Changing concepts in culture and language learning

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Introduction While it is becoming less commonplace for national flags to feature on language-learning materials, it would be premature to announce their demise, particularly in the case of languages other than English. They are even to be seen in the supposedly modern context of computer-based materials, gently waving in the virtual breeze. On the positive side, they convey an acceptance that language learning is inextricably linked with culture, but they also imply more worryingly that the culture in question is a concept which can easily be captured, even that it can continue to be represented by the state where the historical – and often colonial – past of the language is located. More particularly, even within those states, the definition of culture in the context of language-learning materials is problematic, as factors such as cultural diversity within the state, the postcolonial legacy, and the history of economic and political immigration have created and continue to create societies where the traditional mono-cultural concept is being increasingly called into question. This brief chapter cannot aim to solve such a vast problem, but merely to reflect on the concepts of culture which underpin language learning and teaching, and to underline the importance of raising awareness among language teachers of the changing cultural and theoretical contexts within which they are making decisions regarding the teaching of language and culture.

Three approaches relating to culture and language learning will be discussed which have increasingly received attention in the later decades of the twentieth century, namely the mono-cultural, multi-cultural and intercultural approaches. This will be followed by a consideration of the potential relevance to language learning of an approach based on cultural hybridity, more commonly encountered in postcolonial studies than in the area of second language acquisition. Finally the implications of these approaches for future directions in culture and language learning will be addressed. While studies such as this must necessarily take account of the major contributions to research in the teaching and learning of English, including studies on English as an international language (Kachru, 1986), this chapter is largely situated in the context of the teaching of modern foreign languages to native speakers of English, with examples primarily taken from the context with which the author is familiar, namely the teaching of French in the Irish and British education systems.

The mono-cultural approach
The major shift in the teaching of modern languages in the Irish and British contexts, occurring some time in the 1960s, was from the acceptance of high culture, or culture with a capital C, as the source of the content for language learning materials (within the grammar-translation method) to the adoption of the anthropological definition of cultures as “structured systems of patterned behavior” (Lado, 1986: 53). It is easy to understand how the anthropologists’ concept of complex and varied systems of behaviour in a possibly diverse cultural context became simplified in language-learning materials, focusing on one manifestation of the culture in question. Just as the high culture chosen as the content for language programmes had concentrated almost exclusively on the literature of one country where the language was spoken, so also the non-literary content of which replaced it was based on that same country. Eagleton (2000: 14) comments that the “wholeness” of culture as a homogeneous way of life, greatly appreciated by the Romantics, is undoubtedly a myth. However, the myth persists in the language learning context, and many textbooks in particular present a picture of a single target culture which is homogeneous and static. The considerable historical cultural diversity in countries such as France and Germany, the rapid changes due to immigration throughout the twentieth century, and the fact that French and German are spoken in other countries, all these factors of diversity are impinging with great difficulty on language learning course materials, which are still imbued with the Romantic ideal of the homogeneous culture.
The dominance and the oversimplification of this mono-cultural approach are remarkably persistent, despite comments by researchers on its limitations. Initially, researchers justifiably concerned themselves with promoting the acceptance of culture as an integral component in language learning, in contrast to an approach based on “a fixed system of formal structures and universal speech functions, a neutral conduit for the transmission of cultural knowledge” (Kramsch, 1995: 89).

Culture in language learning is not a fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one ... (Kramsch, 1993: 1).

In addition, researchers are careful to present culture as changing rather than static, including not only “the synchronic axis of space” but also “the diachronic axis of time” (Kramsch 1995: 85). The recognition of diversity within cultures is also addressed by researchers, at times in a way which presents it as problematic:

Another type of problem related to distribution differences, or rather to assumed distribution differences, occurs when members of one culture, who normally recognize many subgroups in the population of their own culture, assume that another culture with which they come in contact is uniform (Lado, 1986: 60).

