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FILTERING ESP 'THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS' OF ART AND CULTURE FOR LIFE SCIENCE STUDENTS

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Abstract

With this paper we approach the much-trodden path of the part played by culture within the economy of any foreign language acquisition process, with a view to filtering its utmost importance under the current turmoiled inter-cultural context. Once regarded as the colourful backdrop of any setting architectured to facilitate the teaching of a new language, cultural aspects, otherwise organically linked to that particular system of communication, seem to act as insightful accelerators of a thorough understanding of the anthropologic matrix of the target language. The aim of the paper is to approach the phenomenon of teaching English for Specific Purposes to Romanian life science students, in search of a 'bridge' that could span between the realm of science and academic communication patterns and the endless kingdom of creativity and artistic imagination. We embark upon this journey with one goal in mind, that of sculpturing mindsets, encouraging respect for other people and their cultural heritage, while fostering a clear understanding of the interrelation of language and human nature. A rather unusual research tool, the tree, both as a core element of the plant kingdom, as well as a metaphorical construct has been selected to act as the figurative 'axis mundi' of the study that intends to 'weigh' students' responses to the challenges implied not only by the accurate decoding of scientific constructs and language, but also by a genuine understanding of the imbedded cultural symbolism which projects the story onto an altogether greater canvas.

Keywords: ESP; linguaculture/languaculture; communication 'iridescence'; context; poetics of language.

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1. Introduction

In her study *Context and culture in language teaching*, Claire Kramsch states that culture is not just the "expendable fifth [language] skill", besides speaking, listening, reading, and writing as she regards it to be "always in the background right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging the ability to make sense of the world around them" (Kramsch, 2004, 1). I would go further by saying that culture fosters an appetite for opening to new learning experiences, for exploring new territories within the matrix of the target language, whose absence would only make the journey blurry and somewhat erratic. It is time we all understood that culture "has always been touched but not hugged dearly enough" (Vahdani, 2005, 93) and that it should no longer be regarded as "peripheral consideration" (Warford & White, 2012, 400), and if one simply casts a glance at the ways of the world one experiences today, such a remark erupts with the force of an utmost severe diagnosis.

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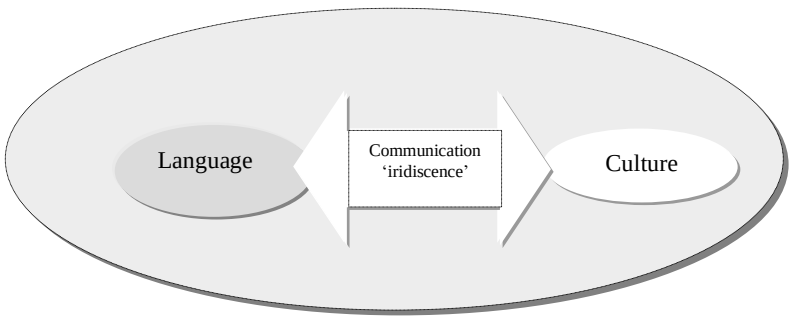
This is the framework of analysis the present article intends to set up, as it explores the rough terrain of scientific communication and its thought-provoking geography that leaves little room to a second, more colourful and customized reading of the map. Nevertheless, this abrupt, clear-cut delineation between the two legends of the map, the analytical and the symbolic one, with the latter stretching its skylines into infinity, has proven its vulnerability with its single-faceted perspective. As in a play, the setting is represented by the English language course tailored for undergraduate science students, with a special focus on life science-related specializations (i.e. biology, plant-science) with a view to broadening their understanding of the world not only through scientifically conveyed content, but also through a much wider webbing of information that derives from it; if Culture, with capital 'c' becomes another legend of the map, the more complete its understanding. It is not only a matter of enabling students to communicate confidently and effectively in their usual study environment, as it is a question of discovering a path towards mixing critical thinking tools with creative thinking ones.

