Culture and Language in Second and Foreign Language Teaching

Dr. Michael Byram

I will try to do three things in this paper:

- to begin what I consider to be the necessary development of a theory of cultural learning for language teachers - whether involved in second or foreign language teaching.
- to demonstrate how research and theory in second language or bilingual/bi-cultural situations can be usefully linked with foreign language teaching in schools.
- to suggest that cultural learning must become a more explicit and structured part of foreign language teaching if it is to have the positive effects on pupils' attitudes and perceptions which are vital in any society which wishes to belong to the international community.

I start from the position that foreign language learning is and ought to be an integral part of cultural learning. It is integrated with cultural learning because the language learnt - unless it is merely a codification of learners' first language - refers to a reality within and beyond learners' existing experience. It ought to be integrated whenever language learning is a part of general education - usually at secondary school level and beyond - where foreign language teaching contributes to learners' personal and social development as young people growing into a society which itself is part of an international community.

I distinguish foreign from second language learning in a number of ways. A second language is one which is acquired in an environment where it is spoken as a medium of communication between people who are either first or second language speakers. Some examples are as follows: migrant workers arriving as adults in a new country or second-generation children of immigrants who meet the second language when they start school or children brought up in bilingual families or students going to a foreign university or school pupils learning some of their school subjects in a second language. The last two examples indicate however that the distinction between second and foreign language learning becomes blurred at the edges.

Another dimension of the distinction is psychological. A second language has a different role in the identity of the learner. Second language learners - most of whom can be described as 'natural bilinguals' find themselves in situations where their social identity, i.e.

their sense of belonging to a social group, is not a simple phenomenon. It is made complex by the fact that learning a language is acquiring a culture, which in turn becomes part of the individual's identity. It becomes an inseparable part of the self. Indeed the individual cannot exist as a human being without a cultural identity. For the bilingual, however, the simplicity of belonging to one culture and to one social or ethnic group is not available. The complexity of belonging to two or more in differing degrees and through differing relationships is a function of acquiring more than one language. Let it be said, however, that this phenomenon is far more frequent in the world than the simplicity of monolingual and monocultural communities.

What does this tell us about the foreign language learner? First of all, it reminds us that the foreign language learner brings to the classroom an existing cultural identity, acquired with the first language, which is an integral part of the self. This suggests that the learning of another language and culture involves not just the acquisition of linguistic skills but also a modification of learners' sociocultural identity and an expansion of learners' perceptions of reality as lived by people in other societies and cultures. This is a statement of what necessarily is the case when a foreign language is learnt other than as a codification of the first language. It is also a statement of a philosophy of language teaching which says that such modifications and expansions of learners' identities and perceptions ought to be among the purposes of foreign language teaching.

* * *

This initial statement of my position has opened up a lot of questions and I propose now to explore some of them in greater depth. I intend first to explain more precisely what I mean by cultural learning. I will then relate this to some of my research on bilingual or minority education and the question of cultural or ethnic identity. Finally I will return to the foreign language classroom and the issue of the influence of foreign language teaching on learners' perceptions of other cultures. This too will be supported from my research.

First, then to the question of cultural learning. One often used phrase is misleading. To speak of "the acquisition of culture" is to imply that we acquire an object which exists independently in an 'objective' reality, or that we learn certain skills of social behaviour. It implies that culture and individuals are separable and that each individual has to acquire the object or skills - or at least a part of them. To study the acquisition of culture by young children would mean, from this perspective, first of all defining a culture and then analysing the process of acquisition.

38

I would like to present a different view. The acquisition of culture is not separate from the psychological development of the child but is, rather, one and the same as that psychological development. When we observe the development of the child as a social being we are in fact observing the process of cultural acquisition. Culture is not an object but a part of the subject. One well-known definition of culture makes this clear.

A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members. Culture is not a natural phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people's behaviour or emotions; it is rather an organisation of these things. It is the form of things people have in mind, their models of perceiving, resisting, and otherwise interpreting them.

(Goodenough, 1964 : 36)

"The organisation of things", "the form of things people have in mind" are the product of the acquisition process, although that process is never complete and the products under continuous change. In addition, however, the mind itself is not an independent organiser; it creates an organisation of things but is itself formed by this organisation, which is common to all members of a specific community of individuals. In order to understand this mutual influence, we need to consider human development both phylogenetically and ontogenetically, to look at the development of human beings as a species and at the development of each individual human being.

