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# Perspectives

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## THE ISSUE

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### Revisiting the Role of Culture in the Foreign Language Curriculum

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IN INTRODUCING THE LAST *PERSPECTIVES* column on the role of foreign language (FL) departments in internationalizing the curriculum, I observed that claiming such a role was rather akin to asserting the obvious. This column, too, with its focus on Revisiting the Role of Culture in the FL Curriculum, seems at first sight to fall into the same category: affirming the tried and true—namely, that culture has an established place in FL curricular discussions. However, the title already and quite deliberately signals a certain distancing from any self-satisfied stance toward the topic, inasmuch as it probes the implied reconsideration of culture in FL curricula with at least two kinds of “why”s: a retrospective and causative query and a more prospective and purposive “why” that would illuminate the path forward with regard to the role of culture in FL programs.

As is to be expected, the two go hand in hand. What might be less expected is how much innovative thinking has of late gone into a seemingly “checked-off” construct like culture in FL curricula and pedagogy. Indeed, might the proposed “revisiting” approximate a “revising,” a typographical slip that I encountered in the very writing of this introduction? There is good reason to at least consider that possibility, precisely because the *context of culture* and the *context of situation* within which FL specialists in their particular professional culture now discuss the nature and the role of culture in their educational work has shifted dramatically in the last decade or so.

We know that these two prominent terms were originally used by the anthropologist Malinowski (1935) as a way of capturing the fact that any understanding of words depends on and is em-

bedded in the “active experience of those aspects of reality to which the words belong” (p. 58). Malinowski came to extend that notion of the significance of context to an entire culture, thereby yielding the two pivotal notions of *context of situation* and *context of culture* in a linguistically oriented anthropology. Considering the implications of such a position over 40 years later, Halliday (1999) interpreted Malinowski’s as follows:

language considered as a *system*—its lexical items and grammatical categories—is to be related to its context of *culture*; while instances of language in use—specific texts and their component parts—are to be related to their context of *situation*. (p. 4, original emphasis)

I refer to this insight because, with a certain flight of fancy (although one that I hope does not needlessly stretch the analogy), one might say that the contexts for language teaching and learning, the purposes for which languages are learned and taught, and the teachers and learners who are engaged in this educative activity of leading out and being led out—*educere/educare*—have already fundamentally changed the social activity of FL or second language education, whether we acknowledge it or not.

In this introduction I choose three documents as placeholders to briefly sketch out that shift in the FL profession as it pertains to the role of culture: The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (ACTFL, 1996/2006), the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001), and the report by the Modern Language Association (MLA) Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Language Learning (2007), entitled “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World.” Readers might recall that each of these documents has been highlighted in previous editions of *Perspectives*. Thus, the impact of the Standards project was discussed as part of the interrogation of

communicative competence as a framework for collegiate FL study (*MLJ*, 90, 2006), even as the enormous forward movement toward a focus on language in use that the Standards had documented and facilitated was unequivocally recognized. Contributors portraying it as yet falling short, at least for higher education, argued, on the one hand, for its practical nonattainability; on the other hand, they either exposed the fact that, deep down, its agenda for linking language knowledge and cultural content knowledge had yet to be appropriately fulfilled or they called for a seemingly altogether different competence called *semi-otic competence*. The winter 2007 issue (*MLJ*, 91) addressed the remarkable reach toward plurilingualism for a European citizenry that stands at the heart of the CEFR, highlighting this ambitious civic agenda as the driving force behind a new language policy, even though much professional discussion centered on assessment regimes, rating scales, or curricular-pedagogical implementations. Finally, the summer 2008 column (*MLJ*, 92) examined how the challenge of developing students' translingual and transcultural competence, as it was put forth in the MLA report, might be taken up and fulfilled in collegiate FL departments. There seemed to be a sense that its vision of cultural learning, broadly interpreted, was not matched by an equally appealing—and workable—notation of completely integrated and concurrent language learning.

In sum, its different geographic, cultural, and educational provenance notwithstanding, each document wrestles with how to relate language and content or cultural learning, how to determine the educative ends that are to be in focus, and, therefore, how to clarify the assumptions about the existing and the desired role for language and multiple languages. Each document, too, assumes that language use must be seen as embedded in diverse social activities in the lives of people and peoples around the globe as they interact with each other in increasingly varied and often surprisingly intimate ways, even across formidable distances.

