Culture in Foreign Language Education:

Issues Past and Present

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my family for its unending support through many years of study. I thank my parents for genuinely believing that I could accomplish anything I put my mind to. I thank my husband for being a conversational and brainstorming companion, an ardent supporter, and my source of sanity during this and many future projects.

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Abstract

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For at least a century, applied linguists have been researching and developing an ever-evolving concept of how to approach and teach culture in the foreign language (FL) classroom. Frequently, we find researchers stating why culture should be taught, offering their own definitions of culture, and suggesting methods for practical implementation. A common goal in this process has been finding a cohesive definition of culture that would unite the field in the implementation of methods that would naturally follow. While great strides have been made in the development of theories, definitions, and suggested methods, there exists a lag between researchers' discoveries and the application of the concept in teachers' lessons. This paper will briefly review the history of culture research in the FL field, offer analysis of potential reasons for the lag in implementation, and conclude with an overview of challenges in the practical field.

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Introduction and Initial Questions

INTRODUCTION

As a language learner who began her journey within the last ten years, I am amazed by the methods used in the courses that I took. In retrospect, I realize that my instructors fumbled through the inclusion of culture in our classrooms much the same way many of their colleagues at other universities must have also done. The inclusion of culture was superficial, intermittent, and at times nonsensical. Ashamedly, I recall *hating* our culture studies, though in my defense my attitude as a student was probably indicative of a problem that still overruns our field, despite many years of research and attempts at implementation: disassociation of language and culture. Though my instructors made the effort to teach culture, it was minimal, isolated from other parts of the curriculum, and accompanied by no explanation as to the nature of culture, whatsoever.

In stark contrast was the instruction I received while studying Spanish in Mexico. I found myself going through a comprehensive change of perspective. Scrutinizing the experience now, I see that it was not only my actual encounters with the target culture that opened my eyes to *cross-cultural understanding*, but rather the combination of that exposure with guidance from my instructors regarding culture and cultural interaction itself. A course specifically entitled "Cross-Cultural Studies" focused not only on Mexican culture, but taught us the nature of the differences between, for example, body language the world over, rousing our interest through illuminating the fact that cultures vary in fascinating ways we had never considered. That course was a favorite among all the students. However, even the instructors of "Composition," "Conversation," and "Civilization" were careful to teach the depth of culture to us. Debates in a

conversational course had us take sides of the issue of "sex education in public schools" as conservative or liberal *Mexican* organization leaders, requiring us to take on the varied perspectives of Mexicans and demonstrating the stratification of a culture other than our own (which we already knew was not homogenous).

Though my language instructors in the United States saw the importance of teaching us factual information about the target cultures, they did not equip us with the skills to make sense of that information and to process cultural difference. Realizing the necessity of equipping us with skills to deal with the culture around us, the instructors in Mexico carefully incorporated cultural and cross-cultural instruction into our studies. The difference of context in these scenarios is, of course, relevant, but yet more relevant is that the American classroom lacked this training in cross-cultural understanding that the Mexican instructors knew we could not survive without. My point is this: teaching cross-cultural understanding is not bound by location, but rather method. The methods for teaching cross-cultural understanding can be applied to our foreign language learning contexts with potentially great result. As this paper will demonstrate, updated theories exist and have been developed after years of research in the field; however, practical application of them to the classroom lags significantly behind the research.

INITIAL QUESTIONS

A starting point in finding motives for teaching culture may be the following question: "What is it that we hope our students take away from our language classrooms?" Naturally, proficiency in the language is our desired goal, and by "proficiency" we mean the ability to communicate with others (especially, but not only, native speakers) in the target language. But communicating in a language proficiently means more than a mere capacity to conjugate verbs or pronounce words properly. As

