Communicating Culture through Video

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The outstanding feature of video films is their ability to present complete communicative situations. The combination of sound and vision is dynamic, immediate, and accessible. (Lonergan,1994,4)

In learning a foreign language, it is primarily an academic subject that the students are learning. Students are often far removed from the reality of life and language in the target community- As a matter of fact, although they are learning the language, they are not learning the culture that goes along with it. Lack of knowledge about cultural notions sometimes leads to drastic breakdowns. The big question for the teacher at this point is how best a teacher can approach teaching culture. What can I do as a teacher to help make the target culture real for my students? EFL practitioners have highlighted the role of collaboration, focusing on the meaning-making use of language, loosening teacher control, and creating desirable setting for learners. The workshop that is described here proposes the potential of using videos as a vehicle for promoting cultural knowledge. Firstly, in so doing the significance of teaching culture in an EFL curriculum is highlighted. Secondly, the views on the use of teaching aids – here video – are briefly reviewed. Finally and most importantly, while introducing different tips, the researcher will suggest ways to encourage teaching culture.

Why Culture?

Prior to the 1960s, the line between language and culture was carefully drawn. People learned a second or foreign language in order to read and study its literature. It was through reading that students learned of civilization associated with the target language. The development of anthropology and sociology resulted in a more widespread understanding of culture (Sapir, 1970; Stern, 1983). In the 1970s, the emphasis on sociolinguistics resulted in greater

emphasis on the context and situation where the foreign language would be used (Pride and Holmes, 1972; Trudgill, 1978).

Culture is powerful and pervasive; therefore, culture has found a significant role in L2 education. Language and culture are from the start inseparably connected. Similarly, culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom about what and how the conversation proceeds, but it also determines how people encode messages, the meanings they have for the messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interrupted (Sapir, 1970). Culture, one may say, is the foundation of communication. According to Sapir (1970), culture is "a guide to social reality" and "a symbolic guide to culture"(p.68). It is the recognition of an unbreakable bond between language and culture that motivates us teachers to believe that one should not teach language without also teaching culture.

What is culture?

Culture may be defined by the way of a people or a way of doing things or a way of being. Of course, in this paper, I don't mean to refer to "high culture" or "the appreciation of music, literature, the arts and so on" (Wardaugh, 1986, p. 211). Culture here refers to whatever a person must know in order to function in a particular society. Goodenough's (1957) definition of culture seems most relevant to the present study: "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"(p.l67). Culture is therefore the "know-how" that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living.

Teaching Culture

Teaching English as culture means showing the students how grammar and vocabulary express the students' ideas and are a metaphor for the social and cultural reality of an English-speaking world (Halliday, 1978; Kramsch, 2001). Our responsibility as language teachers is to help students become fluent in language but also to gain an understanding of the culture. According to Liddicoat (2001), culture in language teaching can be seen either as a set of facts and artifacts about a country or a group of people or as a set of practices in which people engage. The former he calls "static culture" and for the latter he uses the term "dynamic culture". Due to the dynamic nature of culture, it never remains static but it is constantly changing. So it is not enough and it is not appropriate to teach merely the static culture.

Whether culture is taught explicitly or not is another concern. Integration of language and culture, right from the beginning stages, would certainly be effective. We are not exaggerating if we add that culture is part and parcel of teaching a language. Teaching culture is considered important by most language

teachers, but it has remained instrumental and sporadic in most language classes. In discussions of the issue with teachers; it was found that the problems originated from lack of time; uncertainty about what aspect of culture to teach; and lack of potential techniques.

Why Videos?

The growing acceptance of content teaching within EFL as a motivation for students has led teachers in recent years to the creation and selection of appropriate content. Similarly, it is necessary for students to be exposed to authentic language in order to be able to assimilate it when they are in an authentic situation. This is, to use Nunan's (1991) words, part of a communicative language teaching which features: "an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language... (and) an attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom" (p.279).

Finding ways of making English relevant to students' lives and increasing classroom participation, the researcher emphasizes that a blackboard- and textbook- system of education in the age of "microelectronics" will inevitably be detrimental. There could be a waste of resources if pedagogy does not take advantage of new technological tools. Salaberry (2001) warns us against the danger of ignoring "the arrival of such a revolution [microelectronic]"(p.43). So teachers can make use of technology-based instruction by selecting from what they have access to, from online facilities, internet sites, teleconferences, e-mails, video tapes, pictures, etc. Teachers have long been searching for ways to make students' learning experiences more active and interesting, more similar to those that occur in the real world. The advantages of using videos in class are obvious and many. The use of authentic documents as a language teaching remains one of the greatest means of bringing the world back home. You can get more value out of posters, photographs, and advertisements than texts (Brown, 1994).