It is this larger frame of reference that also guides the contributions to the present column. Michael Byram of the University of Durham, England, one of the most prolific and influential writers and thinkers about "Context and Culture in Language Teaching and Learning," the title of perhaps his best known publication, opens the discussion by explicitly focusing on the "why" of linguistic and cultural education—that is, the larger purposes that the foreign language profession must clarify for itself if it is to contribute

to contemporary educational concerns. Exposing the unproductive dichotomy between an educational role for the teaching of culture and its more use-oriented role, he turns to two concepts as a way of bridging that divide: the notion of *Bildung* as formation of the whole person in his or her social context and, related to that, the notion of the *acteur social* 'social agent' as acting within a given social context in the interest of social good and goods. What these notions can and should mean in a political environment that, if not outright postnational, at the very least attenuates the earlier ideologically privileged link between a single normative language and nationhood and therefore citizen identity, remains to be worked out. However, Byram's proposed notion of the *gebildete acteurs sociaux* would seem to provide a felicitous framework within which to explore just such issues.

A sophisticated reading of the *Standards* is the way in which Katherine Arens of the University of Texas proposes to imagine educational steps that would realize an understanding of culture as "a set of interlocking cultural literacies." These include the history, traditions, and the pragmatic patterns that characterize what Bourdieu refers to as a *field*: "any site or region within which a group acts, communicates, and evolves its characteristic knowledge and identities." In a happy confluence of thinking across contributions, Arens, too, highlights that "our target for teaching and learning needs to be the field of action and agency of an individual within a C2 community or communities." What makes her representation all the more convincing is that she links it to discursive—and hopefully practical—habits to which many educators in the United States have ready professional access via the extensive literature and practices associated with the Standards project.

Continuing the journey around the globe, Angela Scarino of the University of South Australia highlights the consequences of moving from a cultural to an intercultural orientation. Accordingly, she focuses on language learning as the development of an intercultural capability that critically depends on and develops new forms of meaning-making through new forms of positioning oneself in and through the language one is learning. It is through a consideration of the notion of *stance* as a way of capturing "the overall framework of knowledge, understanding, and ethical dispositions of teachers"—and, presumably, of learners—that she imagines as well a "necessary reconceptualization of language that includes its relationship with culture and

learning.” She points to the fact that this has significant consequences for assessment practice. If learners are to learn how to engage in mediating meaning between and across cultures and if one also recognizes the long-term nature of the development of that ability, then ways must be found to capture its dynamism throughout the language learning process.

That same concern with capturing the long-term quality of an evolving intercultural understanding and the imperative that this be adequately reflected in both pedagogical and assessment practice appears as well in Gilberte Furstenberg’s contribution. Known for the innovative use of technology in support of developing *transcultural competence*, she and her colleagues have created a course platform now used in a number of language environments beyond the original French context. It translates a philosophical stance that privileges a process of inquiry and probing, of hypothesis creation and testing, of uncovering contradictions and then contextualizing them in networks of meaning-making into the core of language and culture learning that students from the respective countries engage in through the use of asynchronous forums of cultural exchange. As she states, whether and how such an approach is generalizable into whole-program contexts remains to be seen. However, there can be no doubt that it would challenge many of our earlier notions of culture.

The contribution by Erin Kearney shows one such context in which reconsideration might fruitfully take place: The unapologetic assumption that regular FL classrooms, as contrasted with immersion classrooms or study-abroad sojourns, can enable learners to develop the kinds of intercultural identities that all contributors seem to call

for by fostering a deep engagement with narratives. Narratives as a particularly accessible and particularly “impressive” way for learners to experience cultural immersion in the FL classroom deserve close attention not only because they are among our “primary sense-making resources” but also because they inherently highlight differing perspectives taken in different cultures on the human condition. The fact that narratives are also among the most central forms in which we engage with language and, by extension, learn language is the final decisive feature that recommends them for the larger project of integrating language and culture in FL classrooms.

