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The Importance Of Teaching Culture In The Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

The thesis is concerned with the contribution and incorporation of the teaching of culture into the foreign language classroom. More specifically, some consideration will be given to the why and how of teaching culture. It will be demonstrated that teaching a foreign language is not tantamount to giving a homily on syntactic structures or learning new vocabulary and expressions, but mainly incorporates, or should incorporate, some cultural elements, which are intertwined with language itself. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to incorporate culture into the classroom by means of considering some techniques and methods currently used. The main premise of the paper is that effective communication is more than a matter of language proficiency and that, apart from enhancing and enriching communicative competence, cultural competence can also lead to empathy and respect toward different cultures as well as promote objectivity and cultural perspicacity.

Introduction

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. It could be maintained that the notion of communicative competence, which, in the past decade or so, has blazed a trail, so to speak, in foreign language teaching, emphasising the role of context and the circumstances under which language can be used accurately and appropriately, ‘fall[s] short of the mark when it comes to actually equipping students with the cognitive skills they need in a second-culture environment’ (Straub, 1999: 2). In other words, since the wider context of language, that is, society and culture, has been reduced to a variable elusive of any definition—as many teachers and students incessantly talk about it without knowing what its exact meaning is—it stands to reason that the term communicative competence should become nothing more than an empty and meretricious word, resorted to if for no other reason than to make an “educational point.” In reality, what most teachers and students seem to lose sight of is the fact that ‘knowledge of the grammatical system of a language [grammatical competence] has to be complemented by understanding (sic) of culture-specific meanings [communicative or rather cultural competence]’ (Byram, Morgan et al., 1994: 4).

Of course, we are long past an era when first language acquisition and second or foreign language learning were cast in a “behaviouristic mould,” being the products of imitation and language “drills,” and language was thought of as a compendium of rules and strings of words and sentences used to form propositions about a state of affairs. In the last two decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in the study of language in relation to society, which has led to a shift of focus from behaviourism and positivism to constructivism to critical theory (see Benson & Voller, 1997: 19-25). Yet, there are still some deeply ingrained beliefs as to the nature of language learning and teaching—beliefs that determine methodology as well as the content of the foreign language curriculum—which have, gradually and insidiously, contrived to undermine the teaching of culture.

One of the misconceptions that have permeated foreign language teaching is the conviction that language is merely a code and, once mastered—mainly by dint of steeping oneself into grammatical rules and some aspects of the social context in which it is embedded—‘one language is essentially (albeit not easily) translatable into another’ (Kramsch, 1993: 1). To a certain extent, this belief has been instrumental in promoting various approaches to foreign language teaching—pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and communicative—which have certainly endowed the study of language with a social “hue”; nevertheless, paying lip service to the social dynamics that undergird language without trying to identify and gain insights into the very fabric of society and culture that have come to charge language in many and varied ways can only cause misunderstanding and lead to cross-cultural miscommunication.

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. What is debatable, though, is what is meant by the term “culture” and how the latter is integrated into language learning and teaching. Kramsch’s keen observation should not go unnoticed:

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.

(Kramsch, 1993: 1)

The teaching of culture is not akin to the transmission of information regarding the people of the target community or country—even though knowledge about (let alone experience of) the “target group” is an important ingredient (see Nostrand, 1967: 118). It would be nothing short of ludicrous to assert that culture is merely a repository of facts and experiences to which one can have recourse, if need be. Furthermore, what Kramsch herself seems to insinuate is that to learn a foreign language is not merely to learn how to communicate but also to discover how much leeway the target language allows learners to manipulate grammatical forms, sounds, and meanings, and to reflect upon, or even flout, socially accepted norms at work both in their own or the target culture.

There is definitely more than meets the eye, and the present paper has the aim of unravelling the “mystery,” shedding some light on the role of teaching culture in fostering cross-cultural understanding which transcends the boundaries of linguistic forms—while enriching and giving far deeper meaning to what is dubbed “communicative competence”—and runs counter to a solipsistic world view. I would like to show that the teaching of culture has enjoyed far less “adulation” than it merits, and consider ways of incorporating it not only into the foreign language curriculum but also into learners’ repertoire and outlook on life. The main premise of this paper is that 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. After all, communication requires understanding, and understanding requires stepping into the shoes of the foreigner and sifting her cultural baggage, while always ‘putting [the target] culture in relation with one’s own’ (Kramsch, 1993: 205). Moreover, we should be cognisant of the fact that ‘[i]f 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…’ (Politzer, 1959: 100-101).

The History OF Culture Teaching

As will become evident, the role of cultural learning in the foreign language classroom has been the concern of many teachers and scholars and has sparked considerable controversy, yet its validity as an equal complement to language learning has often been overlooked or even impugned. Up to now, two main perspectives have influenced the teaching of culture. One pertains to the transmission of factual, cultural information, which consists in statistical information, that is, institutional structures and other aspects of the target civilisation, highbrow information, i.e., immersion in literature and the arts, and lowbrow information, which may focus on the customs, habits, and folklore of everyday life (see Kramsch, 1993: 24). This preoccupation with facts rather than meanings, though, leaves much to be desired as far as an understanding of foreign attitudes and values is concerned, and virtually blindfolds learners to the minute albeit significant aspects of their own as well as the target group’s identity that are not easily divined and appropriated (ibid.) All that it offers is ‘mere book knowledge learned by
rote’ (Huebener, 1959: 177). The other perspective, drawing upon cross-cultural psychology or anthropology, has been to embed culture within an interpretive framework and establish connections, namely, points of reference or departure, between one’s own and the target country. This approach, however, has certain limitations, since it can only furnish learners with cultural knowledge, while leaving them to their own devices to integrate that knowledge with the assumptions, beliefs, and mindsets already obtaining in their society. Prior to considering a third perspective, to which the present paper aspires to contribute, it is of consequence to briefly sift through the relevant literature and see what the teaching of culture has come to be associated with.

