

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CULTURAL ELEMENT IN TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: *The present study aims at challenging the theory of “culturally responsive teaching” (Gay, 2002), laying stress on the importance of the cultural iconicity of the language and civilisation taught. The paper comes as a result of the authors’ extensive experience in teaching Romanian as a foreign language to expats, and draws on the conclusions of not only first-hand classroom work, manuals and syllabus design, but also on the data collected from a number of questionnaires filled in by the participants in the summer language school organised by The Romanian Cultural Institute annually, as well as from the feedback provided by these students at long distance.*

Key words: *teaching, testing, foreign languages, importance, methodology, cultural element.*

1. Introduction

Teaching languages across cultures has always been a challenge, let alone assessing students with different cultural backgrounds, especially when it comes to teaching/testing minor languages which do not benefit from international recognition.

The present paper is focused on the cultural element as a valid tool in the language teaching and testing process, with focus on teaching Romanian as a foreign language, and comes as a result of the experience the authors have gathered in teaching Romanian as a foreign language to expats for more than six, respectively eight years. The cultural icons of the language and civilisation taught, and not those of the students' cultural backgrounds, can represent an important means of intercultural language assessment.

The outcomes of the study, as a result of the research undertaken by the authors when analysing theories belonging to, for example, Karen Risager, in her 2005 *Linguaculture as a key concept in language and culture teaching*, supported the assumption they started from, as it seems that minor languages which are not widely spoken for either commercial, financial, political purposes, or even touristic ones, have become appealing to foreigners out of exactly cultural reasons. Consequently, the indigenous cultural icons – which can operate at different levels as it will be indicated and defined throughout the

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paper – become the main attraction of the teaching/testing process and prove their utility as instruments in language teaching.

The conclusions of the present study can represent premises for future papers, as the whole analysis focused on teaching in this research can be further extended and extensively analysed at the testing level of the teaching process.

2. Framework

Basically, CRT or Culturally Responsive Teaching is defined as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. It is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly.” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). In her study, Gay focuses on four basic aspects which make the profile of CRT and which are considered, at the same time, fundamental in building cross-cultural teaching bridges: “developing a knowledge base about cultural diversity, including ethnic and cultural diversity content in the curriculum, demonstrating caring and building learning communities, communicating with ethnically diverse students, and responding to ethnic diversity in the delivery of instruction.” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). The first item refers to the importance of acknowledging cultural diversity in teaching a foreign language to expats and of creating a data base to cater for the needs of dealing with this diversity on the way; the second one is related to the methodology of this particular area of teaching for which the curriculum itself, i.e. the official documents that regulate the behaviour of both the teacher and the students, need to make an official record of this cultural diverse background that is encountered in the particular teaching process that is under analysis here; the third one brings about the ethic and emotional components of the ethnic phenomenon by “demonstrating care” alongside the professional and socialising aspect when referring to “building learning communities”; while the fourth one enforces the supremacy of the communicative aspect itself, seen as a two-way process, the tutors meeting the specific demands of the students’ diverse ethnic backgrounds, while, at the same time, catering for different and specific needs in the delivery of the teaching process, which thus turns into a completely different type of an approach than the one for which the audience is composed of relatively similar students with relatively homogeneous cultural backgrounds.

Thus, as obviously pointed out by Gay, the outcomings of the concept dwell on the positives of teaching a foreign language by including familiar cultural icons belonging to the source background, i.e. accessing the familiar iconicity of the students, rendering for them an emotional support that can help them anchoring into known cultural shores: “As a result, the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters” (Gay, 2002, p. 106).

All in all, CRT is valuable for the contribution it brought about regarding raising awareness relative to cultural diversity and its importance in the teaching process of foreign languages to expats. Its limitations still, are to be observed, according to our point of view, when it comes to addressing the type of cultural items that need to be taken into account when practically starting to work with them, as they refer to the familiar cultural heritage of the students and their home environments and not to the ones of the language being taught to them, some of the times even in the cultural environment of the country

whose language is being taught. The latter, in our view, would contribute more to the progress a student can make in a foreign language than the former, and even if cultural items, elements and icons belonging to the students' backgrounds may ease and smoothen the teaching process, the ones belonging to the new language under teaching acts as a necessary catalytic tool in the long run for any foreigner approaching a foreign language, on foreign soil. And this will be our most demonstrated idea, in the following sections of the paper.

