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# Aspects of integrating culture in the Spanish-as-a-Foreign-Language (SFL) classroom

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*While there has been growing awareness among teachers that language learning/teaching and culture learning/teaching should occur together, the techniques and classroom activities for integrating culture in the FL classroom are still a matter of research and further testing. The present work explores some aspects of teaching culture in the Spanish-as-a-Foreign-Language (SFL) classroom, which may very well constitute suggestions for anyone approaching this subject matter. It is basically an account of my experience with different groups of students from Transilvania University of Braşov. I shall discuss the overall efficiency of the different techniques, specific activities, and teaching materials employed with my groups of SFL students, also pointing out some of the differences in the approach and challenging aspects of teaching culture to SFL students from different curricular areas and students with different linguistic competence of Spanish.*

Key-words: *language, culture, Spanish-as-a-Foreign-Language.*

## 1. Introduction

It has been obvious for quite some time now that a foreign language cannot be (success)fully learned or taught without constantly addressing the culture of its native speakers. Foreign language (FL) teaching cannot be reduced to merely teaching a set of grammar rules and vocabulary items because language possesses an inherent sociocultural dimension, manifest in all of its features, either lexical or grammatical, which renders it unique.

Language is a reflection of the community where it is spoken, a fact clearly demonstrated, for instance, by the many names the Eskimo culture has for snow (Seelye 1984 *apud* Castro 2007, 203) or the variety of terms employed by some Latin American cultures to refer to bananas (Castro 2007, 203).

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Language and culture, then, occur together and they cannot be dealt with separately. So "the acquisition of a second language […] is also the acquisition of a second culture" (Brown 2007 *apud* Dema and Moeller 2012, 76).

## 2. What is culture?

There have been numerous attempts to define culture, but there is no single agreed-upon definition. However, all researchers that have dealt with the matter seem to agree that culture is a very broad term.

The concept of culture seems to embrace all aspects of human life (Seelye 1993 *apud* Dema and Moeller 2012, 77). It is "an individualizing patrimony of human groups" (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952 *apud* Denis and Matas Pla 2009, 88), a set of socially acquired traditions, lifestyles, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting (Harris 1990 *apud* Miquel and Sans 2004, 3). Each culture is then a different way of classifying reality, a distinct vision of the world, the identification document of a society (Porcher 1986 *apud* Miquel and Sans 2004, 3; Denis and Matas Pla 2009, 88).

Culture is in fact "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, the laws we make and follow" (Standards 1999, 40).

## 3. Culture in the foreign language (FL) classroom

Traditionally, the teaching of a FL was primarily focused on the teaching of its grammar and vocabulary. Cultural aspects of a FL were approached as a separate subject, usually represented by the geography and history of the nation involved, not paying (enough) attention to "the cultures expressed through that language" (Standards 1999, 43).

Nowadays foreign languages are no longer taught in this manner, or at least, they shouldn't be, as teachers have grown more and more aware of the interrelatedness between language and culture and, as a result, they have incorporated cultural aspects in their lessons in a more systematic way. This change of perspective, as we shall see further on, is also due to the fact that there are now useful written guidelines available to assist the teacher in the process of teaching a foreign language and its culture.

### 3.1. Goals for integrating culture in the FL classroom

It seems that the key to effective human interaction and the main goal of today's FL classroom is "knowing *how*, *when* and *why* to say *what* to *whom*". According to this

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principle formulated in the now worldwide known and cited *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (see below), the *how* (grammar) and the *what* (vocabulary), although vital and traditionally fundamental in the classroom, as previously pointed out, need to be constantly supported by appropriate and meaningful communication with native speakers of a language, that is, the *when*, the *why*, and the *whom* (Standards 1999, 43).

*The Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (its latest edition titled *The World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages*), since first published in 1996, has become a reference work for foreign language instruction. This document, elaborated by a coalition of language organizations in the US, defines content standards ("what students should know and be able to do") in FL education. It describes five main goals for language learning, the so-called five Cs: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities.