Seen from a phylogenetic viewpoint, the human species developed culturally and biologically simultaneously and not, as we might think, first by developing a mind which then invented culture. Following Geertz (1975), the mind is "a certain set of dispositions of an organism" which in human beings has developed through the interaction with culture and natural phenomena:

The apparent fact that the final stages of the biological evolution of man occurred after the initial stages of the growth of culture implies that 'basic', 'pure' or 'unconditional' human nature, in the sense of the innate constitution of man, is so functionally incomplete as to be unworkable. Tools, hunting, family organisation and, later, religion and 'science' moulded man somatically; and they are therefore necessary not merely to his survival but to his essential realization.

(Geertz, 1975 : 82-3)

The development of the human mind cannot be separated from the historical development of human culture. And this phylogentic development is paralleled in the ontogentic development of the

39

individual. A similar point is made by Midgley, who also introduces the notion of instinct: "man is innately programmed in such a way that he needs a culture to complete him. Culture is not an alternative or replacement for instinct, but its outgrowth and supplement" (1980 : 286). Instinct is what most resembles the fundamental nature of human beings but it is not accessible in any 'pure' form. The individual's general cultural potential is realised by exposure to a particular culture - a parallel and integral development to the particular linguistic realisation of the individual's potential for acquiring a language. This means that the particular culture and its language will stamp the individual indelibly, will be an inseparable element of the individual's nature. This view is supported by work in cognitive anthropology, which suggests that the limitations of a particular culture and language circumscribe the conceptual development of individuals belonging to the cultural community (Quinn, 1985; D'Andrade, 1984).

In developmental psychology, it is Vygotsky and his followers who have studied the ontogenetic process of cultural learning. The child's potential is realised when it comes into contact with others, and a major part of this interaction is linguistic. It is through using linguistic and other signs that the child acquires meanings and gradually recognises the meanings of signs he has already used in social interaction without full recognition of their significance. 'External' culture, in the sense of shared meanings and patterns of behaviour, is 'internalised' because of the child's innate disposition to fulfil an incomplete potential. This does not mean that the internal system of cultural meanings is simply reflections of the external system. The internal system has, according to Vygotsky (1971 : 57) its own laws, and semiotic webs of meaning are created which enfold individuals. As Geertz puts it : "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun; I take culture to be those webs ..." (1975 : 5).

These webs of meaning have been analysed in various ways - routines, schemata, scenarios - which I shall not describe here. A 'schema' is the cognitive construct or configuration we impose on experience in order to understand it. Briefly, the analysis of cultural schemata, i.e. the shared interpretations of experience common to a social group, is simultaneously an analysis of the means by which the individual makes sense of his own experiences. The cognitive development of the child is the process of acquisition of schemata through interaction with others, the acquisition of schemata which we shared with all those who belong to a particular cultural community. That cognitive development is however also a continuous process of modification of already acquired schemata, i.e. a continuous changing of the subjectivity or cultural identity of the child. The child

40

internalises the shared schemata of a cultural community and thereby becomes a social being. The culture thus has an objective existence in the sense that it is common to many individuals; it is a commonly developed part of the subjectivity of the members of a particular community. This is however the only objectivity culture has. There are objects which express culture often in art or technology - and there are behaviours which conform to culture, but these are secondary phenomena which depend on culture for their meaning and existence.

What then is the position of individuals who are bilingual and bicultural? What happens when children are brought up in an environment where there are people who belong to two cultural communities? As the child develops, its contact and interaction with others goes through a number of stages. Its social space is extended and it acquires new schemata as old ones are modified. It leaves the home and family and enters into contact with friends and social institutions. From direct experience, it moves to vicarious experiences - through television, books and other media. As it acquires the beliefs, values and knowledge of its environment and negotiates and discusses them with others, its cultural schemata are under continuous change and extension.

Now among these schemata, there are certain specific ones which give the child the feeling that it belongs to a specific cultural group. He shares them with others and they serve to reinforce and circumscribe the group adherence (Taylor 1971; Barth, 1969). The group may be ethnic, political, religious or other, and the individual usually belongs to several. Many schemata are shared by different groups, but each group feels the need to establish its own identity by separating itself off in some respects from others and developing its own group - specific schemata. This causes breaks in communication between cultural groups because certain views and beliefs are used deliberately or unconsciously to separate the particular group from others.