One may suggest that one of the commonest idioms in English, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", with just a mere selection of familiar words plays with a scientific truth reflected by the fact that the most amazing and striking colours of the peacock feathers are nothing but a "translation" of the structural elements that make up the stunning beauty of the peacock's eye pattern. Beyond the brownish pigment of the tail feathers, it is their microscopic structure that makes them reflect blue, turquoise, and green light, mesmerizing not only the mating partner, but all those who contemplate them. In a somewhat symbolic key, the double-layered approach of this paper intends to capture the iridescence of cultural aspects amid the robust scientific truths since "[t]he need to understand culture and worldviews other than one's own has critical personal, social, economic, and cultural importance in our increasingly diverse, mobile, and globalized society" (Garret-Rucks, 2013, 191).

2. Linguaculture / Languaculture

Recorded in a manuscript in 1988, the term 'linguaculture', coined by the linguistic anthropologist Paul Friedrich and first published in a 1989 article on the relationship between political economy, ideology, and language was thought to act as mediator between language and culture, whose inseparability is now beyond question.

Figure 1. 'Linguaculture'



Displacing either of the two aspects from their symbiotic relationship would simply dissociate one's role as an individual from that of a social being, threatening the very essence of culture and its thorough understanding, which is about preserving this delicate balance. Understanding culture refers to connecting one's self to the larger social network of individualities, acknowledged and acclaimed as such. Similarly, in the academic environment of EFL course, the teacher, cautious not to hegemonize (Johnson, 2005, 2), is summoned to integrate culture within the curriculum; it is not only a strategy to avoid miscommunication, it is inevitable whenever one operates with incongruent elements of either cultural or linguistic nature, a must in an increasingly ever more globalized world, in continuous evolution and transformation. It is not only the world and the way in which it evolves that undergo significant changes, it is also the tools that are destined to map its newly configured geographies that adapt and (re)invent themselves.

In his book *Language Shock. Understanding the Culture of Conversation*, professor Michel Agar redefined the term 'linguaculture' to 'languaculture' saying that "I modified it to "langua" to bring it in line with the more commonly used "language"' (Agar, 1994, 265), in a construct that was conceived to bring together discourse and meaning and travel well beyond them.

> Language, in all its varieties, in all the ways it appears in everyday life, builds a world of meanings. When you run into different meanings, when you become aware of your own and work to build a bridge to the others, 'culture' is what you're up to. Language fills the spaces between us with sound; culture forges the human connection through them. Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture (Agar, 1994, 28).

The American cognitive linguistic anthropologist does much more than merely reinventing a term, he imagines an open geometry of communication which escapes what he refers to as "the tendency (…) to draw a circle around language" that would only limit the latter to a complex set of rules at the expense of what, by far, is the most important aspect, namely "the meaning that travels well beyond the dictionary, meaning that tells you who you are, whom you're dealing with, the kind of situation you're in, how life works and what's important in it" (Agar, 1994, 16). 'Languaculture' becomes thus an individual construct amplified through connectivity and openness, a fact that can only further acknowledge its relational nature, that focuses on the semantics and pragmatics of language. Languages have evolved under the exact same challenge, permeated by different exogenous sociolinguistic vectors. What Agar managed to highlight is the amplified dimension of communication, the articulation of a coherent discourse, for his focus of interest fell neither on words, nor on longer and more complex structures, such as sentences or phrases, that would have only projected disparate, sequential elements; the pivotal element remains the production of an articulated discourse that includes within its poetics not only what has been said, but also what has remained unuttered.

In line with Michel Agar's proposed concept and terminology, the Danish professor Karen Risager decided to consider cultural and social anthropology in terms of "rethinking of the relationship between language and culture" (Risager, 2020, 113). She thus acknowledges the cognitive aspect of culture in language, a vital element in her understanding of 'languaculture', a term she would later abandon, as she would continue to refer to this intricate fabric through the term linguaculture that she considers to be "a more straightforward term for linguists" (Risager, 2020, 113). In stating her position, she departs from the two major philosophies that have defined the relationship between language and culture over the past centuries, the first one arguing that there is an inseparable connection between the two, whereas the second one looks at language from a culturally neutral perspective, for "it is possible to study language as a structure or a functional system without reference to cultural and historical context of use" (Risager, 2020, 113-114).

