

PLACE OF LEARNERS' CULTURES IN SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

According to the action-oriented approach that currently inspires second language (L2) teaching, learners must be able to perform tasks in the L2 within the cultural framework of this language. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages mentions that learners must be able to act as cultural mediators between their linguistic community and native speakers. Second language learning is always an invitation to intercultural dialogue. Being able to talk about their own culture is as important as learning about the L2 culture.

Second language learning is considered as learning the culture of the L2 and language textbooks give an important place to the cultural aspects of the L2. Some textbooks for refugees, for example, make room for activities linked to the learners' cultures and offer the possibility of talking about themselves and their country.

This paper discusses the place given to the learner culture in the second language acquisition reference documents and L2 classrooms and the importance of using the learners' native culture and non-linguistic knowledge in second language teaching in adults.

Keywords: *English L2 learning, motivation, interest in the cultures of the English language, tool for intercultural communication, perceptions of English*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the action-oriented approach that currently inspires second language (L2) teaching, learners must be able to perform tasks in the L2 within the cultural framework of this language. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2020) mentions that learners must be able to act as cultural mediators between their linguistic community and native speakers. Introducing the mediation in CEFR, the Council of Europe notes that “mediation is one of the four modes in which the CEFR model organizes communication”, and “mediation is a strategic process which requires agency at every stage, develops linguistic and cultural awareness, and highlights the developmental nature of linguistic repertoires. Mediation plays a crucial role in successful plurilingual/pluricultural encounters and in distance communication” (Council of Europe, 2020, <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/mediation>>).

Culture can be defined as a set of arts, philosophy, knowledge, and achievements of a nation or other social group. Culture includes language, beliefs, religion, way of life, traditions, social habits, cuisine, cultural products, and technologies. Language and culture association in second language teaching and learning received wide disciplinary coverage (e.g., Kramsch, 1998, Hinkel, 1999) and this association makes consensus.

Sometimes reference documents reveal surprising expectations. *Échelle Québécoise* (2011), language benchmarks for French in Québec (because the province of Québec does not use *Canadian Language Benchmarks for French* developed at the federal level and recognized in other provinces), mentions, among the proficiency indicators, that learners must understand “the meaning of a specific and researched text” and cites religious texts as an example (*Échelle Québécoise* 2011, p. 117). The document does not specify which religion or why this skill is necessary in French L2.

Second language learning is always an invitation to intercultural dialogue and mutual discovery. Being able to talk about their own culture is as important as learning about the L2 culture. Intercultural competence includes comparing and contrasting learners' local culture with the target language culture; L2 helps to acquire more knowledge about the L1 culture and different means of analyzing and understanding others (Byram, 1997). The confrontation with the culture of the L2 is often an opportunity to become more aware of the L1 culture. Moeller & Nugent (2014, p. 14) state:

When intercultural competence is an integral part of the language classroom, learners experience how to appropriately use language to build relationships and understandings with members of other cultures. They can examine their own beliefs and practices through a different lens, negotiate points of view different from their own, and gain an insider's perspective of another culture.

However, L2 courses devote more time to the culture of the target language. References to the culture of the learners appear sporadically, in particular by comparing the L1 and L2 cultures. Usually, activities are organized around the L2 culture, and the ability to speak and explain one's own culture has no place in L2 classroom.

In order to talk about the values and traditions of other cultures, one must first know the values and traditions of one's own culture. Many learners are caught off guard when it comes to naming the values of their country and culture. Knowledge of the history of their country is not always there either. I do not intend to discuss here the quality of instruction and the level of knowledge of history and culture in L1, but I would like to point out that it is risky to take for granted that learners will be good ambassadors of their country/culture during cultural exchanges in L2 and that they will find the linguistic means to talk about them.

The reference to the learners' culture appears explicitly mainly in the case of learners with literacy needs. Second language textbooks give an important place to the cultural aspects of the L2. However, some textbooks for refugees or learners with literacy needs, for example, make room for activities linked to the learners' cultures, which makes it possible to somewhat attenuate the break with the country of origin and offer the possibility of talking about themselves and their country. In the case of less literate learners, valuing their cultures and know-how strengthen learners' engagement in the learning process.

Canadian Language Benchmarks: FLS for Less Literate Adults (2017), an official document aimed at supporting French L2 teachers who work in adult classes in Canada, sets out principles and describes the recommended pedagogical approach. Referring to prior studies (Bigelow & Schwarz, 2010, Condelli & Wrigley, 2004, Vinogradov & Bigelow, 2010), the document states that less literate second language learners "are probably affected by trauma, forced uprooting, separation from loved ones, isolation, poverty, family problems or an unfavorable social system" (*NCLC – FLS pour AMA*, p. 13), learners with literacy needs face more challenges than literate FSL learners in their integration process and their educational shortcomings create a number of several cultural barriers (*NCLC – FLS pour AMA*, p. 43). To facilitate cultural integration and the acceptance of differences in ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, the document recommends second language activities that allow "a cultural knowledge exchange on the topic of "how it is in my culture" (e.g., buying food, raising children, talking with a boss, choosing appropriate topics for studies or informal discussions)" (*NCLC – FLS pour AMA*, 2017, p. 43).

