

## **Bridging the Culture Gap**

### **Abstract**

It is a widely held belief that foreign language teaching can make an influential contribution to learners' views of the people and culture whose language they are being taught, but what about other cultures and peoples? This paper is aimed at educators in the tourism sector and examines some of the solutions recently proposed by foreign language professionals to help reduce the superficial views often held of the way that foreign people live their daily lives. These are relevant not only to those of us involved directly in language teaching, but to educators of all disciplines.

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### **Keywords**

Multicultural language solutions

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### **Author details**

Graham Stanley is a freelance English Language teacher based in Barcelona. Involved with teaching English to undergraduate tourism students at *ESADE Escola Universitaria de Turisme Sant Ignasi*, he is also finishing his M.Ed. in ELT and Educational Technology at *the University of Manchester*, and is a member of *IATEFL* (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language). He can be contacted by e-mail at *stanleyg@stignasi.es*

## Bridging the Culture Gap

'language is a steed that carries one into a far country' (Arab proverb quoted in Fromkin & Rodman (1998:420)

'To know another's language and not his culture is a very good way to make a fluent fool of one's self' (Winston Brembeck quoted in Utley D 2000:8)

"There is no way to avoid teaching culture when teaching language; they go together like....Marks & Spencer" (Valdes J 1990:20)

These three quotations illustrate the widely held belief of the interdependence of language and culture. Indeed, many believe it impossible to teach one without the other as both are so intertwined: 'language teaching has...always and inevitably meant, in fact, "language and culture teaching". 'Byram & Esarte-Sarriesv (1991:5).

## The role of culture in language teaching today

The aim of this paper is to identify the major cross-cultural challenges from the perspective of educators involved in the teaching of foreign languages, to describe the solutions they propose, and finally to show how they can be applied to the education of tourism professionals in general. It takes as its base the four approaches to language teaching and culture outlined by Risager (1998:242-254), and looks at the challenges and proposals associated with each one. The four approaches are:

1. The *foreign-cultural* approach.
2. The *intercultural* approach
3. The *multicultural* approach
4. The *transcultural* approach

The paper includes feedback from final year students studying at *ESDADE Escola Universitaria de Turisme Sant Ignasi* who have had the chance to experience some of the methods discussed in the paper.

As we shall see, each approach has its own associated problems, but what is clear is that *cross-cultural capability* is now considered 'a necessary function of the language learner' (Killick 1999:4).

## 1. The foreign-cultural approach

It has often been said that 'Language teaching is, in a sense, a subject in search of a subject matter' (Harrison 1990:1). In the *foreign-cultural* approach, which can also be described as a *mono-cultural* approach, and which has been losing ground since 1980s, much of that content has traditionally come from learning about a single culture, that of the target language.

Traditionally, foreign language-learning has been more concerned with techniques than with content. With the arrival of the communicative approach to English language teaching (ELT) in the 1970s and the emphasis on language use rather than form, and the promotion of spoken language, came the monolingual method and a proliferation of native speaker teachers (Howatt 1984:287-9). The hidden byproduct of this was a mono-cultural approach, especially when the teachers were monolingual and monocultural themselves. What happened in ELT was subsequently taken up by many practitioners in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) in general.

Since then, there has been a measure of uncomfot among some ELT educators that English teaching might be seen as cultural imperialism and could 'compromise the cultural integrity of the non-native speaker' (Modiano 2002:339). One solution offered is in favour of 'deculturising English' (Harris 2002) , but many others believe much of culture 'is internal and hidden' and 'governs behaviour' (Weaver 1993:157) and 'without cultural awareness, a language cannot be properly understood' (Byram & Fleming 1998:4). For this reason, cross-cultural solutions have been suggested by many educators.

I would like to take one of the cultural challenges (stereotyping) and look at how the foreign cultural approach deals with it:

### Combatting stereotypes and prejudice

As Barro, Jordan & Roberts note, '*Culture* has tended to be dealt with superficially in textbooks, as *thin* description.' (1998:78), and the end result in many cases is stereotyping. This has been defined as 'the general inclination to place a person in categories according to some easily and quickly identifiable characteristic such as age, sex, ethnic membership, nationality or occupation, and then to attribute to him (or her) qualities believed to be typical of members of that group.'" (Tagiuri 1969). This goes hand-in-hand with prejudice, which has been called 'aversion fuelled by ignorance' (Clarke 1990:31).

