

Re-conceptualising Ethnography to Teach Culture in Foreign Language Classrooms

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Abstract

Ethnography in foreign language teaching is seen not as a source of material for teachers, but as a methodology to be adopted by the teachers/learners in order to learn/explore the foreign language culture. The aim of this paper is neither to emphasise the necessity to teach the target language culture nor to trace the history of teaching culture along or within a foreign language but to conceptualise an ethnographic approach to teaching culture. As a process approach to teaching culture, this approach repositions learners as researchers and researched and teachers as facilitators. Following ethnographic methodology, the learners look at culture through an ethnographer's lens. They make use of ethnographic techniques such as observations, description and interpretation of the "behavioural repertoire" of a given society to generate new knowledge.

Key Words: Ethnography, culture, intercultural encounters, approach, ethnographic methodology.

ملخص

يهدف هذا المقال الى تبين الميزات الإيجابية للمقاربة الاثنوجرافية في تعليم اللغات الأجنبية، واقتراح العمل بها في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية. فتعليم اللغات الأجنبية لا يقتصر على تأهيل المتعلم للتمكن من وسائل التعبير الكتابي والشفوي، بل يتعدى ذلك إلى تنمية قدراته على الاتصال والتواصل مع الغير، مع القدرة على فهم واحترام الاختلافات الثقافية والاجتماعية بين اللغات. هذه المقاربة تمكن متعلمي اللغات من النظر إلى الثقافة من خلال منظار عالم الاثنوجرافية، واستعمال طرق البحث المعمول بها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاثنوجرافية، تعليم اللغات، المقاربات الثقافية، التواصل.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is neither to trace the history of teaching culture along or within a foreign language nor to explain the necessity to teach the target language culture but to reconceptualise the ethnographic approach to teaching culture. On the one hand, this will enable teachers to place the learners directly in the target culture in order to enable them to observe, inquire, analyse and reflect on the target culture. On the other hand, this change of orientation will enable the learners to discover both their own as well as a second or third culture. In sum, the aim is to enable learners explore how the foreign language culture behaves and interacts.

Today's classroom English teaching practices common within the English departments in the Algerian universities are deeply rooted in the native speaker-based notion of communicative competence developed by Canale and Swain (1980). However, the lingua franca status of English with its "enormous functional flexibility" (House 2002, p. 243) has pushed educational authorities worldwide to adopt new approaches to teaching English in their higher education institutions. Therefore, there seems to be little alternative for the Algerian universities but to modernize their English teaching pedagogy to gain access to the international knowledge network.

The Cultural Turn in Foreign Language Teaching

Language learning/teaching is now determined in terms of cultural terms. The aim is the development of the learners' intercultural competence instead of striving for the native speaker linguistic competence. This later is mainly criticised because it views learners as "incomplete native speaker[s]" (Byram, 1997, p. 11) and because it advocates unrealistic learning objectives. The impetus for this change in orientation is the need for cross-cultural encounters in present day globalised world. Terms like 'cultural mediators', 'border crossers', 'negotiators of meaning', 'intercultural speakers' and 'language learners as Ethnographers' used to refer to foreign language learners have become very fashionable in the literature related to foreign language teaching. A close examination of the meaning and implications of each of these terms reveals both the breadth and depth of agreement about the importance of integrating culture in foreign language teaching. However, the array of approaches, methods and techniques used in teaching culture have echoed deep differences among foreign language teachers, educationists and syllabus designers' understanding of the concept of culture. The obvious beginning therefore is to start with a definition of the terms culture, intercultural competence and ethnography.

Language learning inevitably implies culture learning because language and culture are intrinsically related. Putting it differently, "Culture is not learned as language is, yet language is not learned until culture is" (Swiderski, 1993, p. 06). Following this line of thought, if one believes that

learning a foreign language equips learners with a form of life, it follows that this form of life can never be free of culture.

The relationship between teaching a language and teaching culture has been exhaustively investigated and many linguists expressed the firm belief that the primary aim of foreign language teaching is to equip learners with the necessary skills, attitudes and knowledge that will enable them to function as intercultural speakers (Corbett, 2003) in intercultural encounters. In Byram's terms, to enable the learners to "see and manage the relationships between themselves and their own cultural beliefs, behaviours and meanings, as expressed in a foreign language, and those of their interlocutor's, expressed in the same language – or even a combination of languages" (1997, p. 12). Accordingly, the aim of foreign language teaching is to develop knowledge, awareness and understanding of how the learners' native world relates to that of the target community.

