Sameness and difference: the challenge of culture in language teaching

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"it is not always easy to define what 'culture' is, let alone how we should integrate 'culture' into our teaching"

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'Culture', in all its guises, is a particularly strong theme currently in language teaching debates, as I discovered when I reviewed recent issues of *The English Language Teaching Journal* for my last article. This perception was confirmed in *The Modern Language Journal*, the North American journal for language teachers, and in *Language Teaching Research*, a UK-based research journal, which recently ran an edition focused on Asian contexts for teaching English and an anglophone context for teaching Chinese. The debate has also been well represented in the pages of *The Language Learning Journal*[1]. It is perhaps all the more 'live' since the aim of generalised functional fluency in a second language among secondary students in this country now seems so utopian. As the MFL teaching profession tries to take stock and regroup, it is timely to remind ourselves of one of our *raisons d'être*: language learning *is* culture learning and a potential vehicle for promoting cultural awareness.

DEFINITIONS OF CULTURE

While most of us instinctively recognise a link between language and culture, it is not always easy to define what 'culture' is, let alone how we should integrate culture into our teaching. All writers reviewed here define culture as the ways in which a group constructs the meaning of their lives and gives it expression, rather than as a body of facts about a country or a country's artistic products. For example, Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004: 5) in *Modern English Teacher* focus on culture defined as 'the totality of a way of life shared by a group of people linked by common and distinctive characteristics, beliefs and circumstances' and 'the attitudes and behaviour of a community of people who share inclinations, interests and goals'. Rogerson-Revell (2003: 158), writing in *ReCALL* about a business language training resource that includes a cultural component, cites Hofstede's (2001: 9) definition of culture as 'the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or people from another'. Other authors emphasise the dynamic, on-going nature of culture: 'culture is not a given, but constituted in the everyday practice of groups and individuals' (Roberts *et al.* 2001: 30, cited by Bateman, 2003: 319). From this perspective, it is hard to imagine 'teaching culture'. That is precisely the point, say Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) and Bateman (2003): 'teaching culture' has to be 'teaching cultural awareness', since, as Tseng (2002: 13) puts it, 'understanding culture is a process of learning rather than an external knowledge to be acquired'.

CULTURAL AWARENESS, NOT KNOWLEDGE?

Tomlinson and Masuahara (2004) provide a very clear introduction to their concept of cultural *awareness* as distinct from cultural *knowledge*. Cultural knowledge (that is, information about the target culture, its typical patterns of behaviour and its attitudes) is likely to be 'external', 'static', 'stereotypical' and 'reduced'; that is, it tends to be knowledge that is passed on to a learner from someone else, rather than arising from the learner's own experience; it reflects broad generalisations often based on a narrow selection of evidence. And while such knowledge can give us pointers to differences in behaviours and values, it can also be misleading. As an American student of Spanish reported, 'I always had a stereotyping [*sic*] image because of [our textbooks], that all Spanish-speaking people were very religious ...' (Bateman, 2003: 326). As Michael Guest (2002: 154), an English teacher working in Japan, comments: 'A propensity to reduce something as rich and varied as culture to a few salient, general principles is bound to end up closer to caricature than any real understanding or deep analysis'.

And even when we experience a different culture directly, we have a tendency to 'culturize',

as Guest (*ibid*.) puts it. In other words, we search for cultural explanations to interpret behaviour or values that are different to our own. As teachers, we may then be tempted to pass on these observations to our students. Yet within our own cultures, when we come across differences in behaviour, we account for them as characteristics of individuals:

> ... within one's own culture, qualities such as rudeness or generosity are generally treated as part of a person's characters. Why then, when dealing with foreign culture, do such qualities come to be interpreted as being representative of that culture, as though the behaviour of the 'foreigner' is entirely a product of his or her culture? (Guest, 2002: 157)

Cultural awareness, then, is an approach to culture which emphasises not information about a culture but skills in exploring, observing and understanding difference and sameness, and perhaps most centrally, 'suspension of judgement, i.e. not being instantly critical of other people's apparently deviant behaviour' (Tomlinson and Masuhara, 2004: 7).

In fact, we should be talking here about *cross*-cultural awareness, because fundamental to this awareness is a more objective and extensive understanding of one's own culture and particularly, the insight that one's own culture can appear 'deviant' and 'odd' to an outsider. So central to promoting cross-cultural awareness is getting learners not only to understand 'difference' in the target language culture, but also to explore ways in which what is familiar to them might be experienced as different by others; what Tseng (2002: 12) refers to as 'perspective consciousness'.

