

CULTURE SHOCK AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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RESUMO

Este trabalho teve como objetivo principal estudar os diversos tipos de reações emocionais experienciadas pelos missionários Mórmons Americanos, residentes em Vitória da Conquista, em virtude das diferenças culturais existentes entre o Brasil e os Estados Unidos da América. Pretendeu-se ainda, através deste trabalho, buscar subsídios visando ao estudo da importância da abordagem de aspectos interculturais no ensino/aprendizagem de uma língua estrangeira. Todos os participantes da pesquisa foram jovens missionários americanos, de 18 a 22 anos de idade, do sexo masculino e feminino, membros da Igreja de Jesus Cristo dos Santos do Últimos Dias, mais conhecida como Igreja dos Mórmons. Os dados foram coletados através de um questionário e de entrevistas. O questionário foi elaborado pelo pesquisador com base em leituras específicas e constou de perguntas relacionadas a choque cultural, cultura e o ensino de língua estrangeira, além de informação demográfica sobre os participantes. As entrevistas, também, versaram sobre choque cultural e aspectos de aculturação. Os dados coletados foram submetidos a testes estatísticos específicos para análise e interpretação. Já que se tratava, também, de uma pesquisa etnográfica, foram utilizados métodos descritivos para explicar os resultados das entrevistas. Concluiu-se que os participantes passaram por choques culturais dos mais diversos e que o ensino de uma língua estrangeira, juntamente com os seus aspectos culturais, é fundamental para um melhor entendimento e aceitação de uma determinada cultura.

INTRODUCTION

With the advance of technology, the world has become increasingly globalized. As a result, contact between peoples of different languages and cultures has increased a great deal. This, in turn, has required from all of us better knowledge, understanding and acceptance of different cultures and world views. As human beings we are not an island entire unto ourselves as was first said by Donne (1624) more than three centuries ago. We are a piece of the continent, a part of the main. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to investigate the diverse types of culture shock faced by American Mormon missionaries living in Vitória da Conquista, Bahia, Brazil, resulting from the large differences that exist between the cultures of Brazil and the United States of America. In addition, the objective of the study was to explore aspects of the acculturation process, as well as the importance of cross-cultural communication awareness in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL). Cross-cultural communication awareness, as it is treated in this paper, deals with everyday attitudes and feelings that are passed on not only through language specifically but by a number of paralinguistic features as well.

First, a brief description of culture shock and its general symptoms is given, followed by an overview of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and descriptions of the American missionaries and their daily routines while in Brazil. The study is described, and a discussion of the results of the survey conducted among the Mormons and the implications of these results for foreign language learning and teaching is presented.

Culture Shock

The term “culture shock” was first used by the anthropologist Oberg (1960) to refer to the anxiety that results from being exposed to an environment that is completely new. Bock (1970), on the other hand, sees culture shock as an emotional reaction due to the lack of control, understanding and prediction of other people’s behavior. According to Guanipa (1998), feelings of culture shock begin during the first weeks of exposure to the new environment, at which point culture shock is manifested by discomfort, both physical and emotional, which appear at different times. Generally speaking, the life style of the new environment is considered abnormal and unacceptable to the newcomer, compared to life “back home.” According to Oberg, the signs and symbols of social intercourse are completely different for the newcomer. The newcomer does not know how to orient himself/herself to the normal situations of daily life, such as: when to shake hands, what to say when meeting people, the right time to tip someone, when to accept and when to refuse invitations, when to take statements seriously and when not, etc., in addition to interpreting gestures, facial expressions and other customs and norms.

Symptoms of culture shock are diverse and can appear at any time, varying according to the person’s personality, mental health, and socioeconomic and educational background, and these symptoms occur even when the newcomer has some knowledge and familiarity with the language to which he/she is exposed. Guanipa (1998) cites the following as symptoms of culture shock:

- Sadness, loneliness, melancholy
- Preoccupation with health
- Aches, pains and allergies
- Insomnia, desire to sleep too much or too little
- Changes in temperament, depression, feeling vulnerable, feeling powerless
- Anger, irritability, resentment, unwillingness to interact with others
- Identifying with the old culture or idealizing the old country
- Loss of identity
- Trying too hard to absorb everything in the new culture or country
- Unable to solve simple problems

The above symptoms could probably be minimized, if not completely overcome, if foreign language teaching programs around the world included issues of intercultural communication and cross-cultural awareness in their curriculum.

