Stereotypes and Representations of "the other" in the Context of an Inter-Cultural Language Learning Situation

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Abstract

For most people, the "other" and his culture represent static objects: objects that we can observe, comment on and even criticize. However, "the other's" culture can only and in all fairness, be supposed partially. From examples of phenomena which play a major role in the acquisition of language (like the *interlanguage* concept), the knowledge of foreign culture can only be partial and in constant evolution. From this point of view, stereotypes present a significant interest for they constitute a ground for the construction of information. Through this paper, we seek to understand to what measure the fact of guiding learners to re-examine their representations could penetrate the context of an inter-cultural approach. We, first, underscore the nature of stereotypes to determine their origin and to understand their functioning. We then seek to confront the possible interests and inconveniences of stereotyped visions. Afterwards, we explore the profitability of work (exercises) based on stereotypes, the sociocultural context of language-learning, identity and communicative competence with a view of acknowledging a better apprehension of "the other" and his culture.

Introduction

Stereotypes, preconceptions and generalizations are schemata[ii]. Schema, one of the main concepts in social cognition, is an organized collection of one's beliefs and feelings about something. The basic idea is that your mind isn't just a hodge-podge of isolated facts about everything in the world. The mind organizes its contents very carefully and elaborately. According to Baron & Byrne (1987: 94), schemata are what the mind uses to organize the wealth of its information about the world. These authors hold the view that there are many types of schemata, including *self-schemata, person schemata, role schemata, event schemata...* (ibid: 95). An attempt to present the whole picture of schemata, or even to give an exhaustive description of schema would be an important but almost impossible undertaking: thousands of pages may not be sufficient. Our objective therefore is to provide a series of images, no doubt partial and incomplete, that offer the non-specialist reader with an occasion to appreciate the diversity of the concept 'stereotype', and to understand the inherent problems and challenges.

What is a stereotype?

The term "stereotype" results from a complex process that it suffices not only to explicate, but also, and most importantly, to seize the 'unvoiced' sense. We take it on our account to reproduce Bardin's definition[iii]:

> A stereotype is a ready made semantic composition, generally very concrete and picturesque, organised around some simple symbolic elements, (which) immediately replace or orient objective information and/or actual perceptio"
> (1980: 51).

It is, in other words, the 'portrait' or 'image' that appears spontaneously when *"it is about ... "* (ibid.). It is simply a fixed idea that many people have about a particular type of person(s) or thing(s). When we apply this definition to national stereotypes, we may consider that it concerns the image that we create of one's national group (auto-stereotypes) or of 'other national groups' (hetero-stereotypes), given that auto-stereotypes could have emigrated

from their countries of origin (having undergone important transformations). The latter takes the form of generalization.

We may, then, consider that stereotypes develop at three levels:

- A conceptual level, where one assumes a simplified vision by the principle of cognitive economy or by the concern of internal coherence;
- An identity level, which consists in opening up or in closing in on oneself at the culture[iv] of "the other" and in step with the interest or the indifference that we give that "other";
- An affective level, linked to the approval or the rejection of different values.

The conceptual level

A stereotype responds, above all, to a principle of economy. It offers a 'ready made' interpretation, and constitutes some sort of 'ready-to-think' semantic. It offers a conceptual shortcut, in which case participating in the construction of sense through categorisation. Consequently, the idea that English football fans are hooligans, for example, is enough to explain the repeated immoderation which is created in stadiums and from which the press has become a fanatic echo.

By virtue of its simplistic and globalising nature, a stereotype constitutes an essential tool for our 'perception of the world'. Indeed, everyone appears to be in the necessity of wanting to level the 'missing links' in their perception of the world that surrounds them. As well, a strange behaviour must be explained through the 'analysis means' at our disposal. It seems simpler to conclude that "others" nurture hostile sentiments in our direction than to search for the factors that push them to behave in such a manner. Watzlawick would strongly assert:

> *Our perception of the world is and shall always remain a construction of the mind; it does not have any other provable existence.* (1980). Hundeide, on his part, claims that the way in which we interpret "other's" acts rests on:
> *A repertoire of episodes and daily acts a collectively shared structure, that is, organized episodes which reflect the regularity of the life of a society having its own social culture, its own language, its own history and its own ecology* (1985:75).

Dubal takes an interesting standpoint:

In 'others', we always hold the self in us[v] with the highest esteem (1960: 27).