Brooks (1968) clarifies, there are three "distinct bands" of language: syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic. Whereas the syntactic refers to "the grammar of sounds, marks, forms, and orders of words, and their relationship to each other," and the semantic refers to "how signs mean what they mean and how the modifications in the syntactic area bring about parallel modifications in meaning," the pragmatic refers to "the manipulation of syntax and semantics by an actual user of language" (206). The pragmatic realm of language essentially refers to the ways in which culture and language interact—ways that conjugation and pronunciation cannot predict. And as Rivers (1968) states, "...language cannot be separated completely from the culture in which it is deeply embedded. Any authentic use of the language, any reading original texts (as opposed to those fabricated for classroom use), any listening to the utterances of native speakers, will introduce cultural concomitants into the classroom whether the teacher is conscious of them or not" (262). Culture is part of our language classrooms, whether implicitly or explicitly. Embedded in the ideas and linguistic devices we use are cultural norms of the ways we have learned to communicate. Learners must be taught these norms in order to communicate with native speakers of the target language. They can include how to ask where a bus stop is, what one does in a bakery, how to address adults or elders, or what tenses are most polite and when they are appropriate to use. Teaching the effects of culture on language is vital to our students' success as language learners and users.

However, the scope of culture teaching for language users can not be limited only to tidbits such as when and how to use formal or informal register. Many researchers and language teachers acknowledge the potential for foreign languages to change one's entire perspective. It is no secret that language programs have been claiming this benefit from their beginnings. Achieving such a goal for our students is increasingly vital, for reasons that Seelye (1984) cites:

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An understanding of the way of life of a foreign people is important to survival in a world of conflicting value systems, where the boundaries that formerly isolated and protected people from alien ideas have been eroded by advances in the technology of communication or struck down by the angry clamor of the downtrodden in their search for a better life. How is one to liberate one's ideas from the stagnant recesses of ethnocentrism...if not through a study of other cultures? (14)

Regardless of which career paths our students take later in life, learning the type of understanding Seelye describes will assist them in any field and will have positive impact on the larger world culture. However, some researchers question whether methods, as practiced in the 20th century, made progress toward such goals. We will return to this idea of accomplishing "understanding" in our students; the next portion of this paper will examine the history of culture teaching theories and attitudes throughout the 20th century.

Culture in the FL Classroom: History of the Concept

While it has long been recognized that culture is important in the foreign language class, the reasons it was considered important have shifted throughout history. During the first half of the 20th century, the cultural purpose for learning foreign languages was access to the literature and other fine works of a society. As early as 1904, Otto Jespersen acknowledged the validity of culture learning and indicated that "the highest purpose in the teaching of languages may perhaps be said to be the access to the best thoughts and institutions of a foreign nation, its literature, culture—in short, the spirit of the nation in the widest sense of the word" (quoted in Rivers, 1968). While Jespersen alludes to the goal of broadly instructing our students in foreign cultures, his phrasing sets up an equation as follows:

"the spirit of the nation in the widest sense of the word"	**=** ("in short")	"the best thoughts and institutions...literature, culture"

Jespersen undermines the concept of breadth (the "widest sense") by initially providing a rather narrow characterization of culture. The context of culture was not considered key to understanding lexical, syntactic, and literary devices; emphasis on grammar and vocabulary was assumed adequate to achieve this goal. This view was the generally accepted consensus among language teachers until the 1960s when many language theorists began to search for new methods. Though many claimed that international understanding would arise invariably from foreign language study, Rivers (1968) points out that the narrow focus of literature as culture accomplishes vastly different objectives

than cultural understanding. She holds that it actually proves counterproductive to goals of international understanding: "It may well be maintained that many hours of tedium and limited comprehension in classrooms around the globe have produced a great deal of international *mis*understanding" (262, emphasis added). Many researchers during the 1960s began to realize similar problems with the field's narrow approach to culture. Allen (1985) summarizes the transition in culture theories in the following way: "The equation of 'Culture' with literature gave way in the 1960s to acceptance of anthropological/behavioral culture as a valid object of study that was most appropriate to the early levels of instruction" (143). As Allen continues, she enumerates four areas of focus that arose during this time:

1) the classification of culture according to a descriptive analytical scheme;
2) the establishment of specific instructional goals for the teaching of culture;
3) the development of techniques, strategies and materials designed to involve learners actively in learning culture and to integrate culture study with language study; and
4) the creation of new curricular models designed to mesh the teaching of language and the teaching of culture. (143)

Many theories were proposed during and after this paradigm shift in the 1960s, and the field gained a great deal of momentum. A key point that arose was the existence of two different layers of culture; one layer, of course, was the high, "big C" Culture of literature, art, and philosophy, while another layer comprises the "little c" culture of people's daily lives. Brooks (1971) gives these two types of culture the names *Olympian* and *Hearthstone*, respectively. Brooks (1975) also calls Hearthstone culture "culture BBV," for beliefs, behavior, and values. This type of "little c" culture had not been included in the previous study of Olympian culture. It consists of the aspects of normal life in the target culture—the types of ideas and activities language learners are most likely to encounter when communicating with native speakers or while traveling abroad.