Culture and EFL Teaching

The role of culture in language teaching has been one of conflict. It has been claimed that language and culture are one and the same and that it is impossible to disassociate the two in any real sense. There is an assumption that it is impossible to teach language without teaching culture. There are, however, two conflicting pedagogical views toward the role of culture in the teaching of EFL abroad, according to Alptekin and Alptekin (1984). One view, held mainly by native speakers of English, is that the teaching of English should be done taking into account the values and the sociocultural norms of the English-speaking country in order to form bilingual and bicultural individuals. Hyde (1994) points out that the separation of English from its cultural baggage would also strip students of very valuable knowledge. On the other hand, the view held largely by nonnative speakers of English is that the teaching of English should be done independently of its culture context with a view to creating bilingual, but not necessarily bicultural, individuals. Appel and Muysken (1987) write that it is not true that speaking a certain language inevitably leads to holding certain values and further that the relationship between language and culture does not seem to be as strong and fixed as was previously assumed. They contend that while there is a great involvement of language in the transmission of culture, different speech communities may use the same linguistic code (e.g., English) to accomplish the cultural needs of their respective groups.

Bearing these studies in mind, a study of Mormon missionaries living in Vitória da Conquista, Bahia, Brazil, was conducted to determine whether or not these missionaries went through any kind of culture shock while performing their work, and, if so, what type of culture shock they went through, how they dealt with it, and what they attempted to do to overcome the discomfort caused by culture shock. In addition, participants were asked about their views on culture and language teaching.

Brief Overview of the Mormon Church

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Hinckley, 1979), more commonly known as the "Mormon Church," was founded by Joseph Smith and five other men on April 6, 1830, in Fayette Township, New York, U.S.A. Due to religious discrimination, most Mormons left New York State and moved to Ohio in 1830-1831. By 1847, the majority began to move to the Salt Lake Valley in the future state of Utah. During this period, missionaries were already being sent to many countries all over the world.

Service is one of the principal tenets of the Mormon faith. Although there are many ways in which a Mormon may serve, serving as a missionary is one way that a Mormon may serve others. In 1830, four Mormon missionaries were sent to the western states of the U.S. to convert North American Indians. In 1837, missionaries were sent to Great Britain. By 1848, missionaries were being sent to Canada, France, Italy, the Scandinavian countries, Malta, India, the Pacific islands and also to Chile. Today, Mormon missionaries go at their own expense all over the world.

The majority of Mormon missionaries are young men aged 19 to 21, although women also participate. These young people may serve as missionaries between the

ages of 19 and 26. The young men's missions last for two years and the women's last eighteen months, during which time they do not return to the United States. Usually, these young missionaries know very little about the country to which they are being sent. They are required to write letters home once a week and are allowed to telephone home only twice a year, on Mother's Day and Christmas. While in the mission country, they are not allowed to speak English unless absolutely necessary.

Generally, these young missionaries have not traveled outside the United States before they arrive in Brazil. Usually, they are at an age when they have not yet formed definite opinions about what course they should take in life. In other words, they are impressionable and possibly may adjust more rapidly to new environments than older adults would. However, at the same time, they do not have much experience to draw upon when confronted with completely new situations.

Although most of these missionaries receive two months of intensive language training before they are sent to a particular country to do missionary work, most seem to lack cultural and philosophical knowledge of the host country, generally resulting in moderate to serious problems associated with culture shock.

General Characteristics of the Mormon Missionaries in Vitória da Conquista, Bahia

Each missionary is assigned a partner (called a "companion"); therefore, they are almost always seen in pairs. The companion may be a Brazilian Mormon or an American. There is a standard dress code for the young men: slacks, dress shoes (not tennis shoes or sandals), a white dress shirt (no T-shirts or sleeveless shirts) and a tie. Note that this attire would not be the normal, everyday attire of the young men in the United States, unless they worked for a firm that required such a dress code. The women are required to wear skirts of a length that covers the knees, usually down to their ankles, and their blouses have sleeves that go down to the elbows. They are not allowed to wear sunglasses since this is thought to create distance between themselves and potential converts. All of the missionaries have completed four years of secondary education.