CULTURAL INSIGHTS THROUGH E-LEARNING

How can the electronic learning environment support cultural learning? Rogerson-Revell (2003) in *ReCALL* and Furstenberg *et al*. (2001) in the e-journal, *Language Learning and Technology*, report two rather different approaches. Rogerson-Revell raises the problem of how to incorporate a cultural dimension into computer-based business language materials aimed at European managers in the construction industry. Interestingly, the target users of her materials do not all see learning about culture as the on-going process of awareness-raising conceived by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004):

> Earlier experience producing and delivering business culture training programmes had already raised the issue of potential resistance by some business trainees to what can be seen as 'too much theory and awareness-raising' content and a preference for 'hard facts' and 'practical tips'. (Rogerson-Revell, 2003: 159)

While recognising that 'there is obviously a perennial danger here of ending up with a list of "do's and don'ts" based on somewhat outdated generalisations', Rogerson-Revell defends the provision of some cultural information as 'an important building block' in developing a framework for understanding cultural differences and similarities. For example, she suggests that it is important for her target group to realise the different perspectives on the job titles 'architect' and 'engineer' in e.g. Germany, where they are legally protected terms with fee scales fixed by law, and the UK, where there is a lack of legislation governing qualifications in the construction industry.

To complement and extend this factual information, learners can work on authentic recordings of construction professionals highlighting their own experiences of cultural similarities and differences in the workplace. The syllabus informing the materials development draws on the dichotomies for the analysis of different cultures proposed by Hofstede (2001) which focus on different societies' attitudes to, for example, power, uncertainty and time. Rogerson-Revell generously provides details (given here in the bibliography) of how to view LANCAM project materials.

Unlike LANCAM, the *Cultura* project, described by Furstenberg *et al*. (2001), places great emphasis on e-discussion as a means of promoting cultural awareness. Furstenberg *et al*. report how American and French students 'observe, analyse and compare similar materials from their respective cultures as they are posted on the web' (*op. cit*.: 5). In the first stage, these materials consist of questionnaires, filled in by both groups of students, designed to highlight potential cultural differences through word associations, sentence completions and comments on situations. Each group analyses both sets of questionnaire responses and then discusses the findings in an electronic forum with the partner group.

In the particular case described, this stage alone led to the exploration of all manner of cultural connotations and meanings. For example, the word *individualism* on the American side was associated with the positive connotations of 'freedom', 'creativity' and 'personal expression', while on the French side, *individualisme* evoked negative associations with 'égoisme', 'égocentrisme' and 'solitude'. In this way, the students became aware that different cultures map the meaning of apparently similar words rather differently. Such discussion, Furstenberg *et al*. (2001: 11) note, provoked reflection on the values not just of the 'other' group, but also of the students' own culture.

As the project progresses, different materials are added. For example, the two groups discussed the same films and shared their perceptions; a particularly interesting idea was to get the groups to focus on an original French film and its Hollywood remake. The resulting forum discussions then themselves became material for analysis with both sets of students realising that the complexity of 'culture' could not be reduced to a few casual generalisations. As the authors justifiably conclude:

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We […] train [students] to look, make hypotheses, ask questions, reflect on what 'culture' is, identifying along the way their own culturally encoded behaviours, becoming more alert and open towards another culture, more flexible, and enriching the way they perceive the world. (Furstenberg *et al*., 2001: 31)

LANGUAGE LEARNERS AS ETHNOGRAPHERS

Furstenberg *et al*. (2001: 2) label their approach 'constructivist'; in other words, students are encouraged to construct their own understanding through exploration and hypothesis-testing. A number of authors have recently proposed a similar approach for encouraging cultural awareness, drawing on ethnographic research methods. The ethnographer's goal is to understand a culture from the point of view of its members, and *not* to evaluate cultural practices in relation to their own. This is typically achieved by non-directive interviewing in which the interviewee is encouraged to talk freely about their experiences, views and feelings. The interviewer's aim is to put themselves 'in the shoes' of the interviewee.

In the UK, students have been introduced to ethnographic approaches as a means of facilitating their integration into target language communities while on a year abroad (see Barro and Grimm, 1993 and Roberts *et al*., 2001). A recent article in *The Modern Language Journal* by Blair Bateman (2003) recounts a US-based 'home ethnography' project which involved students of Spanish interviewing members of the local hispanic community. Bateman was particularly interested in the impact of the project on students whose motivation for learning Spanish was limited to meeting college requirements and who, typically, saw little connection between language learning and cultural learning.

He reports both quantitative and qualitative findings: for example, he found a significant increase in understanding of, and respect for, Spanish speakers, which was clearly confirmed in open-ended responses. These also highlighted the value of the project in promoting two realisations: firstly, that received knowledge about a cultural group is often stereotypical and does not necessarily apply to individuals, and secondly, that others might view one's own culture quite differently. As one student remarked, '[The project] gave me an outsider's perspective about a culture I've always lived in and taken for granted' (Bateman, 2003: 326). Interestingly, however, the project had little quantifiable impact on students' desire to study Spanish further. In particular, there was little evidence that it had changed the attitudes of those studying to fulfil graduation requirements. Perhaps then such opportunities enhance the motivation of those who already have positive attitudes, but sadly, do not necessarily change those who are not positively predisposed.

