Foreign language teaching as foreign culture teaching? The problem of intercultural understanding

Arnd Witte
NUI Maynooth

Throughout the relatively short history of foreign language teaching methodology, the notion of culture has experienced quite a bumpy ride. In the Grammar – Translation method, it reigned supreme, because the texts of the target language were selected not so much in accordance with their grammatical features, but rather due to their status as valuable documents of foreign literature. Cultural content therefore had, to a large extent, a historical slant, since the literary texts in question hailed from past epochs.

The audiolingual method took a different approach: pattern drills were the order of the day, and the texts used in class were not literary texts, but usually highly artificial texts put together to emphasize particular grammatical patterns. The prevalence of grammar left only a minor place for cultural elements in the textbooks, so that cultural knowledge was picked up more implicitly than explicitly in the situative context of speech acts. But nonetheless the cultural context knowledge related to contemporary everyday culture rather than to historically distant periods. This synchronic notion of culture was subsequently used by all other methods of teaching foreign languages, although initially it referred to a cognitive concept of culture that viewed the foreign culture as a compilation of facts — rather than a system of practices — to be taught and learnt in the foreign language classroom.

The communicative approach of the 1980s emphasized the pragmatic elements of everyday language usage; much more than previous methodologies, it focused teaching materials on the social and cultural moulding of the individual learner. The pragmatic context of situations where language was being used became almost as relevant as the language itself. Hence a situational progression complemented the grammatical progression so as to enable the learner to acquire a truly communicative competence, i.e., the knowledge of what language elements to use in what situations. The notion of culture was freed from its marginal existence as mere context knowledge and integrated into textbooks in separate sections of German *Landeskunde*, French *civilisation* or English

culture. But it still had a supporting function for language usage which is manifested in the rather unsystematic inclusion of these cultural elements into communicatively oriented textbooks. This separate treatment of culture implied — at least for the foreign language learner — an independent existence of language and culture which ultimately trivialized the notion of communication in the foreign language.

This is one of the points of departure for the intercultural approach which carries the orientation programmatically in its name. It puts even more emphasis on the experiences, expectations, attitudes, and institutional and learning traditions of the learner and his or her culture, and it aims at facilitating an intercultural competence rather than merely a communicative competence. This means that the learner should not only be able to communicate appropriately in the foreign language, but he or she should also be able to understand the motivations and intentions of foreign language speakers, including the communicative subtext which is usually highly charged with historically developed sociocultural concepts and meaning. In order to achieve this, the learner must automatically turn to the sociocultural concepts of his or her own categories of understanding, so that the critical discussion of the home culture becomes an important element of foreign language classes. The ultimate aim of the intercultural approach is not so much the imparting of linguistic, communicative, and cultural content, but rather the development of general and sensible abilities, strategies, and skills in relation to foreign cultures in order to enhance a better understanding of other and self.

But is the deeper understanding of home and target cultures — and both are not static entities — a realistic aim for foreign language teaching? Some serious problems arise with two of these terms: 'culture' and 'understanding'. To start with, the notion of culture is — according to Williams in *Keywords* (1973, quoted in Young 1995: 30) — one of the two or three most complicated words to define, and many academic disciplines are involved in this definition process. Some social scientists have even argued that the concept of culture is an all-encompassing notion that reduces sociohistorical complexities to simple characterisations, and that it levels moral and social contradictions that exist within and across communities; therefore it should be abandoned (Hess 1992: 1; 38-52). Others are of the opinion that the notion of culture is so identified with a colonialist agenda that it cannot be used without a series of

naive and misleading binary oppositions such as 'us' and 'them', 'civilized' and 'primitive', etc., that always tend to stigmatize the 'other'.[1] This criticism is justified in that it should make us aware of the political role of the academic discourse in the production of marginalization, but to do away with the notion of culture altogether and replace it with that of individuality, as e.g. Notebohm (in his speech at the Frankfurt Book Fair 1993, reported in Hansen 1995: 144) and Hess (1992) suggest, would be too reductionistic because it would ignore super-individual aspects of society and fall back on a more or less atomistic view of people. But a notion of culture based on individuals would prevent an analysis of the dynamics of cultures, for which clearly a super-individual concept of culture is a precondition; such an individualistic notion of culture would make communication between people of different societies and cultures even more difficult than it is already between people of different origins, because it would take no account of the sociocultural level of integration. What is necessary is a differentiated and open notion of culture that is ethically responsible, historically based, and aesthetically accentuated (*Beirat Deutsch als Fremdsprache* 1992: 112).

