

Teaching Culture: Problems & Solutions

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People all over the world have become more aware of the value of foreign language competence and cross-cultural understanding. As populations have become increasingly diverse, more and more parents, educators, and students have come to recognize the importance of valuing multiculturalism. The need for a strong commitment to the development of cultural understanding within the language program is clear; evidence of "hate crimes" against various ethnic or social groups throughout the world reveals the crying need for understanding and mutual acceptance among the world's peoples. The valuing of ethnic and cultural diversity must be a high priority in education as our students learn to live in an increasingly interdependent world. Moreover, it has been proven that investment in learning about other languages and cultures can bring significant economic and technological advantages. Yet, culture is still the weakest component of our curricula; cultural teaching remains insubstantial and sporadic in most language classes, especially those related to the Less Commonly Taught Languages. Why is this so? What are the problems foreign language teachers are facing? Can we find appropriate solutions? In the following paragraphs, I will try to explore two of the problems and suggest solutions to them.

The first problem teachers are facing is that of an overcrowded curriculum.

The study of culture involves time that many teachers feel they cannot spare in an already overcrowded curriculum; they content themselves with the thought that students will be exposed to cultural material later, after they have mastered the basic grammar and vocabulary of the language.

Solution: Teachers need to be aware of the fact that this "later" never seems to come for most students. Therefore, instead of teaching language and culture in a serial fashion, they should teach them in an integrative fashion, from the beginning through the more advanced levels of proficiency. This, according to Lafayette (1978 & 1988), means that they have to:

- Plan cultural lessons and activities as carefully as language activities and integrate them into lesson plans;
- Use cultural contexts for language-practice activities;
- Use a variety of techniques for teaching culture that involve the four skills;
- Make good use of textbook illustrations and photos – have students analyze their cultural significance;
- Teach students about the connotative meaning of new words when teaching vocabulary;
- Use discussions, brainstorming, and role-plays for cultural instruction; and
- Test cultural understanding as carefully as language is tested.

The second problem teachers are facing is their fear of not knowing enough.

Teachers are afraid to teach culture because they fear that they don't know enough about it, thinking that their role is only to impart facts.

Solution: Even if teachers' own knowledge is quite limited, their proper role is not to impart facts since they are no longer considered the sole providers of knowledge. Teachers should explore and learn along with the students; they need to help their students attain the skills that are necessary to make sense out of the facts they themselves discover in their study of the target culture.

- Processes vs. facts: the objectives that are to be achieved in cross-cultural understanding involve processes rather than facts. A "facts only" approach to culture for which the only goal is to amass bits of information is ineffective.
- Procedural knowledge: goals and objectives have to be set that relate not only to descriptive or analytical knowledge of facts, but also to procedural knowledge that would enable students to observe and analyze cultural elements and patterns. After all, students should have the ability to react appropriately in any social situation, even those not previously studied.

Below are some examples of how teachers can proceed when teaching the Target Language culture.

According to WestEd. (2010), teachers should:

- Get their students to reflect on their own cultural backgrounds and compare them with the backgrounds of the people who speak the TL.
- Respect and actively nurture their students' prior knowledge about the TL culture.
- Set aside their own cultural assumptions to listen to how students view the world: make it safe for them to ask questions, clear up misconceptions, and fully express their knowledge.
- Forge alliances with parents and leaders of different cultural groups represented in the school population.

According to Dunn (2011), teachers should:

- Share with the students the fact that one of their major concerns is to prevent culture shock which might impact the students' adjustment and feelings of belonging when interacting with people speaking the target language, no matter where this interaction takes place.
- Tackle with their students what is acceptable and what to expect in the target language culture.

According to Dittmer (2010), teachers should relate to their students' current interests by using immersive virtual worlds (IVWs):

- Video games: should be thoroughly incorporated in the classroom experience.
- Second Life: helps promote change within students' conceptualizations of representation, narrativity, and affect.

According to Hong (2008), teachers should have their heritage students play an active role in class since they might be more familiar with the culture of the target country.

After having explored two of the problems teachers are facing when teaching culture, three problems remain to be tackled: 1) dealing with students' attitudes; 2) lack of teachers' adequate training; 3) how to measure students' cross-cultural awareness and change in attitudes. We shall explore those problems in subsequent issues.

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Relevant links:

Learning from Online Worlds; Teaching in *Second Life*
<http://learningfromsocialworlds.wordpress.com/>

Writing Arabic in Second Life
http://www.netvibes.com/nergizkern#Nergiz_Kern

Identity-and-culture-in-virtual-worlds
<http://www.slideshare.net/lyrlobo/identity-and-culture-in-virtual-worlds>