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Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom

José Villavicencio

Introduction

The United States is going through great demographic changes in the diversity of its population that does not only include ethnic and racial diversity but, also, linguistic diversity. People with limited English proficiency are entering schools in greater numbers. (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). These demographic changes require that the schools prepare citizens who are knowledgeable of other cultures, who are more accepting of cultural differences, and who can communicate with people of different backgrounds (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2003).

In agreement with the above proposition, the foreign language national standards suggest the need to develop citizens with cultural understanding and awareness of other’s views of the world, their way of life and their contributions to human kind. Students study cultures in other courses; however, they directly gain greater understanding by learning another language (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996).

What is culture?

As explained in the Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century, culture includes "philosophical perspectives, the behavioral practices, and the products--both tangible and intangible--of a society” (National Standards, 1996, p. 43).

The idea that everyone has a culture transcends the idea that culture is only for the elite and refined (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). Culture then is all around us, it is: the language we use, the way we interact with each other, what we believe, what we produce, the music we play and listen, how we dress, the games we play, and the laws we make and follow (Standards, 1996)

In our milieu, we interact with each other with very few misunderstandings. Out of our friendly surroundings of our culture, our perspectives are challenged and our conclusions in some situations may lead to stereotyping (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). For example, these differences may simply be the use of gestures, how close to stand to the interlocutor during a conversation, or maintaining eye-to-eye contact during a conversation. The lack of awareness leads to misunderstandings or personal affronts. The Latin American student from Mexico or Central America who does not look at the teacher “in the eyes” does so out of respect and not dishonesty. In this part of the world, children are not expected to look at their parents “eye-to-eye” because to do so challenges their authority. (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002; National Standards, 1996).

Study a Foreign Language to Learn Other Cultures

It is through the study of language that students can become observers and analysts of other cultures. The study of languages without the inclusion of culture renders it meaningless and devoid of its rich context. Students who only learn grammar and
vocabulary miss the opportunity to understand how people think and organize their world and how they have been shaped by their beliefs, practices, religion, geography, family, feasts, celebrations, music, art, history, etc. For example, teachers should strive to:

- teach similarities and differences to the students' main culture
- provide opportunities for interactions with members of other cultures
- learn expressions that may lead to misunderstandings
- visit museums
- travel abroad
- watch television programs
- read literary works
- read the newspaper, and
- play games

Through these activities students will gain greater understanding of their culture and other cultures.

**Classroom Limitations and Possibilities**

The teaching of culture in the classroom has its limitations because culture requires a long process of development in its own environment. (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2003). The classroom is an artificial reproduction of that environment that can only serve as a “window” to the world through the use of the students’ rich imagination, the teacher’s guidance and through the use of technology. However, in a foreign language classroom this limitation provides the opportunity to integrate a content-based curriculum across all levels of schooling from kindergarten to high school. (Shrum & Glisan, 2000)

Culture should be infused into any foreign language course at all levels. The classroom should be a rich environment that reflects the culture of the language being learned: posters, artifacts, art pictures, pictures of important people, maps, etc. The teacher plays music of the countries being studied, reads poetry, reads and shows the news of the day, and plays games according to the level of the students. The teacher must also have access to technology: videos, computers, and tape recorders.

**Level Specific Strategies**

The national standards provides some strategies for engaging students at grade 4, grade 8, and grade 12 in studying the perspectives, practices and products of the target cultures. These are some ideas that can be used to integrate culture within the content area at any level from K – 12:

- Social Studies: celebrating holidays, studying important people, learning about historical events, and comparing and contrasting similar celebrations.
- Mathematics and Science: studying the ecology, conservation, the flora and the fauna of the region. Comparing and contrasting the flora and fauna. Studying the living accommodations, drawing to scale their own house, and comparing and contrasting the concept of family. Using catalogs or the internet to carry out a virtual shop excursion that will require monetary conversion.
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- Art and Music: Studying the art of different regions; replicating a product from another country; singing and dancing to the music of other regions to incorporate the learning and practicing of other rhythms and of vocabulary and expressions.

- Language Arts: Listening to and reading the legends and myths of other countries.

- Using technology: Making traveling arrangements, listening and viewing TV and radio stations, researching topics of interest, and communicating with peers from other countries. (Kramsch, 1993)

Conclusion

If indeed it is the goal of schooling to develop citizens who are educated and able to participate positively in our democratic institutions, then it is imperative that schools prepare them for that future. Because learning another language provides a direct way of learning other cultures, the foreign language classrooms must provide opportunities to compare and contrast the dominant culture with the one being studied and analyze products, perceptions, and practices of the dominant culture and the one being studied.

References


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