

TEACHING CULTURE THROUGH ADVERTISING¹

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Sumário

Quando se ensina uma língua estrangeira, devem-se apresentar aos alunos aspectos culturais e a publicidade poderá ser uma boa maneira de mostrar a cultura através de uma perspectiva diferente. Este artigo irá mostrar o que é a cultura e como é que a publicidade poderá ser usada para ensinar alguns aspectos culturais de um país.

Abstract

When teaching foreign language classes, one needs to present cultural aspects to the students and advertising can be a good way to introduce culture in a different perspective. This article will focus on what is culture and how advertising can be used to teach some cultural aspects of a country.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching a foreign culture can be interesting or really annoying to students. Teachers should make the introduction to these different cultural aspects interesting in order to make student curious and eager to learn. This article will define culture as something that is everything and is part of human life, as well as present Porter and Samovar's six characteristics for culture: it is learned, transmissible, dynamic, selective, ethnocentric and its aspects are interrelated. Then one will try to answer three questions related to teaching a foreign language: why students choose a second language, how to make cultural presentations, and what students should learn about the target culture. Afterwards there will be an explanation on how advertising works and the problems related to the cultural archetypes it uses and inherent problems.

2. CULTURE

According to Kroeber and Kluckhohn:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts (as cited by Hadley, 2001, p. 349).

Culture can be also ideas and behaviors that human beings accomplish as members of a society and they use culture to adapt themselves and transform the way they live. In short, culture is everything in human life (Brooks as cited by Hadley, 2001, p. 349) and cannot be separated from the individual, neither from the historical context (Geertz as cited in de Mooij, 2004, p. 26).

If a student is learning a new foreign language, by studying the culture of the country (or countries) where that language is spoken, he or she will be able to understand in a more precise way what is "behind" it. The new foreign language standards also "emphasize the need to integrate the teaching of culture in the language curriculum" (Hadley, 2001, p. 345).

According to Porter and Samovar (1993, p. 12), culture is learned and transmissible and it means that when we are born we are "culturally clean" human beings. Right after that, we start receiving cultural information from our family that will teach us how to behave. After our family, the cultural process is also acquired in schools, churches, hospitals, museums, restaurants, through broadcast media, Internet, written press etc. These information guide us in his society, differentiate us from others, make us associate our cultural influences to other cultures, and help us understand it. As an example, there is the fact when one is teaching a different culture one tends to associate the similarities between the taught culture and that of the students, so they can better understand why things are like that.

One knows that culture is a shared system of symbols, values, beliefs, expectations, attitudes, and behaviors of everybody that lives together. Besides this shared system, each individual also belongs to many subcultures, i.e. social, professional, ethnic, and religious. This way we can say that each society organizes and conducts itself and that is what distinguishes it from other societies. Probably this is the reason why Anthony Giddens (as cited by Cesnik and Beltrame, 2005, p. 4) says that there is no culture without society and *vice-versa*.

The third characteristic pointed out by Porter and Samovar (1993, p. 12) is the fact that culture is dynamic, because our culture is always in contact with others. It can produce change through mechanisms of invention² and diffusion³. Also right now one cannot think of a single day without having access to the guidelines today's culture provides.

The fourth characteristic is selectiveness (Porter and Samovar, 1993, p. 13), i.e. one must be aware that the human being is selective in almost everything, like when he chooses what to wear or to eat, who his friends are etc. The same happens with the many cultural aspects that surround him, when he chooses to absorb the ones that are more close to his ideas, to his family or values.

Regarding the fact that the aspects of culture are interrelated (fifth characteristic), the authors point out that culture is a complex system, because if you touch a culture in one place, everything else is affected (Porter and Samovar, 1993, p. 13).

Ethnocentricity is the sixth and last characteristic and it is described by Porter and Samovar (1993, p. 13) as a window through which culture interprets and judges all other cultures. Probably this is the most usual attribute when one is teaching other cultures, because it is how people tend to see the latter as less important than theirs, in spite of being just different.

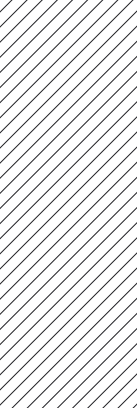
3. LEARNING CULTURE

In 2001, Rapaille (p. 17) said that we have entered the multi-cultural century. Everywhere we look, nationalistic, ethnic and racial issues are affecting business, political, economic, and social trends, and that is why it is so important to learn and know other cultures.