As Lessard-Clouston (1997) notes, in the past, people learned a foreign language to study its literature, and this was the main medium of culture. ‘[I]t was through reading that students learned of the civilization associated with the target language’ (Flewelling, 1993: 339, cited in Lessard-Clouston, 1997). In the 1960s and 1970s, such eminent scholars as Hall (1959), Nostrand (1974), Seelye ([1974] 1984), and Brooks (1975) made an endeavour to base foreign language learning on a universal ground of emotional and physical needs, so that ‘the foreign culture [would appear] less threatening and more accessible to the language learner’ (Kramsch, 1993: 224). In the heyday of the audiolingual era in language teaching, Brooks (1968) ‘emphasized the importance of culture not for the study of literature but for language learning’, as Steele (1989: 155) has observed. Earlier on, Brooks (1960) in his seminal work Language and Language Learning had offered sixty-four topics regarding culture interspersed with questions covering several pages. These ‘hors d’ oeuvres’, as he called them, concerned, inter alia, such crucial aspects of culture as greetings, expletives, personal possessions, cosmetics, tobacco and smoking, verbal taboos, cafes, bars, and restaurants, contrasts in town and country life, patterns of politeness, keeping warm and cool, medicine and doctors […] In a sense, his groundbreaking work was conducive to a shift of focus from teaching geography and history as part of language learning to an anthropological approach to the study of culture. What is important is that, by making the distinction between “Culture with a Capital C”—art, music, literature, politics and so on—and “culture with a small c”—the behavioural patterns and lifestyles of everyday people—he helped dispel the myth that culture (or civilisation or Landeskunde, or what other name it is known by, (see Byram, 1994)) is an intellectual gift bestowed only upon the elite. Admittedly, the main thrust of his work was to make people aware that culture resides in the very fabric of their lives—their modus vivendi, their beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes—rather than in a preoccupation with aesthetic reflections or high-falutin ideas. As Weaver insightfully remarks, the commonly held notion of culture is largely concerned with its insignificant aspects, whereas our actual interaction with it takes place at a subconscious level.

Many, if not most, people think of culture as what is often called “high culture”—art, literature, music, and the like. This culture is set in the framework of history and of social, political, and economic structures….Actually, the most important part of culture for the sojourner is that which is internal and hidden…, but which governs the behavior they encounter. This dimension of culture can be seen as an iceberg with the tip sticking above the water level of conscious awareness. By far the most significant part, however, is unconscious or below the water level of awareness and includes values and thought patterns. (Weaver, 1993: 157, cited in Killick & Poveda, 1997: 221)

Following Brooks, Nostrand (1974) developed the Emergent Model scheme, which comprised six main categories. The first, culture, regarded value systems and habits of
thought; society included organizations and familial, religious, and other institutions. The third category of conflict was comprised of interpersonal as well as intrapersonal conflict. Ecology and technology included knowledge of plants and animals, health care, travel etc., while the fifth category, individuals, was about intra/interpersonal variation. Finally, cross-cultural environment had to do with attitudes towards other cultures. As Singhal (1998) notes, ‘[i]t is evident that one would have to be quite knowledgeable in the culture under study to be able to present all of these aspects accurately to second language learners’. Since the 1960s, a great many educators have concerned themselves with the importance of the cultural aspect in foreign language learning, with Hammerly (1982), Seelye (1984) and Damen (1987) being among those who have considered ways of incorporating culture into language teaching. In the 1970s, an emphasis on sociolinguistics led to greater emphasis on the situational context of the foreign language. Savignon’s (1972: 9) study on communicative competence, for example, suggested the ‘value of training in communicative skills from the very beginning of the FL program’. As a result, the role of culture in the foreign language curriculum was enhanced, and influential works by Seelye (1974) and Lafayette (1975) appeared. The audiolingual method was replaced by the communicative approach, and Canale and Swain (1980: 31) claimed that ‘a more natural integration’ of language and culture takes place ‘through a more communicative approach than through a more grammatically based approach’. In addition, teacher-oriented texts (Hammerly, 1982; Higgs, 1984; Omaggio, 1986; Rivers, 1981) now included detailed chapters on culture teaching for the foreign language classroom, attesting to the predominant goal: communication within the cultural context of the target language. (see Lessard-Clouston, 1997)

It is only in the 1980s that scholars begin to delve into the dynamics of culture and its vital contribution to ‘successful’ language learning (Byram, Morgan et al., 1994: 5). For example, Littlewood (cited in Byram, Morgan et al., 1994: 6) advocates the value of cultural learning, although he still ‘keeps linguistic proficiency as the overall aim of communicative competence’ (ibid.). Also, there are many insightful comparisons made between behavioural conventions in the L1 and L2 societies which are culture-specific and which could be said to impede understanding: the use of silence (Odlin, 1989; La Forge, 1983: 70-81), frequency of turn-taking (Preston, 1989: 128-131, Odlin, 1989: 55), politeness (Odlin, 1989: 49-54), and so forth (see Byram, Morgan et al., 1994: 8) Furthermore, in the 1980s and 1990s, advances in pragmatics and sociolinguistics (Levinson, 1983) laying bare the very essence of language, which is no longer thought of as merely describing or communicating but, rather, as persuading, deceiving, or punishing and controlling (Byram, 1989; Fairclough, 1989; Lakoff, 1990), have rendered people’s frames of reference and cultural schemata tentative, and led to attempts at ‘bridg[ing] the cultural gap in language teaching’ (Valdes, 1986).

On the assumption that communication is not only an exchange of information but also a highly cognitive as well as affective and value-laden activity, Melde (1987) holds that foreign language teaching should foster ‘critical awareness’ of social life—a view commensurate with Fairclough’s (1989 and 1995) critical theory (see also Byram, Morgan et al., 1994). More specifically, when the learner understands the perspectives of others and is offered the opportunity to reflect on his own perspectives, ‘through a process of decentering and a level of reciprocity, there arises a moral dimension, a judgmental tendency, which is not defined purely on formal, logical grounds’ (Byram, Morgan et al., 1994). To this end, the learner needs to take the role of the foreigner, so that he may gain insights into the values and meanings that the latter has internalised and unconsciously negotiates with the members of the society to which he belongs

http://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue3_3/7-thanasoulas.html
Beside Melde, Baumgratz-Gangl (1990) asserts that the integration of values and meanings of the foreign culture with those of one’s ‘native culture’ can bring about a shift of perspective or the ‘recognition of cognitive dissonance’ (Byram, Morgan et al.), both conducive to reciprocity and empathy. What is more, Swaffar (1992) acknowledges the contribution of culture when he says that, in order to combat, as it were, ‘cultural distance’, students must be exposed to foreign literature with a view to developing the ability to put into question and evaluate the cultural elements L2 texts are suffused with. Kramsch (1993, 1987a) also believes that culture should be taught as an interpersonal process and, rather than presenting cultural facts, teachers should assist language learners in coming to grips with the ‘other culture’ (Singhal, 1998). She maintains that, by virtue of the increasing multiculturality of various societies, learners should be made aware of certain cultural factors at work, such as age, gender, and social class, provided that the former usually have little or no systematic knowledge about their membership in a given society and culture, nor do they have enough knowledge about the target culture to be able to interpret and synthesize the cultural phenomena presented. (Kramsch, 1988b)

