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'Cultural awareness' as vocabulary learning

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'cultural awareness' has gained prominence in foreign language teaching in Britain since its introduction into the National Curriculum for England and Wales in 1991. It was explained in some detail in the report of the Working Group which was set up to make recommendations for the new National Curriculum:

> "A growing awareness of the culture of the people who speak the language of study is intrinsic to the learning of it (...) Without the cultural dimension, successful communication is often difficult: comprehension of even basic words (...) may be partial or approximate, and speakers and writers may fail to convey their meaning adequately or may even cause offence. (...) comparisons between the learner's own way of life and that of the other language community are an essential means to better understanding of both."(DES, 1990: 37)

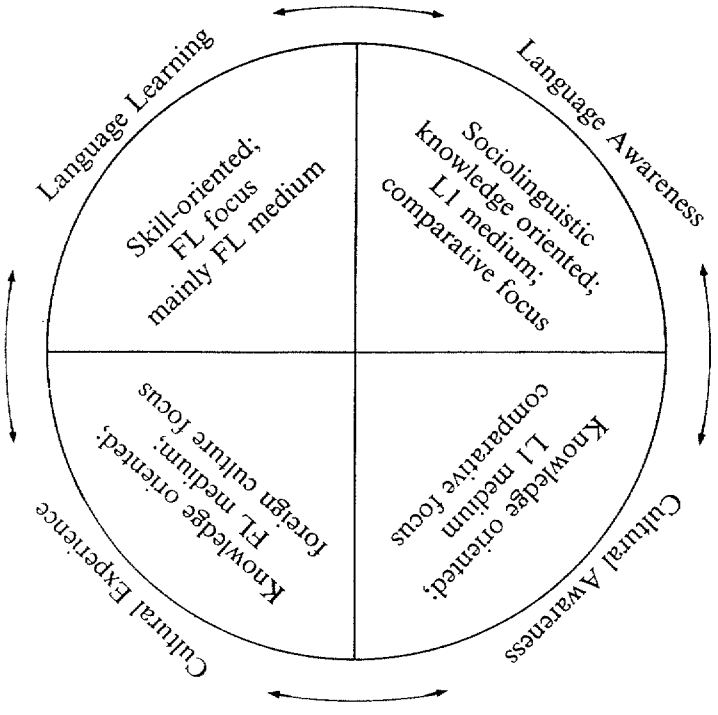
Not long before that I had argued that the notion of 'cultural awareness' could be developed by analogy with language awareness (Byram, 1989: 142), that both involve a reflection on the nature of what is being experienced and learnt, and both require a comparative methodology leading to a better understanding of learners' own language and culture as well as that of another language community.

I suggested a model of language and culture teaching where both L1 and FL are to be used. The former is for comparative analysis of own and foreign meanings. The latter is the medium of experience of foreign cultural phenomena. The introduction of learners' own language into the foreign language classroom is anathema for many people, but is the means of crystallising the developing awareness of the nature of language (language awareness) and the nature of culture (cultural awareness). The relationships between different components and media of language-and-culture learning are represented as in Figure 1.

This model involves, first, language learning in the sense of skill acquisition, as evident in much 'communicative language teaching', and this is then enriched by the study of the nature of language as a social and cultural phenomenon (Language Awareness). Second, the study of language is in turn combined with the study of culture, both of these being carried out with comparative techniques using the learners' L1. Thirdly, the direct experience of selected aspects of the foreign culture from the viewpoint, and from within the ethnic identity, of the foreign peer group takes place in the foreign language, and this in turn contributes to the learning process.

