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Through Drama and Ethnography

Edited by Michael Byram and Michael Fleming

Excerpt

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## Introduction

Michael Byram and Michael Fleming

### Culture and language learning

The purpose of this collection of chapters is to enrich our understanding of the nature of language learning and the potential of language teaching. The chapters focus on the fact that in learning another language students are exposed to, and inevitably learn something about, one or more other societies and their cultural practices. The nature of the learning, the desirability of such learning and the ways in which it can be shaped by particular teaching strategies are some of the concerns shared by all the contributors, whatever their starting point and perspective. Their perspectives include different national and international viewpoints, different disciplines and different degrees of emphasis on teaching and learning. Moreover, as our sub-title suggests, there are two themes which cut across these varied perspectives: ‘drama’ and ‘ethnography’.

The former arises from a deliberate attempt on the part of the editors to take a new look at drama in language learning and consider the potential for cultural as well as linguistic learning. This was done through an international seminar at which the papers were not simply presented, but part of a very practical and exciting workshop. We hope some of the flavour of the workshop will be conserved by putting the papers in a separate section.

The presence of ‘ethnography’ was not planned deliberately, but the fact that it is to be found in a number of chapters is an indication of how the focus on cultural learning has led a number of language teachers and researchers independently to an appropriate new source of ideas and inspiration. Ethnography is the methodology originally developed by anthropologists and later adopted by other disciplines as a means of understanding the cultural practices, meanings and beliefs of unfamiliar social groups. When language teaching begins to take seriously the concept of learning a language as the means of communication and interaction with people of another society and culture,

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it is not surprising that it turns to ethnography to provide a 'thick description' (Geertz 1975) of a context in which the language is used. Some of our contributors also show that ethnography can be a method which learners themselves can acquire in order to develop their understanding of other contexts and other languages in context.

The concern with the cultural dimension in language learning is not a new one. It is evident in the history of *Landeskunde* in Germany and *civilisation* in France. It was part of the post-1945 development of audio-lingual and audio-visual methods in the USA and Western Europe, particularly in France (Steele and Suozzo 1994; Puren 1988). This remained, however, unsatisfactory because there was a tendency to separate the learning of a language as a grammatical system from the provision of information about one or more countries where it is spoken. Learning the grammar of a language remained the important focus and the rest was 'background', to use the term common among British language teachers (Byram 1991). It is only as a result of a greater emphasis on language learning for communication and, even more importantly, social interaction, that it has become evident in recent decades that a fresh perspective was necessary.

If communication is to be successful, the people involved need to share the same referential meaning of the words they are using. When this is the case, they can send messages to each other through the medium of a given language, and particularly when they are at a distance and using the written language, they can assume that an efficient exchange of information has taken place. However, when the exchange of information takes place in face to face interaction, it becomes more evident that communication is not merely an exchange of information. There, the people involved have a number of social identities (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985). These identities bind them to particular social groups and their cultural practices. The language is not merely a means of reference to what is in an objective world, but also carries the shared connotations and associations which help to maintain a speaker's sense of belonging to particular social groups.

When people interact in a language which is foreign to at least one of them, the shared meanings and values it carries for those involved cannot be taken for granted in the way they are when those involved are from the same language group. Learning a language as it is spoken by a particular group is learning the shared meanings, values and practices of that group as they are embodied in the language. However, precisely because they are shared and only made explicit when there is a breakdown of communication and interaction, learners find it difficult to discern them and understand their significance. Only after a process of discovering those meanings and practices can learners negotiate and

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create a new reality with their interlocutors, one which is new to both learners and interlocutors, a shared world of interaction and experience.

The contributions to this volume are all concerned with the ways in which language learners need to go beyond the acquisition of a linguistic system, and language teachers need to find new ways to help them do so. This makes language learning and teaching more demanding than ever. The more we understand about the nature of language and its function in society, the more the task becomes complex and difficult. Yet, as these chapters will demonstrate, there are new approaches and methods being developed, where language teachers are prepared to go beyond the traditional reference disciplines of applied linguistics and psychology.

