

Problem-based Paper Assignment:

How Should We Teach Culture in a Language Course?

EDUC 5199G Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL) - Dr. Allyson Eamer

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It seems that many scholars and teachers of languages, Chastain, Kramersch, Seelye and Brown to name a few (as cited in Abbaspour, Nia, & Zare, 2012), agree that teaching culture in a language classroom is essential. However, there seem to be some issues, which get in the way of implementing teaching of culture in the language classrooms. This paper will examine some of the reasons for the gap in teaching culture using technology in the language classrooms, and how this gap may be bridged if it's possible.

The authors, Abbaspour et al. (2012), feel that the primary reason for not teaching culture in classrooms is related to practical issues such as lack of time creating a cultural syllabus, choosing appropriate teaching techniques, and presenting culture-related topics and activities. Furthermore, findings from a large scale state-wide surveys conducted in Texas, U.S.A. indicate that only about 2% of teachers with bachelor's degrees received some training in culture (Moore, Morales & Carel, 1998, p. 121). This study also found that language teachers with higher education (Masters, or Ph. D.) used more technology in classrooms and had more training in culture-related studies. Consequently, lack of time and training seem to be some of the reasons for the gap in the teaching of culture using technology in the language classrooms.

However, if we analyse teachers' needs, lack of time and training are inter-related. In order to create a cultural syllabus, to choose appropriate teaching techniques, and to present culture-related topics and activities, teachers would need training in these areas, and also the time required to get the training needed. Consequently, what would training of language teachers on the subject of culture look like? How would it be introduced? Some of my findings on cultural/ intercultural teaching in language reveal that there are many layers of teaching culture. Thanasoulas (2000) stated in his thesis, "we cannot go about teaching a foreign language without at least offering some insights into its speakers' culture," and "we cannot go

about fostering ‘communicative competence’ without taking into account the different views and perspectives of people in different cultures, which may enhance or even inhibit communication” (p. 3). Accordingly, teaching of culture and communicative competence are connected and must complement each other. It also implies that the “the ultimate goal of teaching culture is to promote intercultural communication among the students” (Abbaspour et al., 2012, p. 23).

It seems that only since the 1980s, with the advances in pragmatics and sociolinguistics, the issue on bridging the gap in culture and language became prominent as explained by Thanasoulas (2000). What I find interesting in these discourses is that when I consider intercultural communication as a topic, I would think of it as a subject/ or a course to be taught on its own. For example, in L1 language such as English, an English course would be taught as a separate course and a Communication course would be considered another course, which would be obviously related to English, but with a different focus on Business Communication, Intercultural Communication, or other related communication topics. However, when teaching L2 language or foreign language, it would seem that teachers would be expected to incorporate both culture and communication into their teaching curriculum.

In a foreign language teaching context, this expectation seems to make sense as expressed by Kramsch,

“Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill tacked on ... It is always in the background right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard won communicative competence, challenging the ability to make sense of the world around them” (as cited in Abbaspour et al., 2012, p. 1).

Nonetheless, given the scope of teaching needs as described above, it would require much knowledge, effort and specialized training by the language teachers in order to incorporate culture and communicative competence into language courses.

Clearly, the type of communicative competence and culture training that Thanasoulas (2000) and Schenker (2012) mentioned in their writing encompass a huge array of learning objectives. Kramsch and Singhal believe that “culture should be taught as an interpersonal process, and rather than presenting cultural facts, teachers should assist language learners in coming to grips with the *other culture*” (as cited in Thanasoulas, 2000, p. 9). Thanasoulas (2000) indicated that cultural awareness informs and enriches communicative competence. Furthermore, communicative competence would include verbal as well as non-verbal communication, such as gestures, and other appropriate behaviour in the target culture. This would require language teachers to be constantly up-to-date with the evolving culture of the language. Also, if a language is spoken in many different parts of the world, which culture should be introduced to the students? Is there a general rule/ guide that should be followed when teaching culture?

It’s evident that the more we delve into the matter of teaching culture in the language classrooms, incorporating intercultural communicative competence becomes more complex and multifaceted. The above questions would need to be considered by language teachers and may need to be incorporated into the curriculum. However, rather than analysing the complexity of teaching intercultural communicative competence, I found that reflecting instead on some of the examples of cultural exchanges made possible through the use of computer technology in language classes to be much more revealing examples of pedagogy.