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ATTITUDES AND MOTIVATION: AN UPDATE

Bateman's study, in investigating changes in attitudes and goals resulting from contact with a target culture, falls within a rich context of debate, dominated by the work of the Canadian social psychologist, Robert Gardner. Gardner, along with various associates, has been investigating the relationships between attitudes to the target language culture and general openness to other cultures, motivation and achievement in second language learning for the last 45 years. His key distinction between integrative orientation (wanting to learn a second language to integrate with members of its culture) and instrumental orientation (wanting to learn a language to get a better job or appear better educated) is now well known in the language teaching literature. However, the headline idea – that integratively orientated learners are more motivated and achieve more than instrumentally orientated learners – has obscured important details of Gardner's more wide-ranging socio-educational model.

This model was developed in the 1980s along with the Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), a lengthy questionnaire designed by Gardner and his research associates for consistent, quantitative testing of the various constructs of the model (Gardner, 1985). Achievement is then measured by taking students' grades, self-assessment ratings and scores from an objective test. Over 75 studies involving 10,500 individual learners have now been conducted, and at last, a meta-analysis of these studies has been published in *Language Learning* (Masgoret and Gardner, 2003) to provide an update on the model, as well as a response to an earlier critical meta-analysis by Au (1988).

It is instinctively attractive to claim that those who are open to other cultures are good language learners, but Gardner's research clarifies how this relationship should be conceptualised. The meta-analysis provides statistically robust evidence to show that achievement in a second language is correlated significantly to measures of motivation, and motivation in turn is influenced by two sets of attitudes: integrativeness and attitudes towards the learning situation. Integrativeness is a broad construct including Gardner's original integrative orientation and also positive attitudes to the target language community and positive attitudes to learning languages generally. Attitudes to the learning situation sub-divides into attitudes to the teacher and attitudes to the course.

Most importantly, the socio-educational model claims that these groups of attitudes do not *of themselves* directly influence achievement and, sure enough, the correlations with achievement in the meta-analysis are far less strong than those between motivation and achievement. The two original orientations, taken separately, show even more marginal correlations with achievement. Thus, the idea that integratively orientated learners will be

good learners is not supported. What can be said is that with strongly integrative attitudes and positive attitudes to the learning situation, a learner's motivation is more likely to be strong. The stronger the motivation, the more likely achievement will be high. In other words, having positive attitudes is not enough: in ways that are not yet clear from Gardner's research, motivation, as it affects achievement, is something more than just the two sets of attitudes.

Masgoret and Gardner also use the meta-analysis to explore hypotheses put forward by their critics. One such hypothesis is that the relationship between integrative attitudes and achievement will be stronger in settings where there is contact with target language speakers. However, the meta-analysis results are inconsistent, showing higher correlations between integrativeness and grades in contact settings but the reverse for the objective achievement tests and self ratings. Similarly, when the effect of age/classroom experience on the correlations was tested, contrasting the patterns for elementary, secondary and university students, there was little consistent evidence to support a hypothesised stronger link in the case of older students.

The immediate impression after reading complex studies such as these is of a statistical hammer being used to crack a common-sense nut. But as we have seen, the common-sense assumption that integrative orientation leads to more successful language learning is simply not borne out in the research. What Gardner and his associates have done is painstakingly develop *one* way of researching a theory about the link between attitudes, motivation and second language achievement and, within that framework, have checked and double-checked the validity and reliability of their results. Given the difficulty of developing valid and reliable quantitative measures of such intangible things as 'attitudes', 'motivation' and even 'achievement', the consistency of their findings in relation to the key pathway of attitudes > motivation > achievement is impressive, if a little underwhelming for the language teacher in the classroom.

LANGUAGE CLASSES IN DIFFERENT CULTURES: SAME OR DIFFERENT?

So let's get back to the classroom. Mitchell and Lee's (2003) research, reported in *Language Teaching Research*, is of a very different nature to Gardner's, using the qualitative methodologies of observation and interviews to illuminate similarities and differences in practice between two experienced teachers of languages to near beginners, working in what one would assume would be very different educational cultures. One was a Korean teacher of English in a Korean elementary school and the other was an English teacher of French in a UK secondary school. The

Korean pupils were aged 10-11, while the UK pupils were 11-12. Both groups had spent more or less the same amount of time in language classes. Given Western stereotypes of Asian educational values, one might imagine the Korean classroom to be teacher-centred and authority-orientated with learners not encouraged to take an active role and much evidence of rote learning. In the reality reflected by this particular case study, it was in fact the Korean classroom that appeared to emphasise the learners' own responsibility most explicitly.