Definition of Culture

Culture is not the property of foreign language teaching; it is the object of study of many other disciplines. This can be seen in the array of definitions in the literature about culture. Providing a comprehensive definition thereof goes beyond the scope of the current paper. Instead, it will consider a view of culture mainly from an ethnographic perspective and the many meaning-oriented dimensions it displays in order to highlight its relevance to teaching foreign languages.

From an ethnographic stance, culture is generally seen as what members of a given society share in common i.e. their history, language and worldview. It refers to the various practices in which members of a given social group engage in in the course of their daily lives. These practices are constantly changing in accordance with the changing roles and needs of the participants in the society they live in. In the words of Goodenough,

As I see it, a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves. Culture, being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist of the end product of learning: knowledge, in a most general, if relative, sense of the term. ...we should note that culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behaviour, or emotions. It is rather an organisation of these things. It is the form of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them. As such, the things people say and do, their social arrangements and events, are products or by-products of their cultures – they apply it to the task of perceiving and dealing with their circumstances (Goodenough, 1964, p. 36).

Inherent to this cognitive view of culture is the idea that that culture must be learned and is different from the biological endowment one is born with. Culture is a system of socially acquired knowledge. This knowledge includes the “know-how” and “know-that” which members of a particular social group must learn in order to function therein.

Hall (1973) refers to culture as “the way of life of a people ... the sum of their learned behaviour patterns, attitudes, and material things” (p. 20). Hence, anything that relates to a way of life of people has a cultural nature. It is a mould in which members of a society are cast, and it controls their day-to-day lives in various ways.

A more detailed definition is given by Moran (2001, p. 24) who argues that “culture is the evolving way of life of a group of persons, consisting of a shared set of practices associated with a shared set of products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world, and set within specific social contexts.” Culture, for him, has five dimensions: products, practices, perspectives, communities and persons. Accordingly, culture should be seen as a way of life shaped by various factors.

Spradley (1980) defines culture as “the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behaviour” (p. 6). Brown (2000) had this to say about culture, “It is a system of integrated patterns, most of which remain below the threshold of consciousness, yet all of which govern human behaviour just as surely as the manipulated strings of a puppet control its motions” (p. 177). In this regard, culture is an ingrained set of behaviours and modes of perception.

Following these definitions, culture is not something one is born with but rather something one learns/explores as a result of his/her belonging to a given society. In this paper, the term culture is used to refer to the totality of thoughts, experiences, and patterns of behaviour specific to a particular society and the concepts, values, and assumptions about life that guide behaviour of members of that society.

Ethnography

In ethnography, Language and culture are closely related. On the one hand, language is seen as being part and parcel of culture; on the other hand, language is seen as the medium through which culture is expressed. This interconnectedness between language and culture is best depicted by Agar (1994, p. 28) who wrote that: “Culture is in language and language is loaded with culture”. Put differently, language is a product of culture and by the same token has a cultural nature. This view is parallel to that expressed by Galisson (1991, p. 119) who believes that language and culture are naturally bound up and that “they are the reciprocal and compulsory reflection of each other (Translated by the author of this paper). Galisson’s point of departure was

semantics. He was more oriented towards the study of culture in relation to lexicography. He believes that culture is contained in the vocabulary of a language.

As a qualitative research method in anthropology, ethnography has won a wide currency in educational research and is "characterized by first-hand, naturalistic, sustained observation and participation in a particular social setting. Ethnography as defined in different cultural anthropological studies refers to "the study of 'other' people and the social and cultural patterns that give meaning to their lives" (Barro, Jordan and Roberts, 1998, p. 76). Spradley (1980) defined ethnography as "the work of describing a culture" (p. 5). Seen from such a perspective, the essence of ethnography requires the researcher to immerse in a group, to observe it closely, to collect information about it, to describe it in detail and finally to interpret the facts. An ethnographer's research "involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p.1). The job of ethnographers in this sense can be squeezed into the following: "They have a culture out there and their job is to come back and tell us what it is" Geertz (1973).