It must be said that such learners may well have been influenced in these attitudes by language-learning textbooks which present the culture associated with a language as being associated with only one country which is mono-cultural. As very many textbooks could be cited in support of this claim, it seems unfair to select a small number of them, but it is undeniable that French textbooks, for example, traditionally concentrated exclusively or almost exclusively on France, and that there was little or no effort to convey the considerable cultural diversity existing within the country, let alone the fact that the language was spoken in other countries. An early exception to this was Les Orléanais ont la parole (Biggs and Dalwood: 1976). Based on interviews with inhabitants of one particular region, it not only provided the learners with access to authentic language use, but also by its very title avoided any suggestion that the people who were interviewed represented “French culture”. While the choice of a central location in metropolitan France did not call into question received notions on culture, the specificity nonetheless implied that no single course book could hope to encompass the entire culture associated with a major language.

The multi-cultural approach
A number of factors explain the change from a mono-cultural approach to an acceptance, firstly that the country most closely associated with the target country is multi-cultural, and secondly that the language in question is spoken in more than one country. Firstly, from the 1960s onwards it became increasingly obvious that several European countries were becoming increasingly multi-cultural and multi-racial, and the issues arising from this were discussed in the media. Alongside this development, the communicative approach to language teaching highlighted the need for learners to have access not only to materials relating to the “target culture”, but also to materials to which they could directly relate and which they could discuss. In this way social, political, environmental and other issues became popular components of the language syllabus. It was a logical step to combine these two developments, and to expect learners to discuss a topical issue, such as immigration or racial tension, not only in relation to their own experience or information gleaned from their own national media, but also in relation to the target culture. Increasing attention paid to equality issues in European societies in general also impinged on the content of language learning materials to a certain extent, so that most textbooks now feature people from different ethnic backgrounds, albeit in minor roles, as a way of indicating acceptance of a multi-cultural society. It must be admitted, however, that these developments do not entail a major shift from the mono-cultural approach described above, which is still the dominant mode in
language-learning materials, but rather a minor, if important modification of it, to correspond to changing realities which are so evident in society that it is no longer acceptable to ignore them completely.

The dominant mono-cultural approach to language learning materials was also under threat from another quarter, in that textbooks in English had to face the problem of how to present the language in an age when images of central London or American flags were no longer accepted as relevant symbols of the target culture. This accompanied the development of the communicative approach, encouraging the provision of materials on topics which the learners could discuss, and in an increasingly globalised context. More importantly, it demanded a reappraisal of the link between language and culture, as the world-wide market for English became dominated not by British or American or any other nationality, but by the need for international communication outside any national context. Thus many native speakers of English are now accustomed to hearing Danes and Italians or Spaniards and Germans, for example, communicating in English. While the phenomenon of the lingua franca is peculiar to English, the teaching of languages such as French and Spanish has also had to take account of the fact that the language is widely spoken outside the country of its historical origin. In the case of France this takes the form of official government promotion of cultural diversity within the French-speaking world, la francophonie, while at the same time promoting the French language, for reasons which no doubt have more to do with international economic and political influence than a desire to reflect changing cultural contexts. This policy is clearly reflected in language-learning materials, producing a situation similar to that observed above in the case of cultural diversity within one state. The traditional monocultural approach continues to dominate, with a relatively small amount of information added on the broader international context in which the language is spoken. Panorama 1 (Girardet and Cridlig, 2000), for example, with its global-sounding title and its allocation of only one chapter, number 17, to “Le français et le monde” (pp.154-161) provides an excellent example of how the mono-cultural approach is modified, but not fundamentally changed to represent changing cultural contexts.

The intercultural approach
The concept of language as intercultural communication represents an important new development in relation to the cultural component in language learning and teaching, in that it places the focus firmly on the learner as cultural mediator (Byram and Butjes: 1990), rather than concentrating solely on the culture as an object of study. This is not to say that the culture is not present, but rather that it is only present as observed through the eyes of the learner, not as a pre-defined package provided in a textbook or other form of teaching material. Researchers in intercultural or cross-cultural communication emphasise the importance of language learning and teaching as a means of changing the initially mono-cultural approach of the learners and enabling them to stand outside their own culture and “to relativise self and value other; suspend belief in one’s own and disbelief in other’s behaviours, beliefs and values (to ‘de-centre’) [savoir être]” (Byram, 1999: 18). The learner or intercultural speaker is defined as having three primary characteristics:

- a multilingual competence;
- a sensitivity to the identities present in interlingual and cross-frontier interaction;
- an ability to mediate/relate own and other cultures with “intercultural communicative competence” i.e. a communicative competence familiar to language teachers from the developments of the past two decades, which is complemented by “intercultural competence” (Byram, 1999: 18).

