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French culture in textbooks for French as a foreign language

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Psychologists emphasise that the importance of textbooks in the development of a child is because using textbooks is one of the first independent intellectual activities undertaken by a child. The role of the textbook is not only to create and form the culture of thinking, but also the culture of using books and other sources of information. The textbook helps to enlarge knowledge, as well as in the search for new information and experience, the application of everything that is learned to everyday life, and the realisation of independent products (Plut, 2000).

If we know how important textbooks are for a child's education and the development, and how much they can influence motivation for learning (for good or ill), we should pay more attention to the creation of better textbooks - more modern, attractive, original, and interesting. It is important in every school subject, but possibly most important for foreign languages because the characteristics of modern world civilisation are openness to the world, understanding of others, tolerance and respect of human rights, and these characteristics should be present in foreign language textbooks.

The aim of foreign language teaching/learning is to make it possible for the pupil to identify the difference between two national cultures and to facilitate his communication with members of another culture. Today the presence of a foreign culture (and how, and how much it is presented) is one of the most important criteria for judging the quality of foreign language textbooks. Teaching culture within teaching a foreign language, apart from its educational value, has an important pedagogical aim: a pupil learns perception, tolerance and understanding of others, and also develops a better notion of self and her/his own culture.

The aim of our research concerning the elements of French culture in Serbian and French textbooks used for teaching/learning French was to help Serbian authors improve their textbooks and influence the education of future foreign language teachers in the field of cultural studies. Our research included all those Serbian and French textbooks for teaching French as a foreign language which were used in our primary and secondary schools from 1990 to 2000. We were interested in the similarities and differences between the Serbian and French textbooks.

How much of the elements of French culture are included in texts, exercises and evaluation tests at different levels of teaching/learning French as a foreign language?

French culture in the Serbian-produced books is mainly shown in conventional ways: natural beauties, the sights of Paris, reproduction of works of art, something about contemporary life. It cannot be said that elements of French culture are not present in our textbooks, but what is there is not sufficiently diverse, original, contemporary, interesting, attractive or used in the right way: often these aspects appear separately, at the end of teaching units. On the other hand, the French textbooks, although more contemporary and more attractive, are very often less systematic in presenting elements of French culture, lacking clear progression in learning. Neither contain enough elements of French culture

in exercises, and in both of them French culture is more present at the higher levels of learning.

There is no less evaluation of knowledge about French culture in Serbian textbooks, but the forms of these evaluations are different. In Serbian textbooks, knowledge is most often tested by connected authors and their work and listing, whereas the French textbooks offer multiple choice exercises. In Serbian textbooks questions are related to history, art and other forms of human activities and creativity, whereas the newer French textbooks feature the everyday life of French people in France. This clearly shows tendency of French authors to leave history aside, as well as an attitude to methods of teaching French language and culture according to which a real knowledge of French culture means recognising everyday customs. It is our view that in both sets of texts there should be more possibility of checking knowledge via short and versatile texts. The *European Language Portfolio* could serve to do this: it would take into account all language and intercultural competencies, and it represents the instrument for promoting pluri-linguism and pluri-culturalism.

Are the elements of French culture portrayed representative more of the past of France or of modern everyday life?

French textbooks are more contemporary, with less so-called cultural information in a narrow sense, and with more practical, utilitarian content. Scientific-technical and technological innovations are described in French textbooks; concern about preserving the environment appears, and the benefits of belonging to Europe as a wide, rich and interesting cultural community are stressed. There are more similarities between Serbian textbooks and old French textbooks in which history and getting acquainted with cultural and historical heritage was more emphasised: we do not consider this inappropriate, because the general culture of pupils is widened, and the danger of our pupils gaining an incorrect impression of close similarities of the countries of Western Europe is avoided.

Which are the topics and the types of texts?

It may not be possible to answer precisely the question of what constitutes a 'real' image of French culture, or of what is French culture. It is obvious however that in Serbian textbooks the most frequent elements of French culture which appear are Paris and Cote d'Azur, and that French textbooks insist on globalisation, the future, protection of the environment, money and the consumer society. It would be helpful if topics in all these textbooks included more different everyday activities (in addition to school, entertainment, holidays, travel etc., common household problems, a working day in the office, etc.).

