

Culture Awareness in English Language Teaching

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Introduction

This paper describes the Malta Culture Awareness Project aimed at introducing a culture component in English teaching in the lower forms of the secondary school. The research was based on the belief that "a culture component in language teaching actually improves language learning and makes students more tolerant of cultural diversity". The assumptions are that culture awareness (a) facilitates language learning and (b) makes students more tolerant and appreciative of diversity. Indeed these very assumptions underpinned the Council of Europe Project "Language Learning For European Citizenship", which was launched in the light of the socio-political phenomena that created the "House of Europe" in the last 20 years (Neuner 1994). Our assumptions were also substantiated by Byram and Zarate (1995, *Preface*) "the Council of Europe believes that teachers of languages (and also of other subjects as history and education for citizenship) have a central role to play in preparing young people for full and active democratic citizenship in the new Europe".

The Project

The four-phase Malta Culture Awareness Project consisted of :-

- **The First or Pilot Phase. January to May '94.** This was carried out with one class of girls aged 14+.
- **The Second or 'Selling' Phase. July '95.** This consisted of a two-day seminar for 15 teachers of English and the setting up of the 'Culture Team'.
- **The Third Phase. September '94 to May '95.** This phase saw the implementation of the project in six different schools.
- **The Fourth Phase. July '95.** This phase consisted of a seminar for all state school teachers teaching English at Form I level, and saw the launching of the new official English syllabus that included a culture component.

Seven teachers who made up the Culture Team participated in a year-long project in six secondary schools (Two Area Secondary Schools, two Junior Lyceums, one Trade school and one private school).

The project involved some one hundred and eighty students of the first three years of Secondary and Trade Schools and covered approximately two hundred and ten teaching hours to culture teaching, an average of thirty hours per class.

Local networks between secondary schools were developed, giving rise to their own strategies for culture and language teaching. Strategic use of human resources was also made through the roping in of British students and other British residents in Malta. Teachers organised meetings between their classes and foreign students enrolled at their schools. A chance encounter with an English Headmistress and a class on an outing, also led to a structured meeting with other students engaged in the culture project. As Byram and Zarate (1995:13) point out these types of encounters proved to be "a powerful source of affective and unconscious learning".

a) **The project methodology** consisted mainly of the setting up and the continual support and development of a Culture Team by the project organiser. Team members were released from school one afternoon a week to attend the English Language Resource Centre where they could find materials, and engage in collaborative planning and evaluation among themselves and with the project organiser. The teacher of the pilot phase played the role of coordinator and animator when the organiser was not available. Some thirty hours of meetings were devoted to (i) planning and evaluating lessons, (ii) designing and processing student questionnaires (iii) discussing the project with British visitors and visiting consultants.

b) **The teaching methodology.** This covered a number of traditional teaching methods connected with the four language skills. 'New' strategies included (i) the time-line (ii) the shoebox, (iii) local networking and the tapping of human resources.

The time-line. Teachers encouraged students to compile a calendar covering (Maltese and British) events of personal, school, national and international significance. Children learnt about them, shared their knowledge with fellow classmates, and wrote about them to both overseas and local students.

The Shoebox. Classes filled shoeboxes with articles that they thought best represented themselves and their school, their youth culture and their country. The process included various strategies like discussion, prioritising, categorising, researching, as well as the four skills. These shoeboxes were then exchanged with others from foreign classes. The foreign box was then discussed and the opinions gleaned from its contents were compared with those that the students had held hitherto.

Local networking. A number of classes from different schools started corresponding with each other and kept each other informed about the status of their project.

c) **The research methodology.** Action research procedures were used. As a result of the introduction of a new component in language teaching and learning, the research had to address the **problem** of expanding an already full syllabus. There was the felt need of discovering how this new component could be integrated into the syllabus so teachers would not see it as an 'add-on'. We also wanted to avoid the mere transmission of information and adopt strategies that would create culture awareness while helping students learn the four skills.

Owing to the need for teachers to integrate this innovative aspect of language learning with the syllabus, teachers found that they themselves had to become learners. Reports showed that teachers viewed this role switch as a significant contribution towards their professional development and one that increased their job satisfaction. The enthusiasm thereby generated, mitigated the trials of hunting for 'culture' materials and experimenting with syllabus-integration strategies which included (a) linking particular grammatical points with a culture topic, (b) exploiting culture-oriented passages for listening and comprehension exercises, (c) couching creative work topics in target culture contexts, (d) exchanging letters on local and target culture topics with both local and foreign classes.

One students' and two teachers' questionnaires were administered. Teachers' kept journals and wrote group and individual reports. They supported their claims with written and taped evidence of students' work. The project organiser kept her own journal and other records.

The project was a great success with both teachers and students as evidenced by :-

- The widespread student enthusiasm reported by all teachers of the Culture Team.
- The students' responses to the final questionnaire, of which 95.16% judged culture lessons as 'interesting' or 'more interesting than the usual English lessons'.
- The students' work exhibited during the July '95 seminar for teachers of Form I.
- The contagious enthusiasm displayed by the Culture Team members themselves while addressing the seminar participants.
- The Culture Team's positive questionnaire responses. While acknowledging the extra work the project involved, the teachers described it as 'a breath of fresh air', 'professionally rewarding', 'a good motivator for students', 'a challenge that had a great impact on students'.
- Parents' encouraging remarks about the positive influence the project was having on their children's learning of the English Language.

Questionnaire responses of participating teachers showed that all felt that the culture project had had a positive effect on their students' knowledge, skills and attitudes. This was corroborated by the students' questionnaire answers which showed that:-

- 80% recollected the British customs and festivals discussed in class.
- 91.03% felt the need to learn about British people in order to improve their language learning and general knowledge and to be able to cope when in Britain.
- 64.8% felt they could now definitely communicate better with a British family while a further 29.65% felt they could communicate 'a little better'.
- 92.41% reported 'not minding' or actually 'being pleased' to have a British family move in next door.
- Prodded to make a choice between a *descriptive* and a *judgmental* comparison between British and Maltese people, 75.17% chose the descriptive while 24.83% opted for the judgmental.

Asked to continue the sentence "*I think British people are.....*" students came up with a number of adjectives of which 17.94% were negative (boring, snobbish), 58.9% were positive, (nice, friendly, polite), and 23.07% were neutral (busy, sporty).

Conclusion

The teachers' training, intervention and guidance is essential to the successful teaching of a foreign culture. Teachers should be sensitised to the need of enriching and upgrading their own

knowledge of the target culture. There seems to be a need for close collaboration between pre and in-service teacher training agencies. Perhaps it is time for these two agencies to look at their complementarity and to find ways of making the experiential learning of the target culture a required part of language-teacher training.

References

Byram M. & Zarate G. (1995) *Young people facing difference*. Council of Cultural Co-operation Education Committee. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Neuner G. (1994) *The role of sociocultural competence in foreign language teaching and learning*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.