TEACHING CULTURE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT
This article discusses the current challenges regarding the teaching of culture in a foreign language classroom. In earlier times, most instructors agreed that introducing learners to ‘high’ culture was the most appropriate method of teaching culture. However, the 1970s turn to communicative language teaching brought with it the idea that culture should be taught alongside language, encouraging the study of patterns for living instead of literature and fine arts. Regardless of the methodology used, many authors insisted on methods to aid in setting learning objectives, developing instruction, and implementing specific classroom techniques which can help students understand the culture more deeply. This literature review explores several of these writings.

There was a time when academics may have argued over whether culture needed to be taught at all. Those times seem long gone, and most agree that learning about the target culture is a necessary, if not the most important, course component. By default, it has consistently fallen on the foreign language professor to impart his or her knowledge of the target culture during foreign language instruction. Unfortunately, teaching culture brings with it several variables which create significant challenges that the instructor must overcome in order to be effective.

Without a doubt, one of the most significant challenges related to teaching culture is that there is no commonly agreed-upon definition of culture. In fact, over 50 years ago, Nelson Brooks explained, “Our greatest immediate problem is that we are uncertain about what we mean by the word culture.” At first glance, it appears that two distinct camps have emerged. The first camp views culture as the everyday interaction between people of a certain group, often mislabeled as popular or “pop” culture. The other group tends to lean toward literature or fine arts, claiming that the best way to teach others about a people is through “high” culture. This is oversimplified, to be certain, and both approaches are problematic. While “pop” culture may be more appealing to Americans, it may be ephemeral and ignores the role fine arts play in many societies. Focusing on literature or fine arts is also inadequate as they deal mainly with the past, and a focus on fine arts can lead to an extremely narrow view of a society. The reality is that there are several levels in between, and dividing the argument into two separate groups does a disservice to the students and the culture the instructor wishes to explain.
In his attempt to define culture, Brooks lists five sub-definitions of culture and stresses that the instructor must focus on how the individual reacts within these sub-definitions:

- **Culture 1—Biological growth**
- **Culture 2—Personal refinement**
- **Culture 3—Literature and the fine arts**
- **Culture 4—Patterns for living**
- **Culture 5—The sum total of a way of life**

Brooks recommends that, at least in beginner-level language courses, the instructor should focus his or her efforts on **Culture 4**—patterns for living, reminding the instructor that, “what is important in **Culture 4** is what one is “expected” to think, believe, say, do, eat, wear, pay, endure, resent, honor, laugh at, fight for, and worship, in typical life situations.” This, after all, provides the content of most novice-level language topics (i.e., self, family, daily life). Other authors have used similar definitions and drawn similar conclusions that culture, as it is taught in the foreign language classroom, must focus on patterns within a society. Once the student has some understanding of these patterns, he or she can begin to learn about and discover significant matters in the realm of fine arts (**Culture 3**) and how everything fits together (**Culture 5**).

Once a working definition of culture has been selected, the instructor must determine the best way to incorporate that view of culture instruction in the classroom. Dale Lange expanded on Brooks’ findings thirty years later, encouraging the teaching professional to do just that. He provides several examples of how to combine culture with foreign language, and gives practical questions for course designers and textbook writers that guide them through the process of determining what culture is, establishing goals to incorporate culture into the classroom, implementing techniques to reach those goals, and evaluating students’ understanding of the information.

Seelye continues this theme of planning cultural outcomes by providing six “organizing goals” that instructors can use to develop the overall plan, ranging from the basic goal of creating interest in a culture, to the final level of exploring the culture on their own. Once the overall goals are established, the instructor can determine the specific approaches he or she will use to guide the students through the process of cultural exploration. There are several approaches, but a few stand out as the most popular within the community. Culture capsules, role-playing, mini-dramas, and audio-motor units appear to be the most frequently recommended. These active learning techniques allow the student to see, hear, touch, and act out real-life cultural situations or discuss cultural differences in the classroom.

One of the main difficulties in teaching culture is assessing the effectiveness of various techniques. Some methods mentioned in the existing literature range from fact-based questioning to surveying students regarding whether or not they enjoyed the lesson. However, none of these truly appear to capture the intent of teaching culture. Fact-based questioning will only measure whether a student can regurgitate facts, and surveying students’ enjoyment only tests whether or not the capsules were interesting. Surveying students who have returned from study abroad opportunities as to the relevance and effectiveness must be implemented in order to get a clear assessment. Unfortunately, such methods are difficult to organize and assess. Task-based instruction, however, provides learners with a quasi-authentic environment and scenario in
which they can use language and their knowledge of living patterns to complete a task typical in the target culture.

