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CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

The fact that the world is divided into numerous languages and cultures was made more acknowledgeable due to social and political developments in late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Recent world events have created such an unprecedented global situation that there is always the challenge of not taking seriously different cultures around us or even addressing easy judgements to them. Therefore, foreign language teachers need to take into account that today a special emphasis is placed on the foreign language classroom where ethnic and cultural differences should always be at issue and both the teachers and students should be aware and at ease with their own cultural differences and never strive to sameness though they are teaching and learning one and the same culture and its language, in this case English. Entering a foreign language classroom they both will have to recognize that neither the mother tongue, nor the foreign language is universal and neither is the world view they implicitly transmit. The teacher himself/herself faces the need to deal with a wide range of individuals in ways that will engage them whatever their cultural identity, background or initial attitudes. Grounds for motivation should be sought more within these diverse individuals than external factors. The quality of language acquisition should firstly be grounded on the individual speech culture and on the speech culture of the society the individual represents and only secondly on the target language. Therefore the classroom is an appropriate place to explore alternative perceptions of socio-psycho-cultural realities.

Whatever the teacher's cultural preference in human relations, the process of teaching a foreign language involves being aware that human beings should relate to each other despite the cultural differences meanwhile coping with the difficulty of encountering difference through analysis, discussion, imagination and creativity. This is really essential in a foreign language classroom but is impossible without the student's sense and awareness of his own (initial or original) cultural and linguistic identity which should always be encouraged by the teacher. The English language (or any other foreign language) should not be performed on students but sought to be inspired on the basis of the student's own cultural and linguistic consciousness. The success of acquisition of

the target language greatly depends on the student's own cultural awareness and the teacher's ability to see and find new directions, perspectives and stimulating concepts to follow. The initial communicative competence of those involved in the lesson is very important too.

Cultural interaction itself assumes distinct cultural difference or, logically, consciousness of difference is the product of interaction, inquiring into national phenomena with an awareness of the international connectedness. Accordingly any search for original difference stimulates cultural and linguistic interaction. (That a comparative approach crossing national boundaries necessitates the acquisition of additional linguistic and cultural competence and skills, is another question.)

In our case the reference is not only to students who are bearers of one culture but also to the ones who are bilingual or even multilingual. In terms of language learning it is helpful to recognize that such internalized language(s) and their implicit cultural projections are the result of some arbitrary circumstances, i.e. such learners have shaped their original cultural (multicultural) awareness under specific circumstances. Only after fully realizing their own (no matter which and how many) cultural and linguistic awareness will they be able to readily encounter someone else's, in this case the English language and its cultural realities. Once one understands his own culture, he will see that all cultures share certain arbitrary differences and will be able to put cultural relativity to work by assessing each situation on its own terms. The new sets of English language and new associations connected with it are starting to function not in a cultural vacuum, but in the frames and on the basis of one's own cultural awareness in the process of projecting the familiar into English. The better the learner's experience and knowledge of his own culture(s) and language(s), the better will he be able to generate alternatives and evaluate them in different contexts of the target language. Any language expression taken out of the own culture's context may not work until the assumptions on which they are based are made explicit and the act of being aware of at least one culture is promising on the way to a better foreign language acquisition. In becoming aware of unconscious associations in the original culture and mother tongue is to see what they are in a new way from the point of view of a new culture, in the process of viewing such inescapable associations in acquiring a new language.

The materials that appear to meet the above requirements facilitating the cultural awareness and analytical and imaginative participation of individual teachers and students in the learning process more successfully are those of

narrative, descriptive, and suasive (argumentative) discourses which are nowadays most frequently presented in language arts and foreign language textbooks. Our approach supposes the application of the above discourses as a means of stimulating the students' initial cultural consciousness with the aim of achieving multicultural awareness and a better acquisition of the English language. The following basic goals of the above mentioned discourses can be mentioned:

- This is what happened: narrative.
- This is the look/sound/value of something: descriptive.
- This is the cause of certain phenomena and accomplishment of some tasks based on different approaches: argumentative.

The study of the discourses should be based and linked with the notion of likeness (comparison) versus unlikeness (contrast) to a certain extent and can be applied both in oral and written practice.

