The Most Common Approaches to the Teaching of Culture

In language teaching, an *approach* has come to mean "the theory, philosophy and principles underlying a particular set of teaching practices (Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics 2002). However, in the literature on teaching culture, the term is used in a more relaxed way: only a few of the so-called approaches seem to constitute a theory or a philosophy.

In the history of the teaching of culture different approaches can be noticed. Some of them have lost ground; some have had and still have dominant positions. The approaches can be classified in different ways. In very broad terms, they can be divided into two: those which focus only (or mostly) on the culture of the country whose language is studied (the mono-cultural approach) and those which are based on comparing learners' own and the other culture (the comparative approach).

The**mono-cultural approach** was typical for the courses like *Landeskunde*, *area studies*, and *British life and institutions* and is considered inadequate nowadays because it does not consider learners' understanding of their own culture.

The **comparative approach**, on the other hand, emphasises that foreign culture should be related to learners' own. Buttjes and Byram (1991: 13, cited in Edginton 2000:136) claim that instead of providing learners with "a one-way flow of cultural information" they should be encouraged to reflect on their own and foreign culture. The comparative approach draws on the learner's own knowledge, beliefs and values which form a basis for successfulcommunicationwithmembersoftheotherculture.Byramstatesthatlearnerscannot rid themselves of their own culture and simply step into another. For learners to deny their own culture is to deny their own being (Byram 1994: 43). While the essence of the comparative approach is to provide a double perspective it does not mean that learners need to evaluate which culture is better.

Instead, students learn that there are many ways of doing things and their way is not the only possible one.

So the comparative approach does involve evaluation but not in terms of comparison with something which is better, but in terms of improving what is all too familiar. Comparison makes the strange, the other, familiar, and makes the familiar, the self, strange – and therefore easier to re-consider.
(Byram and Planet: 2000: 189)

The comparative approach may begin either with the strange or the familiar. Traditionally, the primary focus in foreign language classes has been given to the other culture. Nonetheless, some authors emphasise the need to deal with the familiar first and then move to the strange (ibid.).

Comparison gives learners a new perspective of their own language and culture and questions their "taken-for-granted nature" (Byram 1998: 6). Through comparison, learners discover both similarities and differences of their own and other cultures. This, in turn, can lead to increased knowledge, understanding and acceptance.

Risager(1998:243-252)describesfourapproachestotheteachingofculture,twoof which- *theinterculturalandmulticultural-* includeaconsiderableelementofcomparison.***Theinterculturalapproach***isbasedontheideathatcultureis bestlearnedthroughcomparison. Though the focus is on the target culture, *the interculturalapproach*deals with the relations between the learners' own country and thecountry/countries wherethelanguage is spoken. It may include comparisons between the two and itdevelopslearners'understandingofboth.Theaimistodeveloplearners'interculturalandcommunicative competences, which would enable them to function as mediators between thetwocultures.The approach has become increasingly recognised since the 1980s.However,Risager(1998:246)considersthisapproachinadequateasitis"blindtotheactualmulticult uralcharacter of almost all existing countries or states" and suggests that teachers should use the multiculturalapproach.

The multicultural approachdraws on the idea that several cultures exist within one culture. The multicultural approach includes a focus on the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the target

country/countries as well as on the learners' own. As in the *intercultural approach*, comparison is important. Risager (1998: 246) also stresses that a balanced and anti-racist view of cultures should be involved. This approach emphasises the principle that cultures are not monolithic.

The third approach suggested by Risager is the ***transcultural approach.*** The basic idea behind this is that in the modern world cultures are interwoven due to extensive tourism, migration, world-wide communication systems, economic interdependence and globalisation. It is also reflected by the fact that many people speak foreign languages as *lingua francas*. The transcultural approach, therefore, deals with the foreign language as an international language. Its main aim is to teach learners to use it for international communication. In this case, it could be argued that it is not necessary at all to link the foreign language to any specific culture. However, Byram (1997: 55) contends that although it is possible to introduce topics which are of universal significance in all cultures, such an approach leaves learners without topics which are characteristic of a particular country that is the ones which "characterize its uniqueness for the language learner". Also, such an approach denies the link between language and culture.

The mono-cultural approach in Risager's list is represented by what he calls the ***foreign-cultural*** *approach.* It is based on the concept of a single culture and focuses on the culture of the country where the language is spoken. It does not deal with the learners' own country and the relations between the two. The teaching aim is to develop the so-called native speaker communicative and cultural competence. The approach was dominant until the 1980s and is criticised nowadays because of the lack of relationships between cultures.Galloway provides some other examples of the mono-cultural approach (1985, cited in Wiśniewska-Brogowskan.d., Liiv 1999: 61), the most wide-spread of which are the following four:

The Frankenstein Approach: A taco from here, a flamenco dancer from here, a Gacho from here, a bullfight from there.

The 4-F Approach : Folk dances, festivals, fairs and food.