Whether these representations amount to a fundamental reconsideration of the role of culture in FL curricula or not, they provide stimulating perspectives that might ultimately enable it.

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## THE COMMENTARIES

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### Linguistic and Cultural Education for *Bildung* and Citizenship

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At the heart of theory and practice in foreign language teaching, as of education in general, is the need to clarify purposes. Given the number of books and articles on methods and techniques for the classroom, it might appear that it is methodology that is central. The dominant contemporary assumption is that the purpose of foreign language teaching is to develop communicative competence and discussion turns around “communicative methodology” in its various forms, but methodology is a second-order issue derived from the question of purposes.

In this contribution, therefore, I want to focus on purposes—avoiding the narrowness of the terms “aims and objectives”—and to suggest that a reappraisal of purposes with respect to the cultural dimension of foreign language teaching will lead to richer, more complex outcomes. These reconsidered purposes are, however, more demanding on teachers and learners; in other words, my proposal is not an easy option.

It is often in times of critical societal change that questions about purposes come to the fore, and a tension between “educational” and

“functional”/“utilitarian” purposes appears in general debate about schools and society. This distinction is then applied to language learning per se. Specifically, language learning is presented as a discipline, as training of (the faculties of) the mind, even though that is a long discredited 19th-century approach, and placed in opposition to learning or acquiring a language for use in interaction with others, those others more often thought of as “speakers” than “writers” of a foreign language. The same distinction between educational and utilitarian purposes is also applied to the cultural dimension of foreign language teaching and to the linking of culture and language.

Learning about the speakers of another language and the (national) culture to which they seem to belong can be presented as having practical purposes and as having educational ones. This is evident, for example, in the discussions of purposes of language teaching in reaction to the First World War. In Britain, a report on that topic was commissioned during the war and appeared in 1918. Commonly called the Leathes Report (1918), it stated boldly that knowledge about other countries and their (national) cultures might have influenced the course of the war: “Ignorance of the mental attitude and aspirations of the German people may not have been the cause of the war; it certainly prevented due preparation and hampered our efforts after the war had begun; it still darkens our counsels” (p. 32). The report concluded that language teaching should change its focus from the philological and literary tradition to the inclusion of knowledge of the economies, histories, political systems, and contemporary societies of other countries. This was to be encapsulated in the change from languages to “modern studies.” This report was also noticed in the United States. Indeed, several articles in the *Modern Language Journal* in the early 1920s debated the purposes of language teaching, referring to the Leathes Report (e.g., Olmsted, 1921).

Ultimately, the report’s proposal was ignored, and the report itself shelved. However, the concern with knowing cultures as well as languages of countries or regions of geopolitical significance for pragmatic reasons can be seen again and again over the years. In Australia, for example, it is present in the shift from teaching European languages to East Asian languages. In the United States it is evident in the recent surge of interest in Arabic, an interest that, according to Kramsch (2005), is linked to national defense:

The real world problem is no longer how to understand the role of the USA in a world that speaks languages other than English, but how to create a cadre of language professionals that, with advanced knowledge of the language and the culture, are able

to collect and interpret intelligence necessary for US national security. (p. 556)

The echoes with the Leathes Report (1918) are clear—*plus ça change* . . .

The other and apparently alternative purpose of foreign language teaching—the educational purpose—suffers beneath the weight of making language learning efficient and effective for the instrumental purpose. Wherever one looks, policymakers are concerned about the level of proficiency attained through language teaching. This is the case in Japan on one side of the world and one end of a continuum, where the common perception is that language teaching—usually synonymous with the teaching of English—does not produce proficient speakers. It is also a concern in Norway on the other side of the world and the other end of a continuum, despite the common perception that language teaching is successful. In fact, the learning of English happens more outside school than within, and the learning of other languages in schools is no more effective than in other countries.

Language teaching professionals follow the lead of policymakers—and properly so because they have a duty to society—but in so doing they fail to give adequate attention to the educational purpose and its methodological implications for the classroom. The possibility that educational purposes do not exclude efficient and effective language learning receives little professional attention, no doubt because there is an automatic but unnecessary assumption that the methods involved in the one are inimical to the other; the confusion of purposes and possible methods creates problems because of loose thinking.

