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Language, Culture & the Classroom
Honors Senior Project
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Is it necessary to understand a foreign language's culture to speak the language? Though it may seem like a language could be learned without an understanding of the culture, research on both first and second language acquisition and the teaching of foreign languages suggests that language and culture are reflections of each other and that the ability to speak and interact appropriately in a given culture is a vital part of communicative competence. Furthermore, the teaching of culture in foreign language courses can improve students' cultural competence and change their views on particular languages and cultures. Language and culture are deeply connected, and it is crucial that foreign language instructors place an emphasis on culture so that their students can effectively communicate in the target language.

Language plays an important role in shaping our own cultures. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis maintains that languages have categories, grammatical structures, and other distinctions that are not found in any other languages. As different groups have different languages, they see the world differently. Essentially, we can only think in the certain way we do because of the language we speak (Brown & Eisterhold, 2004). The language we speak unconsciously impacts the way we think and conceptualize the world. It is in this way that language and culture are intrinsically connected. Researchers in the language socialization tradition maintain that language and culture are acquired together and are inseparable, and that each provides support for the development of the other (Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

Elements of language that reflect the speaker's culture are apparent in many ways, and present many opportunities for miscommunication between native and non-native speakers. For example, backchannel cues, feedback given while someone else is talking to show that the listener is listening, such as "uh huh," can vary greatly across cultures (Brown & Eisterhold, 2004). Imagine speaking with someone who uses very little or no backchannel cues- you may

feel that they are not listening or paying attention to you, but perhaps backchannel cues are not common in their culture and they do not feel a need to use them to let you know that they are in fact listening. Differences in speech acts- the actual words spoken, the intention behind the words spoken, and the effect the words have on their hearers- can also be seen across cultures. This includes sarcasm and the use of non-literal or implied words or phrases. If you walk into a meeting late and somebody asks, “What time is it?,” would you think they were truly curious what time it was, or that they were implying that you were late? How would a non-native English speaker perceive the question? Furthermore, the dictionary definition of a word and the connotation and cultural value of a word can be very different from the meaning of the word in another language (Koning, 2010). And when it comes to idioms, cultural perspective is almost certainly a requirement. The study of vocabulary alone is not enough to make these distinctions.

Thus it is apparent that the coding and decoding of communicative acts requires an understanding and appreciation of the cultural context in which they occur (Johnson, 2005). In fact, an important part of communicative competence is the ability to participate appropriately in relevant speech events (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Speaking a foreign language requires much more than knowledge of basic grammar and vocabulary- people must understand the rules for speaking appropriately in a given culture. Even speakers with a high degree of grammatical competence can fail to maintain basic conversations with native speakers due to the transfer of first language (L1) socio-pragmatics to the second language (L2) (Warford & White, 2012). One cannot assume that the way they would think, speak, and act in a conversation in their native tongue will remain the same when speaking in another language.

Consequently it is crucial that foreign language teachers incorporate the target culture into their curriculum. Language teachers not only give their students access to another group of

people who speak another language, but also to the cultural values, beliefs and attitudes that are encoded in the language (Koning, 2010). Language teachers must help their students become culturally capable and literate. Students cannot master a language unless they also master the cultural contexts in which the language occurs, and without cultural insights, foreign language teaching is inaccurate and incomplete (Ashirimbetova, Davis & Doganay, 2013). John Schumann's acculturation model explains that "the closer they feel to the target language speech community, the better learners will 'acculturate,' and the more successful their SLL will be. The more alienated from that community they perceive themselves to be, the more pidgin-like their second language will remain." (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Students can gain cultural competency and improve their interaction and speaking skills through the teaching of culture in foreign language classrooms.

Although it is clear that language learners need to have an understanding of the target culture in order to effectively communicate in it, culture is viewed and defined in a variety of ways in the various language teaching methods. In the somewhat antiquated Grammar-Translation Method, culture is seen as consisting of literature and fine arts (Anderson & Larsen-Freeman, 2011). Fortunately in many more current methods, such as the Direct Method, the Audio-Lingual Method, Desuggestopedia, and Total Physical Response, culture is viewed as the lifestyle and everyday behavior of the target language speakers and is an important part of language instruction (Anderson & Larsen-Freeman, 2011). Culture is viewed as an integral and inseparable part of language in the Silent Way and Community Language Learning (Anderson & Larsen-Freeman, 2011). In other methods, such as Content-Based Instruction and Task-Based Language Teaching, culture is not explicitly addressed but may be studied as certain topics arise (Anderson & Larsen-Freeman, 2011). It is important that many of these methods view culture

not as just the traditional “big C” elements such as art, literature, and food, but as the “little c” elements such as cultural norms, everyday behavior, and verbal and non-verbal language symbols as well.