What professor Risager suggests is that although language and culture can, at some point, be separated, a language can never be "culturally neutral" (Risager, 2020, 114). Furthermore, she enriches the double-layered perspective of any language system that refers to the linguistic practice and the "linguistic resources in the individual subject" (Risager, 2020, 114) with a third layer, namely the idea of "the language" or "the language system" conceived as an organic system, be it object, organism or individual. As in a symbolically reverse Enigma inspired story, it is no longer the robustness of linguistic codes that gain supremacy, as the object of interest lies now on the *content* and *meaning* that travel beyond them. Karen Risager also makes room within this construct for the poetic dimension of 'linguaculture' which travels with the richness of meaning brought about by the dance of constant linguistic interplay.

The linguistic and with it, individual identity are difficult to separate from one another, the two forging a unique and vibrant construct. In the eighth chapter of her book *Language and Culture: Global Flows and Local Complexity*, entitled "Languacultural Dimensions", Risager speaks of the linguistic and poetic resources engaged in a development of competences in what she refers to as "a life-perspective". "Depending on their social and personal circumstances, the individuals develop various poetic resources in connection with their first language, both receptively and productively. If

they migrate, they naturally take their poetic resources with them, and these perhaps gradually change as they come into contact with other poetic traditions" (Risager, 2006, 126).

2.1. 'Languaculture' in foreign language education

Beyond the refined intricacy of the relationship between language and culture especially when the binomial structure refers to the language "only in its function as a first language" (Risager, 2020, 117), case in which the Danish scholar acknowledges its undeniable inseparability, the powerful connection does not dim its nature not even when it is summoned to mediate between different pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic systems, as is the case in foreign language teaching. It may not be too much to say that the more an individual is exposed to various contexts of communication imbedded within different linguacultural canvases, the greater the chances that (s)he may infuse the communication context with their own poetic resources, developed in connection to their first language and poured onto the communication product of the target language whose 'languacultural' amplitude grows exponentially. The permeation process is reversible, creating thus a dynamic that constantly shifts perspective from first language to target language and the other way round.

Learning a foreign language and journeying into one of its specialized terminologies translates an allegorical form of migration; the accuracy of the decoding process lies not only in a flawless mastery of both the scientific and linguistic codes, but also in the successful migration of the decoder from one linguistic system to another. There is much more in the institution of the reader than the mere existence of a recipient, translator of a certain code; reading a text is a form of appropriating it while creating new contexts of interpretation and expression, an enduring translation of poetic resources as seeded in the 'languacultural' matrix of the interpreter-creator.

"Culture is … *what happens to you* when you encounter differences, become aware of something in yourself, and work to figure out why the differences appeared. Culture is an awareness, a consciousness, one that reveals the hidden self and opens paths to other ways of being" (Agar, 1994, 20). Transferring these thoughts onto the field of foreign language teaching with a particular focus on science, one may consider embracing all those inherent differences with a special poetics of a linguacultural nature, in search not of a more precise decoding of the message, but with the will to travel far beyond the texture of the scientific decorum. 'Languaculture' become thus as much a participatory presence in the process of foreign language education as any of its par-excellence constituent parts.

Claire Kramsch (2004) identified three ways in which language and culture can be brought together and they may even apply to the field of ESP, when language learning targets a very narrow and cryptic specialism – science. First, she argued, language is the vehicle of expressing cultural reality and with it come along people's ideas and attitudes; then, language embodies cultural reality, as people transfer meaning to their experience, and finally, people appropriate reality through language, as part of their social and personal identity. Although it is difficult to imagine that all students may be physically immersed into the cultural backdrop of the target language, teaching strategies should always consider the importance of accommodating not only specific grammar and vocabulary notions, but also details about the culture of the target language, which, once placed in context will help students to better grasp, visualize and understand reality. They will filter it through their own idiolects and 'languaculture', and even if they are not able to seize the entire perspective of the picture, they will be ready to properly breathe it in when the time of the real encounter comes along. Regardless of the adopted learning strategy, the aim of teaching culture fosters a genuine awareness of the target culture, inspiring students to build their knowledge on a research-minded scaffolding, supported by insatiable curiosity, interest, emotional intelligence and empathy. Even in the narrowest of specialisms there is always room for some cultural intarsia that could, in more instances than one, steer students towards a new direction of research; and even if it may not add to its intrinsic scientific validity, it would certainly complement it with invaluable details. The magic of it resides in the fact that in the process of acquiring a new language as a foreign language, a student will constantly adapt his/her

'languaculture' to the target language, in a process that recommends its reversibility as a means of enriching both sides.