Given the fact that culture is a highly complex notion and a contested ground within contemporary theory, it would be hypocritical to claim that in this paper an ultimate definition of culture could be given. I cannot even give a summary of the numerous different approaches to culture (for example, universal, relativistic, structuralistic, symbolic, functionalist, interpretative, cognitive, semiotic, discursive, and many others), so that a working definition of culture will have to do for this article, especially since current theories have tried to avoid an all-encompassing definition of culture in favour of more context-specific notions. For our context it might be sufficient to say very broadly that culture consists of the historically evolved and negotiated, commonly shared meanings and conceptual maps of a society or a group of people. Culture

> is a relatively instable product of the practice of meaning, of multiple interpretations both within society and between members of society and ... between societies. The substanzialisation of culture is a specific kind of practice of identification of others, an essentialization of otherness in which the product of the multiple practices of interpretation

takes precedence over the practices themselves [Friedman 1994: 74].

Let us turn now to the notion of understanding, which is also a highly complex and contested one. Basically, there are three paradigms of understanding, namely the universal (logocentric), the relativistic (ethnocentric), and the individualistic (egocentric) approaches. The point of departure for the universal school is the universal human experience: the other and I share a common world. Therefore, all humans must have the same basic faculties and devices of perception and understanding. The linguist Noam Chomsky goes a step further by arguing that humans are innately equipped with a 'Language Acquisition Device' to create and understand language; Chomsky analysed that all languages share certain formal similarities, which led him to believe that there must be a 'Universal Grammar'. His pupil Steven Pinker suggests that understanding and thinking operates with a pre-linguistic medium beyond existing languages: 'people do not think in English or Chinese or Apache; they think in a language of thought. .... Knowing a language, then, is knowing how to translate mentalese into strings of words and vice versa' (Pinker 1994: 81-82).

From a hermeneutic perspective, the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer comes to a similar conclusion of universal proportion: In order to understand something or someone this has to be appropriated to the individual cognition, otherwise it would remain alien. 'To seek one's own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of the spirit, whose being is only return to itself from what is other' (Gadamer 1975: 15). If this universal hermeneutic approach, which Gadamer intended for the historical alien, is shifted to the synchronic alien, it implies that the alien is assimilated and integrated into one's own categories and values.[2] Consequently, this process of understanding the alien is inherently connected with domination and exploitation.

The relativistic approach rejects this notion of understanding as a form of destructive imperialism. The relativistic position recognizes language as the central medium of reflective thought, which in turn is shaped by culturally moulded categories of perception and construction. Therefore Pinker's notion of mentalese as a universal system of mental representation is rejected, because mind 'is not a mysterious inner mechanism of a mechanical and general kind, operating according to its own universal *lingua mentis*, but ... it is a

cultural production, reflecting in its make-up different ethnically and politically structured modes of operation in different circumstances' (Shotter 1993: xv; italics in original). Since our mind then is always determined by sociocultural traditions, convictions, experiences, and conventions, understanding is only possible by sharing this *habitus* (Bourdieu) as a socially internalised disposition.[3] The ethnocentric approach is closely linked with linguistic relativity, meaning

> that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by the grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of extremely similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world [Whorf 1956: 221].

Cultural notions, concepts, categories and values are inscribed in a language.[4] Understanding a culture in the ethnocentric sense then is only possible from a position within that culture. Consequently, this relativistic approach to understanding does not colonize the other in the universal sense, but (a) it erects insurpassable barriers between cultures, (b) it does not question — and hence legitimizes — the historically-evolved basis of suppression and power between cultures, and (c) it can be for us as members of supposedly superior cultures — according to Clifford Geertz — 'an easy surrender to the comforts of merely being ourselves ... and maximising gratitude for not having been born a Vandal or an Ik' (Geertz 1986, quoted in Bredella and Christ 1995: 16).

A third approach to understanding goes beyond the assumptions of universalism and relativism. The individualistic approach fundamentally questions the autonomy and unambiguity of persons

> as all equal, self-enclosed (essentially indistinguishable) atomic individuals, possessing an inner sovereignty, each living their separate lives, all in isolation from each other — the supposed experience of the modern self — [it] is an illusion, maintained by the institution between us of certain forms of communication [Shotter 1993: 110].