3. Theoretical Background

The relationship between a society and its culture has long been discussed and minutely analysed from different points of view and according to different approaches and criteria. It has been considered that a society, with its various manifestations, is either the supra-defining order which determines the nature and the characteristics of the culture that starts developing on its territory, or the sub-absorbing element which starts displaying the traits of a powerful culture that captured and subdued it. But there is also a third possibility, that of drawing the arrow between the elements of this equation in a bi-directional way, on a par: a society is as much its culture as its culture bares the particular features of the society which generated it or adopted it. It establishes, in this way, an "incarnation"-type of relation, using a term coined by Eliot (1973), which proves that two of the elements defining the characteristics of a nation (the other being its religion) influence each other in equal amounts. Thus, out of the many aspects which configure the concept of culture, each and every time anybody wants to pinpoint the most visible items that can make a culture *that* culture they have to take into account elements from language, arts, politics, literature, sports, philosophy, economy, physical setting, history, music, habits, religion unfolding on that territory in order to draw the profile of that nation and its society in its characteristic terms. And it is only afterwards, with the help of time and by means of perspective that the most iconic representations of all these domains come to pass the test of survival and remain as defintory for a particular culture. In this way, particular appealing, attractive, important and famous marks ensure international visibility for a certain nation and sometimes even end up defining it by reducing it, in a nutshell, to them.

According to Risager, "No language is culturally neutral. All natural languages (i.e. their users) constantly *produce* and *reproduce* culture (i.e. meaning)" (our emphasis) (2005, p. 189), proving once again that Eliot's theory of "incarnation", when it comes to equating society and culture, prevails over any other, after such a long time. And Risager continues: "What forms of culture are associated with the Russian language? What forms of culture are associated with the English language?" (Risager, 2005, p. 190), in an attempt to make the next step and focus on particular cultures, trying to identify those elements that may define them. And it is as if, anachronically speaking, Benedict Anderson answers her from the past, sharing through a flashback the same opinion as hers, when he says: "Yes, the fact that I was born a French is a hazard; but after all, France is eternal" (our translation) (2000, p. 15). Ironically enough, as it was proven, some nations try so hard to identify themselves as social individualities that the very process of identification makes the very characteristic that establishes their profile. According to Chiriță (1998), this would be the exact case of the Romanians whom about

“some may say, without looking for the paradox, that a trait of their national specificity is their perseverance in the endeavour of deciphering this specific” (our translation).

In more general terms, however, Sorin Antohi prompts the question: “How can we be what we are?”, of course referring to we as to a nation, establishing the bigger coordinates according to which the approach in corner stoning a nation can be laid: “... the great identity storm is aroused only when the pressure of the initial interrogation hasn’t dissipated yet on the surface of the human type, and still focuses on one of its very representations: the tribe, the ethnic group, the nation, or the individual whose identity is built beforehand within these horizons, for that matter.” (our translation) (Antohi, 1999, p. 237).

Against this particular background, Risager is to be considered again trying to provide a cultural point of view over language: “There are many ways of theorizing the relationship between the social and the cultural. [...] I just want to stress that all societal life may be considered as both social and cultural. The analysis of social life typically deals *with relational, temporal and spatial aspects of activities, institutions and structures*, whereas the analysis of cultural life typically deals with the *production and reproduction of meaning and representations of various realities*. The two sides cannot be separated from each other. All social life carries meaning, and all exchanges and negotiations of meaning are embedded in more or less shifting social structures and relations of power.” (our emphasis) (Risager, 2005, p. 188). And for all italicised concepts from the quote, the language teacher can find an appropriate icon, rooted in her culture, to serve as linker between as many different students as cultures they happen to come from and are present in her class in order for them to be infused with the target language they eagerly want to acquire. And what better approach to have towards this, if not to disperse information on two levels at the same time: linguistic and cultural, which, according to the above theoretical display of definitions, are not quite so apart.

