

# THE INVOLVEMENT OF POLISH TEACHERS OF ENGLISH IN TEACHING TARGET LANGUAGE CULTURE

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*... learning a foreign language always entails  
learning a second culture to some degree, even if  
you never actually set foot in the foreign country  
where the language is spoken.*

Brown (1989: 65)

**Abstract.** The present paper discusses the current perception of the concept of culture with relation to FL students' needs. It explores the extent to which Polish teachers of English are aware of the significance of teaching target culture and reports on its actual implementation in the language classroom. Comments on the present situation and suggestions for improving it are provided.

**Key words:** culture, communication, language learning, teaching

## Introduction

The present paper discusses the current perception of the concept of culture with relation to FL students' needs. It explores the extent to which Polish teachers of English are aware of the significance of teaching target culture and reports on its actual implementation in the language classroom. Comments on the present situation and suggestions for improving it are provided. Many students of English admit that despite their linguistic proficiency they experience communication problems, especially when they first visit an English-speaking country<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, the aware-

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<sup>1</sup> The resulting distress is defined in the literature as „language shock”.

ness of their communicative deficiency develops feelings of frustration and helplessness, which is sometimes equated with schizophrenia due to the disorientation caused by a lack of knowing how to behave in an unfamiliar linguistic and cultural setting. The shock must logically be attributed to their inadequate knowledge and understanding of the target culture. It follows that familiarity with a number of intercultural differences is absolutely essential and indispensable for communicative efficiency, since

... every person is part of a culture. And everyone uses a language to express that culture, to operate within tradition, and to categorise the universe. So if you're planning to carry on some sort of communication with people who speak or write a given language, you need to understand the culture out of which the language emerges (Dörnyei, 2001: 14).

It is clear that communication skills develop best in a natural linguistic environment. However, we assume that interactive skills for effective communication can also be developed in the language classroom on condition that sufficient time and attention is devoted to practising language that is related to ordinary events and everyday life of the people who communicate naturally in the target language countries. Yet, even cursory classroom observation or a perfunctory glimpse into a number of syllabuses show that this condition is not abided by. Thus in order to improve the situation it should be mandatory to furnish language students with greater knowledge of the target culture than that which they get from their coursebooks and language lessons. For example, a proper understanding of essential differences between English or American and Polish social and political systems, or even of the peculiarities of the British sense of humour, will greatly improve the efficiency of communicative acts between communicators. Consequently, it is hypothesized that the discussed culture gap results from the educational inadequacy that consists in belittling or even ignoring the significance of the cultural aspects and components of foreign language teaching as exercised in the regular language classroom.

### **The significance of culture for successful communication**

For the purpose of the present paper it does not seem necessary to discuss the concept of culture in greater detail. As a matter of fact, culture is difficult to define – over 200 definitions have been proposed in the literature (cf., Kroeber and Kluckholm, in Lustig, 2010). Nonetheless, it seems worthwhile to explain the very notion in so far as is relevant to the concept of communicative competence. For example, the view of culture as expressed quite some time ago by Hofstede (1991) explicitly indicates the causes of the problems that students come across while communicating in a foreign linguistic environment. This view also helps teachers to estimate the importance and place of teaching culture to students along with developing their

language skills. According to Hofstede (1991: 55), culture embraces visible and invisible parts. Its visible part includes heroes, rituals and symbols. Heroes are well known, respected, or loved individuals usually set as examples worth following. Rituals are patterns of behaviour that are shared and practised by members of a culture; they relate to the ways of greeting, celebrating events, etc. Symbols are manifestly visible in words and gestures, customs, works of art, religious objects, etc. They all contain exact meanings that are clear only to members of the same cultural group or community. Moreover, it is also claimed that culture is a “historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz, 1973: 89). The above claims indicate that members of a given culture are encapsulated within the boundaries of both their native cultural patterns and language. It also means that it is difficult for foreign language users to break through the cultural boundaries so as to understand and adopt those that are valid in another language in order to successfully communicate in it. Even though the visible manifestations of culture are easily perceptible, they are, nevertheless, not easily and accurately interpreted. It is exactly this fact that leads to miscommunication between members of different cultures since they are likely to interpret what they see in terms of their own cultures. As for the invisible part of culture, it relates to the values that people attribute to its various manifestations. It is indeed their very invisibility that makes them still more difficult to comprehend than the visible ones. From the above considerations it follows that a reasonable plea for bridging the cultural gap is essential.

