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CULTURE – THE FIFTH LANGUAGE SKILL

The increasing mobility of people, goods, and information has driven a powerful trend toward cultural uniformity and the extinction of local languages. Globalized economics and media are changing the face of culture around the globe, reducing the number of languages that human speak. As the world economy becomes more integrated, a common tongue has become more important than ever to promote commerce.

Foreign language learning is comprised of several components, including grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, as well as a change in attitudes towards one's own or another culture. For scholars and laymen alike, cultural competence, i.e., the knowledge of the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of another country, is indisputably an integral part of foreign language learning, and many teachers have seen it as their goal to incorporate the teaching of culture into the foreign language curriculum. At any rate, foreign language learning is foreign culture learning, and, in one form or another, culture has, even implicitly, been taught in the foreign language classroom– if for different reasons.

Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them. We cannot go about teaching a foreign language without at least offering some insights into its speakers' culture. By the same token, we cannot go about fostering «communicative competence» without taking into account the different views and perspectives of people in different cultures which may enhance or even inhibit communication. Moreover, we should be cognizant of the fact that if we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates; we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning...

From all the above, it is evident that, much as the element of culture has gained momentum in foreign language learning, most educators have seen it as yet another skill at the disposal of those who aspire to become conversant with the history and life of the target community rather than as an integral part of communicative competence and intercultural awareness at which every «educated individual» should aim.

Clearly, everyday language is «tinged» with cultural bits and pieces—a fact most people seem to ignore. By the very act of talking, we assume social and cultural roles, which are so deeply entrenched in our thought processes as to go unnoticed. Interestingly, culture defines not only what its members should think or learn but also what they should ignore or treat as irrelevant. That language has a setting, in that the people who speak it belong to a race or races and is incumbents of particular cultural roles, is bla-

tantly obvious. Language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives. In a sense, it is 'a key to the cultural past of a society, a guide to social reality'.

Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted... Culture is the foundation of communication.

It could be argued that culture never remains static, but is constantly changing.

Knowing a second or foreign language should open windows on the target culture as well as on the world at large. On a practical note, culture teaching should allow learners to increase their knowledge of the target culture in terms of people's way of life, values, attitudes, and beliefs, and how these manifest themselves or are couched in linguistic categories and forms. More specifically, the teaching of culture should make learners aware of speech acts, connotations, etiquette, that is, appropriate or inappropriate behavior, as well as provide them with the opportunity to act out being a member of the target culture. Equipped with the knowledge that such notions as «superior» or «inferior» cultures are nothing but sweeping generalizations emanating from lack of knowledge and disrespect to other human beings with different worldviews, learners can delve into the target language and use it as a tool not only to communicate in the country where it is spoken but also to give a second (or third) voice to their thoughts, thus flying in the face of cultural conventions and stereotypes. To this end, language educators should not only work to dispel stereotypes and pockets of ignorance but contribute to learners understanding that begins with awareness of self and leads to awareness of others. It goes without saying that foreign language teachers should be foreign culture teachers, having the ability to experience and analyze both the home and target cultures.

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