The young missionaries are not allowed to use their first names but are instead addressed as "Elder," for example, "Elder Smith," in the case of the men, and "Sister" in the case of the women (e.g., "Sister Jones"). A name plate with the words "Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints" and the missionary's title and last name is attached to their shirt pocket, in the case of the men, and to the blouse in the case of the women.

Each day of the week is very highly structured and scheduled, with almost no free time. In fact, they carry a preprinted schedule which they mark when certain tasks are completed. (Their "free time" is often spent by writing their weekly letters home and by doing their laundry.) The young missionaries spend their days walking the streets of their assigned neighborhoods within the city, knocking on doors and introducing themselves, making appointments to return and deliver their message to potential converts (called "investigators"), going for lunch at homes of local members or investigators, going to church, going to the post office, and travelling to conferences.

Prior to their arrival in Brazil, they have no idea to which city they will be assigned. Further, every few months or so, the missionaries may be transferred to other neighborhoods or cities with little advance warning.

THE STUDY

The study was conducted by means of a questionnaire and informal interviews. Authorization for the participation of the Mormon missionaries was given by the Mormon church's district president in Salvador, Bahia. The questionnaire was constructed by the researcher, and the questions dealt with demographic information, culture shock symptoms, acculturation and foreign language teaching. Informal interviews were conducted through appointments and casual encounters.

The participants of the study were 29 Mormon missionaries from the United States. Although the missionaries came from all over the U.S., most were from the state of Utah. Also, the participants came from cities and towns of various population sizes. A breakdown of survey participants by gender, ability to speak Portuguese and average months in Brazil is given in Table 1. Of the 29 participants, 27 were male and two were female. Average ages were 20 years for men and 22 for women.

All participants had studied Brazilian Portuguese for an average of two months before coming to Brazil, and a few studied more after their arrival. However, only 16 had studied aspects of Brazilian culture (although in a very superficial way) through encyclopedia articles, video and slide shows, and by talking with Brazilian friends or persons who had been to Brazil before. The participants had already been in Brazil for a period of from 3 to 15 months at the time of the study. The great majority of them (93%) had never lived abroad before.

Table 1

Breakdown of survey participants by gender, self-rated ability to speak Portuguese, and average months in Brazil

	Male	Female						
Gender	27	2						
Average Ages	20	22						
			Low Beginning	Beginning	Low Intermediate	Intermediate	Advanced	High Advanced
Ability to Speak Portuguese	0	3	1	15	8	1		
Average Months in Brazil	0	3	10	7	11	15		

All of the participants had, in one way or another, experienced at least one of the symptoms of cultural shock listed in the questionnaire (see Tables 2 and 3). A large majority of the respondents (59%) marked A (*Longing for family*) as the number one symptom. Unlike the larger American culture, the culture of the Mormons seems to be very family oriented, and the sizes of the families tend to be larger. There is an emphasis on what the Mormon church considers to be the “proper” roles of the father, the mother and the children within the family. This family “closeness” may be the reason for so many missionaries experiencing a longing for family.

Preoccupation with health (B) was the second most occurring symptom with a score of 48%. Preoccupation with health seems to be of great concern in American culture. Nearly all Americans have access to sources of safe drinking water, but while in Brazil the missionaries are instructed to drink only bottled or boiled water. The missionaries would also be made aware of the existence of tropical diseases heretofore unknown to them. Furthermore, they are required to take a prescription medication for the elimination of intestinal parasites, once every six months. All of this would certainly heighten their anxiety with regard to their own health. Americans, in general, may be culturally more preoccupied with health concerns than Brazilians. It is well known that many Americans remain in jobs (or take jobs) that they dislike because of the health insurance benefits, which demonstrates the importance placed on access to health care in the United States.

