

**UNIT 4. VALUATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION.****INTEREST IN LINGUISTIC VARIETY THROUGH THE KNOWLEDGE OF A NEW LANGUAGE AND ITS CULTURE.**

Language is the main means of human communication, although, ironically, it also constitutes the main barrier. Understanding among people can sometimes be difficult because of the existence of so many different languages. We quickly notice this barrier when travelling, in international political relationships, in research and business.

Keeping the previous idea in mind, the present unit aims to argue the relevance of teaching a foreign language as an instrument of communication and the increasing interest in language study.

As it can be easily deduced, it is a complex unit regarding contents. This makes that the exposition will be divided into different parts in order to make it clearer.

- First, I will study the way foreign language can act as a barrier to international communication. In order to do so, I will point out different methods than have been proposed to reduce this problem and I will argue why learning foreign language is necessary.
- Second, I will underline the interest in language diversity by getting to know a new language and its culture. In order to do so, I will try to answer the questions what culture is and why it should be taught.
- Then I will consider different ways of teaching language and culture in the EFL classroom.
- Next, I will conclude explaining some ways to develop our pupil's awareness.
- Finally, I will compile the main conclusions and the bibliography used to develop this topic.

In the present topic, we will have a look at those characteristics and see how they can be applied in the English classroom so as to enable our students to move gradually toward the general goal of acquiring communicative competence. As a response to these necessities, the basic curriculum for Primary Education, recorded in the Royal decree 126/2014, establishes as the main aim of the foreign language area the acquisition of an adequate communicative competence, where the oral skills will be outlined over the receptive ones. Taking into account that the main goal that appears in the Organic Act 8/2013 for the Improvement of Quality in Education, also known as LOMCE, and its adaptation to Asturias in the official curriculum for Primary Education in the Decree 82/2014, for foreign language teaching is make our students communicative competent.

According to such legal dispositions, English is considered as an important international language.

However, in some cases, a...

## 1. FOREIGN LANGUAGE CAN ACT AS A BARRIER TO INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION.

The discovery that language can be a barrier to communication is clearly made by anyone who travels to a foreign country, or in some cases, within our own country. The lack of knowledge produced by the foreign language is generally seen as halting, or at least, impeding progress. There are several ways of getting around this barrier formed by lack of knowledge of the foreign language but none has yet been entirely successful. The most important are:

- Increasing the number and availability of translating and interpreting services but the problem is that an exact equivalent may be impossible.
- Developing an auxiliary language that everybody will understand, but the problem is that it is not attached to any particular country. As Esperanto language.
- Using an existing language that everybody will understand, as it is the case of English nowadays, because it is used as a second language all over the world.
- Providing increasing motivation and opportunity to learn foreign languages.

The most realistic way to overcome the language barrier is the access to learning foreign languages. That is the reason why organizations such as The Council of Europe, have adopted recommendations to the governments of the member states to ensure their population has access to effective means to acquire knowledge of foreign languages.

However, making linguistic predictions is difficult and it is not easy to know which the common international language will be. Without any hesitation, nowadays we can see...

### 1.1. ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

English is said to be the universal, diplomatic and commercial language. For these reasons, it is an essential language all over the world. But there are more reasons:

- a) **Historical reasons:** because of the legacy of British or American imperialism.
- b) **External Economic reasons:** the American dominant economic position.
- c) **Practical reasons:** English is the language of international air traffic control, international maritime, policing emergency services, business and academic conferences and international tourism.
- d) **Intellectual reasons:** Most of the scientific, academic, technological information is in English.

e) **Entertainment reasons:** It is the main language of popular music, home computers, videogames...

All these reasons make us wonder...

## 1.2. WHY LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGE IS NECESSARY?

The necessity of learning languages is questioned by many people who are reluctant to learn a second language. However, there are some answers to defend the opposite idea and protect the need to teach and learn foreign languages. Let us see some of these reasons why learning foreign language is necessary.

- 1) It can be said that foreign language learning is not a luxury but a need in an international world. The path towards a united Europe demands citizens who can communicate. Learning a foreign language in Europe is a criterion of responsible international membership.
- 2) Learning a foreign language promotes understanding, tolerance and respect for the cultural identity, rights and values of others. Language learning broadens our minds, because we encounter other ways of thinking about things.
- 3) Foreign language teaching has an essential role in preparing our pupils to cope with an every-changing environment. They may overcome their insecurity and develop their confidence as they face up to social and personal demands, which are not usually encountered in a Spanish context.
- 4) Success in international commerce is becoming more and more dependent on foreign language learning. All grades and categories of personnel may profit from foreign language learning.
- 5) Finally, we can say that foreign language learning is the only way to fully appreciate your own language.

