The SAGE Encyclopedia of Intercultural Competence

Culture Learning in the Language Classroom

Language learning is linked to culture learning through the assumption that language and culture are inseparable and that full understanding of a language is only possible if learners have some knowledge of one or more countries where the language is spoken. For many years, culture learning involved knowing about national cultures; this has often been criticized as leading to stereotyping or *essentializing*. More recently, however, the emphasis has been on culture as complex and constantly evolving, and thus, culture learning involves knowing about different groups within societies as well as the changes taking place in those societies. In addition to the long-established focus on *knowledge* of other cultures, the cultural dimension of foreign language teaching is more recently expected to also influence *attitudes* and build *skills*, both components of intercultural competence. Language educators design activities to enhance learners' attitudes toward people speaking the target languages, reduce prejudice, and increase their ability to interact successfully with such people. Thus, intercultural competence is now considered by many to be a central aspect of learning in the language classroom, even though there may not be as much attention paid to it as might be expected, owing to gaps in language teachers' preparation or lack of teachers' skills in culture teaching.

This entry provides a historical overview of the cultural dimension in the language classroom, demonstrates how various education policies reflect theoretical developments, and outlines some of the pedagogical principles and methods of intercultural language teaching.

Historical Overview of Cultural Dimensions in the Language Classroom

That culture and language are inseparable has been widely assumed in modern language teaching since it began in the 19th century and is closely related to the notion that language and thought are also inseparable. Language is not only an embodiment of culture but also a medium through which human beings create and negotiate new cultural meanings. While this relationship remains largely but not entirely uncontested, the cultural aspects of language education have been approached from different perspectives. From the 1880s until the 1950s, language learning was predominantly

confined to the elite and the middle classes. Culture pedagogy in the Anglophone tradition tended to focus on concrete representations of *high culture* in great works of literature. The elite who were to journey abroad also studied travel guides and phrase books to gain a wider perspective of knowledge of the land and the people. In the German tradition, the notion of *Landeskunde* was understood to include not only high culture but also knowledge about traditions and daily life and elements of geography and history. A similar position was taken in the French tradition with the notion of *civilization.*

In the 1960s in the United States of America, there was a move to make the cultural content of language teaching more visible and at the same time more similar to teaching in continental Europe. This took place in an era characterized by racial, ethnic, and political conflicts, thereby pushing the importance of intercultural communication further up the agenda. In the 1970s, culture pedagogy in the United States tended to adopt a pragmatic approach to facilitate intercultural communication for business or political purposes. Thus, there was a preponderance of interest in studying aspects of *low culture*— everyday life, norms, and values—as opposed to the *high culture* that had been favored in previous years. In Germany, the misuse of *Landeskunde* (or *Kulturkunde)* in the Nazi period to reinforce German identity rather than promote knowledge about other people led to a reassessment **[p. 205 ↓]** of its purpose after 1945 in both the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany, until eventually a values-driven approach took over.

In the 1980s, cultural learning became generalized and normalized alongside a more specifically linguistic- and communicative-oriented pedagogy. However, in spite of this broad acceptance, cultural aspects tended to be taught discretely. Culture and language learning generally existed in practice in a dichotomous relationship, despite their assumed inseparability at the theoretical level. It is important to note that in the 1980s, foreign language learning was becoming more widespread in many countries and was no longer confined to elite groups. It was a period in which the *communicative approach* for teaching languages was extremely popular; the purpose of foreign language learning was to give learners the skills for authentic or functional communication in a more interconnected world and economy. In this context, learning to communicate was often related to task accomplishment, such as purchasing and selling goods or transactions that would be helpful to tourists. This period was not only one in which there was a

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notable shift away from the study of literature but also a time during which the cultural dimension, in general, assumed an inferior status to communicative competence. The little cultural information that survived in textbooks tended to take a tourist orientation. In retrospect, this is surprising, not least because of the strong influence of the work of the anthropologist Dell Hymes on the communicative approach. While Hymes emphasized cultural competence as well as sociolinguistic appropriateness as a basis for communicative competence, this was commonly overlooked by language teachers.

Nonetheless, applied linguists started to argue that one of the most important aims of language teaching should be to foster cultural awareness, tolerance, and understanding. Modern languages education includes topics that directly lend themselves to helping learners develop positive attitudes and a better understanding of other cultures. The development of cultural awareness involves examining cultural practices and values that are typical of the target language community, for example, national festivals, religious holidays, culinary practices, and daily routines, to name a few. At the same time, learners should be made aware of their own cultural practices, a focus that was new to language teaching.