As far as the types of texts are concerned, in Serbian textbooks the most often used are original and adapted non-literary written texts (from newspapers, very often from *Le Monde*), followed by adapted literary texts (particularly descriptive ones), didactic texts (written by the author of a textbook) and 'textbook's texts' (written by the author of a textbook with the aim of providing some information or widening the knowledge of the pupil). Dialogues are rare and long, oral speech is grammatically formal, with language reminiscent of tourist booklets - this is particularly true of the older textbooks. In the French textbooks the most frequent text is original non-literary written text (taken not only from the Parisian press) and especially dialogues (natural, direct, practical)

conversations in everyday situations). The culture of Francophone countries is rarely mentioned in any of these textbooks, the exception being French textbooks for advanced level.

How is French culture illustrated and what is the technical quality of the textbooks?

The technical quality of the French textbooks is incomparably better: this is partly due to the different financial situations appertaining in the two countries, but is also influenced by lower publication quality and the existence of a publishing monopoly in Serbia.

The number of illustrations of French culture in Serbian textbooks is not small (although it is regrettable that there are a lot of drawings, which are culturally neutral) but they require modernisation and improved technical presentation. The illustrations are slanted towards the past, which may be because the textbooks do not present France as a combination of past and present, and they are not always sufficiently well associated with the topic of the text or unit. The French textbooks show scenes from contemporary everyday life, and there are also illustrations of both cultural-historical sights and natural beauties.

Is there any approach to the culture of pupils?

In both Serbian and French textbooks the authors insist on making a comparison of French culture with the native culture of the learners. The new French textbooks in particular insist on an intercultural approach: they want the elements of French culture to pervade the whole unit, and not only parts.

The notion of knowing oneself and one's culture through learning about a foreign culture is fundamental for an intercultural approach. In the great majority of Serbian textbooks the approach is still cultural and comparative: it is static and insufficiently effective because this approach describes situations and compares two cultures taken as simple objects, often without real understanding. In contrast to this, the intercultural approach is dynamic. This approach takes into consideration changes and development, conceives cultures as mobile and changeable, talks about fragments of culture, and not about global and stable cultural entities. Basically this is the difference between the comparative and intercultural methods: the comparative approach only compares two cultures, but the intercultural approach insists on an understanding of native culture so that pupils are better able to understand the foreign culture, and vice versa.

Louis Porcher speaks about a programme of foreign language teaching in Europe prepared by Council of Europe and by the Commission for Pedagogy: the intention of the programme is to promote the notion of interculturality as a necessary factor in the teaching processes of multinational societies. The basic ideas of this programme are:

- all societies are now multicultural: homogenous cultures no longer exist;
- every culture is as valuable as any other, has its own values, referential systems and rules;
- learning always takes place in a multicultural context and the foreign language teaching process must take that fact into consideration;

- contacts between cultures must be established because these contacts where cultural exchanges occur and where reciprocal dynamics and mutual respect for both cultures are formed (Šotra, 2001).

Henry Besse suggests that in the intercultural perception following proceedings these steps should be followed:

- confronting pupils, even beginners, with facts concerning a foreign language and culture which can be unusual and strange, in order to motivate and develop their interest and curiosity (the facts should be authentic and given in context, not artificially separated);
- encouraging pupils to express hypotheses on interpretation of given data either verbally or non-verbally (through drawing, mimes, etc.). These hypotheses are individualised and they show pupils' understanding, non-understanding and particularly misunderstanding of the elements of foreign culture. They also reveal to the teacher a pupil's habits from his/her own language and culture, and stereotypes and notions the pupil has about the foreign culture they are learning. Some of these hypotheses are accepted by the teacher, and some of them are rejected, with an explanation of why that is done. This encourages pupils to be more precise and to give different views of the preliminary hypotheses, thus becoming aware of the language and cultural sieve which had an effect on their creating (Besse, 1984).