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. As has been intimated above, the present paper takes a third perspective, in claiming that cultural knowledge is not only an aspect of communicative competence, but an educational objective in its own right. Nevertheless, cultural knowledge is unlike, say, knowledge of mathematics or Ancient Greek, in the sense that it is an all-encompassing kind of knowledge which, to a certain extent, has determined—facilitated or precluded—all other types of “knowledge.” Rather than viewing cultural knowledge as a prerequisite for language proficiency, it is more important to view it as ‘the community’s store of established knowledge’ (Fowler, 1986: 19), which comprises ‘structures of expectation’ (Tannen, 1979: 144) with which everyone belonging to a certain group is expected to unconsciously and unerringly comply. A corollary of this third perspective is to view the teaching of culture as a means of ‘developing an awareness of, and sensitivity towards, the values and traditions of the people whose language is being studied’ (Tucker & Lambert, 1972: 26). It goes without saying that to foster cultural awareness by dint of teaching culture means to bring to our learners’ conscious the latent assumptions and premises underlying their belief and value systems (see Humphrey, 1997: 242) and, most importantly, to show that our own culture predisposes us to a certain worldview by creating a ‘cognitive framework.…[which] is made up of a number of unquantifiables [my emphasis] …embracing assumptions about how the world is constructed’ (ibid.). But this cognitive framework is, to a great extent, maintained and sanctioned through the very use of language, which is arguably ‘the most visible and available expression of a culture’ (Brown, 1986, cited in Valdes, 1986: 33). As will be shown, though, language and culture are so intricately related that their boundaries, if any, are extremely blurred and it is difficult to become aware of—let alone question—the assumptions and expectations that we hold. It should be reiterated that language teaching is culture teaching, and what the next chapter will set out to show is that, ‘by teaching a language…one is inevitably already teaching culture implicitly’ (McLeod, 1976: 212), and gaining insights into the foreign language should automatically presuppose immersion in the foreign culture, in so far as these two, language and culture, go hand in hand.


**Language And Culture: What IS Culture And Why Should IT BE Taught?**

In this section, we will briefly examine the relationship between language and culture and see why the teaching of culture should constitute an integral part of the English language curriculum. To begin with, language is a social institution, both shaping and shaped by society at large, or in particular the ‘cultural niches’ (Eleanor Armour-Thomas & Sharon-ann Gopaul-McNicol, 1998) in which it plays an important role. Thus, if our premise is that language is, or should be, understood as cultural practice, then ineluctably we must also grapple with the notion of culture in relation to language. Language is not an ‘autonomous construct’ (Fairclough, 1989: vi) but social practice both creating and created by ‘the structures and forces of [the] social institutions within which we live and function’ (ibid.). Certainly, language cannot exist in a vacuum; one could make so bold as to maintain that there is a kind of “transfusion” at work between language and culture. Amongst those who have dilated upon the affinity between language and culture, it is Duranti who succinctly encapsulates how these two interpenetrate:

> to be part of a culture means to share the propositional knowledge and the rules of inference necessary to understand whether certain propositions are true (given certain premises). To the propositional knowledge, one might add the procedural knowledge to carry out tasks such as cooking, weaving, farming, fishing, giving a formal speech, answering the phone, asking for a favor, writing a letter for a job application (Duranti, 1997: 28-29).

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’ (Eleanor Armour-Thomas & Sharon-ann Gopaul-McNicol, 1998: 56). That language has a setting, in that the people who speak it belong to a race or races and are incumbents of particular cultural roles, is blatantly 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’ (Sapir, 1970: 207). In a sense, it is ‘a key to the cultural past of a society’ (Salzmann, 1998: 41), ‘a guide to “social reality”’ (Sapir, 1929: 209, cited in Salzmann, 1998: 41).

Nineteenth-century sociologists, such as Durkheim, were well aware of, and expatiated upon, the interdependence of language and culture. For Durkheim (1912 [1947]), children master their mother tongue by dint of making hypotheses as to the possible circumstances under which it can be used, and by learning probabilities. For example, a child sees a canary and is culturally conditioned to associate certain features and attributes of the bird with the actual word canary. And most importantly, the extent to which the child will internalise the relationship (or lack thereof) between the word canary and its referent in the world is contingent upon ‘social adulation’ (Landar, 1965: 225). If he is taken for a walk and sees a sparrow and says, “canary,” he will be corrected, learning that ‘competence counts’ (ibid.). In other words, “[s]ocioculturally structured associations have to be internalized” (ibid.)—and, as often as not, these associations vary from culture to culture. Rather than getting bogged down in a ‘linguistic relativity’ debate, the tenets of which are widely known, some consideration...
should be given to the claim that ‘language is not merely the external covering of a thought; it is also its internal framework. It does not confine itself to expressing this thought after it has once been formed; it also aids in making it’ (Durkheim, 1912 [1947]).

Fairly recently, many ethnographers such as Buttjes (1990), Ochs & Schieffelin (1984), Poyatos, (1985), and Peters & Boggs, (1986) have attempted to show that ‘language and culture are from the start inseparably connected’ (Buttjes, 1990: 55, cited in Lessard-Clouston, 1997). More specifically, he summarises the reasons why this should be the case: language acquisition does not follow a universal sequence, but differs across cultures; the process of becoming a competent member of society is realized through exchanges of language in particular social situations;

1. every society orchestrates the ways in which children participate in
2. particular situations, and this, in turn, affects the form, the function and
3. the content of children’s utterances;
4. caregivers’ primary concern is not with grammatical input, but with the
5. transmission of sociocultural knowledge;
6. the native learner, in addition to language, acquires also the
7. paralinguistic patterns and the kinesics of his or her culture.

The implications of Buttjes’ findings for the teaching of culture are evident. Language teaching is culture teaching and teachers do their students a great disservice in placing emphasis on the former, to the detriment of the latter. As Buttjes (1990: 55-56) notes, ‘language teachers need to go beyond monitoring linguistic production in the classroom and become aware of the complex and numerous processes of intercultural mediation that any foreign language learner undergoes…’. To hark back to the relationship between language and culture; Samovar, Porter, & Jain (1981: 24) observe:

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.

