

## CULTURE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING ON THE EXAMPLE OF EASTER AND CHRISTMAS

### Introduction

This article focuses on teaching English traditions in Polish classrooms, using Easter and Christmas as examples. The main aim of the article is to indicate the relationship between language and culture. The first theoretical part presents various positions on the definition of culture and the second one, practical – two proposals for conducting classes.

The idea of teaching culture is nothing new to second language teachers. Already in the 1990s, teachers started paying attention to teaching activities aimed at showing the connections between language and culture. However, only after Poland's entry into the multilingual and multicultural European Union (2004) the interest in these issues increased [Komorowska, 2017: 105]. Unfortunately, although most teachers consider teaching culture to be important, it remains insubstantial and sporadic in most classrooms due to time constraints and uncertainty about which cultural aspects to teach. Furthermore, the emphasis on standardized language proficiency tests, which primarily assess linguistic skills, often overshadows the importance of cultural understanding.

W. Brembeck wrote that "(...) to know another's language and not his culture is a very good way to make a fluent fool of one's self" (Brembeck, 1997: 14). Therefore, teaching students how to communicate effectively in a foreign language involves much more than acquainting them with new vocabulary and a new grammatical system. Giving them explicit information about cultural differences between their own country and the English-speaking countries can raise their cultural awareness.

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If you really want your students to understand the language, you have to teach culture (...). If you really want your students to understand the language, culture comes naturally [Yang, Chen, 2016: 1131].

### **Definitions of culture**

Since culture is a difficult and ambiguous concept in human and social sciences, there are many ways of defining it. This term derives from the Latin root *colere*, which means ‘to tend’, or ‘to cultivate’. Thus, culture was originally a noun of process geared to describing the fostering of the growth of something, especially a plant or an animal. During the next centuries this term was applied to development of human beings, especially the mind or intellect of an individual (Oxford English Dictionary, 1978: 1247).

Culture, in the strict anthropological sense, is passed down from generation to generation. People think, feel, and behave in certain ways because of what others within their culture have taught them. Cultural norms influence how people think, eat, dress, work, interpret natural phenomena such as the weather or the transition from day to night, spend their leisure time, communicate, and engage in other fundamental aspects of human interaction. In simple terms, ‘culture’ means training, development, and refinement of mind, tastes, manners and behaviours (Oxford English Dictionary, 1978: 1248).

We learn through imitation and role modelling. Culture is the process by which the younger generation learns behaviours and values from the older generation. However, culture modifies itself in this process, as social norms are changeable. During this shift, some elements of traditions prevail while others weaken providing room for new cultural behaviours that are more adaptable to contemporary society. Things not acceptable in last generation’s culture might be acceptable today. Thus, traditions exist in a constant state of change from generation to generation (Byram, 1989: 80).

Anthropologists define culture as ‘the whole way of life of a people or group. Also H. N. Seelye defines it as “a broad concept that embraces all aspects of the life of man” (Seelye, 1984: 47). In this context, culture includes all the social practices that bond a group of people together and distinguish them from others’ (Montgomery and Reid-Thomas, 1994: 5). According to D. Peck, “culture is all the accepted and patterned ways of behaviour of a given people” (Peck, 1998: 92). It is that facet of human life that is learned by individuals as a result of belonging to a particular group; it is the part of learned behaviour that is shared with others. This concept includes not only a group’s way of thinking, feeling, and acting, but also the internalised patterns for doing certain things in certain ways. Culture also includes the physical manifestations of a group, as seen in

their achievements and contributions to civilisation. It is our social legacy, as contrasted with our organic heredity, and it regulates our lives at every turn.

L. Samovar and R. Porter define culture as

(...) the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving (Samovar and Porter, 1981: 78).

To gain a better understanding of this broad concept, educators often distinguish between *high culture* (or capital C culture) and *low culture* (or small C culture). *High culture* includes the humanistic manifestations and contributions of a foreign culture: art, music, literature, painting, architecture, technology, and politics, while *low culture* includes all aspects of daily life, such as the behavioural patterns or lifestyles of the people: when and what they eat; how they make a living; the attitudes they express towards friends and members of their families; and which expressions they use to show approval or disapproval. (Bandura 2000: 56, 59; Tomalin and S. Stempelski 1996: 6). N. Brooks (1983: 210) calls it *formal culture* and *deep culture*.