Lack of confidence (C) came in third place with 45%. In informal interviews, the missionaries related that during the months in which they felt their language skills were inadequate, they felt a lack of confidence that inhibited their ability to speak Portuguese. They stated that they did not want to make mistakes and that many times they did not have the words to express what they wanted to say. This was a time of awkwardness for them and may also be the cause for the high number of missionaries who experienced D and E (*Feelings of inadequacy or insecurity and sadness*; and *Loneliness and melancholy*, respectively), both experienced by 38% of the respondents. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents reported experiencing F (*Changes in temperament, depression, feeling of vulnerability and powerlessness*), while 24% had developed stereotypes about the new culture (G). These stereotypes were largely related to what the missionaries perceived as the Bahian living habits that run counter to the teachings of the Mormon church, e.g., drinking alcohol and the resultant effect of alcohol on behavior. Only 14% of the participants marked item H (*Insomnia, desire to sleep too much or too little*), making it the symptom least experienced by all the respondents.

The researcher considered that there might be a correlation between the number of symptoms experienced and the population size of the home town of the respondent, due perhaps to a “city kid” or “country boy” effect, but there was no such correlation. Respondents from both large cities and small towns experienced the same levels of culture shock.

Table 2

Respondents (n = 29) were asked to indicate all symptoms they had while living in their new

Number Responding	% of Total	Symptoms
17	59%	A. Longing for
14	48%	B. Preoccupation with
13	45%	C. Lack of
11	38%	D. Feelings of inadequacy or
11	38%	E. Sadness, loneliness,
8	28%	F. Changes in temperament, feeling vulnerable or
7	24%	G. Developing stereotypes about the new
4	14%	H. Insomnia, desire to sleep too much or too

Table 3

Number of Symptoms Experienced by the Respondents

For example, nine respondents had at least two symptoms of culture shock; three respondents experienced six symptoms.

Nº. symptoms Respondents	Zero	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six	Seven	Eight
	3	4	9	2	2	3	3	1	1

When the respondents were asked what they would do to overcome the symptoms that they had had, most indicated that they would resort to prayer. Talking to friends, writing home, working, “go with the flow” and “give it time” were other strategies used to cope.

Examples of cultural discomfort experienced by the missionaries

In the final section of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to describe a time when cultural differences put them in an awkward position or caused any kind of constraint. Below are some of the responses given by the participants:

“About a month after I arrived here, I had a good story. I was walking down the road, and I said, ‘Tudo bem’ [Everything okay?] to a man on the side of the road. He responded, ‘Vai tomar no...’ [up yours]. I smiled and replied with a thumbs up. My companion told me later what had happened.”

“When I first arrived here in Brazil, I was eating lunch one day and a woman offered me a chicken’s foot. I refused to eat it, but I felt bad afterwards because I thought I might have hurt the woman’s feelings.”

“I was in a house of an investigator [prospective new member of the church], and they had made a huge meal for us. My companion and I tried to eat as much as we could, but finally we had to

stop. We couldn't eat any more. When our friend that fixed the meal for us saw what we hadn't eaten, she started to cry, thinking that we didn't like her food. We tried our best to convince her that we couldn't eat any more and that the food was great, but she wouldn't believe us. In America, if you eat too much they think that you are a pig; in Brazil, if you don't eat like a pig they think you are insulting their food."

"Today we were eating in the house of a friend, and I said that I didn't want any more food because I was full. He said (or rather advised) me that to say 'I'm full' has a different implication, here. Also, every day, I make mistakes with the humor of Brazilians. The humor here is more simple and childlike."

"As missionaries, oftentimes, members of the church will give us lunch. Once, I had finished lunch, and the *domo* [host] asked me if lunch 'foi lavagem.' I was thinking that *lavagem* was a play on *lavar* [to wash], or that he was asking if I had cleaned my plate. But, I had responded positively to the question of whether the food was 'pig-slog,' instead. Fortunately, members [of the church] understood and were notorious for joking around with 'greenies.' "

"I was eating at a family's house here and they had nothing. I had no idea how they bought the food that we were going to eat. So, I told them I didn't want to eat because I didn't like it. They looked at me and felt bad. But after I knew what I had done, I smiled and started to eat. I learned that lunch here, or food in general, is something very important to these people."

"The Brazilian people are very blunt. Many times it seems like they don't think twice about your feelings. If you're fat, they tell you that you're fat; if you're ugly, they tell you that you're ugly. One time, I was speaking with a couple and trying to explain something to them. After I finished, the man just looked at me like I was an idiot and couldn't speak and looked at my companion who was a Brazilian. He didn't put forth the effort to understand, especially because I was with a Brazilian. This happens a lot when an American is with a Brazilian. They don't pay attention and just listen to the Brazilian. That really bothers me, when the majority of educated people understand what we say as Americans."

