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# GAINING CULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH THE GLOTTODRAMA PROJECT

Methodological  
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article

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## Abstract

*In a world characterized by globalization and mobility understanding cultures and communicating with people of different cultures has become significantly important. As cultural competence is part of communicative competence, integrating culture into language learning has become a must in education. Culture helps learners to be culturally competent and communicate efficiently in different societies. The European Glottodrama project run by EuroEd Foundation Iasi initiated an innovative language teaching methodology. The language course combining drama and language techniques with a very strong cultural component was applied to a group of 20 international students from the University of Medicine in Iasi studying Romanian as a foreign language. According to the Glottodrama method, the cultural element is very important as a profound understanding of a dramatic text means presenting culture in action. The article highlights the learners' opinions and attitudes towards the role of culture in foreign language learning and some of the activities designed to develop cultural competence.*

## Introduction

Learning a foreign language goes beyond producing grammatically correct sentences: it means speaking and behaving appropriately and effectively in another society, understanding its beliefs and values. This brings the role that culture has in foreign language learning into discussion.

Although the term “culture” has been given a lot of definitions, culture is commonly agreed to be a system of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, customs, or behaviors that are in use in a society at a certain time.

In the present-day world there is a growing need for cultural competence as linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to be competent in that language (Krasner, 1999).

People travel a lot for different purposes: study, work, business or pleasure. With globalization and people mobility it is inevitable that one needs a certain level of intercultural knowledge and competence to be able to survive in new cultural and educational contexts.

Cultural competence is not an automatic result of getting information about the foreign language culture; it requires a conscious effort (Fenner, 2006).

Culture should be integrated in classes so as to raise students’ awareness about the differences between cultures (Tavares&Cavalcanti, 1996) and also help them to be culturally competent and communicate efficiently in the society of the target language. Culture should be used as an important element in language classrooms (Tomalin&Stempleski, 1995).

Since language and culture mutually influence and shape each other, it is difficult to separate the learning and teaching of a foreign language from learning and teaching its culture.

## Principles of culture teaching/learning

The Glottodrama project (<http://www.glottodrama.eu>) initiated a foreign language course with a very strong cultural component. Several principles have been followed. Firstly, students are successful language learners only if cultural elements are included in the curriculum, so culture was incorporated in language learning. Secondly, learners need to engage actively, body and mind, in cultural learning. In this respect, facilitating their access to knowledge held by the members of the foreign culture is very

important so that they can adjust to new ways of routine, behavior and communication. Cultural experiences help students get better insights and better understanding of the two cultures. Students should be aware of the relations between cultures because culture is best learned through comparison between the target and the learners’ own culture. The teaching of culture in the course includes, therefore, knowledge, values, behaviour and skills (Tomalin&Stempleski, 1995).

## The Glottodrama project

The Glottodrama project makes full use of national and international applications of drama techniques and principles to foreign language teaching and learning. The Glottodrama method enhances students’ motivation to learn by giving equal chances to acting and language techniques: it turns the class into a theatre company; communication is no longer a mere exchange of information, but more like social interaction and negotiation with definite purposes whose realization relies on verbal and nonverbal solutions alike. The cultural element is very important as the profound understanding of a dramatic text means presenting culture in action perceived both explicitly and implicitly (Nofri, 2009).

## Glottodrama project principles

According to Glottodrama principles, learning a foreign language is “learning by doing”. Linguistic competence is mostly improved by active and oral practice. Only by being involved mind and body in a global and holistic way in learning do students master the target language. In order to achieve this goal an interdisciplinary solution was suggested: the cooperation of two teachers (language teaching and drama), both of whom work on the communicative performance of their students. Paralinguistic elements in communication are taken into account.

A linguistic act, as a communicative act, is complex and its efficiency depends on students’ ability to combine and interrelate different sign codes: linguistic, paralinguistic (suprasegmental and intonational aspects), kinesic (expression and gestures), proxemic (posture and special position), and so on (Colibaba et al., 2013a).