Videos expose students to authentic materials and to voices, dialects, and registers other than the teacher's and they provide cultural contexts. Visual aids can improve the comprehension and retention of materials presented. Moreover, the dynamics of various information which can be derived from viewing the video, such as authentic setting, accents, posture, and gestures, of native speaker relieves students from the boredom of traditional class language drills (Svensson, 1985). So, as it can be seen, this change from the usual routine makes a more enjoyable classroom environment (Lebedko, 1999; Reid, 1995; Salaberry, 2001).

Most foreign language teachers acknowledge that videos expose students to authentic materials and provide cultural contexts for foreign language teaching. So, to recap what is good about videos as a springboard for activities and the use of authentic experiences and materials,

> Videos stimulate students to acquire the target culture as well as the language.

> Since they are saturated with cultural information, videos can widen students' knowledge of culture.

Let's refer to Lebedko (1999) "In one word, the main goal is to attract students' attention to those cultural issues they may leave unnoticed and to highlight cross-cultural issues"(p.2).

Researcher's Tips:

At this point, the researcher offers her insights about communicating culture through videos.

To begin with, I had some questions in mind (Mir Emadi and Marefat, 2000):

> How can I make the best of use videos to maximize student interaction?

> How can I develop classroom practices that encourage collaboration?

> How can I be more concise and let my students do what they could do for themselves?

> How can I make use of multi-skills activities that are characteristic of everyday communication?

It should be mentioned that videos could be used in different stages and in different classes, from the very first session towards the end of the semester. Depending on the class level, the teacher might choose to have different varieties of tasks. In brief, the project requires the learners to work in groups of 2-4 students.

The activities are done in a controlled fashion and gradually lead to more autonomous and independent performances' Independent learners, to borrow Pachler and Field's (1999) words, "enjoy learning; are aware of factors impeding their learning; identify their own needs and act upon them; use various learning strategies and techniques" (p.63). It is the ultimate goal of any teacher to lead learners to being independent.

The teacher is also there to check each group, giving feedback when necessary. The video I used with my students was a wedding film, which the students found attractive and it gave rise to a lot of interesting discussions.

> Generally, it is not the film that matters so much as the way that we use it. The content of the video we use is important and should depend primarily on our students' interest and background knowledge. Videos should be to the point and relevant to the issues being discussed; not all videos would be useful. At the same time, the video should enhance students' recognition of cultural differences.

> The length of the film should usually be no longer than 3-5 minutes. In fact longer tapes are frustrating even for the advanced level for information density and speed. There seems to be great deal of mental energy used in viewing such a video. One should remember that shorter does not necessarily mean easier but that the shorter one can help concentrate the students' attention. The problem that remains here is that shorter videos do not offer a rich context.

> Break the film into shorter sections. It should be shown in segments not as a whole.

> Set a task before students watch a video, asking questions like a treasure hunt, etc.

> Be ready to help teams when in trouble.

> Try to make use of multi-skills approach

> Supplementing appropriate texts can create a richer experience. For instance; students can focus on how cultural values are affected by factors such as religion, nationality; socio-economic status, personality, etc. Reading a relevant text would give them some knowledge as well as activate their knowledge.

> Viewing could be done with sound off and picture on. Students watch a short film and answer questions previously posed or discuss what they saw.

> A "Predicting" exercise provides students with the chance to think about what they will see next.

> Students may be asked, next, to write summaries of what they have seen. They might be asked to write questions they would like to ask a native speaker about the vague points, They may even be

asked to list 3 differences or similarities they find in the video regarding their own culture.

> Remember to choose the suitable level of difficulty.

> Teacher may use several resources.

> Use video as a supplement.

> Make the activities as interesting and as challenging as possible by using different interactive and communicative information gap activities.

> English captions or subtitles could also be helpful.

Discussion activities
> <u>Reformulation</u>: Ask them to explain in their own words what they just watched to their partner.

> <u>Notice</u>: Ask them to note all differences from their own culture.

> <u>Prediction</u>: Stop the tape at critical junctures and ask them what might come next.

> <u>Research</u>: Ask them to do research on the discussed issue. Following the discussions in the class, a survey can be conducted in which learners can choose aspects of the topic to investigate and formulate their own questions. Doing this, they come to obtain an original and personalized angle on the topic.

> <u>Personalize</u>: Ask the students to relate the issue to their own lives

Do not try to cover everything: all we can do as teachers is provide SOME pathways to help them learn more about the culture, a tool that we expect would foster our own teaching.

Issues of Research
    What needs to be investigated in this regard? How important students think culture is? How best can culture be taught? Could we come to the point of thinking of a cultural syllabus? Do you think learners would benefit from that?
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