Research projects in intercultural communication typically involve advising learners on methods to adopt when observing aspects of other cultures (Byram, 1999: 24-25), thus allowing the learner to perceive culture as made up of individuals, possibly from diverse cultural and ethnic contexts. A more detailed analysis of language learning as intercultural communication is not possible within the scope of this brief chapter, but it is important to note that by its emphasis on de-centring and mediating, it runs contrary to an inherent aspect of
the mono-cultural approach to culture as “difference, variability, and always a potential source of conflict when one culture enters into contact with another” (Kramsch, 1993: 1).

Cultural hybridity
By proposing a more relativist approach based on individual observation in specific contexts, the concept of language learning as intercultural communication proposes an alternative to the mono-cultural approach which is timely, as other developments in literary and cultural studies are even more fundamentally undermining this approach. Within postcolonial studies in particular, where the focus is mostly on literature produced in former or existing colonies, the concept of literature as an expression of a simply defined culture is stretched well beyond its limit. Indeed, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, postcolonial writers struggle to refuse the temptation to seek refuge in an imagined, pure, mono-cultural past in Africa or elsewhere: “hybridity in the present is constantly struggling to free itself from a past which stressed ancestry, and which valued the ‘pure’ over its threatening opposite, the ‘composite’ (1989: 35-36). As Boehmer points out:

post-independence writers again relied on hybridity – that is, the blending of different cultural influences, an upfront and active syncretism – to unsettle the inheritance of Europe. Indeed, they had no other option but to be syncretic. No matter how determined were writers’ efforts at reclamation, in a postcolonial society coming to terms with the corrosion of tradition during colonial occupation, cultural purity was not on offer (1995: 203).

Research such as this has fundamental implications not only for the study of literature in language programmes of study, but also for the presentation of culture in language learning materials in general. Defending the role of literature in language learning, Valdes (1986: 137) describes literature as “culture in action”. Bhabha explores the complexity of this concise statement when he writes:

The very concepts of homogenous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or “organic” ethnic communities - as the grounds of cultural comparativism - are in a profound process of redefinition (1994: 5).

Citing examples of what he describes as “hybrid” literature from Sri Lanka, Australia, South Africa and India, Bhabha concludes that Rushdie reminds us in The Satanic Verses “that the truest eye may now belong to the migrant’s double vision” (1994: 5). In other words, literary studies, both in general and in the context of language learning, must not only move on from a facile acceptance of a traditional literary canon, but must acknowledge the central importance of writers who were once marginalised, from former colonies or immigrant communities. To generalise and paraphrase Boehmer’s comment, cultural purity is no longer on offer, if indeed it ever was.

Conclusion
The implications of statements such as these for the representation of culture in language learning are clear. It is surely no longer acceptable to base language teaching on material which mostly focuses on an outmoded concept of the culture of one state, adding on a few examples of cultural diversity within the state, of ethnic diversity as a result of immigration, and a few pages on the international context of a language such as French or Spanish. Current teaching materials, however, tend to do exactly that, facing the language teacher with the challenge of how to present the cultures associated with the target language in a way which corresponds more closely to current research on culture in both language-learning and literary contexts. Abandoning the textbook and replacing it with materials more closely suited to the learners’ needs is an option which has been
advocated (Jolly and Bolitho, 1998: 110-111), but which is hardly realistic for the vast majority of language teachers. The use of supplementary material is probably the only option, while waiting for language-learning and teaching materials to be produced which make it possible for the teacher to select an appropriate path and to enable the learner to observe not representatives of a national culture, but rather individual instances of language use as part of a large and culturally diverse geographical area. Given access to the Internet it is not difficult to access such materials and thus to circumnavigate traditional centralised conduits of culture.

References