These standards, while not a curriculum guide including specific course content or recommended sequence of study, seem to have provided a valuable instrument that supports teachers in their endeavor to integrate cultural aspects in the FL teaching process and to actively engage learners in the acquisition of a foreign language and its culture.

The teacher's challenging role remains, however, to continuously look for effective ways and techniques that can best stimulate classroom communication and interaction and thus enable students to achieve these standards.

To gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures, according to the Standards, students should demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied (Standard 2.1), as well as an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of that culture (Standard 2.2) (Standards 1999, 47).

Cultural products may be tangible (a painting, a piece of literature) or intangible (a system of education, an oral tale, a dance), cultural practices refer to "patterns of behavior accepted by a society", while cultural perspectives represent that culture's view of the world, its popular beliefs, values, attitudes and assumptions. The three components (products, practices, and perspectives), also referred to as the 3 Ps, are interrelated, the products and practices being derived from the perspectives (Standards 1999, 47.).

Defining culture in terms of the 3 Ps represents "a re-conceptualized approach to culture [which] shifted the focus of teaching culture to a study of underlying values, attitudes and beliefs, rather than simply learning about cultural products and practices (Dema and Moeller 2012, 79).

FL learners seem to be able to handle cultural products and practices quite well and not very well cultural perspectives as values; beliefs and attitudes are intangible and, consequently, pose greater challenge to teachers when attempting to introduce them in the FL classroom (Morain 1997 *apud* Dema and Moeller, 2012, 79).

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Also, while cultural products and practices may appear as somewhat disconnected pieces of information, thus encouraging stereotypes, relating them to perspectives, as suggested by the 3 Ps approach, ensures a more systematic, contextualized and flexible way of exploring culture, helping teachers "tie together the disparate knowledge about products and practices" and students "acquire a deeper understanding of culture overall" (Dema and Moeller 2012, 78-79).

### 3.2. Strategies for integrating culture in the FL classroom

When approaching a foreign culture, while learning a second language, that is, when we discover a "different classification of reality" (see *supra* 2.), we are presented with the opportunity of enriching what has been called our *cultural capital*, made up of our entire knowledge under all its possible forms, some of which we may not even be aware of, all "the symbolic goods that we share with others". The new classification we acquire is not static; it will change constantly as we advance in the study of a FL (Denis and Matas Pla 2009, 89).

Successful integration of L2 culture in the FL classroom is highly dependent on the materials and resources used, as well as on the teaching approach.

As far as the former are concerned, several ways of integrating cultural aspects in the foreign language classroom have been suggested: the use of cultural capsules (brief items of information about the L2 culture), cultural clusters (series of culture capsules), cultural assimilators (short descriptions of various situations of interaction between persons from L1 and L2 culture with a choice of four possible interpretations, with only one being correct), and authentic materials (newspapers, magazines, movies, videos, etc.).

As previously mentioned, culture is not static, it is very dynamic, which can prove quite challenging for teachers when choosing relevant teaching material and activities. Textbooks, for instance, tend to be static in depicting culture, so the use of such material should always be completed by using digital media. Technology, in fact, seems to have had a major impact on instruction and learning as a whole, making it more effective and more engaging as far as students are concerned and the 3 Ps approach actually "permits the use of any document – be it an advertisement, newspaper article, or literature text – for cultural learning where appropriate" (Lange 1999 *apud* Dema and Moeller 2012, 79).

The use of authentic teaching materials, which may cover a wide range from the above mentioned to social applications, blogs, podcasts, or even folklore, fairytales and art, will allow students to maximize the opportunity to be exposed to L2 and will make both teachers and students part of an interactive environment. Moreover, the introduction of activities based on such authentic materials will make culture learning more relevant to the students and more accessible as

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students may also be able to freely access and explore this material (Dema and Moeller 2012, 80-86).

