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*Editor*

**I CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL HISPANO-ALBANÉS: ÁMBITO  
FILOLÓGICO INTERNACIONAL, HISTORIA Y CULTURA  
ESPAÑOLA CONTEMPORÁNEA**

**Actas**

**2-3 de abril de 2012**

**UNIVERSIDAD DE TIRANA**

**III edición corregida**

**Mayo de 2014**



Universidad  
Rey Juan Carlos

 **Santander**  
UNIVERSIDADES

 **Universidad  
Rey Juan Carlos**  
Vicerrectorado de investigación  
Cátedra Presdela  
Presencia Española y Desarrollo Socioeconómico en Iberoamérica

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**Coordinador Académico:** José Manuel Azcona.

ISBN: 978-84-615-8145-0

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**DIDÁCTICA DE LA ENSEÑANZA DE LENGUAS  
MODERNAS**

# **CULTURE AS A CRUCIAL COMPONENT OF LANGUAGE LEARNING**

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## **Introduction**

When studying a foreign language people need to focus not only on reading, writing, listening and speaking skills but also be aware of how to interact and communicate using such a language within a new culture that is often very different from their own. Many curricula, including those of University of Tirana include culture as an essential component that students need to learn when studying a language. For example, students that study English language are also introduced to different aspects of British and American culture, those studying Spanish to different elements of Spanish culture, and so on. In the case of English language teaching process, students are introduced to British and American Studies as a special course<sup>1</sup>.

It is indispensable for students to consequently pay attention not only to linguistic elements while learning a foreign language but also to the cultural ones, on the contrary they risk lacking a very important part in learning process. Having said the above, it makes sense to define culture as an absolutely essential part of the second language learning class. Aside from understanding the linguistic side of language, culture is a key component in giving the student a well-rounded education in the chosen language and provides a context for understanding different aspects of life, culture and human development.

## **Cultural Interactions in Language Teaching and Learning**

Definitions of culture given by various scholars who have dealt with studies of culture, cultural competence and intercultural awareness and communication vary in the way they are formulated and the number of words used to describe each of

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<sup>1</sup> Baseline study: "English Language Education in Albania" , Tirana, British Council, 2003.

them, but in essence they follow more or less the same pattern and imply same idea.

Among all, the way how Hall defines it, can be highlighted as essential, especially when related to the subject of how language and culture interact together, when stating that "culture is learned and shared behaviour.... learning came into its own as an adoptive mechanism when it could be extended in time and space by means of language"<sup>2</sup>. Further on, the American National Center for Cultural Competence defined culture as "an integrated pattern of human behaviour that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting, roles, relationships, and expected behaviours of a racial, ethnic, religious or social group; the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations; is dynamic in nature"<sup>3</sup>. The implication of language usage in both definitions above shows that it an essential part in explaining what culture is and at the same time helps to further enhance the role culture plays in the language learning process. Thus, during the foreign language study, it is crucial to think of and plan the introduction of certain cultural elements, introducing not only some local traditions, songs, and daily habits of the people from the area of the language to be learned but also examples from current political, economic and social developments in that area. Culture in its broadest meaning has to do with the intellectual development of a society and as such it is defined beyond only sporadic examples of food, or singing and dancing, traditional costumes, ceremonies and social institutions of certain groups of people. So in trying to summarize the real meaning of culture, it would be more than fine to say that it is a mirror that testifies our existence. And of course if we try to answer the question of how culture is managed through, in other words, how all these things are put into action, what comes first in our minds is of course through language. According to O'Sullivan and Tajaroensuk 'language not only expresses culture, it also brings it about.'<sup>4</sup>

Peterson and Coltrane's state in their article that "through initiatives such as the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning, language educators in the United States have made it a priority to incorporate the study of culture into their classroom curricula. Cultural knowledge is one of the five goal areas of the national standards. Through the study of other languages, students gain a knowledge and

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<sup>2</sup> Hall Edward, T. *The silent language*. New York, Double Day, 1959, 1981 re-print.

<sup>3</sup> Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development, National Center for Cultural Competence [on line] < [http://www.culturalbroker.info/8\\_Definitions/index.html](http://www.culturalbroker.info/8_Definitions/index.html) > [checked on 20 March 2012].

