

Intersecting Language and Culture in the FL Classroom

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Abstract—This paper addresses the intersection of language and culture in the context of foreign language (FL) instruction. It is widely accepted that successful foreign language learning requires acquiring cultural competency corresponding to the language being taught, leading to the challenge of how to teach culture, what aspects of the culture or cultures in some cases. This paper contains discussions regarding the problem and offers suggestions for modeling communicative competence that is culturally relevant, the importance of “teaching culture,” difficulties of teaching culture with language instruction, theories of communicative competence, and model elements to create a new meta-linguistic model.

Index Terms—teaching culture, communicative competence, language instruction, meta-linguistic model

I. INTRODUCTION

It is almost universally recognized within academic circles that teaching a foreign language requires knowledge and understanding of the culture associated with the language being taught. When teaching a FL, teaching culture becomes an inseparable task,

Despite this widely accepted notion, introducing cultural content remains a source of tension for language teachers, creating sometimes a feeling of guilt for what teachers describe as not “covering” enough culture. Many teachers conclude that they bring culture into the classroom only as tidbits of information added as a manner of appetizer or dessert for a lesson but not presented as the actual thread that ties language to a meaningful context.

The goal of this paper is to reflect on how teaching of culture evolved over time and propose a model that engages and encourages both teachers and learners to experience the culture they are studying from while studying the language.

II. THE TEACHING OF CULTURE OVER TIME

Historically speaking, some of the strategies that have been used for the advancement of intercultural proficiency included the following: audio-lingual drills, role-playing, detailed studies of a specific culture, and comparative/contrastive analysis of cultural variables. Most of these types of activities allowed the teacher to count those moments as “cultural activities”. Another popular tool developed then that it is still utilized today is this concept of “culture capsule”. This is an activity where learners are asked to create a project which contains information on various aspects of the target culture. While these tools were and remain beneficial, it is important to understand that in and of themselves these tasks do not resolve the issue of the compartmentalization teachers feel when approaching the teaching of culture this way, which aspects of culture are essential for culture teaching.

Around the 1970s, language instructors started having discussions about the definition of culture, and how to incorporate it into their language lessons. The most significant progress made in this decade included a fairly consistent definition of what culture meant, understood as a set of values, beliefs, and practices that are shared by a specific group of individuals (Choudhury, 2014). The field of sociology also contributed to the discussions of the teaching of culture during the 1970s. Increased focus was placed on nationality, on ethnographic approaches, that is, the study of crucial interactions between members of a culture (Meadows, 2016), and on “non-observable cultural aspects. These aspects of the culture were seen as are either guidelines informing suitable behaviors from a particular cultural group or as values and beliefs that underlie the observable behaviors. Teaching culture in a language classroom in the 1970s focused more on culture labeled as “Little-C culture”. Within this mindset, rather than learning a word, phrase, or sentence in the target language in isolation from context it became common to either visualize or to play-act a conversation within the culture in which the word, phrase, or sentence would be used. A significant ideological shift was also occurring at this time. Instructors started to refrain from assuming that there were absolute cultural truths and the concept of cultural relativity was introduced. It became apparent that cultural representations needed to include despairing attitudes and beliefs between cultures and not accepting these differences would imply feeding prejudices (Thanasoulas, 2001).

In the 1980s, much of the shifts that had started in the previous decade were brought to fruition. The focus on non-observable elements of culture became more pronounced as well as the understanding that people should not value cultural experiences from a certain group as better or worse than another group but learn to appreciate the differences. In this decade, two brand-new lines of discussion emerged. One was a shift away from emphasizing specific parts of the culture to concentrating on general elements of the target culture. A reason behind this transition is that it became

significantly common for students to take a study abroad trip to countries in which the target language was spoken. Teachers preparing students for these study abroad experiences needed to take a more generalized approach when giving students tools to succeed abroad since it was too difficult to predict what types of interactions they would eventually have. The second line of discussion in research circles around that time was concerning the issue of whose cultural experiences needed to be taught, whose stories needed to be told. This brought to the fore front factors like race, ethnic background, and economic class that tended to be absent in previous culture teaching or research thereupon.

The 1990s saw the increasing impact of post-structuralism on language instruction (Shanahan, 1997). This reinforced the aforementioned hesitancy concerning whether to assume that cultures are to be objectively assessed according to ethical standards of one's own culture. Another result of this influence was a basic line of questioning concerning whether there is such a thing as the essence of a culture. This made it even harder for teachers than it had been to decide which cultural elements to include in language instruction. Culture began to be regarded as "a form of social practice and subjective schema of significance" (Meadows 2016, p. 155). As a part of the same shift, Western designs of language teaching and learning started to be challenged. Researchers started rethinking colonial and post-colonial relations between the west and target cultures' nations. Lastly, there was a move away from focusing solely on the dominant cultures in a specific country, state, or other geographical locations.