2. DISCUSSION

2.1. Reasons to learn a second language

Learning a language is done for a wide variety of reasons and is not intended to communicate with native speakers of the language: study or work abroad, work in international teams or organizations, tourism, etc. It is necessary to rethink the association between language and culture, not only because a language can be part of several very different cultures, but also because a language can be used as a communication tool outside of a particular cultural background. Nault (2008) states:

What is needed is a truly global approach to teaching culture in ELT contexts. Such an approach would recognise that English is not merely the language of an undifferentiated mass of 'Anglo-Saxon' Caucasians within a limited region of the world; it would expose students to alternate ways of perceiving reality and using English from all corners of the globe; it would challenge the myth that native speakers, particularly those from Great Britain and the United States, are the sole purveyors of 'English culture'; and, finally, it would broaden learners' mindsets and hone their linguistic skills to enable them to communicate effectively in socially complex international settings with people from different races, religions and linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Nault, 2008, p. 317).

The purely functional and utilitarian aspect of the L2 seems to be underestimated. Results of my previous study that examined the perception of the language-culture association vs the instrumental utility of English L2 in bilingual and multilingual adults residing outside of English-speaking areas show that only 28% of the respondents are interested in Anglo-Saxon cultures, 41% are not really interested in the content of English language cultural products but they are heavy consumers of them. The availability of cultural products in English (and not a particular interest) seems to be the determining factor for their choices (Dankova, 2019). Even though English is perceived often as a lingua franca, many other languages have the same status. Knowledge of French can be very useful in Africa; Tatar, the official language in Tatarstan, is understood by a large number of speakers of other related languages in Europe and Asia.

Rare are learners who openly say that they are not interested in the culture of the language they learn, for fear of appearing rude or closed-minded. Nevertheless, this attitude towards the L2 culture is not an exception:

It seems important to me to talk about what interests me, where I live, what I believe and think. I, therefore, study the vocabulary associated with my interests as a priority. I am curious and I like to meet new people, but my L2 learning is first organized around my centers of interest, the L2 culture that I learn remains incidental - I do not intend to move to countries where the language is spoken. I know I sound self-centered, but I'm being honest.

Even if L2 learners intend to live in a country where that language is spoken, they may perceive the L2 only as a means of achieving their personal goals and not as a way to access the culture of the country and fully endorse the status of new citizens. We must face the facts: many immigrants do not dream of identifying themselves with their co-citizens, and knowledge of the L2 is essential for them to obtain a job and to function in their new living environment. This vision of things is very far from the American (or similar) dream and from the idealized perception of the host country. Candidates for immigration meticulously study the advantages and disadvantages of the countries where they could immigrate, and economic criteria come before the cultural richness of the destination country. The language of the destination country is judged mainly in terms of ease of learning regarding the investment of time and effort, and usefulness in the future: *Am I ready to learn Icelandic, German, or English and how long does it take? Will this language be useful to me if I change country again?*

For many immigrants, success in learning a second language is often decisive in their integration into the labor market and the well-being of their families. For them, it is urgent to learn the language and to be able to function in this language. There is a serious disconnect between an academic and theoretical vision of L2 learning and the perception on the part of adult learners enrolled in language courses provided to immigrants. In some cases, the insistent attempts to 'sell' the values and realities of the host society and the discourse on adaptation and integration are perceived as propaganda or worse as a devaluation of the cultures and countries of the learners. Comments abound:

When the teacher talks to us about René Lévesque and the history of Quebec, I am wasting my time. I'm looking for work, my French is poor, and I make a lot of mistakes, it stresses me out. I would have preferred that we work more on grammar and oral expression instead of talking about history. With my three children, I don't have time to study on my own and, for now, French lessons are the only opportunity to improve my French and I don't want to waste my time.

Another L2 learner adds:

The teacher tells us that Canadians are welcoming and tolerant, but I'm not blind: racism and discrimination exist here too. It's sneakier than elsewhere. I lived for a few months in Morocco. I can tell you what hospitality means. In time, I will form my own opinion and I don't need to be told what to think.

The good intentions of teachers are sometimes misunderstood, and learners feel under-evaluated as a person: "I don't come from a jungle. I am not an exotic animal. Even if in my place things happen differently, I know that there are many ways to live, to think, to do ..." Another student says: "When I am asked, 'What do you eat in your country?' I don't know how to answer in one or two sentences. If I ask you 'What do you eat in France? Will you be able to give me a short answer? The question sounds to me like 'Do you have something to eat in your country? But maybe this is only my interpretation.'"

