

A Foreign Civilization course, what for?

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Few people agree on what is- or should be the content of a foreign civilization course. Judging from the practice of some teachers and textbooks of some authors, it would, at times, seem that it is mainly a history course or a course in geography or a mixture of foreign economics, sociology and anthropology or, again a music or art course with much guitar playing and a lot of documentary films and slides.

Instead of spending most of our time discussion this highly controversial issue, I wonder whether it might not be more advisable to attack the problem at the other end, that is, consider first the generally acknowledged reasons for which people need a civilization course, and then draw some conclusions about what ought to be taught and how it should be presented.

Few teachers would deny that one of the objectives of a civilization course is to provide students with the minimum of background information required to read intelligently foreign books and magazines as well as to understand when abroad, the many allusions to nationally-known facts which are so often found in television shows. For, although we may not notice it in our won country, it is obvious that authors and producers take for granted that their readers, listeners or viewers, have in common some basic knowledge of their nation's past and present, its geography, institutions, customs and folklore. Within this background, a foreigner will miss or misunderstand much of what he reads or hears.

Another generally accepted reason for taking a foreign civilization course in the target language is that it provides students who do not appreciate literature an opportunity to pursue their language training without taking one more literature course. One of the causes of the disastrous drop in enrolment at the end of the first

two years of foreign language study – that is, at the very moment when past efforts are about to bear fruit is, in most American colleges or universities, students cannot major in a foreign language without taking mostly literature courses - although many of them are not interested in literature in their own language, and are even less interested in traditional literary erudition or new criticism acrobatics.

Offering these language students an alternative, the possibility of developing their four skills by reading and discussing topics of general interest or subjects germane to their area of specialization if they happen to major in history, geography or sociology- might retain in our foreign language departments many who would otherwise drop out.

Finally, the third and perhaps the most important reason for taking a foreign civilization course is humanistic: it widens students' outlook and enables them to evaluate their own civilization. As every qualitative judgement is bound to be relative to something or somebody else taken consciously or not as a standard, nobody is really in a position to assess one's own way of living, doing and thinking until he has been introduced to another way. A course in foreign civilization supplies the necessary terms of comparison.

Without this experience, students are likely to take what is only a matter of national habit or prejudice for something intrinsically natural or legitimate. Until they have seen pictures illustrating the refined, mellow harmonies of an English or Florentine countryside, many Americans are inclined to believe that America the Beautiful is indeed the most beautiful country on earth. In short, a foreign civilization course can be a unique lesson in self-criticism as well as self-appreciation, an eye-opening experience which may lead to fruitful reforms, increased tolerance and sometimes, in the case of Americans more especially, to a counting of one's many blessings.

Supposing now that we are, on the whole, agreed on these three main reasons for taking a civilization course, let us see what influence they should exercise on the contents and methods of such a course.

The assumption that one of the purposes of a foreign civilization course is to provide students with the background information required to appreciate foreign books, magazines and broadcasts, implies first, that they acquire at least, that residual knowledge which lingers in the minds of the average foreigner after he has left high school. Contrary to appearances, such a requirement does not entail either a very encyclopaedic knowledge or a very detailed one: outside their areas of specialization, most adults remember from their school days only a few basic facts, some famous events and men, some important institutions, places and products, and the names of great authors and artists whose works have been universally reproduced or anthologized.

Hence, for the civilization instructors, everything which has become part and parcel of the foreign culture, including national delusions and misrepresentations, are of interest. The stories about Lincoln's perfection or Washington's cherry tree may, for example, be inaccurate, but they are integral part of the American folklore.

This somewhat superficial overview should not, of course, preclude an individual study in depth of some special topics of particular interest to either student or teacher. But a private love for the arts, or folk songs, or any other subject, should not lead a civilization teacher to concentrate exclusively on one or two aspects of the foreign civilization to the detriment of the whole, depriving his students of the comprehensive background information they need.

The second assumption, that a civilization course ought to offer an alternative to students who want to pursue their linguistic training by studying subjects other than literature, implies on the other hand, that a civilization teacher must not neglect the improvement and development of his students' language skills.

Several experiments have shown that it is not only difficult to understand in a foreign language a subject matter such as inflation which is entirely unknown to students completely ignorant of economics, but that it is difficult to memorize

entirely new concepts when they are formulated in a foreign language. The heart of the matter is that teaching a foreign civilization course in a foreign language to an audience little versed in any of the social sciences, confronts instructors with an almost impossible challenge. It compels them to violate one of the soundest principles of good teaching. Instead of proceeding from the known to the unknown, they must, of necessity, present unknown facts and ideas in a more or less ill-known language. This basic difficulty will therefore often force them to accept compromises with the requirements of a pure direct method, if they do not want to water down the contents of their civilization course to a childish and uninteresting level.

One of the possible solutions to this problem may be to recommend outside reading about the foreign civilization. Another is to use texts rewritten in “easy” foreign language, or textbooks in the unadulterated original but accompanied by an abundance of study helps such marginal translations of al rare or difficult expressions, or, if need be, handouts prepared by the instructor himself. Still another solution is to give students majoring in history, sociology or the arts some introductory-level foreign textbooks on these subjects: our majors’ familiarity with the subject matter will both help them guess the meaning of many unknown expressions and facilitate assimilation in the foreign language of what they already know. The ultimate aim must be always to provide enough assistance so that students do not have to spend hours dictionary-thumbing.

As for the third assumption that, in a foreign civilization course, students should learn to re-evaluate their own civilization and beliefs, it implies that the teacher must not try to provide a series of complete courses about the foreign country’s history, geography, sociology and arts, all compressed into one indigestible mass of information, but should rather concentrate on the most significant points and more especially the differences from American civilization, especially the contrasts between the two civilizations. To non-specialists, learning about customs which are almost identical to American ones is of dubious interest, but learning that Frenchmen shake hands much more often than Americans is much

more instructive. Similarly, memorizing the names of the numerous French political parties is less profitable than learning that one of the reasons why democracy has long worked better in Anglo-Saxon countries is that Anglo-Saxon countries have a two-party system – theoretically less satisfactory but practically more efficient.

However, this contrastive approach should not be used without a certain amount of caution. Some authors tend to exaggerate contrasts or draw from them arbitrary conclusions or much too sweeping generalizations. Yet, contrastive study of foreign and American civilizations will prove profitable in every respect: it will not only develop the students' critical faculties but also their linguistic abilities. As when comparing the two civilizations, they will have the opportunity to describe their own, they will speak of what they know in the language they are learning, or, in other words, proceed, as recommended, from the known to the unknown.

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