As we can see, some of the most important reasons have to do with international communication, but this has to do not only with knowing the linguistic aspects of the language, but also with knowing about the culture in which the language is a vehicle for.

## 2. THE INTEREST IN LANGUAGE DIVERSITY BY GETTING TO KNOW A NEW LANGUAGE AND ITS CULTURE.

Generative Transformational Grammar (CHOMSKY) says that there are some elements shared by different languages. Some studies show that bilingual children develop more flexibility of thought. Teachers must use the similarities between two or more languages by sharing the linguistic principles common to these languages. If children have a clear idea about their own language, they will internalize more easily any particular use of structure in another language.

Nevertheless we have to bear in mind we need to teach not only the linguistic but also the culture that every language has within it. Therefore, the language should be a vehicle for knowing about the culture. New materials incorporate aspects as geography, economy, social values that not only make learning more global but also help our students to become more tolerant.

Methods and Approaches for teaching a foreign language have greatly changed in the last decades, and the sociocultural awareness has been a key factor in this evolution. The first methods were centred in the study of linguistic rules, avoiding the study of social and cultural rules and norms or the importance of the language within a specific context. As a result of the role of language as social practice, new ways of looking at the teaching of language and culture have been suggested. Let us see them:

- Establishing a “sphere of interculturality”. To teach culture in the language classroom, it is necessary to reflect upon both the English and the Spanish culture, being this comparison a real educational process.
- Teaching culture as an interpersonal process. The conception of language as social practice implies that meaning depends not only on its linguistic context, but also on the social-cultural background.
- Teaching culture as a difference. It is important to each the differences related to a nationality do not depend only on the culture, but some other factor as: age (generation gap), sex (different between women and men), regional accent or social class have to be taken into account.
- Crossing disciplinary boundaries. The teaching of English language, and therefore its culture too, has to be linked with other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, semiology and not only with grammar.

However, the development of cultural awareness is not an easy task. To facilitate it we should give our pupils regular opportunities to:

- Come into contact with native speakers in this country (English club) and abroad (Project Lingua, pen-friend club).
- Work with authentic materials from the countries of the target language (it may be a good idea to have a permanent link with a school in a foreign country, watching cartoons).
- Consider and discuss the similarities and differences between our pupil’s culture and British, American... culture.

- Identify with the experiences and perspective of British, American... peoples. An effective activity would be to invite learners to role-play emotions.
- Learn the appropriate social conventions (formulaic language).
- Solve cultural problems in specific situations (for example in a restaurant).
- Provide pupils with opportunities to learn and use verbal and non-verbal communication, such as gestures, facial expressions, typical from the target culture.

Nevertheless, I want to present one step on my discussion called present-day English. The exporting of the English language began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the first settlements in North America. English speakers can be divided into three groups:

- **Native speakers**, that is, those speakers whose mother tongue is English.
- Those who have learned it as a **second language** in a world where almost everybody is bilingual, and
- Those who have to use it **for professional, administrative and educational reasons**.

We can point out the appearance of the Standard English and non-standard language, formed by the dialects, argots and jargons. These are called sociocultural or diastratic differences.

It is possible to list some basic characteristics of the English Language:

- **Simplified forms**: there is no number distinction in adjectives.
- **Flexibility**: due to the loss of inflection.
- **Extensive vocabulary**: English takes words from other languages and creates compounds, derivations...
- **Future of English**: geographically it is the most spoken language in the world. It is the language of business, politics, technology, etc.

Now we will see how we can motivate our students to develop their cultural awareness through the integration of the target culture in our class. So we first think of a topic which can be related to some aspect of the foreign culture (most of the topics can), for instance, "travelling around the world". But before going deeper in this topic it is necessary to make clear...

## 2.1. WHAT CULTURE IS

Culture can be defined as a whole of knowledge, lifestyles and customs of a concrete society in an historical moment. It has been widely recognized that culture and language are interrelated and that language is

used as the main medium by means of which culture is expressed.

Therefore, culture and communication are inseparable: culture dictates how communication proceeds, establishes the relationships between the participants and also helps to determine how people encode messages and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed or interpreted.

Let us go on answering the second question: “why culture should be taught”. In order to do so, I will highlight the main goals intended when teaching culture to Primary students:

- To be aware of the existence of different culturally-conditioned behaviours.
- To develop an understanding that social variables (such as age, sex, social class) influence the ways in which people speak and behave
- To be aware of conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture.
- To increase awareness of cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.
- To avoid stereotypes in the target language.
- To stimulate students’ intellectual curiosity about target language, and to encourage empathy towards its people.

Taking those goals in mind, there are...

