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Teaching socio-cultural aspects in literary texts at secondary school level: towards the development of social skills in language lessons to facilitate the learner's smooth integration

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Abstract

This study represents our modest contribution to the teaching of texts in upper secondary school classes in particular, and to all secondary school classes in general. Our foremost concern is to see secondary school French teachers develop pupils' understanding of sociocultural aspects when teaching texts. Indeed, French teachers currently focus solely on developing linguistic aspects when teaching texts, without any reference to cultural aspects. This is why we have sought to find a solution that provides an effective response to the teaching of texts by addressing the axiological dimension, with a view to helping learners develop the attitudes and qualities necessary for successful social integration.

Keywords: Sociocultural aspects, teaching, text, critical analysis.

1. Introduction

We are delighted to have this opportunity to write a few words on the learning of sociocultural aspects when teaching literary texts in secondary school, and more specifically at the upper secondary level. Although there is indeed a fairly extensive body of literature on the subject – comprising articles, dissertations, theses and books – there are, however, fewer

authors who have addressed the teaching of sociocultural aspects, specifically the study of 'educational situations'.

Indeed, a question arises: how can sociocultural aspects be developed when teaching texts? Consequently, a significant number of French teachers do not develop the sociocultural component throughout this stage of education when teaching texts. However, Rosier, J-M. (2002) makes the following emphatic statement:

'What could be simpler, indeed, than to assert that the subject of French at secondary level is twofold: language and culture. With this in mind, it is appropriate to approach the literary text, which naturally finds its place in language learning and language work.'

It is to address this shortcoming – which, however, does not benefit learners' development – that we are applying our thinking and our intellect to make our modest contribution through this paper, with a view to encouraging French teachers to develop socio-cultural aspects in order to build socio-cultural competences when teaching texts. Our primary concern is to see French teachers help learners develop, through the teaching of texts, 'their behaviour, values and interpersonal skills'.

This reflection therefore seeks to answer the question of whether the learning of sociocultural aspects forms part of the

specific objectives of teaching texts at the middle and upper secondary levels. This will be followed by a discussion of the essential necessity of learning sociocultural aspects for learners' development. Furthermore, our discussion will focus on how to identify sociocultural aspects and how to make progress in learning them. Finally, we will list the other aspects that should be developed alongside the sociocultural aspects in order to avoid the pitfalls that must be avoided when teaching texts.

2. Sociocultural aspects

As we saw in the previous chapter, the teaching of French essentially boils down to the development of 'language skills' in accordance with the guidelines laid down on this subject. However, learning a second language by no means excludes learning about cultural aspects. This is confirmed by Ilunga Ntumba Willy, who puts it in other words: 'Language teaching normally ensures that culture is taken into account in the educational programme for responsible citizenship'.

Indeed, language also conveys the culture of the community for which it serves as a means of communication. According to Professor Metho Nkayilu Éric of the University of Kinshasa (2023): 'A child's education takes into account both their visible and invisible realities. The search for solutions to schoolchildren's emotional problems leads the teacher to familiarise themselves with the work of Sigmund Freud'.

It should be noted that a child's emotional development encompasses the following aspects:

Sexuality: this is distinct from genitality, which refers to the genital organs. It encompasses all activities aimed at the pursuit of pleasure in the child.

1. Fixation: this is a preferential attachment (love) on the part of the individual towards objects, representations or areas of the body at specific stages of their development;
2. The erogenous zone: this is the zone of pleasure;
3. Ambivalence: these are thoughts, feelings and tendencies that assert themselves and coexist simultaneously;
4. Socio-emotional development: this is the evolution and change in a child's feelings in relation to their social environment.

Thus, the learning of any second language has a twofold aim:

- Developing linguistic aspects, which encompass the acquisition of the four language skills to be developed;

- Developing cultural aspects, from which socio-cultural aspects derive.

This enables us to state emphatically that learning French today involves five skills to be developed throughout the entire period during which the learner is engaged in the learning process. Of these skills, the four that are language-related aim to develop the learner's proficiency in the French language, with a view to producing high-quality output in both spoken and written forms, as well as effectively receiving spoken and written communication.

The language skills are categorised as follows:

- Receptive skills,
- Productive skills.