There are exceptions, and it is not surprising that they include language professionals in Germany, where the significance of *Bildung*—that interplay between the individual and the world that is the “formation,” perhaps “transformation,” of the individual—continues to be central to debate about all education, including foreign language education. Werner Hüllen, for example, in his address to the conference of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Fremdsprachenforschung (DGFF, German Society for Foreign Language Research) in Munich in 2005, reminded his audience of the importance of *Bildung*, as did Lothar Bredella and others in their publications. For example, Bredella (e.g., 1992) has demonstrated for many years that the study of literature is one of the modes of achieving intercultural sensitivity and competence, not only literary critical competence. Additionally, the blurb of a recent book edited by Bredella and Hallet

(2007) emphasizes the importance of literature to counteract the dominance of the pragmatic:

The present volume attempts to demonstrate the contribution to *Bildung* made by literature. . . . This will gainsay contemporary tendencies, which reduce foreign language teaching and learning to a functional-pragmatic dimension. (book jacket, my translation).

In this context, the concept of competence deserves a closer look. It was not available to those writing about language teaching in the 1920s, and it is often decried today as being reductive and technicist. It is, however, a useful concept when used wisely (Fleming, 2009) inasmuch as it can operationalize not only the instrumental purposes of language teaching, for which it seems most appropriate because they are related to performance, but also the educational purposes, which likewise need to be realized in performance or “action.”

The concept of *acteur social* adds yet another dimension to such an understanding of competence. It is found notably in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2001), where it was first formulated in French and then in English. The influence of the CEFR is substantial in Europe and beyond but often largely in terms of the definitions of levels of language competence. Yet, it is worth recalling that the CEFR and related works were produced under the aegis of a project on language learning that envisioned a new European citizenship. The CEFR is thus an attempt to describe the consensus view of the plurilingual competence needed by European citizens and how they might acquire it. It emphasizes the functional-pragmatic tendencies to which Bredella and Hallet (2007) refer, with the implication that the social agent is thereby enriched:

As a social agent, each individual forms relationships with a widening cluster of overlapping social groups, which together define identity. In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote the favourable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture. It must be left to teachers and the learners themselves to reintegrate the many parts into a healthily developing whole. (CEFR, 2001, p. 1)

There is, then, in principle no contradiction between the concepts of the *acteur social* and the *gebildeter Mensch*, whatever the debates about each of these separately may be. Such debates must be seen in their internal relatedness, not least because their underlying concepts are complementary. The classical, neohumanist understanding of *Bildung* focuses on the formation of the individual per se and might reject the utilitarian engagement

with society of the social agent. However, as Løvlie and Standish (2002) showed, the transmission of the concept of *Bildung* to other traditions allows for a “pragmatic transformation” (pp. 319–320). Such pragmatism is particularly well developed in Dewey's work, where attention is paid to the individual taking social action and where inquiry is democratic, the individual acting together with others.

To date, foreign language teaching has not yet drawn appropriate conclusions from such considerations. It does not define its purposes and outcomes—or its methods—in a way in which the *gebildeter Mensch* and the *acteur social* can be the focus of language teaching. I suggested, in 2008, that the way forward is to turn to education for (democratic) citizenship. Here, the much-debated notion of the *gebildeter Mensch* includes, at the very least, the ability to analyze, discriminate, and reflect on oneself and on the society into which one has grown and into which one has been led or “educated.” The concept of *politische Bildung* operationalizes this notion, even as it also emphasizes the importance of social action within that society. It thus makes explicit the complementarity of *Bildung* and action. Theorists of *politische Bildung* (e.g., Gagel, 2000; Himmelmann, 2006) have defined it in terms of competences; similarly, the U.S. American *National Standards for Civics and Government* (1995) have defined intellectual skills (e.g., identifying, explaining, and evaluating) and participatory skills (e.g., influencing policies, negotiating, and managing conflicts). Although such documents have provided useful impetuses, they continue to be focused on national societies and take for granted that the language competence required, for example, in managing conflicts will be unproblematic, even though, within any society, there are groups with different first/native languages. Similarly, they have assumed a shared (national) culture even though the skill of negotiation needs knowledge and understanding of the multiple cultures present in any situation within a given society.

