On The Role of Cultural Content and Cultural Context in Language Instruction

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1. Why language, culture and context?

Culture could be said to be the conventionalization of nature. Language could be viewed as the most prototypical of all examples of this process. But language is related to culture not only as an example of a systematic relation between nature and culture but also by presupposing and being presupposed by a range of other primarily nonlinguistic cultural phenomena. The outcome of all this Is that linguistic and cultural competence can In no easy way be separated. Becoming linguistically competent presupposes becoming culturally competent and vice versa.

Language and culture are also connected with context. The term **context** here Includes both the linguistic context (sometimes called cotext) and the extralinguistic context. Linguistic communication always takes place In a context *which Is* constituted partly by nature and partly by culture. The natural context includes such factors as the noise level, the visibility conditions, the temperature, the temporal and spatial difference between the communicators, etc. it also Includes various biological characteristics of the communicators, eg a physical handicap. These factors play a role both for the production and comprehension of linguistic expressions.

The cultural context enters through the psychological and social context. On the psychological side such factors as values, beliefs, attitudes, abilities have developed in different individuals as a result of an interaction between their biologically given characteristics and their socialization process which may Include contact with one or several cultures. The cultural influence here becomes apparent both in more longterm values, attitudes and beliefs (sometimes called character or personality traits) and In more temporary short term values, attitudes and beliefs (an example here might be a passing mood of anger In a conversation).

The more social side of culture enters into communication through the social identities of the communicators (sex roles, class factors, educational level etc) but also through the social character of the immediate communicative interaction. What is the purpose and function of the joint activity in which they are engaged? Consider a business negotiation, an informal dinner, a commercial transaction In a shop, etc? Or consider activities on, a more specific level: a quarrel during a business negotiation, the telling of a joke during an Informal dinner and an episode of flirtation during a commercial transaction In a shop. No reasonably concrete account of the function or purpose of these activities can be given without including culture specific elements.

Furthermore, in all these settings, the activities give rise to cultural expectations about social roles. How to talk and write as a businessman, a negotiator, an angry negotiator, a host, a guest, a customer, a sales clerk, a flirtatious customer etc.

Linguistic communication is, thus, always carried on in a context which is in large parts culturally constituted. This context sets criteria concerning relevance, adequacy and correctness which in turn determine both the production and the understanding of the linguistic expressions which are used by the communicators.

A consequence for language teaching is that relevant, adequate and correct use of language can be taught independently of context neither when it comes to productive skills such as speaking and writing nor when it comes to receptive skills such as perceptual discrimination, identification and understanding (whether these processes occur in connection with reading or in auditive and visual participation in direct spoken interaction).

Another consequence is that communication in a new language, at least when it is carried on with speakers who have the new language as a first language, is intercultural communication, ie communication between people who have different cultural backgrounds. Cf Gumperz, 1982 or Saville-Troike, 1982 for overviews of this field of enquiry. It might therefore be useful briefly to examine the notions of cultural background and culture.

2.   The concept of culture

The concept of "culture" has been analyzed in many different ways. Cf Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952 for an overview of about 200 different ways of determining the concept. Here I will use the concept in the following way. A culture can be defined as a collection of traits connected with a community of individuals which is: (i) common to the individuals in the community and (ii) not given by natural (ie biological or physical) necessity.

The fact that all individuals in the community, originally, most probably, were equipped with two legs Is, thus, not a cultural but a natural trait. However, if the members of the

community turned out to have a particular manner of walking this would probably be a cultural trait.

From a conceptually analytic point of view 1 would like to distinguish 4 main aspects of culture (Cf Allwood, 1985):

1. **Patterns of thought** - Common ways of thinking, where "thought" Is meant to include both factual beliefs as well as values and emotional attitudes.

2. **Patterns of behavior** - Common ways of behaving; including behavior from ways of talking to ways of ploughing the fields.

3. **Patterns of artefact manufacture and use** - Common ways of producing and using material objects; including objects from pens to houses.

4. **Traces In Nature** - Durable traces in Nature which are the result of the activity of members of the community toward the natural environment. We can find this aspect of culture captured in expressions such as agriculture.

