, attitudes, situations, purposes, aims, ages, and locales of each class, to name a few of the factors to be considered. Patently, the material presented to an intensive English class at a college or university in the United States will differ greatly from that presented to a class of

elementary school children in Greece, or to a class of engineering students in Algeria studying English for the purpose of reading American textbooks. Some of the material in this book is derived from experience in a particular pedagogical setting; the conceptual bases, however, are universal and may be applied to any number of other settings. In this regard culture does not differ from the more traditional components of the curriculum – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – all of which must be tailored by the teacher to fit the specific individuals who make up each class.

There is a burgeoning number of classroom texts designed to teach culture to the nonnative speaker of English, with diversity of approach, content, technique, and, alas, quality (see Morain 1971a). Nearly all of these have been properly designated as appropriate to a particular age group, level of proficiency, and type of student, ranging from children in bilingual education programs to adult immigrants with varying amounts of education. The teacher who selects or is assigned a cultural text for a class, however, does not have the whole problem of the culture component solved; the teacher at this point more than ever needs the background from which to draw to determine methods and techniques of presentation, concepts and values to be stressed, areas requiring tact or extensive explication for certain ethnic groups, what to expand from the printed material and what to omit or compress, and, most vital of all, how to make it interesting and nonjudgmental: For while it is essential to include culture in the teaching of a language, it is equally essential to avoid chauvinism in teaching it, or, at the other end of the spectrum, negativism. Indeed, as Bochner has pointed out, what the sojourner or student must accomplish is a knowledge of the culture – to understand behavior, not necessarily to become a part of it:

> "Adjusting" a person to a culture has connotations of cultural chauvinism, implying that the newcomer should abandon the culture of origin in favor of embracing the values and customs of the host society. On the other hand, learning a second culture has no such ethnocentric overtones. There are many examples in life when it becomes necessary to learn a practice even if one does not approve of it, and then abandon the custom when circumstances have changed. Americans will find that they have to stand much closer to an Arab during interactions in the Middle East than they would with fellow-Americans at home. Japanese must learn to have more eye-contact with westerners during conversation than is customary in their own culture. Australians in Great Britain of necessity have to learn to drink warm beer, a habit they discard as soon as they depart. An English gentleman in Japan will learn to push and shove his way onto the Tokyo subway, but resume his normal queuing practice after returning home. The possession of a particular skill by itself carries no value judgement – the act attracts notice only when the appropriate skill is not available, or the skill is used in inappropriate circumstances. (Bochner 1982: 164)

At the same time, recent research (see Tuttle, Guitart, Papalia, and Zampogna 1979) has indicated the salutary effect of teaching to foreign language classes in the United States more of the similarities between the two cultures rather than concentrating solely on the contrasts. In either case, the overriding point of view should always be that objectivity is the *sine qua non* for effectiveness in the teaching of culture to students from different backgrounds.

Part I of this book contains articles ranging across the broad spectrum of language, thought, and culture, and these serve as a foundation for all that follows. The theory regarding the relationship of language and mind is essential to an understanding of culture as it affects language learning.

Part II aims to present some cultural phases of particular groups in order to assist teachers to a better understanding of some of their students. We all too often become impatient with students because we fail to understand the cultural values that underlie their behavior. Perhaps the most widespread occasion for our impatience is the high frequency of plagiarism, despite all of our protests. We could learn something from Agatha Christie in *Hickory Dickory Death*, in which she presents an African student in London:

> 'All this morning,' said Akibombo mournfully, 'I have been much disturbed. I cannot answer my professor's questions good at all. He is not pleased at me. He says to me that I copy large bits out of books and do not think for myself. But I am here to acquire wisdom from much books and it seems to me that they say better in the books than the way I put it, because I have not good command of the English.' (1955: 149–50)

Mrs. Christie may have missed her calling.

Part III brings into focus a number of approaches to presenting culture to students in the classroom, from practical suggestions regarding useful materials to theory underlying the teaching, understanding, and grading of compositions by nonnative speakers of a language.

It is to be hoped that this collection will provide teachers with the required basis for making the most of the culture component of the language course, as well as for bringing about a clearer understanding of the students and of themselves.

Joyce Merrill Valdes