**Recommendations**

The following are recommendations for teaching culture in the foreign language classroom gleaned from the listed readings and nearly two decades of studying and teaching foreign languages and cultures:

- Determine which definition and approach to teaching culture will be used before designing any objectives or outcomes.
- The instructor must leave his or her comfort zone. Instructors tend to play to their own strengths when defining culture; the fine arts guru who knows little about “pop” culture must learn about it. Conversely, the instructor who does not understand how the fine arts reflect the target culture must become familiar with the “high” culture of the target.
- Focus on Brooks’ *Culture4* in beginning classes; move to *Culture3* as students progress and know more about the culture.
- Remember to focus on how individuals operate within the target culture.
- Plan cultural instruction; do not treat it as a natural byproduct of language teaching.
- Always use authentic materials, including photographs, props, music, videos, etc.
- Above all, plan instruction to create a positive attitude toward the target culture; avoid teaching culture as stereotypes or using negative connotations.

**Conclusion**

It is doubtful that a commonly-agreed upon definition of culture will emerge in the near future. It is, therefore, incumbent upon program and course directors to determine what view of culture will be used at their individual universities. Only after a working definition is established, can a plan be developed to allow instructors and professors to implement cultural instruction and lead students through Seelye’s six goals. Research tends to point to the fact that, at least at the beginning levels, culture should focus on patterns and trends seen in everyday life of the target culture. Later, after the student has been exposed to the culture and understands some basic differences between his or her culture and the target, “high” culture can be introduced as a way of understanding another dynamic within the target culture.

**References**


**Annotated readings**

One of the first to tackle the subject, this is easily the most cited article regarding teaching culture in the foreign language world. Brooks admits that culture is extremely difficult to define, and attempts to create a definition of different levels of culture. The article advises language instructors to focus on how individuals react and live within the framework of each level, and offers both theoretical and practical advice to the instructor. Above all, Brooks advises instructors in beginning classes to focus on "patterns for living," and to always use authentic materials, meaning those produced for use by those in the target culture.

In stark contrast to the majority of articles regarding this topic, Koppe avoids the theoretical and focuses on practical application of the culture-teaching strategies. She focuses on audio-motor units, mini-dramas, cultural capsules, and role-play activities, giving examples used in the German classroom that could be adapted to any culture. Although the article touches on ways to evaluate students, it does not discuss this topic in-depth.

Kramsch discusses the difficulty in determining what is important when teaching culture. She briefly discusses the movement from structuralism when culture was always defined as 'high' C or fine arts and literature, to the view held during the 1970s in which interest in culture shifted to 'low' C, or everyday customs. The bulk of the article focuses on an 1992 experiment in which groups of American, French, and German foreign language teachers attempted to describe the foreign culture to the members of the target culture. The experiment was based on the idea that a native would need an outsider's perspective in order to effectively teach about one's own culture. In the end, however, the instructors could not reach a consensus as to what should be taught about any of the represented languages. Kramsch also touches, albeit briefly, on the fact that instructors tend to bring their own presuppositions and preferences about the target culture to the classroom, creating filters through which information passes to the students.
Kramsch defines many of the terms and processes used to link culture and language together.
She explores areas such as Speech and Discourse Community, Linguistic Relativity and various
theories related to the topic. While this text is helpful in defining ways in which culture and
language interact and influence one another, it gives very little insight in how to teach a foreign
language.

Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German, 89-96.
At the time of publishing, Lalande's article was one of, if not the first to focus on a specific
language-learning level. As the title implies, Lalande discusses how to teach culture in an
intermediate college German course. Lalande argues that "high" culture need not focus on
literature, but should also focus on the sciences. He describes an experiment that he conducted at
the University of Illinois in which he created culture capsules regarding famous German
scientists. According to the text, the capsules were positively received by his intermediate
German students.

Shanahan, D. (1997). Articulating the Relationship between Language, Literature, and Culture:
Toward a New Agenda for Foreign Language Teaching and Research. The Modern Language
Journal, 164-174.
Shanahan discusses the positive aspects of using literature in a foreign language classroom. His
argument is mainly between teaching literature as culture and only teaching communicative
skills. According to this text, literature affects the way individuals within a society communicate.
Therefore, literature should be viewed as a catalyst to understanding a language.

This is an extremely practical guide for the instructor wishing to utilize culture capsules in the
foreign language classroom. Taylor and Sorenson briefly outline the theory behind culture
capsules, and then describe several that they have used in multiple levels of Spanish courses.
Significantly, the authors recommend that the instructor feel comfortable using the same capsule
for varying levels of students, but that they add more detail as the proficiency level of the
students increases.

Additional resources

French Review, 300-311.
Cambridge University Press.
Press.