We do not propose to go any further in tracing the developments in language teaching and learning within which this volume lies. The purpose of this introduction is to focus on some of the conceptual issues which form a framework for it. We shall do so by starting from the perspective of the English education system. For although there is common ground and mutual influence from one language teaching situation to another, conceptual developments and curriculum changes are never context-free, and it is better to relate an analysis to a specific case in which more general changes are realised and their significance revealed.

### **‘Cultural awareness’: an example from the English National Curriculum<sup>1</sup>**

The statement of the educational aims of ‘modern foreign language teaching’ within compulsory education is similar to what can be found in policy documents in many countries. Most of the aims are familiar to the language teaching profession, and they can be divided roughly into four categories:

- those which focus on the development of *practical communication skills*;
- those which focus on an understanding and *awareness of language*, and how languages are learnt;
- those which encourage *positive attitudes towards* and *understanding of* speakers of foreign languages and their way of life;
- those of a *general nature* which develop learning skills and capacities which are also found in other subjects in the school curriculum.

<sup>1</sup> We refer here only to England since the situation is different in other parts of the United Kingdom, where each country has its own education system.

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What is particularly interesting and new, however, is the introduction of an educational aim which turns learners' attention back onto themselves and the way of life which they take for granted and seldom question:

to develop pupils' understanding of themselves and their own way of life (DES 1990:3)

This is a major innovation, in England at least, because language teaching is for the first time explicitly stated to have what might be called a 'reflexive impact', a focus on learners' own culture and not just a view outwards to other cultures.

This was the consequence of proposals by a working group who use the phrase 'cultural awareness'. They do not give a definition of cultural awareness, but they emphasise that it is a significant aspect of language learning, and indeed that without cultural awareness, a language cannot be properly understood:

A growing awareness of the people who speak the language of study is intrinsic to the learning of it [...] Without the cultural dimension, successful communication is often difficult: comprehension of even basic words and phrases (such as those referring to meals) may be partial or approximate, and speakers and writers may fail to convey their meaning adequately or may even cause offence. (DES 1990:37)

When they discuss teaching methods for cultural awareness, they link the understanding of other and native cultures through the notion of comparison:

The context of the language community, whether in this country or abroad, derived from a variety of authentic sources, plays a substantial role in classroom activities. In this, comparison between the learner's own way of life and that of the other language community is an essential means to better understanding of both. (DES 1990:37)

It is the comparison of own and other cultures which begins to help learners to perceive and cope with difference. It provides them with the basis for successful interaction with members of another cultural group, not just the means of exchanging information. There is of course one school of thought, we should note in passing, which argues that teaching should emphasise similarities, our common humanity, whatever the cultural differences. The problem with this view is that it does not help learners to overcome the problems of interactions, and yet interaction is crucial to their experience of a sense of common humanity.

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The working group also identify other methods for developing cultural awareness: from ‘contact’ with otherness, to comparison and ‘appreciation’ of similarities and differences, to ‘identifying’ with otherness, and finally to take an ‘objective view’ of their own culture. Referring to students in the first three years of language learning, they say learners should have frequent opportunities to:

- work with authentic materials deriving from the communities/countries of the target language and especially from links with schools abroad ...
- come into contact with native speakers in this country and where possible abroad
- from these materials and contacts, appreciate the similarities and differences between their own and cultures of the communities/countries where the target language is spoken
- identify with the experience and perspective of people in the countries and communities where the target language is spoken
- use this knowledge to develop a more objective view of their own customs and ways of thinking. (DES 1990:36)

This list suggests an underlying concept of progression which presupposes a theory of cultural learning not made explicit. In particular, it is the notion of ‘identifying with’ which introduces potential links with ethnography and drama. It implies, we would argue, teaching techniques which are not widespread, and psychological processes which are new to language teaching.

Finally, in their recommendations for older students – in the fourth and fifth years of learning – the working group add three other points:

Learners should have the opportunity to:

- investigate and report on a particular aspect of the communities/countries of the target language
- plan a visit abroad, if possible with a view to carrying it out, but at least as an exercise
- make general and specific comparisons between their own country and the communities/countries of the target language. (DES 1990:37)

Here, the notions of investigating and reporting, of visiting and exploring another country and community, suggest a link with the ethnographic methods which have served anthropologists well in precisely this task of understanding another society and its culture, and seeing its relationship to one’s own.

