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S2 lecture 4: Common approaches in Teaching culture

In language teaching, an approach has come to mean “the theory, philosophy and principles underlying a particular set of teaching practices (Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics 2002). However, in the literature of teaching culture, only a few of the approaches seem to constitute a theory or a philosophy. In the history of teaching culture different approaches can be noticed. They can be classified in different ways. In very broad terms, they can be divided into two: Approaches that focus only (or mostly) on the culture of the country whose language is studied (the mono-cultural approach) and those which are based on comparing learners’ own and the other culture (the comparative approach).

The mono-cultural approach

It is one way flow of cultural information that focuses on the target language culture. It has been considered as being inadequate as it doesn’t account for learners’ understanding of their own culture. It follows the foreign cultural approach that aims at developing individual’s communicative and cultural competence.

comparative approach

The comparative approach, on the other hand, emphasizes that foreign culture should be related to learners’ own culture. Buttjes and Byram (1991 cited in Edginton 2000 , p. 136) claim that instead of providing learners with “a one-way flow of cultural information” they should be encouraged to reflect on their own and foreign culture. The comparative approach draws on the learner’s own knowledge, beliefs and values which form a basis for successful communication with members of the other culture. learners need to know their own culture before stepping into another one. “For learners to deny their own culture is to deny their own being” (Byram 1994 , p. 43). While the essence of the comparative approach is to provide a double perspective, it does not mean that learners need to evaluate which culture is better. It is a method of teaching culture in which it considers the learners’ own culture and the foreign culture as well . In other words , it emphasizes on teaching and comparing the mother culture with the target culture .

The comparative approach does involve evaluation but not in terms of comparison with something which is better, but in terms of improving what is familiar. Comparison makes the strange, the other, familiar, and makes the familiar, the self, strange – and therefore easier to re-consider. (Byram and Planet: 2000 , p. 189) .The comparative approach may begin either with the strange or the familiar. Traditionally, the primary focus in foreign language classes has been given to the other culture. Nevertheless, some authors emphasise the need to deal with the familiar first and then move to the strange. Comparison gives learners a new perspective of their own language and culture and opportunity to question

their “taken-for-granted nature” (Byram 1998: 6). Through comparison, learners discover both similarities and differences of their own and other cultures. This, in turn, can lead to increased knowledge, understanding and acceptance. Risager (1998, p. 243- 252) describes four approaches to the teaching of culture, two of which the intercultural and multicultural include a considerable elements of comparison .

The use & significance of the comparative approach

It answers the question of how can the teacher teach or compare cultures .

- Teach students about traditions and customs .
- Explain the history and geography .
- Compare lifestyle including food , clothing , names , music and art .
- Share cultural differences and embrace their nuances .
 - It develops students’ cultural awareness and enhances their sense of identity because they get a better understating of their culture and others' culture .
- Students become more open minded since they are exposed to a variety of opinions and cultural background.
- It encourages students to feel safe and confident .
- It increases the learners' knowledge , understanding and acceptance.
- It prepares learners for a diverse work place .

All of the above can be taught through classroom interaction , discussion , workshop , pair work and group work .

Intercultural approach

- It is based on comparing learners’ culture & the target language culture
- The aim is to develop intercultural communicative competence
- It acts like a mediator between the two cultures

Multicultural approach

It refers to the assertion that dissimilar and several cultures coexist within a single culture or community. Today, this type of society approximately prevails in all nations of the world; they comprise a wide spectrum of varied ethnicities and nationalities, religions, arts, languages, traditions and philosophies, and diverse cultural backgrounds as well. All the individuals get to care for agreeable intercommunicative life and unity along with unconditional endorsement. It is confirmed that cultures are not monolithic. they should pertain to a balanced, equal, and anti-racist framework. Teaching in a multicultural classroom may be considered a problematic mission to execute. Teachers need to construct a classroom environment for ethnically diverse learners by incorporating the different cultural characteristics of their learners into the instructional materials and content without preference since they all share one common goal; because the chosen materials also should mirror cultural diversity that exists in the language classroom.