These competences can be summarised as the ability to enable the learner to:

- Listen carefully to spoken messages,
- Listen carefully to written messages,
- Write down spoken messages accurately,
- To form sound judgements about messages.

However, the development of cultural skills aims to equip learners with the abilities that will facilitate their social integration. In other words, learning about cultural aspects involves cultivating in learners the good habits and social norms they need for their social development and social integration. It is clear that these teachers are content to focus primarily on developing linguistic aspects—which are the products of language skills—whilst almost entirely neglecting aspects relating to social life. As we noted earlier, these socio-cultural aspects include good social habits, social norms of good conduct, and national or universal cultural values that do not conflict with good morals and ethics.

This is confirmed by Nkayilu Metho Éric, who puts it as follows: 'The socio-emotional domain is linked to interpersonal skills; in other words, it concerns the realm of relationships and how one behaves towards others. It draws on emotions and feelings (love, hate, joy, sadness, rejection, sharing, etc.) and the development of an individual's personality.' Thus, whilst not claiming to be able to draw up an exhaustive list of social skills, here is a list of the social qualities that first spring to mind: patriotism, excellence, service to the nation, politeness, charity, obedience, freedom, non-violent resistance, sincerity, tolerance, transparency, truth, humility, accountability, piety, modesty, hard work, team spirit, temperance, solidarity, honesty, fidelity, decency, loyalty, determination, obedience, respect for elders, respect for the laws of the republic, punctuality, love for one's neighbour, respect for public property, cleanliness, the fight

against hunger and poverty, living together in harmony, hospitality, generosity, the fight against corruption, the eradication of banditry and greed, a love of sound values, the protection of nature, the rejection of begging and idleness, the defence of the nation, etc.

3. Learning about socio-cultural aspects and the specific objectives of teaching texts

It falls to us to raise the issue of objectives in this context, as objectives encompass the aims of all learning. In other words, it is the objectives that govern the aims of all learning. This is because the first question that arises is what objectives we wish to achieve by the end of the learning process and what behaviours we would like to see manifested in the learner.

This is why defining objectives remains essential for teachers, and particularly for teachers of French as a second language, as far as we are concerned. Indeed, ‘an objective is the description of a set of behaviours (or performances) which the student must demonstrate in order to be recognised as competent. An objective therefore describes an intention rather than the process itself’.

However, it must be noted with great regret that most teachers do not attach sufficient importance to defining objectives once the probationary teaching placement period is over. And, alongside the previous category, there is a second one: teachers who formulate the objectives for French lessons very poorly, in general, and those for teaching texts, in particular. This lies at the root of what students are demonstrating today – not only in terms of a decline in academic standards, but also in terms of a lack of the ability to live together and to be in harmony with true values.

That is why it is important to define objectives correctly before embarking on the learning process. However, one very important aspect that some teachers overlook is the ability to define objectives. It is essential to undertake specific training as a French teacher in order to be able to formulate objectives correctly.

4. The indispensability of learning about socio-cultural aspects

The highly malleable and fallible nature of human beings means that children must be educated to enable them to develop and reach physical, moral and intellectual maturity. Indeed, it is difficult, if not impossible, for a child to survive without benefiting from this social support, which sets them apart from other living beings such as the young of animals and plants, or young trees, which do not necessarily require the support of others to survive and thrive.

Currently, ‘culture is expressed through texts and exercises which are, in effect, vectors of social reality as it is reflected in this textbook. Belonging to a specific language, the words used take the form of referents that construct the world (Beacco 2000). These words help learners to later formulate a parallel discourse, for, as Bakhtin (1984) has shown, a discourse is merely the reproduction of other discourses previously spoken (or heard) on a given theme.’

Thus, ever since its inception, humanity has always organised, first and foremost, the people, and subsequently the structures responsible for a child’s education from birth through to adulthood and even into old age. This is why ancient Rome employed a ‘paedagogus’, who was, in reality, a female servant tasked with looking after the child. To provide a definitive and lasting response to this social and humanitarian need, the United Nations had to impose on its Member States an obligation to which they must all subscribe, in order to promote and ensure the long-term development of children until they reach the age of maturity. Thus, Article 26, paragraphs 1 and 2, of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights enshrines this obligation in the following terms:

‘Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the case of primary and basic education. Primary education shall be compulsory. Technical and vocational education shall be made generally available; access to higher education shall be equally open to all on the basis of merit. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship amongst all nations and all racial or religious groups, as well as the development of the United Nations’ activities for the maintenance of peace.’

