

Strategies to Raise Cultural Awareness and Create Multicultural Materials and Activities in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

Nowadays, language teaching professionals face the challenge to incorporate culture in their instructional practice. This paper helps them explore their cultural beliefs and develop skills to evaluate and create cultural materials and activities in the language classroom.

Key words: culture, multicultural materials, second language learning, strategies

Resumen

Los profesionales de la enseñanza de idiomas enfrentan el reto de incorporar objetivos culturales en sus lecciones. Este ensayo ayuda a los educadores a explorar sus propias creencias culturales así como a desarrollar habilidades para evaluar y diseñar materiales y actividades culturales en sus lecciones.

Palabras claves: cultura, materiales multiculturales, aprendizaje de una segunda lengua, estrategias

I want the cultures of all lands to be blown
about my house as freely as possible.

-Mahatma Gandhi

The world today is a global village, a global community, where “isolationism is a dangerous stance to take” (Omaggio, 1986). Everywhere at all hours, the possibility of meeting someone from another country is not a possibility anymore, it is a reality. The constant and increasing interaction with people from other cultures has brought controversy and conflicts but also interest and human concern. So, more and more, knowledge of cultural issues

has become proactive, and it is no longer exclusively a response to culture clash but a necessity to build long lasting relationships.

Intercultural skills are in fact demanded by international companies and large business corporations. They have realized that a cultural misunderstanding can many times break important deals. In politics as well, intercultural effectiveness is a must. Diplomatic relations could not be properly held if the representatives of the different countries were unaware of the cultural assets of one another.

In recent years, cultural training has also gained more importance in the language education field. Increasingly diverse classrooms have forced educators to include learning standards that encourage “using English in socially and culturally appropriate ways” (TESOL, 2008).

Still, although culture has been considered a language skill like listening, speaking, reading, and writing, it is often overlooked in language classrooms and has caused what Barlund (1999, p.14) calls “cultural myopia.”

So, why are language educators not including cultural aspects in their instruction? There are many reasons: 1) the assumption that language alone is enough to communicate successfully; 2) the lack of resources that address culturally relevant and appropriate issues; 3) the lack of opportunities for language teaching professionals to receive training in the field and develop cultural awareness themselves; 4) and in some cases the apparent feeling that there is no need to explore cultural matters.

However, the reasons mentioned above can be regarded mostly as excuses. As Barlund (1999) highlights, “human understanding is by no means guaranteed because conversants share the same dictionary” (p. 6). Knowledge of culture can only be achieved by studying that culture or being exposed to it. Not only that, “learning the cultural roots of a language is essential for meaningful fluency” (Seelye, 1993, p. 275). Furthermore, nowadays there is a myriad of cultural resources available for language professionals and extensive opportunities for them to learn about the teaching of culture. Finally, the fact that a country is rather homogenous, if compared to the population of other countries like the United States and China, is by no means a sign that cultural guidance is not necessary. On the contrary, sharing the same linguistic background does not guarantee having the same cultural background. If anything, it only increases the need to be ready to interact with people with other cultural and linguistic origins.

As stated by EdChange, it is the educators’ role to produce “socially and critically active and aware students.” Therefore, all language teaching professionals should assess their educational practices in order to make sure they are culturally inclusive. By including cultural instruction in the language classroom teachers can assure all their “students are well prepared to competently participate in an increasingly intercultural society” (EdChange, 2007).

Given that language and culture go hand in hand, the language classroom is the perfect place to raise cultural awareness. But how can we teach culture when one does not really understand the importance and the many layers of cultural issues? Just as the teaching of any subject matter that involves delicate social issues, cultural education cannot be taken lightly.

Because of that, “making educational decisions regarding cultural differences can be much more slippery or abstract” (Ovando, Combs & Collier, 2006, p.180) than what teachers think. Language teaching professionals’ exploration of their own cultural beliefs and knowledge of the process to select and create culturally relevant materials and activities are key elements in the journey of encouraging cultural exploration in the language classroom.

Exploration of Cultural Beliefs

We don’t see things as they are,
we see them as we are.

-Anais Nin

Because culture is so ingrained into people’s lives, it is often hard to see it as being culture. As an object of study, it is difficult to explore cultural patterns when in order to do so “the same mechanisms that are being evaluated must be used in making the evaluation” (Barlund, 1999, p.14). The following story, by the Centre for Intercultural Learning in Canada - also available at their website as a short clip - illustrates the concept better.