This somewhat personal introduction is justified, I hope, because it demonstrates how closely the two phrases, 'cultural awareness' and 'language

Figure 1



awareness', are related, and more importantly, because it demonstrates that language and culture cannot be treated separately in the discussion of language teaching theory and practice. The purpose of this article is to examine more closely the nature of the relationship, its significance for language teaching, and how it can be dealt with in classroom practice.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

The nature of the relationship between language and culture or language and the way of thinking about the world shared by a particular social group, does not need to be discussed at length here. Hüllen (1992) suggests that the relativist hypothesis that each language expresses a different view of the world was first put forward by Humboldt (1836/1988). The hypothesis was brought to the attention of linguists in this century by Whorf (1956). Together these views suggest an inescapable relationship between language and culture, or language and thought. In the definition of culture which I assume here, - the framework of ideas, values, and shared knowledge common to a particular social group and the manifestations of them in behaviour and artefacts, - the relativist hypothesis links language and culture as two sides of one coin.

One effect of the relativist hypothesis on language teaching is to make it clear that language learning requires careful attention to the specificity of each language and the thought and culture it expresses. In a report on the teaching of languages in Britain in 1918, the only national report ever done, this was seen as central to the educational aims of language teaching:

> "Language teaching in schools has and should have a disciplinary and educative aim. It should train the mind, the taste and the character. Language is a means of expressing thought, and the study of a foreign language reveals the anatomy of thought. Each language has its own modes of expression, and the contrast and comparison of different modes of expression leads to a more accurate sense of logical processes and a closer observation of the finer shades of meaning."

Although the style is different from the language of government reports today, this statement is in tune with contemporary conceptions of linguistic and cultural awareness. It goes on to remind us that this phrase should also include a sensitivity for the poetic dimension of language:

> "But there is more in language than logic. The laws of language are sure and valid, but they are revealed in speech and writing as the laws of nature are revealed in living beings - in a delicate harmony of balanced forces and blended qualities. The elements can be recognised, but the harmony itself defies ultimate analysis. Therefore language training has not only a logical and intellectual value; it has an aesthetic and artistic value." (Leathes Report, 1918: 86)

The contemporary argument for attention to the different 'modes of thought' expressed in a language is more likely to be in terms of a contribution to intercultural communication. In an introduction to 'intercultural language learning', Doyé makes this point after reviewing new concepts of 'landeskundlichen Lernens':

> "Übergeordnetes Ziel des Landeskundeunterrichts ist die Befähigung der Lernenden zu interkultureller Kommunikation,..." (Doyé, 1992: 6)

The communicative and the poetic are clearly not mutually exclusive and the challenge of the relativist hypothesis is significant for both. We need therefore to ask how valid the hypothesis is.

Recently, comparative linguistic studies by Wierzbicka (1992) have provided evidence to support the hypothesis in a moderate form. Wierzbicka argues that some areas of language reflect a culture – although she does not argue that language constrains thought, as Whorf did. For example, in her discussion of the universality of emotions and the ways these are expressed in different languages, she says:

> "English has no word for the feeling encoded in the Polish word *tesknic*. Does this mean that native speakers of English do not know (never experience) the feeling in question? Not necessarily. Individual speakers of English have no doubt experienced this feeling. But the Anglo-Saxon culture as a whole has not found this feeling worthy of a special name." (1992: 123)

Wierzbicka's approach is as a linguist. She is interested in all aspects of language, and starts from grammatical items as well as from vocabulary. I shall concentrate here on vocabulary only, although there is no reason in principle why learners should not be introduced to the analysis of the link between grammatical structures and culture-specific phenomena.

As learners become more advanced and independent in their learning, it is above all in the acquisition of new vocabulary in new areas of cultural and linguistic experience which is crucial. Furthermore, the members of a social group are sometimes aware of key words or 'rich' items (see Agar quoted below) which express their beliefs and values, whereas they are less likely to be aware of or able to explain the subtleties of language-culture links at the level of syntax or morphology.

INVESTIGATING VOCABULARY – 'DICTIONARY METHODS'

The essence of understanding the cultural content of words is in their connotations. Particular words

express the culture of a group and maintain their identity as a group because they share (some of) the connotations of those words. I shall suggest three approaches to investigation which are relevant for different ages and stages of language learning.