A child which grows up surrounded by two groups is thus open to strong pressures. It can accept many schemata without any problem, because they are common to both groups. On the other hand it experiences schemata which are mutually exclusive. It is not merely a question, however, of rational selection of one set of views rather than another, for we are here speaking of the formation of identity, of the cognitive and also affective development of the child. It is not a question of choosing between two external options, but of an interactive process in which the child is pulled in opposing directions. Often it is the entry into school which marks the first major tension in the child's life and in bilingual and bicultural communities the way in which the school is organised is extremely significant.

41

The consequences of growing up among the tensions of a bicultural community can be seen most directly in children's accounts of their own identity. It is about the age of 9 - give or take 2 years - that children become aware of their group identity, of the notion of belonging to a nation or to an ethnic group. (I shall leave aside the question of the relationship between nationality and ethnicity). In my research in Brussels some years ago, I had occasion to talk to children aged 11 or 12 who were of Italian origin living in Belgium. Some were second generation and still spoke a lot of Italian at home; others were third generation and spoke mainly French. All of them had however been put in an experimental bicultural programme which aimed to maintain their Italian identity in some way. The consequences were sometimes alarming. Children felt confused. They said such things as "je me sens bien plus italien; mais ici, ca me dit d'etre belge et italien, quand je suis ici" or: "avant, quand j'etais la (en Italie) - pour venir en Belgique, j'avais envie de venir en Belgique; et maintenant que je suis en Belgique j'ai envie de rentrer en Italie" or

"je suis sicilienne ... belge aussi; j'aime pas tellement qu' on me dit que je suis belge parce que ... je sais pas pourquoi". Some parents made similar statements, "Bien, disons que c'est difficile; on a pris toutes les habitudes d' ici, mais c'est difficile de dire si on est belge a cause de ca, comme il est difficile de dire qu' on n'est pas belge non plus; puisque tous les enfants sont ici; alors on est ni l'un ni l'autre; ici on est etranger et chez nous on est etranger aussi".

This feeling of belonging nowhere is one which I suspect affects many people living in and between two cultures. I found the same thing on another occasion when researching in the border area between Denmark and Germany. Here the children were older and had begun to clarify their own thinking and feelings. For them there was at least one place where they felt at home in the border area, i.e. between the two countries.

"for me the feeling of being tied is really like this; because I really have no fatherland or whatever ... because in Germany I always still feel a little Danish and in Denmark I feel quite clearly German - and here is simply the only place where we really belong".

(Byram, 1986 : 99-100)

In both Belgium and Denmark, the school plays an important role in developing a bicultural identity. In Brussels, the curriculum contained lessons in Italian, both as a subject and as the language for teaching other subjects, such as mathematics, religion and so on. In Denmark, the schools were entirely German in their use of the German language for all subjects except a few lessons in Danish. In both situations, however, the presence of teachers who were themselves

from the minority group and who embodied the values and cultural schemata of the minority, was the most important factor in the attempt to maintain a bicultural or minority ethnic identity.

* * *

I turn now to the question of foreign language teaching. What light does this discussion of cultural learning and bicultural identity throw on foreign language teaching? I said that bilingual children often meet their first new phase of cultural development when they enter school. This is often called secondary socialisation, coming after the phase of primary socialisation in the family. When children enter secondary school it is often at this point that they begin to learn a foreign language. When they meet a foreign language it is usually the first time that they have, formally and in a structured way, been introduced to a culture other than the one or ones in their immediate environment. It is at this point that a new phase of their development can begin - what might be called a phase of 'tertiary socialisation' - when they may be exposed to the values and schemata of a new culture by beginning to learn the language of that culture. It is open to the teacher to decide how much the links of language and culture shall be made explicit and visible to the learners.

This broadening of cultural horizons is often claimed to be one of the main educational justifications for foreign language teaching. I will quote just one such claim:

Foreign language study ... offers insight into another culture and as such is concerned with the human and social areas of experience. Throughout the course pupils can be encouraged to view the familiar from a different angle, not least in terms of people's behaviour, and thereby widen horizons and break down feelings of insularity. (HMI, 1985: para. 52).

Viewing the familiar from a different angle and breaking down feelings of insularity may be brought about in the confrontation of the schemata of one culture with those of another. For example, perceptions of what is edible in one culture often differ from those of another. English people usually consider snails to be inedible - although they are eaten in France - and French people do not eat turnips, which they consider suitable only for giving to cows. Yet the English do eat turnips.

The question then arises whether this confrontation does in fact break down feelings of insularity, the perceptions which separate one ethnic group from another, and do in fact make people more understanding of each other. This is a question which we have addressed in a major research project over the last four years. We have

43

investigated two main questions:

- do learners have a more accurate and differentiated view of French daily life after learning French?
- do they have a more positive attitude towards French people after learning French?