Narration is thought to be the most universal genre as all cultures have storytelling traditions and so there is some basic universal template for the narrative. Not only symilarities but the existing differences may also be focused on and discussed. The study of English narratives shows that they usually begin with traditional orientations which reveal how syntax can be used to establish the story world. To realize this aim copula sentences (use of *be*), presentatives (*there is, there are* sentences) and identifying (descriptive) clauses are often used. Identifying the hero, the goal, the problem, the narrative goes to working out the problem(s) through a set of action clauses. The concluding part is usually moralistic based on universal human values which helps representatives of different cultures summarize or evaluate the story's relevance nearly in the same way. Evaluative comments involve the audience more fully and actively in cooperative storytelling. The result of this is a successful verbal expression of individual appreciation and its use in telling sequences of their own.

Descriptions, both emotional and technical, seem to engage students immediately (providing they are not too long) and stimulate their interest to known and unknown experiences and surroundings. While reading and comprehending a piece of writing, people consciously or subconsciously are getting to know something new. So the goal of descriptive discourse is to acquaint new users of the language not only with certain cultural things that the author knows and the learner doesn't, but also with certain ways and forms of verbal expression. Certain types of syntactic structures are acquired from descriptions. For example many copula sentences (*be* link), relative clauses,

prepositional and adverbial clauses, presentatives and descriptive adjectives of different qualities (shape, colour, size, value, etc.) are common. After studying thoroughly the language and style of descriptions, students can be given assignments to describe certain types of things, people or actions in the frames of the corresponding cultural perception of their own and the associations they arouse in them. They know more about themselves and their relationships with the world, so even when they are creating their own descriptions in English, the focus is on themselves and the reflection of the new experiences and unknown people can be found within their personal cultural selves.

Argumentation has often been defined as the process of supporting or weakening another statement whose validity is questionable or contentious. Aiming at the audience the author openly or in a "concealed" way shares his attitudes and experiences with them. The structure of argumentative text is even more flexible than the previously described ones. However, there is much explanation of cases, outline of the argument, proof, refutation, problem solving; including effects, causes, possible solutions, the assessment of solutions, the prediction of side effects, and the suggestion of one or some combination of elements as the best solution. Speakers and writers use more initial purpose clauses (*to do this...*) and clauses or sentences stating facts in this discourse than in other forms of speech organization. *In order to..., If you want to, you must...* clauses state a subgoal or subproblem within a context and follow it with a solution. Such clauses guide the learner to look for a solution in the next clause. Speech acts follow each other in order that is determined by the writer and mostly corresponds to the logical sequence of unfolding situations or events. There are many other variants (individual, alternative) that form the argumentative discourse. Though generally there is a connection between the discourse type and the choice of particular morphological and syntactic units, writers and speakers select certain individual and functional stylistic forms (speech varieties or registers) more often than not to carry out their narration, description or argument. Examining some genres of writing which are particularly popular today (essays, travel writing, memories, documentary fiction), one can easily find several patterns for organizing argumentative discourse in written prose. Interestingly enough, due to a number of common (universal) extralinguistic factors and all-human values that underlie the above mentioned genres of writing, many such patterns exist not only in the target language but in the native one(s) as well. The author (the teacher and students as well) is either a proponent of a position (pro) or an opponent (con). The

arguments or solutions put forward by him carry out a persuasive function. More often than not trying to sound objective, the author is trying to conceal his motivation to propagate, but in all cases this bias to hide a certain orientation is always discernable by the reader. Sometimes the author sounds too categorical, showing that alternative solutions are unacceptable. The author's attitudes are expressed in certain patterns:

1. Only one point of view is presented and no refutation is given.
2. A refutation of some known argument is given.
3. The author may choose to reject some points of view and accept another or some combinations of them all.
4. First comes the opposition's arguments, followed by the author's counterarguments.
5. The argument involves the questioning, but not direct refuting of the opposition's argument.
6. Refuting all the arguments of the opponent (not giving his own) and leaving the conclusion to the reader.
7. The argument does not contain any refutation but shows disagreement from the same camp.
8. With the aim of refuting the opponent's argument present it in a "favourable" light with a tone of sarcasm.

