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CULTURAL CONTEXTUALIZATION IN TEACHING LEXIS – PEDAGOGICAL OPTIONS

"Language and culture cannot be separated. Language is vital to understanding our unique cultural perspectives. Language is a tool that is used to explore and experience our cultures and the perspectives that are embedded in our cultures."
(Buffy Sainte-Marie - American singer and song writer, b.1941)

It is a matter of common knowledge that there are significant differences among languages as regards the vocabulary and the meanings attached to lexical units, which are sensitive marks of the cultural differences existing among them. Therefore, when a foreign language is taught/learned, cultural contextualization can play a major role in turning these meanings more explicit. This has been pointed out in the literature of the field (Thanasoulas, 2001), which shows that both communicative competence and cultural competence should be envisaged in the language class. Most authors maintain that the mere focus on grammar, lexis or the four skills leaves the learners unable to perform in a competent manner in contact with the target culture, if they lack (at least basic) cultural insights and information; that is why there are studies suggesting methods and techniques of incorporating culture in the teaching of lexis.

For over twenty years there has been a resurgence of interest in the study of language in relation with society. If the cultural component is disregarded, there is a risk that this may lead to cross-cultural miscommunication. Therefore, what matters is to 'put [the target] culture in relation with one's own' (Kramsch, 1993). Otherwise, what we teach is just 'meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning' (Politzer, 1959). As pointed out (Samovar, Porter, & Jain,1981), the two are inseparable also because it is the language that supports people in encoding their messages and the meanings of their messages, as well as the 'conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted'. Language is interwoven with culture and it is the 'prototypical tool for interacting with the world' (Duranti, 1997). The origins of meanings and of their significance are in the culture of origin (Bruner, 1996). This is refined to a subtler view (Henle, 1970), that maintains that certain linguistic features might make certain modes of perception 'more prevalent or more probable'. Culture seems to have its own 'grammar' (Howell & Vetter, 1976), superimposed on, and reflected in that of the language proper. Moreover, cultural awareness informs and enriches communicative competence, covering both verbal and non-verbal communication, therefore accounting for both appropriacy of language and of behaviour. We can summate the main reasons of including cultural elements in the teaching of language, and, implicitly, of lexis: (i) it helps avoid stereotypes; (ii) it enables students to take control of their own learning and to achieve autonomy, by 'evaluating and questioning the wider context within which the learning of the target language is embedded' (Thanasoulas, op. cit.) and - we can add - (iii) it helps the learners to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words/phrases in the target language. What is more, the manner in which language and the social variables are related should inform culture teaching in the foreign language classroom, starting from the premise that language is influenced by to social variables (sex, age, social class, location

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etc.); similarly, register differences should also be taken into consideration. There are numerous resources pointing to ways of raising the students' cultural awareness. Thus, students can be introduced to some so-called 'key words' such as *marriage*, (Williams, 1983), being provided support in taking an inside view of the connotations of such words in the target language/culture. Another proposal (Peck, 1998) is focused on 'culturgrams' – cultural clusters encapsulating cultural information. Yet another mode of sensitizing the students (Henrichsen, 1998) consists of two interesting tools: 'culture assimilators' - short descriptions of various situations where one person from the target culture interacts with persons from the home culture, and 'cultoons' - visual culture assimilators, emphasizing points of misunderstanding or potential culture shock cauze. Let us conclude upon the need to provide at least a minimum of cultural differences data in the language class, warning (Bessmertnyi, 1994) that if totally disregarded, the main risks are 'misunderstanding, culture shock, even animosity among nations'. In recent times, with the emergence of the communicative approach to the teaching of English (Vizental, 2007), the teaching of vocabulary, seen as an essential 'code' for communication, should include false friends, homonymy, pairs of words, phraseological patterns, idioms – in a contextualized manner, on the basis of authentic input and task type, providing the necessary cultural data, whenever needed. The literature provides a range of views on vocabulary teaching (Zimmerman, 1997; Lewis, 1997; Thornbury, 2004; Pčolinská, 2010), and on understanding cultures through key words comparative analyses (Wierzbicka, 1997). What kind of influence generating differences has been exerted over words to make them get new culturally–specific meanings? They are of various types and origins - social, discoursal, local cultural constructs a.s.o. All this must be made explicit to the learners. The teacher's role is to design and insert awareness raising/sensitizing tasks, insisting on both differences and the dynamics of meanings in time. Students should be made aware of the newly acquired cultural significance of some terms. It is a good way of making them understand their own cultural context, as well, on account of the fact that the semantic implications of a word may differ from one language to another; for example, *making a compromise* is an asset in the English speaking countries, while in Romania, after the years of socialism, it has received a negative connotation (Şerbănescu, 2007). Possible (re)sources for the teacher – and later on, for the learners themselves, on their way towards independent learning, are illustrated. Thus, the 'Key Phrases' dictionary (Nigel, 1990) provides explanations regarding the origin of: *catch phrases* – 'believe it or not'; *idioms* – 'eyeball to eyeball'; *nicknames* – 'flower people'; *sayings* – 'all publicity is good publicity'; *slogans* – 'ban the bomb'. Dictionaries of neologisms (Volceanov, 2000) point out that English is developing, with new words covering new cultural circumstances/events appearing permanently, from various sources: giving a second youth to older terms (*acid rain*, dating from 1850, and re-entering the current use in our ecology oriented times); borrowings from other languages (e.g. Japanese - *karaoke*), but also from other English speaking areas (*Hill rat* – from American English); affixation using fashionable suffixes (*-aholic*, generating *shopaholic* or -ati, producing *numerati*); agglutination (*affluenza* = *affluence* + *influenza*); acronyms (*WAN*, in IT). English has been enriched with terms that have appeared since the 1980s, in: finances: *firewall*; medicine: *mad cow disease*; IT: *phantom bug*; British politics: *Thatcherite*; the ecology oriented movement: *ecofreak*; the newly emerged united Europe: *Eurobottle*.

These materials should be used in class, in various ways, in order to develop the learners' habit of being inquisitive as far as such a 'barometer of social trends' (Ayto, 1989) is

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concerned. Thus, the learners will be able to both use the target language and behave/communicate competently, in a manner appropriate to the target culture.

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RÉSUMÉ

CONTEXTUALISATION CULTURELLE DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT DU VOCABULAIRE – OPTIONS PEDAGOGIQUES

Il est reconnu que, du point de vue lexical, il y a des différences notoires entre les langues. Celles-ci sont autant de signaux qui renvoient à des différences d'ordre culturel. Dans chaque langue il y a une série d'entités lexicales clés qui reflètent des valeurs composant le noyau dur de la culture qui leur correspond. L'étude approfondie des particularités culturelles d'une langue s'enrichit et se nourrit de l'analyse complexe de son lexis. Nous pouvons considérer qu'une culture peut être mieux comprise par une analyse lexicale subtile qui marque les différences majeures qui existent entre celle-ci et les autres. Dans ce sens, la présente étude soutient le fait que pour enseigner le lexique, la contextualisation culturelle peut jouer et joue effectivement un rôle majeur dans l'explicitation des sens. Nous nous proposons d'exemplifier les modalités de sensibilisation des étudiants en sciences et technologies à l'apprentissage de l'anglais en mettant en évidence les ressemblances et les dissemblances qui existent entre cette langue et le roumain et en exemplifiant cette démarche par des types d'activités communicationnelles.

Mots-clés: *contextualisation culturelle, lexis, enseignement d'une langue etrangère, vocabulaire, activités communicationnelles.*

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