Stereotypes vs. ‘all people are the same beneath the skin’

When a group of individuals from the same region, country, or social class is being described as having the same characteristics (behavioural, linguistic, ritual...) they are being stereotyped or categorized.

Stereotyping very often is the cause of cultural blindness, for example if you are taking some holidays in a foreign country you may create some opinions about the people who live there, but the real thing is that in a short period of time nobody is able to see below the surface, besides you may try to confirm the prejudices you already had about the culture and people from the country you are visiting.

One may think that stereotyping is always negative and that is the cause of social distance, but it is important to know, on the other hand, that stereotyping is completely necessary when establishing early relationships with a society, a social class, a group. It is necessary because it helps us to define our orientation to other individuals quicker, so this orientation, as we can see is culturally conditioned, and if we did not know how to orientate to others we would be considered socially ineffective and perhaps unable to function normally in a society.

We can find one example of this in the article ‘Cultural foundations’ by M. Saville-Troike, the author claims that in a classroom the best thing is if the teacher knows each one of his students individually, but everyone knows that this cannot happen at least if the teacher is teaching in his neighbourhood, so what a teacher usually does is guiding himself by his expectations of what students that age are like, that allows him to maintain the role he considers to be appropriate in that context.
Some dominant groups do impose stereotypes on another group to maintain and rationalize its subordination. These stereotypes have a great deal in common, although applied to different cultures, or ethnic groups:

One of these common stereotypes is to say that others are dirty, greasy, and smelly, other stereotypes express animal characteristics: ‘They eat like pigs’, in this category it is also included the “machismo” of the Latin Americans, or the “pugnaciousness” of the Irish. Another common stereotype is that of time, while dominant societies stereotype other groups as “not thinking time is important” the return stereotype is that Anglos are run by clocks. Finally, other quite common stereotype is to stereotype others as shy, backwards, or childlike.

Here we have an example of the typical stereotypes people have from other European countries

Spain: smelly, hairy, dark, greasy, cruel, lazy, temperamental, proud, religious, arrogant, amorous.

UK: athletic, soccer hooligans, reserved, conservative, boring, unemotional, polite, businessmen.

Germany: big, blond, arrogant, industrious, ambitious, aggressive, beer, sausages, cars.

Italy: dark, greasy, fat women, cowards, temperamental, stylish, handsome.

In the article ‘Cultural Foundations’ by M. Saville-Troike she is constantly describing the problems they have in the American Educational System between the different social classes students, they stereotype each other, which is inevitable, but it is an educational problem as well, so teachers must be quite sensitive and identify this stereotypes as soon as possible, otherwise the stereotypes will cause problems in the classroom: on the one hand they will build a social barrier which inhibits communication and learning, an on the other hand they will affect the image of those who are typed; some of these stereotypes are:

‘Their parents are less likely to belong to or attend the church’

‘They do not understand the principles of saving’

‘They cannot put reason before emotion’

‘They are freer and more social in their expressions of sex’

‘They believe education is an obstacle course to be surmounted until they can go to work’

Teachers need to bring under control the stereotypes recognized.

ROLE IDENTIFICATION AND ROLE MEMBERSHIP

People have different attitudes towards the social classification they have in life: some of them value their own group membership, some may even reject other group memberships, others may reject their group membership and wish to change, and others would like to form part in more than
one group. These attitudes can be viewed as positive forces when learning a second language, but sometimes they become negative forces.

M. Saville-Troike points out that if a person wishes to get adapted in the culture of a foreign country and rejects his own culture he or she has to acquire nearly native pronunciation to be accepted, since pronunciation will relate this person into the group.

Some people reject other groups or the dominant group, so they won’t get adapted to a different society, in the mentioned article ‘Cultural foundations’ we find an example in which a boy doesn’t want to speak in English in a class where English is the first language because he claims to be Mexican, he wanted to belong to a unique group and rejected the school culture.

For the people who would like to be bicultural, he or she needs complete bilingual competence as well, and also control their phonological systems.

In a multicultural class, teachers should be aware of the attitudes of their students towards language, because in the case of USA is a social condition, not an educational one, teachers then need to attend the needs of their students as individuals and as group.

Teachers can get blind and categorize their students for the way they behave or because their aspect, there are some stereotypes teachers should avoid, M. saville-Ivoike give some examples:

- People who are from the same race may belong to different cultures and the other way round.
- Surnames should never be used as a guide to students’ linguistic competence.
- Disadvantage students do not constitute a homogeneous group

As we can see language plays a very important role in all this cases in a way that it establishes role identification and group membership is recognized, and it establishes sets of attitudes and values. Language is the principal medium for mediating and manipulating social relationships in our society.

Bibliografía