The purpose of ethnography is "to come to a deeper understanding of how individuals view and participate in their own social and cultural worlds" (Harklau 2005, p. 179). Following Hymes, ethnography is about learning "the meanings, norms and patterns of a way of life" (1980: 98). In sum, ethnographers seek to understand "how things get done, what meanings they have" in the life of members of a given society (Roberts, 2002, p. 35). Ethnography, in this sense, involves both description, interpretation and understanding of a group's day-to-day experience from both an emic and an etic perspective (Creswell, 1998, p. 60). Underlying such a perspective is the premise that "people may construct meaning in different ways" (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Inherent to such a view is the idea that through ethnographic research, researchers seek to suspend judgments, stereotypes and interpretations of behaviours following their native culture and to construct an image of the social and cultural worlds of the culture they are studying (Thornton & Garrett, 1995).

Germane to this discussion is a reflection on the views of an ethnographic approach to teaching culture in foreign language classrooms. The basic aim of such an approach which originated in cultural anthropology is cultural interpretation, i.e., an ethnography oriented approach explains how events and details of experience represent, in Geertz's terms (1973), "webs of meaning" which, like texts, are something to be interpreted.

An Ethnographic Approach to Teaching Culture

Ethnography in foreign language teaching is seen not as a source of material for teachers, but as a methodology to be adopted by the learners in order to learn about the foreign language culture. As a process approach to teaching culture, it repositions learners as researchers and teachers as facilitators. Following ethnographic methodology, the learners look at culture through an ethnographer's lens. They make use of ethnographic techniques such as observations, description and interpretation of the "behavioural repertoire" of a given society to generate new knowledge. This new look at old phenomena enables them to develop an analytical understanding (Corbett, 2003) of other social groups' systems of meaning which, in turn, enables them to function appropriately in intercultural encounters. Ethnographic methodology considers that culture learning involves far more than mere superficial descriptions of facts and behaviour; it involves observation and interpretation of behaviour, and how members of the target group interpret it.

Traditional approaches (Seelye, 1993; Stern, 1983, 1992) to teaching culture have treated the learners as empty bottles to be filled to the brim with knowledge about the target culture of little relevance or importance to learning a target language culture. Teaching culture accordingly was often equated with imparting information about the natives' patterned behaviour. In brief, "students are taught about culture; they are not taught how to interact with culture" (Crawford-Lange & Lange, 1984, p. 145) and, above all, they are required to absorb large numbers of unchallenged facts about the target culture.

Given the fact that culture is a social practice (Kramsch, 1993) and the mediatory role of language in its social construction (Kramsch, 1996), the need for a process approach is necessary. This approach foregoes gathering bits and pieces of information about the target culture and sees culture as a process enveloped in uncertainties the learners may experience and process. 'It stimulates the process of exploring, describing and understanding an unknown culture by means of actual ethnographic enquiry, contrastive analysis of real cultural groups' (Damen, 1987, pp. 54 – 56). The basic aim is to help the learners develop skills to explore culture, question culturally based assumptions, think critically with reference to cultural norms and cope with misunderstandings in cross-cultural encounters. The teaching of culture accordingly should "go beyond training for the predictable to preparation for the unpredictable" (Byram, Esarte-Saries, & Taylor, 1991, p. 8). The implementation of an ethnographic approach is meant to develop in the learners the following skills (Beers, 2001).

1. The ability to see culture as a process rather than a product,
2. The ability to understand the ways local and daily life behaviours and practices in the target culture relate to more wider social, political and economic aspects of the culture

3. The ability to use the information gained from ethnographic study in order to reflect on and compare to one's own cultural norms and patterns that constitute one's own culture.
4. The ability to write an interpretation of the cultural event under study and to mediate between different cultural interpretations of events.

This approach is modelled mainly following ethnographic techniques namely, observation, description and interpretation. Accordingly, teachers should not limit themselves to giving information about different aspects of the target culture; their job is to enable the learners to observe, describe, and interpret these aspects and to compare them to those found in their native culture. Their main concern is to find answers to how, why and what the native speakers do or say and how all these differ from their own ways of thinking, acting and saying things. This is because "one of the major handicaps of students learning to conceptualise a foreign culture is the fact that they have not learnt to conceptualise their own" (Kramsch, 1988, p. 80). More importantly, because of the interaction between the native and target cultures, the learners will free themselves from their cultural assumptions about the world and the other and will be able to occupy what Kramsch (1993) calls a 'third place' which is more than a mere sum of its parts. This third place will help the learners broaden their notion of cultural identity and develop linguistically, culturally, and intellectually. According to her, culture is conflict; it is a "struggle between the learners' meanings and those of the native speakers". Hence, mere transmission of cultural facts about the target language culture is useless. Instead, she claims that understanding a foreign language culture involves observation and interpretation of the target culture, analysis of how the native culture interacts with the target culture, comparison of norms of meaning making processes in both native and target cultures and acceptance of differences between the two. Consequently, the learners will develop self-awareness, a deep understanding of the relationship between language and culture (Rosaldo, 1993) and the skills to negotiate meaning using a third frame of reference in addition to the native and the target frames. Nevertheless, how does this ethnographic theorising translate into actual classroom practices? To answer this question, support is to be sought within the field of visual media.