Moreover, given Duranti’s (1997: 24) definition of culture as ‘something learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next, through human actions, often in the form of face-to-face interaction, and, of course, through linguistic communication’, it is patently obvious that language, albeit a subpart of culture, plays a pivotal role. Bourdieu has emphasised the importance of language not as an autonomous construct but as a system determined by various socio-political processes. For him, a language exists as a linguistic habitus (see Bourdieu, 1990: 52), as a set of practices that imply not only a particular system of words and grammatical rules, but also an often forgotten or hidden struggle over the symbolic power of a particular way of communicating, with particular systems of classification, address and reference forms, specialized lexicons, and metaphors (for politics, medicine, ethics) (Bourdieu, 1982: 31, cited in Duranti, 1997: 45).

At any rate, to speak means to choose a particular way of entering the world and a particular way of sustaining relationships with those we come in contact with. It is often through language use that we, to a large extent, are members of a community of ideas
and practices (ibid.). Thus, as a complex system of classification of experience and ‘an important window on the universe of thoughts’ (Duranti, 1997: 49); as a link between thought and behaviour; and as ‘the prototypical tool for interacting with the world’ (ibid.), language is intertwined with culture. In the past, language and culture were lumped together as if they automatically implied each other. Wilhelm von Humboldt, an eminent diplomat and scholar, once wrote:

The spiritual traits and the structure of the language of a people are so intimately blended that, given either of the two, one should be able to derive the other from it to the fullest extent…Language is the outward manifestation of the spirit of people; their language is their spirit, and their spirit is their language; it is difficult to imagine any two things more identical (Humboldt, 1907, cited in Salzmann, 1998: 39).

On the other hand, Sapir (1921: 215) asserts that ‘[l]anguage, race, and culture are not necessarily correlated’, only to admit later on that ‘[l]anguage and our thought-grooves are inextricably interrelated, are, in a sense, one and the same’ (ibid.: 217-218), thus oscillating between a view of language and culture as being autonomous and separate from each other and one of linguistic determinism, whereby language affects and shapes human thought. According to his lights, ‘[c]ulture may be defined as what a society does and thinks. Language is a particular how of thought’ (ibid.: 218). In addition, Hall (1981: 36) aligns himself with Humboldt and Bourdieu in dubbing language ‘one of the dominant threads in all cultures’. In a similar vein, Bruner (1996: 3) says that ‘[a]lthough meanings are “in the mind,” they have their origins and their significance in the culture in which they are created’. And he adds, ‘human beings do not terminate at their own skins; they are expressions of a culture’ (Bruner, 1990: 12). Furthermore, we could envision the possibility of ‘certain linguistic features mak[ing] certain modes of perception more prevalent or more probable’ (Henle, 1970: 18). Lexical and grammatical categories of a language have been assumed to determine how its speakers conceptualise the world around them. Consider the case of metaphors, ‘which have been analyzed as providing conceptual schemata through which we understand the world’ (Duranti, 1997: 64). For example, the metaphor UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING will generate such expressions as “I see what you mean. To get the whole picture, I’ll tell you….” while the metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD establishes similarities across two different domains (thinking and eating) and generates the expression “It gives me food for thought.” What is more, culture seems to have a grammar of its own, which superimposes itself upon, and is reflected in, that of language. ‘[A] grammar of culture consists of rules for the generation of patterns of behaviour’ (Howell & Vetter, 1976: 376). To achieve a deeper understanding of what the “grammar of culture” really consists in, we should adduce the following example (see Howell & Vetter, 1976: 374). When an American sees a bus coming, he almost always uses the present progressive (“the bus is coming”), in juxtaposition with a Japanese, who uses the present perfect (“the bus has come”). In this case, the difference between the two cultures lies in the ‘conceptual organization of experience’ (Henle, 1970: 3) which they choose, or rather are conditioned, to adhere to. As has been intimated above, to a large extent, ‘[w]e can be conditioned to see and hear things in much the same way as [w]e can be conditioned to perform overt acts as knee jerking, eye blinking, or salivating’ (Bruner & Goodman, 1947: 34, cited in Howell & Vetter, 1976). It is evident that culture is a ‘muddied concept’ (Hall, 1981: 20), elusive of any definitive definition, yet it is inextricably and implicitly related to language. As Duranti insightfully remarks,
words carry in them a myriad possibilities for connecting us to other human beings, other situations, events, acts, beliefs, feelings…The indexicality of language is thus part of the constitution of any act of speaking as an act of participation in a community of language users (Duranti, 1997: 46).

But what exactly is culture? As Nemni (1992) and Street (1993) suggest, this is not an easy question to answer, particularly in an increasingly international world. On a general level, culture has been referred to as ‘the ways of a people’ (Lado, 1957). This view incorporates both ‘material’ manifestations of culture that are easily seen and ‘non-material’ ones that are more difficult to observe, as Saville-Troike (1975: 83) notes. Anthropologists define culture as ‘the whole way of life of a people or group. In this context, culture (sic) includes all the social practices that bond a group of people together and distinguish them from others’ (Montgomery and Reid-Thomas, 1994: 5). According to Peck (1998), Culture is all the accepted and patterned ways of behavior of a given people. It is that facet of human life learned by people as a result of belonging to some particular group; it is that part of learned behavior shared with others. Not only does this concept include a group’s way of thinking, feeling, and acting, but also the internalized patterns for doing certain things in certain ways….not just the doing of them. This concept of culture also includes the physical manifestations of a group as exhibited in their achievements and contributions to civilization. Culture is our social legacy as contrasted with our organic heredity. It regulates our lives at every turn.

It could be argued that culture never remains static, but is constantly changing. In this light, Robinson (1988) dismisses behaviourist, functionalist, and cognitive definitions of culture and posits a symbolic one which sees culture as a dynamic ‘system of symbols and meanings’ whereby ‘past experience influences meaning, which in turn affects future experience, which in turn affects subsequent meaning, and so on’ (ibid.: 11). It is this dynamic nature of culture that has been lost sight of and underrated in foreign language teaching and ought to be cast in a new perspective. Learning a foreign language can be subversive of the assumptions and premises operating in the ‘home culture’ (Straub, 1999), which requires that learners be offered the opportunity for “personal growth,” in terms of ‘personal meanings, pleasures, and power’ (Kramsch, 1993: 238). As Kramsch (ibid.: 238) notes, ‘[f]rom the clash between…the native culture and…the target culture, meanings that were taken for granted are suddenly questioned, challenged, problematized’. However, in order to question and reinterpret (Reynolds and Skilbeck, 1976: 6) L2 culture, “L1 observers” must first become aware of what it means to participate in their own culture and what the contents of culture are.