The first, I will call 'dictionary methods'. The purpose is to analyse the meanings and connotations of words in the foreign language and compare them with what appear to be the same words in learners' own language. For example in a textbook written for teaching German in the United States (Behal-Thomsen et al., 1993) there is a process of comparing different associations with the words 'private' and 'public', which refers to the particular contrast between American English and German. American students are asked to write down what words they associate with 'private' and 'public', and to compare them with those of other students in their class, in the anticipation that there will be some in common. They are then asked to produce a list of words related to the two key words, such as 'privacy' or 'to publish', and as a third stage to look up the translations of the words they have listed in a bilingual dictionary and then the meanings given for the translations in a German monolingual dictionary. Thus they are led to an awareness of the connotations and associations in their own language and then to contrast them with associations in German. The process is further developed by giving students examples of the German words 'privat' and 'öffentlich' in a variety of contexts. Eventually this is linked with texts about differing attitudes to private and public spaces in German and American society.

The aim of this kind of work is to build up an understanding of native-speaker interpretations of such keywords, and to contrast them with learners' own, unconscious connotations. There is however an obvious danger of over-generalisation and stereotyping here, and this approach has to be linked with a method which draws attention to the variety of connotations within learners' own society. This can be done within the group of learners themselves. The purpose is to show that there is a core of common ground that everyone recognises, even though not everyone conforms to the beliefs and values implied. For example, the word 'family' evokes images of two parents and two or more children living together as one group. Even though this may no longer be the most common practice, understanding of the nuances of the word start from this shared perception, a perception which underlies television advertisements featuring a family at mealtimes, for example, or a BBC 'sitcom' of family life entitled "Two Point Four Children". It is of course also true that the connotations of 'family' may already reflect changing social practices, and it is evident that among a group of learners from several different cultural backgrounds, the connotations will differ. All this is true of other societies and their languages too, and there are no simple equations of 'family' with 'Familie' or 'famille' as the bilingual dictionary seems to suggest.

In this way students recognise that there are linguistic manifestations of cultural values and shared knowledge which can be investigated. They are thus acquiring both the item of vocabulary and its connotations, rather than attaching their own connotations to the foreign word.

Such an approach requires a good knowledge of the language, at intermediate level in upper secondary schools for example. It also pre-supposes analytical skills and a stage of cognitive development which is not likely to be present in younger and less experienced learners. In the latter case, a more concrete method is needed. Zarate in her book on the teaching of culture (1986) takes the example of 'fromage' and gives three representations of when and how cheese is eaten and with what it is associated.

Zarate is careful to say that the associations are 'for certain categories of French people', to avoid over-generalisation, and the same point must be made as above in order not to produce stereotypes. Where a class has a partner class in the country of the language they are learning, individuals or pairs of learners produce their own grid and spider diagram of associations, which are then exchanged with the partner class. They can then compare and contrast the different diagrams and grids, looking for common ground but noticing variations, before comparing and contrasting with the practices and associations of ideas in their own culture. Once more, although the words are more concrete in meaning, as is the method used, the purpose is for learners to acquire the meanings and associations of the word 'fromage', and not to assume it means 'cheese'. At the same time they have acquired a technique of investigation, which is as important as the example on which it has been demonstrated.

"There is an obvious danger of over-generalisation and stereotyping"

A second kind of dictionary method is made possible by corpus linguistics and the analysis of very large amounts of data by computer. In a recent paper Channell (in press) demonstrates how current dictionaries fail to give learners an understanding of the connotations of words. For example she takes the word 'carnivore' which is, she says, "a nice development of meaning for a word which has been in the vocabulary for a long time, and which reflects oppositions in contemporary British culture". In a corpus of 200 million words she finds 11 citations where the word is used to refer to humans who eat meat, where the contrasted item is 'vegetarian'. She shows that the use is far from neutral. It has a "jokey, ironic perhaps critical quality", she says, and gives a few examples from the corpus (see Figure 2).