Mantle-Bromley (1992) says that "it is plain that teachers can no longer rely on the traditional definition of culture, which is limited to fine arts, geography, and history," but must "begin to teach also about daily patterns of life, including the values and beliefs of the target culture, and must do so in a way that encourages students insofar as possible to accept the new cultural event as an alternate way of behaving" (119). Brooks (1968) offers five categories of culture: $Culture_1$ – biological growth; $Culture_2$ – personal refinement; $Culture_3$ – literature and the fine arts; $Culture_4$ – patterns for living; and $Culture_5$ – the sum total of a way of life (210). In his view, these five categories organize the definition of culture the way a dictionary would, offering different, related aspects of one word. Brooks acknowledges the validity of each of the five definitions, but states that our focus in the earlier levels of language learning should be on $Culture_4$, which he defines this way:

> $Culture_4$ 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 he can, associates with those around him, and relates to the social order to which he is attached.

According to the model proposed by Brooks, the culture of "life situations" is the proper starting place for our students.

With the distinction made between "big C" and "little c" cultures, a more comprehensive approach of the totality of culture pervaded new theories. However, there were noted pitfalls to the methods of incorporating this type of information. Often times, methods for teaching culture beyond only teaching literature have resulted in a factual approach; trivia and factoids about the target culture are presented to the students, under the guise of being "authentic" target culture. Galloway (1985) describes four approaches teachers often adopt:

1) **The Frankenstein Approach:** A taco from here, a flamenco dancer from there, a gaucho from here, a bullfight from there.
2) **The 4-F Approach:** Folk dances, festivals, fairs, and food.
3) **The Tour Guide Approach:** The identification of monuments, rivers, and cities.
4) **The "By-the-Way" Approach:** Sporadic lectures or bits of behavior selected indiscriminantly to emphasize sharp differences.
(summarized by Omaggio Hadley 2001, p. 349)

These four approaches all represent ways in which culture is *easily* incorporated into the classroom, albeit ineffectively. Despite their accuracy, facts do little to contextualize the language and may actually serve to lead students to draw *wrong* conclusions about target cultures. Additionally, they lead students to think of culture as a static construct that never changes or evolves. This impression of culture is inaccurate and will do little to broaden our students' perceptions of world cultures. If our purpose is to help students to see a bigger picture of the target culture than they would have through literature or linguistics alone, a factual approach takes only small steps toward accomplishing this goal.

Some theorists assert that the instructor need not be an encyclopedia of facts about the target culture(s), to the relief of a great many teachers. The task of accurately presenting the cultures of the world's 21 Spanish-speaking countries, for example, leaves this Spanish teacher considering a career change. According to Seelye (1984), the teacher should focus on teaching students the skills to process a *few* cultural facts, rather than a large, decontextualized group of them. He makes the point that culture is organized by the options allowed its members to meet universal human needs. We are not generally aware of this characteristic of culture because we are not generally aware of its existence in our own lives. The subtle instruction of cultural norms and behaviors is covert, subconscious; learning such cultural information does not require us to understand why it exists. Therefore, when presented with "facts" about other cultures, we interpret the information through the lens of our own cultural context because we are unaware that

other contexts exist or that context is even relevant. This can often have the negative result of some type of judgment or stereotype, even complete rejection, of the culture based on our own frame of reference. In order for our students to understand factual information about the target culture, they must realize that it requires first acknowledging that appropriateness of any given behavior, item, or activity is based on the culture in which it takes place. To reach this goal, students must be aware of the fact that they, too, are part of a culture that is, for them, the frame of reference for their entire perspective. Mantle-Bromley (1992) opines, "self-awareness must serve as the core of a program of attitude readiness. That is, students must become aware of their own culture-bound behaviors before they can realistically observe others' behaviors nonjudgmentally" (119). With awareness as to the nature of how cultures are organized and how students are themselves part of such a construct, more objective study of the target culture is possible. Students who are open to the fact that other frames of reference exist can then begin to see information about the target culture as relating to a perspective different from, though equally valuable as, their own. As Kramsch (1983) states, "To avoid developing in the students a tourist's perspective on the foreign culture, cultural facts and events must be interpreted in the light of underlying attitudes and values. This interpretation is an on-going process of exchange and negotiation of meaning between the two cultures" (437). Heusinkveld (1985) proposes a series of activities that gradually and systematically build cross-cultural understanding by first building self-awareness. Heusinkveld's lessons break the task into small steps, providing time for student processing and eventually arriving at a sense of the student's own culture and the nature of culture itself. Students are then prepared to openly examine the target culture and make sense of—rather than merely memorize—cultural facts. Ortuño (1991) suggests implementing The Kluckhohn Model to teach students that a range of perspectives exists. The model includes views on