Linguistic competence becomes communicative competence when the learner uses the language in a wide range of fields,

from the personal to the social, improving his abilities to interact with other people, and engaging in social and cultural experiences beyond the classroom (Nofri, 2009).

### **The Glottodrama course in action**

The 90-hour Glottodrama course aimed at gradually developing both language and acting skills by involving students in a wide range of activities such as dramatization, role-play, story-telling, monologues, and improvisation (Colibaba et al, 2013a).

The course first trained the medical students into acting by familiarizing them with a wide range of drama techniques through micro-texts which were based on dialogues between doctors and their patients in order to meet students' language needs. Special attention was given to the relation between gesture and word. Socializing activities whereby students got to know each other and work as a group were strongly encouraged. A very relaxed and safe atmosphere was created throughout the experiment and in the final section of the project the students and their teachers prepared a performance (script, acting, costumes, gestures, lights, music) in front of an audience (other university students, teachers, friends and acquaintances). This final performance was filmed and a copy of the film was given to the students together with their certificates to remind them of the time spent with their group (Colibaba et al, 2013a).

The classroom where the course took place had a "stage" area where participants, teachers and students sat in a circle and performed the plays. The classroom also had a "grammar corner" with grammar textbooks and dictionaries for the students to consult (Colibaba et al., 2013b).

The course had 26 teaching units with the following structure:

Presentation of the textual or situational input: students were presented a short text, usually a dialogue.

Performance: students tried to act the dialogue.

Linguistic reflection (grammar corner): students explored the text by consulting grammar books and dictionaries in the grammar corner under the supervision of the teacher.

Actor Studio (rehearsal): students performed the texts which were video recorded with a view to discussing and evaluating students' performance.

Back to the performance: students performed the text again taking into consideration the previous experience and its lessons (Nofri, 2009).

The target group was made up of foreign students from several countries studying medicine at the School of Medicine, all interested in learning Romanian as a foreign language. A first test was administered to assess their knowledge of Romanian and also to highlight their motivation and need to learn the language. According to the test findings, being a student in a Romanian university environment seems to raise interest in learning our language; moreover some of them were even interested in getting a certificate of linguistic competence. A profile of the students interested in the course was created: students studying medicine in Romania who need to have a command of the basic kit (vocabulary/ structures) in everyday Romanian as well as in medicine. We involved our students in a wide range of activities with a view to working on and improving both their acting and their language skills. Throughout the whole course we often filmed lesson sequences in order to allow the students and teachers to watch, reflect, and comment upon the performances (Colibaba et al, 2013c).

The study centers round a questionnaire administered to the students who participated in the Glottodrama project. The questionnaire highlighted students' opinions and attitudes towards the role of culture in foreign language learning and the activities designed to develop cultural competence as part of the Glottodrama project.

### **Questionnaire results and analysis**

The questionnaire we administered had three parts: in Part 1 the students were asked to define the role of culture in foreign language learning; in Part 2 students had to give their opinions about the benefits they experienced from the cultural activities, and in part 3 they had to express their attitude towards the cultural activities carried out during the Romanian language course. Students' comments on each item of the questionnaire were always encouraged.

In the first part of the questionnaire the participants were asked to define the role culture plays in the learning a foreign language. The following table shows the results:

Question	Yes/ No	Number of students	%
Culture plays an important role in learning a foreign language.	Yes	18	90%
Linguistic and cultural differences may lead to misunderstandings in communication.	Yes	17	85%
Learning about a foreign culture can change students' attitude towards their own culture.	Yes	14	70%
Learning about a foreign culture can change students' attitude towards the target culture.	Yes	18	90%
Learning a foreign language should integrate learning about its culture.	Yes	20	100%
Teaching culture enhances students' motivation to learn.	Yes	20	100%
Language and culture helps learners improve their language communication skills.	Yes	20	100%
Raising students' cultural awareness should be done gradually from the very beginning of the language course.	Yes	19	95%
Knowledge of target culture lowers students' inhibition when using the target language.	Yes	20	100%

Most respondents agreed that culture plays an important role in language learning because it enhances students' motivation, appeals to students' curiosity, stirs their interest, engages use of mind and body in their learning and makes learning more complex by providing a concrete context.