There are three questions related to teaching a foreign language: why students choose a second language, how to make culture presentations and what students should learn about the target culture. Morain (1973, p. 61) tries to answer to the first one focusing aspects like the following: students choose a second language because it is required and just want to learn something to be able to pass the course. Other students choose the second language because they want practical knowledge for their future profession and they "are interested in the language itself, in the people who speak it, and in the way of life of the target country". Most of the times, the cultural learning encourages students to pursue their studies and to contact people from the country in question. Steiner (as cited by Morain, 1973, p. 63) says that cultural learning encourages students to pursue their studies and to contact with people and their way of life. In fact, Nostrand (1974, p. 266) suggests that the teacher should ask students what they want to learn about culture. Accordingly, both authors' opinion agree with today's "new" student orientation: "He wants to use language to come closer to people; to their way of thinking; to their way of life." (Morain, 1973, p. 89).

² Porter and Samovar (1993, p. 12) define invention "as the discovery of new practices, tools or concepts that most members of the culture eventually accept".

³ Both authors (Porter and Samovar, 1993) define diffusion as some aspects borrowed from another culture (p. 12).



The answer to the second question (how to make culture presentations) is complex, because there are several theories about it. One of the major problems indicated is that the teacher might not know everything about that specific culture. Another problem is that students might not understand the values and some aspects or concepts from the other culture (Hadley, 2001, p. 347). Weiss (as cited by Morain, 1973, p. 63) says that the teaching of the culture should be done deliberately, students must understand that culture and the teacher should invite them to participate actively in the discovery of cultural insights. Another author, Jarvis (1977), marks that the

difficulty of teaching multicultural concepts lies in obtaining expert consensus on the generalities, for young fields such as anthropology, sociology, and cross-cultural training are constantly in flux (p. 153).

Harris and Harris (as cited by Jarvis, 1977, p. 155) talk about intercultural and intracultural differences: the first ones are like a social cleavage, "value systems, behavioral expectations, gestures may differ from culture to culture as language does". The second differences (Jarvis, 1977) "helps avoid simplistic, static view of the target culture" (p. 156). Probably the main problem is that teachers do not have much time to teach in a cultural basis. As an answer to this problem, Scott (as cited by Morain, 1973, p. 72) suggests to teach the "culteme", the differences between the target culture and the one from the student. For example, whistling in a public American theatre indicates that the public approves the play or the show, the same situation in Portugal might have a different meaning but if you do it in a concert it probably means that you are enjoying the show.

After teaching them the "culteme" and if the teacher still has time he or she can teach some cultural aspects like Galloway (as cited by Hadley, 2001, p. 349) describes:

1. The Frankenstein approach: small pieces of several cultures are spoken in the classroom
2. The 4-F approach: Folk dances, Festivals, Fairs and Food
3. The Tour Guide approach: identification of monuments, rivers, cities
4. The "By-the-Way" approach: "sporadic lectures or bits of behavior selected indiscriminate to emphasize sharp differences". Probably this is the easiest way to make students understand and learn about a new culture, because the teacher will be comparing the target culture with theirs.

After these approaches, students will have something like a "mosaic culture" composed by high culture and popular culture products, i.e. all the cultural pieces would stand together with no particular order, they would be as if they were glued one to another (Heilbrun, 1997, p. 27).

The third and last question on what students should learn about the target culture can be answered as follows: above all, teachers must think that they cannot just go to class and teach all the cultural aspects from a country. They have to know what their students' interests are, should ask them what they want to learn about a specific culture, see how they can compare the given information with their own culture. Usually students tend to think that what they do in their country is the same as in other countries. Also teachers must let them know that there is a global culture (like gestures, folklore, customs ...) that each country or city adds its own aspects. These aspects can be the opposite from one location to another. One must always think global, but act local (Galloway, 1981, p. 15-41).

The more important things are related to daily life such as food, clothes, music, monuments, customs, use of appropriate gestures. After that, students can learn about geography, historical events, monuments, arts, and, above all, to recognize and/or interpret the culture of the target country or countries by using some advertisements that show cultural aspects.