The fact that the individual is only able to position and construct himself or herself in dialectic communication with others, places his

or her psyche on the borderline between the organism and the out-
side world. Sociocultural constructs are always a crucial part of the
inner self of persons, because they are internalized in the process of
socialization and they provide the only tools for representation and
reflective thought. This is particularly evident in the grammar and
terminological conceptualization of language, which the individual
uses as a tool to communicate, construct, and position herself or
himself. Grammar and terminology are already there, including the
inherent rules, codes and conventions, and the individual has to ap-
propriate these given structures and meanings to his or her particu-
lar needs in any given situation in order to make herself or himself
understood, so that his or her inner self is to a large degree deter-
mined by alien categories.[5]

However, the subject is not doomed to a passive endurance of
these categories, as the structuralistic paradigm maintains. He or she
creates meanings in the actual production of speech that generally
can be shared by all members of a given society, but the elements of
speech are filled by the speaker with particular meaning which, to a
certain degree, is not communicable because everyone within a
culture appropriates words in slightly different ways. The word be-
comes one's own

> only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions,
> his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it
> to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this
> moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neu-
> tral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a
> dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it
> exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts,
> serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one
> must make the word, and make it one's own [Bakhtin 1986,
> quoted in Shotter 1993: 41].

Hence interaction with self and the world is a dynamic and dialectic
process of appropriation and assimilation of other and self.
'Meaning is always in the process of emerging, yet any final mean-
ing is constantly deferred' (Hall 1997: 59). The ridge running
through language is reflected in the ridge that runs through every-
one's psyche. As there cannot be a definite meaning for any given
word or phrase, there cannot be a definite atomistic identity of peo-
ple. Both are oscillating between the general and the specific.

But what is the importance of these notions for the purposes of foreign language teaching? First of all it is obvious from our reflections that the basic mechanisms of understanding foreign language and culture are the same as understanding one's own language and culture. This is the universal element of understanding which Heidegger (1979: 144) accordingly termed an '*Existenzial*' because only the process of understanding allows a true (human) existence in the world. Problems arise with the historically evolved and culturally charged backgrounds of meaning, the boundaries of which — according to the relativistic approach — cannot be overcome unless a person learns to understand a given society (skills, customs, folkways, institutions, beliefs) and its cultural traditions from within that sociocultural framework. This is obviously an unrealistic aim for institutionalized foreign language learning because this would ultimately mean that the learner has to be situated in the target culture for a very long period of time, and even then it is questionable whether his or her cultural competence can rival that of natives, e.g. in the finer strands of meaning in the communicational subtext of jokes. It is equally questionable that this person can simply forget the cultural moulding of his or her own cognitive and emotional categories and concepts. But here perhaps the categories of home and target cultures we use in 'understanding' this situation are too static; it is not a binary 'either/or' opposition, but a highly dynamic and complex one in a dialectic process of accommodation and assimilation, always focused on the individual. Neither the home nor the target culture nor the mind of the learner are static and atomistic entities: they all constantly interact and so are subject to constant change. And here the individualistic approach can move us forward because of its dynamic construction of the self within a highly complex network of cultural, mental, and linguistic representations in various dimensions. In this perspective alien cultures must not remain opaque to the foreign language learner: the more the learner learns and understands about the foreign language and culture, the more he becomes critically aware of his or her own language categories and culturally moulded patterns of perception and cognitive construction. Thus he or she loses his or her natural unreflected confidence of moving within them, but he or she gains access to other modes of interpretation and social construction which can only be described as an enrichment — rather than endangerment — of the learner's psyche. When the ability to understand foreign cultures is itself mediated

through language, then the critical reflection process must also include that of the actual position of 'self' within a certain culture, institution and academic discourse. The process of understanding the alien is inextricably linked to the simultaneous process of alienating the familiar. Only on this basis can a careful cognitive departure in the direction of understanding the target culture take place, leading to what Kramsch (1993: 210, 233-259) called a highly dynamic 'third place' between the home and the target culture.

This complex process of understanding aspects of the other culture can be demonstrated on the most basic level even with simple words, which can have a historically evolved significantly different meaning in the other sociocultural context. An example of this conceptual difference even between the closely related languages English and German is the ordinary German term *Schrank*, which is an abstract term for something like a wardrobe. But in the German context, the conceptual representation is much broader than in the English context. Whereas the English category splits the German object-constitution into several distinct ones — *wardrobe, closet, cupboard, bookcase, press, locker* — the abstract German term and conceptualization covers all of these. So the sociohistorical concepts behind these terms point to different conceptual processes of construction and development.

