

THE INTERCULTURAL DIMENSION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

MEDKULTURNE RAZSEŽNOSTI V POUČEVANJU IN UČENJU TUJEGA JEZIKA

Avtorica izhaja iz ugotovitve, da ima učenje/poučevanje tujega jezika tudi medkulturne razsežnosti, kar pomeni, da je med cilji pomembno ne le razvijanje jezikovnih kompetenc, ampak tudi medkulturno razumevanje (zmanjševanje predsodkov in nestrpnosti do ljudi drugih kultur in jezikovnih področij).

Prispevek definira pojma kultura in jezik ter njune medsebojne zveze, v nadaljevanju pa predstavlja model poučevanja in ocenjevanja, kjer so poudarjene medkulturne dimenzije.

V obravnavi povsem praktičnih sugestij, ki so namenjene učitelju, ki na razredni stopnji poučuje tuji jezik in skuša zagotoviti tudi medkulturne dimenzije, izhaja iz modela, kjer je izhodišče otrok, šola in tuji jezik pa sta sestavni del otrokovih izkušenj. Učenje jezika je torej le del otrokovih vsakodnevnih izkušenj in ne nekaj povsem izoliranega. Pri mlajših učencih naj zato učitelj izhaja iz kulture otroštva, ki je sestavni del vseh kultur (igre, pravljice, izštevanka ipd.). V zgodnjem šolskem obdobju (7 do 11 let) so sestavni del učenčevih izkušenj (ne glede na jezik) prazniki, zahtevnejše igre in pesmi, predvsem pa šola, razred in kultura (rituali) šole. V naslednjem obdobju pa je že poudarek na poučevanju jezika v kontekstu ciljnega jezika, povezanega s kontekstom mladih. Pomembna je tudi jezikovna natančnost, ki jo je mogoče pridobiti ob naravnih govorcih (*native speakers*), preko uporabe medijev (radio, TV, časopisi, popularne oddaje, glasbene skupine, revije za mlade) in igre vlog. Učenci naj se seznanijo tudi z različnostjo ciljnega jezika (različno naglaševanje, dialekti). Bistvena je torej vzpostavitev povezave med kulturo učenca (glede na starost) ter jezikovno in šolsko kulturo. Medkulturno zavedanje pomeni zavedanje razlik in podobnosti med kulturami ne glede na jezik.

INTRODUCTION

Those involved in the teaching and learning of foreign languages have many different perspectives on the importance and aims of this area.

A recommendation in the final report of the Council of Europe Language Learning for a New Europe project (April 1997) was that one of the aims of language learning should be *to combat or preferably preclude prejudice and intolerance towards people of other languages and cultures*. Writing as a sociolinguist this is a highly important value.

The stated aim in the Scottish curricular guidelines (February 1993) of learning a foreign language is *to develop the ability to communicate in the foreign language*, a view which would be shared by most teachers.

Children learning a foreign language may have a different perspective which is the desire to understand songs and films in the foreign language.

These purposes inter-relate in that all require an ability to develop not only pure linguistic ability but also an intercultural understanding. Teachers are aware of the need to foster intercultural understanding but are perhaps not so clear about exactly what this means or how to go about teaching this area. This paper aims to define the terms, present a model of teaching and assessing the intercultural dimension and propose some ideas for practice.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

There are many debates about the notion of culture. For the purposes of this paper I shall use the following definition of culture:

The shared patterns of beliefs and knowledge by which people order their perceptions and experiences and in terms of which they act.

(Goodenough, 1971)

Thus culture is not necessarily or only defined by race, language or ethnicity. Nor is culture a static entity which can be factually described or delimited. Culture is contextually dependent. Thus, for example, teachers of a wide range of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds share a culture of pedagogy. Similarly, children who speak many different languages share a culture of childhood.

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

Language is much more than the spoken word and there are many dimensions to language, all of which must be given attention in the teaching of a foreign language:

- The linguistic dimension: the sounds, forms and grammar of the language
- The paralinguistic dimension: the tone, pitch, volume and speed used to articulate the linguistic dimension
- The extralinguistic dimension: the gestures, movements and facial grimaces which accompany and give meaning to the linguistic dimension
- The sociolinguistic dimension: the style of speech used depends on a range of social factors and variables such as the age and gender of the speakers; the relationship between the speakers and the purpose of the interaction.

Most individuals acquire all these aspects of their first language as part of their natural communicative competence.

THE LANGUAGE/CULTURE CONNECTION

The language we actually use to communicate influences our beliefs and therefore our culture and in fact our entire lives.

Slovene, English, Chinese and Arabic words, for example, do not equate directly in meaning with each other, but represent ways of classifying, segmenting and categorising experiences. It is not therefore enough to learn lists of vocabulary but to understand why these phenomena are important to speakers of a particular language.