Apart from Brooks, whose work we mentioned earlier on, several other scholars such as Lado (1964), Goodenough (1981), Kallenbach & Hodges (1963), Straub (1999), and others have provided a framework within which to identify the nature of culture, be it home culture or target culture. For instance, Goodenough (1981: 62) summarises the contents of culture briefly quoted below:

- The ways in which people have organized their experience of the real world so as to give it structure as a phenomenal world of forms, their percepts and concepts.
- The ways in which people have organized their experience of their phenomenal world so as to give it structure as a system of cause and effect relationships, that is, the propositions and beliefs by which they
explain events and accomplish their purposes.

- The ways in which people have organized their experiences so as to structure their world in hierarchies of preferences, namely, their value or sentiment systems.
- The ways in which people have organized their experience of their past efforts to accomplish recurring purposes into operational procedures for accomplishing these purposes in the future, that is, a set of "grammatical" principles of action and a series of recipes for accomplishing particular ends.

For Goodenough (1963: 258-259), culture...consists of standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it. Clearly, culture is a ubiquitous force, forging our identities and our relationships with other things and individuals. Were it not for culture, we would be 'little more than...gibbering, incomprehensible idiot[s], less capable of mere survival than a member of the very earliest tribe of prehistoric men' (Kallenbach & Hodges, 1963: 11). To view culture as 'the total life way of a people [and] the social legacy the individual acquires from his group' (ibid.) leads to the belief that to be human ineluctably means to be cultured. What is more, according to Kallenbach & Hodges (1963: 20), culture channels biological processes—vomiting, weeping, fainting, sneezing...[while] sensations of pleasure, anger, and lust may be stimulated by cultural cues that would leave unmoved someone who has been reared in a different social tradition.

Culture creates and solves problems. If, within a specific culture, cows are looked upon as sacred animals, or breaking a mirror is assumed to bring bad luck, 'threats are posed which do not arise out of the inexorable facts of the external world' (ibid.: 24). Furthermore, such notions as “success,” “greed,” “decorum,” or “promiscuity” can only be assessed against a culture-specific yardstick, as it were. ‘[S]uch value judgments are acquired in the culture in which the individual has grown up and are accepted unquestioningly by most members of the social group’ (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum, 1957, cited in Rivers, 1968: 266). It goes without saying that the importance of ‘any single element in a culture design will be seen only when that element is viewed in the total matrix of its relationship to other elements’ (ibid.: 29). Let us illustrate this by drawing upon De Saussure’s semiotic theory (Barthes, 1973, cited in Leiss et al., 1990: 200-201): Roses signify passion or love. If we analyse their “meaning,” we have three elements: the signifier—the roses; the signified—passion or love; and the sign—the “passionified roses” as a whole. Obviously, there is nothing inherently “passionate” or “amorous” about roses; they are viewed as such within the context of western culture. In another culture, roses could signify something different, even the opposite of passion or love. Of course, if we asked an Indian why she worships cows or a Frenchman why he says un pied de laitue (literally “a foot of lettuce) whereas English speakers say “a head of lettuce” and Greek speakers ç čáňáůů ãíůóéééé (literally “a heart of lettuce”), chances are that we would get no more satisfactory an answer than we ourselves would be ready to give regarding our own language or culture (see Desberg, 1961, cited in Fotitch, 1961: 55). Interestingly, according to Lado (1964: 28), culture comprises various elementary meaning units (EMUs), such as the ones touched upon above, which may be at variance with other EMUs at work in another culture. For him, coming to grips with these EMUs is ‘necessary for full communication with natives, to understand their
reports on great achievements, and to read their classics’. It is our contention that these EMUs can pave the way for a ‘third place’ (Kramsch, 1993), a third identity, which can draw upon the L1 and L2 cultures in enunciating personal meanings (this issue will be considered later in the study).

That ‘[c]ulture is not a relatively harmonious and stable pool of significations, but a confrontation between groups occupying different, sometimes opposing positions in the map of social relations’ (Fiske, 1989b: 58, cited in Kramsch, 1993: 24) is further illustrated below (see Henrichsen, 1998): A new teacher from the U.S. was teaching English in a Palestinian school in Israel, working with a fairly advanced group of students and trying to help them understand and use the present perfect tense. To this end, she began with the question, “Have you ever lived in Israel?” Some of the students answered, “No,” while the rest of the class seemed a bit confused, shaking their heads in lack of comprehension. The teacher repeated the question, only to receive the same response. Then, a student said, “Palestine, teacher, Palestine,” thus shedding light on the misunderstanding. Even though the students understood the question, they refused to give Israel recognition as a nation, even by name. ‘The students knew the grammar principle very well; they would simply not acknowledge the political circumstances it assumed’ (ibid.).

In view of this, it is reasonable to assert that cultural awareness should be viewed as an important component informing, so to speak, and enriching communicative competence. By communicative competence, we mean verbal as well as non-verbal communication, such as gestures, the ability (or lack thereof) to integrate with a specific group or avoid committing any faux pas, and so forth. In other words, the kind of communicative competence posited here is one which can account for the appropriateness of language as well as behaviour. On the one hand, it can help us understand why the sentence A cigarette is what I want is unlikely to be elevated to the status of a possible utterance in English; on the other, it can suggest why being careless about chinking glasses in Crete may cause trouble. It is what Desberg (1961, cited in Fotitch, 1961: 56) dubs ‘linguistico-cultural meaning’ that has been extirpated from the foreign language milieu, and led to the false assumption that culture is a compartmentalised subject amenable to ‘educational interventions’, to quote Candy (1991), rather than an educational goal in itself.

The question arises, however, that if language and culture are so intricately intertwined, why should we overtly focus on culture when there are other aspects of the curriculum that need more attention? To begin with, we should concern ourselves with culture because, even though it is inherent in what we teach, to believe that whoever is learning the foreign language is also learning the cultural knowledge and skills required to be a competent L2/FL speaker ‘denies the complexity of culture, language learning, and communication’ (Lessard-Clouston, 1997). Second, it is deemed important to include culture in the foreign language curriculum because it helps avoid the stereotypes that Nemni (1992) has discussed and the present study has intimated. The third reason for expressly teaching culture in the foreign language classroom is to enable students to take control of their own learning as well as to achieve autonomy by evaluating and questioning the wider context within which the learning of the target language is embedded. Tomalin & Stempleski (1993: 7-8), modifying Seelye’s (1988) ‘seven goals of cultural instruction’, may provide an answer pertinent to the question posed. According to them, the teaching of culture has the following goals and is of and in itself a means of accomplishing them:
To help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviours.