5. The Cultural Approach to Teaching

Besides the already well-known and widely supported and implemented communicative method of teaching languages, which belongs to the modern times in the history of language teaching, after the obsolete grammar-translation approach, also known as the period of “Garden of Eden” (West, 1992), or the structuralist approach, named by researchers “Vale of Tears” (West, 1992), the “Promised Land” (West, 1992) of the communicative era focused very much on the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and reading) which have come to represent nowadays the main interest and focus of any teacher / student / assessor when it comes to teaching / learning / evaluating the quality of the teaching process in a foreign subject. As stated by Purcaru and Nechifor (2015), this generated a lot of updating of methodologies, manuals, teaching instruments, etc., and even though it still enjoys supremacy and provides extremely good results in point of being able to place the candidates to learning a new foreign language in a real life context in order for them to better understand from the very beginning the real use of a certain, let’s say, grammatical structure newly taught to them, next to the a possible function of the language which can be activated alongside, it inevitably leads to asking further questions: is there a follow-up to this methods? Can there be something even better than this? Or, at least, can this approach be enhanced in such a manner that it can provide even more for the students dealing with learning a new language? A straight

answer coming from the authors of the present paper, as a result of having actually worked with it, is, obviously enough, the cultural approach. Having benefitted from a particular context of implementing it, that of a summer school for expats eager to learn the Romanian language as a foreign language, this method proved its positives, as they could be measured in the opinions gathered by the organiser of the even at the end of each and every edition for six years, under the form of feedback, as well as under the form of practically measuring the degree of interest this idea raised in the minds and hearts of the candidates after leaving Brasov, the Romanian location where the summer school has been held in the past years, as it will be described in the following chapter.

5.1. Students' Motivation

But in order for the authors to have been motivated to deal with such cultural elements in the first place, as working material introduced in the manuals used, here is the starting point which acted as the incentive for the entire endeavour. Collected by one of the authors of this paper, head of the programme which offers Romanian classes with the Romanian Cultural Institute and who coordinates the entire summer school programme, from enrolment to teaching and collecting feedback, from the initial personal statements that the candidates are asked to fill in at the beginning of enlisting themselves for the Romanian classes, the following reasons for coming to Romania to learn the language were dominant, as the numbers in the second column of the table in Figure 1 indicate:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Out of personal and professional reasons | 60 |
| I want to study in Romania (undergraduate and postgraduate levels) | 21 |
| To improve the language level | 39 |
| Because I attended the intermediate course and I like it | 2 |
| To develop my business and, also, for pleasure | 1 |
| I want to be granted citizenship and to permanently live in Romania | 5 |
| Because I haven't spoken Romanian for long and this would represent an advantage in my CV | 1 |
| To be able to get hired and integrate myself in the community | 1 |
| To successfully accomplish my mission as a diplomat in Bucharest | 1 |
| To live and work better in Romania, professionally and socially | 101 |
| In order to be able to talk with Romanian people and therefore, to be able to get easier integrated within the society and within the professional environment | 81 |
| To better communicate with my colleagues in the company, with my friends and family | 19 |
| Out of pleasure | 11 |
| To be able to communicate as much as possible with Romanian people in their own language in order to experience more of the Romanian culture (to understanding the Romanian culture better, as, for what I think, language is indispensable) | 48 |
| I like Romania and I'm respecting it. This respect I want to show by learning it. | 2 |

Fig. 1. *Reasons for learning Romanian by expats*

As it may be seen from the table, the answers vary in point of motivation, but the ones which drew our attention were the ones related to the desire so many candidates have to socially immerse themselves in the Romanian community. And how else can one do this, professionally, but more importantly personally, how else can one be even granted

citizenship, how else can one respect a new language and, most of all, how else can one experience more of the Romanian culture, understand the Romanian culture better, and find out more about the philosophy, the musicology and the Romanian language and literature, if not by getting as much as possible acquainted with the cultural element of the nation whose language they are so eager to learn, if not by being exposed as widely as possible to the cultural element which defines the nation whose language they want so much to respect?