3. The image of the tree as a symbolic 'axis mundi' in an ESP context

In 1968, Yale professor Nelson Brooks, while striving to define the concept of 'culture' so as 'not to lose sight of the individual', bewildered at the number of meanings recorded by dictionaries, adopted the so-called Humpty-Dumpty approach "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean neither more nor less" (Brooks, 1968, 210). After a sound analysis of all the meanings listed by such lexicographic repositories, he came with a series of five concepts which he assimilated to 'growth'; 'refinement'; 'literature and fine arts'; 'patterns of living'; 'the sum total of a way of life', with a special focus on number 4, '**patterns of living**' - the one that should receive a major emphasis in the classroom.

"Culture4 refers to the individual's role in the unending kaleidoscope of life situations of every kind and the rules and models for attitude and conduct in them. By reference to these models, every human being, from infancy onward, justifies the world to himself as best as he can, associates with those around him, and relates to the social order to which he is attached" (Brooks, 1968, 210).

Professor Brooks' Culture4 concept singles out the same mechanisms we choose to refer to as *communication 'iridescence'*, thus defining a concept that encapsulates the philosophy of cross-cultural communication in which the journey from the first language to the target language is substantially enriched and nuanced by the personal cultural heritage of the traveller, symbolically regarded as either a mere visitor or an enchanted dweller, a future resident within the realm of foreign utterance. With the enchanted, future dweller identity in mind, we set out on a journey that has undergraduate, intermediate to upper intermediate level (B1-B2) second language students from Iași University of Life Sciences as its protagonists, and the seminars of English for Specific Purposes as its setting. The principal focus during seminar hours is on improving students' communication skills and offering them practice, as well as on developing the most common tasks required by a future researcher, a fact that implies the use of situation-based activities that encourage students to practice the language and communication skills learnt in realistic contexts, the use of specific topics based on examples selected from published scientific research, always with a constant focus on using the relevant vocabulary presented in professional contexts.

Little room for cultural intarsia, one would say; nevertheless, we decided to allure students into discovering a different story about one of the commonest elements in the plant kingdom, visited, at some point, during the English course, and extensively at plant anatomy lectures and seminars. The situation presents itself with the fascinating topic of biomimetics where students explore different examples of the way in which living organisms have been studied with a curios eye and an inquisitive mind in order to transfer their properties to various human applications and discover the way in which biophilic ideas have been translated directly from nature to the world of science and technology. Caught in this marriage between nature and science, as biomimetics is the science and philosophy of learning from nature, comes the image of the tree, a woody perennial defined as "a perennial plant with a self-supporting woody main stem, usually developing woody branches at some distance from the ground and growing to a considerable height and size" (Wilson, 2021).

Of the eight approaches to teaching culture identified by Hans Heinrich Stern (1992, 223-232), we decided to integrate within the course, as a means of opening new windows towards a more complex and thought-provoking understanding of the real world, two of the techniques mentioned, namely 'creating an authentic classroom environment' (by means of using displays and realia provided by the augmented reality that explores the invisible life within the plant organism itself) and the culture capsule that opens an invitation onto the world of arts and architecture, encouraging an appetite for new explorations of both territories and ideas/concepts/imagery. Throughout time, science and art have both been constantly fuelled by human imagination and feelings, and inspiration has always been at the heart of both scientific and artistic discoveries. One of the UNESCO reports (*Our Creative*

Diversity, Paris 1997), after having studied the interactions between culture and development, acknowledged the fact that culture has a big influence on the way we think, create and behave. Encouraged and animated by such results, students are invited to 'visit' trees in a totally different context, though equally captivating and rewarding. The tree becomes the axis around which evolve works of art and architecture, just as much as trees continue to inspire some of the most contemporary architects (Diébédo Francis Kéré, Sou Fujimoto) to craft original designs.

