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CULTURE LEARNING AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

The scientific study of communication across cultures is a relatively new area of research and one that holds much promise both in terms of language learning and, more generally, in terms of intercultural communication. At the base of intercultural understanding there is a recognition of the ways in which two cultures resemble one another as well as the ways in which they differ. General discussions and theories regarding cultural differences are necessary for consideration of specific cultures in their relationship to the target culture, and the one without the other is like a river without a current. The comparison of other cultures with the language being taught opens great possibilities for the teacher and provides a basis for better understanding of persons from other backgrounds, as well as supplying new insights into approaches to teaching a second language.

By culture we mean a shared background (for example, national, ethnic, religious) resulting from a common language and communication style, customs, beliefs, attitudes, and values. "Culture" in the present article does not refer to art, music, literature, food, clothing styles, and so on. It refers to the informal and often hidden patterns of human interactions, expressions, and viewpoints that people in one culture share. The hidden nature of culture can be compared to an iceberg, most of which is hidden underwater. Like the iceberg, much of the influence of culture on an individual cannot be seen. The part of culture that is exposed is not always that which creates cross-cultural difficulties; the hidden aspects of culture have significant effects on behaviour and on interactions with others. Cross-cultural communication includes communication (verbal and nonverbal) between people from different cultures; communication that is influenced by cultural values, attitudes, and behaviour;

the influence of culture on people's reactions and responses to each other. Verbal communication means spoken communication, including the use of words and intonation to convey meaning. Effective communication in another culture means knowing both the language and the culture. Any study of a culture must look to the behaviour and values of the majority to form its observations and theories; it would be a rare culture indeed that had no exceptions. Making presumptions about a member of a particular group from a knowledge of his/her "culture" is a risky business, yet that knowledge can serve as a guide to better understanding in the effort to learn more about an individual. Only after coming to know, understand, and appreciate something of other cultures one can realize the importance of providing cultural clues to assist the language learner in a new environment and to recognize what values and behaviour patterns of the new culture the learner has already acquired.

Foreign language learning presupposes culture learning which means gaining knowledge and skills. It is adapting to a different style of life and people in a way that is possible for *you* to do. The gain that comes from successful culture learning is the ability to communicate comfortably with people in your own culture and people in another culture. Culture learning, like language learning, is adding to what you already have. When you learn a second language, you do not lose or forget your first. You are able to talk to *more* people. With culture learning, you are able to communicate with and understand a group of people who may have beliefs, behaviour, and a communication style very different from your own. If you can accept this point of view, then you don't have to feel that you are losing your cultural identity, i.e. the part of you that is influenced and shaped by your culture. Instead, you are gaining ways of understanding and communicating with people from different cultures. People use cultural knowledge and beliefs to understand their own experience and to guide their own actions and behaviour. When people share a culture, this generally means that they have a shared language and communication style as well as shared customs, beliefs, attitudes, and values. This shared knowledge is learned and is passed on from generation to generation.

When we meet people from other cultures, we cannot see all the ways that their cultures have influenced them. This is because culture is like an iceberg; the only part of it you see is the tip. You don't see the rest. Most of the iceberg is deep within the ocean just as much of culture is deep within people. We can more easily understand a person from another culture if we try to understand the hidden parts of culture. To do this, it is necessary to know how a culture is different from one's own and how it has influenced people in ways that are not obvious. And this is very essential in the process of both foreign language learning and teaching. It is also important to remember, however, that fluency in a language does not *guarantee* perfect communication all the time. Even two people who speak the same language can have difficulty. Learning to communicate well with people from other cultures involves becoming aware of the hidden part of culture.

Culture learning goes *hand in hand* with language learning. With language learning, you don't just learn about the language. You learn to speak the language. With culture learning, you don't just learn about a culture. You learn how to cope with cultural differences and you learn how to communicate comfortably with people in another culture.