The use of visual media in the study of cultural processes of a particular society has become a common practice among anthropologists and ethnographers. More importantly, many scholars call upon foreign language teachers to adopt ethnographic rather than historical approaches in dealing with the target language culture (Kramsch, 1996).

Multimedia and advanced telecommunication technology has brought deep changes to the contexts of teaching a foreign language culture worldwide. As a result, the aim is no longer to enable learners to gain knowledge about the

target language culture but to equip them with the necessary skills to explore the target culture. One possible way is to teach them ethnographic skills that will enable them to discover and explore the native speakers' meaning making processes and the ways they interpret their social reality. Through practice of basic ethnographic skills like ethnographic projects, ethnographic interviewing and the use of ethnographic material, learners will have much to gain by becoming more aware of both the target language culture social reality and their own.

The bad news is that ethnography requires doing participant observation which requires complete immersion and participation in the action and context of a social group. However, many, if not all, Algerian learners of English, albeit for various reasons mainly financial ones, cannot afford to sojourn in an English speaking country for a period of time long enough to practice ethnographic skills. Consequently, ethnographic techniques can only be applied in the target culture naturalistic environments. However, since the aim is not to produce professional ethnographer or to advance research in other disciplines, the need to break with this convention and to reconceptualise the very concept of ethnography is necessary in the Algerian context. The aim of such a reconceptualization is to give the learners the opportunity to engage in ethnographic studies in their home culture. One possible way to do so is to connect students to the target language and culture in the world outside the classroom by transforming foreign language classrooms into ethnographic sites using videos (films). Miller and Slater (2000, p.58) state that "media provides the means of interaction and modes of representation that add up to spaces or places that participants can treat as if they were real."

One possible way to assist in the implementation of the suggested approach is the 'movie video'. By movie video is meant "materials that are originally produced in a given language for a native-speaking audience of that language, and not for learners of the language as a foreign language" (Garza, 1991, p. 241). This is particularly useful in teaching culture within language because it helps promote the learners' appreciation of the diversity that exists between their native culture and the English culture. Movie videos are powerful vehicles for teaching students conceptual flexibility and ability to shift perspectives (Gallos, 1993). Movies are the mirror of society and reflect a society's culture (Steel, 1990 cited in Atamna, 2008). It also gives the learners the opportunity to enter an intercultural space while learning English. The extra-linguistic features such as facial expressions and gestures used by native speakers can promote the learners' comprehension. The language spoken in films is not only authentic but is also used in different cultural contexts. More importantly, the use of movies may contribute to enhance the often neglected skill, namely, listening comprehension (listening is in many ways an undervalued skill: no module is designed to teach this skill.) In brief, it helps to

enhance communication competence, reduce stereotypes, and develop cultural sensitivity.

Although videos cannot substitute for actual observation on the site, still they can nurture understanding and develop cultural sensitivity. "Learning about stereotypes, ethnocentrism, discrimination, and acculturation in the abstract can be flat and uninspiring. But if we experience intercultural contact with our eyes and ears, we begin to understand it" (Summerfield 1993, p. 1). According to Wildner-Basset (1997), movie videos can be a means for "decreasing cultural and social distances" between foreign language learners and the target culture and native speakers.

One possible way to do that is through introducing the learners to ethnographic fieldwork. This can be done through lecturing the learners about the techniques of ethnographic analysis. Possible ways of using ethnographic techniques in teaching culture through movie videos are listed below.

