DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 152 077 FL 009 309

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TITLE Should We Train Our Students to Be Spies?
PUB DATE Oct 77
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Conference on New Methodologies in Modern Language Training (Cedar Falls, Iowa, October 28-29, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Body Language; Communication Problems; Cultural Activities; *Cultural Differences; *Cultural Education; Cultural Images; *Cultural Traits; *French; Higher Education; *Language Instruction; Language Skills; Language Usage; *Nonverbal Communication; Pronunciation; Secondary Education; Second Language Learning; Second Languages; Sociocultural Patterns; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS French Culture; Kinesics

ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to illustrate the importance of an accurate sociocultural description of a number of unconscious verbal and gestural behaviors which help to distinguish a Frenchman from an American. An accurate description of many of the most elementary signs and gestures is needed to help to dispel the notion that there is a one-for-one equivalent between languages. False interpretation and social blunders may result when individuals transfer their own cultural behavior to the setting of the language being learned. Problems also arise when an attempt is made to extend observed foreign behavior to situations which a native speaker would avoid. A "small c" cultural presentation should be part of language teaching from the beginning level through the civilization course. Recent methodological innovations, such as the audio-motor unit, can be useful in setting a context for sociocultural information. (Author/CFM)

SHOULD WE TRAIN OUR STUDENTS TO BE SPIES

Michael D. Oates

In a recent interview published in l'Express[1], Laurence Wylie quotes an American researcher who has established that only seven percent of the content of speech is given by the meaning of the words used. Fifty-five percent of oral communication depends on facial expression and the rest of what is communicated to others is based on intonation. Words alone are clearly not enough to motivate students to share their thoughts, feelings and needs in the foreign language they are learning.

Students typically study dialogs and vocabulary without an emotional response, a personal involvement. They learn that très bien means "very good" but so long as they perceive French as another way of expressing American reality, it matters little whether or not the meaning was obtained through a direct method. What does matter is that students come to believe that the ability to shed a bit of their own native-language personality is a worthwhile goal. This requires early and frequent exposure to "small-c" cultural behavior in the foreign language together with a conscious effort to incorporate the new way of acting in the learner's foreign-language "personality". The desire to act like a Frenchman and the developing ability to perform as one will help to overcome the self-conscious performance of most language learners who view French as a type of Morse Code for their American thoughts and words.

Acquiring a French personality, however, does not imply anti-American attitudes or a pledge of allegiance to France. It does not even require love of France and the French people, although at least a degree of respect would be necessary. What it means is that, when using French, students try to switch their linguistic identities and act like the French. Recently, a popular comic strip has depicted the dog Snoopy as "Joe French", complete with trenchcoat and moustache, with the Eiffel Tower in the background. Snoopy has disguised himself as a Frenchman and is acting out the part, which includes pronouncing the as "ZEE". French teachers may grind their teeth at this humorous caricature of the French. Snoopy's props are the gallic equivalent of the stereotype Mexican sombrero and cactus but they do have the merit of making him feel French.

Before the reader feels he/she is being encouraged to have students grow moustaches and wear trenchcoats, it should be stated that props are not what is intended when "acting like the French" is mentioned. The focus is rather on a number of mostly automatic verbal and gestural behaviors which are typically French. These include the way a Frenchman stutters, the utterances and facial expressions used to express pain, joy, disbelief and the neutral French facial position. One should add the way a Frenchman knocks on a door, counts on his/her fingers, says "no, thank you" and a host of kinesic messages. Although the French are often unaware they are using them, they readily recognize as foreign those behaviors which do not fit the pattern.

While several studies which give an accurate socio-cultural description of French body language have been published[2], help is still needed to select readily teachable expressions and gestures which students can incorporate in their efforts to communicate in French. By consciously choosing specific verbal and gestural behaviors which he/she associates with his/her role as a "Frenchman", a student will actually feel and act more French.

The following is an attempt to choose and describe specifically French patterns which are easily learned by students and which contrast with our American way of acting:

KNOCKING ON A DOOR

A Frenchman typically knocks on a door with the back of an open hand letting the knuckles of the index and middle fingers do the actual knocking. The closed-fist "American" style is employed only when a Frenchman is angry. It is not surprizing then that a newly-arrived French lady misinterpreted the intentions of her American neighbor when he knocked on her door to welcome her into the neighborhood. Not only was she unprepared to be greeted by her neighbors, she actually experienced fear when she saw him knocking with a closed fist.

COUNTING

The thumb is used to indicate the number one in French and the raised thumb and index indicate two, not one as is the occasional American interpretation. The American habit of counting on the index first may result in a misunderstanding, especially if the other fingers are not closed tightly. The American who wonders why the ticket seller in the crowded metro station asks him/her to repeat his/her request for tickets would do well to avoid indicating one book of tickets by raising the index finger.

TRES BIEN

The thumbs-up sign to indicate très bien is widely known in the states, even though the average American would normally join thumb and index in a circle while raising and spreading the other fingers. This popular American gesture is most likely copied from a somewhat similar French gesture au poil - "to the hair", indicating perfection. Thanks to the "Fonz" hero of a popular television program, the thumbs-up sign has come to take on a new meaning in the United States. It is advisable to inform our American students that in France, at least, this gesture has a different meaning than "sit on it". This may help to avoid a possible social blunder.

