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Teaching Culture: Perspectives in Practice

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Teaching Culture: Perspectives in Practice

Boston: Heinle & Heinle

Patrick R. Moran (2001)

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I have yet to see a book on culture that does what it sets out to do: show the relation between teachers *in the classroom*.

A few idioms clearly have a cultural content and explaining the context in which they were used they appeal to the widespread liking for the *exotic*. Yet, other elements are just as strong, for we have no trouble memorizing an expression like *it's raining cats and dogs* the cultural content of

The difference between *tu* and *vous* in French is also clearly cultural and no non-native is ever (or should be) French for that matter!). In the same way, Patrick Moran deplores the fact that he never knew how to kiss blames it on his lack of knowledge of the culture but he should rest in peace as *nobody* knows the difference between outs of kissing in France though.

So, inasmuch as I believe that culture and language are inseparable, this is more an article in the classroom, I still don't know.

Patrick R. Moran's book seemed promising in that respect. He was going to reveal it all. And it didn't go further. As enchanting as his description of his first arrival in the Ivory Coast is, it is not a teacher in Bangladesh trying to teach English to classes of one hundred students or more.

What we do get in the book is a description of how culture works, with examples and diagrams as a visual aid. Mostly, the book can be useful for ESL teachers in an English-speaking country. The book is not for EFL situations and does not carry out his promise.

The once-popular notional-functional approach is revamped to look like new but it is still not working. In non-English speaking countries at least. In France, for example, teachers have to deal with the strong urgings of inspectors.

What Moran describes as his objective in the introduction (p. 3) announces the impossibility of the task:

I want to emphasize that culture learning, whether it occurs in a foreign language or in the native language, is not limited to the classroom, with or without teachers, through books or through people, but it is a personal encounter with another way of life. [-1-]

In the classroom, in spite of what he says, you do not encounter personally another way of life. Is a breakfast more real and personal to students than the funeral rites in ancient Egypt? You can see it on TV, for example. But you do not even need the language for that. Dubbed films do the trick.

There are many views of culture, Moran reminds us. It is *multifaceted and complex, and tied to a variety of works of art, customs, etc.* Many fields of study are involved (sociology, history, linguistics, etc.) and not just language.

To illustrate the necessity of learning culture, Moran gives the example of the drive-through car wash. He says that since people learned the use of a car or of currency through language, therefore language and culture are linked. Nor do I believe that people have to use language to express their experiences and that this must be done in the target language.

The aim of teaching culture would be *to get a sense of the humanity of other people* (p. 8). Teachers often think in stereotypes: the English eat bad food and have a weird sense of humor and the Arab students equate a language with a culture that they consider oppressive and learning the language is a punishment (I mention this latter problem which is not exceptional).

The book is organized in three parts: cultural content, culture learning and culture teaching.

The first, cultural content, takes most of the book (up to chapter 10), leaving only one chapter on culture teaching.

Moran describes the five dimensions of culture: products (e.g. tools, food, clothes), practices (rituals, customs, taboos), perspectives (values, beliefs), communities (race, gender, religion) and interactions, following definition (p. 24):

Culture is the evolving way of life of a group of persons, consisting of a shared set of products, based upon a shared set of perspectives on the world, and set within specific social interactions.

Practical work is proposed here and there but the questions and problems posed to the teacher are often too abstract. The editor insisted on it (it is often done nowadays) and Moran found it hard to comply. Further, some of the exercises are extremely bad and I doubt that they can incite anybody to reflect on the situation anyway, for example the situation of presenting a newborn baby to other people. How relevant is that?

In fact, Moran clearly separates teaching language and teaching culture: one learns the language, the other uses the language to learn about the culture (p. 39: *The language we use in the classroom, where culture is the topic and language the means to comprehend, analyze and act upon*). Students who want to become English teachers in France do in a *civilization* class. It is indeed not surprising that to *tailor the language-and-culture* so as to make it more accessible *necessarily involves* *separately on the language to learn culture* (p. 47). [-2-]

After that, I lost interest for a while, in the chapters describing the five facets of culture. Some of the elements are meant for extra-terrestrials ignoring the globalization of culture. Less and less relevant are those that are totally different, foreign, exotic. And who comes to our classrooms? Not Indians from the Amazonian jungle. And if they are taught English there, what do they want with drive-through windows? TV may be considered and used differently in Texas and in Bali, it is still TV with its role of entertainment. I find it hard to suppress homemade satellite dishes (Afghanistan being an exception until recently). It is more Balinese than Bali for an American.

Moran talks more about teaching culture, thinking about culture, than the relation between language and culture. In the target language is not learning the cultural component of the language and does not work. It may be done that way because it's easier for the teacher of multilingual classes or for the learner to get over.

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