

More Than a Decade of Standards: Integrating “Cultures” in Your Language Instruction



By SANDY CUTSHALL

EDITOR'S NOTE: *In this issue, we continue our series of articles focused on the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning, or the “5 Cs.” In the February issue of the magazine, we highlighted the goal area of Communication. Here, we look at Cultures as expressed through language—or what the Standards say should be the “true content of the foreign language course.” Later this year we’ll focus on the rest of the goal areas—Connections, Comparisons, and Communities.*

Cultures

“Man’s mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimension.”

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

The study of other cultures through their own language stretches the minds of those who make the effort to learn about people and ways of life beyond their own, opening the world to them. In the best language education happening today, the study of another language is synonymous with the study of another culture. The two are inextricably linked and long gone should be the days when anyone would suggest that language could be taught “on its own” as discrete grammar points with no sense of the cultural products, practices, and perspectives of native speakers.

As the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* document states: “Because language is the primary vehicle for expressing cultural perspectives and participating in social practices, the study of a language provides opportunities for students to develop insights in a culture that are available in no other way. In reality, then, the true content of the foreign language course is not the grammar and vocabulary of the language, but the cultures expressed through that language.”

Ask anyone studying a language why they are doing so and they will likely say they want to communicate with others in that

language—a key reason why Communication is the most easily understood and most quickly embraced of the goal areas of the National Standards. However, as anyone who has spent time speaking or corresponding with someone from a different background understands, there is no true communication without some demonstration of cultural knowledge and sensitivity.

“Cultural knowledge and culture-appropriate communication skills play an important role in all three modes of communication: interpersonal (implying, of course, culturally appropriate interaction); interpretive (implying sufficient knowledge of the target culture to understand culture-specific meanings); and presentational (implying selection of culture-appropriate contents and use of style and register, i.e., the conscious or subconscious understanding of what can be said to whom, how and in what circumstances),” states Renate Schulz in her article, “The Challenge of Assessing Cultural Understanding in the Context of Foreign Language Instruction,” published in the Spring 2007 issue of *Foreign Language Annals* (vol. 40, no. 1).

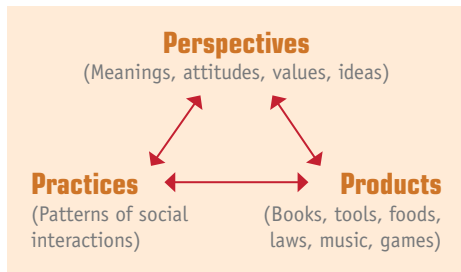
Culture is not only closely tied to Communication, but to the other 3 Cs as well.

With a strong cultural component present in a language class, students can better make connections to other disciplines, can develop the insights necessary to make comparisons to their own native language and culture, and can discover ways to better participate with and relate to different communities at home and around the world.

“The exquisite connections between the culture that is lived and the language that is spoken can only be realized by those who possess a knowledge of both,” states the Standards document. “American students need to develop an awareness of other people’s world views, of their unique way of life, and of the patterns of behavior which order their world, as well as learn about contributions of other cultures to the world at large and the solutions they offer to the common problems of humankind.”

In the National Standards, culture is presented as the philosophical perspectives, the behavioral practices, and the products of a society. This “Cultural Framework” may sometimes be referred to as “3 Ps” and can be expressed through the image of a triangle with “Perspectives” at the top and “Products” and “Practices” forming the base, showing how the products and practices are derived

from the perspectives that form the world view of a cultural group. This image also demonstrates the fact that these three components of culture are closely related.



In brief, the 3 Ps are:

Products—Both Tangible and Intangible

Items required or justified by the underlying beliefs and values of that culture. Examples include books, arts and crafts, tools, foods, laws, dress, types of dwellings, music, dances, and games

Practices—“What to Do When and Where”

Patterns of social interactions or behaviors accepted by a society, such as rites of passage, use of forms of discourse, social “pecking order,” and use of space

Perspectives

Representing that culture’s view of the world, including meanings, attitudes, values, and ideas

The Cultures goal area includes two standards (2.1 and 2.2.) based on this Cultural Framework. The first focuses on understanding cultural practices and the perspectives that are revealed through these practices; and the second focuses on understanding the products of a culture and the perspectives that are revealed through the use of these products. (See box above.)