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There are thus many implications of this kind of reassessment of language teaching but the implications are not thoroughly discussed. Teachers are left to make of it what they can, and the need to explore these issues more thoroughly was one of the reasons for the seminars on which this volume is based, and since we believe that the situation is not untypical, for the re-working and publication of the papers.

### **The ‘intercultural speaker’: a new purpose for language-and-culture teaching**

Although a particular case, the perspective represented by the English National Curriculum documents is part of the changes in language teaching as a whole which we outlined above. It suggests that language learning should lead to insight and increased understanding of the society and culture of speakers of other languages, but also of learners’ own society and culture and the relationship between the two, a cognitive learning process. It also suggests that language learning should lead to positive attitudes towards speakers of other languages, an affective change. Although attitudes towards learners’ own society and culture are not mentioned, it is probable that they are assumed to be positive already. It is, however, possible that a perspective on one’s own society and culture from the vantage point of another leads to a critical reassessment of what has hitherto been invisible because all-too-familiar.

The methods suggested in the documents are also representative of those in use elsewhere. They include comparison, a particularly significant means of acquiring a new perspective on one’s own language and culture. It questions the ‘naturalness’ and taken-for-granted nature of the culture into which learners are socialised, in the home and in the school. Just when pupils are in the midst of the process of primary and secondary socialisation, they are introduced to a new way of doing things, a new conception of reality, a new set of values, which are just as ‘natural’, at least for those who have been socialised into them. This meeting with otherness which challenges and ‘denaturalises’ the learners’ own culture, might be called ‘tertiary socialisation’ (Byram 1989a; Doyé 1992). It involves an implicit, and sometimes explicit, questioning of learners’ assumptions and values; and explicit questioning can lead to a critical stance, to ‘critical cultural awareness’ (Byram 1997a). The process and the teaching methods associated with it need, of course, to be supported by and related to learning theory in general and to theories of psychological change in the face of experience of otherness in particular. There is no space to develop that here, but we

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have begun to do so in other publications (e.g. Byram, Morgan *et al.* 1994). The methodological question which then arises, is how this process of tertiary socialisation and decentring from one's own taken-for-granted world, can be structured systematically in the classroom. As later chapters will show, this is another starting point for a dialogue with drama, ethnography and other modes of experiential learning.

The framework for language learning and teaching we have developed to this point has three aspects:

- an integration of linguistic and cultural learning to facilitate communication and interaction;
- a comparison of others and self to stimulate reflection on and (critical) questioning of the mainstream culture into which learners are socialised;
- a shift in perspective involving psychological processes of socialisation;
- the potential of language teaching to prepare learners to meet and communicate in other cultures and societies than the specific one usually associated with the language they are learning.

The next stage of our argument is to introduce the concept of 'intercultural communication'. The starting point for this is again linked to the notions of identity and interaction. Whenever we are engaged in interaction with others, we perceive and are perceived ourselves in terms of our social identities, one of which is our ethnic identity (Tajfel 1981). In British society and those similar to it, for example in Western Europe, the ethnic identity of the dominant majority coincides with their national identity. This in turn sometimes coincides with state citizenship, although the second coincidence is less frequent.

Each person has a number of social identities, social groups to which they belong, and cultures, cultural practices, beliefs and values to which they subscribe. Which identity is dominant in a given interaction depends on a number of factors in the situation: the language in use, the relationships with the other, how the participants identify each other. When the other with whom we are interacting is from a different state with a different national identity, symbolised in a different language, it is our national identity which comes to the fore, at least in the initial stages. It is therefore important to understand the national group and culture to which that person belongs. Any international interaction will refer to national identities and cultures which are therefore embodied in the mutual perceptions of the actors involved. It is for this reason that language teaching puts an emphasis on national cultures and the mutual perceptions of national groups, attempting to ensure a proper analysis of national stereotypes. When an interaction takes the people involved



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beyond this stage and into relationships where other social identities – for example, gender, social class, age group – become significant, then it is necessary for the participants to know, or be able to find out, about the other social groups to which their partner in the interaction belongs. Language teaching thus also needs to anticipate what learners need to know or what skills they need to acquire in order to discover other identities and groups – and their cultures – for themselves. In the first instance, however, learners usually perceive others and are themselves perceived by others as belonging to a national group and culture.