The potential in foreign language learning for combatting stereotypes and prejudice, especially when combined with a visit to the target language country, may seem obvious, but Byram and Esarte-Sarriev have noted that 'the hypothesis that foreign travel will have an effect on pupils' stereotype images and lack of knowledge is only partially sustained (1991:105).

One problem has been the effect of using classroom materials which reinforce stereotypes. Obviously, a two week study visit cannot hope to correct years of study with books showing stereotypical representations of the country.

For instance, here is the stereotype of Great Britain as seen by a group of French learners: 'It is a rainy country, deprived of industry, with no historical past, ruled by a queen, where people drink tea, beer or whisky, where men are still carrying umbrellas and wearing bowler hats, where the countryside is green.'(Byram & Cain 1998:33)

These type of views are not only misrepresentations, but a denial of 'the linguistic and ethnic diversity...in British society' a 'devaluation of, among others, women, black Britons, and those living north of Shakespeare's birthplace. " (Clarke 1990:35)

For this reason, the Anglocentric, trivial content language and communication activities of some of these coursebooks 'has rightly come under close scrutiny' (Harris 2002:6).

The result can be seen in some of the new materials in the marketplace. 'What's it Like', for example, is an intermediate textbook which has reading activities based on cultural diversity. There are poems written by immigrants to Britain, and readings about cultural conflict. The emphasis is that which Byram & Fleming promote, that 'language learning should lead to positive attitudes towards speakers of other languages' and should attempt 'to ensure a proper analysis of national stereotypes.' (Byram & Fleming 1998:6-7). This kind of material shows the moving away from the mono-cultural approach, reflecting the ever-increasing multicultural nature of modern society.

One of the keys here, then, is that the educator should select classroom materials carefully, bearing in mind the view of culture demonstrated by these materials. Particular caution should be exercised when using materials which are old, and which might show a lack of sensibility or a distorted view of culture. 'Successful language learning requires language users to know the culture that underlies language' (Tseng YH 2002), but it is important to present culture as it actually exists, and to challenge the stereotypical views when they are held by students.

## 2. The intercultural approach

The communicative approach to language teaching is generally concerned with the development of *communicative competence* (Hymes 1972) This was developed from Chomsky (1965:3) and relates to what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a foreign language. This idea, developed further by Canale & Swain (1981) and Widdowson (1989) has come to emphasise the part sociolinguistics (including cultural awareness) plays in the development of this. The *intercultural* approach, which is perhaps most dominant nowadays, stems from this idea and is based on the belief that different cultures are related to each other.

The emphasis here is on the analysis and comparison of the learner's own culture and the target language culture as the student is involved in the learning process. The challenge for the intercultural educator is to constantly 'engage learners in analyzing their experiences' (Sunnygard 2002:332-334 ).

The growth of this view is reflected in ELT by the view that 'whenever two people from different cultures meet and use English to communicate with each other, they will inevitably, intentionally or not, be using English in culturally distinct ways.' (Hyde 1998:9), and has seen a 'move away from the model of ...'English as a Foreign Language' to the more inclusive model of...'English as a means of Intercultural Education' (Hyde M 1998:7), which English teachers are 'well-positioned to branch out into' Chamberlain R (2002:6).

As Alptekin mentions, 'It is becoming increasingly apparent that real communicative behaviour ought to be redefined in relation to the reality of English as an International Language...taking into account the meaningful background provided by the indigenous language and culture of the learner.' (2002:61-2)

This approach works especially well when there is overlapping between language learning and awareness and cultural experience and awareness (Byram 1990:17-20). It can be demonstrated by looking at some ways of dealing with *culture bumps*, for instance, the use of simulation, and drama.