The software programme used to analyse such a large corpus cites the word in question and a few words to each side appearing in the text from which it is taken. It is usually surprisingly easy to infer the context and the connotations from this citation, as will be evident from the example.

need to be full. If you are a carnivore, try the Errazuriz Panquehus
remain convinced that Carling is a carnivore. Even his mum Pam admitted
throat of even the most committed carnivore. If you are at all squeamish or
to satisfy the most dedicated carnivore, to say nothing of the
win over the most hard-hearted carnivore. Many are run on a very
pale and anaemic in a way no hearty carnivore ever should. Kinnaird replied
we are a vegetarian, fishetarian, or carnivore, there are certain foods which are
and that Denis Leary (professional carnivore, nicotine addict, health-freak
would tempt even the most resolute carnivore. Not only do they have that
neighbouring taverna caters to the carnivore and cravings for ouzo, cigarettes
seeking an alternative to their carnivore diet. Recipes range from the

Figure 2 Extract from a Linguistic Corpus;[1] 'Carnivore'

As a dictionary-maker, Channell says these connotations have to be introduced into definitions. As a teacher, I can see this data being used in the classroom with learners who do their own analysis and make their own dictionaries. It is possible to buy corpora and programmes for analysis which will work on personal computers, and which though not 200 million words in size, are nonetheless suitable for analysis by intermediate and advanced students. If the material is analysed by the teacher first and the citations carefully chosen, it may also be possible to adapt this approach to learners in the early stages.

INVESTIGATING VOCABULARY – ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

The second approach, I call 'ethnographic methods'. The purpose is again to analyse the connotations of words, but this time the data are collected by ethnographers going out and talking to people. For example, Agar has explained how he and his students collected data in Austria about the Austrian German word 'Schmäh'.

Like Wierzbicka, Agar (1991) argues that *some* parts of a language are particularly 'rich' carriers of cultural meanings, and therefore are the more difficult to grasp for speakers of another language. He suggests that the concept of a Whorfian 'wall' between languages should be thought of rather as Whorfian Alps, where some frontiers are easier to traverse than others, 'a mountain range with plenty of valleys and trails and a few vertical cliffs' (p. 176). These 'rich' parts emerge from comparisons between languages, but they are also areas which native speakers recognize and then disagree over. Such parts are, says Agar, 'puttied' into the language so that when they are lifted up, they bring with them all kinds of strands and pieces which are stuck to them. One such 'rich' item is the word 'Schmäh'. It was investigated in three ways: a systematic interview placing the concept in the centre and asking questions to elicit connotations and relationships; a collection of anecdotes somewhat like ethnographers' fieldnotes; an informal interview which encourages native speakers to discuss 'Schmäh' in any way they choose. Agar sums up the results as follows:

"the connotations are historical as well as contemporary"

> "*Schmäh* is a view of the world, a 'life-feeling' (*Lebensgefühl*), that rests on the basic ironic premise that things aren't what they seem, what they are is much worse, and all you can do is laugh it off. Such an attitude is hardly unique to Vienna. What is unique to Vienna, perhaps, is that the world-view, with all its complicated strands, is puttied into a single piece of language, and that the rich piece of language is, in turn, used as a badge of self-identification. (.....) The analysis of *Schmäh* tapped deeply into the world of Viennese discourse. At its highest level, *Schmäh* as 'life-feeling' feeds back down into many other details, ways of speaking and hearing, or writing and reading. *Schmäh* began to pull me into a different way of being, one that has made it easier to be in Vienna and use Austrian German and more difficult to return and use American English." (p. 178-179)