Bilinguals, who use two or more languages in their everyday life, thus have access to differing visions of the same world. The ability to function in more than one language provides bilinguals with a way of comparing and contrasting one view with another.

For example, the Italian language has many words for different types of pasta and styles of cooking pasta. The Inuit language has many different words for snow. In Urdu the words used to signify relationships depend on whether the maternal or paternal side of the family is being discussed. Scots English has many words for rain not found in Standard English.

Thus our culture structures our experience in a particular way and our language encodes our experience in words. Intercultural experiences provide exposure to the whole culture of another language, not just the words. The difficulty for the language teacher is to know how to substitute for intercultural experiences in the classroom and how to assess the students' intercultural understanding.

WHERE TO BEGIN

In many cases of learning a foreign language, the learner will have no direct access to the target culture, thus the time devoted to cultural comparisons constitutes a critical part of the acquisition process, but how does the teacher do this? Hans Freyer has suggested that perceptions of reality are divided into categories on the basis of how meaning is given external form. Freyer's *Theorie des Objektiven Geistes* suggests there are five universal modes: *Gebilde* (construction), *Gerat* (the tool), *Zeichen* (the symbol), *Sozialform* (organisation) and *Bildung* (education). His theory proposes that the

universal aspect of these five modes facilitates comparison within and across languages and cultures. His five modes are therefore a useful starting point in considering how to teach and assess the intercultural aspect of foreign language learning. These five modes can be translated for the purposes of teaching young children as houses, toys, signs, greetings and the school. Before considering this the teacher must decide how he or she views the child, the school and the subject, as per figure 1:

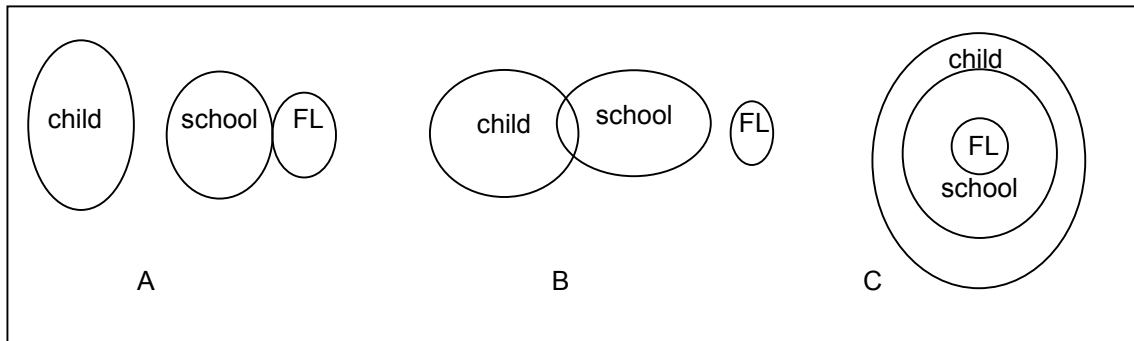


Figure 1. *The relationship between the child, the school and the subject*

In A, the child and school are viewed as separate entities, with the foreign language (FL) as an adjunct of the school. In B, there are seen to be overlapping areas between the child and the school and the foreign language is viewed as apart from both the child and the school. The model preferred by the writer is C, where the child is viewed as the starting point, with school a part of the child's experiences and the foreign language a part of the school and therefore the child.

This view of the child and Freyer's five universal modes can provide a useful model for considering the teaching of intercultural aspects of foreign languages.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

I shall now propose some activities which the class teacher at different stages can use when teaching a foreign language in order to ensure that the intercultural aspect is incorporated. All the suggestions build on Freyer's five universal modes at the level of the child and all see the language learning experience as part of the child's whole experience.

EARLY YEARS (5 - 7 years old)

The culture of childhood is shared across language barriers. It is therefore vital that the teacher of young children draws on the shared elements of the culture of childhood in teaching a foreign language, using children's prior experience and knowledge.

- Introduce the target language for known children's games, e.g. Hide and Seek, Peek-a-Boo.
- Use fairy tales which the child knows in Slovene. Read in the target language, using simple picture versions and sharing the pictures with the children. Ask the child in the target language: "What happens next?" The child can respond in Slovene and the teacher will confirm their knowledge and successful participation in the telling of a story in the target foreign language.
- Translate songs that the children know in their first language into the foreign language. In this way the children do not have to think about the melody and will delight in the familiarity of a song in a new language.
- Action rhymes, e.g. "Head, shoulders, Knees and Toes" will provide the children with concrete referents for new vocabulary.
- Foreign language learning for young children should be incorporated in play areas (e.g. the house corner, the sand area or the painting area) so the new language is introduced in a familiar context.