### Culture Bumps

*Culture bumps* happen when someone from one culture has an embarrassing or uncomfortable experience interacting with people of a different culture (Archer 1986). They are caused by people having different expectations of behaviour, and demonstrate how there is 'always a potential source of conflict when one culture enters into contact with another.' (Kramsch 1993)

Ruben and Lederman give an example of a culture bump in the following business scenario: 'The Japanese habit of closing the eyes when concentrating on a question may be quite traumatic to the Canadian businessperson who has no idea how to interpret the action.' (1990:211). The problem here seems to be how is it

possible to teach our learners how to cope with subcultural conventions that are so different from our own?

It has been suggested that the best way to equip students with strategies for dealing with this phenomenon is to move culture to the centre stage and make it 'an essential element in any training activity involving international English.' (Utley 2001:49), or indeed the teaching of any foreign language. Tseng suggests using these 'cultural differences as a source of productive tension.' (2002). One way of doing this using the intercultural approach would be to explore the behaviour of the two cultures in different situations through use of drama, or simulation.

### **The use of drama**

Drama can be used here to create 'contexts for practice in communication through simulation of real-life experiences.' (Byram & Fleming:143) The advantage of this method lies in the fact that 'the exploration of culture can take place in the safety of the fictional world created in the drama, using non-realistic methods such as slowing down the action, voicing inner thoughts, replaying scenes with different emphasis.' (Byram & Fleming:144), all of which can help cross the cultural barrier.

Because this 'cultural barrier implies a lot of things besides language problems: the way people behave, dress, gesticulate, smile, laugh, use space and time, etc. – all this is very important for the process of communication' (Ter-Minasova 1998:36), it lends itself well to exploration through drama.

Obviously, the use of drama requires careful handling, and would not be suitable for all groups of learners. However, role-playing has been an acceptable part of foreign language learning for a long time now, and asking students to play the parts of complaining tourists, for example can be well-received, especially as our learners more often find themselves on the other side of the fence. The 'potential pitfalls in this approach', have been noted by Fleming, who cautions that 'representation of foreign cultures in improvisation can easily lead to stereotyped portrayals' (1998:150), which would defeat the objective of the exercise.

With other groups, a less threatening way of inter-cultural exploration can be performed by using simulations.

### **Using simulations**

Simulations, which do not require learners to adopt roles, have been defined as 'operating models of reality' by Ruben and Lederman (1990:208), who suggest using 'interactive simulations' as a good way of studying the difference between cultures because 'the intricate and dynamic relationship ... is difficult to model and hard to teach with traditional methods', and because 'If one treats simulations as real experiences, participants can be provided with real insights into these experiences.'

They suggest two types of simulations : culture-specific and culture-generic. The first type is common in traditional methods of instruction – In this case students are asked to perform tasks, adapting their culturally specific behaviour. The students can be given material which is difficult to interpret without reflecting on the other culture, and their reactions and behaviour can be examined once the simulation is over.

The second type of simulation, about the nature of culture and communication and their relationship to one another encourages 'learning about the process underlying the development and change of *all* cultures' is less common. One example would be an activity which 'sought to provide participants with firsthand experience of the dynamics of cultural adaptation.' This type of simulation relates more to the multicultural approach to language learning.

### 3. The multicultural approach

'Language is the main means whereby people communicate. It is also, ironically, the main means whereby people fail to communicate. One possible solution ...is to promote the development of an existing language as a world language – something that currently seems to be happening to English.' Another '...is to foster the growth of multilingualism in individuals and societies' (Crystal 1997:343)

The *multicultural* approach to language learning emphasises the fact that several cultures may coexist within the boundaries of the same society and state, and the focus is on the linguistic and ethnic diversity that is found in the countries where the target language is spoken. This approach in ELT also reflects the real needs of non-native speakers, most of whom learn the language as a means of communicating with other non-native speakers.

Risager noted in a survey of language teachers' views on culture that few 'make explicit an understanding of culture that associates it with more than one country' or 'mention cultural diversity within one country' (1998:252). This, and the concentration on cultural differences, when what students really need is 'to learn to *act* in cross-cultural situations' (Meyer 1990:137) are considered by some to be the problems with the previous approaches to foreign language teaching.