Further arguments in favour of teaching culture (which should be regarded a necessity) derive from other claims. For example, Hofstede (1984) strengthened his stance on culture proposing that patterns of culture develop due to social interactions and thus they shape the way individuals perceive reality around them. It follows that “Culture is defined as a pattern of learned, group-related perception – including both verbal and nonverbal language attitudes, values, belief system, disbelief systems, and behaviour” (Singer, 1987: 34). Consequently, to develop intercultural communication skills teachers should both appreciate the significance of teaching culture and be able to show students what impact culture can exert on communication; they should also turn to researchers with a plea to explore the effects of intercultural differences (and similarities) on communication. Furthermore, teachers (and students likewise) need to become convinced that learning a new culture means adopting a new identity: this involves emotions. Acting on one’s own cultural ground provides a sense of belonging and security. Communicating in another language often deprives the user of these emotions and may produce negative ones: a foreign language eventually becomes a source of psychological discomfort or anxiety.

With regard to the above considerations teaching culture must also be perceived in terms of being a process that is both dynamic and heterogeneous. From this perspective such an understanding of culture should sound encouraging to teachers. It indicates that developing and adopting a new cultural identity is feasible and thus can inspire them to consider their intentions and potential efforts in this area as really worthwhile. Consequently, it seems that this conjecture deserves close scrutiny so as to define the extent to which teachers actually implement teaching culture in their FL teaching practice.

It is clear that successful communication is dependent on a large number of factors, of which cultural differences are clearly the most serious. Among those that also affect the quality of communication is the communicator's level of L2 proficiency and, above all, his/her ethnocentrism: what is alien is often non-acceptable and hampers integrality. Moreover, it can also be recognized that language users are aware they belong to a particular culture and develop language ego (Guiora and Acton, 1979), which amounts to a cultural barrier that individuals may not be aware of. Personality factors, however, are not discussed here as they are beyond the scope of this paper

## Research

This paper was stimulated by the assumption that the discussed culture gap may significantly result from educational inadequacy; furthermore, this inadequacy could be tentatively attributed to the exclusion of culture from poor syllabuses or from belittling or even ignoring its significance in actual language teaching as it is commonly exercised in regular FL classes. Consequently, in order to provide some evidence for this contention adequate research has been taken up in the belief that suitable action could be undertaken to prevent unwelcome outcomes in further work with students and include a significant cultural component in syllabuses.

It needs to be mentioned that the subsequent research was based on the assumptions that the teachers who took part in it (a random sample) would admit that they did have some knowledge of the target culture, that they did take advantage of it in teaching English, and also that their answers would honestly reveal a number of reasons for the current situation in the investigated area.

The research aimed to find out whether and/or to what extent Polish teachers of English

- are aware of the value of teaching target culture,
- introduce culture in their actual teaching practice,
- identify problems that impede introducing elements of culture in language teaching.

## Subjects and research instrument

Sixty three practising teachers participated in the research. They voluntarily agreed to submit their questionnaires for analysis. The majority of them were young (between 23 and 30) and several were middle aged (over 30 up to 45). All of them were extramural postgraduates enrolled in the MA program offered by the Department of English in the University of Social Sciences in Warsaw. All the subjects held a BA degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language and were continuing their education to obtain MA degree in the same field.

The research instrument was a questionnaire designed especially for the present paper. Its main purpose was to collect data on the actual involvement of the teachers in developing students' cultural sensitivity and interactive competence.