<sup>4</sup>O'Sullivan, K. and Tajaroensuk, *Songphorn A handbook in intercultural communication*. Sydney, NCELTR Macquarie University, 1997.

understanding of the cultures that use that language; in fact, students cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs".<sup>5</sup>

In the same way, the EU gives priority to the incorporation of culture competencies into foreign language learning in the EU countries. This can be seen clearly in the outcome and recommendations of an EU<sup>6</sup> study which states that "the teaching of foreign languages is the logical and appropriate environment for the simultaneous development of linguistic skills and intercultural competences. There is sufficient evidence that this dual approach is already being widely applied in the EU's Member States, though the range of intercultural competences prescribed for development by the curriculum is often limited. The teaching of foreign languages will be enhanced by the promotion of these intercultural competences, since the spoken and written word - perhaps the key expression of a culture - is however only one of the many facets of a society and its culture: the full meaning of a language comes to life through an understanding of its speakers' value systems, beliefs, norms, practices, traditions, history, as well as its non-verbal signals. If this understanding is then also complemented by an ability to deal with these features affectively and behaviourally, the success of language learning will be all the greater.

If compared to the above examples, we can say that Albania has also shown signs of following the same trends through revision of curricula in the late 90-s and can be classified as a pioneer one in its efforts to develop cultural and intercultural competences in line with the linguistic ones. For this purpose, since 1997 the Faculty of Foreign Languages, at the University of Tirana launched a project to develop further its own curricula by introducing two extra courses, one of which was related to cultural studies i. e British and American Studies. Later on efforts were made in 2009 - 2010 to introduce cultural studies in the master studies curricula i.e Second Level Diploma in Language, Intercultural and Touristic Communication, as well as Literary-Technical Translation and Interpretation<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Peterson, Elizabeth and Coltrane, Bronwyn. 'Culture in Second Language Teaching'- Center for Applied Linguistics [on line] <[http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/digest\\_pdfs/0309peterson.pdf](http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/digest_pdfs/0309peterson.pdf) > [checked on 20 March 2012].

<sup>6</sup> Languages and Cultures in Europe (LACE) - The Intercultural Competences Developed in Compulsory Foreign Language Education in the European Union. EAC/25/06 - "Study of the intercultural skills taught in foreign languages courses at each stage of compulsory education and training in the European Union" [on line] Final Report; <[http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/doc/lace\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/doc/lace_en.pdf) > [checked on 20 March 2012].

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.unitir.edu.al/rektorati/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=109&Itemid=130](http://www.unitir.edu.al/rektorati/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=109&Itemid=130) [checked on 20 March 2012].

### **Is culture needed in the language learning process?**

During the recent years many scholars who have dealt with studies of both culture and language development, have acknowledged that the uses of a certain language are in a way or another the mirrors of cultural characteristics of the society by which the language is used. When studying and learning a language, both the linguistic and cultural competences should be inter-related. Language learners need to develop along with linguistic competence, also (inter)cultural competence. As Byram writes "intercultural communicative competence requires that students acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and critical cultural awareness necessary to communicate intercultural"<sup>8</sup>. Intercultural knowledge means knowing about one's own culture and the culture of the second language. This means that students need to gain knowledge of many countries that speak the language and their associated cultures. Along with knowledge of the culture, students need to gain knowledge and understanding of societal and cultural norms, values and interactions associated with the culture(s) of the second language. They should be aware, for example, of the culturally appropriate ways to address people, express gratitude, make requests, and agree or disagree with someone. They should know that behaviours and intonation patterns that are appropriate in their own speech community may be perceived differently by members of the target language speech community. They have to understand that, in order for communication to be successful, language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behaviour.

Quite often, culture is taught implicitly, incorporated in the linguistic forms that students are learning as well as in different examples and situations to illustrate lessons during reading, listening, writing and speaking. It is mainly teachers' task to try and turn those cultural features into a specific subject to be dealt with in relation to the linguistic forms being studied, thus helping students become aware of the cultural features reflected in the language they are learning. As an example to be mentioned here is the case of teaching academic writing, more specifically teaching writing formal and informal letters in English language to Albanian students. The teacher can help students understand when it is appropriate to use an informal form of greeting as 'best regards' rather than a formal form of greeting yours sincerely/faithfully – a distinction that Albanian language does not have as much specific. In the same way, an English teacher who teaches English as a Second Language could help students understand socially correct and appropriate communication, such as making requests that show respect "Would you mind coming closer?" as compared to the informal language being used in everyday

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<sup>8</sup> Byram, Michael. *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Multilingual Matters Ltd. 1997.

conversations and amongst friends for example, "Hey you, come closer". Both are linguistically correct requests, but not culturally appropriate when two people of different ages or ranks get involved into the conversation.