These attitudes are both contrastive and cognitive and relatively individualised, because there is no real contact between the two languages and cultures, but between two individuals who are more or less culturally formed and who overlap, acquiring knowledge on foreign culture in relation to their personality and history.

Martine Abdallah-Preteille, Maddalena De Carlo and Geneviève Zarate wrote extensively about the intercultural, but it is our view that the intercultural approach is not sufficiently theoretically founded to form methodical concepts. Very often the requirement for interculturalism is accepted as a requirement for regional and culturally specific conception of the textbook. The concept of intercultural competence has not been discussed sufficiently, and demands for perceptions of intercultural pedagogy and xenology have not been sufficiently understood in method conception.

The work of a teacher and pupil is not sufficient for the realisation of the intercultural: there needs to be connection and coordinated work in other subjects (particularly in other foreign languages), adjustment of programmes and ways of evaluation, and the overcoming of possible institutional obstacles and resistance in some countries (which may be important in specific social-political situations). Zarate, one of the theoreticians who dealt most with this matter some time ago, defined precisely the difference between a 'dialogues of cultures' and an intercultural approach:

- education is more stressed (readiness to accept different value systems) than it is of informative character – the approach is different from contrastive;
- the intercultural approach contains contemplation on foreign and domestic culture and calls for the acceptance of cultural relativity. Its final aim is the construction of personal identity and the acquaintance with domestic culture;

- the intercultural approach can change ways of work in the present didactics of French as a foreign language. There are many problems in a thematic approach to work on cultures, so it would be better that instead of a panoramic study of the society, the very essence of conflicts in a functioning society should be shown (Zarate, 1982).

Getting to know a foreign culture is often accomplished very fast and superficially. The perception of features of a foreign culture should be approached step by step, and identifying marks which distinguish it from the domestic culture should be noted. M. De Carlo (1998) stresses that the term 'intercultural' means interaction, exchange, erasing borders, reciprocity and true solidarity; in this way it means overcoming ethnocentrism in the modern world of many migrations. An intercultural approach is directed against the dominance of the so-called 'big languages' and it tends towards preserving and development of all languages and cultures equally.

There has been a growth of awareness about the need to learn foreign languages and get to know foreign cultures in the countries of European Union over recent years. Different countries are trying to solve this problem in accordance with their special needs and conditions, but all of them have the commitment to integration and the widening of learning foreign languages in almost all school subjects. This sort of pedagogical approach is distinguished by the hope for every school subject to be transferable. Similarly, there are attempts to place the learning of foreign languages within other school subjects, so that in the countries of the EU there are two 'language' classes in which a foreign language is not only a separate teaching subject, but also the means of adapting other teaching content.

Some thirty years ago there were such classes in the experimental school 'Vladislav Ribnikar', and there are even today such ideas and attempts (for example in the Ninth Belgrade Secondary School), although only in relation to French. There are some negotiations between the Ministry of Education and Sport of Serbia and Montenegro and the Ministry of Education in Italy about founding bilingual classes in secondary schools with intensive courses in Italian, with an obligation for five more subjects to be taught in Italian. With the aim of better intercultural upbringing it is believed that at least at the beginners level, there should be integrated teaching of foreign languages: the Teacher Training Faculty at the University of Belgrade is preparing its future primary school teachers for this. We believe that future class teachers will be in a situation to introduce to their little pupils, step by step, intercultural education through the integrated teaching of a foreign language, starting from the first year (age seven) and dealing with diverse teaching contents (not only language).

It is also necessary to point at the need to change the way we educate our teachers of foreign languages. Their education should also be interdisciplinary and far more wide, not only based on literature written in the language they study as is the case currently. This is why curricula of the institutions dealing with the education of foreign language teachers should consider relations between the following:

- thorough studying of the language;
- training in method;
- practical experience in the classroom;
- integrating psychology and pedagogy;

- integrating other subjects from the area of culture (see the conclusions from the Regional symposium about educating foreign language teachers in South-eastern Europe, held in Belgrade: Education of foreign language teachers, 2002).

A better-prepared teacher can reveal and overcome possible faults in the textbooks which s/he uses and achieve better and more successful education of his/her pupils.

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