There are no, in actual sense, two identical ways of looking at the world, and of talking about it. For some, Nairobi[vi] represents an excellent 'dream city'; for "others", this is just a village that is extremely polluted and cluttered by traffic.

Language exercises an elemental role in perceptual processes. Words translate our mental   sketches, and reflect a certain number of weaknesses (failures) so much on the perception level as on that of interpretation. In fact, language reflects a particular perception of the world, tied to both individual and collective experiences. On this note, Byram advances the following:

Language essentially incarnates the values and meanings in a culture; referring to the cultural artefacts and indicating the cultural identity of an individual (1992: 65). He also says that: From its symbolic and transparent nature, language can exist singly, and represent the entire phenomena in a culture (ibid). To sum up, when we express, we reflect our own life experiences and the teachings borrowed from our culture. To approach the language of the "other", therefore, according to De Carlo's expression, is:

> *To penetrate through all the sense sediments that history and culture have laid down* (1998).

As a result, expressions that restrict, truncate or deform reality rest on some form of 'cultural implicit'[vii] This constitutes some sort of *flickering* and aims at rendering a point of view 'sharable' by a large number of interlocutors. The implicit, in stressing on the coherence and in hiding contradictions, allows immediate adhesion. Besides, it is difficult to fight against stereotypes when interpersonal relations are largely based on the implicit and on language habits that are influenced by cultures. Whether we like it or not, we are guided in our perception of "the other" by our thought sketches. We interpret cultural codes in relation to our own codes.

The identity level

We have pointed out that the elaboration of a stereotype arises from a complex phenomenon. This stems from the fact that a stereotype reflects the superposition of an individual's cultural past and that of the community in which he belongs. Some would talk of 'identity accommodation'. The elaboration (of a stereotype) which is generated in an unconscious manner is a positive process that has the objective of adaptation. It helps us effect classifications in our perceptions of oneself, "others" and things. It also enables us to situate ourselves in relation to these classes and to recognize ourselves in such or such a class. A closer glance undoubtedly exposes the classifications as being, moreover, more revealing of the 'classifier group' than of the 'classed group' from the fact that they bring out the cultural filters with which perceptions transit. Stereotypes equally respond to a principle of coherence. Each one of us develops a personal system of beliefs, on oneself, on "others" and on the world. This process sanctions the construction of an impression of coherence which comforts us in our identities and helps us adapt ourselves to the world that surrounds us.

The affective level

We often nurture hostile sentiments in respect of a culture, a race, a people or a country or to the contrary, kind ones. It then becomes a matter of questioning or adhering to a system of different values. For this reason, many people are attracted by the American lifestyle while "others" reject whatever is American, the society and its mentality. These attitudes are, of course, related to the emotional dimension of each individual. They spring from positive or negative experiences realised at an affective level. When a learner has a negative vision of a culture, s/he unconsciously constructs a cognitive barrier which blocks the acquisition of new knowledge. This makes it essential to progressively fight this barrier so that s/he approaches the language with some degree of composure.

The Advantages and drawbacks of stereotypes: A phenomenon of simplification

We have seen that stereotypes contribute to the translation of our intimate experiences. The linguistic processing of our perceptions ineluctably supposes a phenomenon of simplification. Subsequently, it turns out that we omit, by maintaining blindness to certain aspects; that we distort, in erroneously interpreting facts; and that we generalize, in transforming an occurrence into a universal phenomenon.

Omission:

Omissions reveal our centres of interest and our search for coherence. A piece of information which is not interesting to us shall be discarded, the same way that an incoherent piece of information shall be refuted. Omissions can be expressed by incomplete comparatives

(ex: "the Japanese work *more*" – more than who?) or by non-specific verbs ("I hate Germans" – with which evaluative criteria?)

Generalization:

Much as this can be an important back-up in forging some form of *database,* and in moving from the concrete to the abstract, the faculty of generalization can (when it comes to communication) be counter-productive . If each interlocutor presents a viewpoint that they create from personal experience, then we can comfortably predict that no exchange takes place. We thus maintain the illusion of speaking, by making words say each thing and its opposite[viii]. Generalizations can also be revealed by universal quantifiers ("white men *always* keep time" – surely always? all white men?), modal operators ("one must *never* trust a kikuyu[ix] woman", or "one must *never* trust a luo[x] politician" – what would be the consequences?). They can equally be characterized by an unknown origin ("drunk like a catholic father" – who said that for the first time? In what context?).