Famous for his philosophy of designing architecture in harmony with man and nature, Friedensreich Hundertwasser is the mastermind behind one of Vienna's most visited and beautiful buildings which has also become part of the country's cultural heritage, The Hundertwasserhaus. Not only are passers-by fascinated by the colourfully decorated exterior façade, they soon discover the architect's innovative ideas, the 'tree tenants' and the 'window right' which means that anyone who lives in the house has the right to decorate the façade around the windows entirely to their own taste, and the obligation to have trees and shrubs on the balconies and roof terraces. It is as if nature continues the green, leafy silhouettes of the parks onto the buildings of the former imperial capital. Travelling to another majestic city, closer to the Romanian western border, one has the chance to admire a work of architecture created by Sou Fujimoto, inspired by and surrounded by tress in the centre of Budapest's City Park. The Japanese architect looked at trees for inspiration and designed a concert hall whose overhanging roof echoes the canopy of trees in the vicinity of the impressive building. The choice of trees comes with a story of its own, as they have acted as silent and friendly hosts for different events in the life of human communities. For instance, Burkina Faso's architect Diébédo Francis Kéré used one of his country's vegetal symbols, the palaver tree, to design the Serpentine Pavilion for London's Serpentine Galleries. Another story comes with the world's largest library reading space hosted by the city of Beijing, due to be completed in early 2024. The daring forest of tree columns equipped with technology that controls temperature, lighting, acoustic comfort and rainwater disposal, took its inspiration from the Chinese ginkgo tree, thus defining the design of the future public library, known as the Forest of Knowledge.

With such a symbolic destination in mind, and a whole world awaiting to be explored, students discover that the universe of science opens up in a myriad of tales and journeys of fusing outlooks and intricate webbings. Entering a culture capsule can only add value and unforeseen rewards in the design of the most splendid architectural construct of all, the human mind. Exposing life science students to selected topics related to their specialisms could only enrich their academic experience and enhance their creative and symbolic thinking, encouraging them to open up to new experiences and to build their own personal keys of understanding the world and the way others think and communicate, instead of simply operating with some inherited, monochromatic patterns of thinking. In order to assess students' response to the 'linguaculture' challenge, we ran a simple study, following the completion of the 14-hour ESP course taken during the second semester of the 2022-2023 academic year. The course accommodated lectures, research project presentations, and cultural capsule episodes and, in the end, students responded to a two-item questionnaire, as a means of an overall assessment of 'linguaculture' awareness. The study was run with the assistance and support of 83 second year students (34 females and 49 males) majoring in agriculture and biology. Tables 1 and 2 present the interviewees' expressed views regarding the issue, in a binominal perspective that interprets the results in quantitative and qualitative terms, using the dichotomous scales "yes" or "no". In Table 1 below, the participants expressed views concerning 'linguacultural' awareness of both the target culture as well as their own.

Table 1. 'Linguaculture' awareness

Question	Responses	%
Have cultural capsules helped you raise awareness about both your own as well as the target language culture?	Yes	59.2
	No	40.8

An encouraging 59% of the students developed such an awareness in not so generous a time framework.

Table 2. Attitude response to 'linguaculture' awareness

Question	Responses	%
Has your attitude towards the target culture changed at the end of this course?	Yes	64.7
	No	35.3

A quick look at Table 2 above shows that nearly 65% of the participants expressed positive thoughts regarding the analysed item. Culture capsules act as a reliable tool in the delicate process of shaping people's attitudes towards a more comprehensive approach to cross-cultural communication.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, there is no doubt that 'linguaculture' awareness, beyond any statistical interpretation, is organically embedded in the process of teaching foreign languages. It is essential to make students curious and anxious to "explore" the world, discover its wonders and listen to its countless stories. Using realia and any material that act as cultural capsules, unconventional tools within the specialised process of teaching ESP, helps learners to improve their receptive and productive skills, as it also encourages their aesthetic sensibility while unveiling the secrets of the foreign culture through its artefacts. The findings of the study suggest that exposing students to a multifaceted cultural approach is significantly beneficial in terms of creating a more genuine learning environment, refining language skills, raising linguaculture awareness, changing mindsets and attitudes both towards native and target societies. In a world that is shrinking in dimensions, under the pressure of an alarmingly unrelenting globalisation process, one must constantly remember the fact that linguistic awareness will never be complete unless it is accompanied by sound cultural awareness.

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