H. Douglas-Brown (1994: 47) claims that two meanings of culture are of major importance to teachers: 1. Culture as ‘everything in human life’ (Hearthstone or “little-c” culture, culture BBV: BELIEFS, BEHAVIOUR, VALUES); 2. Culture as ‘the best in human life restricted to the elitists’ (Olympian or “big-C” culture, culture MLA: MMUSIC, LLITERATURE, AART of the country).

Culture is not static, it changes over time. All cultures are constantly evolving, albeit at different speeds, in response to contact with ideas, technologies, and practices of other cultures, and to innovations that may arise within the culture. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century people do not longer see the world as having only one culture, which individuals and groups possess on varying quantities. Rather, we see the world as containing multiple cultures. The National Cultural Strategy uses the broad definition, developed by UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies (Stockholm, 30 March-2 April 1998):

In this widest sense, culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of human beings, value system, traditions and beliefs (Adams, 1998) <http://www.wwd.org/policy/Stockholm.html>).

In other words, culture includes spiritual beliefs, actual physical properties, people's emotions and thoughts. It includes basic human rights, people's values and traditions.

J. Childrens and G. Hentzi indicate that culture has a very broad meaning, and it is quite difficult to define it.:

In contemporary theoretical and critical discourse the term balances between two distinct meanings. In the social sciences, especially archaeology and anthropology, culture usually refers to the material production of society. In history, literary studies, however, the term refers to system of signification and the production of meaning. The line between these two uses of the word is not always clearly drawn (Childrens and Hentzi 1995: 66).

Regardless of how culture is defined – as the material objects and practices of a society (material culture) or as a system of shared meanings, beliefs and values that shape how people understand and interact with the world (system of significance and production of meaning) – teacher's aim is to show students that different does not mean worse. Teachers should help students grasp and accept those dissimilarities while trying not to disregard their own cultural values.

### **The importance of intercultural education**

Linguists and anthropologists have long recognized that the forms and uses of a given language reflect the cultural values of the society in which it is spoken. Linguistic competence is not sufficient for successful communication as culture is integrated in any communicative activity (Krasner, 1999: 81). Learners need to become aware, e.g. of the culturally appropriate ways to address people, express gratitude, make requests, and agree or disagree with someone. They should know that behaviours and intonation patterns that are appropriate in their own speech community might be perceived differently by native speakers. They need to understand that for communication to be successful language use must be associated with other culturally appropriate behaviours. Hence, students will master communication in a foreign language only when they learn both its linguistic and cultural norms (Peterson and Coltrane: 2003).

Being a teacher means to teach pupils about the world. One of the main teacher's tasks is to show and explain to children differences between people and countries, to help them understand that other people may have different standards of behaviour, which do not make them live unhappier lives.

Culture (traditions, customs) shapes our view of the world. And language is the most representative element in any culture. Knowledge of the codes of behaviour of others is important if today's foreign language learner is to commu-

nicate fully in the target language. Without the study of culture, foreign instruction is inaccurate and incomplete. For students, language study seems less meaningful if they know little about the people who speak it or the country where it is spoken.

The study of different cultures aids us in understanding people, which is a necessary prelude to respecting the others and their ways of life. It helps to broaden students' awareness of the similarities and differences among the lifestyles of various cultural groups. But at first students should understand their own customs and traditions and only then they should be taught about the foreign ones. Cultural awareness comprises both an understanding of the alien culture and one's own culture.

According to B. Tomalin and S. Stempleski, teaching about culture has the following goals, and is of and in itself a means of accomplishing them:

- To help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally conditioned behaviours.
- To help students to develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave.
- To help students to become more aware of conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture.
- To help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.
- To help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence.
- To help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.
- To stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its representatives (Tomalin, Stempleski, 1993: 7–8).

As a final point, M. Smolik and J. Galant's factual opinion about introducing cultural elements during the lessons should be mentioned. They claim that culture awareness is essential in stimulating the intellectual and emotional development of learners. They underline that Poles should be educated to develop their own high self-esteem and identity, and that Polish students should also be taught to respect other groups of people and their cultures. (Smolik and Galant's, 2002: 4).

Teaching the language does not only mean teaching grammar and vocabulary. C. Kramersch explains: "Language is not culture free code, distinct from the way people think and behave, but rather, it plays a major role in the perpetuation of culture, particularly in its printed form" (Kramersch, 1998: 8). According to R. Tang, "language is culture (...) the soul of the country and people who speak it" (Tang, 2004).