The significance of linguistic and intercultural competence in *Bildung* and *politische Bildung* is evident to language professionals. However, the lack of clarification of the responsibilities and activities of an *acteur social* in documents such as the CEFR would be evident to those engaged in education for citizenship, all the more so when the citizenship in question is European and social action and active citizenship necessarily involve competences in other languages and cultures.

*In fine*, the cultural dimension of foreign language teaching needs to fulfill purposes that are

both educational and utilitarian. As is now well established by theorists and by some exemplary practice, educational competence can be fulfilled by a focus on intercultural competence, which includes critical reflection. The utilitarian can potentially be fulfilled by theoretical and practical interaction with education for citizenship, for “intercultural citizenship.” It can simultaneously enrich education for citizenship by paying attention to multilingual and multicultural aspects of social action. In the best of all possible worlds, the intercultural citizen is *gebildet*, is a social agent active in a multicultural society, whether “national–state” or international polity.

Furthermore, the linguistic purpose of language teaching can be enhanced by attention to the linguistic competence needed in social action and intercultural citizenship. This has not been my focus, but it is evident that the skills of negotiation, for example, presuppose linguistic competence of a kind that is not trivial. The concern is not with basic interpersonal communication skills, to borrow Cummins’s (1979) term, but with more complex and advanced competence analogous to Cummins’s cognitive academic language proficiency.

I have portrayed a demanding scenario, one which can only be met in favorable conditions of teaching and learning. Not coincidentally, it also takes us back to questions of methodology and curriculum to which I referred at the outset. Although a full treatment is obviously beyond the scope of this text, current methods, whether old or new, and current modes of organizing curricula, which give insufficient time for foreign languages, quite clearly will never solve the problem. A simple calculation of the number of hours of “exposure” to language teaching of, say, 4 hr per week for 40 weeks per year over 5 years—to take a typical language learning career—is equivalent to about 2 months of living in an environment in which the language is spoken. Even with the benefit of structured learning rather than mere exposure, realistic expectations suggest modest outcomes even before considering the specifics of methods, of the difficulty of a given language for given learners, and of matters of motivation.

We need a more radical vision of language education of all kinds, as proposed in the new project of the Council of Europe called “Languages in Education, Languages for Education” (2009). Here methods of content- and language-integrated learning (CLIL) have indicated a way forward, provided the conditions are appropriate. Foreign

language teachers might turn the experiences of CLIL to their advantage and focus on content as well as form—a lesson learned from bilingual education in Wales and propagated by Dodson (Dodson, Price, & Williams, 1968) and Hawkins (1981) many years ago. My own proposal is that the content in question should draw on citizenship education, enriching it with attention to intercultural communicative competence and giving substantial and meaningful content to language lessons, while providing opportunities for methodological innovation and cross-curricular cooperation. The acquisition of intercultural citizenship competences would be the aims and objectives realizing both educational and instrumental/functional purposes.

In concluding my reflections, let me forestall some of the comments readers may have by acknowledging that I have deliberately been polemical and necessarily prone to simplification. Even so, I have tried to contextualize the issues historically and contemporaneously in order to state where we might go in the future with language teaching for societies—both national and international—that require their citizens to be *gebildete acteurs sociaux*, if I may allow myself a plurilingual coin at the end.

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## The Field of Culture: The Standards as a Model for Teaching Culture

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The title for this forum, “Revisiting the Role of Culture in the Foreign Language Curriculum,” already points to the challenge that has not been taken up: reconceiving language learning within a more consistent educational framework that teaches language and culture in tandem, with its goal a joint literacy about a second language (L2) and culture (C2).

Postsecondary education staunchly upholds both the convention of a 2- or 1-year language requirement as key to a liberal education and the educationally unreachable goal of the quasi-native speaker (for limitations of this practice, see Kramsch & Whiteside, 2007). At best, that lofty outcome is achievable only for certain learners and outside the traditional higher education environment, such as in institutions that educate future professionals (e.g., in the military, intelligence, the foreign service, and certain fields of international business). For those students, it is indeed necessary to target outcomes as some variety of the traditional “four skills” because they purportedly need to function in a C2 as full linguistic adults who are integrated into appropriate domains. However, that expectation does not define the aspirations, abilities, and opportunities of the average college student. Mastering the four skills is in a real sense a canonical outcome, defining what “proper” language learning must be: The student will have failed if she has

not achieved proficiency in the four skills and the social integration into a C2 that these skills promise.