Consequently, the iconicity of culture was very much taken into account when, on the one hand, manuals were designed for this experiment, and, on the other hand exposed, discussed and explained in class, when communication time provided the teachers with the appropriate context to do so.

5.2. Levels and Methods

Defining the cultural element, after acknowledging the importance of the internal, indigenous or domestic one, i.e. the one belonging to the target language, to the detriment of the cultural iconicity of the elements belonging to the source language, might be one of the most difficult tasks. Considering all the compartments of a language: phonetic and phonological, lexical, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic, as well as the levels of discourse and oral and written communication, but also including the patterns of social and professional behaviour, historical and geographical landmarks and icons, national sports, art products and famous personalities, to enlist only a few examples, characteristics that define a certain culture can be traced within the tendency of associating them to the specifics of that particular background whose language is under the process of being taught.

That is why, from sample of sounds or diacritical marks which would make the parameters of a specific language to the way in which people respond to a simple “Hi”, in point of preferred and dispreferred answers in an example of adjacency pairs, the indigenous cultural element can be introduced in and must infuse the textbooks used to teach the new language in order to create a complex cultural environment for the students who, in this way, will start living the language, not only leaning it.

A side discussion is worth opening, regarding the two possible learning contexts under which the teaching of the target language can take place. Thus, if reference can be made to a summer school, as is the case of analysis in the present paper, which offers, besides the language classes as such, a variety of extra-curricular activities centred on discovering the cultural dimension of the place where the language is taught, the approach may stand even better chances of consolidation, as the examples which the manuals may include can also be checked by the candidate live and then discussed upon, for fixation, back in class.

On the other hand, if the classes take place against the minimalist background of the classroom or even the atmosphere offered by the private tutorials, then the cultural element cannot be immediately identified or experienced, especially if the teaching meetings are organized in other locations than the mother country of the language taught. In this case, the desire of getting into direct contact with the examples provided, from a simple meeting with a native speaker of the foreign language, if the teacher is a non-native speaker herself, to check pronunciation, to the feeling of experiencing a traditional dance or eating a particular type of food in the real context of the culture exposed can become external stimulating factors, associated to the concept of external motivation,

which can trigger good results in candidates, as soon as they understand the necessary and logical connection between the simplistic and, sometimes, incorrectly perceived as monotonous, process of learning a language and understanding the culture exposing it.

The teaching process must be accompanied all the time by explanations guided towards the idea of cultural icons and the manuals can anytime make use of pictures displaying the elements under discussion. Thus, a simple unit on pronouns, introducing personal pronouns and then the formal address by means of the polite pronoun will no longer be a class focused on grammar exclusively, but one in which the particular contexts in which nowadays the polite pronoun is used can make the link between pragmatic cultural icons, synchrony and diachrony in language use, as well about a whole story regarding correct/incorrect usage of the forms *dumneavoastră* vs. *dumneata*, *mata*, *matale*, *mătăluță*, extended to explanations regarding other forms of polite address like: *doamnă*, *domnișoară*, *domn*, vs. *duduie*, *don'șoară*, etc. For example, Fig. 2 portrays images of the places named in the exercise, an exercise which focuses, at the same time, on pronouns and the verb „a fi (to be)”, asking the students to fill in with the appropriate forms:

a) Noi *suntem* în România. Voi *sunteți* la București. // Unde? Dar voi unde? // la / în București. Noi la / în Brașov.



Fig. 2. *The map of Romania, the cities of București and Brașov*

b) - Bună ziua! Mă numesc Ileana Vasilescu! profesoară de limba română pentru străini. De unde sunteți dumneavoastră?

c) - Ce mai faci (tu)? // - Ce mai faceți (dumneavoastră)? forma politicoasă // - Excelent, mulțumesc! Foarte bine, mulțumesc! // - Dar dumneavoastră? / Și tu? // - Groaznic! Așa și așa! Nu prea bine! (Borca, 2013, A1).