For example, in collaboration with the target language school administrators, instructor and students, Schenker (2012) conducted a six-week online email exchange between American and German students with specific goals to learn about the students’ interest in culture associated with the target language, and to determine whether the students showed improvement in

achieving intercultural communicative competence using Byram's model. The results of the study indicated that students exhibited "all learning objectives associated with the objective of critical cultural awareness and political education ... Additionally, the telecollaborative project showed an increase in the students' self-perceived knowledge about the target culture" (Schenker, 2012, P. 460).

Another example can be found in the *Cultura* project, which used constructivist, interactive approach between French and American university students. The students observed, analyzed, and compared materials from their respective cultures as posted on the Web, and exchanged viewpoints on these materials in a "reciprocal and ever-deepening understanding of the other culture" (Furstenberg, G., Levet, S., English, K., & Maillet, K., 2001, p. 59). The students also studied and researched films, texts, and online new media to expand their cross-cultural analysis. The resulting comments from the students' experiences from the *Cultura* project is quite inspiring to read. Students learned to acquire "a method for understanding a foreign culture" from the exchanges (Furstenberg et al., 2001, p. 9). In addition, majority of the students involved in the study indicated that direct contact with students in the other culture made it possible for them to form opinions for themselves and to put an end to stereotypes! These would have been exciting findings for the researchers involved in the study. The authors also indicated that they

"are quite often surprised to discover how deep and insightful some of the students' comments are and how proficient they become at identifying cultural features and making relevant connections -- to the point where their perceptions, unbeknownst to them, even match the findings of cross-cultural experts" (Furstenberg et al., 2001, p. 92).

The above two examples reveal that it's possible to provide opportunities for students to learn intercultural communicative competence in a language class within a very short period of time using the available technology. As Seccombe (2010) points out, modern technology allows

us easy, quick and free access to materials that would help “to increase our students’ tolerance and understanding of other countries and cultures ... nothing will achieve that aim more than personal contact between our students and their counterparts overseas” (p. 39). Moreover, Dubreil, Young and Canfield (2011) believe that the new media have radically affected language learners in the way they socialize and learn, and that the current “highly structured paradigms are slow to” meet the changing needs of the students (p. 2). The learners today require “learning environments that allow greater personal latitude in constructing knowledge” (Dubreil et al., 2011, p. 2).

Consequently, providing students with an opportunity to learn using technology to engage in dialogue with students in target culture, and to analyse various cultural artefacts seem to pave ways for language learners to acquire intercultural communicative competence. Coppens, Rico and Agudo, (2012) also share their experiences using the Web and blogs to accumulate authentic teaching materials for language classrooms. It seems that we need to “co-evolve” with the current technological environment, and with the needs of the twenty-first century learners to provide authentic enriched learning environment for our students (Dubreil et al., 2011, p. 2).

Overall, it appears that the training that language teachers would need involves learning to work with current technology to provide students with additional support in their dialogue process, and also to provide opportunities for this dialogue to occur. Teachers would be facilitators learning along with the students’ exchanges/ dialogues and guiding them along the way when required. Language teachers are also required to tap into current list of resources using technology to provide students with authentic culturally engaging teaching materials as mentioned by Coppens et al. (2012).

It seems that technology is a catalyst for language teaching to evolve into a dynamic communicative process, where learning occurs in a multi-faceted way for both teachers and students alike. In the current technological environment that we are moving deeper into, I feel that teaching of language and culture would become synonymous. I realize that for all language teaching to evolve in the direction that was mentioned above, it would take time. However, in the globally interconnected world that we live today, it seems that connecting language students with their target cultures would benefit all who are involved in the process and would provide learners with engaging, social constructivist environment as described by Lev Vygotsky (Principles of Learning Course Wiki. Retrieved November 19, 2013, from http://wikis.apa.uoit.ca/wikis/EDUC5001-SEP10/index.php/Lev_Vygotsky). However, as with any process, this dialogue process may not be possible or suitable for all language learners depending upon a given situation. Instead, it would be one of many options available to language teachers, and seems to have much potential for future learners.

In summary, although my problem-based paper was successful in identifying the problem of implementing teaching of culture in language classrooms, finding a suitable solution to this issue seems much more complex, and would require more research and more innovative insights into the communicative process. My vision of teaching language classes in the near future would have a website, where the teachers would be able to access a list of target language classrooms to choose an online dialogue process for their students. For students, the reflections gained from this dialogue process would be part of a completion requirement for any language course.

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