Exacerbating the gaps between canonical and newer goals for language learning, a decade of curricular reforms has called for the use of texts relevant to our students’ interests and lives. Mobilizing student interest does foster learning, but the newly chosen texts often tacitly undermine traditional claims for language learning as fostering intercultural literacy: German hip-hop, for example, does not necessarily carry the same claims for legitimacy as Goethe, Schiller, Flaubert, Dante, or Cervantes. A curriculum committee or dean may be inclined to doubt that teaching a teenager how to be a teenager in German is an appropriate outcome for college-level classrooms. Calling such addenda a new “language and culture” curriculum further calls our collective judgment into question and exacerbates the famous gap between lower and upper divisions by taking one kind of culture for the lower division and another for the majors.

A more pragmatic definition of culture as a *field* may open the door to alternatives. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1993) used the term to refer to any site or region within which a group acts, communicates, and evolves its characteristic knowledge and identities (see particularly, chapter 1). That site is furnished with a

tradition of institutions, group behaviors, pragmatic practices, discourses (verbal and otherwise), ideologies, and a characteristic knowledge base. Once populated and furnished, Bourdieu's field functions like a chessboard on which individuals act to produce, manage, or reproduce knowledge, signify affects and identities, negotiate meaning, and reinforce or challenge positions. The site thus sponsors what straightforwardly can be called a "culture" with a distinct set of "native" (better: "indigenous") resources and functions.

Bourdieu's (1993) field challenges us to rethink how a language curriculum can become a culture curriculum, addressing not just the language resources available to a "native speaker" (writer, reader) but also a set of interlocking cultural literacies, including the history, traditions, and the pragmatic patterns used by individuals on that field to construct and assert their identities, and to manage their negotiations with infrastructure, the community, and historical norms.

The sticking point is, of course, how to transpose this philosophy about the field of culture into practical goals for "language learning" in a redesigned instructional sequence sustaining legitimate educational outcomes. How can we move beyond an image of language fostering individual acculturation to a C2 and into a more consistent framework for teaching language and culture? Bourdieu's (1993) model suggests that our target for learning needs to be redefined around the image of an individual functioning within the field of culture, so that "learning culture" means learning the pragmatics of identity formation within the target C2, not just language, facts, institutions, or objects. After all, many of our students will not have much cause to use the L2 after they finish their requirements, and so what they are most likely to remember 2 or 10 years hence is not grammar or vocabulary but "what Germans do"—some aspects of cultural identity.

If we center our teaching around the idea of cultural identities, we have to teach culture as a multisystem, based only in part on language. Our new unit of teaching can no longer be the word, sentence, paragraph, icon, or sign (taking a semiotic paradigm as extending the more familiar linguistic paradigm). Instead, our target for teaching and learning needs to be the field of action and agency of an individual within a C2 community or communities, including the sociocultural pragmatics of knowledge, action, and belief that

Bourdieu (1993) included in his field. Such systems may be structured linguistically, but they are not identical to language. In consequence, our goal for teaching ought to be a C2's pragmatic systems, by means of which individuals negotiate individual identities and their membership in (or exclusion from) its community. What we need to teach, therefore, is how individuals manage cultural knowledge within times, places, and communities, locally; we need to teach paradigms of grammar not as patterns but rather as serving the community, as embodied in situation-based social-cultural necessities that only function in unified systems. Teaching culture as pragmatics thus necessarily implicates cross-cultural learning, as the learner has to move beyond a single national identity and into a global community—and hence into a hybrid identity as a possible global actor—and learn how to manage constructing an identity in two cultures.

