

CULTURAL LEARNING AND TEACHING CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Methods of teaching languages are likely as diverse as the languages themselves, it seems everyone agrees we learn languages in order to communicate with other people [1]. And at the basis of communication lies something that goes beyond grammatical structures of the language and vocabulary. It is culture. Every student in the language classroom might master a language's rules, and even speak without an accent, but without a basic knowledge of culture, communicate the wrong message. There are stories of diplomats shocking their audiences by unwittingly making an obscene hand gesture, thereby damaging their own reputation and the reputation of the country they represent. Language proficiency must include cultural proficiency too.

This article is written to achieve the following aims: 1) to provide definition for the concept "culture", 2) to find out areas of opportunity for growth in current levels of knowledge, 3) to discuss the difficulties in teaching culture in the language classroom, and 4) to offer some strategies on both the theoretical and practical levels of instruction.

If we take a look at current language teaching methods, it appears that cultural learning is usually an after-thought in the foreign language classroom. If there is time after the main material explained properly, students might learn a song, a fairytale or even samples of the ethnic cuisine. Students may even memorize a poem, or read and discuss a classical novel from the culture of the language under study. This approach to learning culture does a disservice to students and the languages they are learning. Language teachers should teach culture intentionally in the language classroom, giving thought to what items of culture are important to learn, and how such information enriches the language learning process. This helps the teacher focus on "those aspects which have a direct and obvious link to language" [2].

Why is it important to understand the culture of a people and their language? It's important because understanding why people act the way they do makes it easier to accept. We may not like it, we may not agree with it, but at least we will not react in a manner that will cause an international incident.

In order to understand a culture, we need to do some analysis; analysis that begins with knowing what culture is, how it evolves, and how it influences on language. Once we know this, we'll be on the road to developing cultural awareness skills that will make it easier for us to adjust to foreign cultures.

As we began to research how culture has an impact on language learning, we found out many concepts and ideas about the term "culture". We offer as an appropriate definition:

"Culture is a broad concept that embraces all aspects of human life. It is an integrated system of learned behavior; patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting that are characteristics of the members of any given society. This system refers to the total way of life for a particular group of people which consists of concepts, values, and assumptions that are shared by them and help them to organize their common life" [3].

To understand a culture, it is very important to acknowledge and appreciate both "visible" and "invisible" aspects of culture.

The visible aspect of culture can be things which represent a popular understanding of the concept culture such as: history, literature, architecture, arts, styles of dress, traditions, customs, festivals, cuisine.

The invisible aspects of culture have more complex meaning in comparison with visible aspects. It applies to norms, beliefs, world views, and values.

According to these aspects of culture, people perceive and understand culture in different ways. It is essential to know and understand the invisible aspects of culture and their impact on