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# TEACHING CULTURE IN THE SPANISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (SSP) CLASS

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***Abstract:*** *This paper analyses the integration of culture as a basic element of language for specific purposes (LSP) teaching which implies that the student acquire the appropriate intercultural ability to allow him/her to manage when faced with the reality of the foreign country. In it I bring forward the main difficulties this approach may raise as well as some efficient solutions. From the point of view of teaching specialized vocabulary, I discuss the different categories of cultural terms which must be given special attention within overall class management and provide some relevant examples in this respect.*

***Keywords:*** *LSP, intercultural approach, cultural terms.*

## 1. LSP and Culture

In accordance with the basic principles of the communicative approach, language acquisition cannot be conceived nowadays outside its sociocultural component. "Learning to communicate – according to M. Fernández-Conde Rodríguez – presupposes immersing oneself in a demanding process of socialization" (32) and the necessity of preparing the student for an efficient communication in a foreign language becomes even more compelling when referring to the area of teaching a language for specific purposes.

Thus, culture becomes a very important "specific and integrated element" (Aguirre Beltrán 21) in language for specific purposes (LSP) class and it is not to be treated as something implicit or secondary.

The teacher must be acquainted with the culture of the language he/she teaches which is bound to allow him/her the sufficient amount of teaching autonomy to deal with a multicultural class. Moreover, the European Union has declared itself in favour of interculturality as opposed to other more economical options but much less culture conscious.

However, the presence of the cultural component in LSP raises various problems, some of which are related to the definition and nature of LSP, others to the concept of the culture to be adopted.

As far as the different LSPs are concerned, we should start from a fundamental premise, that is, the presence within them of a horizontal dimension, related to the topics of a specialized area as producer of knowledge and a vertical one which depends on the sociological component, namely the use of languages as an instrument for communication between the members of a group (Cortelazzo). The importance of these two coordinates is not equal in all areas; for instance, in technical language, topics play a fundamental role which implies an extensive amount of specialized vocabulary. In other fields, such as the area of business, the

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sociological dimension stands out whereas the specialized topics are represented by a variable mixture of elements. In any case, there is no univocal relationship between topics and communication. The purpose is not only to familiarize students with a certain subject but, more importantly, to reach a pragmatic aim.

The concept of genre allows us to overcome this dichotomy between horizontality and verticality. According to J. M. Swales (20), genre can be defined as a communicative event created by specialists with a specific purpose and characterized by a conventional use of language and its forms of expression. In fact, the different LSPs do not exist in pure state, they take the concrete form of a text which is subject to the rules of its belonging genre.

Each LSP comprises a series of particular genres which make use of both written and oral form, with different levels of formality. Some genres follow a very strict ritual and formulaic guidelines such as legal formulas, others are closer to spontaneous conversation. Some belong to a certain subject and have a high concentration of technical terms while others make use of a mixed vocabulary with a strong language basis.

In order to evaluate the function of the cultural component within a LSP, we must consider both its contents and its sociological side. The degree of importance corresponding to each of these sides depends on the genre in question as well as on the potential intercultural differences which are due to "visible" or "invisible" aspects, where by "visible" we understand the customs and beliefs which a certain community shares and by "invisible" a series of norms that the speaker assimilates unconsciously. Disregarding these rules most frequently results in intercultural shock, misunderstanding and even complete communicative failure. (Oliveras 30)

## 2. The Intercultural Approach in Teaching LSP/SSP.

If in its beginnings the teaching of specialized languages focused on the acquisition of specialized vocabulary, at present the tendency is clearly towards teaching a LSP through texts.

This intercultural approach suggests that the student acquire the appropriate amount of intercultural ability to allow him/her to manage when faced with the reality of the foreign country. Undoubtedly, the intercultural ability constitutes a challenge when dealing with languages which are very different one from the other although, in the case of similar languages, it is also essential for the student to avoid applying his/her personal mental patterns to the new culture. In fact, too much similarity between languages can hinder the approach to cultural reality (García García). It is because of this that choosing a suitable teaching method must primarily enhance in the student the capacity of observation by means of practical exercises involving the student becoming conscious of his/her own culture as seen in comparison with the other culture, contemplating the most relevant traits which characterize the foreign culture by analysing authentic documents and, finally, comparing resulting data to his/her own prior stereotypes on the culture in case.