"Culture makes language learning more concrete because it gives language a real context. I can associate abstractions and codes with palpable symbols, images, places or people. It makes learning easy and fun."

All students stated that far from separating culture from language, the former should be integrated in language classes as an essential part of language learning. Culture should be part of the language course from the beginning, in a progressive way, depending on the students' needs. Perceiving culture as an incentive, not a barrier in communication, most students agreed that both linguistic and cultural mistakes impede communication. Still, cultural misunderstanding is the more serious as it often leads to conflicts, even lawsuits.

"We should know what is appropriate and what is not. Otherwise, we can get into trouble even if we speak fluently and our grammar is perfect."

"As doctors we know that understanding cultural differences is essential in our relationship with the patient. You can benefit from a real dialogue with your patient with no linguistic barriers. This helps the patient get and receive the best medicine and care, and also protects the doctor against any malpractice claims."

Most students agreed that studying the culture of the target language puts things into perspective and adds value to their knowledge about their own culture and the target language culture.

"Cultural elements enrich one's experience both intellectually and emotionally. I don't agree with the idea that studying culture can contribute to losing one's cultural identity."

All students agreed that culture enhances motivation and improves their language skills.

"I really liked the atmosphere and all cultural activities were fun and made learning really memorable. They appealed to my curiosity and I found interesting to see that there are so many cultural and linguistic solutions to the same situation. Creativity has no boundaries!"

In Part 2 of the questionnaire the students were asked to express their opinions about the

benefits they had from the cultural activities run throughout the course; the benefits were related to the knowledge, attitudinal and skill dimensions of cultural competence. Experiential activities informed students and raised their awareness about the history and geography of Romania, the daily life of the people as well as their values and beliefs; they also promoted open and tolerant attitudes towards other cultures and encouraged reflection, understanding of cultures, ability to empathize and handle cultural situations. The activities carried out were meant to supply students with information and also to encourage comparisons and discussions of lifestyles across countries. The activities prepared students to manage situations they would encounter while staying in Romania. Students had to gather information about a doctor's day/ how people spend their free time and present their findings to the group; they were asked to speak about their perception of a habit or a concept (what people do when going to a party in Romania and in their own country/ the concept of time in several situations: meeting, exam, concert, party, wedding, class/ space). Such activities helped students evaluate common prejudices and even change opinions about the target culture.

For most students (80%) the activities providing information about daily life and routines and fostering the ability to handle intercultural contact situations were essential. This means that students see culture learning as a way to increase familiarity with aspects of the daily life of the people who speak the target language so that they can handle any such situation. They stated that they spoke from their own experience as foreigners living in another culture of which they did not know almost anything. Lack of knowledge and of skills in managing everyday situations deprived them of everyday comforts and often made them anxious.

"Sometimes I desperately needed to order a taxi and I did not know how to make that phone call. I felt as if I had a disability I could not cope with. You can imagine how great I felt when I did that after one of our sessions. I simply applied into practice what I have learned."

The second benefit of cultural activities (60%) lies in enabling students to go through a variety of cultural experiences within a safe classroom environment. Students thought

highly of role play and dialogues which provided them with plenty of such hands-on experiences. "They gave us free and safe access to culture so that we could experiment without any risks."

Developing intercultural awareness and sensitivity by understanding the target culture while exploring the depths of their native culture was another benefit 34% of the students mentioned in their questionnaires. Students appreciated the reflection sessions which encouraged exchange of ideas and information about each other's cultures. They all agreed that these moments helped them extend their knowledge and information about the history and geography of different cultures, while also developing their openness and tolerance towards other cultures.

"It goes without saying that the more you know about people the better you understand them; you find a reason for their behavior; you know why certain things happen in a certain way; its culture competence isn't it?"

All students agreed that embedding cultural elements in the language course and introducing and practicing them by means of drama techniques has lowered the inhibition and embarrassment they have always felt to be a part of their foreign language experience.

