

## **BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN TEACHING LANGUAGE AND TEACHING CULTURE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSE AT THE FACULTY OF AGRICULTURE**

**Laura COROAMĂ\***

*\*IMAGER, University of Paris Est Creteil Val de Marne, Institut Français Timișoara*

**Abstract:** *Decades ago teaching a foreign language was exclusively linguistic oriented. Nowadays, more and more approaches recognize the holistic aspect of language learning. In spite of this acknowledgement, current textbooks and curricula do not contain specific information in order to familiarize students with the cultural implications connected to learning a foreign language. The aim of this paper is to raise awareness on the advantages of integrating cultural concepts and topics within the French course at all levels. Cultural knowledge should become a significant part of students' academic culture as it represents a major landmark in their future development.*

**Key words:** *French, language-culture, global approach, evaluation*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the last decades, teaching foreign languages has undergone numerous changes as it is more and more believed that speaking several languages is increasing our openness to other worlds. Thinking in a foreign language and relating to things, people, events can develop specific skills that facilitate comprehension and, finally, integration in the multicultural society that the world has become.

It does not need any demonstrations that the global change of goods, the mobility of people, and the information flow require more than a communicative competence of the functional kind. Relating to this world also involves building bridges across universes of knowledge and beliefs, languages and cultures. The cultural element has been gradually taken into consideration when talking about teaching a language as the phenomenon is complex and it cannot be reduced to the assimilation of a system of sounds and letters.

The aim of this paper is to advocate the conviction that no language can be taught strictly for its instrumental purpose "to speak in order to act". Researchers in modern didactics today use concepts such as "interrelatedness" to describe a new paradigm which has at its core the development of complex thought (Morin, 1990) within an "ethical, humanistic view of language and language education" (KRAMSCH, 2010: 12).

### **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

The observations and analyses of my study have been carried out on a group of first year students from the Faculty of Agriculture. They can choose between English, French and German (languages already studied during their high school period). The participants at my study have chosen the French course and they have at least 4 years of previous study before entering the university. As far as their level is concerned, a B1 level (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) is required at the end of high school. However, their real level is A1-A2, a heterogeneous elementary level as the written comprehension is considerably better, but the oral communicative skills are those of a

beginner. Globally speaking, the students have a 'survival' level that should allow them to manage simple everyday communicative situations.

During the academic year 2015-2016, 50 students have accepted to participate in a preliminary enquiry of what learning a foreign language means nowadays. As my main objective was not a quantitative research, I have focused my interest on the qualitative aspect. The experiment had three stages:

1. filling in a questionnaire in which the students were supposed to retrace their linguistic and/or cultural experiences. Students were asked to identify and describe all their memories about the contact with a foreign language, the circumstances, their feelings in a particular situation, etc.
2. observing and identifying students' ways of relating to cultural content during the courses throughout the year. This part is about deliberately including activities with cultural elements in the study curriculum in order to observe and analyse students' attitudes and reactions.
3. requiring the students to undergo a reflexive process and give a feed-back on their relation with the language and the culture associated.

I have inventoried a corpus of data including the answers to questionnaires, written feed-back on the self-evaluation and course assessment, and course observation charts. The method used is an experimental one having its source in the ecological approach of language learning. (van Lier, KRAMSCH).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### *What kind of communicative content?*

To begin with, I have to highlight the gap between the linguistic content taught until university and the academic curricula. The latter is conceived in terms of follow-up and reinforcement of previous knowledge. However, current observations do not confirm this type of articulation and coherence. Therefore, we are constantly challenged as teachers to adapt courses both to our students' level of language and to our curricula.

The main functional objectives of first year students in French are: revisiting conversational everyday topics previously studied, reinforcement of grammatical structures and general practice of the four skills - reading, writing, listening and speaking. According to the respondents' answers, they possess more a linguistic repertoire, particularly informative, than a tool for real communication. Class observations also confirm students' limited ability to activate their passive vocabulary, which proves to be extremely helpful in reading comprehension activities, for example.

In a nutshell, isolated words and phrases, idioms or fragmentary sentences constitute the core of students' main linguistic acquisition. Grammar is ranked as number one in the list of obstacles that prevent them from speaking the language. Nevertheless, the majority of the respondents have already accepted their lack of oral skills as a consequence of their linguistic experiences, mostly based on comprehension competences and not the expression ones.

### *The ecology of language learning*

The concept of 'environment' is a central one in the ecological approach of learning and teaching foreign languages. The theory of complexity and the theory of chaos (C. Kramsch, D.Larsen-Freeman) are used to explain the behaviour of dynamic systems. Their functioning involves different agents that interact and may or may not give birth to another level of complexity. These non-linear processes can be explained by their high sensitivity to elements from the environment, a specificity which is better known as the *butterfly effect* whereby even the flapping of a butterfly's wing in one part of the world may cause weather changes in another.

Teaching, in general, and teaching French, in our case, is powerfully influenced by the environmental specificity. Linguistic material can be found in different forms and places all around us. Formal and informal learning are part of our lives whether we are conscious about it or not. Although linguistic contact with French might be more reduced than with other languages, such as English, it cannot be totally excluded. Even more, both the academic environment and the non-academic one contain elements that may lead to a process of learning the language.