Distortion:

Sometimes we interpret the information that we perceive devoid of a thorough validation. Distortion can stem from the simple 'reading' of thought ("the English do not make an effort to learn languages" – what qualifies this affirmation?), or from the cause-effect association, indisputably, established arbitrarily ("*chang'aa*[xi] renders a man potent" – a man is less 'dynamic' without the influence of liquor?). Our aptitude to omit, generalize and distort perceived information helps us create sense by developing a system of semantic pre-constructs. Some are useful, and others are limiting.

Drawbacks

It is often said that any stereotype reflects some part of reality, that there would be *no fire without smoke*. This opinion is not foreign to the equally (and widely) spread idea that there exists an absolute reality that one can approach from an objective angle. This implies that any information, whatever its limits, is worth taking into consideration. This argument tends to legitimize the use of stereotypes. In actual fact, a stereotype could well hide ideological motivations. It is clear that it reassures our beliefs and reinforces our convictions – in relation to the legitimacy of our own values. But does our perception of the world cover the world as it is?

From Lattaignant's (1697-1779) expression: *"A map is not the boundary"*. Put otherwise, the word is not the named thing. Each word is fixed to representations which are unconsciously associated to it. Language is only an approximation of experience, and does not represent the same experience for everybody. In consequence, language frequently conveys stereotypes: expressions such as "drunk as a *chokoraa*[xii]", "strong as a donkey", "to take the French leave" (whose French equivalent is curiously *"filer à l'anglaise*[xiii]*"*) offer pre-thought concepts 'shareable' by a linguistic community.

More still, stereotypes are frequently validated and relayed by the mass, and the media. Anti-French tabloid campaigns in Washington during the recent war on Iraq (that saw Saddam Hussein overthrown), for example, sanctioned the denunciation and boycott of products from the Hexagon[xiv].
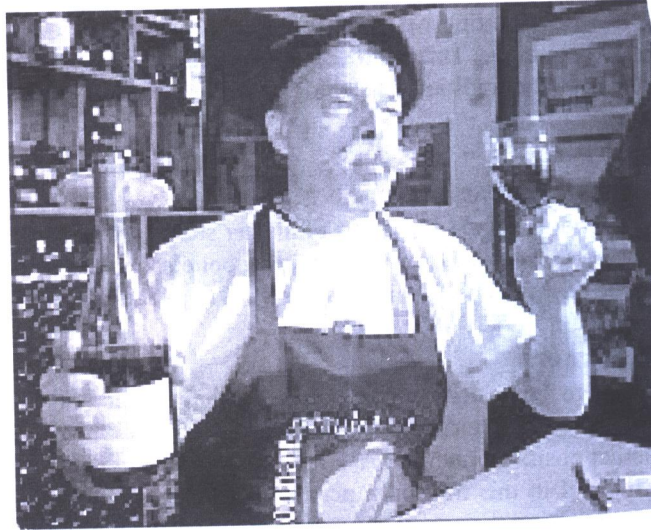
No more Beaujolais? The standoff over Iraq has some Americans boycotting French products. (Jacques Brinon/AP Photo)[xv]

However, the study of opinion polls on the French[xvi], and of the unfolding events to the effect that Britain and the United States lied to the world by unashamedly exaggerating Saddam Hussein's potential through the catch-phrase "weapons of mass destruction" could be of good use in the re-examination of information that a learner disposes. Let us instructively note that certain stereotypes can be founded on outdated data. Really, how many French men wear the beret today? Social and cultural realities change faster than accruing stereotypes.

Finally, stereotypes often function on the metaphor or metonymy (reduction to a single trait: "frog eaters") modes. This way, we find French nationalists – in deed chauvinists, for we have in our minds, certain outstanding personalities in the history of France, such as Napoleon or Charles de Gaulle. If it is desirable to blend this point of view, it is not a matter of embracing the inverse excess, which consists in refuting the existence of nationalists in France.

Advantages

A stereotype could have positive virtues when it deviates towards humour. Comic strips give an attractive aspect to the rest of a press publication. From this line of thought, *Plantu* drawings have become an inevitable element of *Le Monde*[xvii] magazine, which in some sort, makes them its emblem in having them appear on the first page of each issue. *Les Guignols de l'info*[xviii] on its part, reaps a sparkling success from its political caricatures.