The same type of iconicity, regarding famous places or locations, can be widely used at superior levels, in different variations of drills, as the more advanced the students get, the more creative the manual and the teacher can be:

Răspundeți la următoarele întrebări (Answer the following questions):

Cine stă *departe de* centru? Cine stă aproape de Parcul Cișmigiu? Stai *aproape de* centru sau *departe*? Parcul Cișmigiu este *aproape de* Piața Universității? Muzeul Satului este *aproape de* Parcul Herăstrău? Aeroportul „Henri Coandă” este *aproape de* București? Biserica Neagră este *departe de* Piața Sfatului? Strada Sforii este *aproape de* Biserica Neagră? Restaurantul Old Center Bistro este *aproape de* centru? (Borca, 2013, A2).

Here again, images of all the locations mentioned in the text can be inserted

Previously mentioned locations can afterwards be used in other exercises for better fixation, the focus this time being on something else, such as a language function. For example, making reservations at a restaurant over the phone:

- Bună dimineața! Restaurantul „Caru'cu bere”. // - Bună dimineața! Aș dori o masă pentru trei persoane. // - Pentru când și la ce oră? // - Pentru sâmbătă seara, la șapte. // - Pe ce nume? // - Alexandru Ionescu. // - Perfect. Vă așteptăm! (Borca, 2013, A2).

The exercise can also continue with a beautiful concatenation of information regarding, this time, specific culinary treats, as the context of a restaurant can invite to this. Thus, a dialogue can be imagined between the persons who booked a table for the evening, see above, and the waiter, on the topic of Romanian dishes:

Marc: Este foarte frumos aici. // Alexandru: Da, așa este! „Caru’ cu Bere” este una dintre cele mai vechi berării din Bucureşti. (*and in this way, new information is built on old information, adding to the profile of certain elements – our comment*) // Chelnerul: Bine ați venit la noi! Aici este masa dumneavoastră. Luați loc. Pofțiți meniurile! // David: Cum este mâncarea aici? Au și mâncăruri românești? // Alexandru: Este foarte bună și au multe feluri de preparate românești. De exemplu: sarmale în foi de varză, cu mămăligă și ardei iute sau mămăligă cu brânză și smântână. Iar la desert au niște papanași foarte gustoși. // Marc: Eu vreau sarmale și papanași. David, tu ce dorești? // David: Eu doresc un păstrăv românesc la grătar și clătite cu dulceață de vișine. Și tu Alexandru? // Alexandru: Eu vreau o salată de vinete și o felie de tort cu mere. // David: Perfect! Putem comanda! (Borca, 2013, A2)

Another type of insertion of elements related to the culture of the language taught can play on the national level, making the core content of a communication activity in which specific Romanian celebrations can be selected in order to be presented to the students, accompanied by specific vocabulary defining them and inviting students to share any information that they might already know about them and, at the same time, to make any comparisons to possible similar celebrations belonging to their culture:

În ce lună și în ce dată sunt următoarele sărbători și ce știți despre ele (what date take place the following celebrations and what do you know about them?) (Borca, 2013, B1):

1. Mărțișorul, 2. Paștele, 3. Dragobetele, 4. Ziua Națională a României, 5. Sânzienele.



Fig. 3. National celebrations

A day in the life of a normal Romanian clerk will anytime elicit the interest of a foreigner trying to adjust to the mentalities and customs of a new country that he/she might be a part of for some time at a certain moment. And here is how, a simple grammatical drill focusing on a Romanian past tense (*perfect-compus*) can be placed against the background of a daily routine describing exactly this type of an activity:

Ce activități ai avut ieri (What activities did you do yesterday)?

Am plecat la birou la ora 9.00. Până la birou am făcut o jumătate de oră. În acest timp am ascultat muzică și știri. La birou am lucrat mult. Am completat niște formulare, am semnat multe acte și am căutat diverse informații. La ora 13.00 am luat prânzul împreună cu colegii. După masă am avut o întâlnire. Am terminat munca la ora 17.00. După muncă am ieșit cu prietenii la o bere. Am ajuns acasă la ora 23.00. (Borca, 2013, B2).