This is further reinforced in the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2006) in the following terms:

‘Everyone has the right to school education. This is provided through the national education system. The national education system comprises state schools and approved private schools. The law lays down the conditions for the establishment and operation of these schools. Parents have the right to choose the type of education to be provided for their children. Primary education is compulsory and free in state schools.’

5. How can we foster the learning of socio-cultural aspects?

This is where the second concern comes into its own, which can be summarised in this question: how can the learning of socio-cultural aspects be facilitated in a teaching context? In response to the question of how to ensure sociocultural

learning when teaching texts – given the various ways in which these skills can be learnt and formed into learning objectives within a teaching context – we propose the following: (i) guidance; (ii) encouragement; and (iii) prayer.

And, through reprimands, discouragement and indifference when it comes to anti-values and vices. This means that the teacher will use either encouragement, exhortation or prayer to invite learners to love and practise what is presented to them, whilst resorting to indifference, discouragement and reprimands with regard to vices, in order to help learners who are at a crucial age when their whole being is developing, both physically and psychologically. Hence, it is important that learners have access to all the information necessary for their holistic development. This is what Professor Metho Nkayilu Éric (2023) argues, in other words:

‘Adopt a helpful and benevolent attitude. The teacher’s guidance should help to instil in the child a sense of modesty, revulsion and shame within society. Whatever impulses may be observed, the teacher must:

- Support and help the child, rather than dominate them or treat them as an object;
- Guide them towards a sense of their own worth, that is to say, self-esteem;
- Eliminate humiliation; offer the child tenderness and understanding.

Personality development stems largely from childhood experiences that have been largely forgotten. Every moment in a child’s emotional development, as they come into contact with the realities of adult life, can lead to adaptation. Teachers are therefore right to take this into account in their relationships with their pupils’.¹

6. Identifying Sociocultural Aspects

It is clearly stated that it is through the teaching of texts that learning about sociocultural aspects should be developed. Indeed, texts contain sociocultural aspects in the same way as they contain linguistic aspects. Before proceeding with the teaching of these social skills, the teacher must first ensure that these two conditions are met:

- An understanding of how they coexist with language skills;
- An understanding of how to teach them.

If the French teacher recognises the coexistence of these two skills in the texts used for teaching, they will do their best to identify them and harness them to support learning when teaching the text. This is because every text always relates to

a particular society and, consequently, describes the sociocultural aspects of that society. However, the description of these socio-cultural aspects, just like that of linguistic aspects, can be explicit, implicit or even allusive. This means that the texts address these aspects in one way or another. It is up to the teacher to make full use of their intellectual abilities to identify them, with a view to placing them at the centre of the learning process when teaching the texts.

As we have already pointed out, the acquisition of language skills relates solely to the development of the learner’s technical competence, whilst socio-cultural aspects focus on personal development. And personal development concerns the development of the whole person. This is what we call the holistic development of the individual, that is to say, the individual in all aspects and dimensions of life. It is indeed the learning of socio-cultural aspects that opens the door to a holistic education in French language teaching; otherwise, none of the other subjects taught offer learners ways of living or behaving within society. However, at present, all good education systems are pragmatic because they offer learners the subjects they experience or will encounter in life. This is why Anglo-Saxon models are currently the best in the world and why the competence-based approach prevails over other pedagogical approaches.

Having addressed the question of the coexistence of these two types of competence – namely, language competence and social competence – we would like to emphasise once again that language competence stems from linguistic aspects and social competence from cultural aspects, as these indeed constitute the two main aspects of literature: (a) culture, and (b) linguistic aspects.

It is therefore essential to pay careful attention to these aspects when teaching texts in order to ensure the effective learning of French as a second language.

To act differently is to do something that runs counter to the teachings of the texts and to steer the teachings of the texts away from a holistic education.

7. Other aspects to be explored

Teaching a text involves clarifying the textual clues, that is, deciphering all the components of the text. These are words or expressions through which the author conceals the true ideas that constitute the very meaning of the text. These components constitute what semiotics refers to as textual clues. These clues may relate either to linguistic aspects or to social aspects that influence human life in general, and that of learners in particular.