To help students to develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave.

To help students to become more aware of conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture.

To help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.

To help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence.

To help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.

To stimulate students’ intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people.

This list of goals is definitely an improvement on Huebener’s (1959: 182-183) list of ‘desirable outcomes’. At any rate, the aim of teaching culture is ‘to increase students’ awareness and to develop their curiosity towards the target culture and their own, helping them to make comparisons among cultures’ (Tavares & Cavalcanti, 1996: 19). These comparisons, of course, are not meant to underestimate foreign cultures but to enrich students’ experience and to sensitize them to cultural diversity. ‘This diversity should then be understood and respected, and never…over (sic) or underestimated’ (ibid.: 20). In the next chapter, we will consider different ways of teaching (about) culture. As Kramsch (1993: 245) succinctly puts it, teachers’ and learners’ task is ‘to understand in ever more sensitive ways why they talk the way they do, and why they remain silent: this type of knowledge Clifford Geertz [1983] calls local knowledge’.

**INCORPORATING CULTURE INTO THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

A question germane to our discussion is, how can we incorporate culture into the foreign language curriculum, with a view to fostering cultural awareness and communicating insight into the target civilization? In the past, this has been attempted by dint of discoursing upon the geographical environment and historical or political development of the foreign culture, its institutions and customs, its literary achievements, even the minute details of the everyday life of its members. At other times, insights into the target community have taken the form of ‘lectureettes’ (see Rivers, 1968: 272) or a “homily” on such issues as marriage customs and ceremonies, festivals, Sunday excursions, and so forth, thus rendering the study of the foreign culture a tedious and unrewarding task. Admittedly, we cannot teach culture any more than we can teach anyone how to breathe. What we can do, though, is try to show the way, to teach about culture rather than to posit a specific way of seeing things—which is corollary and ancillary to cultural and linguistic imperialism. By bringing to the fore some elements of the target culture, and focusing on those characteristics and traits that are of importance to the members of the target community—refraining from taking an outsider’s view—teachers can make students aware that there are no such things as superior and inferior cultures and that there are differences among people within the target culture, as well. ‘[Teachers are] not in the classroom to confirm the prejudices of [their] students nor to attack their deeply held convictions’ (ibid.: 271). Their task is to stimulate students’ interest in the target
culture, and to help establish the foreign language classroom ‘not so much as a place
where the language is taught, but as one where opportunities for learning of various
kinds are provided through the interactions that take place between the participants’

According to Straub (1999), what educators should always have in mind when teaching
culture is the need to raise their students’ awareness of their own culture, to provide
them with some kind of metalanguage in order to talk about culture, and ‘to cultivate a
degree of intellectual objectivity essential in cross-cultural analyses’ (ibid.: 5). What is
more, another objective permeating the teaching of culture is ‘to foster...understanding
of the target culture from an insider’s perspective—an empathetic view that permits the
student to accurately interpret foreign cultural behaviors’ (ibid.). Prior to considering
some concrete techniques for teaching culture in the foreign language classroom, it is
useful to attempt an answer to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter by
providing some guidelines for culture teaching (most of the discussion that ensues is
mainly based on Lessard-Clouston, 1997).

First, culture teaching must be commensurate with the dynamic aspects of culture. As
Lessard-Clouston (1997) notes,

[students will indeed need to develop knowledge of and about the L2
or FL culture, but this receptive aspect of cultural competence is not
sufficient. Learners will also need to master some skills in culturally
appropriate communication and behaviour for the target culture...
[C]ultural awareness is necessary if students are to develop an
understanding of the dynamic nature of the target culture, as well as
their own culture.

Second, it is important to eschew what Lessard-Clouston (1997) calls ‘a laissez-faire
approach’, when it comes to teaching methodology, and deal with culture teaching in a
systematic and structured way. Third, evaluation of culture learning is a necessary
component of the “foreign culture curriculum,” providing students with feedback and
keeping teachers accountable in their teaching. A fourth point is made by Cruz,
Bonissone, and Baff (1995) pertaining to the express need for linguistic and cultural
competence as a means of achieving and negotiating nations’ political and economical
identities in an ‘ever shrinking world’, as they put it.

Our world has changed, but in many ways our schools have not. Linguistic and cultural
abilities are at the forefront of our ever shrinking world. Yet we continue to shy away
from addressing these very real global necessities. Just as no one superpower can
dominate without censure from others, citizens must now begin to see their global
responsibilities and must learn to move comfortably from one cultural environment to
the next. Persuasion rather than armed coercion has become the way to do things
politically and effective persuasion requires that one know the other party’s values and
manner of establishing rapport. (ibid.) Apparently, culture can become a third (or second,
for that matter) “superpower” dispensing justice and helping maintain stability and
equilibrium if need be.

A cursory glance at most textbooks nowadays is ample to show what educators must
first combat and eradicate: stereotypes. As Byram, Morgan et al. (1994: 41) observe,
‘[textbook writers] intuitively avoid bringing learners’ existing hetero-stereotypes into
the open and hope that [their] negative overtones...will be...counteracted by presenting positive...images of the foreign country'. As a matter of fact, stereotypes are extremely tenacious, in so far as people from different cultures have their own schemata through which they conceptualise and understand the world, and to step into another culture is ‘to deny something within their own being’ (ibid.: 43). In order to provide a different perspective on “the foreign culture,” teachers should use comparison, with a view to identifying common ground or even lacunae within or between cultures (see Ertelt-Vieth, 1990, 1991, cited in Byram, Morgan et al., 1994: 43). Most certainly, learners will not relinquish their ‘cultural baggage’ (ibid.) and begin to see the world “in the French, English, or Japanese way,” so to speak. Nevertheless, they can acknowledge that any “intellectual antinomies” emanating from their exposure to the target culture are natural and by no means pernicious.