While discussing arguments, some other original patterns may appear, but on the whole, in order to follow the argument elements, the learners must identify the type of pattern, locate the author's major claims and assumptions, locate the opposition's arguments, note concessions and direct refutations, read the author's tone (sarcastic, humourous or serious). The second step is to start discussions and conversations with the addition of their own viewpoints, which are always the result of a certain cultural awareness and social and ethnic mentality and have been stimulated through the argumentative discourse of the target language. While discussing materials of argumentative discourse, students tend to find out a lot of cultural similarities and differences. During argumentative debates and discussions they not only learn how the debate is progressing in English through definite rules, structures, but also discover how similar or different they are as compared with those in their languages. Thus, the same argumentation (in English) is accomplished in different ways in different cultures.

The success of the learning process can be easily judged on how the argumentation and counterargumentation is accomplished. Interestingly, face-to-

face argumentation always engages students more actively than other choices. They enthusiastically concede or reject the author's, the teacher's or one another's arguments, using both the author's and their own theoretical and empiric knowledge and vocabulary. The author's or the teacher's highly structured and sophisticated arguments are sometimes dropped for more emotional responses from the side of the students.

All the above discourses reflecting the intentions and goals of the writer and speaker, work successfully on the basis of cultural awareness in certain non-traditional unique genres of writing (science fiction, detective fiction, travel writing, autobiographies, diaries, documentary fiction) that seem to engage students more immediately than the traditional choices but have been long kept away from English departments. American researchers have suggested that national ethnocentrism, strongly reinforced since the middle decades of XX century by World War II and the Cold War, expected literature as taught at schools and universities to promote a sense of national identity and greatness. Genres of writing which did not readily serve such ends tended to be neglected as "inferior". As the world started evolving rapidly from such concepts, the late 1990s rediscovered these genres of writing rich in cultural, historical and linguistic insights and drew on them as a source of teaching material and activities. Now it has become evident that the so-called neglected genres represent and provide insights into historical and contemporary issues in the society, that much concerning the language and the society can be learnt from the genres and that the application of that kind of material to the EFL classroom can really be a success.

All human groups tend to see themselves in the center of the world. This is the root notion of Us as a basis for comparison allowing us to become conscious of who we are as opposed to one or more Thems. We are unique and different from anybody else in the world but at the same time we have so many things in common. This notion is clearly expressed in a modern literary tradition: **Science Fiction** which is regarded as Literature of Cognitive Estrangement. This literary genre commonly uses techniques both from the realistic and the fantastic traditions of narrative to tell a story of which a referent, implicit or explicit, is the mind-set, the mythos of modern world. The origin of the imagery, the motive of the narrative is to be found in the contents, assumptions and views of the modern world. Its living art is connected to the central concerns of the society and has a social and intellectual function. The intellectual content and moral function are equally essential elements of this "clever" fiction. Today

Science Fiction is qualified as "a modern fairy tale" or "mythology of the modern world" and as in fairy tales and mythology the discourses of narration and description play an important role in it. A great deal of Science Fiction goes beyond escapism - in order to inspire new visions for the recreation of the present and future. During the short history of existence (from its Golden Age of 1937 to the New Wave in 1960s, flourishing feminist Science Fiction in late 60s and 70s, Cyberpunk Movement in 80s and Ribofunk at the beginning of the second millenium), Science Fiction has for decades imagined encounters with the alien, alternative history, alternate or parallel worlds, thought experiments in physiology, psychology, sciences, experimental model of society. And like in fairly tales of all nations, Evil is always defeated here. At this particular moment in history contemporary technology is placing us in contact with others all over the world. Therefore we are necessarily more aware of cultural differences and of the nature of our own cultural position. This historical situation thus places a special emphasis on the foreign language classroom which is a privileged place of encounter with the Other. Not only are we confronted with the need to understand the language, but we have an even greater need to appreciate the multiple cultural realities that make any language at least comprehensible and at best beautiful.