"We were visiting a family during my first month here in Brazil, and during our conversation, the mother just started breast-feeding in front of us. I wasn't really sure what to do or think, but I guess the best thing to do is act like nothing different is happening."

"One time I was talking to a girl about religion, and I told her, 'you are very interesting' in Portuguese [*interessante*], instead of 'you are very smart' [*inteligente*]. The two words are almost exactly the same in Portuguese, and it sounded to her like I was trying to pick her up or something."

"It's been awkward sometimes with the kind of food we're offered. I eat things here to be polite that I would never have considered eating in the United States, like cow's stomach, brains, etc. Sometimes, I don't understand the slang very well. I heard a song called 'Galinha da Visinha' [literally, 'the neighbor's chicken'; colloquially, the meaning is far less respectful], and I thought it was literally talking about the neighbor's chicken. Another time, a guy walked by me and said, 'O pecador' [sinner]. I didn't understand him and cordially said, 'Boa noite' [good evening]. It caught him off guard."

DISCUSSION

All of the testimonies, above, given by the participants, demonstrate, to a certain extent, the problems of cross-cultural communication. Some of the problems are cultural and others are purely linguistic. The fact is that these are problems, nonetheless, and they can (and have) caused discomfort and miscommunication between members of

two culturally different social groups. Some of the testimonies given by the American Mormon missionaries are perfectly understandable and expected, considering the impact of culture shock (discussed in the comments of Table 2). However, we may consider some of the events to be somewhat extreme and therefore cannot be thought of as general indications of normal occurrences in Brazilian culture, for example, the testimony about the woman who cried when the guests did not take second helpings of food.

Most of the Mormons participating in the study were fairly fluent in the Portuguese language. In fact, none of the participants indicated that their ability to speak Portuguese was at a low level, not even those who had been in Brazil for only three months at the time of the study (Table 1). Fifteen of the Mormons rated their ability to speak Portuguese as intermediate, even though they had been in Brazil for only seven months. Surprisingly, eight of the 29 participants self-rated their ability to speak Portuguese as advanced, after having been in Brazil for 11 months. What can be observed here is that the majority of the informants generally believe they have a reasonable command of the Portuguese language. On the other hand, the missionaries appear to lack any philosophical or social knowledge of Brazilian culture, making them into what Bennett (1997) terms “fluent fools,” or people who are fluent in a foreign language but lack the social or philosophical content of that language. “Such people are likely to get into all sorts of trouble because both they and others overestimate their abilities. They may be invited into complicated social situations where they cannot understand the events deeply enough to avoid giving or taking offense.” (p. 16)

According to Brown (1994), the “affective domain” [“the emotional side of human behavior” (Brown, 1994, p. 135)] cannot be separated from the learning of a language and its consequent use with others. According to the definition of Krathwohl, Bloom and Masia (as cited in Brown, 1994), the development of affectivity begins with “receiving.” Receiving is an awareness of the environment, a consciousness of situations, a willingness to tolerate a stimulus and a willingness to give controlled or selected attention to the stimulus. However, it is necessary to go beyond receiving to “responding,” which is a willingness to commit to something, to respond voluntarily and to receive satisfaction from the response given (Krathwohl *et al.*, in Brown).

In order to respond correctly and elicit the highest degree of comfort in the native speaker, it is necessary for the learner to “value” the observed behavior of the native speaker. Value creation is perhaps one of the most important requirements for acculturation or adapting to the new culture. Adapting to the new culture reduces gradually the symptoms of culture shock; that is, anxieties, frustrations and lack of confidence subside. Such acculturation requires a “reorientation of thinking and feeling” according to Brown (1994, p. 169).