## Christmas and Easter traditions during English lesson

People in every country around the world have their own special festivals and holidays. Different traditions and customs serve as the medium of our national identity, human values, and heritage passed down from generation to generation. British and Polish calendars are full of events marked as national or special, but in this article, only two holidays – Easter and Christmas – are considered, as they are celebrated not only by many British and Polish people but also by Christian communities worldwide. Two lessons “Easter all over the word” and “Christmas in England” were conducted in 2024 at a Polish secondary school (pre-intermediate level).

“Easter all over the word” – procedure:

WARM-UP (10 min.)

1. The teacher writes the word “EASTER” on the board and asks students to think of any English words they know related to Polish Easter (brainstorming). The teacher does not explain any words until the pupils have no more ideas.
2. The teacher reads and explains unfamiliar lexis with the help of the class. The students repeat after the teacher. Then a few students read the vocabulary.

PRESENTATION (15 min.)

1. The students are given five short texts about different Easter traditions around the world. Before reading the teacher asks questions concerning the pictures and the students analyze them and try to guess what they represent.
2. The teacher asks students to read quietly about different Easter traditions and then match the texts with the pictures.
3. After reading the teacher asks the students which of the traditions they know, and which ones are popular in Poland. Then students are asked to copy the words from the blackboard.

PRACTICE (15 min.)

1. The students are given a handout with true/false questions.
2. The teacher asks them to justify their opinions if their answers are false – referring to the texts.
3. The teacher asks students to think about typical Easter traditions in Poland. Working in pairs, they should write some words or phrases describing three Easter days (*What do people in your country do on: 1. Palm Sunday?, 2. Easter Monday?, 3. Silent Saturday?*). The teacher collects ideas on the board, improving and/or correcting language at the same time.
4. The students are asked to describe their last Easter in their notebooks (some of the things they did), using the vocabulary from the lesson – the

phrases collected in the last task. Afterwards some students are asked to present their works, the teacher corrects if necessary.

**CLOSE UP (3 min.):** The teacher revises introduced lexis and then rewards the best works.

**HOMEWORK (2 min.):** The students are given an Easter crossword and have to complete it.

The main aim of the lesson was to teach words and phrases related to Easter traditions around the world and their characteristics. The teacher tried to connect with the students' knowledge of Polish Easter before introducing the subject. That is why, during the first part of the lesson, students were asked to think of as many English words related to Polish Easter as they could. It was a very interesting exercise, both to teach them new vocabulary and to review words they already knew. To consolidate the customs with their respective countries and to record new words, after reading a text about different customs around the world, true/false questions were introduced. This activity also showed how well the students understood the text and whether they were able to guess the meaning of words from the context.

During the last part of the lesson (describing their last Easter), the teacher played the role of a consultant. More advanced students completed this exercise quickly, but weaker students had some problems putting words and phrases into correct sentences (word order). It was noted that the different customs of celebrating Easter seemed funny and strange to the students, as they could not find Polish equivalents.

The topic of the lesson was important from a cross-cultural point of view – the students were given a chance to broaden their knowledge about different Easter traditions around the world. The lesson contributed to raising their cross-cultural awareness.

“Christmas in England” – procedure:

**WARM-UP (10 min.)**

1. The teacher writes vertically on the blackboard the word CHRISTMAS.

The students are asked to work in groups of four. They have 5 minutes to find as many words connected with Christmas as possible. The lexemes should begin with the given letters.

2. The students read the words and add new one.

**PRESENTATION (15 min.):** The students are given a text about celebrating Christmas in England. They read it quietly and then aloud. The teacher helps students to translate the text.

**PRACTICE (15 min.)**

1. The students are asked to correct the following sentences on the given paper sheet:

- a) You can kiss under a pantomime.
  - b) British and American children hang boots at the fireplace.
  - c) Christmas dinner is on Christmas Eve.
  - d) Santa Claus eats apples and drinks water.
  - e) A cracker is something to eat.
  - f) Mistletoe is served for dinner.
  - g) Many people spend Boxing Day at work.
2. The teacher asks students to match the words (Santa Claus, reindeer, mistletoe, carol, holly, Christmas tree, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, sleigh, Boxing Day) with definitions (Santa's 'car'; 26<sup>th</sup> December; one of Santa's animals; tree that you take home for Christmas; special song which people sing at Christmas; 25<sup>th</sup> December; plant under which you can kiss everyone; a man with a long, white beard, who brings presents; 24<sup>th</sup> December; a small tree with green, prickly leaves and red berries).
  3. The teacher asks the students to write in their notebooks five sentences describing Christmas in Britain.