A compatible example for the same relationship between object and language category (and both do not exist independently) in reverse angle is the English term *box*, which cannot be translated as such into German; it is differentiated into the utterly unconnected terms *Karton, Kiste, Schachtel, Pferdestall, Loge, billiger Fotoapparat, Fernsehapparat*. From the German point of view any conceptual connection between these items seems ridiculous. Only an abstract definition brings similarities to light: a box is 'rigid typically rectangular often with a lid or cover in which something unliquid is kept or carried' (Webster's 1981: 236).

Difficult as these conceptual differences may be to understand for the unsuspecting foreign language learner, on the level of linguistic terms and their social usage in its historicity they can be explained by the teacher. This then defines this aspect of the role of the teacher as that of a person competent in both the home and target cultures who should be in a position to mediate aspects of both cultures in a way that his or her students can understand them.[6]

Much more difficult to understand are fundamental concepts of social reality constructed — and perceived — by the other culture and society over centuries. These basic concepts are not static but dynamic entities, and change takes place neither rapidly nor sharply; it occurs imperceptibly for the individual.[7] Looking, for example, at the roles of man and woman in society, these have drastically changed in the Western world over the past decades. This can cause problems in understanding the newly defined social roles from a non-Western point of view. The author experienced an example of this when the well-known short story *Das Brot* by Wolfgang Borchert (1986 [1947]) was discussed in a class in German as a foreign language in West Africa. The story is set in the immediate post-war period in Germany in which an old almost starving man gets up at night to secretly eat a slice of bread which is rationed and hence is extremely scarce. He is caught by his wife who pretends not to notice his clandestine meal and pretends to believe his explanation that he got up because he heard some noise. In the Western context it is quite obvious that the wife does not want to embarrass her husband in this situation of existential shortage of food because she loves him and knows that his self-respect and their 39-year marriage would suffer if she bluntly accused him of stealing. This is the cultural backdrop of the short story; but when read in a West African country, the cultural background is very different. The following is a short quotation from the classroom discussion of the scene (quoted in Witte 1996: 285):

1 T: Why would she [wife] hurt him [husband] if she had shown that she understood him? Why would she have hurt him? Warum hätte sie ihn verletzt?

2 S1: She would have accused him of stealing the bread.

3 T: Yes, she would have told him in the face: "You are a liar. You told me a lie now". Okay. But what of the fact that the man actually goes to work and earns the money? And the wife is at home preparing the food for him. She doesn't earn money. Can you connect it?

4 S2: The man should have eaten the bread boldly and...

5 T: [Interrupting:] He should have eaten the bread with boldness?

6 S2: Yes.

7 T: And just should have said confidently: "I was hungry"?

8 S2: Yes, because it was his anyway. He is the man in the house.

The German teacher, although having lived in West Africa for over a decade, does not anticipate that the students — despite elaborate information on the immediate historical setting of the short story — do not understand this interpersonal relationship according to the German historical perspective, but rather against their own sociocultural background. The question of why the wife pretends not to know that her husband took a slice of bread is neither being related to the situation of existential food shortages nor to the relationship on level terms between husband and wife, although the teacher tried to lead the students to this angle of understanding. Obviously the students cannot comprehend the behaviour of the wife and even less that of the husband, although most of them are themselves no strangers to the situation of food shortage. Due to the insufficiency of purely cognitive explanations by the teacher, the West African sociocultural conceptualization of the relationship of husband and wife seems to be dominant in understanding the scene: in West Africa the man, especially the elder, has absolute authority in his family and home. From this perspective, the action of the man in secretly eating his own bread in his own kitchen like a thief cannot be understood, and his denial seems to be unnecessarily embarrassing and humiliating.