Much of these exact same trends continued at the beginning of the 2000s. Culture as a clearly defined concept was substituted with concepts of culture that embodied a framework that offered options for interpretation. More commonly, "the 2000s literature set a re-aligning of the concept of culture to be in tune with globalized realities" (Meadows 2016, p. 158). Culture teaching at this time moved toward promoting diversity in instructional models. A vital theoretical advancement during this decade was the realization of the lack of connection between scholarship on language and culture instruction on one hand, and the experiences of language and culture instructors on the ground, on the other. This issue will play a central role in the discussion that appears below.

In recent years, the conceptualization of culture continues to be seen as ever-more complex and variegated. Culture teaching is becoming increasingly intercultural in emphasis, and specific acknowledgment tends to be given to the fact that many cultures have actually been shaped by colonialism. There are, as we will see, challenges on how culture should be taught in the context of teaching a foreign or a second-language but first we will address the importance of teaching culture.

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF TEACHING CULTURE

One can envision an argument for the separation between teaching language and teaching culture. It is possible, at least in theory, to learn to speak, comprehend, and write in a foreign language utilizing nothing more than dictionary and a textbook. Why would this not be adequate, in a complete sense, as learning the language? A person can speak and comprehend the words themselves but lacks the context to successfully communicate and negotiate conversations in real life. Bennett (1993) reminds us that "a fluent fool is someone who speaks the language well but doesn't understand the social content of that language" (p. 16). In order to develop intercultural communicative competence and not be a "fluent fool" one has to familiarize oneself with the cultures where the language is spoken.

Intercultural competence is defined as the ability to communicate and relate successfully in multiple contexts (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). Successful intercultural speakers are those who can mediate between groups from different cultures. They can negotiate a system of values that is different from their own, and adjust their behavior as necessary. One theorist elaborates on what he calls "the three levels of learner results" as learning culture is concerned: (1) cultural understanding, (2) cultural awareness, and (3) cultural skills (Nguyen 2017, p. 145). Teachers have an easier time bringing elements of culture that promote cultural understanding and awareness but find it more difficult to create circumstances to experience and develop cultural skills.

Communicative proficiency needs proficiency of sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of language and culture. Two elements of this proficiency are the ability to express a message properly and to comprehend the kind and the value of background understanding that tends to be assumed to be in place in a lot of genuine cultural encounters (Brdaric, 2016). Constructing a message properly includes among other things, picking one of several expressions that might be counted as comparable in a dictionary. Even if a dictionary differentiates them, it can be difficult or almost impossible to know which expression must be used in which circumstance without acquiring understanding about a culture-- that is, communicative proficiency.

Additionally, research on intercultural communicative competence highlights the importance of preparing learners to engage in a global society by discovering the appropriate manner in which to interact with people from different cultures (Sinicrope et al., 2012).

IV. CHALLENGES IN TEACHING CULTURE

The challenges with teaching culture persist in spite of the fact that instructors appear to be generally knowledgeable about its importance (Gonen & Saglam, 2012). The most common factor cited by teachers appears to be the way the majority of the textbooks are designed. Although teachers have a certain degree of flexibility on how to design their curriculum, when teachers adopt a certain text, the text becomes the curriculum that guides instruction. Most textbooks

have a vocabulary, a grammar and a culture section. Cultural tidbits are sprinkled in every chapter throughout the text but at first glance, cultural curricular concepts appear separate from language concepts. This seemingly harmless organizational structure appears to be the main culprit to blame for the separation of language and culture.

Another less common but yet real reason as to why teachers find it challenging to incorporate culture as they teach language is that it is a tough and lengthy task to become an expert in a given language. When we honor the teaching of culture together with language, we are implicitly asking that those associated with language instruction become specialists on the target culture as well (Byram & Kramsch, 2000). Although it is possible for teachers to achieve high levels of cultural competence, it is difficult and at times intimidating. Scholars have found that foreign language teachers lack intercultural competence and are generally described as ethnocentric (DeJaeghere & Cao, 2009; Mahon, 2009; Wright, 2000; Yuen, 2010). Mahon (2009) found that educators that displayed ethnocentric attitudes tended to avoid confrontation when working with conflicting cultural concepts. Programs developed to help promote intercultural sensitivity will need to find ways of addressing the ethnocentricity not only in the learners but also in the teachers. Research shows that when teachers participate in professional development activities that focus on intercultural competence they show significant gains in intercultural awareness and in turn develop a curriculum that emphasizes cultural experiences for learners (MLA, 2007).

Another challenge is that cultural matters are not always without controversy, and they can differ within a single culture and a single language. For example, two Arabs who both speak Palestinian Arabic may appear the same but are different because one lives in Israel and the other lives outside the occupied territories in the West Bank. They both may very well have a different understandings of their shared culture. It is nearly certain that conservative and liberal Jews who reside in Israel have extremely diverse understandings of their shared culture, regardless of sharing a language along with a culture. This is not to say that there are no accurate and inaccurate ways to understand a culture. The point is that there can be genuine distinctions and conflicts in the way cultural elements are perceived and expressed by different people. The point is even clearer when we frame culture from a historical perspective. How history is told can be both questionable and conflicting (Daraselia & Jojua, 2016). The way history molds our understanding of culture is a lens that needs to be included in the discussion of cultural values that happens in the foreign language class.