All human activities involve the two first aspects. Most activities Involve the third aspect and the activities which at least from an ecological perspective are the most important also involve the fourth aspect. There is also an association between culture and what Is learned concerning the 3 first aspects and to some extent concerning the fourth. When a particular activity in a permanent way combines several of the aspects we say that the activity has been; **institutionalized** and that the activity has developed into a **social institution**. Social Institutions and social conventions are among the most important *organizational devices* for maintaining a culture in a certain group of individuals.

So far, 1 have not said anything about what kind of groups can be associated with a culture. in fact, any group which has a durable association with a collection of commonly shared, learned traits not given by natural necessity can be said to have a culture. Thus, we can speak of youth culture, male culture, workers' culture, carpenters' culture or London culture. Mostly, however, the concept of culture has been associated with ethnic groups or nation states, eg. Catalan culture, Galician culture, Basque culture or Spanish culture. Even if this kind of group often is the relevant one, when we are interested In language teaching, we should not forget that the cultural differences between non-nationally or non-ethnically based groups can be just as great or greater than the differences that exist between ethnic or national groups. An interest in cultural variation is a useful antidote to the risk for cultural stereotyping which nearly always occurs as a result of trying to abstract a set of common traits for a large number of individuals. Cf. Tingsten (1936).

Drawing on this discussion of culture we can now characterize <u>cultural background</u> as the beliefs, values, attitudes. habits, skills and expectations an individual possesses due to his or her socialization in a certain cultural community.

It is this cultural background which provides a mostly unnoticed and taken for granted basis for communication between members of a cultural community but which can become problematic when Individuals with different cultural backgrounds are going to communicate as a result, for example, of language acquisition.

Let us therefore turn to the problem of what types of cultural information should be combined or integrated with language teaching in order to make intercultural communication possible in a language which is new for at least one of the parties. I will divide my discussion into the following sections

(i)   Factual cultural information
(ii)   Attitudes and values
 (iii)   Learning by doing
(iv)   Training aspects of Communicative Behavior

3.   Factual cultural information

First, we can turn to parts of the f our above given aspects which which can be given a fairly straight forward f actual description. I presuppose that we are dealing with a culture associated with a national group.

1.   Physical geography; natural environment, climate, natural resources.
2.   Cultural geography; demographic distribution, routes of transportation, exploitation of the natural environment.
3.   History
4.   Religious and other significant ideologies.
5.   Political and social institutions.
6.   Types of industry.
7.   Types of commerce.
8.   Types of contacts with other groups.
9.   Customs of habitation.
10.   Customs of eating.
11.   Customs of clothing.
12.   Leisure, Sports and holidays.

The information concerning these parts should be presented In as many and varied ways as possible eg books, comics, videofilms, interactive video, computer games, etc. Whenever possible, the students should be led to actively pursue the information rather than just to

passively receive It. This can be done by requiring cultural authenticity in essays, roleplays, etc. that the students are asked to produce or by using the interactive possibilities of the mechanical devices exemplified above.

Three cultural phenomena deserve extra *attention because* of their Importance for linguistic communication.

1. Regional and social group formation.
2. Activity patterns.
3. Aesthetic cultural activities.

Under the first heading we include information about regional differences in customs including dialect differences. These differences can, as is well known, in some cases, be very large. We also include information about how differences between social classes, sexes and age groups are manifested in a particular culture of interest.

Under the second heading - activity patterns - Is meant to be included information about how different activities such as chatting, quarreling, negotiating, story telling, debating, lecturing, consulting, instructing, etc. normally are carried out within different social institutions. It would be desirable If the information given could be contrastive comparing the student's background culture with what holds for the culture about which the student Is trying to learn. In this Information could then be included differences concerning the purpose and/or function of the activity, differences concerning the rights and obligations going with a particular role in the activity. Consider, for example, the differences in rights and duties that can hold for a chairman of a meeting or a schoolteacher.

There should also be information about the linguistic routines going with the activities. Cf further below under learning by doing.