Students will master a language only when they learn both its linguistic and cultural norms. As Sapir states "human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. ....No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality"<sup>9</sup>. As we go on to further stress the interconnection between the language and culture, it is important to mention Halliday's statement that "language is a semiotic system (a system of symbols) that expresses the culture and society that we live in" and "language as a social semiotic means "interpreting language within a socio-cultural context, in which culture itself is interpreted in semiotic terms."<sup>10</sup> To continue with what Geertz concludes about it when he states that "culture denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."<sup>11</sup>

### **Introducing culture in the language classroom**

Many wonder how culture can be incorporated into the foreign language curriculum, with a view to fostering cultural awareness and communicating insight into the target civilization. It has been widely recognised in the language teaching profession that learners need not just knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways<sup>12</sup>. Amongst other publications during the recent years, the 'Common European Framework', also introduces the 'Intercultural Dimension' into

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<sup>9</sup> Sapir, Edward, *The Status of Linguistics as a Science* 1929 [on line] <<http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/SapirWhorf.htm> [checked on 20 March 2012].

<sup>10</sup> Halliday, M.A.K., *Language as social semiotic: the social interpretation of language and meaning*. London, Edward Arnold, 1978. (Review by M. Berry, *Nottingham Linguistic Circular* 11, 1982, 64-94; M. Gregory, *Applied Linguistics* 1, 1980, 74-81).

<sup>11</sup> Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York, Basic Books, 1973.

<sup>12</sup> Byram. Michael, Gribkova, Bella and Starkey, Hugh "Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching" -a Practical Introduction for Teachers , CoE 2003 [on line]. [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/guide\\_dimintercult\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/guide_dimintercult_en.pdf) [checked on 20 March 2012]

the aims of language teaching.<sup>13</sup> They all aim at helping those who learn foreign languages to communicate and interact with speakers of other languages smoothly, avoid misunderstandings as well as to be aware of the background and identity of their own as well as their counterparts in a conversation. All these are done with the belief that those who are educated with cultural aspects while learning a language will become successful not only in communicating information but also in understanding better different situations, circumstances being these political, historical, economic and so on. In certain times this has been attempted by indentation of the geographical environment and historical or political development of the foreign culture, its institutions and customs, its literary achievements, even the minute details of the everyday life of its members. At other times insights into the studying of a target community have taken the form of 'lecturtttes'<sup>14</sup> or a 'homily' on such issues as marriage customs and ceremonies, festivals, weekend excursions, and so forth, thus rendering the study of the foreign culture a tedious and unrewarding task. In the recent years, introduction of native speakers and their deployment to different countries with a primary task to teach language and at the same time disseminate culture and customs of the country of origin have been one of tactics, to be mentioned here the Peace Corps Volunteers sent around the world. Admittedly, trying to teach culture to anyone can be compared with teaching anyone how to breathe. Under such circumstances all what we can do is try to show the way, to teach about culture rather than to force a specific way of seeing things.

By bringing to the fore some elements of the target culture, and focusing on those characteristics and traits that are of importance to the members of the target community, refraining from taking an outsider's view, teachers can make students aware that there are no such things as superior and inferior cultures and that there are differences among people within the target culture, as well. 'Teachers are not in the classroom to confirm the prejudices of [their] students nor to attack their deeply held convictions'.<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, teachers should stimulate students' interest in the target culture, and to help establish the foreign language classroom 'not so much as a place where the language is taught, but as one where opportunities for learning of various kinds are provided through the interactions that take place between the participants. Cultural information should be presented without prejudice and in such a way that does not place value or judgment on distinctions between the students' native culture and the culture explored in the classroom.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibídem.*

<sup>14</sup> Rivers, Wilga. *Teaching Foreign-Language Skills*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press. 1968, pág. 272.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibídem*, pág. 271.

