

## ***The Picture and its Cultural Interpretation***

**BOUHADIBA Zoulikha**  
**(Université d'Oran)**

*“From my own experience, soon after I arrived to the U.S., I can recall this event: I was about to purchase a card with nice grey and white flowers, bearing the caption “with my dearest sympathies.” The vendor exclaimed, “Sorry, you’re sending it! “Did someone you know die?” Confused, I replaced the card. I had intended it as a thank you note to a friend. (In French, “sympathique” has nothing to do with death).” (Kacem Benhamza, p. 169)*

*“Upon his arrival from home, an Arab student once ordered in front of me a “coke” from a waitress (using the same vowel sound as in “dog”). She returned two minutes later with another waitress, both giggling, asking my fellow student if he cared to repeat the order”. (Kacem Benhamza, p. 170)*

American and British studies are important components of the core curriculum of the licence degree in our English department. They are taught in content modules and constantly referred to in skill modules. Both language and culture are taught to our foreign language students through British and American studies.

What do we mean by “studies”? The following definition is the answer to our question:

*“In its most and universal sense “American studies” include any scholarly study of the United States of America , however broad or narrow in scope. The term can apply with equal merit to all the social, political, economic, literary, artistic, religious, philosophical, or other historical and cultural experiences of man in the territories covered by the fifty states from the pre-colombian times to the present...”* (Making America)

It is imperative to teach the cultural traits of the target language. It is also vitally important to control and correct the wrong cultural assumptions almost always present in the mind of our students. For example items like time, gestures, humour, eating and dressing habits, behaviour in general differ considerably from one culture to another.

Referring to the issue, Ahmed Meziani, in his article: “Cartoons: a mirror to language and culture” reminds the reader:

*“How about the culture bit? The humour of a culture is one of its most idiosyncratic attributes. Humour is one element that can serve to distinguish one culture from another. It arises*

*from the very psyche, of a people and thus can reveal much of their psychological and social make-up, understanding a culture’s humour is therefore synonymous*

*with understanding the culture itself*'. (American studies in North African Universities, p. 229).

Language and culture are interrelated. This interrelationship urges us to refer to a rewarding pedagogical tool which has become part of our methodology in teaching conversation to second year students. This teaching technique is the use of pictures as visual aids and, inevitably, as class openers for communication.

Indeed, a picture teaches “something” about language and culture. And, consequently, it makes the student refer to his “cultural background” or “cultural load” when interpreting a target culture. (Though the student is at a disadvantage every now and then since the picture carries some cultural aspects that he either rejects or ignores).

Of course, “American studies are not part of the oral expression module, but we often find ourselves using pictures from American contexts. This is not a deliberate choice, almost imposed because of the variety of books that are available now in our institute library and even in our own library.

Unfortunately, even this satisfactory pedagogical tool poses problems to the teachers and students alike. For, if language always carries cultural aspects, the picture, which just like language is a “reflection of culture”, may not carry very specific cultural aspects.

To illustrate this point, we will give some examples. The student has to interpret the following pictures:

Picture one: A happy father and a nurse holding a new-born baby.

The student starts saying that “the father is not happy because he has already got a daughter and the new born-baby is also a daughter. So, he is angry with his wife because she gave birth to a baby girl.” Then, he adds: “the wife is going to face problems and probably a divorce.”

Picture two: A lady preparing a meal. She is wearing trousers.

The student starts saying: “It is obvious that the lady is European because she is in the kitchen and she is wearing trousers. She is certainly not Algerian.”

Picture three: A lady relaxing in a sofa and thinking.

The student says:” This lady has got a problem with her husband. She saw him selling cigarettes in the street.

He always does so after work and he has never told her anything.”

Picture four: Two neighbours in their garden. The two gardens are separated by a fence. One neighbour is working in his garden and the other is watching him and smiling to him.

The student says: “These are neighbours. They are jealous of each other because one is rich and the other

is poor. One makes fire in his garden and disturbs the other.

They are bad neighbours. They are in bad terms. One always puts his nose into his neighbour's affair.”

So, in trying to decode the above pictures referring to American culture, the student simply used aspects of his own culture that he transferred to the target culture without being aware of the specific cultural dimensions that the source and target culture do not share.

Evidently, in trying to describe or to interpret the picture, the student (who was told that the picture reflects aspects of the American society) failed to make the slightest effort to refer to any cultural reference in his oral production of English. So, though the student has sufficient knowledge of the American culture (through books, T.V., and content modules such as literature and civilisation) to communicate orally, he always uses aspects of his own culture.

To conclude, we can say that the student almost always mobilizes all his efforts to interpret the picture without showing any clash between the American culture and the Algerian context. It seems that the student (consciously or unconsciously) refuses to give specific cultural aspects to the picture on the grounds that a picture has no nationality. For him, “a picture is a picture” and has nothing to do with one culture or another.

***Références :***

BENHAMZA, Kacem, (1991), Teaching American Civilization: An anthropological Dimension, American Studies in North African Universities, Rabat.

Ed. Luther, S. Luedtke, (1990), Making America: The Society and Culture of the United States, Washington, D.C.

MEZIANI Ahmed, (1991), Cartoons: A mirror to language and culture, American studies in North African universities, Rabat.