“Empathy” is another type of social transaction that is important to the learner. Some type of personal rapport or affinity must “bridge the gap” between the language learner and the native speaker. Empathy is created when the learner gives selected attention to a new stimulus, responds appropriately, and both parties receive satisfaction from their own responses and the ones that they are given in return. Once a good level of comfort is achieved, we can say that empathy has been created between the two parties. The development of empathy is crucial to moving towards “sympathy” or

philosophical agreement between the two parties (Brown, 1994). Sympathy is the primary objective and the instrumental goal of the missionaries. They desire to get their message across as quickly and to as many potential converts as possible. Anything that interferes with communication and sympathy creation is a deterrent to their mission. Their motivation for learning Portuguese is “instructive” rather than “integrative” [Gardner and Lambert, as cited in Brown (1994)], meaning that the missionaries’ goal is specific and is not related to their becoming members of Brazilian society. They are not in Brazil as tourists or even as typical sojourners like business people, but rather as *instructive sojourners* whose objective leaves little time for the absorption of “Big C” culture (i.e., literature, art, architecture, music, dance) but causes them to be exposed primarily to “little c” culture (everyday behaviors: forms of greetings and leave takings, meal times, birthdays, weddings, grocery shopping, etc.) (Hadley, 1993, p. 362). Since the missionaries’ sole motive is instructive, little or no emphasis is placed on acculturation in their language training. In fact, because their access to normal channels of “Big C” culture is extremely limited while they are in Brazil (e.g., they are not allowed to watch television or use the Internet, and they have no time to read Brazilian literature or go to museums or cultural events), it is difficult to see how they could avoid forming adverse cultural stereotypes of Brazilians. In fact, due to their religious mission, they may view many normal Brazilian behaviors as “incorrect” simply because the observed behavior does not conform to Mormon church teachings. This would likely cause them to “judge” most of what they observe, using a religious “lens,” and hence would inhibit the creation of feelings of value for the new culture or of empathy with the native speaker. As Brown clearly states: “The most destructive aspect of stereotyping is that which is derogatory or falls short of valuing and prizing people from different cultures.” (p. 167) A “bad attitude” would certainly inhibit their learning Portuguese.

It is also interesting to note that many of the problems related in the testimonies reported above are concerned with food. Eating habits are, indeed, a major concern in intercultural settings. What is eaten in a certain country or region, is obviously not eaten in another. Also, the whole context of eating varies from culture to culture. In Brazilian culture, for example, children are taught to offer whatever they are eating to other children around them, just out of politeness. If a visitor comes to someone’s house while the family is eating any meal, he/she will be invited, sometimes insistently, to join the family. Whether or not to accept the invitation is a matter of cultural knowledge. On the other hand, in the United States, children are taught not to ask for too much food since this is considered greedy.

We should also take into consideration that these missionaries spend a good deal of their time trying to convert Bahians who are economically disadvantaged. Much of the missionaries’ discomfort seems to stem from social interaction with these less advantaged native speakers. Since the majority of the missionaries are from middle class American families (the missionaries’ families pay US\$375 per month for two years, or 18 months, to support their children on the mission), there seems to be a very obvious economic disparity between their own backgrounds and those of their prospective converts. The missionaries (who receive the Brazilian minimum wage while on the mission) usually become acutely aware of the huge cost to the native speakers of

providing large meals just for the purpose of giving hospitality to the missionaries. This causes the missionaries to feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. They feel they must limit their intake of food in order to preserve it for the family offering it, not realizing that the offering of food is an important way for these Bahians to show hospitality. The uncomfortable missionary then searches for ways to decline the food offered and ends up personally offending or hurting the feelings of the hosts.

We also know that there are subcultures within a certain culture, and there are cultural differences based on social status. The fact that one of the hostesses cried because the missionary did not want to eat more of her food seems to be exceptional and odd behavior. As for the chicken foot being refused by a missionary, it is also true that many Brazilians would have refused to eat it. And there are also many Brazilians who would never eat brains or cow stomach, even out of politeness.

The use of gesture (and body language as a whole) is another aspect that differs from culture to culture. For example, the American gesture used for “okay” in Brazil means “up yours.” The thumb gesture used for hitchhiking in the United States is similar to what is used in Brazil for “okay.” Also, in Brazilian culture, as well as in other cultures around the world, playing with words is very common, which can be a problem for nonnative speakers. A word or expression used in one context can mean something entirely different in another. This is the reason the respondent became confused with the expression “the neighbor’s chicken” mentioned in the testimony above.