As to **Detective Fiction** from its invention by Edgar Allan Poe to its reshaping by Chandler and its reinvention by Mosley it has always attracted the attention of not only literary critics but linguists as well. The focus in this genre is on the way in which the form moved from the one interested in ratiocination (the process of methodological reasoning) to focusing on the problem of the lone hero, trying to maintain his decency in a world of injustice, concepts of justice versus revenge and the role of expression and repression are considered. The traditional values of vice and virtue are common for all cultures and form a good basis for analytical discussion. The discourses of narration and description are widely reflected in the genre and represent a good piece of English literary language with a variety of structural forms.

Autobiographies, Diaries, Memories are genres of personal history. This concept of the genre allows us to bring side by side notions which are rich in cultural, linguistic, social insights but have long been kept apart by the English Departments. The prevailing tradition asserts that autobiographies for which diaries and memories are merely one format of recording, are qualitatively different from fiction. They all imply to traditional thinkers factuality, a reliable record of someone's life from the person's own view. On reflection, however,

we soon realize that every writer in this genre relies on selecting certain events and perspectives among a longer array. The genre is a contract between a writer and a reader and as such has its terms, i.e. its own rules and canons. Though personal, they always aim at some kind of audience, deal with the interest of each person. The richer and more emotive the author's style, the greater public demand and satisfaction will be. Due to the ability to share opinions with the reader, they attract a great deal of public attention. In short, genres of personal history with the juxtaposition of fact and fiction, is a good field for linguistic study and can be successfully applied to the ESL classroom.

Travel Writing is a literary form that expresses the traveller's attempt to define himself and his homeland through the mirror of another land. Combining two forms of education - fictional and scientific, it reports the reader about the economic potential, political prospects, ethnic conflicts, wars and terrors, culture and history, thus emulating its goal to integrate diverse forms of observation into a complex whole. The appreciation deepens the general capacity of observers to understand foreign cultures not only as curiosities but as meaningful totalities. Indeed, this is a leap in accuracy, a meeting of science and art, a combination of lyrical appreciation and scientific precision, of fact and fiction in describing peoples, cultures, developments. Message and impact are the two dominant categories for the experience of Travel Writing. Travel Writing documents a circulation of cultures, a process of socialization that is called "transculturation". As to Travel Writing in the context of teaching English, it is really a good means for a teacher coming to a FL classroom for carrying out the task of culturally reopening the "acculturated" minds. The proliferation of the genre at present leads to its inclusion in educational syllabi, testifying to a serious and larger cultural diversity. Travel Writing encourages analytical and imaginative participation of teachers and students in the learning process and offers a source of language and cultural materials through which to explore a wide range of classroom materials and activities, including role playing improvisations and discussions of the first attempts of students travel narration.

The Essay in our days reflects persons, facts and events taken from real life. All the above discourses are widely represented in it aiming at more lasting, hence at a slower effect. The style of essays is both logical and creative. It is not proof, it is representation based on the author's experience which then becomes the experience of those who are reading the story. The key note to the essay and the engine of the plot progress is the author's personality, exploration of his ideas, i.e. the authorical "I". His comment, estimation and evaluation various in

stylistic forms, make the essence of the essay. His logical argumentation and images, to be more exact, is the reason for its expressiveness and power and realizes a certain communicative purpose. The stylistic contradictions of scientific (intellective, informative)-fictional, message-impact, fact-fiction, objective-subjective, logical-emotive, direct-figurative, colloquial-bookish and the public basis make it a perfect means of studying a foreign language. The various themes: Motherland (the voice of the land is in our language), Family (family stories and their lasting effect), Education (changing through learning), Society (making a social commitment), Community (reaching out to the community), Culture (understanding diverse cultures), Politics (reflection of us or not) and many others are not only full of linguistic insights but also indicate to the direct relation of language and the social context. They are steps into the logic of speech and the public world of our society, teaching individuals that becoming part of a group is a way of working with others to make positive change. Together, individuals affect society and find purpose in their own lives as well. And this can be achieved through learning a new language, through discovering and preserving one's own cultural identity in the context of a new culture, through stimulating alternative perceptions of socio-psycho-cultural realities.

Thus, a foreign language can become a matrix for inviting initial linguistic and cultural awareness which in its turn stimulates the acquisition of the target language. The process of encountering a new language involves serious awareness of one's own culture and education in the broadest sense.

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