

### ***The foreign language classroom: a place to maximize intercultural communication***

«The dilemma of the global age is that, we have finally discovered that we are one people who must share one precarious world, and we are profoundly divided by race, culture and belief.» Young (1996).

The purpose of this presentation is to bring awareness of the actual limited level of intercultural communication in our classrooms. We teachers as agents of change, need to become more open to the idea that we can consciously continue to move ahead in our own culture-learning continuum, which will in turn help our students to move ahead in their own level of intercultural sensitiveness. In response to this lack, an emphasis on bringing the cultural component to the foreign language arena has been considered central to the teaching of languages for many years. In spite of this, few teachers have been successful in effectively integrating cultural patterns of the target language being studied.

Every semester I give an entrance test to Intermediate Spanish students. This test has a linguistic and a cultural part. The results of the latter are most alarming: there is clearly a lack of knowledge and/or understanding of the beliefs, behaviours and values of the Hispanic cultures. Most of the students come with stereotypes that in no way encourage the celebration of cross-cultural understanding. And this is happening at a crucial moment when history has decreed that the USA be linked with many Spanish speaking countries by powerful economic, political and cultural forces.

The unsuccessful intercultural communication in the foreign language classroom is mainly due to the use of traditional approaches and also to the teacher's lack of awareness of his/her stage of culture-learning continuum. Alice Omaggio (1995) deals with this issue by giving reasons to explain why many language courses do not include a systematic study of culture:

- a) Teachers have too much grammar and vocabulary to cover in communicative situations, so culture is left for 'later' for many students, later never seems to come.
- b) Teachers do not feel very comfortable with the level of knowledge of the target culture(s), they consider they do not know enough to teach their students well.
- c) Teachers avoid talking about culture in the classroom because they are afraid of their students' reaction to differences. Students tend to react negatively towards patterns of «otherness», such as different ways of dressing, dancing, eating, etc.

Galloway (1985a) summarizes some common approaches that these teachers just described tend to use in their Spanish classes. The lack of an organized scheme to select and treat cultural themes does not allow students to progress in their cultural competence. He mentions four types of approaches:

1. The Frankenstein Approach: A taco from here, a flamenco dancer from there, a gaucho here, a bullfight from there.
2. The 4-F Approach: Folk dances, festivals, fairs, and food

3. The Tour Guide Approach: The identification of monuments, rivers, and cities
4. The "By-the-Way" Approach: Sporadic lectures or bits of behavior selected indiscriminantly to emphasize sharp contrasts.

Stern (1981) believes that the deficiencies in teaching culture are more related to the problem of how to define it. Many teachers have taught the "Olympian culture", a term used by Brooks (1971) that represents the literature, music and art of a country. Although these are important factors to consider about a culture, it is the "culture BBV" (beliefs, behavior, and values), also referred by Brooks, that brings an anthropological approach to study culture as the everyday patterns of life that are typical of a group of individuals. To fully understand the concept of culture will allow teachers to bring more effectively intercultural communication to the classroom.

But this is not enough. Many foreign language teachers do not realize that they are not truly multicultural educators; they are excellent 'language' educators but they still need to revise their **Stage of Intercultural Sensitiveness**.

**Factors** that will help promote intercultural learning.

1. Milton J. Bennett (1993) suggests that there is a culture-learning continuum along which people seem to progress. To move from ethnocentrism to what he calls "ethnorelativism" depends on how a person reacts to cultural differences. He identifies six stages in this process:

- a. Ethnocentrism- a simple denial that the differences exist.
- b. Defensiveness- the perception that the differences are threatening.
- c. Minimization of the perceived differences- the perception that the differences are not very great.
- d. Acceptance- the recognition that differences exist, that they are substantial and important, and that they can be positive and negative.
- e. Adaptation- the willingness to accommodate and adjust one's behavior to the patterns and styles of another culture.
- f. Adoption and integration- the merging of selected aspects of another culture into one's own cultural identity, becoming a bi- or multicultural person.

Identifying the stage where you are will help you consciously progress in your culture-learning continuum.

2. The teacher's willingness to expose students to "other" cultural patterns in different experiential learning activities, such as discussing with them valuable personal experiences lived abroad, inviting international exchange students as native informants to the classroom, telling stories that emphasize the beliefs, behavior and values of the "other" culture etc. These may have a significant impact on the students' traditional stereotypes of Hispanics or Chinese or any other heritage group and a more effective intercultural communication will be fostered.

3. The teacher's permission for students to explore their attitudes towards their own culture, because they need to be conscious of how their cultural patterns work. They will realize that they transfer not only linguistic patterns to the language being learned but also their own cultural traits.

They will realize that for a long time they had thought that, "things that fit their cultural framework are logic, they make sense. Those that do not fit are 'different', nonsensical, even immoral" Galloway (1985)

4. The National Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the USA. Progress is being made by the recent work of colleagues that have worked on the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning. They certainly understood the lack of emphasis that the cultural component has been given in the Foreign Language curriculum and out of the Five C's: Communication, Cultures Connections, Comparisons and Communities we can clearly see the important role given to the cultural component. Essentially ALL five C's are connected with culture, leaving considerable space for its treatment in the areas of Communities, Comparisons, and Culture.

As a teacher of Spanish in an institution of higher education in the USA, I would like to see more students being significantly exposed to those many similarities and differences encountered in a cross cultural study of the Anglo American and the Spanish American cultures. I would like to hear students commenting on Spanish speaking people and their values not in the ethnocentric way that they so often do, but in an attitude of understanding, of respect and hopefully of acceptance.

Education has an important role in providing Intercultural awareness in students that need to develop a global, multicultural consciousness to be able to effectively communicate and interact in the ever changing world of the 21 century.

In the words of the American Council on Education, "Emerging national needs require American Education to organize itself to educate students for competence and success in an interdependent world. The nation must commit itself NOW to providing all students with... a powerful, deep-rooted understanding of other languages, diverse cultures and global issues." (Educating Americans for a World in Flux) Washington, D.C.

Robert Young (1996) suggests that "The key to an adequate understanding of intercultural communication is a simple one. We have no choice.

We must succeed in doing it, we have succeeded in doing it in the past (here and there), and we must adopt ways of theorising it which recognize the imperative of extending our capacity to do it to a global level".

A new challenge has come to our classrooms. You and I CAN make a difference in creating intercultural communication and global understanding.

This challenge is our homework.

## References

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