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human nature, man's relationship with nature, time orientation, forms of activity, and relationships among members of society. Through use of such a model, students will see their own perspectives within the larger framework of existing options. This not only provides the students with opportunities for self-awareness, but simultaneously provides the opportunity for students to see how the varying cultures are related, equal, yet different.

Reasons for Practical Lag: Why have new theories not been implemented?

Despite the many innovations developed by researchers, many of these theories have not made it to the foreign language classroom. Some teachers still utilize the grammar- and vocabulary-based curricula that dominated the "literature as culture" pre-1960s era. Even well into the 1980s Seelye (1984) maintains that "[c]ulture is viewed too often as an elitist collection of facts about art, literature, music, history, and geography" (8). As Nostrand (1989) points out, ACTFL omitted culture from its *Proficiency Guidelines* in 1986, citing as a reason for its exclusion that, "[less] mature than the other fields, that component was further from a consensus on its definition,"(as summarized by Nostrand) which also made it difficult to assess and outline by ACTFL's usual three-column format. Even after ACTFL did include culture in its 1996 *Standards*, moving into a new century Walker and Noda (2000) state that "in the study of language, nothing has been discussed more and with less effect than the relationship between language and culture"(as quoted by Omaggio Hadley, 2001). And as already mentioned, within the last ten years my personal language study did not include culturally-contextualized language instruction. Though there are teachers who are contextualizing language instruction, there is a lack of consistency among the overall instructional community.

If the theories that have been proposed were strong enough to change the mindset within the field of research, why have they not been implemented into classrooms consistently and comprehensively? It is not entirely surprising that "Teachers have been slow to accept culture as a broadly defined concept," (Seelye, 1984, p.14) considering that the field of research accomplished such a goal gradually over a century of work.

However, there are many legitimate reasons that practical application has suffered such a great lag behind the development of new theories.

In order to teach culture as more than literature or factual knowledge, rather as an ever-changing, living *thing*, teachers themselves have to be aware of this fact. A language teacher begins his or her career as a language learner: after studying the language intensely in college and perhaps even studying at various locales abroad, the learner then becomes a teacher, often utilizing the same methods through which he or she learned. Many language teachers receive far more training in the language than in teaching methods. After years of learning culture through a factual or literary approach, the teachers of today may not be aware that this narrow view has been replaced by new theories. In fact, *they* learned that way and can communicate in the language just fine*; if it ain't broke why fix it*? Rivers (1968) explains, "Many teachers of foreign languages, with the best will in the world, have received no preparation at all for this aspect of their work" (262). Teachers not only suffer a lack of training in methods of culture teaching, but rather have been taught, by example, to perpetuate many antiquated methods.

Additionally, Allen (1985) speaks of a gap between theorists and teachers, both in number and in intellectual priorities. The size of the research community pales in comparison to the size of the instructional community. The detachment of new theories from classroom teachers has significantly slowed the process of diffusion of updated methods. Additionally, many teachers have concerns in their classrooms that make it difficult to relate what can often be heavily abstract theories to the everyday needs of the classroom lesson. The distance between the two communities has not been bridged successfully by theories and research. And many teachers take one look at the amount of material they already have to teach in their classrooms and fail to see space to add a hefty

topic such as culture. Yet more teachers recognize the difficulty of teaching culture or their lack of training to do so. Seelye (1984) states:

> Since many teachers feel uncomfortable dealing with concepts and data of the social sciences, they tend to rely too heavily on literature to teach culture. Consequently, the common dual descriptor of 'literature and culture' has itself become suspect; it too often means a little culture and a lot of literature. (17)

Perhaps overwhelmed by the task of teaching culture comprehensively, teachers revert to the literary approach.   Nostrand (1989) offers valid justification for the hesitation educators and researchers have had with implementing culture-teaching theories: "The maturing of this component is the more difficult because here our emerging discipline of language teaching must draw upon the greatest number of feeder disciplines: sociology, anthropology and social psychology; political science and economics" (189).