#### Multi-Cultural Solutions for a multicultural world

The multicultural approach makes sense 'in a business world where a German marketing officer is sent to Japan by her employer, a Finnish telecommunications corporate, in order to negotiate joint ventures for the emerging markets of Eastern Europe' (Nierasgden 2002) and where 'the dangers lie not only in getting your grammar wrong.' Its aim is not to 'look for melting-pot schools, where diversity melts into as unity, but for salad-bowl schools, where all the ingredients mix together but keep their own taste', and to 'help individuals obtain self-understanding by observing themselves from different perspectives.' (Roldán Tapia 2001).

Many supporters of this approach advocate moving away from the native speaker norm.

#### The native speaker norm

The multicultural multilingual approach implies a reappraisal of goals in foreign language teaching and the questioning of the native speaker's 'ownership' of language, to use Widdowson's phrase (Widdowson 1994). As 'most English language interactions...are more likely to be between non-native speakers (and therefore non-native cultures) than with *natives*...' (Killick 1999), the native speaker norm seems out-of-date. This is supported by Byram and Zarate (1994), and Kramsch: 'In our days of frequent border crossings...it is appropriate to rethink the



monolingual native speaker norm as the target of foreign language education' (1998:30).

The proposal is that 'successful bilinguals with intercultural insights and knowledge should serve as pedagogic models...rather than the monolingual native speaker' (Alptekin 2002). This is because 'It would seem logical that only someone who is bilingual and bicultural can really understand and help with the problems of language learners.' (Harris 2002:6) This is why many now consider that the best foreign language teacher 'for monolingual groups is the fluent bilingual speaker of either nationality.' Walker 2001.

### **Inter-disciplinary collaboration**

One way that subject teachers can promote a multicultural approach in their classes is through greater co-operation with language teachers. The introduction of foreign language material in class can help promote other cultures and stress the importance of learning foreign languages for tourism professionals. It helps set a model for students. This interdisciplinary approach can also be promoted by the use of language teachers by their teaching of tourism content. These two methods have been adopted by educators at *ESDADE Escola Universitaria de Turisme Sant Ignasi*.

Some of the student reactions to this can be seen in the comments to a questionnaire (*Appendix I*) which I administered to 45 final-year students at the end of a content-based short course on 'Customer Service in Tourism' In 2002. A selection of the comments of the students, who were asked their opinions on the relationship between culture and language, can be found in *Appendix II*.

#### 4. The transcultural approach

The *transcultural* approach accepts as a norm 'the interwoven character of cultures as a common condition for the whole world' (Risager 1998:248) and strives for the goal of 'competence to use the language as a contact language in all kinds of situations characterised by cultural and linguistic complexity, among others as a *lingua franca* in international and interethnic communication.'

Speaking about the ideas in Porto (2001), Pulverness summarised that 'each participant in a given learning situation will belong simultaneously to a number of different cultures, and that one of the prime educational objectives in the language class should be to enable learners to learn to mediate between these various cultural identities.' (2001). The idea here is that a foreign language learner will eventually change from having a mono-cultural identity or awareness to bi-cultural or (ideally) multicultural one through the integrated teaching of culture and language.

This *transcultural approach* is emerging as different cultures penetrate each other as a consequence of tourism, migration and international communication. In the United States, for example, 'multiculturalism has become the hallmark of American classrooms' (Kramsch 1998:28) and one example of *transculturalism* here is the fact that many learners of French or German in the States are not 'monolingual monocultural Anglo-Americans, but are, for example, Mexican or Chinese bilingual speakers of Spanish or Chinese and English.' (Kramsch 1998:28)

In line with this, Tomalin & Stempleski (1993:8) suggest seven goals of cultural instruction, including the stimulation of curiosity and encouragement of empathy. They 'advocate a task-oriented approach towards teaching culture' with co-operative learning tasks in which students work together to gather information, share and discuss what they have discovered to form a bigger picture, interpret the information within the context of the target culture and in comparison with their own culture(s).