The investigation was carried out in two schools where we used a number of techniques for gathering data:

- giving pupils attitude tests
- interviewing pupils informally about their views of French life
- observing French lessons and analysing textbooks and the image of France they portray
- collecting information through questionnaires about pupils' visits to France and abroad, family connections with foreign countries, perceptions of France in the public media and so on.

We tested 400 pupils and interviewed 200. We observed lessons for a whole school year. We carried out both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

The results are impossible to summarise in a paper of this length. I can simply take one aspect - if there is time - and describe it in isolation.

Part of the project was devoted to describing just what does happen in classrooms between pupils and teachers. How do teachers "tell" about France. What is it that pupils remember? Do teachers have a particular plan or a specific method for telling? Four teachers were observed throughout one year with one of their classes. Our purpose was to describe the variety, not to evaluate the differences, for we need first to know what happens before we can even think about doing it better.

Before the variety, let us remember what the four teachers and classes had in common. They were all third year secondary classes with the same subject on their timetable, "French". They were all using the same textbook. All the pupils had studied French compulsorily since entering comprehensive school, although the allocation of time in the past had varied and one of the classes had, in the third year, less time allocated than the other three. All the classes were in principle preparing for the same examination, although some pupils would choose not to continue in the fourth year. The four teachers all stated a belief in the importance of learning about French culture as a fundamental part of their subject. They expressed variously the notion that cultural knowledge or information should have a beneficial effect on attitudes and uaderstanding in the longer

44

term and, in the short term, also helps to make lessons more attractive and interesting. Finally, as we shall see, the four teachers were differently qualified, but they had in common experience of visiting France on a number of occasions and in similar circumstances: they had all been involved in school visits and exchanges which had taken them into French families and French schools.

Some had wider and more experience than this but this was a common minimum. Against this background we turn to the different approaches, each given a label for convenience.

The first approach we called 'academic', to summarise the combination of characteristics observed. The dominant ethos was of a subject to be taught under some pressure of time - this was the class with a lower allocation than others - to a group considered to be the highest achievers in their year. Time was spent on exercises on language structures; there was rapid progression through the textbook; homework was given regularly and pupils expected to take responsibility for handing it in. The activity of language learning was carried out in serious ways, with little role-play and no games or drawing etc.

Despite the emphasis on language, a considerable amount of cultural information was provided, as the opportunity arose from the textbook. The information was often anecdotal, referring to the teacher's own experience, and went beyond the scope of the textbook. For example the teacher was observed to talk about military service and the police force in France, the system of car registration numbers and the regions they refer to, and the system of discipline in French schools. When information from the textbook was used pupils were asked to read a section for homework and then asked factual questions about it later.

The second approach, called the "survival approach", arose with a group of lower ability. Unlike the previous teacher who was a graduate in French, this one had a qualification in art and was teaching French as a consequence of her own enthusiasm for France and ability in French. She preferred to teach 'less able' classes partly because this meant she could spend more time on teaching about the country, for she found 'pure' language teaching uninteresting.

In this approach lessons were characterised by a relatively large amount of information presented in the spirit of the textbook which stresses preparing pupils for visit to France as tourists, advising and warning them of possible difficulties. A variety of teaching materials was used, including video-recordings, documents and the like brought from France and narration of the teacher's own experience as a tourist. French was frequently used by the teacher in the classroom, including

the giving of instructions and other aspects of lesson management. In essence the approach can be described as 'practical' and 'instrumental' with continuous stress on the notion that pupils will need the linguistic and cultural knowledge in order to 'survive' a visit to France.

The third approach, dubbed "language enjoyment", takes us back to a style with a high achieving class. Where the "academic approach" is future-oriented, concerned with preparation for examinations, and humour is rather part of the teacher-pupil relationship than a teaching technique, in the "language enjoyment approach" the orientation is more towards the here and now, to appreciating and understanding language and having fun in the lessons.

Lessons were characterised by variety and flexibility in techniques, which involved games, drawing and role play, as well as gramar explanations and exercises. Pupils were encouraged to enjoy themselves, for example in introducing humour into scenes played out and recorded on video. Lessons might be changed on the spot to suit the humour of the class and the teacher, despite plans for other activities. In short, the subject was presented as interesting in itself in a class which was keen to learn and willing to work.