Despite the fact that the importance of culture in language education has been agreed upon, culture is still largely being taught as something on the periphery of language courses (Koning, 2012). There is an ongoing trend of treating culture as a “throw-in” activity due to the belief that culture is a peripheral consideration to the nature of foreign or second language teaching (Warford & White, 2012). There is evidence of the rift between culture and language teaching in the widespread tendency of instructors to teach culture in their student’s native tongue (Warford & White, 2012). There exist a variety of reasons for this disconnect between language teaching and culture. Four main reasons include lack of time, fear of making a mistake or teaching stereotypes, a lack of testing and assessment on culture, and the potential for controversy (Koning, 2012). In the case of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers teaching American culture, there are criticisms that the teaching of mainstream American or British culture in ESL courses is hegemonic and that they are portrayed as dominant and superior to the culture of the L2 (Johnson, 2005). The dilemma for ESL teachers is figuring out how to teach culture without imposing it.

Teachers have potential concerns regarding the teaching of culture in language courses and may elect not to spend much time teaching culture, but what are the students’ opinions? In one study on the addition of culturally-oriented activities to a normal ESL curriculum, students expressed that by learning features of foreigners’ behaviors, it became easier and more engaging to be involved in the current learning process, and that active speaking abilities developed through the cultural activities (Ashirimbetova et al., 2013). The results of the study indicated that

the usage of culture in foreign language teaching “facilitates and empowers language education and acquisition” (Ashirimbetova et al., 2013). The researchers believe that students’ interaction skills were improved and that the target language was used more effectively due to the culture-based exercises. These assertions are backed by the fact that the students in the experimental group (those who had been exposed to additional culture-based activities) had test scores that were 6.45% higher than the control group’s scores at the end of the course (Ashirimbetova et al., 2013). In another study on the teaching of culture in ESL classrooms, it was observed that students and teachers “forget” they are studying a language when cultural issues arise, which could be a sign of internalizing the new language. When asked, students reported that they did not see cultural lessons as an imposition of the culture, but rather as “a set of guidelines that help them use English in real-world and culturally imbued contexts” (Johnson, 2005). These ESL students also explained that they enjoyed learning about American culture because it helped them to understand what Americans are talking about.

Not only can the teaching of culture help students use a language effectively, it can help change student’s preconceived notions of cultures and their people. In a study on the shaping or reshaping of stereotypical cultural representations in an introductory French course, 85% of the students reported a change in their views of the French language and 35% reported a change in their views of the French people at the end of the semester (Drewelow, 2013). Students discovered that the French people are not rude, snooty or arrogant; they are not so different from themselves, and they are not all from Paris, disproving three stereotypes the students had held at the beginning of the course. They also changed their minds about French being a difficult language to learn. The study confirmed language instructors’ ability to impact students’ opinions on a language and its people as well as the fact that learners use their native language, culture

and existing knowledge to compare and examine the target language and culture (Drewelow, 2013). Because of this, it is important that the students themselves recognize and understand the connection between language and culture and encourage the development of cross-cultural understanding.

There are many ways to incorporate culture in the classroom. The “process framework” is a seven-stage tool for lesson plan development that can help integrate culture into lessons. The first four stages- presentation of new material, practice, grammar exploration and transposition or use, are fairly common in language education (Koning, 2012). The next three stages- sociolinguistic exploration, culture exploration, and intercultural exploration- bring cultural elements to the lesson. Sociolinguistic exploration helps students understand how language changes in different context and with different people and different topics. In culture exploration, the cultural contexts of interactions are examined, and students learn how speakers interact and behave during various functions. In the last stage, intercultural exploration, the systems of interaction used in the target language and in English are compared and contrasted (Koning, 2012). Another method for integrating culture into the classroom is the Sociocultural Model Lesson Plan (SMLP). The SMLP uses literacy as a vehicle for transmitting cultural information (Warford & White, 2012). It is composed of five stages: (1) Activation of Schemata; (2) Text Interpretation; (3) Sociocultural Interpretation; (4) Sociocultural Presentation and (5) Sociocultural Debriefing. In Activation of Schemata, the instructor poses leading questions about cultural conventions that are pertinent to the text the students will explore. During Text Interpretation, the instructor guides student readings with bottom-up and top-down questions to help them process the text. Following the reading, the instructor facilitates Sociocultural Interpretation by comparing elements of the target culture found in the reading with elements of

the student's culture and by discussing which of their assumptions were correct or incorrect. During Sociocultural Presentation, students develop an adaptation or re-creation of the presented text. Finally, the instructor and the students examine the appropriateness of the students' simulations against the linguistic and cultural elements previously identified in the lesson. The process framework and SMLP are just two examples of potential methods for integrating culture into lesson plans.