Nowadays language teachers find different ways to introduce to their students certain objects, examples, situations or ideas that have their origin from the culture of study, but which in fact are not well-known or familiar to students. Under such circumstances the best way would be to give students some hints about any details or background information about objects, situations to be used as complementary information from the students and help them to better understand the new concepts, words, expressions or situations. An example might be a household bread-making machine. Students would be told that the object is somehow used for cooking, and then they would either research or be informed about when such a machine has been used for the first time, how does it operates, who uses it more, etc. This could lead into related discussion about ways how bread and related products are made in the target culture, customs, and so forth. This situation and others of similar background, offer students the opportunity to explore and understand not only the object or word being taught at that specific moment but also other notions, historical and social facts about the target culture as compared to their own. The followings are a variety of examples through which elements of culture and language learning can be very easily integrated through usage of authentic materials such as art work, commercials, videos/movies, music videos, news casts, radio, field trips, festivals, pod casts, songs, newspapers, anecdotes, illustrations, photographs, literature, stories and maps.

In order for students to understand the culture of the target language (C2) as separate and distinct from their own culture (C1), they need to be able to engage with authentic materials like those listed above, and not simply be exposed to them. In other words, playing a song from the target culture as students enter is a good way to set the mood for a class, but it isn't exposing the students to the culture in a meaningful way. In order for the experience and exposure to be meaningful, there must be some discussion or additional activities used on conjunction with the authentic materials in order to push students towards a deeper understanding of the C2. At the same time it is always important to incorporate examples and sometimes put them in a certain context by alternating them. Examples from the C1 sometimes might also help understand better those from C2 and vice versa. Below is a simple case study to illustrate this.

### **Case study: English through Public Relations and Vice-Versa**

The case of using combined authentic theoretical materials from C2 and illustrating examples from C1 has proved to be efficient during the Public Relations teaching classes. When introducing the PR subject to students of 2nd year at the Faculty of

Foreign Languages, English Branch, a challenge in its own was how to explain and define certain issues in PR, due to the fact that such subjects and its practical examples were not familiar to most of the students. Under these circumstances the best would be to not only teach it theoretically but also use as many examples as possible to illustrate the concepts and meanings. Because the subject was taught in English I decided to use authentic materials from US as basis for the lectures. The main course book was "Public Relations Kit for Dummies", written by Eric Yverbaum and Bob Bly<sup>16</sup>. Both authors being PR practitioners for almost 15 years illustrate theory with a lot of practical examples in their book. Thinking of that, at the beginning I was encouraging students to use the authentic examples from the book as much as possible to illustrate different concepts they were learning. After a while I realised that students were learning by heart but not really re-acting towards different situations. I decided to change the strategy and incorporate examples from our everyday life, Albanian culture and reality (C1), comparing or associating them with the authentic materials from the book. For example when in the book the concept was illustrated by using the example the Domino Pizza company<sup>17</sup>, I encouraged students to find examples from the local businesses on pizza-making such as *PICA ERA* or *PICA Juvenilja*, in the case of *Federal Express* or *Airborne Express* students were asked to look at *Posta Shqiptare* or *Ekspres Tirana*, while for *Wall Street Journal* and *Harvard Business Review* they were asked to bring examples from *Gazeta Shqiptare*, *Panorama*, *Shqip*, etc. I could immediately notice the difference and reaction of the students. They started to love doing this exercise and love the lessons as well. After dealing with this for almost 5 years now, I can state that it is important to integrate cultures into learning process and especially illustration with alternate concrete examples from both target language and their own one functions best.

## Conclusions

The interaction and relationship between language and culture, dating back in history, comes as live and vivid now days through the work of different scholars, anthropologists and linguists at the same time. The teaching of culture, together with that of grammar, reading, and writing, speaking and listening should constitute an integral part of the language learning curriculum. Just as learning and using a language involves the understanding of grammar and vocabulary, it also requires an understanding of the role of socio-cultural effects as well as the

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<sup>16</sup> Yaverbaum, Eric and Bly, Bo . *Public Relations Kit For Dummies* .Wiley Publishing, inc. NY.2001 pág. 27.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibidem*, pág. 27.

environment where certain cultures develop. Although teachers have involved and dealt with culture in implicit way more frequently, it remains one of their primary tasks to introduce cultural aspects, and further develop their cultural competence while teaching foreign language classes. They should intensify efforts to fully incorporated culture as a vital component of language learning and especially while teaching second language classes. In conclusion, it makes perfect sense to state that those who take over the responsibility to teach a foreign language to a target group should of course be able to instruct and deliver to this group information and knowledge about the foreign culture as well, being in this way able to understand, experience and analyse both the home and target cultures at the same time.