The strip cartoon, *Les Bidochon*, as well as the televised program *Les Deschien*, have the advantage of presenting the image of the French as seen by *the French with a certain indifference*. In the same line of thought, proverbs or regional expressions ("a Norman[xix] answer") help expose the categorizations effected on oneself or on "the other". This same view holds for jokes on catholic fathers, for example.

A stereotype likewise presents some interest when it formulates a perception in a positive manner. This is how the exotic stereotype ("the French Riviera") presents a positive anchorage which makes it possible to approach "the other" positively.

Likewise, setting out from cultural stereotypes has the advantage of enabling one to rely on the 'known' (or the 'supposed known') in order to progressively steer into deeper knowledge. As pre-acquired knowledge, stereotyped representations have a key role to play in the framework

of an intercultural learning. Setting off from representations makes one attached to the sociological dimension of cultures. This approach situates the teaching more at the level of the learners needs, contrary to the traditional teaching of culture – elitist culture (therefore not inclusive).

Developing learners' representations

How can a learner be made conscious of his/her stereotyped representations? How can one be helped to liberate oneself from these limiting beliefs, and to see things otherwise? Within the above frame of reference, this is what we wish to put across.

Setting off from learners

It is important to guide learners in exercising their reflection (thought) on what personally defines them (on a cultural point of view). Do they find themselves in common representations, whether positive or negative? The English that is described as anti-European, does he recognize himself in this trait on a personal point of view? Led thus to question themselves on the diversity and the complexity of the elements that define a culture, learners shall be in a position of approaching the culture of "the other" from a point of view that is aimed at *opening up*. A technique which consists of looking at one's own culture through the 'eyes' of "the other" could be put to advantage in the setting of an intercultural learning. This way, seeking to know how "others" view us creates in us some degree of consciousness to the subjectivity which underlies these representations.

The objective is, at the end of the day, to make learners recognize the complexity, the diversity, and the dynamic character of a culture, and to accept its ambiguities and contradictions. The culture of a country manifests itself in an incalculable number of ways, which ways have as many interpretations as there are existing people. Putting one's representations in the perspective of "the other" helps bring out the inherent complexity of any culture. It is equally conceivable to let learners work on a universal theme. Porcher (1998) proposes animals, love, and water, but we could think about themes that are closer to the target public – such as parental authority or the school, if one is dealing with adolescents. This step has the advantage of giving each individual the occasion of sharing one's personal experience and the cultural models which define it.

For a teacher of French, for example, it is desirable to approach stereotypes in relying on those that the French have on themselves and the society which surrounds them. One could then take a series of comical strips and ask learners to look for the implicit elements. It would be interesting to 'gamble' on the pessimistic vision that the French have on themselves in order to effect a contrast with the positive representations at foreigners' disposal about France. In thus updating the connotations, one shall start to perceive the differences in representation. Learners could advisedly reconsider the stereotypes concerning their countries abroad. This whole reassessment process shall make it possible to bring out the three types of deviance that we have mentioned: omission, generalization and distortion.

Bringing out stereotypes

Elaborating situations favourable to the emergence of representations in their diversity is a prerequisite to an intercultural approach. Such an approach aims at *opening up* to "the other", and is made possible by a conscience of the process and the effects of stereotypes. It is instructive, from this point of view, to learn to interpret the differences on a new grip, while concealing all form of judgement.

The concept of an intercultural approach implies a give-and-take scenario, some form of compromise, in short, a mutual enrichment between two cultures. Such a theory supposes the levelling of barriers, 'stock phrases', stereotypes, phobia etc. The idea of *'opening up' to "the other"* is essential. In an intercultural approach, we seek to stand back in the face of one's own representations. In the first place, a stereotype stems from the *'a priori'* belonging to the culture of origin. The first step therefore consists of upsetting the ground of obviousness. It is a question of doubting one's certainties for a while, and transposing oneself into the imagined cultural setting of "the other".

Barry (1995) proposes a project that makes it possible to bring out stereotypes and to research on their validity. The project consists of sending the following questionnaire to a group of learners of French of the same age as that of one's own learners:

> *Who is an Englishman?*
> *My name is ...*
> *I am ... years old.*
> *I live in ... (county) in ... (country).*
> *I think that the English:*
> *eat: ...*
> *drink: ...*
> *dress: (men) ... , (women) ...*
> *like: ...*
> *hate: ...*
> *know very well: ...*
> *are: ...*

Once the questionnaire is returned, one shall then ask the learners to analyse the answers. One shall at the same time (while seeking to delimit the origin and the nature of the different stereotypes) ask the learners to react.