In the age of the internet, there are endless cultural resources available to teachers. Authentic materials such as money, menus, comic books and posters can be ordered by anyone. There are a multitude of travel videos and blogs that can show students what life is like in another country. Students can also create their own blogs in the target language to respond to or be assessed on cultural topics. Music videos, television shows, radio channels and movies can be streamed online in the classroom. Aside from internet resources, inviting native-speaker guests into the classroom for interviews or role-playing activities can also prove to be a great way for students to learn about proper cultural interactions (Koning, 2012). Likewise, folk tales and myths can be used as a launching point for cultural discussions (Koning, 2012). The resources and options available for teaching culture are virtually endless.

Research has demonstrated the undeniable link between language and culture and the importance of it being taught- not just as an additional or peripheral activity, but as an important element of a course. When students get to know the way people in a given culture think and interact, they become better equipped to use the language in actual settings and improve their cultural understanding. Cultural activities have also been proven to improve students' speaking and overall foreign language learning. With this knowledge, a next step for foreign language

instructors would be further exploration on methods for including culture as a central topic in their lessons.

Annotated Bibliography

Brown, S., & Eisterhold, J. (2004). *Topics in language and culture for teachers*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Brown and Eisterhold provide a basic overview of a variety of topics related to language and culture, including methods of distinguishing cultural differences, the relationship between language and culture, comparing words across cultures, communicative competence, first and second language acquisition, and language contact between individuals and cultures. A general understanding of the way language and culture are related as well as some basic elements of linguistics and language learning theories are explored. The way people communicate within and across cultures is also examined.

Doganay, Y., Ashirimbetova, M., & Davis, B. (2013). Making culture happen in the English language classroom. *English Language Teaching*, 6(10), 11-16. Retrieved November 1, 2013, from the ProQuest database.

In this study, the researchers examined the effect of adding culturally-oriented activities into contemporary general English curriculum as well as the attitudes of students in relation to language learning through culture based activities. 80 students studying English as a second or foreign language at the University of Kazakhstan, ranging in age from 17 to 21, were given questionnaires and pre- and post-tests related to their attitudes toward culture-based activities. An experimental group was exposed to additional culture-based activities not included in the General English textbook. A control group was only exposed to whatever culture-based activities were already included in the textbook. Based on the pre-testing and questionnaires, it was determined that a vast majority of the students enjoyed and recognized the importance of culture-based activities in the language classroom. At the end of the semester and the experiment, exams were given. Average scores of the experimental and control groups were compared, and the

experimental group's scores were 6.45% higher than the control group's scores, indicating that the additional cultural activities aided their foreign language learning.

Drewelow, I. (2013). Impact of instruction on shaping or reshaping stereotypical cultural representations in an introductory French course. *Foreign Language Annals*, 46(2), 157-174. Retrieved November 1, 2013, from the Wiley Online Library database.

Isabelle Drewelow sought to explore what influenced learners' preconceived images and cultural representations of the French language and culture in an introductory level French course. The primary research questions are described as: RQ1: "In what ways does learning a foreign language contribute to the shaping or reshaping of existing images and cultural representations about the French language?" and RQ2: "In what ways does learning a foreign language contribute to the shaping or reshaping of existing images and cultural representations about the French people?" Students in four sections of a first-semester French course at a large public university participated in the study. The sample for the study consisted of 34 native English speakers who reported a change in their cultural representations of French language or French culture in an end-of-semester survey. Questionnaires were distributed at the beginning and end of the semester and interviews took place at multiple points throughout the semester. A majority (85%) of the participants reported a change in their views regarding the French language, while only 35% reported a change in their images of the French people. Data analysis revealed three themes about the French language: students believed it (1) is not so difficult to learn (2) reflects cultural practices and (3) is an inefficient and annoying language. Themes about the French people included: (1) the French people are not rude, snooty, or arrogant; (2) they are not so different from us; and (3) they are not all from Paris. The study shows that instructors can change preconceived notions of a language and its people. It also confirms that learners use their native

language, culture and existing knowledge to compare and examine the target language and culture.