With regard to the teaching approach, teachers should make sure students' access L2 culture in a very conscious way by developing strategies for them to communicate successfully in the new system of classification. The goal is for the students to achieve what Byram at al. 1997 (*apud* Denis and Matas Pla 2009, 90) call a *savoir-faire*, *savoir-apprendre*, *savoir-être*, that is to achieve skills, awareness, attitudes, and values. For this purpose, L2 learning should always be contextualized; students should work with real life, relevant situations that will pose specific problem solving from which they will be able to extract different cultural aspects. Students should learn how to acknowledge the distinct elements of the target culture, its unique contribution to universal problem solving and they should be fully committed while discovering these different ways of doing things (Denis and Matas Pla 2009, 90).

Students' motivation is thus vital in the process of teaching/learning a FL and its culture. If students are genuinely interested in learning a FL, they will feel eager to approach cultural aspects, and knowledge of L2 culture will considerably improve their linguistic competence.

Since teaching L2 culture is more productive when students discover it consciously, driven by self-motivation, the teaching approach should include more than simply lecturing students on cultural aspects or suggesting textbooks or other material to this purpose; it should include some inquiry, too. This supposes exploring a particular cultural topic in a systematic way. The topic, either suggested by the teacher or arisen from classroom interaction, is thoroughly discussed and research conclusions are presented in class, while students' curiosity is stimulated by inquiry questions (the teacher's or even the students') that generate new questions that will ultimately lead to the unfolding of important aspects of L2 culture. Inquiry-based teaching, although more challenging to many teachers as it involves a change in the way a class is traditionally conducted as well as a change in the set of beliefs, creates a setting for collaborative and long-lasting learning environment, making the newly acquired information easier for the students to remember because it is also something they are truly interested in (Castro 2007, 206-208).

In order to reach an understanding of the *why* about a culture, in addition to the *what* and the *how*, students also need to make meaningful connections and comparisons (two other goals for language learning according to the Standards) between their own culture and the target culture (Dema and Moeller 2012, 81). Such connections and comparisons require students to have solid knowledge and understanding of their own culture, although a person's L1 culture may often be "the biggest impediment to acquiring a second" (Calvo Cortés 2007, 232). The teacher's role here then is to encourage students to develop reasoning skills that will increase their awareness and make them more "sensitive to cross-cultural

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differences" (Seelye 1984 *apud* Castro 2007, 204) for "the goal of culture instruction cannot be to replicate the socialization process experienced by the natives of the culture, but to develop intercultural understanding" (Byram 1991 *apud* Castro 2007, 203). So, instead of requiring that students blindly imitate patterns of behavior, teachers should promote a sense of awareness and understanding for cultural differences (Castro 2007, 203.).

Also, when teaching about L2 culture, teachers should try to combat stereotypes as these are inevitable and "extremely tenacious" (Thanasoulas 2001, 15). Stereotypes can be avoided by showing linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity, as well as class and gender oppositions, that will also help students achieve a more complex understanding about L2 culture (Clarke 1990, 35-36).

To conclude this short review of my research on teaching culture in a FL classroom, I must say I totally agree with Dema and Moeller (2012, 76) that an effective pedagogical approach to the teaching of culture and language may be achieved through the theoretical construct of the 3 Ps, combined with an inquiry teaching approach and the use of technology.

## 4. Aspects of integrating culture in the SFL classroom

The cultural content of a SFL classroom is basically the same as for any language, including the following topics: daily routines and life cycles, social interaction patterns (verbal and non-verbal communication) with differing levels of formality, social groups (ethnic minorities and their respective languages, social and political institutions, geography and history, national identity).

As the purpose of this article is to explore some aspects of teaching culture in the SFL classroom based on my experience with different groups of students from *Transilvania University of Braşov*, I shall first offer a short description of these groups and the amount of time allocated to them for the study of SFL.