2.2. Introducing learners' cultures in the classroom

The second language culture is taught and explained. Students' culture is often 'forgotten' in the classroom. The cultural background, knowledge, and know-how of the learners, which is a link between the past and the present, become a driving force for learning the language if they are shared with others. An approach based on valuing learners' knowledge and skills can motivate learners, boost their self-esteem, and improve their performance in the second language.

There are visible and invisible aspects of culture (Erickson, 1997). Among the visible elements are clothes, food, traditional fabrics, religious objects, and housing. Many aspects such as beliefs, values, time and space management, appropriated topics of conversation or taboos are invisible. The emphasis on visible aspects leads to superficial and stereotyped exchanges. On the other hand, having experience and knowledge about other cultures help L2 teachers to overcome barriers due to cultural differences in the classroom and to improve their teaching (see also Allred, 2018, Bollin, 2007, Lanteigne, 2007). Ledford & Odoms (2022) point out that "language instructors should feel empowered to invest great time in identifying, celebrating, and promoting the classroom as a multilingual community of which they are a cherished part" (Ledford & Odoms, 2022 p. 97). McKay (2002) maintains that it is essential that teachers institute "a sphere or interculturality in EIL (English international language) classrooms so that individuals gain insight into their own culture. These insights can then be shared in cross-cultural encounters undertaken in international contexts" (McKay 2002, p. 100).

Lack of knowledge of other cultures results in misunderstandings and failed activities. For example, an elderly early childhood educator converted to an L2 French teacher for immigrants in Canada shows pictures with a stork bringing a baby and another with a black graduation gown and asks to talk about the events that these pictures represent. Most learners remain silent. A participant comments: "By watching American films, we knew about black graduation gowns, but the picture of a stork evoked absolutely nothing for the group". The worst – the teacher seemed unaware that the associated symbolism was not universal and did not understand why the group remained puzzled. It would have been much more informative and motivating to ask learners how important events are celebrated in their cultures. To initiate such an exchange, it is important to have prior knowledge and be able to help with vocabulary if needed.

Culture is not only food or exotic clothes. If we want to integrate learners' culture, we need to know a little bit about it to avoid stereotypes in our questions. Teachers complain that this task is impossible given the great cultural diversity in the classroom. There is a choice to do nothing or start somewhere. For instance, if learners come from different countries, they can have in common the same religion. Teachers might ask them about their favorite holidays and ways to celebrate them, or, in the case of polytheistic religions, about their favorite god: one of my students from India explained why she likes Shiva, one of the gods. Prior research is necessary, otherwise, it is difficult to ask smart questions and discuss the topic.

Climate is another common topic. Instead of asking about temperature and weather, teachers might ask learners to explain, for example, preventive measures in the case of tropical rain. The question

formulated in these terms calls for expertise and requires linguistic efforts. It also reflects an interest in the response. Students need to feel experts in domains where the teacher and other students are not.

Valuing learners' know-how is another important aspect, not only for the dynamics of the group but because the learners will have to talk about it during job interviews or in other circumstances. I had a student from Lithuania, he was very shy and was not comfortable speaking in public. I asked him a question, in private, about his profession in Lithuania. He worked as a lifeguard and diver in the cold Baltic Sea, he saved many lives and brought back dead bodies. He agreed to talk about this in the classroom. After that, he became a hero in the eyes of the group and performed much better in language tasks.

Introducing students' languages in the classroom is another aspect to consider. There are no excuses for teachers to ignore linguistic diversity in the classroom. I had an opportunity to teach French to Cree students (one of the First Nations in Canada). They had to learn French because of the language policy in the workplace in Quebec. It was a formality for them: they were going to work in English because nobody speaks French there. This situation was very challenging and politically charged for teachers. During the first lesson, I asked my students to write their names in Cree and French. I also asked to write my name in Cree on my badge. I asked to translate some words in Cree during the lessons. I tried to memorize and use them during the lessons. My interest in languages is sincere: I speak several and I always take the opportunity to learn something new. I learned a lot about Cree culture and traditions and my students learned French without resistance. I did not try to 'sell' French to them – I tried to learn about them in French.

3. CONCLUSION

For teachers, second language teaching is an opportunity to discover new people and their cultures and not limit themselves to a stereotyped and simplistic vision.

Teachers and students must discuss as equals. A paternalistic attitude kills adult students' interest in the classroom. Teachers must manifest a genuine interest in other cultures and have at least a basic knowledge of them. Unfortunately, many second language teachers are monolingual, have no experience living abroad or learning a new language, and exhibit condescending attitudes toward students' cultures.

Teachers should plan learning activities where learners appear as experts in the field and ask questions that solicit knowledge and know-how from the students. All students have something special to share with others. In the case of the students with literacy needs it is more important because sometimes they have low self-esteem. They learn better if the content, social interactions, their knowledge, and know-how are interconnected.

Teachers should not only prepare learners to interact in an intercultural environment in the future, but they also have to make the intercultural exchange happen in the classroom from the beginning.

Note: Learners' comments quoted in this text are from personal communications.

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