Everyone who lives in Bongobongo wears yellow sunglasses. Quite naturally, everything they see-the sky, the trees, the people, the food-has a sunny yellow tint. It has always been like this and the citizens of Bongobongo live quite contentedly in their yellow universe. Into this world, comes a visitor, a citizen of Adanac. As you may have heard, all Adanacians wear blue sunglasses. When they wake up each day, they kiss their beautiful blue children, and look out on to blue fields, forests and farms, all of course, under a perfect blue sky. Being a culturally sensitive visitor, the Adanacian feels it is only right that he tries to understand the Bongobongo perspective of the world. So he acquires a pair of yellow sunglasses. Then he puts them on over his own blue ones. “Ah!” he says with some satisfaction. “Now I get it. Everything here in Bongobongo is green!”

As the story depicts, one’s own experiences filter or “color” any attempts to try to make sense of the system of beliefs and communication that people from other cultures use. Language teachers will also, states Hollins, “bring [their] own cultural norms into [their] professional life” (as cited in Hernandez-Sheets, 2005, p. 145). For that reason, the first step to become a strong promoter of cultural matters in the language classroom is to start by reflecting on one’s own preconceptions about culture.

Even within one’s own culture, stereotypes linked to family diversity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender differences, and ability differences influence one’s perspective of life. Consequently, requiring teachers to carry

out a thorough self-analysis before embarking in the task of educating their students is imperative to increase their knowledge about themselves and the world. In addition, it is also necessary in order to avoid reflecting biased ideas into everyday instruction. If teachers and students hold their own biased ideas, it is not hard to imagine then, the existence of stereotypes, whether conscious or not, about another culture. Therefore, after evaluating their own perspectives of culture, teachers should encourage their students to do the same. Starting by themselves before looking at others is a healthy practice that will help both teachers and students for years to come.

Several organizations and books provide language teaching professionals with questionnaires and resources to inquire about their cultural beliefs. *EdChange* for example, is an organization that offers support online to spread culturally accurate messages throughout the world. Their website, edchange.org, presents innumerable handouts and suggestions for self-reflection and for creating a culturally inclusive classroom. As *EdChange*, other organizations with online initiatives and resources are *Tolerance.org*, and the *Birminghampledge.org*. Dr. Jon Reyhner from Northern Arizona University also has a *Multicultural Education Resource Guide* at with over fifty links to multicultural websites. The number of websites with multicultural programs and materials is outstanding; just typing the phrase *cultural resources* on Google results in over 200,000,000 entries. Opportunities for cultural training and self-reflection are definitely abundant.

In short, when teachers start by examining, culturally, what is inside and around them, there are more probabilities they develop genuine interest and passion for multicultural education; and it should not come as a surprise that if teachers are looking at developing students' empathy, flexibility and curiosity, as Jarvis (1977, p. 160) points out, teachers themselves should be carriers of those very desirable qualities. If teachers are expecting their students to be critical thinkers, they should also apply critical thinking skills in their lesson delivery.

Selecting and Creating Multicultural Materials and Activities

“La culture, c’est ce qui reste quand on a tout oublié”

Edouard Herriot

The second step to provide culturally meaningful instruction is carefully selecting and creating materials and activities. Through history, there have been several approaches that organize cultural instruction. Omaggio (1986, p. 362) delights the reader with Galloway's explanation of what the available approaches for teaching culture were at the end of the eighties. Galloway divides the most common models into the *Frankenstein Approach*, a little of facts from every culture, the *4-F Approach*, folk dances, festivals, fairs, and food, the *Tour Guide Approach*, monuments and cities, and the “*By-the-Way*” *Approach*, isolated

facts. Somehow surprising is the fact that still today, more than 30 years later, teaching professionals keep attempting to teach culture in the same way, if any.

However, it is now known that teaching plain facts about a specific culture resembles more a social studies or geography class than a culturally inclusive lesson. For one thing, isolated or groups of facts “may not hold true across time and social strata”. (Jarvis, p. 153). Furthermore, a society is much more than just a set of icons, for “Structures of value, status, role and other functions exist in every culture and communicative behavior can best be understood in relation to this underlying structures” (Jarvis, 1977, p.154). Cultural instruction should therefore portray those aspects as well.

So, when it comes to guiding cultural instruction, basic knowledge of cultural schemas is a plus. Therefore, becoming familiar with modern cultural approaches is very rewarding. Still, as in any field of study, almost never does one schema fulfill all instructional needs. Especially for busy language teaching professionals, theorizing for hours about this system or that set of categories can be exhausting.

Nevertheless, when a cultural inventory or cultural framework cannot be implemented, any attempt to include cultural relevant content and activities in the classroom is always positive. So, although implementing a sound cultural scheme would be ideal, teachers sometimes need to simply find techniques that integrate cultural objectives with academic and language objectives in their current syllabus at one time. Because of that, instead of exploring in depth the different approaches to the teaching of culture, the following are punctual recommendations to try to incorporate cultural activities that can prepare and encourage teachers and students for cultural instruction opportunities.