Integrating Cultures Begins with Planning

It is important for educators to realize that following a textbook and reading over the cultural points that pop up in the occasional sidebar is not sufficient to impart cultural knowledge to their students. Nor is it enough to offer “Culture Fridays” or to think culture is taken care of by celebrating a holiday, learning a few dances, or tasting some authentic food now and then.

“We should be teaching culture every day,” asserts Dr. Donna Clementi, foreign



Cultures

Gain Knowledge and Understanding of Other Cultures

Standard 2.1

Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.

Standard 2.2

Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied.

language methods instructor at Lawrence University and formerly of Concordia Language Villages in Minnesota and Appleton Area (WI) School District.

“Choosing what we share with students when we pick a theme or topic has to be something that is going to provoke discussion and conversation and the best way to do that is through the culture. Why would I want to talk about *schools*? Why would I want to talk about *family*? It’s because of the insights my students can gain by thinking on that topic. So when we say we ‘do’ culture it shouldn’t be just vocabulary and objects related to it. Instead I should always be thinking as a teacher: How does this help shape my students’ view of the world? What are they going to leave understanding about themselves and the cultures they are learning about?”

Clementi encourages teachers to plan their daily lessons and language units with the 3 Ps triangle at the top of the page. “We as the instructors who facilitate learning in our classrooms should always be thinking about what is that product, what is the practice associated with that product, and then what is that deeper understanding when we talk about those two. If we’re more attentive to it as teachers, it will reflect in the way that we set up our lessons and our units.”

She offers, for example, a standard topic taught in most beginning classes: a unit on daily activities. However, rather than simply having students talk about what they do each day (e.g., get up in the morning, brush

their teeth, walk or ride to school), she suggests taking that material and expanding it to look at the environmental impact, or carbon footprint, of these activities.

“It’s still teaching those very basic things you do in routine daily life but then adding in that reflective piece, such as: ‘How much water do you use?’” says Clementi. For this example, she would show her students an image of a village in Senegal with children going to a well to get water to bring back in buckets to their families and then a picture of kids turning on the faucet in Appleton and getting a drink of water.

“That’s how you approach the daily routine with culture embedded. You’re still saying simple sentences in the target language (French, in this case) but it’s choosing those visuals that are interesting and that really draw that contrast to have the kids think about: ‘Wow this is what life is like for this person and this is what my life is like.’ And then you would encourage them to reflect further on how they might be more aware of the water that they are using and what they can do about it—turning off the faucet, for example, and not wasting it. If they compare their lives to the life of someone who has to go fetch water every day, they will start to realize that the people in Senegal are going to be very careful with how they use the resource.”

Language students at every level need to be given the opportunity to go deeper than merely recognizing the surface aspects of another culture. “It’s not good enough if students can just identify objects; it’s not good enough if they can just imitate how they would greet someone in that country. They need to think about what that means,” says Clementi. “When we choose our topics, we must think carefully about how rich we can make them for our students.”

Knowing What You Teach

Professor Sue Barry of Auburn University believes that regularly spending time in the target culture is crucial for language educators.

“One of the biggest problems is that too many teachers don’t go abroad and they just read culture notes out of a textbook,” says Dr. Barry. She adds that textbooks don’t have the depth of contemporary culture and may lead us in the direction of stereotyping. “Unfortu-

nately, some teachers may not be knowledgeable enough themselves because they don't go abroad with any frequency—they maybe went abroad 15 years ago but the world is a different place today, and perhaps they only went to one location. Basically, they don't have the background so they themselves don't understand the culture. Then they may teach their students stereotypical information, which does more harm than good."

Teaching about products and practices seems to be the easier, more accessible part of the 3 Ps triangle for many educators, with perspectives remaining as the sticking point. Some teachers may not be sure how to include this piece or if their students will have the language skills to handle it. This can be a challenge even for those who understand the importance of including the Cultural Framework in their instruction.