CLOSE UP (2 min.): The teacher revises the new vocabulary introduced during the lesson.

HOMEWORK (3 min.): The students are given a Christmas crossword.

During the first part of the lesson the students were asked to write as many words connected with Christmas as possible. The words had to begin with the given letter. It was a quite difficult task as students had problems with words beginning with the letters I, M, A. However, it was a very good exercise to teach them new vocabulary and to review words they had already known.

Reading was one of the main points during the lesson. Students were asked to read the text about Christmas in England quietly and then the understanding of the text was checked by the exercises. The false sentences and matching words with the definitions were introduced. These activities also showed how the students understand the texts and if they were able to guess the meaning of the words from the context. They did not have many problems with the tasks, although they had some difficulties with remembering Polish equivalents of English *Christmas Eve*, *Christmas Day* and *Boxing Day*.

The last exercise seemed to be really involving for all students – they treated this task as an opportunity to compete. The most difficult words were given in advance not to discourage the students from involving in the reading. The students were really satisfied with the additional materials because they liked working with activities different from those included in their book.

## Conclusion

The main aim of this article was to present different definitions of culture and to indicate the relationship between language and culture. As an example, two lesson proposals were conducted in a Polish second language classroom and described in detail in the article.

The brief theoretical review of 'culture' has shown that there is no single definition, and that we need to combine various perspectives to understand what the term 'culture' truly means. Teachers should help students become not only skilful users of the language but also active architects of a new cross-cultural world order. Cultural competence enables students to develop a greater understanding of people across national boundaries and provides them with sympathetic insight into the ways of life and thought of the people who speak the language they are learning.

Both lessons appeared to be interesting to the students, who requested more topics related to culture. This showed that teenagers are interested in different cultures and are both tolerant of and curious about 'otherness.' At times during the lessons, they reacted to various multicultural customs with smiles or funny jokes.

Even though preparing lesson plans about traditions and habits demands teacher's involvement and the use of diverse resources, it is well worth the effort. The teacher's dedication makes English lessons more engaging, helps students raise their cultural awareness, and encourages their curiosity about the countries whose language they are learning.

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Streszczenie  
**Kultura w nauczaniu języków  
na przykładzie Świąt Wielkanocnych i Bożego Narodzenia**

Celem niniejszego artykułu było przedstawienie różnych definicji kultury oraz jej znaczenia w całym procesie uczenia się. Opisane zostały dwie lekcje języka angielskiego przeprowadzone w szkole średniej – dotyczące świąt Bożego Narodzenia i Wielkiejnocy. Termin *kultura* ma bardzo szeroki zakres semantyczny i aby zrozumieć jego istotę, należy posiłkować się wieloma definicjami. Znajomość kultury i tradycji innych krajów pozwala uczniom, nie zważając na międzynarodowe granice, zrozumieć drugiego człowieka, jego motywacje postępowania i tok myślenia, uczy tolerancji. Wprowadzanie tematyki związanej z kulturą danego kraju na lekcji języka obcego sprawia, że zajęcia stają się bardziej interesujące, podnosi świadomość uczniów na temat wielokulturowości i powoduje, że uczniowie są bardziej zainteresowani krajem, którego języka się uczą.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kultura, program nauczania, wielokulturowość, nauczanie języka angielskiego

Summary

**Culture in language teaching on the example of Easter and Christmas**

The aim of this article was to present different definitions of culture and to show its importance in the entire learning process. Two ideas for presenting culture in the classroom were described: Christmas and Easter. The term culture has a very wide semantic range, and to understand its essence, many definitions must be considered. Knowledge of the culture and traditions of other countries allows students, regardless of international borders, to understand other people, their motives, and ways of thinking. Moreover, it teaches tolerance. Topics related to the culture of a given country introduced in foreign language lessons make classes more interesting, raise students' awareness of multiculturalism, and increase their interest in the country whose language they are learning.

**Keywords:** culture, curriculum, multiculturalism, teaching English