When it comes to listing the stereotypes, one can ask the learners to classify this information under two columns: stereotypes/objective data. A debate can then ensue, from the differences in classification, specifically questioning the validity of the second column. It could as well be useful to look for the information that confirms or invalidates the hypotheses. To bring out stereotypes, a certain number of learning situations may be created. One can, for example, resort to *scattergrams* (one writes the word "France" in the middle of the board and places words that are mentally associated with it, all round) or asks learners to describe "France in one word" or to imagine a "catch-phrase (slogan) for France". One can as well rely on iconographic documents: cartoons or advertisements are rich in stereotypes. An activity like the following makes it possible to sensitize learners on the varieties of stereotypes: *What is characteristic of :French WritersFrench SingersFrench Actors and French Politicians*

The answers can be compared to those of French learners to whom the same questionnaire was sent, or to a document like "men of the year". One would then measure the divergence in the representations, and would seek to expose the cause (obsolete representation, difference in point of view in relation to the 'representativity' of the individual etc.).

It is preferable that learners work, preferentially, from objective data, and be encouraged to look for obsolete data so as to objectify their hypotheses. This information can be gathered by the use of tables (or numbers), press articles, interviews etc. The exercise of data collection shall, preferably, be affected by learners so that they usurp the said data and feel personally

implicated in the choices that they would have made. The concept of verifiable hypotheses is fundamental. Once the stereotypes turn out to be evident, it then becomes handy to convert these stereotype perceptions into hypotheses in order to lead learners to seek to verify the hypotheses.

Developing representations:

A traditional measure in the context of cultural teaching consists in denouncing stereotypes as a limiting representation. To denounce stereotypes on a Manichean basis or to turn them into a subject for discussion is not the solution. In reality, chances are that at the end of the discussion, everyone plants him/herself on his/her opinions – their convictions may even get reinforced. In return, seeking to make "the other" known, from an angle of personal discovery and enrichment, appears more sensible.

To sum up, it is not a matter of judging, but of helping each learner to refine his perception in a framework from where s/he could construct sense, and understand him/herself. The learners' motivation gets reinforced from when they start catching a glimpse of the living aspects of language, when they discover new, complex and interesting concepts. Rather than confine them to enclosing representations, it is indeed worth *meeting* "the other" from an angle of constant discovery and enrichment.

The learner must therefore learn to liberate him/herself from his/her limiting beliefs. As we have underlined, our logic system does not always correspond to that of "the other". Often, we only perceive that which we want to perceive, consciously or unconsciously. The *presupposed* quickly transforms itself into *value judgement* instead of remaining a *hypothesis* to be verified. Our aptitude to interpret things can quickly lead to the elaboration of a rigid system, a definite prejudgement.

It is convenient therefore to identify our beliefs. Positive beliefs have a constructive scope. Limiting beliefs, are usually formulated in negative terms. A depreciative belief is impractical in the sense that it blocks reassessment. These beliefs are difficult to detect: their prominence requires that one turns to past experiences. One of the solutions recommended by thinkers consists in, first of all, listing the stereotypes formulated in negative terms, then reformulating them in positive terms. As a result, a French man would not be "chauvinistic", but would give the necessary importance to his 'relatives' (close ones) and would be attached to his culture. This approach rests on the postulate that any behaviour is oriented towards adaptation. Put otherwise, behind every behaviour hides a positive intention. It would be sensible to put this step to good use, in proposing to the learners to reformulate positive expressions from a list of negative stereotypes.

We may borrow a leaf from linguistic sojourns (attachments) in France. A linguistic sojourn or trip is well often considered as an efficient means of liberating learners of stereotypes in confronting them to the day-to-day realities of a culture. However, some claim that a linguistic sojourn would tend to reinforce rather than modulate perceived ideas. In deed, a stereotype implies expectations of attitude and of behaviour which validate hypotheses. It is therefore indispensable to prepare learners for the foreign sojourn. Moreover, certain organisations of foreign sojourn (of long duration) propose preparatory training sessions or publish booklets which prepare students for their family or community of destination. One of these organisations gives the following advice:

Your host family will definitely have different values from those that you are used to. That does not mean that certain values are good and others bad. They are simply DIFFERENT.