"It can take a long time for teachers to get comfortable with bringing culture in an authentic way into their classrooms—especially the perspectives," says Laura Droms, a Spanish teacher from Grayson High School in Loganville, GA. "As a non-native speaker, I don't feel extremely expert myself. So, this has always been a challenge."

"Too many language teachers don't get around to the relationship with perspectives. It's not brought out—all they do with students is products and practices," says Barry. She offers the iceberg metaphor for culture: "The products and practices we see are above the surface of the water, but it's what is below that's driving everything," she says. "We want our students to strive to see below the surface. There can be a lot in terms of values, cultural assumptions, and beliefs that we can hypothesize about based on what we do see."

As a methods instructor, Barry is charged with training college students planning to become language teachers. At the undergraduate level, she tries to impress on these future educators the idea of "discovery learning"—a method of inquiry-based instruction. "Rather than telling their students what to think about culture, my advice is to give them tools, authentic texts, that they can use to compare and contrast. The students themselves should be coming up with the comparisons and cultural insights, not being fed them by the teacher."

For her graduate students, Barry offers an entire class focused on culture and they are required to study abroad as part of the program. However, these future teachers are not traveling abroad as tourists, or even as linguists or scholars. Instead, they are charged by Barry to become "novice ethnographers"—carefully studying and systematically recording their cultural observations in another country on a specific topic.

"Teachers should be taught and encouraged to be lifelong learners and they need the tools to actually be ethnographers," asserts Barry. "It's a whole sense of observancy that they need to cultivate, to start asking: 'How do I look at another culture? What things do I want to look for? What do I want to learn? How can I bring it back to my classroom? How can I incorporate it into my instruction?'"

Culture Can't Wait

One misconception that some teachers have—especially those with beginning students—is that they should "save" culture until their students have more advanced language skills and can better appreciate it.

Dali Tan, Chinese instructor at Landon School in Bethesda, MD, and Northern Virginia Community College, believes that it is a major mistake for teachers to hold off on cultural topics until their students have higher-level language skills. "You really cannot separate the two—so how can you wait to discuss culture?" she asks. "Culture is a gateway to the language."

She says that while not all students will go on to mastery of a second language, learning about other cultures will help broaden their horizons no matter what they do. "Whether or not they continue with Chinese and are one day able to use it in their business interactions, the world is becoming smaller and by learning cultural perspectives, they can still learn so much about interacting with people from all over the world. It makes it much easier for them to walk in another person's shoes," Tan says.

Since a language immersion experience in China is part of the program where she teaches, Tan works on cultural awareness with her students both before they go and while they are abroad. "To me, it's more

important that students understand culturally appropriate behavior than all the intricacies of the language," she says. "People will forgive language mistakes but might not be as forgiving for cultural errors, if they are perceived as rude." She encourages her students to keep a journal while in China and to note anything that they see as strange or different. They will bring those questions up with her later, she says, so that together they can identify the perspectives behind the practices—for example how their Chinese hosts react when given a gift and what cultural values might be expressed through that behavior.

Spanish teacher Melyn Roberson, from Campbell High School in Smyrna, GA, sees a disconnect between teachers and students regarding why individuals choose to study a foreign language and why they later discontinue their studies. She bases this observation on an action research project that she undertook at her own school by interviewing current and former language students and their teachers.

"Teachers mostly thought students were studying a language to complete requirements and that they discontinued the language when they completed them. But students said they wanted to take a language to learn about a culture and to speak," says Roberson. "After about two years of language classes, the students felt they hadn't learned what they wanted and so they would discontinue. . . . We found that students were making this decision based on the fact that they had goals and they weren't achieved—and one of those goals was understanding culture."

Some of the teachers Roberson spoke with even admitted they were saving culture for the upper levels. "But the kids don't get there, so what are you saving it for?" she asks. "Start it right away. They might actually make it and if they don't they might get something else out of it that might be of some use in their lives."

Tools for Integrating Culture

"At every stage of language learning, both similarities and differences among the students' own culture and other cultures should be presented," reads the National Standards. "Interactions with representatives of other cultures and experience with a variety of

cultural expressions (personal anecdotes, poetry, headlines, editorials, laws, music, museums, trains, and pets, for example) help learners shape their own awareness.”