MERCI

What could be easier to translate than "Thanks"? Actually this word is one of the best examples possible to illustrate the importance of context in vocabulary usage. French people avoid the use of merci when compliments are paid to them. Since American culture conditions students to respond "thank you" in answer to a compliment such as "that's a nice suit you're wearing", a French person will be thought unfriendly and impolite if he/she does not thank an American who pays him/her a compliment. On the other hand, an American will be perceived as doubting the sincerity of the Frenchman who compliments him/her if he/she answers "merci".

In another context, at table, an American can answer with an affirmative "gee, thanks" when offered

some food which he/she likes. Conversely, a Frenchman who answers merci when offered food is saying no. A young friend from France spent six weeks with his host family during the summer of 1976. The morning after his arrival he responded "thank you, thank you" to the mother of the family who offered him a glass of milk. He was then astonished to see her go ahead and pour the glass of milk which he believed he had refused. Even this most common of words can lead to confusion unless we attempt to perceive its cultural contexts in the same way as a Frenchman.

HOW TO SOUND FRENCH

There are certain sounds which should be presented early in the French course, not only because they add a distinct French flavor to one's speech but also because they are phonetically very useful and are fun to learn. First among these is the front rounded "euh" sound used by the French to fill in the gaps when speaking. Pierre Léon[3] estimates that the "euh" of hesitation represents more than half of the words used to fill in involuntary pauses in French speech. Why not teach students to stutter in French right from the start? This will not only help to avoid the American "uh", but will encourage greater lip rounding. This lip-rounded, front vowel position is the one French people typically "wear" even when they are not speaking. The spread-lip position associated with the English "uh" is the neutral American facial position. By contrasting the two facial expressions, students can be made conscious of the importance of lip rounding in French and will actually become more French for their efforts.

In addition to "euh", there are other involuntary sounds which give away a Frenchman. The cry of pain in French is either aïe! or ouille!, both of which end in the yod (/j/), not found in final position in English. There are also berk and miam, miam which, however impolite, allow students to avoid saying "yuk" and "yum, yum". Since the /R/ of berk is exaggerated and is placed before the velar /k/, it is an excellent word for learning the French /R/. With respect to miam, the final oral-vowel, nasal-consonant combination is useful in helping American students

avoid automatically nasalizing the final vowel. This stress on phonetics need neither be boring nor wasteful. It can be quite interesting, for example, to pretend that the students are training to be spies in France. The desire to avoid giving away their American speech habits can be the impetus for stressing French pronunciation.

One may, at this point, object that the emphasis is being put on differences between the French and the American cultures, rather than on similarities. The response is precisely, yes, it is. Those things which make French culture specifically French should be stressed. As far as student attitudes are concerned, while they may occasionally laugh at the differences, students' acceptance of the way French people act will depend largely on their teachers' attitudes. Teachers can help their students to gain insight into cultural relativity by objectively presenting contrasting French and American behavior, being careful to avoid rejection of either one. Explanation and demonstration can be followed up by incorporating the French word or gesture in classroom activities.

The Audio-Motor Unit[4] can be an especially useful technique for presenting cultural behavior. These units are followed by a discussion based on the meaning and extension of the French pattern. This will help students to avoid extending the observed foreign behavior to situations which a native speaker would avoid. The way the French eat bread and drink wine can be contrasted with American habits. The close ties in French families can be illustrated by an Audio-Motor Unit in which a young man kisses his father goodnight. This could have quite an effect on American boys, most of whom are culturally cut off from kissing their dads. In the words of Mills Edgerton, by "singling out and discussing comparisons and contrasts between life as the students live it in these United States today and life as it is lived by today's Frenchman, [one can sensitize] the student forever after to the reality of cultural differences, prepare him to perceive them or at least to expect their existence in given situations..."[5]

With respect to the goal of learning to act and react as the French do, the verbal and gestural differences already mentioned are perhaps a good place to start. They are typically assumed to be the same as his native-language habits by the beginning language student. Contrast and comparison, however, should not stop at the level of body language. The experience of another way of acting when learning French, together with the growing awareness that languages cut up reality into different size pieces, will hopefully have whet students' linguistic appetites. Lexical and grammatical contrasts can be studied in the same spirit as gestures. Distinctions such as when to use heure, temps and fois, the use of deuxième versus second, the distinction between penser à and penser de, and the use of the subjunctive versus the indicative can be presented as a challenge to students who are encouraged to mask their native-language identities by learning to react more and more like a Frenchman. Granted enough experience, motivation and language talent, they may actually develop a second-language personality which will help them to perform in the same ways as the native speaker whose language they are mastering.

NOTES

1. Wylie, Laurence. "Les Français Epinglés", l'Express, Aug. 1-7, 1977, pp. 52-7.
2. For example:
Brault, Gerard. "Kinesics and the Classroom", French Review, Feb., 1963, pp. 374-82.
Niedzelski, Henri. The Silent Language of France: French Culture through French Gestures, Educational Research Associates, Dubuque, IA.
Wylie, Laurence, and Stafford, Rick. Beaux Gestes, A Guide to French Body Talk, E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1977.
3. Léon, Pierre. "Aspects Phonologiques des Niveaux de Langue", Le Français dans le Monde, no. 57, June 1968, p. 70.
4. Elkins, Robert, et al. "Teaching Culture through the Audio-Motor Unit", Foreign Language Annals, vol. 6, no. 1, Oct., 1972, p. 61-7.
5. Edgerton, Mills. "A Philosophy for the Teacher of Foreign Languages", Modern Language Journal, Jan., 1971, pp. 10-11.

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