It is not possible, nor desirable, for learners to identify with the other nor to deny their own identity and culture. Yet in terms of linguistic learning this has been the implicit aim for many years. We have judged the best language learner to be the one who comes nearest to a native speaker mastery of the grammar and vocabulary of the language, and who can therefore ‘pass for’, or be identified as, a native, communicating on an equal footing with natives.

When considerations of social identity are introduced into the debate a different kind of judgement of the good learner is implied. It is the learner who is aware of their own identities and cultures, and of how they are perceived by others, and who also has an understanding of the identities and cultures of those with whom they are interacting. This ‘intercultural speaker’ (Byram and Zarate 1994) is able to establish a relationship between their own and the other cultures, to mediate and explain difference – and ultimately to accept that difference and see the common humanity beneath it. The concept of ‘intercultural speaker’ is thus one of the fundamental themes of this volume. It is developed by Kramsch in the first chapter, and though not used as a term by others, many of the chapters are concerned with how the competence for intercultural communication can be defined and promoted inside and beyond the classroom.

### **The ‘intercultural speaker’ and English Language Teaching**

Risager identifies in a later chapter of this volume four approaches to language teaching, each of increasing complexity as the issues of cultures and cultural identities are recognised by the teaching profession. She suggests that a ‘transcultural approach’ is emerging as cultures interpenetrate each other as a consequence of extensive migration, tourism and international communications. One aspect of this is the development of the *lingua franca*, in particular English. The debate about which, if any, standard form of English should be the reference for learners throughout the world is made more complex



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when it includes the question of which culture(s) learners might be exposed to.

How the question is to be answered is an issue for teachers and learners themselves, and will vary according to their situation. They may decide to focus on one country and the social identities and cultures present there, with which they may come into contact. They may argue that there is a sufficiently international '*cultura franca*' for them to treat this as the basis of their teaching, although this would be to ignore the various social identities of speakers of English as a *lingua franca* which operate in any interaction.

The emphasis of this volume on approaches through ethnography and drama does not pre-suppose one answer to the debate, but rather offers a means by which learners can be prepared to interact with speakers of English irrespective of whether they are native speakers from the United States, Australia, Britain or elsewhere. The 'intercultural speaker' is someone who has a knowledge of one or, preferably, more cultures and social identities and has a capacity to discover and relate to new people from other contexts for which they have not been prepared directly.

The 'intercultural speaker' is thus someone who is learning to become independent of the teacher and the limits of what can be achieved in the classroom (Holec 1981). It is a process which can take place whatever the learners' age, and the chapters of this volume describe research and development with school pupils and adults, in formal education and in the workplace. It is not a process which is ever totally complete, and teachers and researchers themselves continue to learn and develop their capacities as intercultural speakers. This is an advantage. Teachers who take seriously the cultural dimension of language learning as we have described it briefly here, will not expect to know and teach everything about a specific society and its culture(s). They will place more emphasis on developing their learners' and their own awareness of the nature of intercultural interaction, and the skills and competences which allow them to relate to cultural difference. In the final analysis, even teachers who have never personally experienced a particular society and the people of many different social identities within it, can help their learners to engage with texts and documents where those identities are expressed. Their task, and expertise, as teachers is to enable learners to enquire into the beliefs, values and cultural practices they embody, and it is this approach which is represented in the chapters of this book.

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### **Overview of the following chapters**

We have divided the chapters into three parts and provided separate introductions for each. We suggested above that improved understanding of the nature of intercultural communication and interaction leads to increased demands on the learner. In the first part, the focus is upon learners and on further definition of what is required of them, what they bring to the learning, and descriptions of teaching and learning approaches which aim to fulfil those requirements. The second part explores the contribution to intercultural learning which can be made through particular approaches to drama and theatre. It will be of interest to language teachers but also to drama teachers who believe in using drama as a means of exploring other subjects in the curriculum. The third part focuses on the teacher, for we must not forget that our improved understanding of intercultural communication also places new requirements on them, as well as on their students. This section describes how teachers and researchers experience intercultural interaction, and how they might be helped to develop their own competences, both intercultural and pedagogic, to meet the challenges of language teaching into the next century.