Tan warns teachers against presenting cultural points out of context. “It can be superficial. It’s generally not helpful to quickly observe differences and go on. There’s the danger of stereotyping; we can end up reinforcing stereotypes rather than changing them.”

One way to get away from preconceived stereotypes, says Tan, is to have students interview native speakers as part of a project, something she frequently does with her classes to gauge their understanding of culture. “When students know they’re going to conduct interviews and interact with real Chinese speakers, they become much more keen observers of cultural differences,” she notes.

“Making culture real to students is enhanced when we can connect with native speakers from the countries of the languages we’re teaching so that the students can ask questions and get responses that help them understand why something is the way it is,” says Clementi. With online video technologies today such as Skype, this kind of real-time connection right in the language classroom is becoming more and more commonplace, letting students communicate immediately and directly with people, including others their age, across the globe.

The use of authentic materials is also very important to help students appreciate another cultural perspective. Droms, as one of Dr. Barry’s graduate students, studied housing for her ethnographic research project. She collected pictures of houses, interviewed people extensively in both the United States and Mexico about their homes, and made recordings of these original interviews that she is now able to use with students in her own classes in a variety of cultural activities.

While she doesn’t have that deep level of authentic materials for every Spanish-speaking culture they study, Droms frequently utilizes the Internet to fill in the gaps. She recommends several excellent sites such as one from the University of Texas at Austin featuring video clips of native Spanish speakers from various locations throughout Latin America and Spain (www.laits.utexas.edu/spe/). YouTube (www.youtube.com) also

What the Survey Shows

In 2008, ACTFL was awarded a three-year federal grant to assess the role that the National Standards have had on the profession. This grant, *A Decade of Foreign Language Standards: Influence, Impact, and Future Directions*, assembled data from a variety of evidence and has resulted in two reports that together show that the Standards have indeed influenced and instigated change in how languages are taught and learned. This narrative report and data document are available on the ACTFL website at www.actfl.org. Specific survey findings related to Cultures can be found online at www.actfl.org/secitinTLE.



offers a huge variety of video segments on every conceivable topic, but teachers should always carefully screen them for cultural and classroom appropriateness.

Once one figures out how to dig into the richness of teaching culture, the question of assessing cultural knowledge or sensitivity arises. Schulz, in her 2007 article, proposed portfolio assessment to evaluate students’ emerging awareness, pointing out that paper-and-pencil methods such as multiple-choice questions, short-answer or even traditional essay tests or simulations “often force students to engage in broad generalizations or stereotyping.”

Roberson has her students create a Cultural Research Portfolio which they work on outside of class and that can follow them through the different levels of Spanish—an approach that was inspired by her graduate work on ethnography with Dr. Barry.

“I always look at things ethnographically now,” says Roberson. “I have my students create these portfolios and draw conclusions based on their independent cultural research. It’s all based on self-discovery. They start by examining their native culture first and then move on to the target culture. At Level 1, they’re really just global and international, not specific to Spanish necessarily. Level 2 is all language-specific, and Level 3 is even more specific, for example, instead of ‘Spanish-speaking countries,’ they will focus on ‘National Parks in Costa Rica.’ But the

kids choose their activities and they follow what they are interested in.”

She continues: “I may not always have the same opinion about their conclusions, but those are their opinions and they have value . . . I’ve had many kids who have traveled abroad and they often come back and say, ‘I’m so glad we looked at this or that aspect of culture,’ because it made a difference in how they could understand and relate to people in other countries.”

Note: Barry and Roberson will be presenting on the topic of “Teachers as Novice Ethnographers” this July at the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP) Convention in Puerto Rico.

The Only Way Forward is Forward

When it comes to integrating cultures into instruction, language educators must look beyond any challenges and simply make it a priority. One jumping-off point can be to begin with a clear sense of place, advises Clementi.