If preparation is important, so is the follow-up. During the sojourn, one can distribute a questionnaire inviting learners to reassess themselves on the following points:

- *What, in your host family, sounds typically French?*
- *What have you discovered (and which seems enriching) from a personal point of view?*
- *What mannerisms seem strange to you[xx]?*

From the answers provided, one can invite learners to reflect on the interpretation of their preconceived notions. One shall equally see how the representations may have evolved in relation to the pre-sojourn period. Within the reference apparatus that we have just developed, it seems convenient to now look at the sociological context of the process of learning.

The socio-cultural context of language-learning

It is a foregone conclusion that research from anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and education provides insights into the powerful and complex influence that sociocultural processes have on language acquisition. We want to suggest a few examples here. Among new arrivals to the United States (U.S.) are documented students from other countries seeking refuge from war, political oppression, or severe economic conditions. These students present special social, emotional, and academic needs, often having experienced interrupted schooling in their home countries. Students escaping war may exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as depression, withdrawal, hyperactivity, aggression, and intense anxiety in response to situations that recall traumatic events in their lives (Coelho, 1994: 301-327). Studies of these refugees' adaptation to life in the U.S. and of their success in school have emphasized the importance of a bicultural learning context, integrating first language, culture, and community knowledge into the curriculum, as well as the importance of parents' maintenance of home language and cultural traditions [Caplan, et. al. (1992: 36-42); Tharp & Gallimore, (1988); Trueba, et. al. (1990)].

We want to argue that external societal factors in the U.S. may have a major influence on language acquisition for learning institutions. Examples are the social and psychological distance often created between first and second language speakers, perceptions of each group in inter-ethnic comparisons, cultural stereotyping, intergroup hostility, subordinate status of a minority group, or societal patterns of acculturation *vs.* assimilation forces at work. *Majority-minority* and *inter-ethnic* relations, as well as social class differences are at the heart of these factors, influencing second language acquisition and success in school. Researchers such as Ogbu (1993: 83-111), Oakes (1985), and Minicucci and Olsen (1992) have found extensive evidence of institutionalized structures in U.S. learning institutions that deny access to the core curriculum through tracking, ability grouping, and special programs that segregate language minority students. Segregated transitional bilingual classes and *English as a second language* (ESL) classes can sometimes heighten the social inequities and subconsciously maintain the status quo in *majority-minority* relations (Hernandez-Chavez, 1984: 144-183; Spencer, 1988: 53, 133-153).

May we state that the negative social perception of these classes that both *English-speaking* and *language minority* students have often developed in U.S. schools has led to the social isolation of second-language students, denying them the critical conditions that Wong Fillmore (1991: 49-69) says must be present for second language acquisition to take place. To break the cycle of special classes being perceived as remedial in nature, they must be a permanent, desired, integral part of the curriculum, taught through quality instruction that encourages interactive, problem-solving, experiential learning, through a multicultural, global perspective (Frederickson, 1995). Learning institutions can serve as agents of change or places where teachers, students, and staff of many varied backgrounds join together and transform tensions between groups that currently exist in the broader society.

If, in fact, we want to see our learners understand the foreign aspects of culture from a social anthropology base, (that is, as *participating observers*) we must give ourselves the objective of participating, 'living it from within and observing it' and 'understanding it from the outside'. Any other objective may be devoid of sense, for it would leave learners immersed in their culture, judging the foreign from inappropriate criteria. They will look at it from a tourist's point of view, without noting the straight line between the language they learn and the culture incarnated in the language. The issue of *viewpoint* is linked to that of *cultural analysis*.

Until this point, we have studied the relationship between three important phenomena: stereotypes, language and culture. In approaching the elaboration of programs, we now should perhaps think about how identity and competence could be supposed.

Identity and communicative competence

It is instructive to focus our pedagogic work on an interactive approach that borrows heavily from the personal and interpersonal experiences of the learners and their teacher. In this perspective, the whole (total) person is engaged in the process, and this includes his/her affective dimension. Teachers and learners ought to participate in a personal and interpersonal systematic exercise of psycho-sociological discovery and create room for free linguistic expression. This can only be developed if the native (local) language finds its place in a language class and flourishes. It is in this way that linguistic competence in a native (local) language could take place and be developed. The possibility of using the learner's native language facilitates (on the learners' part) a personal liberation which helps him/her not only to express him/herself, but also to communicate and to find his way.