How to choose culturally relevant materials

According to Sutherland (as cited in Hernandez-Sheets, 2005, p.130), authors usually take three different ideological stances. They assent, advocate for, or attack a particular theory or set of cultural theories. Some textbook writers support the supremacy of a culture and encourage the others to conform to it; others acknowledge a variety of cultures but send out an underlying message that cultural differences fade away in a “melting pot”, yet others support cultural pluralism. For this reason, materials and activities should be carefully evaluated in terms of cultural appropriateness before being used in the classroom.

Hernandez-Sheets (2005) suggests three types of examinations: availability, appropriateness, and ideological perspective examinations to be carried out at the beginning of the school year or course. Educators should first look for the available resources at their schools. After that, they can look at the language, age level, and accuracy of the information presented. Finally, they should check the underlying cultural message that the materials and activities convey. Several checklists and charts are accessible in books and the internet.

Hernandez-Sheets in her book, *Diversity Pedagogy*, includes a very punctual guide in which the message, the authenticity, the language, and the illustrations are analyzed in cultural terms.

A very popular source that should be closely monitored for cultural accuracy is literature. From folktales to novels and short stories, to poetry and fiction, cultural accounts have always existed and continue to increase. Although literature is a culturally rich and invaluable resource, hidden bias is often more likely to remain hidden without a close look. Depending on the author experiences and upbringing, cultural events or portrayal of people from another culture can be detrimental to students' developing concept of cultural matters.

That being said, literature - if used appropriately - can provide students with experiences they would not have other way. At *cultureforkids.com* teachers can find a variety of books beautifully illustrated as well as flashcards and CDs in different languages. DVDs depicting people from different countries and their lifestyles and traditions are also available. Although these resources are not free, they are affordable and unique.

Sometimes, however, it is difficult to know whether a specific cultural group is being misrepresented in literature or in the media. Special guidelines to select literature with different ethnic groups in mind can be found at the Scholastic website for free. In there, special tips make the task of selecting stories and books for students easier.

How to create culturally appropriate materials and activities

Culture capsules, culture assimilators, and culture mini-dramas are among the most common "exclusively cultural" activities to get across cultural aspects in the classroom. However, there is no reason why cultural activities cannot encompass other areas of teaching at the same time they approach culture. In fact, integrating culture with language instruction and subjects such as mathematics or science might be more meaningful to students than dealing with culture per se.

For any cultural material or activity to be successful, academic, linguistic, and cultural objectives must be carefully selected and integrated. Just as teachers vigilantly choose objectives for their lessons, materials and activities should have an objective too. Cultural objectives should be stated as skills and abilities, what Seelye (1993) calls "performance objectives" rather than facts. Seelye's six instructional goals, summarized in the chart below, present a quite clear, easy to follow schema.

Goal 1	Students show curiosity and empathy.
Goal 2	Students recognize that social variables affect the way people speak and behave.

Goal 3	Students realize effective communication requires decoding cultural conditioning.
Goal 4	Students recognize that situational variables and convention shape behavior.
Goal 5	Students understand that people act the way they do in order to satisfy their needs within the options their society allows.
Goal 6	Students can evaluate generalizations and conduct research about the target culture.

Adapted from Seelye (1993, p. 31)

Different learning styles and intelligences as well as cognitive skills (Bloom's taxonomy) should be also taken into account when planning cultural activities. The key, however, is to integrate harmoniously all aspects together. Including both surface culture - facts about language, culture, food, and music - and deep culture -values and behavior patterns- is also imperative. The following chart provides a guideline to make sure teachers include all aspects in their planning of a cultural activity.

Cultural Activity Planning Form

Language Objective:

Academic Objective:

Cultural Objective:

Surface Culture:

Deep Culture:

Multiple Intelligences:

Cognitive Skills:

All in all, providing students with the resources to get acquainted with and develop cultural skills is just the beginning. Hernandez-Sheets recommends close examination of students' reactions to the cultural resources and activities used in the classroom as well as periodic descriptions of successful and not so successful cultural lessons and activities.

Bottom line, it is the language teaching professionals' duty to look for professional development opportunities that enable them to understand cultural

processes better. It is also their task to provide students with culturally appropriate instructional techniques and models to use in their classrooms. In the words of William M. Chase (as cited in Culture Coach, n.d.)

Diversity...is not casual liberal tolerance of anything not yourself. It is not polite accommodation. Instead, diversity is, in action, the sometimes painful awareness that other people, other races, other voices, other habits of mind have as much integrity of being, as much claim on the world as you do... And I urge you, amid all the differences present to the eye and mind, to reach out to create the bond that...will protect us all. We are all meant to be here together.

English teaching professionals in the world have the mission and responsibility to create that bond: to teach cultural understanding. It is only by doing so that we will achieve peace and tolerance in the world.

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