During informal interviews with various missionaries, it was apparent that they often experienced frustration when partnered with a Brazilian companion. Often, during visits to homes of prospective converts, the American half of the pair felt ignored and left out by the Brazilians. These Americans were mildly irritated because even though they felt that they spoke understandable Portuguese (see Table 1: the abilities are self-rated), the native-speaker missionary was the one who was listened to. The American missionaries often stated that the prospective convert looked at them blankly as if they had not understood a word that the American missionary had said. On occasion, the Brazilian missionaries even told the American missionaries not to speak at all. This is an example of the missionary experiencing a sense that he or she is not valued, in which the native speaker has used a negative stereotype.

CONCLUSIONS

In my opinion, most of the misunderstandings reported above could have been avoided if the participants had been made aware of certain aspects of Brazilian culture. This awareness could have been obtained during the two months of intensive language training the missionaries received before coming to Brazil. The missionaries, in informal interviews, indicated that they would have been better prepared to face the problems of cross-cultural communication if the topic of cultural differences had been addressed more specifically.

How can these problems be addressed during the relatively short period of language training (two months or less) that the missionaries receive prior to beginning

their mission in Brazil? Given that the time is so short, it would seem inexpedient to set time aside to try to teach these young people to identify their own cultural lenses before teaching them to view cultural situations through the lens of an entirely new culture. How then to teach them to avoid “little c” *faux pas*? First and foremost, they should be instructed to expect discomfort and the occasional, awkward situation. It should be emphasized that culture shock is perfectly normal and will pass with time. Secondly, they can be informed that their prospective converts also have difficulty and discomfort in their presence. This may especially be the case when dealing with economically disadvantaged persons living in the interior of Bahia, the vast majority of whom have never had contact with any foreigners, much less young Americans on a mission. The new missionaries need to be informed that they will be exposed to many different layers of Brazilian society and that they cannot expect all people to respond to them in the same way, that they should give care and concern to persons who are not prepared socially for visits from “foreigners” who may be perceived as equally strange through the eyes of the native speaker.

There are several ways in which discomfiting situations may be made familiar to the missionaries during their language training. However, due to lack of time, there are two particular methods which may be used to good effect and will not take up too much time in getting their points across. One method would be to use cross-cultural role playing (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993) that is specific to the problems encountered in everyday social interactions. Role plays of everyday informal family meals can be included in the missionaries’ training. Given the enormous number of missionaries that are sent to Brazil each year (more than 1,000), it should not be difficult to locate returning missionaries who can relate their own experiences to the learners. Another method would be to incorporate “native informants” in the classroom (Hadley, 1993). A significant number of missionaries actually end up returning to the country of their mission in order to marry Mormons from that country. As a result, there are a number of Brazilians now living in Utah. Both returning missionaries and native speakers could be incorporated into the classroom. It should be simple enough to demonstrate the common ways of greeting, introduction and leave taking. In fact, it is especially important to do so because the male missionaries are not allowed to have physical contact with female investigators and female missionaries are not allowed to have such contact with male investigators. (Shaking hands is allowed.) Since hugging and kissing on the cheek are normal ways to greet friends in Brazil, it is imperative that the missionaries be taught a non-embarrassing way to refuse this type of greeting. Situations when something goes wrong because of cultural misunderstandings are referred to as “critical incidents” by Tomalin and Stempleski, and these can be described and discussed in the classroom.

The importance of teaching language learners to try to value what they may initially perceive as strange behavior on the part of native speakers cannot be over-emphasized. There is a strong human tendency to reject that which is strange. Rejection may be followed by ridicule. (Rejection and ridicule are manifestations of culture shock.) Ridicule lends itself to negative stereotyping. Neither rejection nor ridicule is conducive to the furthering of acculturation or language learning.

We can conclude that culture plays an important role in the teaching of a foreign language and that a language should not be taught separately from its cultural aspects.

When we teach language separately from culture, we, as foreign language teachers, may be preventing students from acquiring valuable cultural knowledge necessary for communication and cultural adjustment. Teachers of foreign languages need to make students aware of the need to understand cultural differences and to make them aware that, as expressed by Brown (1994), not everyone in the world is “just like me.” It is important to impress upon students of foreign languages that the values of other cultures are just as important as their own values, and they should make every attempt to value the new culture and see it through the eyes of its native speakers.

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