The final challenge worth pointing out when it comes to the teaching of culture is linked to the training received during teacher preparation programs and more specifically the way those language teachers were taught when they were language learners themselves. It has been known to be challenging to break the pattern of teaching the way we were taught (Sandorova, 2016). Primarily because people feel it worked for them as successful learners of the language and they identify positively with the process hence they tend to repeat it. As pointed out earlier in the discussion of the teaching of culture over the years, the paradigm shift under which the current teachers were taught does not correspond to the current model of intercultural competence. Therefore, teachers have to not only break the mold on how they were taught but identify positively with a new model of teaching. Numerous language instructors are well versed culturally yet not always informed on the specific ways of teaching culture (Yang & Chen, 2016). The majority of teacher preparation programs and graduate programs have what they call "culture" classes in their curriculum but they tend to have not more than one class in their entire curriculum committed to the discussions around the how to teach culture.

As the pressure to promote language instruction that addresses multicultural components grows, professional organizations like ACTFL came up with frameworks that help teachers embrace a more holistic understanding of language teaching. The document put out by ACTFL "Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st century" provides teachers with the framework for foreign language teaching with five major components designated as the five Cs of foreign language teaching: communication, communities, comparisons, cultures, and connections (ACTFL, 2012). All of these components are rooted in the understanding that foreign language study should expand the ability of the learner to recognize the differences between cultures, make connections and links aspects of their own culture with the target one.

Part of the topic for this paper is to consider a different lens for approaching the teaching of culture and evaluate the underpinnings of the model of communicative competence that guides it. It is to such proposed theoretical underpinnings that we now turn.

V. PROPOSED MODEL: EXPERIENCE CULTURE

In most of the issues presented in the challenges to teach culture section, the argument seems to revolve around how much cultural content do we bring in, how much time should we spend, when should this content be brought it, what cultural content should we discuss. A potential shift in thinking could be to affront these decisions following the approach already prevalent in the field of language acquisition that accentuates the importance of learning a language by using the language and not by talking about the language. In the same manner, we can work on experiencing culture as opposed to talking about the culture. As Ellis (2021) suggests the classroom should not be a place where learners are taught language, but where they experience it. We need to stop treating culture as a concept to teach and start trying to create opportunities to experience it.

Those who study the importance of study abroad experiences in developing intercultural competence have shown how vital those real life experiences are in taking the learner to higher level of competence (Scollon, 2004).

Unfortunately, not all learners can go abroad therefore it falls to the teacher to create those experiences that will render the most meaningful results in shifting intercultural competence.

The approach to intercultural competence (ICC from here on) teaching under this model is based primarily on an experiential model using what the literature refers to as critical incidents (Milner et al., 2013; Kolb, 1984) as the basis for how learners will explore culture. Critical incidents as defined in Richards and Farrell (2010) are unplanned events that occur without anticipation but serve as a trigger for teaching moments. Teachers can create experiences for learners that will likely provoke incidents that will serve as opportunities to reflect critically. These incidents are contextualized situations that allow the learner to reflect on social realities of the country being studied or narratives pertinent to the culture in question. There are multiple examples of “episodes” around us that could work as culturally relevant pedagogical moments that we can use to develop the awareness dimension of ICC. Curricular conversations and situations could incorporate critical incidents around interacting with people from a different culture. Teachers can draw from conversations learners already have with people from another culture in their daily lives. These incidents can be drawn from interactions students have as they shop, or reflect back to situations where some of their classmates in high school were non-English speakers. Have learners reflect on what would they would do different. Other options could be a potential scenario at a hospital ER room and the challenges around not being able to communicate. These critical incident scenarios create opportunities for learners to go out in the community and complete tasks that make them experience the culture and then reflect on it.

For ICC to feel real and experiential it has to occur beyond the walls of the classroom. These “out of the classroom” situations are more difficult to assess and control but if carefully planned and intentionally guided, these experiences can be brought back to the classroom by incorporation reflection and discussion tasks on what was experienced. Resolving those situations will help learners decenter themselves and overcome what initially were intercultural obstacles.

VI. CONCLUSION

As numerous theorists have discovered, it is much simpler to recommend a model of communicative proficiency than it is to test it empirically. The model recommended here is no different in this regard.

Developing ICC is a lengthy and arduous process which makes it difficult to fit within formal parameters of education (Dema & Moeller, 2012). Can we say we are making progress in developing learners' ICC in one semester of Spanish? Probably not but one thing that constantly occurs in the language classroom is that learners negotiate an intercultural linguistic space that by nature functions as a training ground in ICC. Blending what is done traditionally in foreign language classrooms with an experiential approach rooted in critical incidents can shorten the path to achieve intercultural competence. Incorporating a critical incident approach will create more self-awareness on the part of the learner and the teacher by putting them in situations where they will have to compare and make connections as suggested in the ACTFL framework.

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