In teaching LSP, the intercultural approach must take as a starting point the notion of genre. For instance, explaining to the student what the language of economy is generally characterized by may prove of little interest; he/she may find it more useful to learn how to recognize the specific rules of genre such as business negotiation, application, filing a complaint, etc. as it is in these rules of genre where

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cultural differences are best reflected. Also, we need to take into account the fact that the language teacher does not share the same technical knowledge of his/her students, especially in the case of areas with a heavy horizontal subject matter component and, despite a lifetime teaching experience which enables the teacher to acquire a considerable amount of specialized knowledge, one cannot expect him/her to turn into a lawyer, a doctor or an economist. So, from this point of view, we underline the usefulness of working with parallel texts.

In this respect, when teaching SSP, a series of individualizing aspects must be accounted for: the phenomenon of bilingualism characteristic for some geographical areas of Spain, the use of the familiar *tú* form or the different cultural horizons which a language spoken by several nations, such as Spanish is, involves.

## 3. Cultural terms in SSP.

Among the linguistic factors to consider we obviously have vocabulary. Even by rejecting a traditional teaching method of LSP focused on the learning by memory of word lists, we must admit that technical terms constitute a central part of specialized communication. From an intercultural perspective of the vocabulary of LSP, we must underline the presence of "cultural terms", a category including: *realia* which are real cultural terms, words without referent in other cultures; common language terms being attributed a special new meaning and syntagmatic forms (Calvi 114).

It is, thus, important for students to capture the cultural value of words beyond any similarities that his/her professional knowledge can detect between the two cultures. Here are some examples of cultural terms:

In the language of economy, we come across an interesting case which corresponds to the category of *realia*. It is the Spanish term *autonomía* (Spanish self-governing region) and its derivatives with the meaning given to it by the Spanish Constitution. This is basically a legal term related to the political process of transition in Spain. Its obvious monosemic quality cannot be transferred to other languages by means of a simple process of translation which implies that the student must be aware of the institutional value of this Spanish noun in order to be able to understand expressions such as the following: *derecho autonómico* (regional law), *desarrollo autonómico* (regional development), *televisión autonómica* (regional television), etc.

The presence of cultural terms in the political genre such as discourse and debates is quite plentiful and significant, too. These are mainly common language words which at certain historical periods and used by political characters are endowed with a specialized meaning as part of the peripheral area of the political vocabulary. Expressions such as *rodillo* (high-handed performance of a group), *dedazo* (appointment of relatives/friends as civil servants), *soberanía compartida* (shared sovereignty) among many other, require a solid knowledge of the Spanish political reality (Rebollo Torío 16).

In the field of tourism, the translation of cultural terms creates a series of problems due to the great number of both *realia* and words with equivalents in other languages but with special cultural marks in Spanish (Calvi 118). In the discourse of tourism, elements from different microlanguages (economy, geography, art history, etc) are combined. Its most characteristic genres, the brochure, the tourist guide contain a very heterogenous mixture of terminology belonging to the previously mentioned areas with quite a variable density.

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Since there is a close relationship between tourism and the cultural-historical heritage of a nation, naturally the number of cultural terms will be greater in the genre describing tourist products. Such is the case of the cultural terms from the area of art history used to describe monuments: *mozárabe* (Mozarabic), *mudéjar* (Christian Moorish), *isabelino* (Elisabethan), *churrigueresco* (Churrigueresque – Spanish Baroque) or the case of the adjectives *andaluz* (Andalusian) and *andalusí* (of Muslim Spain) similar as etymology but different in use and significance.

Some terms of cultural origin, commonly used in tourism, become technical terms. In the area of hotel trade, for instance, apart from the worldwide known *hotel,* we come across terms belonging to the historical legacy of Spain: *parador* (state-owned hotel housed in a historic building), *hostal* (cheap hotel), *posada* (inn). Also, gastronomy, especially in the area of restaurant service, offers an extremely interesting field of observation since all ingredients and typical dishes are closely connected to popular culture and traditions.

## 4. Conclusions

We have seen that culture has become an important element of LSP teaching nowadays and, when deciding upon an adequate teaching method, the language teacher must consider an intercultural perspective as well as insist on developing the students' capacity of observation so as to enable them to identify the different cultural aspects and communication styles which can cause misunderstandings or cultural shock in professional interactions.

As far as SSP is concerned, we have seen that there are plenty of examples to support this modern teaching approach as Spain possesses a very rich culture with lots of individualizing aspects which no specialized field can do without.

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