Mitchell and Lee found striking similarities in the organisation of lessons, with both teachers using a 'weak' version of the communicative approach. This involved 'whole-class interaction', focusing on the intensive practice and application of functional phrases. A key difference was the way the Korean teacher organised her class of 40 into five groups of eight, each group with a group leader and a vice-leader. At given moments in the class, these groups were expected to practise taught expressions together. Groups who were able to produce correct phrases were given points; this competitive element, the Korean teacher felt, promoted effort and motivation. Thus, there was an explicit framework for collaborative work and peer tutoring, with the group leaders being expected to help other students to arrive at correct responses. The Korean teacher was quite clear that the stronger students needed to take such responsibility, while the weaker students should make an effort to participate in their group.

In the English teacher's class, participation was determined by the teacher's nomination and she attempted to nominate learners 'equally', with few concessions to differences in ability. 'Learner-centredness' found expression in the expectation that learners would try to apply the learned phrases to themselves, for example, expressing their personal likes and dislikes using the phrases being practised. She was also prepared to build on students' occasional efforts to initiate utterances in French and to try to encourage them to use French for 'real' purposes, such as reporting a lost book. This dimension of authenticity was not seen in the Korean lessons.

This fascinating case study, rich with transcriptions of the classroom interactions, reminds us again of the dangers of cultural generalisations. As the authors comment, the differences between the classrooms 'do not reflect common stereotypes about Anglo and Asian teaching styles in any simple way' (Mitchell and Lee, 2003: 35). There has been much questioning of pedagogic proposals such as the communicative approach and learner autonomy on the grounds that they may reflect exclusively Western cultural values (e.g. Underhill, 1994; Smith, 2002; Sonaiya, 2002). This case study shows up a fine-grained reality: on the one hand, similar interpretations of the communicative approach and on the other, different aspects of the 'learner autonomy' agenda being promoted in a Western and an Asian educational setting.

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THE NATIVE SPEAKER: A CULTURAL MYTH?

A rather different set of cultural issues was raised when I was recently asked to advise on the following problem: a young student from a francophone African country had allegedly been told by her French teacher that she would probably fail her French A level oral exam because of her 'accent'. She had protested that that was how French was spoken in her home country; the suggestion angered her even more because she felt she spoke French more fluently and more correctly than her English teacher. Now, I hope that the French teacher was wrong and that nobody would fail an oral examination because of an authentic, but non-Parisian, accent. But this problem makes us think about the touchstone by which we assess language ability and the cultural values which underly it. Further, it raises issues about which culture we choose to reflect when we attempt to link language and culture. After all, the majority of habitual speakers of French reside in Africa, not in Europe; yet the African francophone context is rarely prominent in coursebooks.

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These issues are central to Cem Alptekin's (2002) challenging article in the *English Language Teaching Journal*, even though he is writing in relation to global English. He suggests that 'the native speaker', whose language is assumed to be linguistically and culturally most 'authentic', is in fact a myth, based on social values. Why should the standard form of British English, for example, serve as a model, in preference to Indian English or Nigerian English, spoken by multilingual populations? As he reminds us:

> Languages, English included, often have several dialects. One cannot claim that there is one correct and appropriate way to use English in the sense that one set of language patterns is somehow inherently superior to all the others. If certain language patterns are preferred over others, this is certainly done according to social values ... (Alptekin, 2002: 59)

Equally, the embedding of a language in specific cultural behaviours should not necessarily be imposed on learners as an expectation of successful communicative competence: 'How relevant are the conventions of British politeness or American informality to the Japanese and Turks, say, when doing business in English?' Alptekin (*op. cit.*: 61) asks. His resolution involves promoting what he calls 'intercultural communicative competence' as an aim in language teaching; in other words, we should focus on developing learners' ability to use the target language as confident and efficient *non-native* speakers, rather than as imitation native-speakers. Similarly, awareness of the range of native-speaker varieties should be encouraged.

CONCLUSION

Language teaching has always been culture teaching, but over recent years, triggered no doubt by the emphasis on language as communication, we have come to ask questions about 'what culture?', 'which culture?' and 'teaching, or awareness raising?' We no longer have the luxury of seeing 'culture' as just the literary canon associated with a particular language or a body of facts about a country. Further, we cannot assume that openness to other cultures happens by osmosis in the language classroom. As the articles reviewed here make clear, encouraging positive contact between cultures means not just building our knowledge of other cultures, but constantly questioning our own assumptions.

NOTES

[1] Numbers 19 and 20 of the *LLJ* have a special section titled 'Intercultural dimensions' and most other issues since contain at least one article on this theme.

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