### *Language vs Culture?!*

Is teaching the linguistic system of a language the only main objective in the French class? When asked what memories they have as far as learning French is concerned, students' mentioned its difficult grammar and pronunciation, at the very top of their list. However, the learning process should not be focused on its difficulties, but on real potentially-resourceful experiences.

It is not within the scope of this paper to revisit the numerous advantages of knowing a language nowadays. Nevertheless, we are persuaded that the cultural dimension is a fundamental asset for the student's portfolio. Several questions require some serious interrogation such as: "what do we understand by "culture"?", "what kind of cultures or subcultures should we envisage while teaching?" This concept has a particular complexity as it concerns both the individual and the group. On the other hand, one must not overlap the concepts of "culture" and "civilisation". Culture is a system of significations, a global phenomenon in which there are others sub-systems, thus creating a web of meanings.

LOUIS PORCHER (1996) revisits Pierre Bourdieu's definitions of culture and discusses the difference between *cultivated culture* and *anthropological culture*. An individual is the result of two components: his/her genetic heritage and his/her cultural heritage. In PORCHER's opinion (1995), „une culture est un ensemble de pratiques communes, de manières de voir, de penser et de faire qui contribuent à définir les appartenances des individus, c'est-à-dire les héritages partagés dont ceux-ci sont les produits et qui constituent une partie de leur identité.” One very important aspect is the idea of belonging to a community or communities. Moving further on, LOUIS PORCHER comments upon the nature of these belongings, calling them "minor cultures": generational culture, sexual culture, professional culture, religious culture, foreign culture.

We are all members of different communities, sharing a language and a social and cultural identity. Therefore, the identity aspect is strongly connected to the language, may it be the mother tongue or a foreign language. The social identity is a result of the appropriation of

both the foreign language and its culture. In other words, it is the social identity that creates the belonging to the group. Somebody who wants to be accepted in a group has to learn its language. However, if he/she knows the language but does not possess the keys of the social functioning, he/she will fail to be accepted by the group.

### *Teaching Culture in an Academic Environment*

Undoubtedly, students in Agriculture do not need exhaustive knowledge of French culture. It is about acquiring what is necessary and sufficient in order to use this cultural capital when activating the language. The most current practice nowadays in terms of didactics in specialized environments is the FOS (Français sur objectif spécifique), a more professional field-focused branch of English for Specific purposes. The FOS is a complex initiative that brings together knowledge from different skills in order to create a ready-to-use kit for a specific professional community. In our case, students in Agriculture do not benefit only from standard general French, but from a language tailored to their needs as future experts in the field of agricultural sciences. Therefore, the identity aspect of professional communities plays an important role in teaching French. For example, understanding the “vouvoiement” in French is a fundamental behavior detail that may have impact in a business negotiation. In order for the communication in the foreign language to be a successful one, one may consider the cultural differences of both participants. Although the linguistic message may pass, cultural inappropriateness might offend the interlocutor and could be harmful for the global process.

The discovery of the anthropological culture must necessarily pass by interculturality. The main idea is that we cannot keep explaining cultural approaches from the French-speaking countries without comparing them with our own cultural aspects. In an ecological approach, every element of the environment that supports learning plays another part in the larger system. Teachers need however to obey certain methodological principles such as:

- provide authentic and updated documents related to students’ living and studying environment, as much as possible; in our study case, texts related to agriculture, in France or other countries where French is an official language, it must represent a starting topic of conversation and of comparison with the Romanian realities;
- a certain variety of the documents should be provided: alternate visual, audio and video in order to practice all skills; integrated learning would thus serve both linguistic and cultural objectives;
- the inductive-deductive principle should be at the core of the learning process. The teacher should guide students to find the rule by themselves;
- being open to students’ suggestions may improve teacher’s selection criteria.

First year students’ feedback on the type of topics they would like to talk about in the French class revealed their interest in various fields of knowledge. Not surprisingly, after two semesters, it has been a fact that discussing these subjects have led to comparative analyses concerning both their native and foreign cultures. The intercultural dimension has become a motivating trigger which encourages them to talk and improve their communicative skills. I have made up a list with some discussion topics with high cultural potential that can be the object of integrated interculturality:

1. The habits of French people in terms of hobbies, taste and entertainment;
2. Life in the city and at the countryside;

3. The relation between the individual and the professional world;
4. Business opportunities for young people;
5. Environmental issues in the modern society;
6. Human relationships;
7. Out-of-the-box initiatives in modern agriculture

Despite the topic the teacher chooses or the methodology he/she decides to adopt, the conversational task must be related to linguistic objectives and respond to learners' communicational needs.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

At the end of this part of my study I can draw up some partial conclusions:

1. Teaching culture must be integrated in language teaching activities depending on the students' specialization;
2. Every teacher must be encouraged to imagine their own teaching sessions based on students' age, the faculty they belong to, group dynamics and students' communication needs, types of environment they usually attend, etc.;
3. Teaching integrated cultures in an academic course also contributes to the individual's general cognitive and social development.

Further research should highlight the articulations between the native language-culture and the foreign one depending on the type of environment in which the learners uses them.

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