"I feel comfortable now; I am aware that I know what is appropriate and I won't place myself in an embarrassing situation. I know that I don't have the necessary vocabulary to express myself but I have other means: gesture or facial expressions. It is like acting."

The findings show that all three dimensions of intercultural competence were covered by respondents who ranked the knowledge dimension over the attitudinal and skills dimensions.

Part 3 of the questionnaire reflects students' attitude towards the cultural activities carried out during the course.

Question	Yes/ No	Number of students	%
Did you like working in pairs or groups with students from different countries? Was communication genuine?	Yes	20	100%

Did you find cultural activities useful?	Yes	20	100%
Did you like discussing cultural issues with your peers and tutors?	Yes	19	95%
Did you like role play and dialogues?	Yes	20	100%
Did you like learning the foreign language through acting?	Yes	20	100%
Did you like watching the video clips and reflecting on students' performance?	Yes	17	85%

The results show that all students liked interacting with their peers and found the activities (role play and dialogues) very useful because they offered good tips and hands-on experience regarding efficient interaction in real life. Such activities helped them use the language more efficiently and also stimulated their language learning and creativity. Most students were of the opinion that communication was genuine, not based on reproducing lines by rote. Instead, students were required to make full use of the verbal and non-verbal ways of communication they knew at that moment. That is why the use of improvisation during the course was highly appreciated. Students said that at first it was difficult because they felt, as it were, left on their own, without any support. In time, they realized that everything was part of the overall strategy which actually helped them speak the language and cope with situations. They also noticed that improvisation impacted favorably their creativity and independence as language learners.

"I felt I learned everything in context as a whole. The message was the most important issue. I have never felt limited to say the exact lines of the dialogue. I was not supposed to reproduce the exact words: the whole message counted. So I felt encouraged to use

improvisation, which in fact was based on my knowledge. I felt great."

Students enjoyed acting. At the beginning of the course all of them complained about feeling uneasy and perceiving the foreign language as an "invisible mask" or a "bottle-neck" that hindered their self-expression (Nofri, 2009). The final goal of the Glottodrama method was to take off their invisible mask. "I love acting: I feel so free and words come easily to my mind; acting makes words stick in my mind!"

They particularly liked the studio sessions when watching their own performance often stimulated vivid talk on cultural differences. For instance, some students noticed that there were different cultural perceptions of space they had not been aware of. Personal space seemed to differ a lot depending on each student's culture. Therefore, space was a value we had to consider in designing the course activities. Students said that video observations also raised their awareness about the importance of nonverbal ways of communication, especially body language (facial expressions: eye contact, smile, gestures: hands, fingers, arms folded/ by the side, posture: how people stand or sit, proximity: how close people stand to each other, dress: how people dress, formal or informal). Some of them noticed that there were some differences between gestures from culture to culture.

"I often use body language when I speak with Romanians because I don't have the necessary vocabulary, so I supplement it with gestures. But I have to pay attention to it because there are some differences. It is good that I have learned the significance of body language here, at the course."

### Conclusions

The Glottodrama project involves spheres largely neglected so far and it is getting closer to achieving an efficient communication in another language (Nofri, 2009). The results of the Glottodrama project have shown that communicative competence relies on intense language use as part of social and cultural experiences in varied fields ranging from personal to social. Since cultural competence is part of communicative competence, cultural elements should be integrated into language learning from the onset. Language learning is

enriched with additional values and meanings when incorporating cultural elements.

Culture is a strong incentive which clearly stimulates students' motivation (McKay, 2000). The Glottodrama project has showed that cultural activities such as acting out, dancing or role playing greatly appeal to students. They also raise students' interest in other countries and peoples.

With mobility becoming a key feature in today's world, learning foreign languages has never been so important. Students' level of communicative competence (where intercultural knowledge and behaviour are included) should ensure their survival and confidence irrespective of the culture and educational context they find themselves in. In this respect, their perception and understanding of the new cultures, as well as of their own, plays a vital role.

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