“When we plan our units, we need to think about the place we want to share with our students, so they don’t get this hodgepodge of ‘what [French/Spanish/German . . .] culture is’—but they are really entering it through a city, for example. So, I can make sure my students become really familiar with this place or this region. After we have worked with that region, when they move to

Continued on p. 37



1. The National Standards identify three key elements for teaching the goal area of Cultures:
 - A. Art, literature, and music
 - B. Products, practices, and perspectives
 - C. Who, what, and why
 - D. Economic systems, philosophy/ religion, and social customs
2. Which of the following were used in the original Standards document to describe teaching the goal of Cultures?
 - A. It is important to help students expect differences and learn how to analyze observed differences
 - B. The exquisite connections between the culture that is lived and the language that is spoken can only be realized by those who possess a knowledge of both
 - C. It is equally important that students recognize that members of one culture tend to make assumptions and draw corresponding conclusions about other cultures based upon their own values
 - D. All of the above
3. In the following description of a cultural phenomenon in the United States, identify which item is the cultural perspective, as described in the standards:
 - A. In the U.S., food labels must identify calories and nutrition information
 - B. Many people go on crash diets and pay to join a weight-loss program
 - C. Americans tend to value youth over old age; some would call it an obsession
 - D. Restaurants are starting to include more fish and low-carb menu options
4. All of the following are examples of products of Cultures, as described in the Standards, except:
 - A. Typical breakfast foods
 - B. Laws
 - C. Greetings
 - D. Music
5. All of the following are examples of practices of Cultures, as described in the Standards, except:
 - A. Eating utensils
 - B. Patterns of social interaction
 - C. Paying a set price or bartering
 - D. Rites of passage, such as entering school, obtaining a driver’s license, graduation, getting married
6. A key message from the Standards is to establish the relationship between products and perspectives and between practices and perspectives. To help students learn about the cultural perspective of “coming of age,” all of the following are examples of the link of perspectives with either practices or products, except:
 - A. The legal drinking age varies a lot in different countries.
 - B. Some birthdays have the added significance of celebrating when young people move into more adult roles and responsibilities
 - C. The age for obtaining a driver’s license signals when a society acknowledges a transition in trusting minors with more responsibility
 - D. While not standard across a culture, the age when dating is generally approved varies from culture to culture because it coincides with when the culture expects an increasing independence of the young people from their parents
7. Teaching of Cultures is strengthened when students read, listen to, or view “authentic materials,” which are defined as:
 - A. Written and oral communications produced by members of a language and culture group for members of the same language and culture group
 - B. Magazine and online articles, restaurant menus, poems, radio and TV shows
 - C. Language in real use, “reflecting the details of everyday life in a culture as well as its societal values”
 - D. All of the above
8. Of the following, the least effective way to teach Cultures is:
 - A. Students experience and explore the culture
 - B. Integrated with the practice and development of communication
 - C. Connected with a thematic focus
 - D. Isolated cultural topics in specific mini-lessons
9. Like an iceberg, the majority of culture is found below the surface. In this metaphor for culture, examples of the deep culture that is below the surface are:
 - A. Food, flags, and festivals
 - B. Personal space, concept of cleanliness, and attitudes toward children or elderly family members
 - C. Literature, visual arts, theater, and music
 - D. Body language, dress, and vocabulary
10. Which of the following quotes best represents your focus for teaching Cultures?
 - A. “Lead with culture and language will follow.” (Donna Clementi)
 - B. “Language is culture in motion. It is people interacting with people.” (Sandra Savignon)
 - C. Culture “is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.” (Claire Kramsch)
 - D. “Children penetrate a new culture through meaningful experiences with cultural practices and cultural phenomena that are appropriate to their age level, their interests, and the classroom setting.” (Helena Curtain and Carol Ann Dahlberg)

Quiz created by ACTFL Associate Director of Professional Development Paul Sandrock

Exploring Culture While Maintaining Target Language Commitment

Continued from p. 35

another region or another country, they are going to have some tools that allow them to understand that culture more quickly. Being aware that everything isn't going to be the same—New York isn't Appleton; Paris isn't Avignon. If they are grounded in a place they won't be as likely to stereotype and say, 'All French people are like this—.' But instead they can say they know a lot about the people in Avignon and as we travel to another area they can see some of the differences and also compare it to who they are," she says.