In the 1990s, however, some theorists started to underline the limitations of the cultural awareness approach, arguing that this orientation views culture as homogeneous and static, especially if the notion of a *national culture* is used. They contended that learners are potentially led to believe that the population of a country, as a collective group, all act in a similar way, opening up the risk of stereotyping. They highlighted cultural complexities and flows and advocated a new *transnational* or *intercultural* pedagogy. The intercultural approach to language learning promotes languages education for bridging cultural differences and developing harmonious relationships between different cultural groups in ever increasingly diverse and multicultural societies.

In intercultural language learning, the study of culture and the study of language should be closely integrated; the study of culture, which leads to acquisition of knowledge about others, should occur through the medium of the target language. Furthermore, the introduction of the notion of competence—in common with new approaches in many other subjects and classrooms—meant that knowledge became only one aspect of what is to be taught and learned. Competence includes attitudes, skills, and behaviors in addition to knowledge, and there are many descriptions or models of intercultural

competence—in addition to linguistic competence—that are considered necessary for successful interaction with people who speak another language.

One approach to teaching competences has been to see language learners as potential ethnographers, discovering and understanding another country or foreign culture for themselves. This is particularly relevant for those learners for whom a short sojourn or long residence in another country is part of the course of study. Where this is not the case, the study of the literary canon has been extended or replaced by reading and analyzing media documents of all kinds, such as newspapers, films, web pages, or any kind of document or data produced in the other culture.

[p. 206 ↓] The learning of intercultural communicative competence in the language classroom may also occur through virtual interaction, where learners communicate across borders using networked technologies. This may occur using synchronous social media like Web chat or Skype, thereby providing opportunities for intercultural communication in real time. Alternatively, students can communicate asynchronously by e-mail or on social media sites. An advantage of the latter is that there is time to interpret and reflect on the communication before learners formulate responses.

The Cultural Dimension in Language Teaching Policy

In many instances, the theoretical thinking about the role of foreign language learning in fostering intercultural understanding has been echoed in international and national education policy documents. Over the past two decades, policies have stressed the need for young people to learn to accept other cultures through the school curriculum, in general, and through foreign language education, in particular.

Examples of international policies are as follows:

- The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, whose aim is to provide a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabi, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, and so on, across Europe,

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refers to general competences (in addition to linguistic competences) that a learner requires to be able to interact successfully in communicative situations. These include general and sociocultural knowledge of the target language countries, intercultural awareness, intercultural skills, and an open attitude to otherness.

- UNESCO's document *Intercultural Competences: Conceptual and Operational Framework* refers explicitly to intercultural *communicative* competence as a key element of relationship building and as a means of resolving conflict between different cultural groups. It emphasizes that learning to communicate appropriately with cultural others extends far beyond linguistic competence.

Examples from selected countries are given below:

- In the United States of America, the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* are encapsulated in the 5 Cs model: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. This framework emphasizes the significance of both linguistic and social knowledge required to participate in multilingual communities in a culturally appropriate way.
- The English national curriculum for modern foreign languages introduced in 2008 listed intercultural understanding as one of the key concepts underpinning the study of languages.
- The New Zealand languages curriculum included a cultural knowledge strand that recommends that learners compare different beliefs and cultural practices to understand more about themselves and become more understanding of others.
- In China, the *Compulsory Education Curriculum Standards for English* states that understanding the cultures of English-speaking countries helps not only in learning English but also in deepening appreciation and understanding of China.

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Teaching Languages and Intercultural Competences

The reconceptualization of the foreign languages teacher's role as a teacher of both language *and* intercultural competence has important implications for pedagogical skills. In contrast to teaching for cultural awareness, the intercultural approach demands more than just knowledge about the target language country or countries. While deeper cultural knowledge can improve a teacher's attention to and treatment of the cultural dimension and help scaffold cultural learning, this is not the only area of expertise required for developing intercultural communicative competence. Therefore, if it has not been possible for the languages teacher to spend time abroad to acquire in situ knowledge about the country, this should not be a significant hindrance. According to Michael Byram's widely used model for teaching intercultural competence (e.g., in the New Zealand curriculum), the languages teacher should be able to develop not only learners' cultural knowledge but also their skills, values, and attitudes. The teacher, therefore, needs **[p. 207 ↓]** to know how to provide students with opportunities for interpreting and comparing cultural differences, whereby they are able to appreciate how their own values may influence their views of both their own and other cultures.

The development of these pedagogical skills in a subject discipline that has been historically concerned with the cognitive aspects of linguistic learning is not without challenges. However, if one of the central purposes of language teaching and learning is to develop harmonious relations with people from other cultures for humanitarian, political, or economic reasons, these deserve special attention.

See alsoDefinitions: Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes; Language, Culture, and Intercultural Communication; Language Use and Culture; Linguaculture; Teacher Education

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Further Readings

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