Under the third heading - aesthetic cultural activities - what is intended Is exposure to the art, music and literature of the culture In question. Here modern audiovisual aids can facilitate access a great deal by giving students the opportunities to look at slides and videos or to listen to casette tapes. In general, the idea here should not be to look or listen to easier versions but rather to use the "real stuff" with a suitable amount of explanation. In this way study of classical literature becomes a part of the integration of culture with language studies but as can be seen, it is no more than a part. Too often in the past, it has been assumed that exposure to the literature of a certain national culture would be sufficient to Introduce the culture as a whole. For some Instructive Ideas on how to integrate Intercultural information into the school curriculum, see Strömqvist and Strömqvist (1988).

4. Attitudes and values

An especially difficult and sensitive area of a culture concerns what attitudes and values are common In the community whose language we are trying to learn. This area Is so difficult that in the past It has mostly been left out of most cultural curricula. The difficulties are due, on the one hand, to the problems of gaining access to correct Information and, on the other hand, to the risk for incorrect, prejudicated and biassed Information.

From an analytical point of view part of this area could be included under factual Information and part under "learning by doing". However, the area Is separately discussed, since It Is extremely and governs a large part of how members of different cultures behave toward each other. Many misunderstandings arise and sometimes lead to conflict because of culturally determined

differences In values and attitudes between participants in intercultural communication. Especially, this can be true when one of the parties is linguistically less proficient, as is mostly the case, when we communicate in a language which is not our first and is perhaps also
recently acquired.

Thus, even though values and attitudes are an area of many potential pitfalls, 1 feel that It is essential that we make attempts to provide instruction in this area. One way of doing this is to provide a contrastive analysis of common attitudes to a number of concepts which seem to be of central importance in most cultures. It is clear that in establishing such a list of concepts one runs a risk of ethnocentrism but It Is also clear that any comparison between cultures presupposes some standard of comparison. The task Is to make this standard of comparison as fruitful and yet as nonethnocentric as possible. Below 1 give a list of concepts which exemplifies the kinds of concepts that could serve as foci for a comparative study of attitudes and values.

Comparative attitudinal foci.
1. Family
2. Child rearing
3. Love and sex
4. Friendship
5. Sex roles
6. Work
7. Authority
8. Hospitality
9. Beauty
10. Time
11. Space
12. Goals of life

13. View of death
14. Criteria for belief and knowledge
15. View of the Divine and/or supernatural
16. Metaphysics

As can be seen the list is not exhaustive. There are probably other central Interesting concepts. Nor are the categories in the list mutually exclusive. The list is not complete but is meant to give a first Idea of concepts, on which a contrastive study of attitudes and values could be based. In fact, for many cultures there is already a substantial literature connected with many of the concepts.

The material to be included under the *different concepts* could take the form of accounts of the statistical distribution of certain values and attitudes in a community. But perhaps more interesting would be a more reasoned account along the lines of Max Weber's ideal types *showing the* historical and Ideological roots of certain common attitudes and values In a particular community. Cf Weber 1951, *Runciman 1972,* and Allwood 1982.

5. Learning by doing

Teaching and training aimed at integrated linguistic and cultural competence can have several goals. Three of these are:

1. Providing insights about the new language and culture.

2. Attempting to Influence the student's attitudes In the direction of positive or at least tolerant attitudes towards the new language and culture.

3. Becoming linguistically *and* culturally competent *In* the new language and culture.

These three goals can be pursued in different ways. It might for example be thought that the classical lecture format Is suitable for goal no 1 but not so suitable for goal no 2, etc. I do not in general wish to dispute this. *In* fact, It Is probable that the best Interests of both pupil and teacher are served, if the teacher Is competent to employ several different methods. Thus, the lecture format can, indeed, be the best method for some kinds of teaching.

Much experience with the teaching of skills (and linguistic competence is to a large extent a skill), however, shows that the best results probably can be achieved if some kind of "learning by doing" can be employed.