Jarvis (1977, p. 153) divides the educational objectives for teaching culture into three categories: first, the cognitive (knowing): the author explains that students will deal later with a wide variety of cultures—multicultural insights provide a framework that will facilitate subsequent learning of specifics; second, the skill (doing): Jarvis (1977, p. 157) says that “students should develop process skills to continue learning on their own, and two of these important cross cultural process skills are communication⁴ and research⁵”; and third, the affective (feeling): Jarvis (1977, p. 159) affirms that it is related to empathy, flexibility and curiosity and empathy is “trying to see things the other person’s way”.

4. HOW ADVERTISING WORKS

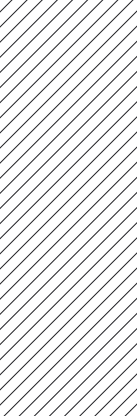
To De Vries, “Advertising might be defined as any device which first arrests the attention of the passer-by and then induces him to accept a mutually advantageous exchange” (in O’Barr 2005, p. 2). This exchange may well be the classical AIDA principles that usually one can find in several campaigns: advertisements must call the Attention to the product or service, promote its Interest, make it known through the information provided, provoking Desire to lead to the Action of its acquisition.

Advertising can be used to show other cultures, although they do not maintain themselves “pure” in this multicultural world we live in. Sometimes what is seen in advertising are no more than cultural archetypes used to facilitate the way one sees other cultures, i.e. the advertisement for McDonald’s “Texas Barbeque” sandwich in Portugal, showed cowboys and cowgirls, and the Sagres Chopps advertisement showed some Brazilians dressed up as “capoeira” players and dancers. Both examples show archetypes of two countries and do not correspond to their culture: not all Americans nor Brazilians dress up and act like that. Probably it would be more convenient to show advertisements that one knows were made for national consumption and that one can be almost sure that they represent trustworthy cultural aspects from the country that is being studied.

Nonetheless and having this in mind, one can still use advertisements to teach cultural aspects and make students identify and think about cultural differences. By using daily life advertisements, one can show students how they are built and what verbal and non-verbal elements can usually be found in an advertisement. Afterwards, one can ask students

⁴ Communication skills: students should know the foreign language, verbal and nonverbal responses required for various social situations (de Wright as cited by Jarvis, 1977, p. 158), and they should be aware of the meaning of the gestures (Triandis as cited by Jarvis, 1977, p. 158), comic strips, dress codes, body language, connotative meanings of environmental features (mountains, trees), and hand-made objects (horseshoes, ...).

⁵ Research skills: Jenks and Seelye (as cited by Jarvis, 1977, p. 159) talk about critical thinking and problem-solving skills developed by a search emphasis; Fenton (as cited by Jarvis, 1977, p. 159) talks about hypothesis formation, data collection, and inductive reasoning.



to identify some cultural aspects of the target culture and ask them to do some exercises where they will tell the similarities between this and their own culture. By the end of class, students will be able to interrelate these aspects to others from other cultures they know from watching television, visiting, reading books or magazines or surfing the Internet.

5. CONCLUSION

After leaving the bosom of the family, one starts receiving information from everywhere and this information brings new cultural aspects that one apprehends and respects in order to better understand others and one self. By using a communication media to carry out a second language acquisition class that can be still and dull, teachers can make it more fun and interesting to students depending on how it is presented to them and, at the same time, make them think and compare their culture to the one presented, allowing them to express themselves more lively.

When teachers do not have much time to teach a cultural backbone, they can do it by pointing out the differences and similarities between cultures. Afterwards, if there is time the teacher can focus on other aspects related to students' interests or to current events that bring to the table discussion to illustrate some differences or resemblances with the students' culture and their way of thinking. In one way or the other, by using advertisements in class to teach about a culture, teachers can get students thinking about these features.

But one knows that not everything can be considered as positive in this sort of class, because students might not be interested in advertisements or in learning about other cultures. Also, teachers may only have access to advertisements with stereotyped aspects or might not know enough of that culture to teach it. These issues can be minimized if teachers and students explore advertisements in ways that fulfil students' needs and learning abilities, as well as, contextualizing with what students had just learnt or are learning as it can be dealt in their visual, written, and, sometimes, audio forms. Stereotypes, however, require knowledge of the culture and a tactful approach to explain them without reinforcing their characteristics to students.

Teaching a foreign culture should be, above all, pleasing and enriching to both teachers and students and one way to achieve that is through knowledge, not only of student's own culture, needs and maturity, but of the culture taught and the purpose of it in the given course.

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