1. First, the learners are given a worksheet. The worksheet may include the following:
 - a. A brief description of the plot of the video in the form of two to three sentences. The description is supposed to increase the entertaining nature of the film not to decrease it,
 - b. A list of the names of the characters in the video to help the learners to be familiar with each character,
 - c. A list of difficult words, necessary in understanding different exchanges in the movie are put in sentences to enable the learners to infer their meanings.
2. Depending on the learners' level, the teacher may choose subtitled videos to reduce the learners' anxiety with regard to the complexity of the language.
3. Depending on the learners' level, the teacher may choose to present the entire movie video or to select particular scenes from a selected movie video.
4. The teacher shows the video and depending on the learners' level, the selected scenes can be repeated in the classroom.
5. The teacher can give introductory synopsis on the cultural aspect to be observed prior to viewing the video.
6. The teacher may assign some selected movies to groups of students as project assignment and ask them to do ethnographic analysis.

Depending on the strategy to be adopted by the teacher, the learners are presented with a video that depicts some social aspects of the target culture, a cultural event or a cultural practice and will attempt to observe it in a way similar to a participant observer in the field. They will have to look at culture from a spectator's position and reflect critically and objectively on the cultural content of the video. They will have to answer the questions "What do/did you see? What is /was happening?" This will enable the learners to reflect on the target culture and one's own culture. This observation phase is followed during

the second viewing by requiring the learners to give an ethnographic account of the scene they observed. Their task consists of describing others and their points of view. The learners will have to answer the question "How does this relate to your lives?" which will lead them to talk about the feelings and thoughts they have during the observation phase. The aim is to write a descriptive-explanatory-interpretive account of the scene. This may help the learners understand the implicit dimensions of the target culture which for an insider remain unsaid (implied) but understood and for an outsider unsaid and thereby unintelligible. This of course requires the learners to possess some observation skills that enable them to engage in a given activity and at the same time to observe both self and the Other and thus they become both the researchers and researched.

The observation phase is followed by a general discussion of the descriptions produced by the students. This discussion focusses on the possible ambiguity inherent in cross-cultural encounters. The aim is to distinguish between patterns of behaviour that are culturally motivated and others that are not. Once the cultural aspect is identified, the students give their own assessment of the cultural differences they observed by answering questions of the following type: Why is there a problem? Is there a cultural event? How do you react to that? To answer these questions, the students attempt to speculate on the possible reasons behind the differences between their culture and the target culture by addressing questions of the following type:

Why do you think you react in this way?

Why do you think you perceive this as a problem/ not a problem? and

What can the people in the situation do about the problem?

The whole discussion may be culminated by answering the question "How do you plan to deal with situations like that?" (Auerbach and Wallerstein, 1987). In the course of each discussion, the learners will develop skills to investigate culture, question cultural assumptions, develop critical thinking with respect to cultural norms, and cope with the misunderstanding in cross-cultural encounters. In brief, students are the ones who "name the problem, understand how it applies to them, determine the causes of the problem, generalize to others, and finally, suggest alternatives or solutions to the problem" (Wallerstein, 1983, p. 17).

Within this approach, there is a collaboration at work between teachers and learners in the process of exploring culture. The teachers are assigned the role of facilitators only. The learners, according to this approach, have the task to observe, describe, interpret and practice cultural phenomena presented within their classrooms. That is, the learners are engaged in a process of meaning negotiation through which they explore different plausible

understandings of cultural events and at the same time explore themselves in the process of culture learning (Menard-Warwick, 2005).

In a foreign language classroom run according to an ethnographic approach, the learners' main task is to look for the cultural meanings inherent in peoples' behaviour be it linguistic or cultural. They are no longer passive recipients of knowledge; they are negotiators of meaning. Looking at culture from an ethnographer's perspective will enable them to decentre themselves from their native culture and become intercultural speakers. Following the above steps, teachers can make of video movies the learners' only 'boarding pass' to "enter into the ongoing social negotiation of what it is to be a member of a given culture at a particular time" (Corbett 2003: 181). In addition, since video movies are "the dominant forms or modes through which people experience the world" (Ryan and Kellner 2005, p. 213), the learners will be able to find out how native speakers see themselves, their own social groups and those out-side their cultures. Consequently, the learners "will learn to communicate verbally and non-verbally as their language store and language skills develop" (Shumin, 1997, p.6).

To round off, once the learners are presented with some aspects of the target culture through a video, their job is to observe, analyse and describe these aspects and thus they become involved in the target culture. Their answers to the various questions will enable them to develop an awareness of both the target and native cultures. Consequently, they are no longer empty bottles to be filled to the brim with knowledge about the target culture; they are constructing knowledge.

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