So if the goal is to enable a student to pursue goals 3, 2 and 1, jointly, It Is most likely that a large portion of the student's curriculum should be occupied by activities which could be characterized as *"learning* by doing".

Some examples of such *"learning by* doing" are the following:

1. Authentic contacts with speakers of the new language (through travel or visitors).
2. Roleplay with varying degrees of predirection.
3. Essay writing.

4. Practical or aesthetical work in a new language - cooking, *mending a* car, singing, reciting poetry, etc.
5. Interactive video or computer programs.
6. Debating.
7. Preparation of a lecture.

Again, the list Is in no way meant to be exhaustive. One Important condition on the employment of activities such as the ones described Is that they should In general have 3 phases:

1) A preparatory phase
2) An executive phase
3) An analytical phase

With this structure the students first get a chance to warm up intellectually and emotionally for the activity to come, then get a chance to employ the new language as a real medium of communication and finally get a chance to analyze, draw conclusions and discuss alternatives. Both the preparatory and the analytical phase can deal with a wide range of topics from a phonetic or grammatical level to a more general cultural level.

6. Training aspects of communicative behavior

The linguistic communicative competence of an individual has at least the following 4 aspects:

1. Bodily gestures
2. *Phonology (segmental* and prosodic)
3. Vocabulary and phrases
4. Grammar

For languages which have a written representation, this competence also for many Individuals include the ability to read and write.

The Individual in acquiring a first language learns to integrate these 4 aspects of spoken direct *communication* and somewhat later, in some cases, he or she also learns to integrate the aspects of written communication. The integration is connected with learning how to contextually adapt the language with regard to the requirements of the cultural environment. Among the contextual and interactive communicative skills the Individual eventually learns are the following:

1)   How to communicatively participate in the sequential phases of a given activity.

2)   How to participate in the turn taking system which is characteristic of a given activity. Cf Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974.

3)   How to give and elicit communicative feedback in a manner that is appropriate given the circumstances. Cf Allwood 1988.

4)   What kind of spatial relations (proximity and angles) are appropriate to a given communicative activity.

5)   How to fill in taken for granted background information appropriate to the circumstances.

Some of the skills which are required, whether on an individual level or on an interactive level, are subject to regular conscious control and monitoring but many of the skills are rarely (if ever) subject to conscious *planning and* control. They have a low degree of awareness and for fluent use in linguistic communication, they require a high degree of automaticity. The question is how such automative features most efficiently can be learned, especially if they involve a change from one set of acquired automatic patterns to a new set.

In general, I think the "learning by doing" approach, advocated above, probably Is most suitable also for these aspects of linguistic and cultural competence. For some learners, especially adults, I think "learning by doing" should be supplemented, firstly, by lectures giving a theoretical account of the phenomena that have a high degree of automaticity. Secondly, there is often need for methods of training related to behavioral conditioning. For most adults it Is extremely difficult to acquire a high degree of proficiency In a new language with regard to features that require rapid automatic execution with a low degree of awareness. Exactly what parts are the most difficult varies from learner to learner but many adult learners have extreme difficulties with certain gestures, certain features of prosody, certain segmental sound features and features of morphology and syntax.

In these cases some kind of behavioral shock treatment might be effective. Examples of such treatment could be prolonged imitation without explanation, intensive drill In the language lab, etc.

7.   Summary

In this paper 1 have attempted to give an outline of some of the main ways In which culture and context impinge on language teaching. In section one, 1 give a brief theoretical suggestion for how one might conceive of the relation between language culture and context. I then suggest an analysis of the concept of "culture" which might serve as a background for a discussion of language learning and intercultural communication.

In sections three, four, five and six a suggestion is then made for how language and culture should be linked in language teaching. Firstly, the topic of what might be called cultural *information is* addressed. Secondly, the difficult but essential area of attitudes and values is discussed. Thirdly, a suggestion is made that *an* overriding guide line for *an* integrated teaching of language and culture is captured under the heading *"learning by* doing". Finally, there is a discussion of the problem of how to teach aspects of cultural and linguistic competence which have a high degree of automaticity and are characterized by a low level of awareness.

Acknowledgement

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