

The development of cognitive processes

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Underlying all three categories in this publication is the aim to develop the cognitive processes of individual students which they employ when engaging with language, culture and their own learning. These cognitive process, which are employed to deal with new information, can be seen as providing a bridge to awareness in general. Their relevance to the three topics under discussion can be summed up as follows:

- *authenticity* – if we take a psychological view of this topic, in designing exercises we take into account the cognitive processes that all human beings employ in real life when using language and processing information.
- *learner autonomy* – one of our aims is to help students become aware of their own learning and various factors that influence it. This awareness-raising process entails developing and enhancing the cognitive strategies which lead to this awareness.
- *cultural awareness* – a ‘dialogue with culture’ (see Fenner) entails entering new territory and being confronted with different and new modes of behaviour and thought; this in turn requires the application of a range of cognitive strategies to deal with this new information.

Cognitive processes and strategies take a variety of forms, some of which are listed below.

- *Comparing* – forms of linguistic expression, behaviour etc. Drawing analogies is an important process both with regard to language learning and to culture. Students will first of all activate their prior knowledge of a particular form of behaviour such as manners, values, linguistic expression; and then reflect upon, and discuss, the relation between the two (or more) different realities.
- *Contrasting* – forms of expression, behaviour etc. By contrasting forms of language and behaviour students will be able to gain insights into different ways of expressing ideas and different styles and attitudes that are distant and extraneous to them. With language, this helps to give a clear focus to different meanings and forms; as far as cultural awareness is concerned, the classroom, and the use of an appropriate textbook, serve as a safe laboratory to dissect the differences in ways that help develop an awareness of ‘otherness’ without inducing negative judgement.
- *Discovering* – linguistic systems, learning styles, other peoples’ beliefs etc. An ‘awareness-raising’ approach to language and learning requires that, rather than provide the students with ready-made answers, the textbook structures and enhances discovery processes by providing texts for analysis and setting appropriate questions and tasks. These discovery processes may relate to systemic features of language or to exploring aspects of culture. Examples and exercises in

textbooks often provide students with new information about other peoples' beliefs, emotions and viewpoints. These exercises would be particularly useful if they serve as a spring-board for the students to ask questions, probe further into the foreign culture, and keep on discovering it.

- *Completing* the linguistic and cultural picture. As human beings we have a natural inclination to look at things as complete. This urge can be used in exercises on cultural awareness to extend students' thinking, such as finding out more about the use and function of certain linguistic expressions: who says what, how, when and why.
- *Explaining* – cause and effect. A number of cultural issues are closely related to sources such as historical or political events, geographical features, population density and political systems. Students are here encouraged to understand and explain how these affect people's daily lives, attitudes, infrastructures, political and educational systems etc. With regard to language, students are encouraged to see the foreign language in terms of regularities and systems.
- *Accepting* that other people do/feel/express things differently. First of all students need to learn to accept the fact that different people do/feel things differently, and that their reactions are often shaped by the culture they operate in. As a result of cultural awareness, students are then expected also to learn how to do things differently. Cultural awareness is not only about decoding but also about encoding the same message in a different way as required in the target culture.
- *Being creative*. All language use can be seen as an act of creation. Even in an area such as grammar, textbooks need to recognise this fact and provide opportunities for students to create their own utterances, relevant to their own needs and contexts. In culture, different symbol systems such as the musical, visual or graphical are used as representations. These encourage creativity in language learning. Classroom activities should encourage students to make use of a variety of expressive arts when it comes to representing culture.
- *Solving problems*. Human learning in general constantly requires the solving of problems. Specifically applied to communication, the cognitive process of problem-solving involves the students in using techniques and in enlisting help for coping with demands of situations which go beyond their linguistic and/or non-linguistic repertoire. Such exercises should also give students the opportunity to reflect and become consciously aware of how and why they took certain decisions during an activity.

The cognitive processes outlined above represent only a few examples of those students might employ when confronting and acting on new information and language. Textbook writers and teachers will be aware of others and might wish to take these into account when designing classroom tasks, activities and exercises.