## 2.2. DIFFERENT WAYS OF TEACHING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

Teachers can propose a specific timetable to work on socio-cultural contents. This should be written into the Course Programming. For example, Halloween, 31<sup>st</sup> October, would be an appropriate date to introduce some American tradition and features, or St. Patrick’s Day, 17<sup>th</sup> March, would be a suitable time to introduce some Irish culture.

English Week is also another specific date that could be used to introduce the social and cultural contents of the different English-speaking communities. If possible, it can imply the participation of the whole school, and every level could collaborate in the set project/s. This event must be included in the Course Programming.

Now we will pay attention on procedures to teach English culture:

- a) **Reading:** we have to bear in mind that the students’ previous knowledge is important in order to plan activities, as well as their own capacities. We can use texts to introduce cultural elements, historic, literary, cartoons, etc.

- b) **Oral expression:** the students can talk about cultural aspects, i.e., giving them photographs showing different aspects of British life and they must say whatever they suggest to them. We can use dramatizations of a dialogue in which we can find cultural features. We can mention the celebration of Christmas, Thanksgiving Day, The American Independence, etc.
- c) **Use of songs:** the popularity of songs makes them a good pedagogic support for the teaching of culture. Songs repeat parts that can be used to know some specific language structures. Songs can be used to improve the linguistic knowledge of structures and vocabulary or illustrate different aspects of everyday life.

We can say that learning a language implies acquiring knowledge about the culture of the target community to participate fully in a conversation at the beginning of a stay in a foreign country. So, teaching should provide the implicit and explicit learning of culture and language varieties through a multi-media approach and an active methodology based on creative use of language. In order to achieve this it is important to use different materials and resources, real or real-alike when possible, such as: radio broadcasts, television, CDs or DVDs, documentaries, films, pictures, and short dialogs dealing with everyday situations. Furthermore, paralinguistic features need to be considered as well as gestures and facial expressions. This makes us think that learners' cultural insights are a must in EFL learning.

But what specific activities can be carried out?

- **Quizzes** are one of the most successful activity types. They can be used to test materials that you have previously taught, but they are also useful in learning new information.
- **Action logs** are notebooks used for written reflection on the activities done during class which also provides useful feedback for the teacher. Students write it up after each class or at the end of each class. By requiring students to evaluate each class activity for interest usefulness, difficulty, and, they must reconsider what they have learnt. Each student also records their target for speaking English, what they think they actually achieve, the names of their discussion partners, and their own comments on the activities. Some students get so interested in the target culture that they write several pages in comments each week.
- **Reformulation.** When students have read an activity or listened to a story, you may like to use reformulation to allow them to check what they have learned and to reinforce it by retelling it to a

partner.

- **Noticing.** As students watch a video or are engaged with some other materials, you can ask them to 'notice' particular features. For example, they could watch a video of a target-culture wedding and note all the differences with their own culture. Asking students to 'notice' gives a focus to the materials by making it into a task, rather than simply passive viewing or listening.
- **Prediction.** As mentioned above, prediction can be a useful tool in quizzes, but it can be equally useful in using almost any materials. Like 'noticing', prediction can engage the students more actively. For example, when you are telling a story, you can stop at a certain point and ask the students to predict how it will continue. Or, when you are giving out a reading for homework, first give the title of the reading and ask students to predict what they will learn. This will force them to review their existing knowledge of the topic and raise their curiosity about whether their prediction is correct or not.

To conclude, learning a foreign language is a necessity in a society that tends to remove language barriers and promotes international relationships at social, cultural, professional and political levels. According to the LOMCE, some of the competences to be developed in Primary Education are Social and civic competences, Cultural awareness and expressions and Linguistic communication, which are directly related to culture. Both the Royal Decree 126/2014 and the subsequent Decree 82/2014 establish that learning a foreign language implies knowing about its different speaking communities. This information, if properly oriented from school, will bring about an interest in learning and acquiring knowledge about other cultures and establishing connections with other people, speakers or learners of that language, favouring respect and integration. Taking the previous idea in mind, we can say that through the knowledge of foreign languages, not only English but also other ones, our students will learn also about other cultures, being aware of different ways of behaviour and also different ways of life. With this, we can make that our students develop an attitude of respect towards other languages and cultures and, in this way, we will be educating them for a more open and tolerant world.

### Sources

Apart from the legal references named during the exposition, I have also considered the information contained in:

**Brewster, J., Ellis, G. & Girard, D.** (1991): *The Primary English Teacher's Guide*. Penguin, London.

**Halliwell, S.** (1992): *Teaching English in the Primary Classroom*. Longman, London, 1992.

Harmer, J. (2007): *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Longman. 4<sup>th</sup> edition.