Before venturing into unknown territories (Grove, 1982), learners must first become conversant with what it means to be part of a culture, their own culture. By exploring their own culture, i.e., by discussing the very values, expectations, traditions, customs, and rituals they unconsciously take part in, they are ready to reflect upon the values, expectations, and traditions of others ‘with a higher degree of intellectual objectivity’ (Straub, 1999). Depending on the age and level of the learners, this task can take many forms. For example, young beginners or intermediate students should be given the opportunity to enjoy certain activities that are part of their own tradition, such as national sports, social festivities, or songs, before setting about exploring those of the target culture. Here, we will only be concerned with the latter. ‘Beginning foreign language students want to feel, touch, smell, and see the foreign peoples and not just hear their language’ (Peck, 1998). At any rate, the foreign language classroom should become a ‘cultural island’ (Kramsch, 1993; Singhal, 1998; Peck, 1998), where the accent will be on ‘cultural experience’ rather than ‘cultural awareness’ (see Byram, Morgan et al., 1994: 55-60). From the first day, teachers are expected to bring in the class posters, pictures, maps, and other realia in order to help students develop ‘a mental image’ of the target culture (Peck, 1998). According to Peck (1998), an effective and stimulating activity is to send students on “cultural errands” (my term)—to supermarkets and department stores—and have them write down the names of imported goods. Moreover, teachers can also invite guest speakers, who will talk about their experiences of the foreign country.

Another insightful activity is to divide the class into groups of three or four and have them draw up a list of those characteristics and traits that supposedly distinguish the home and target cultures. Tomalin & Stempleski (1993: 16) provide a sample of the kind of list students could produce:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>music</th>
<th>national origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>race</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>geography</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>architecture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crafts</td>
<td>customs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clothing</td>
<td>physical features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>food</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this way, it becomes easier for teachers and students to identify any “stereotypical lapses” and preconceived ideas that they need to disabuse themselves of. To this end, once major differences have been established, students can be introduced to some ‘key words’ (Williams, 1983), such as “marriage,” “death,” “homosexuality,” etc., and thus
be assisted in taking an insider’s view of the connotations of these words and concepts. In other words, they can query their own assumptions and try to see the underlying significance of a particular term or word in the target language and culture. For example, in English culture, both animals and humans have feelings, get sick, and are buried in cemeteries. In Hispanic culture, however, the distinction between humans and animals is great, and bullfighting is highly unlikely to be seen as a waste of time, as many western spectators are apt to say. For Spanish people, a bull is not equal to the man who kills it—a belief that has the effect of exonerating, so to speak, the bullfighter from all responsibility; a bull can be strong but not intelligent or skilful; these are qualities attributed to human beings. In this light, notions such as “cruel,” “slaughter,” or “being defenceless” carry vastly different undertones in the two cultures (see Lado, 1986).

Besides, the way language and social variables interpenetrate should inform culture teaching in the foreign language classroom. The main premise is that language varies according to social variables, such as sex, age, social class, location [...], and the concomitant register differences should not go unnoticed. For example, students can be taught that there are certain words used more by women than by men, and vice versa, and that there are also different dialects which may not enjoy equal adulation and prestige (for example, Cockney as opposed to Received Pronunciation in England) (see Henrichsen, 1998).

Through exposure to the foreign civilisation, students inescapably draw some comparisons between the home and target culture. ‘Cultural capsules’ (Singhal, 1998, and others), also known as ‘culturgrams’ (Peck, 1998), attempt to help in this respect, presenting learners with isolated items about the target culture, while using books and other visual aids. Yet, according to Peck (ibid.), a more useful way to provide cultural information is by dint of cultural clusters, which are a series of culture capsules. Seelye (1984) provides such capsules, such as a narrative on the etiquette during a family meal. With this narrative as a springboard for discussion and experimentation, students can practice how to eat, learn how, and to what extent, the members of the target culture appreciate a meal with friends, and so forth. A word of caveat is called for, though. Students must not lose sight of the fact that not all members of the target community think and behave in the same way.

Henrichsen (1998) proposes, among others, two interesting methods: culture assimilators and cultoons. Culture assimilators comprise short descriptions of various situations where one person from the target culture interacts with persons from the home culture. Then follow four possible interpretations of the meaning of the behaviour and speech of the interactants, especially those from the target culture. Once the students have read the description, they choose one of the four options they think is the correct interpretation of the situation. When every single student has made his choice, they discuss why some options are correct or incorrect. The main thrust of culture assimilators is that they ‘are good methods of giving students understanding about cultural information and...may even promote emotional empathy or affect if students have strong feelings about one or more of the options’ (ibid.). On the other hand, cultoons are visual culture assimilators. Students are provided with a series of four pictures highlighting points of misunderstanding or culture shock experienced by persons in contact with the target culture. Here, students are asked to evaluate the characters’ reactions in terms of appropriateness (within the target culture). Once misunderstandings are dissipated, learners read short texts explaining what was happening in the cultoons and why there was misunderstanding. Nevertheless, much as cultoons ‘generally promote understanding of cultural facts....they do not usually give real understanding of emotions involved in
The Importance Of Teaching Culture In The Foreign Language Classroom

Cultural misunderstandings’ (ibid.).

Cultural problem solving is yet another way to provide cultural information (see Singhal, 1998). In this case, learners are presented with some information but they are on the horns of a dilemma, so to speak. For example, in analysing, say, a TV conversation or reading a narrative on marriage ceremonies, they are expected to assess manners and customs, or appropriate or inappropriate behaviour, and to employ various problem-solving techniques—in short, to develop a kind of “cultural strategic competence” (my term). Singhal (1998) sets the scene: students are in a restaurant and are expected to order a meal. In this way, learners are given the opportunity to step into the shoes of a member of the target culture.

Indisputably, conventional behaviour in common situations is a subject with which students should acquaint themselves. For instance, in the USA or the United Kingdom, it is uncommon for a student who is late for class to knock on the door and apologize to the teacher. Rather, this behaviour is most likely to be frowned upon and have the opposite effect, even though it is common behaviour in the culture many students come from. Besides, there are significant differences across cultures regarding the ways in which the teacher is addressed; when a student is supposed to raise her hand; what topics are considered taboo or “off the mark”; how much leeway students are allowed in achieving learner autonomy, and so forth (for further details, see Henrichsen, 1998).