In another example, a research project at Thames Valley University, London, for advanced language learners studying in a country where the language is spoken, we trained language students as ethnographers. Before spending their 'Year Abroad', which is an obligatory part of their course, they had a module entitled 'Introduction to Ethnography' in which they were given a practical training in the techniques of gathering data and an introduction to theoretical concepts in anthropology which would help them analyse their data for a research report they wrote during their stay. Whilst in the foreign country they carried out ethnographic investigations, and often focused on the meanings of words. For example, one student in Spain decided to study the role of dancing in daily life of Seville. She studied the Sevillanas. This is how she describes the focus she chose:

> "The thing is there's so much pressure to dance because everybody, from what I've found through my participant observation, was that you'd be watching a roomful of people dancing Sevillanas and yet you'd be watching two couples and one couple would attract you so much and yet the other wouldn't."

When she talked to people about this they said that such couples 'have grace' (a literal translation), and so the whole of her project was written about what this phrase means. Another student who went to Germany discovered that the word 'Ausländer' was used about her and about other foreigners in quite different ways depending where they came from. So she began to investigate how people use the word in everyday conversation, how it is used in formal and official documents, and so on. Again, her project was an investigation of the connotations of this word and what it tells her about contemporary German society.

Grace Susay (1992) begins by explaining how her research began:

> "Ich unterhielt mich mit einem Palästinenser

und einer Perserin, die auch auf meinem Stock im Studentenheim wohnten. Sie vertrauten mir als Ausländerin und waren sehr aufgeschlossen. Sie haben über ihre Erfahrungen als ausländische Studenten in Deutschland gesprochen, insbesondere über die Spannungen und die Interaktion mit den Deutschen. Sie glaubten, daß sie immer als Ausländer angesehen würden. Infolge unserer Gespräche habe ich über meine eigene Lage und Behandlung in Deutschland nachgedacht, und hatte das Gefühl, daß ich anders als diese Studenten, insbesondere die Studenten aus Asien, Afrika und dem Nahen Osten behandelt worden war. Warum fühlte ich mich im Gegensatz zu ihnen nicht wie eine Ausländerin in Deutschland? (....)Deutsche Studenten schienen ausländische Studenten in bestimmten Gruppen zu kategorisieren. Ich wollte herausfinden, aus welchen Gründen sie kategorisieren, und wovon es abhängig ist, in welche Kategorie sie gesteckt werden."

Grace investigates the language of the German *Ausländergesetz*, and she interviews German students, foreign students and representatives of the *Akademisches Auslandsamt*. She identifies a number of permanent categories which foreign students cannot escape, such as physical appearance or country of origin, and other variable factors, such as language proficiency or relationships with the opposite sex, in which foreign students change and are therefore categorised differently by German students. Foreign students are perceived as less 'foreign' as they adopt German behaviour and values and acquire greater proficiency in the German language.

In a different project, for intermediate learners of French studying in their own classroom in England (Byram Morgan et al, 1994: 94–104), the data collection had to be done by those who wrote the material. For example, an interview with a French school pupil described how he and his friends had gone on strike to protest about conditions at school. The English learners were first asked to think about what they would do if they wanted to protest. The word 'strike' was used only jokingly by the pupils as they talked about going to complain to the headteacher, asking their parents to protest and so on, and when the teacher explored with them what they associated with strikes, it was industrial action only. They then read and analysed the interview with the French pupil, and by the end of the lesson they had begun to see that one of his connotations with 'école' was indeed 'grève'. Furthermore, he explained how his parents could not criticise him for going on strike from school as they themselves had been part of the student strikes and revolution of 1968 in Paris; the connotations are historical as well as contemporary. By the end of the lesson, the English learners of French had begun to understand the meaning of the word 'école' and to see that its connotations are different from the word 'school'.