When the learner discovers a foreign culture, the interaction with the latter and their own culture brings about a redefinition of their maternal identity and the recognition of differences. It is therefore through the process of relating the *culture of origin* to the *target culture* that a reflection on identity can be established in a language class. A foreign language class thus promotes consciousness in relation to the mechanisms of individual identity and, through confrontation with "the other", self perception (Zarate, 1986). Dubar summarizes the complexity of the concept of identity even better, a concept that evolves from birth, is constructed and reconstructed in life:

> *Human identity is not given once and for all at birth: it is constructed in childhood and from then, must be reconstructed in one's life. An individual does not construct it alone; it depends as much on the judgements of 'others' as on one's orientations and definitions of the self ...* (1997:7).

This is to say that identity supposes difference: the conscience to belong to the same 'collectivity' emerges only in the face of "other collectivities", usually felt as "foreign". Since social groups never exist in isolation, since communication always implies people and since it is people who express and/or mediatize the relations between cultures, we ought to consider this plurality in the class – where youth from different origins are gathered, where interactions take place, where communication ought to be established between members of an educational community. It is necessary that those that engage themselves be placed in an interactive field where the problem concerns the relations that the individual and/or collective "I" has with "the other" than on "the other". For this reason, we choose to subscribe to a socio-cultural pedagogy with a view of not only promoting speech, but also and most importantly, contributing to the education of young learners and preparing them for life.

Conclusion

Our intention was neither to establish nor proclaim an exhaustive panorama of learning situations (class practices). We simply offer a spatio-temporal vision, which, like any other vision, is a voluntary and an arbitrary fragment. The study that we have undertaken springs from the idea that learners of a foreign language nurture preconceived notions about the country whose language they learn. This image often presents itself in the form of a stereotype or a representation. This preconceived image motivates one's learning: *"It is a language that sounds good and which sometimes provides a cultural status"*[xxi]. It interested us to establish the measure to which and manner in which the learning of a foreign language could consequently contribute to the modification of this first image.

The stress on stereotypes, therefore, could make learners understand the mechanisms that underlie one's membership to a culture, or dissociation from it. Allowing learners to re-examine their beliefs helps them get sensitized to the uncertain, precarious or outdated character of stereotypes.

The intercultural approach to which we subscribe has the objective of educating the learners' perception so that they may, on an individual level, find some coherence between their personal life experiences and the outside world. This step cannot 'economize' on a learner-centred approach, for it results, moreover, from the personal re-location of the learner. From then, the necessity to abandon a *judgemental relation* for a *relation based on exchange* comes to the fore. It is in this framework that work on stereotyped representations becomes necessary.

For the same reason, the *intercultural approach* goes hand in hand with the *communicative approach* in the sense that one no longer looks at culture as an inert object, but as some means of *opening up* to "the other". For De Carlo (1998), communication and culture are linked: two interlocutors of different cultures and of a common language may find it difficult to establish a satisfactory communication. If their cultural implicits have a greater part of responsibility, multiple blockages also come into play. If one wants to fully be above board (in terms of communication), it is essential not to restrain oneself solely to linguistic phenomena.

Notes

[i]   La notion d'*interlangue*.

[ii]   Psychologists prefer the Greek plural *schemata* instead of *schemas*.

[iii] This and subsequent quotes from texts originally in French, are the authors' own translation.

[iv]   The term 'culture' is contained in E.B. Tylor's (1871) classical definition, to whom culture is *"the whole complex including knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs as well as any disposition or usage acquired by man living in society"*. (P. Bonte, M. Izard, 1992: 190).

[v]   Underlined by us.

[vi]   Kenya's capital city.

[vii] The implicit (implied) features/aspects of a culture.

[viii] cf. The replicas of *La Leçon de Ionesco*.

[ix]   The term "Kikuyu" refers to an ethnic group, the largest in independent Kenya: in this specific case, a woman from the said ethnic group.

[x]   The term "luo" refers to an ethnic group, from western.

[xi]   A lethal (traditional) Kenyan (alcoholic) brew.

xii   *Sheng* catch-phrase for 'street child'.

xiii   To escape the English way.

xix   France.

xx   Source : http://abcnews.go.com/sections/business/World
        frenchboycott_030310_csm.html

xxi   Jeffrey Sparshott, Boycott of French wine losing fizzle with public

        http://www.washtimes.com/business/20030516-102234-3666r.htm

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