Alongside linguistic knowledge, students should also familiarise themselves with various forms of non-verbal communication, such as gesture and facial expressions, typical in the target culture. More specifically, learners should be cognisant of the fact that such seemingly universal signals as gestures and facial expressions—as well as emotions—are actually cultural phenomena, and may as often as not lead to miscommunication and erroneous assumptions (see Wierzbicka, 1999). Green (1968) furnishes some examples of appropriate gestures in Spanish culture. An interesting activity focusing on non-verbal communication is found in Tomalin & Stempleski (1993: 117-119): The teacher hands out twelve pictures showing gestures and then invites the students to discuss and answer some questions. Which gestures are different from those in the home culture? Which of the gestures shown would be used in different situations or even avoided in the home culture? Another activity would be to invite learners to role-play emotions (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993: 116-117): The teacher writes a list of several words indicating emotions (happiness, fear, anger, joy, pain, guilt, sadness) and then asks the students to use facial expressions and gestures to express these emotions. Then follows a discussion on the different ways in which people from different cultures express emotions as well as interpret gestures as “indices” to emotions. As Straub (1999: 6) succinctly puts it, “[b]y understanding how cultures and subcultures or co-cultures use these signs to communicate, we can discover a person’s social status, group membership, and approachability”. According to him, it is important to encourage learners to ‘speculate on the significance of various styles of clothing, the symbolic meanings of colors, gestures, facial expressions, and the physical distance people unconsciously put between each other’ (ibid.), and to show in what ways these nonverbal cues are similar to, or at variance with, those of their culture.

Herein lies the role of literature in the foreign language classroom. Rather than being a fifth adjunct to the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), culture can best find its expression through the medium of literature. As Valdes (1986: 137) notes, literature is a viable component of second language programs at the appropriate level.
and...one of [its] major functions ...is to serve as a medium to transmit the culture of
the people who speak the language in which it is written.

First of all, literary texts are an untapped resource of authentic language that learners
can avail themselves of. Exposure to literary works can help them to expand their
language awareness and develop their language competence. Moreover, trying to
interpret and account for the values, assumptions, and beliefs infusing the literary texts
of the target culture is instrumental in defining and redefining those obtaining in the
home culture (Gantidou, personal communication). Of course, literature can extend to
cover the use of film and television in the FL classroom, for they ‘have the capacity…to
present language and situation simultaneously, that is, language in fully contextualized
form’ (Corder, 1968, cited in Jalling, 1968: 65). A major shortcoming, though, is that
the viewer can only be an observer, not a participant. There is only reaction but no
interaction on her part (ibid.: 68). What is more, there are some difficulties regarding the
example, cautions that a limited knowledge of linguistics could blindfold teachers and
students to the fact that literary texts are ‘holistic artefacts which are situated within
cultural traditions, are historically shaped and grow out of the lived experiences of the
writer’ (Carter & McRae, 1996: xxii).

The literature on culture teaching methodology is vast and a great many techniques have
been employed, in an attempt to strip away the layers of obfuscation the term culture has
been cloaked in, and show that ‘a basic competence in the English language proper, with
a minimum of cultural references’ (Bessmertnyi, 1994), not only is of little value but can
also lead to misunderstanding, culture shock, even animosity among nations. What
should be made explicit is that the “cultural references” Bessmertnyi alludes to can only
act as facilitating devices, so to speak, in the process of socialisation into the target
community. Knowing a second or foreign language should open windows on the target
culture as well as on the world at large. By the same token, speaking English or Chinese
should give the learner the opportunity to see the world through “English or Chinese
eyes,” without making him relinquish his own grip of reality, his personal identity,
which can step back and evaluate both home and target cultures. In a sense, cultural
knowledge and experience should make us aware that, far from becoming members of
the same ‘monocultural global village’ (Kramsch, 1987c), we can actually become
observers and participants at the same time, registering what is transpiring in every
culture and trying to find ‘third places’ (Kramsch, 1993), a third niche, from which to
divine pernicious dichotomies and bridge cultural gaps. After all, as regards language
teachers, ‘[w]e cannot teach an understanding of the foreign as long as the familiar has
not become foreign to us in many respects’ (Hunfeld, 1990: 16, translated by, and cited
in, Kramsch, 1993: 234).

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we should reiterate the main premise of the present study: the
Teaching of culture should become an integral part of foreign language instruction.
‘Culture should be our message to students and language our medium’ (Peck, 1998).
Frontiers have opened and never before have nations come closer to one another—in
theory, at least. As a result, people from different cultures weave their lives into an
international fabric that is beginning to fray at the edges by virtue of miscommunication
and propaganda. In order to avoid this ignominious cultural and political disintegration,
and foster empathy and understanding, teachers should ‘present students with a true
picture or representation of another culture and language’ (Singhal, 1998). And this will be achieved only if cultural awareness is viewed as something more than merely a compartmentalised subject within the foreign language curriculum; that is, when culture “inhabits” the classroom and undergirds every language activity. According to Singhal (1998), language teachers ought to receive both experiential and academic training, with the aim of becoming ‘mediators in culture teaching’ (ibid.). At any rate, culture teaching should aim to foster ‘empathy with the cultural norms of the target language community’ and ‘an increased awareness of one’s own ‘cultural logic’ in relation to others’ (Willems, 1992, cited in Byram, Morgan et al., 1994: 67). This cultural logic, though, is achieved through ‘a recognition of ‘otherness’, and of the limitations of one’s own cultural identity’ (Killick & Poveda, 1997).

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 behaviour, 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 generalisations 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’ (Singhal, 1998). There is certainly room for improvement, and things bode well for the future. Beyond current practice, there are still some areas, such as the ones identified by Lessard-Clouston (1997), that need further investigation. For example, is there such a thing as a ‘natural order’ in L2/FL culture acquisition? What cultural patterns do foreign language students need to learn first and at what levels? Furthermore, are these patterns best learnt by means of immersion in the target culture, or are there any techniques obviating this need? Most importantly, are these acquired patterns maintained over the long haul, or is there some kind of regression at work? Once these besetting issues are investigated, the next step is to do some research on content and materials design for cultural syllabuses (see Nostrand, 1967).

It goes without saying that foreign language teachers should be foreign culture teachers, having the ability to experience and analyse both the home and target cultures (Byram, Morgan et al., 1994: 73). The onus is on them to convey cultural meaning and introduce students to a kind of learning ‘which challenges and modifies their perspective on the world and their cultural identity as members of a given social and national group’ (ibid.). Unfortunately, by teaching about other cultures, foreign language educators do not necessarily nip prejudice in the bud, so to speak; cultural bias can still plague the very aspects of the target culture which teachers ‘choose to indict or advocate’, as Cornereae (1997) insightfully remarks. It is hoped that the present paper has contrived to clarify most of the issues it set out to investigate, and has helped contribute to a better understanding of culture and its importance in the foreign language classroom.

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