Example of an ethnographic interview

Stéphane's account of a 'grève au lycée'

Extracts from an interview with Stéphane, lycée student:

"Quand on s'est réuni le premier jour, on s'est réuni dans le plus grand lycée et alors on a demandé qu'il y ait un représentant par classe qui vienne dans une salle. Un représentant a été et là on a élu le chef comme il y avait cinq lycées qui avaient à peu près une cinquantaine de classes en tout, c'est une cinquantaine de personnes. On élit cinq autres personnes qui représentaient les cinq lycées, une personne par lycée. Et après ces cinq personnes ont demandé à des élèves assez corpulents de venir faire une milice. Pour éviter des débordements comme il y avait à Paris, nous avons fait une espèce de petite police. C'était repérable avec des bandeaux. Et c'est eux qui nous encadraient. Je pense quand on est passé dans la rue piétonne, à Brive, il y avait des marchands qui exposaient leurs marchandises, et il en était simple de voler et à rien faire voir. Et à ce moment-là, la milice s'y mettait entre nous et les marchandises, si fait qu'il n'y a eu aucun vol, aucun débordement, aucune bagarre, aucun bien hebdommagé. Et je pense qu'à Paris ils ont dû faire ça pour éviter que leurs manifestations tournent aussi au mal. Parce que il faut faire voir aux flics .... Il y a la police qui a foncé sur les manifestants, et a matraqué un peu ceux qui passaient.." (.....)

(Interviewer): "C'est.. Je peux vous demander de parler un peu personnellement, comment vous avez vu tout ça? Quel était votre rôle?"

"Oh, je n'ai pas eu de rôle du tout. Moi, j'étais une personne dans la foule, qui criait ses opinions, qui criait pour avoir de l'argent. Moi, je pense que ceux qui ont été au coeur ont eu du courage parce que le premier jour il faisait vraiment froid. Il pleuvait. Quand on arrivait à la sous-préfecture on était tous trempés, on était serrés les uns contre les autres pour essayer d'avoir chaud et pourtant on était là. On y restait. Et après on est revenu après les vacances puisqu'on croyait à ce qu'on voulait. Et on voulait obtenir de l'argent pour l'éducation."

(Interviewer): "Et comment vos parents ont réagi?"

"Euh, mes parents avaient fait mai soixante-huit, aussi ils comprenaient la grève mais ce qui était un peu amusant, c'est qu'en mai soixante-huit, mes parents demandaient moins de surveillants, et plus de liberté. C'est un peu le sujet (de notre grève) qu'ils ne comprenaient pas trop."

INVESTIGATING VOCABULARY – HISTORICAL AND LITERARY METHODS

The third approach I call 'historical and literary methods'. There is a considerable tradition of using literary texts to gain insight into the culture of a society, (cf. two classics of this tradition: Goldman, 1955, Williams, 1958) The adaptation of this work for language learners has been well represented in Germany by Kramer and others (Kramer, 1990). It is currently being actively developed in a new emphasis on 'British Cultural Studies' in the university sector in many countries, and is gradually also influencing textbooks for English as a Foreign Language. In a journal designed to facilitate this development, *British Studies Now*, Alan Pulverness (1995) supports the idea of an integrated English language and cultural study being based on ethnographic methods in a British setting, but says that where it is not possible for learners to spend time in the country, an alternative is the literary text. He is no doubt right that literary texts can give insight into "the texture of life in contemporary Britain", but we should in fact be looking for a combination of literary and ethnographic texts, the latter either in the form of ethnographic data as I described earlier or in the form of ethnographic reports, such as Nigel Barley's *Native Land* (1989), which is written for the general public, or even ethnographies written for professional readers. There are some very good ethnographies of life in contemporary British schools for example. Extracts from these are much more interesting than diagrams of the education system, and provide more insight into life in school as it is actually experienced. For learners of French for example *Vie quotidienne et rapports sociaux dans une petite ville de province* (Bozon, 1984), though a professional report has some very readable short quotations which give advanced learners insights into aspects of French life. Two other books exist in French and English and provide insights into daily life in different social classes (Carroll, 1987/1990; Le Wita, 1988/1994).