Curiosities, at any linguistic compartment, can trigger motivating reactions from the students. Here is an example of this type of information which can be introduced at the

end of certain units which dealt with the particular aspect under discussion, under the form of a *did you know?* entry:

În limba română există aproximativ 66.000 de substantive, dintre care: 24.677 terminate în consoană; 41.322 terminate în vocală: 22.116 în -e, dintre care 9.866 în -ie și 312 în -ee; 15.018 în -ă; 764 în -a, dintre care: 202 în -ea; 2.014 în -u, dintre care: 618 în -iu; 1.065 în -i; 355 în -o. (Căpățină, 2007; Borca, 2013, A1).

What can represent another difficulty in point of operating with the cultural element and which will definitely make the interest of a separate paper, as it generates an entire mechanism of analysis, is the way in which the final step of the teaching process, i.e. the assessment step, can make use of the cultural element. Can the cultural element be the subject of testing itself or can it merely be a support in the background of a test which would only make the students recognize information related to it, but not reproduce anything about it? A comprehensive example for the second situation is the exercise below, which consists of bringing together almost all the examples above, under the form of a fill in drill, focused on the grammatical item of *perfect-compus*, but encompassing various references to diverse cultural elements introduced to the students throughout the teaching process:

Completați spațiile libere cu verbele la perfectul compus:

În weekend (a fi) la Sinaia. (a pleca) cu trenul. Acolo (a sta) la o pensiune foarte plăcută, aproape de Castelul Peleş. Sâmbătă (a vizita) Castelul Peleş și Castelul Peleşor. La Peleş (a sta) regele Carol I și regina Elisabeta, iar la Peleşor – regele Ferdinand și regina Maria. (a lua) prânzul la un restaurant unde (a mânca) o supă de pui, sarmale cu mămăligă și papanashi cu dulceață. După masă (a vizita) mănăstirea Sinaia și casa memorială George Enescu. Seara (a lua) cina la pensiune. (a mânca) o salată și (a bea) un pahar de vin românesc. Duminică dimineață (a pleca) spre București. (a avea) un weekend / un sfârșit de săptămână foarte plăcut. (Borca, 2013, B1)

5.3. Outcomes in the short, medium and long Run

Names like Enric Centeno, Vicente Pascual, William Campos da Cruz, Shawn Williams, Erica van der Sijpt, and Alzir Oliveira are just a few names that certify that the endeavour of even considering the importance of the cultural element of the language taught when teaching a foreign language to expats is worth researching into. What the whole exposure to it meant to them can be measured in the products they generated after their contact with the Romanian language and culture classes: from collections of photographs of the places visited in Romania, collated under the form of a book and released in Spain (Enric), to scripts of films based on Romanian realities (Andrei's Kite) and personalities (Lucian Nemescu) soon to be released (Vicente, winner of two scholarships offered by RCI: one to continue his study of the Romanian language and the other to support his projects), Ph. D. dissertations on the history of some typical Romanian music (Shawn), anthropological post-doctoral studies on women and their giving birth habits (Erica) and Romanian classes founded at universities in their country of origin (Alzir), all these living examples tell the story of the impact in the short, medium and long run that the indigenous cultural element can have over the candidates to learning a new language, if exposed to it through the language classes.

6. Conclusions

And just in order for the premises to meet the conclusions and for the paper to come full circle, here is, once again, the voice of Risager dwelling on the importance of considering the cultural element of the target language: "... it is necessary to construct foreign language studies that are characterized by an integrative view of both language, text, discourse and (the rest of) culture and society. For instance, the target language should be seen as a cultural phenomenon, and simultaneously literature and other texts in the target language should be seen as linguistic phenomena. Although texts are usually studied as cultural products carrying some kind of global content or meaning (representing cultural reality in some way or other), they are always also instances of linguistic practice in a specific language" (2005, p. 195).

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