This type of cross-cultural approach entails changes in the classroom, as 'only a cooperative and learner-centred style will do justice to the newly defined roles of both teacher (who becomes more of a facilitator, and less of an instructor) and learner (who is upgraded to a discussion partner and ideas generator' (Nieragden 2002:3).

#### Conclusion

The views of language teaching professionals presented here reflect the concern that is present across many educational sectors, that 'Humans are cultural beings' and that 'the native culture is always deeply rooted and works subconsciously even when people become familiar with a second or foreign culture.' (Jiang 2001: 386). There are no easy ways to bridge the culture gap, but the fact that awareness of culture as a central issue to be tackled and that the previous view of culture 'as

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supplemental or incidental to the real task.' (Chamberlain 2002:8) is now disappearing.

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## **Appendix I**

### **Student questionnaire**



## CROSS-CULTURE IN TOURISM

I would really appreciate if you could spend five minutes of your time answering this questionnaire, the contents of which I would like to use during my presentation in the **EUROCHRIE** conference next October.

Please think about your classes in general, not just the language classes.

1. How have your ideas about different cultures changed since you started this course?

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2. What part(s) of the course have changed your ideas about different cultures

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3. How do you think learning languages helps the understanding of different cultures?

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4. Have you taken advantage of any trips abroad during your course? If so, how have they helped your professional development / understanding of different cultures?

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5. Apart from in your language classes, how much material was given to you in a foreign language? Was this too much / too little?

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6. How would you feel if some of your subjects were partly taught in another language or if some of the materials were given to you are in a foreign language?

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7. Any other comments about any of the following:

- Ways of understanding different cultures

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- Language and culture (how connected are they?)

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## **Appendix II**

Student responses (sample)

How have your ideas about different cultures changed since you started this course?

- “I have learned a lot about other peoples and feel more tolerant towards other ways of thinking”
- “The course has made me more tolerant towards different cultures”
- “They haven’t changed much since I already had a lot of experience with different cultures.”

What part(s) of the course have changed your ideas about different cultures

- “I had a good experience with a French class, and also *the Multicultural Communication course* with Klaus (the German teacher)”
- “The language classes are the subjects that have changed my opinions the most”
- “Philosophy, geography and various other subjects have broadened my mind about different cultures.”
- “Some of the English workshops last year taught me aspects of other cultures that I did not know”

How do you think learning languages helps the understanding of different cultures?

- “I think it is important not only to learn a language, but also to learn about the customs, country, and culture where the language is spoken.”
- “The more languages you learn, the more you understand about different cultures”

Have you taken advantage of any trips abroad during your course? If so, how have they helped your professional development / understanding of different cultures?

- “I’ve been to Ireland, and this experience changed my point-of-view. It opened my mind 100%”
- “Yes, I have travelled a lot. I advise all students to do it because it helps you develop in all aspects (mind, personality, culture, language)”

Apart from in your language classes, how much material was given to you in a foreign language? Was this too much / too little?

- “A couple of articles to read. I think that they don’t give us a lot and it’s a pity because we are studying tourism and languages are very important”
- “Quite a lot. In all our subjects we have received material in English”
- “It was too little. I think that we as professionals of this sector have to learn how to do more things in foreign languages”
- “They have given us material in foreign languages in various classes. Most of this information was in English and French”

How would you feel if some of your subjects were partly taught in another language or if some of the materials were given to you in a foreign language?

- “Good. I think it would be fine if it were a language I was studying”
- “I think it is necessary so that students make more of an effort to learn foreign languages.”
- “It would be appropriate, but it could be difficult for a lot of students”
- “It would be great, and we need it”
- “I would feel very grateful. This would make our education much easier and would improve our level of English / French / German”

Any other comments about any of the following:

1. Ways of understanding different cultures
  - “Try to live in the country”
  - “Travel a lot”
2. Language and culture (how connected are they?)
  - “A lot. The language, or the way a language is spoken directly responds to the language’s culture and way of life.”
  - “We have a lot of stereotypes. When we learn a language, we can correct some of these”