Spanish is studied mainly for specific purposes by students from different non-philology areas (Law, Economics, Social Studies, Tourism, etc.) and as a third foreign language by philology students from the Translation Studies program, for two weekly hours, for four semesters (the former group) and six semesters (the latter group).

These two groups, although similar in that they all take on Spanish at entry-level, are basically very different, as I shall explain further on, and consequently require different teaching approaches.

As previously pointed out, philology students have much more time available for studying Spanish, which increases their chance of reaching a fairly good command of the language, while non-philology students also have to include specialized vocabulary in their study, which leaves less space for incorporating cultural elements in a systematic and successful way.

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The two groups are also different in point of their motivation and "sensitivity to cross-cultural differences" (see *supra* Castro), both of which, as previously discussed, influence the process of teaching culture in a FL classroom. The former group is not only more motivated to study languages in general, but, thanks to their multilingual instruction, they are also more experienced and inclined to make connections and comparisons between L1 and L2 culture that will lead to a deeper understanding of meanings embedded in L2 culture.

As far as techniques and activities are concerned, most of the currently available ones described in chapter 3 have been tested with each of the two groups. Of course, the approach has been slightly different in each case, as the groups' characteristics are also different.

Cultural capsules have proven quite helpful in integrating cultural elements, as they are present in great number in the textbooks I use, even in some of the Spanish for Specific Purpose (SSP) textbooks, such as those from the area of business or tourism. They have always been successful with both groups in explaining a series of basic, straightforward cultural elements such as Spanish family names, meals and working schedules, levels of formality, differences between Peninsular Spanish and American Spanish.

Another modality of integrating culture in a rather traditional although not less successful way is through the use of short texts, either contained in the textbooks currently used or taken from other textbooks or teaching resources. Unlike authentic materials such as videos, audible dialogues, movies, which I also resort to plenty of times, these written texts present the great advantage of being adaptable. They can be altered so as to suit students' different levels of Spanish. Such texts have been used with all types of students to introduce a variety of cultural topics such as daily routines, customs and traditions, rules of decorum (when greeting people, visiting Spanish families, interacting with Spanish people in different situations, etc.). In addition to being so versatile, they have also provided an excellent basis for the students to start making comparisons between their culture and the Spanish culture, thus proving ideal for increasing students' cross-cultural awareness.

The use of authentic materials is mandatory for every FL classroom nowadays and always makes classroom environment more dynamic and appealing to students. However, this kind of material should be carefully selected as it is not so easily adaptable and, from my experience, some students simply find it discouraging to be exposed to L2 resources that surpass their level of linguistic competence in that language. The authentic materials I most frequently employ are videos either found on line or in some of the textbooks I use. They are, overall, an excellent cultural instrument. They can be used to teach students how to correctly approach situations such as saying hello (with differing levels of formality), ordering in a bar or a restaurant, giving directions, etc. Besides significantly contributing to

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improving students' knowledge of Spanish culture, videos seem to help combat cultural stereotypes and, in this respect, I agree with Bueno's (2009) remark (*apud* Dema and Moeller 2012, 85) that videos turn students into observers of first-hand images of L2 culture, thus helping them to concentrate less on the positive or negative connotations of L2 cultural practices and become more aware of the diversity of elements such as customs, values and language.

The Internet is also a valuable resource for illustrating different cultural products such as typical dishes or local tourist attractions.

Other authentic materials that have proven efficient in my efforts of integrating cultural aspects in the SFL class are magazines. When discussing symbols of social identity such as gossip (*el cotilleo*) and the famous Spanish gossip press (*prensa del corazón*), students of both groups have found Spanish magazines (which were brought to class on paper) exceptionally useful and entertaining. They are a great way of teaching culture, if only for the numerous photos of famous Spanish people and their social routines.

Mostly with the philology groups, a sort of inquiry-based teaching approach has always been successfully developed. As part of this approach, students are required to prepare, in small groups, short PPT presentations on popular topics such as famous Spanish cities or national festivities, which are brought to class and then discussed with colleagues in the form of a "cultural brainstorming session" meant to highlight specific L2 cultural elements, as well as differences or similarities between L1 and L2 culture.