The use of literary texts also opens up the historical dimension, and the possibility of tracing changes in the use of vocabulary over time. It might be possible for example to take the historical references for a particular word from the *Duden Etymologie* or the OED and produce a teaching unit which shows the word in use in different extracts. Of course, this pre-supposes a level of language proficiency which does not develop until upper secondary, but since learners in some Upper Secondary courses are introduced to the classics and to contemporary fiction, the language demands in an ethnographic report are not beyond their capacity.

SELECTING KEY WORDS

One question has been begging an answer throughout the previous paragraphs: 'Which words to choose? How to focus the selection of text extracts and other materials?' It is not possible or desirable to delve into the meanings and connotations of every word learners acquire. As we saw earlier Wierzbicka argues that the areas which are most likely to reflect the living culture are those parts that have to do with the relationship between speaker and addressee. Forms of politeness are an obvious example, and are given special prominence in the second edition of the specification of what learners need in order to cross a threshold of communication in English, published by the Council of Europe (van Ek and Trim, 1991: 105), which will doubtless also be influential on other languages as was the first edition. The examples I have given however have been key nouns or adjectives, and an obvious starting point for deciding which words are crucial to an understanding of contemporary and historical aspects of British society is Raymond Williams' collection of *Keywords* (1976). It would be an interesting project in the preparation of materials for advanced learners of English as a foreign language to select some of Williams' keywords and combine his accounts of them with literary texts, ethnographic reports and computer analysis of corpora of language from contemporary usage.

There would always be two aims to such a project: first to introduce learners to a specific word, its associations, its history, and its meanings and connotations in contemporary society. In the course of this they would acquire the word and its meanings, and other associated words. The second aim would be to teach learners to carry out their own data collection and analysis, whether from their reading, their attention to radio and television, or by ethnographic methods. For, after all, any selection however well founded, remains a selection. Pupils and students need to learn the methods, and the methods need to be an explicit part of the teaching, and not just remain implicit in the teacher's approach.

CONCLUSION

In a definition of intercultural communicative competence which is to be the basis of proposals for assessment, we have identified four dimensions, or *savoirs*:

- *savoir être*: an ability to abandon ethnocentric attitudes towards and perceptions of other cultures, and to see and develop an understanding of the differences and relationships between one's own and a foreign culture; this involves affective and cognitive change in learners,
- *savoir apprendre*: an ability to observe, collect data and analyse how people of another language-and-culture perceive and experience their world, what beliefs, values and meanings they share about it; this involves practical skills and a readiness to decentre and take a different perspective,

- *savoirs*: the knowledge of aspects of a culture, a system of reference points familiar to natives of the culture, which helps the natives to share beliefs, values and meanings, and to communicate without making explicit those shared assumptions,
- *savoir faire*: the ability to draw upon the other three savoirs and integrate them in real time and interaction with people of a specific language-and-culture.

(Adapted from Byram and Zarate, 1994).

The proposals in this article are means of developing learners' *savoirs*, their knowledge of key words, rich items, but just as importantly, learners should be aware of the methods they are using to analyse the language-and-culture in question. This is a transferable skill which will be useful to them not only in the particular language they are learning, but also in their engagement with other languages and other cultures, their *savoir apprendre*. Furthermore, the application of the suggestions in this article to learners' own language, and comparison with the foreign language would be part of a larger scale development of their *critical* cultural awareness (Byram, 1989 and 1997), i.e. their ability to gain a new perspective on themselves and their society and a new critique of its nature and meaning for themselves as members of it. Their heightened awareness not only of other languages, cultures and peoples, but also of themselves as cultural beings is a major contribution of language teaching to their education.

"learners should be aware of the methods they are using to analyse the language-and-culture in question"

NOTES

[1]This material is taken from the Bank of English, developed by Collins Cobuild and the University of Birmingham and owned by Cobuild Limited. The Bank of English is available to scholarly researchers through JANET.

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