Teachers must recognise and should use the shared core of experience that children bring to the classroom. While there is much room for condemnation of the cultural artifacts of childhood (Barbie dolls, Gameboys etc.) on the grounds of values and marketing strategies, they are the shared toys (*Gerat*) which children will be prepared to talk about in a foreign language rather than the decontextualised 'other'.

MIDDLE YEARS (7 -11years old)

- Discuss holidays and festivals which are familiar to the children e.g. decorating eggs at Easter. Then clarify and extend the meaning of such symbols (*Zeichen*) in the target language.
- For older children novelty as well as familiarity is a motivator, so the children should be introduced to unfamiliar games, stories, songs and festivals from the target language. These will provoke questions, attention and interest. It is important that both the Slovene and the target language cultures of childhood are used to construct and organise meaning in the classroom.
- Classroom culture itself also helps children to construct meanings in the target foreign language. The routines which surround classroom rituals are very important to help children interpret the foreign language classroom experience. The teacher should use the target language **only**, i.e. no Slovene, to give common instruction, e.g. "sit down". Visual aids should be used to give cues for the children to use the target language for days of the week, numbers and weather. The teacher can orchestrate the situation to narrow the range of potential meanings.

Children learn the culture of the classroom by watching the teacher for clues, e.g. where to gather for different activities. Meaning in the classroom is situationally embedded, residing in the context and the paralinguistic elements of communication such as gesture and space. Children will tolerate linguistic ambiguity in the foreign language if the context is familiar. This allows them to draw on the total context for meaning.

OLDER CHILDREN (12 - 15 years old)

As demonstrated above, good early education practice offers the teacher many methods for good foreign language teaching, but what about teaching older children? How can the foreign language be taught within a constant cultural context of which it is an expression? How can the foreign language teacher help students to discover that a new language system leads to new ways of perceiving, classifying and categorising the world? How can all aspects of communicative competence be presented to students, e.g. the meanings encoded in stress patterns in spoken English?

Students need to hear not only correct linguistic utterances, but appropriate ones, with the accompanying tones, gestures and other interactional behaviour. The use of appropriate style and interactional behaviour make far more acceptable foreign language communication than just linguistic

accuracy. For example, while it is appropriate to greet people in many Mediterranean countries by kissing them on both cheeks, this is not appropriate in most English speaking countries. There is a need then with older children for giving an increased attention to the teaching of language in its cultural context in order to achieve a foreign language proficiency that will be acceptable to native speakers.

The teacher is only one model of the foreign language and the classroom alone is artificial meaning the foreign language input is severely limited. Ways can be found however to enrich the classroom as a foreign language learning environment for older children.

BRIDGING THE CLASSROOM - CONTEXT GAP

- Teachers should create situations which allow learners to hear other varieties of the target language being spoken, by using audio tapes, radio and television programmes and films. These should not merely be viewed as supplementary material but as an important exposure to linguistic variety, e.g. different ages and genders speaking, different accents and dialects of the target language.
- Role playing can be very useful in avoiding the static classroom relationships and setting. Diverse styles of language use should be explored and practised, e.g. looking for a part-time job; using public transport or trying to make friends.
- Language Awareness can be generated by conducting a language walk in the local area, identifying non-Slovene signs, e.g. MCDONALD'S, STOP! and Chinese restaurant signs. Signs in Slovene can be collected and matched with signs in the target language, e.g. ŠOLA and SCHOOL.
- Children should be encouraged to become aware of the generational changes in their own family's language usage by considering questions such as *What language were you educated in? What foreign languages did you learn at school?*
- Children should be encouraged to know the history of and have a pride in their own language in order that they can better have an intercultural understanding of other languages. The common roots of Slavic languages should be discussed in the classroom. Origins of words in Slovene which have come from other languages should be explored.

USING THE MEDIA TO DEVELOP INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Generally what children **want** to learn about gives a good clue as to how intercultural understanding may be developed. The media provides a range of powerful tools for foreign language learning and intercultural understanding.

- Use teen television programmes in the target language. Turn off the sound and ask students what is happening and how they know this? The students will automatically look for paralinguistic and extralinguistic clues. The sound can then be turned back on and the students can check if their hypotheses were correct.
- Students should be asked to list their favourite music groups and singers and asked what language they sing in? Groups of students should be asked to translate a pop song from the target language into Slovene. They will encounter difficulties and should be asked to try to explain why translation does not always work. What are the themes that can not be directly translated?
- Students should compare the layout of youth magazines across language cultures. They should be asked how they know what something is about in a foreign language magazine without knowing all the words. Students should be asked to identify special youth language in Slovene and the target language.
- Newspapers, adverts, traditional stories and jokes all provide rich sources of intercultural understanding.

At all times the children should be encouraged by the teacher to believe in their own intercultural awareness, to predict and hypothesise based on what they know through experience about the international cultures of childhood and adolescence.

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