With the advanced students, movies have also been used to explore cultural aspects regarding ethnic minorities, symbols of national identity or social phenomena. Although rather time-consuming, such teaching instruments have been well received by students. Illustrating for instance a present-day social phenomenon in Spain such as Brain Drain, using an entertaining comedy movie (*Perdiendo el norte*) has not only familiarized students with this otherwise worrisome matter, it has also made them aware of how other cultures (the German culture here) perceive Spanish people, the stereotypical projections they have of them and it has revealed some new and unexpected similarities between the Romanian and Spanish cultures regarding emigration (students were unaware that a prosperous and respectful nation as the Spanish one is also dealing with the emigration of its young and well educated members).

Another comedy movie (*Ocho apellidos vascos*), brought to class for cultural purposes, has offered students the opportunity of becoming familiar with some of the most culturally emblematic Spanish regions and their individualizing features: Andalusia, in the South of Spain, with its high temperatures, its flamenco, and its religious celebrations, the Basque Country, in the North, with its cold weather, its long family names and its never-ending disapproval of Spanish authority, and Catalonia, with its stylish people and its well-known pursuit of independence.

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Another benefit of using such a resource in class refers to combating stereotypes as it shows the great variety Spain possesses in point of climate, traditions, and people. It makes students aware of the fact that not all regions of Spain are equally sunny and hot, nor do all Spanish people sing or dance flamenco, nor do they all speak only Spanish, which are some of the most common preconceived ideas foreign people have of Spain and its people.

Finally, "the culture expressed through the language" (see *supra* 3.) has always been exploited for students to get a deeper understanding of L2 culture. Idiomatic expressions, proverbs or even a simple dialogue in a bar/restaurant or in the street include valuable cultural elements. Their integration in the FL classroom is spontaneous, as they can come up while working on other activities but they should never be neglected because they can broaden and consolidate the cultural knowledge students receive through all the techniques and activities mentioned above.

With the advanced groups I have occasionally had the time to explore idiomatic expressions in a more systematic way, discussing for instance expressions that refer to different conditions, states of mind, qualifying different situations or including different lexical items such as body parts, colors, etc. Here too, students can be encouraged to make comparisons between the target culture and their own culture.

In point of teaching materials and resources, according to my observations, the best textbooks to use in class for successful integration of cultural aspects are those that include cultural information under the form of cultural capsules or short texts, accompanied by video and audible resources and covering both Spanish speaking environments (Spain and Latin America). There is a particularly rich collection of textbooks published in Spain by Difusión Publishing House which counts with an online space called Campus Difusión, where all the textbooks' accompanying videos, audible material, as well as other teaching resources are available and students can access and explore them mostly free of charge, but also by means of a monthly subscription.

## 5. Final remarks

Teaching culture to different SFL groups of students (general language groups vs. specific purposes groups, beginner / intermediate vs. advanced groups) requires, as we have seen, different planning and approaches. My observations have pointed out that, while students may share the same level of linguistic competence in L2, their personal interests and motivation for learning L2, as well as their general cultural capital and dedication may be different. This is why teaching culture to groups of similar level may result in entirely different experiences because the general outcome of such a process is influenced by all these different factors and,

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as previously emphasized, teaching L2 culture is generally more efficient when students discover it consciously and eagerly.

So, my conclusion at this point, which I consider valid for any FL classroom, is that, although there are now plenty of resources and activities at one's disposal to help integrate cultural aspects in the FL classroom, the task in itself remains rather challenging. The main reason for this is that all the teaching resources and activities have to be carefully planned so as to form a coherent body of knowledge and find a reasonable balance between students' interests and expectations and the amount of cultural information provided.

Thus, no single recipe or formula may be valid. Finding the right approach for each case is a matter of ceaseless and dynamic quest, much like culture itself.

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