Johnson, D. (2005). Teaching Culture in Adult ESL: Pedagogical and Ethical Considerations. *The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language*, 9(1), n.p.. Retrieved November 1, 2013, from <http://tesl-ej.org/ej33/cf.html>

In this study, David Johnson examines the pedagogical dimensions of teaching culture to adult ESL learners. Johnson acknowledges that “the coding and decoding of communicative acts requires an understanding and appreciation of the cultural context in which they occur,” but that there are criticisms that the teaching of mainstream American and British culture in ESL courses is hegemonic and that they are portrayed as dominant and superior to the culture of the L2. This presents a dilemma for ESL teachers: how can culture be taught without imposing it? Johnson conducted interviews with the teachers and students of an ESL school on a Midwestern college campus, as well as conducted classroom observations and document analysis. Johnson found that teachers recognized the importance of culture teaching but were at times hesitant to teach culture as they did not want to impose it upon the students. Some students reported only wanting explicit culture lessons as they relate to increasing proficiency, and were concerned with English proficiency above understanding the culture. Johnson concludes that the teaching of culture is unavoidable, and that even teachers who claim not to teach culture are doing it implicitly or through prompting from students, and that more lively discussions resulted when culture was a part of the curriculum. He also observed that students and teachers “forget” they are studying a language when cultural issues arise, which could be a sign of internalizing the new language, meaning that the teaching of culture is pedagogically sound.

Koning, P. (2010). Culture is integral to language education- but how do we make that a reality in the classroom?. *The Language Educator*, 5(5), 44-49.

In this article, Patricia Koning seeks to answer the question: How do we translate the importance of intercultural communication (ICC) into effective teaching? Koning argues that in the last 30 years, language education has come a long way and that the importance of culture has been widely agreed upon, yet culture is still largely being taught as something on the periphery of a language course. Through conversations with various foreign language educators, Koning explains the importance of culture in language instruction, forces against teachers' integration of culture in the classroom, and various methods of including culture in daily classroom activities, such as YouTube videos, blog posts, guests in the classroom, and study of folk tales and myths.

Larsen-Freeman, D., & Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques & principals in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Techniques & Principals in Language Teaching presents ten different methods of foreign language instruction. Each method is given a brief history and introduction, a real-life classroom experience in the use of the method, a break-down of how the principles of the method were used in the classroom, and a review of both the principles and techniques used in the method. Actual classroom examples and easy to understand break-downs and reviews of the methods thoroughly explain each of the methods as well as ideas on how to use the methods in a classroom setting. The reader will be provided with a greater understanding of a variety of foreign language teaching techniques and the principles behind them.

Mitchell, R., & Myles, F. (2004). *Second language learning theories* (2nd ed.). London: Hodder Arnold.

Myles and Rosamond detail a vast amount of information related to second language learning theories, including the history of second language learning research, universal grammar and linguistics, and a variety of perspectives on second language learning including cognitive,

functional, input and interaction, socio-cultural and sociolinguistic. *Second Language Learning Theories* provides a large amount of descriptive and scientific information about the acquisition of second languages. It presents research from the many differing opinions on the subject as well as an in-depth explanation of some basic elements of language and linguistics.

Warford, M., & White, W. (2012). Reconnecting proficiency, literacy, and culture: from theory to practice. *Foreign Language Annals*, 45(3), 400-414. Retrieved November 1, 2013, from the Wiley Online Library database.

Warford and White lay out their lesson plan format, the Sociocultural Model Lesson Plan

(SMLP) which is designed to facilitate the integration of proficiency, literacy, and culture in foreign language teaching. They begin by considering the ongoing trend of treating culture or reading tasks as “throw-in” activities in the foreign language classroom based on the belief that literacy and culture are peripheral considerations to the nature of foreign or second language teaching. Warford and White go on to argue that literacy and proficiency are “dynamically interconnected” and that literacy is an important vehicle for transmitting cultural information. Using the Second Symbolic Competencies Model, which incorporates culture, proficiency, and literature into one activity, and the Composite Textual Comprehension Model, which depicts various levels of reading comprehension, the authors develop their SMLP. The SMLP has five stages: 1. Activation of Schemata; 2. Text Interpretation; 3. Sociocultural Interpretation; 4. Sociocultural Presentation; and 5. Sociocultural Debriefing. In Activation of Schemata, the instructor poses leading questions about cultural conventions that are pertinent to the text the students will explore. During Text Interpretation, the instructor guides student readings with bottom-up and top-down questions to help them process the text. Following the reading, the instructor facilitates Sociocultural Interpretation by comparing elements of the C2 found in the reading with elements of the C1 and by discussing which of their assumptions were correct or

incorrect. During Sociocultural Presentation, students develop an adaptation or re-creation of the presented text. Finally, the instructor and the students examine the appropriateness of the students' simulations against the linguistic and cultural elements previously identified in the lesson.