The questionnaire was anonymous and consisted of the following two four-scale closed questions and one open question:

1. Do you believe teaching culture is important in the language classroom?
2. How often do you teach target culture in your language classes?
3. What prevents you from teaching culture?

**Results and comments** (the figures below indicate the numbers of students' answers):

1. very	moderate	little	not at all
51	12	0	0
2. always	often	rarely	never
9	16	38	0

3. typical explanations: too little time in the classroom, focus on teaching grammar and lexis, labour consumption, little cultural content in coursebooks, unavailability of adequate educational materials, students are not interested, no access to modern teaching devices at school (computers, projectors, interactive whiteboard, etc.)

The picture that emerges from the subjects' answers is evidently grim, dissatisfactory and far from optimistic. It turns out that teachers, on the whole, are quite well aware of the great value that teaching culture has in language teaching; yet, most of them do not implement their convictions in the classroom. The striking discrepancy between the answers to questions 1 and 2 demonstrates that in spite of their confidence in the obvious purposefulness of teaching target culture, they are not enthusiastic about the idea but are quite resistant to it. This is surprising in view of the expectations that should be cherished based on their prior professional education and experience due to which they must be very well aware of the actual inseparability of language and culture, and which is currently emphasized in preparing students for the teaching profession. The explanations they provided to the third question are only apparent excuses for their indolence in adhering to the necessity of teaching culture. This, however, does not justify their overall lack of commitment and attests

to their serious negligence with regard to language teaching principles, which they must have studied as students. If this situation relates to other educational institutions in the country, it must be considered alarming.

Consequently, the query that calls for a proper response to the above situation seems to include the following concerns relevant to teaching target culture:

- why teachers do not fully perceive the colossal value that culture knowledge has for students' communicative competence,
- what impact teaching culture exerts on the development of language skills,
- how essential is its role in communication, and that
- understanding target culture is indispensable for making communication effective.

It should be hoped that the surveyed group of students now studying for their MA degree will definitely improve their competence and become real professional teachers of English as a foreign language.

## Conclusions

Teaching target culture and learning its language requires that both teachers and students bear in mind these are inseparable. It follows that both processes should be combined, especially in that FL students need to realize that concepts across languages that are similar are often not equivalent and can be deceptive. Hence, it would be naive to assume that target culture is acquired concomitantly and mechanically with learning a foreign language. If it is accepted that learning culture consists in „a way of perceiving, interpreting, feeling, being in the world ... and relating to where one is and who one meets” (Robinson-Stuart and Nocon 1996, in Brown 2007: 194), then students need to undergo a process of enculturation through which they develop a new cultural identity. Since it is a complex, longish, and arduous enterprise it definitely demands the teacher's commitment and devotion to face the pedagogical challenge. The challenge is serious, especially in a highly heterogeneous classroom with some students who are not motivated and are only learning the foreign language out of obligation, or even defy it<sup>2</sup>.

To arouse students' interest in the target culture various suggestions can be found in the literature. For example, Tomalin and Stempleski (2001) propose that culture be taught within the task-oriented approach. Indeed, while performing tasks students notice cultural peculiarities on their own. This is a source of satisfaction that is rightly considered an achievement they are proud of. In order to attain expected results Tomalin and Templeski recommend doing tasks in consecutive steps

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<sup>2</sup> Some practical and helpful advice on how to deal with resistant students can be found in Brown (2007: 213).

which combine language learning and culture learning. Even if teachers do not entirely appreciate the role of target culture in real life and intercultural communication, they should be made aware that educational authorities and official bodies do insist on teaching culture in language teaching. Teachers are naturally required to possess cultural knowledge related to the target language. This is obvious in the programmes of studies of all institutions that educate prospective foreign language teachers. While they are students they obligatorily receive vast information on literature, history, language change, etc. Later, when they become teachers, they are supposed to use this knowledge in language teaching and make every effort to enculturate their students.

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