

## **5. Basic Cultural Competence**

**Basic cultural competence** ("Minimal Social Competence.")

### **5.1. Sociolinguistic Ability** (Heny; Crawford-Lange and Lange)

A person at this level of cultural competence

- can meet all the demands for survival as a traveller: can reach an intended destination via public transportation; secure lodging for the night; order and pay for food and drink; cash a check; make a simple purchase; conduct a simple phone conversation and take notes on information such as price, location, and departure time; can explain public signs and such common symbols as the abbreviations used in classified ads.
- in addition to the survival-level skills, can understand most announcements made over public address systems, gather the gist of a newscast if free to listen intently, and after specific preparation, can grasp the main points of a lecture and take notes; can explain the terms commonly used in culture-related texts such as menus and wedding or death announcements.
- can handle any common social situation with an interlocutor accustomed to foreigners: make requests politely, offer and receive gifts and invitations, apologize, make introductions, and discuss some current events or policies, a field of personal interest, a leisure-time activity of one French-speaking country; can participate in a conversation if conducted in "français soigné," perhaps asking to have some expressions repeated or paraphrased.
- comprehends, though may not use, the common unconscious and symbolic French gestures and facial expressions (Wylie; Nostrand 1988, 138-41).
- prompted by an example, shows awareness that compliments can arouse a reaction different from what would be expected in the home culture.

### **5.2. Knowledge** (Michaud; Ardagh; Duby; Seelye; Verdié; Knox)

A person at this level of competence

- can interpret simple menus, timetables, schedules, maps; manipulate the currency; knows which kinds of shops sell what kinds of merchandise, and knows where to go for information on such subjects;
- beyond the survival level, knows about the phases of "culture shock" and how they may affect perception (Valdes 35-39); can identify the truth or untruth implied in the stereotypes of his or her home culture and of French culture;
- can discuss the present significance of the historic periods, prominent personalities and cultural achievements in France since the Middle Ages, and in the French-

Speaking world since the 18th century; can define such twentieth-century expressions as la Résistance, collaboration, the Algerian war, and May '68 as they relate to present attitudes;

- can name at least two present political parties in France, and two or three major contemporary issues;
- can describe or give examples of qualities prominently sought in French education, such as clear expression and organization of ideas, knowledge of French history and geography, and literature;

- can list ten, including three in Africa, of the more than forty countries or areas where French is the first or second language; can locate them on a map, name their capitals, and add a sentence about their society or economy or international situation;
- can describe in broad outline the main geographical regions, the political institutions, the public education system, and the mass media of France or another French-speaking country; can produce a few proverbs or stock phrases which reflect a world view often encountered there;
- can say how that country's institutions, regulations, and customs such as attitudes toward behavior and appearance in public, may affect him or her as a foreign traveler (or student, trainee, business person); and can name the official agencies which may hold the foreigner responsible for compliance with the regulations;
- can identify, in a literary or a journalistic text, examples of elevated style and of familiar and popular expressions, and in reading, can point out some of the verbal indications of attitudes, hidden quotations or allusions; can read classified ads containing the customary abbreviations;
- can describe a favorable and an unfavorable French attitude toward the United States or its people. (Servan-Schreiber; and present-day journalism).

## 6. Superior Cultural Competence

**Superior cultural competence** ("Working Social and Vocational Competence.")

*At the **Superior level** the person has additional skills and knowledge which enable a teacher to give a fuller experience of the culture, as well as to build upon individual motivation by relating to a wider variety of student interests.*

### 6.1. Sociolinguistic Ability

At this level of cultural competence, a person

- uses cultural references and idioms, comprehends puns, uses the main unconscious and symbolic French gestures (Nostrand 1988, 138-41); interacts with the rhythm of the interlocutor (Hall 1983) and keeps the French distance between persons – "proxemics" (Hall 1959); consistently distinguishes between a formal and an informal way of speaking and behaving. (As an example of formal vs. informal behavior between speakers: if called upon to simulate meeting an old friend after a lapse of time, can judge whether *an embrassade* or handshake is appropriate, depending on the situation, social milieu and ages of the persons);
- finds comic some culture-related French humor, e.g., a passage from Pierre Daninos, and can tell what a French person finds amusing in a situation involving culture-related humor: for example, an unwarranted pretense to *intellectualité*, or an incongruous cultural allusion; value of *la simplicité*, or an incongruous cultural allusion; in a joking or teasing situation, can explain the danger of offending;
- finds comic some culture-related French humor, e.g., a passage from Pierre Daninos, and can tell what a French person finds amusing in a situation involving culture-related humor: for example, an unwarranted pretense to *intellectualité*, a self-satisfaction that clashes with the value of *la simplicité*, or an incongruous cultural allusion; in a joking or teasing situation, can explain the danger of offending;

- can describe a type of compliment likely to be misinterpreted or embarrassing in French culture.
- can participate in a formal meeting, or an informal discussion where several persons talk at the same time; and can infer the underlying intent of a speaker from what is said; (These abilities are important both as goals and as criteria for defining this level. The first two can be tested by combining part of a one-on-one interview with a background of recorded speech, and then testing the interviewee's comprehension of it. The ability to infer a speaker's intent can be judged by how well one "reads between the lines" of a written dialogue.)

## **6.2. Knowledge**

At this level of competence, a person

- can discuss abstractions in fields of prior study: a vocation, a hobby, an aspect of one French-speaking area: its main institutions, social stratification and mobility, the place of private organizations and unions, informal customs, sex- and age-group differences, current cultural and social changes;
- can write a simple social letter or a business letter that does not require technical (e.g., legal) language, with beginning and ending appropriate to the given situation, though the style may be obviously foreign; on seeing such a letter can interpret the evidences of formality or informality;
- in response to questions, can comment on a feature of French culture such as a major value (art of living, friendship, realism, intellectuality), a habit of mind (abstract expression, quest for the "très précis" and the delimited field – e.g., "de A à C, en passant par B"), a widespread assumption (the sharp contrast between friend and outsider, or between work and leisure, the inseparability of fact from context), the space and time concepts which bear on social and business relations (Hall 1978; 1983; 1959 or 1984);
- can list twenty of the forty francophone countries or areas; can locate fifteen of them on a map, name their capitals, and add a sentence about their society or economy or international situation.
- can write about an aspect of France and one additional French-speaking area to the extent of three or four substantial paragraphs. In the case of a developed country, and periodicals, knows about the electoral procedure, and can discuss some recent cultural achievements in film, song, art, architecture, or literature including TV and cartoon serials; in the case of a sub-Saharan or Caribbean area, for example, can write on topics such as the status of women, literacy, Islamic militancy, opposition between subcultures, terrorism, dictatorship, the political and economic relations between the Third World and the developed countries. For the second French-speaking country selected, can name two or three present political parties and describe two or three present political parties and describe two or three contemporary issues; can produce a few proverbs or stock expressions one encounters there.
- can discuss the metaphorical nature and cultural role of myth, a propos of a given text such as an African legend.
- can explain features of his or her home culture that puzzle a French-speaking inquirer.

Many non-native teachers of French aim still higher, at levels 4 and 5 on the Government's ILR (Interagency Language Roundtable) scale of five. In the case of cultural competence these two categories cannot be conceived as "Near-Native" and "Native," but simply as "Near-Optimal," for the outsider never will match the native's childhood experience, nor the unconscious use of face muscles. On the other hand, the outsider, while conforming to the

customs of the society, has a capacity for an eclectic approach to French values and habits of mind which is hard for the native to imitate. These levels, moreover, require a broader knowledge of the French culture area as a whole than most natives ever attempt.