Tour Guide Approach: Monuments, rivers, cities etc.

By-The-Way Approach: Sporadic lectures or bits of behaviour selected indiscriminately to emphasise sharp differences.

All these approaches provide learners mostly with factual information and only offer an "interesting sidelight" to the foreign culture (Chastain 1988: 305). Because of their very limited nature, they should not be encouraged.

Inadditiontotheabove-discussedapproaches,thereareanumberofapproachesthatare centredaround various aspects of a given culture or concentrate on developing certain skills in learners. The following approaches concentrate on both giving knowledge and understanding of the country's culture and encourage students to compare it with their own.

The theme-based or ***thematic approach*** to the teaching of culture is based around certain themes, for example, *symbolism, value, ceremony, love, honour, humour*, *beauty*, *intellectuality*, *the art of living*, *realism*, *common sense*, *family*, *liberty*, *patriotism*, *religion*, and *education*, which are seen as typical of a culture. Though mono-cultural by nature, it tries to show the relationships and values in a given culture and, therefore, helps learners to understand it better. Nostrand, who looked for the main themes for the French culture, worked out a model known as an *Emergent Model* (1967 and 1978, cited in Seelye 1993: 132-133; Hughes 1986: 165-166). This is based on the assumption that certain ingredientsarecharacteristicofthebehaviourofmembersofacertainculture.Nostrand(1974, cited in Seelye 1993: 133) argues that relationships in a given society can be best taught when grouped under main themes. He defines a theme as "an emotionally charged concern, which motivates or strongly influences the culture bearer's conduct in a wide variety of situations." One theme, for example, that he considers as a manifestation of the French culture is *intellectuality.*

However, it is sometimes thought that the theme-based approach provides learners with a segmented view of the target culture. It might be difficult for them to see individual people and understand social processes and values from this perspective and could lead to stereotyping (Wiśniewska-Brogowska.).

The topic-based approach concentrates on more general and cross-sectional topics which involve various cultural issues. According to Alan McLean (1994, cited in Wiśniewska-Brogowska), a "topic-based approach can provide an oblique yet original encounter with British life and culture. It deals with key elements of current British life, such as class, privatisation, education, health, not in isolation but within a series of unifying contexts." Wiśniewska-Brogowska argues that the topic-based approach to the teaching of culture brings life to class and develops a more holistic and integrated view of the target culture. She goes on to say that "knowing about the people who use the language, understanding their behaviours, beliefs and customs increases cultural awareness and promotes greater personal interest both in the language and the culture." Durant (1997: 31), who is also in favour of the topic- based approach, stresses that learning should take place "on the basis of analytic and comparative methods."

The problem-oriented approach aims at getting learners interested in the other culture and encourages them to do some research on their own. Seelye (1993: 47) sees the teacher's role in defining the problem that interests learners. He claims that the more precise a problem is the easier it is for a learner to reach the desired outcome. The teacher should also guide learners in the bibliographic work. He claims that

rather than be told to read a book on the general topic chosen, students can be taught to skim and to read carefully only limited sections that are germane to their specific area of interest. Otherwise, the student will fast become bogged down in the fantastic explosion of knowledge that threatens to engulf all scholars, especially those in science and social science. (Seelye 1993: 47)

This is an important remark to consider, given the amount of material that is accessible to learners today. The result of student research should be a report, either written or presented orally.

The task-oriented approach is also based on learners' own research. Differently from the previous one it is characterised by co-operative tasks. Learners work in pairs or small groups on different aspects of the other culture. They share and discuss their findings with others in order to form a more complete picture. Lastly, learners interpret the information within the context of the other culture and compare it with their own. (Tomalin and Stempleski 1993: 9)

The skill-centred approach differs from the above-given approaches in a sense that it ismore practical and might be useful for those who need to live within the target-language community. It aims at developing learners' skills, which they may need to manage the issues involved in (mis)communication between cultures/societies. It does not primarily mean knowledge of the other culture. According to Bolt, the skill-centred approachemphasises awareness and skills as much as content, the present and future as much as past and, lastly, similarities in cultures as much as differences. He goes on to say that methodologically this means:

- the raising and exploring of open questions rather than answering of the closed ones;
- what can be done at the end of a lesson is as important as what isknown;
- the process of an activity is as important as theproduct;
- cultural input is insufficient, cultural outcomes areessential;
- the learners' involvement is as important as the material the teacherprovides;
- investigatory attitudes to develop the skills of finding, evaluating, analysing and finally communicating aspects ofculture;
- teachers and learners working alongside one another to commongoals;
- language is central andforegrounded.

No matter what approach is used, it is important that the teaching of culture "never lose [s] sight of the individual" (Brooks 1964, cited in Seelye 1993: 135). Seelye (ibid.) goes on to say that the focus should be on "how societal values, institutions, language, and the land affect the thought and lifestyle of someone living in the culture we are studying." Second, comparison of one's own and the other culture isimportant.