This is why all the components of the text must be explained simultaneously in order to claim to have taught a text

effectively. These include, in particular, linguistic competence, referential competence, the discursive component and pragmatic competence. As Sophie Moirand has already demonstrated, communicative competence consists of several components that function inseparably.

Consequently, French teachers are required to ensure that all these components are brought into play when teaching texts in the classroom. The French teacher must draw on their skills to ensure that, through their explanations, learners can acquire not only the phonetic, lexical and grammatical patterns of the language, but also ideas, areas of experience and objects, as well as an understanding of different types of discourse and how they are organised in communicative situations; as well as the choice of language registers in communicative situations and the acquisition of social norms. This essentially involves taking into account all other competences, as argued by Professor Nzanga of the National Pedagogical University:

‘The linguistic component is “the knowledge and mastery (ability to use) of the phonetic, lexical and grammatical models of the language system”. Caroline VELTCHEFF and Stanley HILTON (2003, 24) recognise that this component concerns the knowledge and skills relating to lexis, phonetics and syntax.

The referential component: this is ‘the knowledge and mastery of ideas, fields of experience and objects in the world, and their relationships’.

The discursive component is ‘the knowledge and appropriation of different types of discourse and their organisation according to the parameters of the communicative situation in which they are produced and interpreted’.

The pragmatic component: this concerns ‘the production and interpretation of communicative intentions and functions, and the choice of language registers according to the parameters of the communicative situation’.

In the same vein, Caroline VELTCHEFF et al. (2003, 24) add that this component ‘refers to the functional use of linguistic resources, to the fulfilment of linguistic functions and speech acts’.

The sociocultural component: this is characterised by ‘knowledge and mastery of social rules and norms governing interactions between individuals and institutions, knowledge of cultural history...’²

8. The one pitfall to avoid

When teaching a text in class, every French teacher has several approaches to interpreting the text at their disposal, with a view to conveying the text’s meaning and richness to the learner. It should be noted that artistic beauty certainly extends to both linguistic and socio-cultural aspects. This is why care must be taken to develop explanations covering all the aspects that make up the text. If one limits oneself to a single aspect when teaching a text, the value of interpreting that text in the classroom is called into question. And this leads other teachers to fall into an avoidable trap.

Indeed, the one pitfall that must be avoided is the one into which many teachers fall: reducing the teaching of texts to the exploration of a single aspect whilst neglecting the other constituent aspects of the text. For teaching a text means explaining all the textual clues. However, these clues do not relate exclusively to linguistic structures. They also relate to structures pertaining to the referential and sociocultural aspects, as well as to structures relating to the pragmatic and discursive aspects.

This is why teachers of French (as a language) must consider the social impact of the text being taught on the learner, as teaching is for life. This question is not limited merely to the lesson that can be drawn from the text to serve as a moral lesson for learners, because there are concepts and expressions that must be developed to shape learners’ social attitudes and habits.

The development of the social or affective dimension is the responsibility not only of French (as a language) teachers, in particular, but also of all teachers of other subjects taught at secondary level. Indeed, this is the view put forward by Cuq J.P. and Gruca I.: ‘The class must therefore not only cover the aspects of high culture specific to the language being studied, but also provide the elements of anthropological culture that have been identified as necessary for its proper understanding.’ Furthermore, Castellotti V. and Chalabi H. confirm that ‘every language is now regarded as the repository of a collective experience, as an expression and vehicle of one or more cultures’.

However, another question may arise at this point: will the teacher of French (as a language) have time, within the time allocated to them, to cover all the aspects presented in a text? It is up to the teacher alone to decide how to make the most of these aspects whilst effectively taking into account the duration of their lesson.

Conclusion

We felt it was both highly useful and imperative to shed light on the issue of learning sociocultural aspects at secondary level, and primarily at upper secondary level. Our reflection on this subject has not only highlighted the necessity of learning sociocultural aspects at secondary level, but also identified approaches to fostering such learning in order to help learners develop social skills. Indeed, these skills facilitate the development of social skills and successful integration for learners, as Carton F. et al. advise French teachers to 'adopt an ethnographic perspective and undertake sociological studies in parallel, as this can lead to a better understanding of the reasons behind things'.

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