This example clearly shows that understanding the cultural context of the foreign language can neither be achieved in the short term nor by purely rational explanations: it must be a process that stretches the whole period of foreign language learning (and beyond) and includes the emotional level. It is basically an endless process and one that can only touch certain pragmatic aspects of the target culture which Oksaar termed '*Kultureme*', by no means the target culture in toto.[8] It is also a process whose degree of difficulty increases with the degree of socio-conceptual and socio-psychological difference between the languages and cultures involved. In our example, the process of mediation of cultural knowledge with respect to the social roles of man and woman is only partially successful, because the understanding of this aspect of

the German culture is not deep enough, i.e., it is only rationally mediated and generally too different from the ordinary social experiences of the students. Although the teacher obviously did not anticipate this interpretation by the students, despite the socio-economic information on the historical setting given earlier, she subsequently moves away from the text in order to create room for a comparative discussion of the role of man and woman in West Africa and Germany.

This then is one important mosaic stone in the complex process of intercultural understanding as defined above: problematizing a particular aspect of the target culture turns the mind of the learner automatically to the compatible construct of the home culture which now can be seen in a new light. Whether individual students then tend to support the original concept of their own culture or that of the target culture or one in between the two poles is secondary to the fact that the seemingly 'natural' construct they had internalized has been analysed as not necessarily the only valid one imaginable. It is needless to state that not all aspects of the 'other' have to be understood: boundaries of understanding have to be experienced and accepted (Hunfeld 1995). Thus understanding elements of a foreign cultural code does not offer quick solutions but rather complicates matters in the short term. And this is exactly the purpose of understanding alien *Kultureme*, namely that the foreign language students question the foreign *and* their own *Kultureme*, thus enabling a critical understanding of their subjective position not only in the context of their own culture, but through the concepts and constructs of another culture. This procedural knowledge in respect to increasingly understanding self and other, which includes strategies and skills in dealing with other cultures and societies and the ability to see self and other through other cultural constructs and conceptualizations — and that is my hypothesis — is one of the most important, if not the most important, aspect of foreign language learning. And this can only be achieved by learning a foreign language, not just the grammar, lexis, syntax, and pragmatics, but more importantly, another linguistic and cultural code as an alternative approach to understanding self and other.

Notes

1. Derrida (1972) argues that one pole of the binary opposition is usually the dominant one which includes the other within its field of operation.

There is always a relation of power between the poles of a binary opposition. Hence we should really write ***white/black, men/women, masculine/feminine,*** etc. to capture this dimension of power in discourse.

2. Gadamer's approach is classified as universal here, because he reduces the supposedly global context of tradition ('*Überlieferungsgeschehen*') to only one which, he assumes, is universal: the occidental tradition. He thinks that this is the case because 'it is not by chance that the unity of history depends on the unity of Western civilisation to which Western science in general and history as science, in particular, belong' (Gadamer 1975: 184).

3. The *habitus* is a hidden cultural norm that is acquired by each member of a society in the process of socialization by participating in cultural and social actions: 'because habitus is, it never asks why, for it does not know otherwise. The language of familiarity presumes habitus, and therefore ignores it' (Harman 1988: 110).

4. This is not to be an inescapable 'prison of language' (Cassirer 1942, quoted in Duranti 1997: 64) but merely a recognition of the fact that language provides culture-specific, relatively flexible conceptual categories.

5. It should be emphasized that there is no one-to-one correspondence between a word and an object or concept; it 'rather "points to" or "connects" to something "in the context" .... What it points to is either "presupposed" or entailed (that is, "created")' (Duranti 1997: 38).

6. This difference in conceptual object-constitution and linguistic representation is much larger when two languages and their sociocultural contexts are involved which are not so closely related as German and English. See, for example, Krusche's essay on the Japanese concept of *haiku*, which, he claims, must remain incomprehensible for the non-Japanese recipient (Krusche 1993: 433-449).

7. Hall (1989) differentiates among three levels of culture: (a) the 'basic primary level culture' (relatively instable level of rules and characteristics of a particular culture); (b) 'secondary level culture' (a kind of insider knowledge or member code that is known by members of a society, but not by outsiders); and (c) 'tertiary or explicit, manifest culture' (a 'hidden cultural grammar [that] defines the way in which people view the world, determines their values, and establishes the basic tempo and rhythms of life' (Hall 1989: 230)).

8. In opposition to the predominantly sentence-centred, static, and monologic view of language, Oksaar thinks that different modes of communication can be explained by sociocultural categories, which she defines as *Kultureme* (e.g. abstract categories of greeting, thanking, compliments, silence, directness/indirectness, agreement/disagreement, etc.). If these *Kultureme* are used in actual situational, social, and culture-specific conditions, they lead to different concrete realizations, which she terms *Behavioreme* (Oksaar 1988: 4ff.).

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