"My recommendation to teachers is to start from your area of strength—meaning the culture (related to the target language) that you know the most about. That doesn't mean that's the only thing you can teach, but when you branch out to other countries you haven't traveled to, you can use what you know about (e.g., the South of France) to later consider how to explore Cameroon. What do we want to know? How can we find out more information? How do we know if the information we're finding out is accurate or not? Those are tools we need to give our students."

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See It In The Language Educator?

Find suggestions of favorite websites for teaching about culture from some of the teachers interviewed in this article on the ACTFL website at www.actfl.org/seeitinTLE. You can also see more websites for language and culture learning suggested by other educators in the "So You Say" section of this issue on p. 48–50.

ACTFL has come out strongly in support of the use of the target language in the classroom, with a position statement released in May 2010 suggesting 90%+ use. It reads in part: "Research indicates that effective language instruction must provide significant levels of meaningful communication and interactive feedback in the target language in order for students to develop language and cultural proficiency. The pivotal role of target-language interaction in language learning is emphasized in the K–16 *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century*. ACTFL therefore recommends that language educators and their students use the target language as exclusively as possible (90% plus) at all levels of instruction during instructional time and, when feasible, beyond the classroom."

Donna Clementi naturally supports the 90%+ target for the language classroom. "We want to stay in the language so that students are hearing and using the language as a natural part of that classroom environment that they are in," she asserts. "We have so little time with them."

But, Clementi also suggests, in order to help students gain a richer understanding of cultural perspectives, teachers may want to consider using English for an occasional out-of-class assignment that requires the students to more deeply reflect on cultural information they learned in class.

"Maybe it's a key question that goes home—if they learn, for example, about the role of sports in schools and outside activities, you may want to send home a question to help them share that information with their family. They can talk about it in English at home and perhaps journal about it as well. When they come back to school, the work they did at home goes back to the teacher, but it doesn't interrupt their language learning in the classroom. This gives a teacher the chance to see how the student took the cultural information out of the classroom, how they shared it with others, and what their understanding was. Then that teacher can briefly help clarify those ideas and deepen the students' understanding—without it becoming an English class where they just talk *about* the language."

She notes that students at all levels—but particularly beginners—benefit from being given the opportunity to think at a deeper level when it comes to cultural perspectives and to express what they may not yet have in the target language to discuss. Out-of-class self-reflection, such as journaling, can help students explore more complex concepts and make comparisons between the target culture and their own.

"We've placed so much emphasis on staying in the target language in the classroom—and certainly rightfully so. But we also have an obligation if we say that culture and language are interconnected to make sure that the kids aren't getting just a superficial understanding of that culture. One of the hazards of staying in target language 100% of the time is never allowing the students to ask their harder questions, to reflect on what they're learning, and to have a moment in class where you take time to process that at a deeper level," Clementi says. She feels that it is not only important for teachers to learn how to stay in the target language, but also how to provide the resources students need to manage more sophisticated material.

"It also makes homework meaningful," she notes, "to give students an article to read or a website to go to so that they can gain a deeper understanding of what we're doing in class."

Clementi is leading an ACTFL Webinar on "Exploring Culture Through the Target Language" on April 10. Following that date, the webinar will also be available on-demand. Learn more at www.actfl.org/webinars and on p. 24 of this issue.

2005, *Teacher's handbook: Contextualized language instruction*.
8. D
9. B
10. Your choice! All represent guiding principles well-aligned with the National Standards' implications for teaching culture.

6. A The other choices identify a practice or a product and also identify its significance from within that culture, explaining the cultural perspective.
7. D A is a quote from Vicky Galloway, 1998, in J. Harper, M. Lively, & M. Williams (Eds.), *The coming of age of the profession*; C is a quote from J. Shrum and E. Gilsan,

1. B
2. D Found on pages 47–49 of the 3rd Edition: Revised.
3. C
4. C Greetings are demonstrated in cultural practices.
5. A The utensils are a cultural product; how they are used in the culture is the practice.