An interestingly social aspect that Grandin, *et al*.(1992) cite is the attitude among both language researchers and teachers regarding scholarly respect within the field. Grandin et al. (1992) assert that the foreign language educational community has been fighting itself in making progress on the issue of evolving concepts of culture, as well. They discuss the interesting paradox that the hierarchy of respect in the field places literary scholarship at the top, with literacy and linguistic skills at a much lower position:

> To be a Kafka scholar in a German Department is fine, but to be an expert in language learning technology support systems is somehow of lesser value; to publish an article on an obscure Molière play deserves recognition, whereas an article on teacher training or the implications of teaching French to business students will generally carry less weight in tenure and promotion decisions. To justify foreign language teaching solely as a preparatory path toward the formal study of a national literature is still commonplace among foreign language professionals. (125)

Even today, expanding the concept of culture beyond "big C" literary culture is not consistent among members of the research community.   If language communities demonstrate that literary expertise will be rewarded, whereas linguistic or practical

expertise may not receive equal reward, incentive is decreased for teachers to pursue this path, especially when high stakes, such as tenure, depend on it. Innovation in instructional methods cannot follow a "trickle down" method and reach classrooms without first being assumed by the entire research community.

Conclusion: The Necessity of Immediate Action

Returning to our original question, "What is it that we hope our students take away from our language classrooms?" we see the answer is more complex than we may have initially considered. Language proficiency inherently includes knowledge of culture. Equipping students with the skills to process culture will aid them more than a set of cultural facts. And it is dire that we begin teaching for cross-cultural understanding from the very first levels of instruction. Many of our students will, as Seelye (1984) points out, drop out of foreign language classes after the required beginning and intermediate levels courses required by their schools, colleges, or universities. Two general categories of students exist in our classes: the interested learner and the required learner. (As a disclaimer, these categories do not preclude interest from the students whose purpose in taking the language class was to fulfill a requirement; they merely categorize students based on their initial motivation for taking a course.) The interested learner can be the motivated, linguistically-inclined individual who will always at least appreciate the languages we teach them, even if they go on to specialize in other areas. The required learners are taking language classes solely because they are required to do so; for this reason, there may be broad variation in the motivation among these learners. As language teachers, we already know that languages have a great deal to offer both of these groups, but what are our goals for them?

We do, of course, hope that the pupils who will be long-term students of the language will acquire from our classes sufficient linguistic and cultural knowledge to prepare them for continued language learning, foreign experience, and a lifelong interest in the field. We know that we must prepare these students to communicate with native speakers of language, which requires instruction in language and culture. However, what

do we hope for the students who will leave our classrooms, never to open another text in or about the target language or culture and who forget as much as possible, as quickly as possible, the moment they walk out the door? These students will, assuredly, retain some skills from our classrooms, even if they have nothing to do with language use. For example, they may develop stronger study skills and strategies just to make it through our classes. But shouldn't we have higher aspirations for even the worst-case-scenario *anti-linguists* in our classes? The type of cultural understanding that can be achieved through our classes could be the answer to this question, offering our students opportunities to view the world through a broader lens. In an increasingly interconnected global society, this type of understanding will help all of our students in whatever fields they pursue.

Both categories of students have this need in the classroom, and both will benefit from the learning of language cognitively. And if none of our students continue learning the language after a class that effectively teaches cultural understanding, we can be sure they retain the lessons in cultural understanding for a lifetime—if taught effectively. It is important that we now see that our goals do not truly differ between these two groups, though our methods of engaging students may. We must begin to utilize updated theories on our students now in order to achieve our instructional objectives. Moreover, for the field of research to continue to progress, we must acknowledge the need to disseminate new theories widely, consistently, and completely. Only through classroom trial of theories may we prove them effective or ineffective. It is essential to the progress of the field that we see theories through to application.

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Vita

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