Cultural information was not a major part of the lessons. The teacher would spontaneously add some of her own information to what occurred in the textbook, but briefly. This may be accounted for by the teacher's view of the purpose of this information: that children should be taught to accept differences but that there is not specific body of knowledge which must be conveyed. A second reason for this approach was mentioned by the teacher herself who was in fact qualified in German rather than French and, though she had been to France on school visits and exchanges - both as pupil and teacher - she had less experience than the other three.

The fourth approach is also language-dominated and there are some common characteristics in the style, called 'the language skills approach'. This teacher too was qualified in German rather than French and had far more and wider experience in Germany than France.

The class involved in the "language skills approach" was also comparable to that in the "survival approach": they were both considered to contain pupils of average or below average ability. Nonetheless the uniqueness of each class and teacher - and therefore of each style - remains the significant fact. Lessons were characterised by stress on language learning or skill in using language and recall of vocabulary, which were often tested. The dominant techniques were those suggested by the textbook, which include many games and role-plays. The textbook was dominant also with respect to what

cultural information was supplied and the teacher did not offer personal interpretations and anecdotes in the way that was done in the "survival" or "academic" approaches. On the other hand cultural information was often compared to pupils' own experience, and talk about culture was sometimes introduced by pupils' questions.

In an interview after the period of observation this teacher said she thought there are certain topics of cultural information which she always tries to include although not in a pre-planned way. She implied that the choice is influenced by what pupils find interesting: school life, food, television, shopping and the prices of goods. She includes them because "they are interested - they are always curious about other people", but she does so on opportunist basis:

"They love that. They'll listen to that but that is enough. Just tell them about that and then go on with the rest of the lesson, and if something else crops ... It's bitty but they build up their own picture."

The purpose of our research was to find out whether they do in fact build up their own picture, and how. The full report includes accounts of pupils' "picture" of France, of the sources of their information, of the influence of parents, siblings, the media etc, of the role of teaching French and of the links between The purpose of our research was to find out whether they do in fact build up their own picture, and how. The full report includes accounts of pupils' "picture" of France, of the sources of their information, of the influence of parents, siblings, the media etc, of the role of teaching French and of the links between teaching styles and pupils' knowledge of France. The conclusion of the report is that the effect of language teaching is "disappointing but scarcely surprising". It is disappointing in view of the widely held assumptions about the positive effects of teaching on insights and attitudes and the genuine efforts of teachers to realise these assumptions. It is scarcely surprising because of the overwhelming power of extra-school influences creating ethnocentric views in children from a pre-secondary age. It is unlikely that a few hours of French can counteract such influences unless there is a structured and rigorous attempt to do so, and yet observation shows that teachers' efforts are usually incidental to their concern with other matters and remain unstructured and haphazard. I believe that our case-studies are in this respect representative of many others.

What shall we do to improve the situation? Our project can contribute directly in three ways. First we shall make our findings available in a research report (Byram, Esarte-Sarries and Taylor, in press). Second, we are now researching one of the most important periods of teachers' own cultural learning - the Year Abroad. Third we shall publish a book based on our research (Byram and Esarte-Sarries,

47

in press) which will help teachers to think about their own cultural studies teaching and begin to develop the more structured and rigorous approach which will be more successful in fulfilling the aims expressed in the quotation I gave earlier to which we all, I suspect, subscribe without knowing quite how to attain them.

I am aware that much of what I have said is eurocentric and I hope that by expounding my ideas in a culture which is quite new to me, they will be refined and developed - and my own tertiary socialisation expanded.

References

Byram, M. (1986) Minority Education and Ethnic Survival, Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.

Byram, M., Esarte-Sarries, Y. and Taylor, S. (in press) Cultural Studies and Language Learning: a Research Report. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.

Byram, M. and Esarte-Sarries, V. (in press) Investigating Cultural Studies in Foreign Language Teaching: A Book for Teachers. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.

D'Andrade, R.G. (1984) "Cultural meaning systems". In R.A. Shweder and R.A. Levine (eds) Cultural Theory, Cambridge: CUP.

Geertz, C. (1975) The Interpretation of Cultures, London: Hutchinson.

Goodenough, W.H. (1964) "Cultural anthropology and linguistics". In D. Hymes (ed), Language in Culture and Society, New York: Harper and Row.

HMI (1985) The Curriculum from 5-16. London: HMSO.

Midgley, M. (1980) Beast and Man. The Roots of Human Nature. London: Methuen.

Quinn, N. (1985) "'Commitment' in American marriage: on cultural analysis". In J.W.D. Dougherty (ed) Directions in Cognitive Anthropology, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1971) Mind in Society, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.