To translate that theory into practice, we may be guided by a national project largely ignored by postsecondary education: the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Language's *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (ACTFL, 2006; see also Arens, 2009). It models the domain of language learning as based on five Cs: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. Each of these domains plays a role in accounting for language learning as a C2 literacy and fostering strategic agency of individuals within the C2. These five standards implicate new approaches to curricular development; they complement the kind of learning structure modeled in Bloom's taxonomy, one example of many traditional learning hierarchies (for a contemporary discussion, see Anderson, Sosniak, & Bloom, 1994).<sup>1</sup> The *Standards* model the domains of cultural knowledge inherent in the curricula we design; Bloom's taxonomy outlines the cognitive acts engaged by learners in the order they need to be taught and practiced, as a developmental hierarchy.

In this joint framework, the Communication and Cultures standards conform most overtly to the first three levels in Bloom's taxonomy, often labeled (a) "knowledge," (b) "understanding," and (c) "application," albeit without referring to problems of cognitive difficulty. At these learning levels, the learner engages in identifying and labeling the effects of elements of meaning on their field and then in replicating their basic patterns in action. The Communication and Cultures standards, therefore, target the groundwork



(especially basic knowledge and patterns of action) for defining self and other within a community. Of course, this includes linguistic behavior, but language use is not its exclusive domain and form of manifestation.

The Communication standard highlights language but does so by placing individual communication within the media, pragmatic, and sociocultural norms of a culture. It focuses not just on how to make messages in words but also how to send them, who they can be sent to or received from, and what status obtains for them. Blogs, tweets, bread-and-butter notes, and op-ed pieces are not just language forms but also pragmatic and sociocultural acts within different media. The success of a bread-and-butter note rests as much on the choice of stationery as on language choice; tweets appeal to the middle aged; Facebook updates are neither notes or letters nor tweets. Each has a context and social expectations, and the language used is often formulaic and native to no one—she says, LOL ;-). Their respective “well-formed utterances” do not necessarily require complete words, let alone sentences; the pragmatic details of such acts (dress, posture, tone of voice, manners, typography, emoticons, specialized vocabulary) need to be taught next to linguistic resources, and so classrooms need to use YouTube and chatrooms, not just textbooks (Kern & Schultz, 2005).

The Culture standard targets more than language, as it refers to gaining “knowledge and understanding of other cultures” (ACTFL, 2006, p. 9). All too often, such knowledge and understanding is defined as knowing elements of culture (popular music, food habits, landmarks, or films). However, understanding a C2 requires knowledge of acts embodied in groups and negotiated through their mechanisms of imposing (enabling, fostering) points of view, marking identity, and the like, and it requires an awareness of the patterns of sociocultural interaction using elements and items of such knowledge. Patterns of this kind need to be recovered in a comparison to the C1, not just in an assumed analogy.

Bloom’s upper levels point to more sophisticated sociocognitive interactions: analyze, synthesize, and evaluate. The C2 domains defined by the other three standards also require such more complex intercultural interactions—cultural performances that require a learner to specify goals and succeed or fail in realizing them, evaluating performance, and enacting agency rather than just replicating.

The Connections standard challenges learners to “connect with other disciplines and acquire information” (ACTFL, 2006, p. 9), requiring selectivity, choice, and implementation of a goal explicitly chosen to connect the C1 and C2. Comparisons, in contrast, specifies “insight into the nature of language and culture” (ACTFL, 2006, p. 9) and thus formal comparisons of group interests expressed in various semiotic and linguistic systems, and therefore the strategic management of the two contexts. Communities calls on individuals to produce a cultural identity in the C2: to “participate in multilingual communities at home and around the world” (ACTFL, 2006, p. 9), including acquiring expert knowledge and assessing the value of so doing.

This reading of the *Standards* opens models for teaching the C2 as a field that includes language as one of several socially legible systems through which an individual establishes an identity strategically by managing both form and content. This definition for learning a foreign language targets how we comprehend, manage, and produce messages and understandings from identity positions and how those compare between the C1 and C2; it stresses individual agency rather than assimilation or acculturation. Each standard thus implicates a curriculum offering explicit instruction in a cultural literacy beyond language:

1. Communication requires practice in media and communication networks.
2. Culture requires attention to sociocultural pragmatics and to status systems—that is, to a culture’s “master discourses” as systems conditioning groups’ social existences.
3. Connections stresses that users need to bring elements of the C2 back into their C1 and become conscious about what that importation means.
4. Comparisons requires the ability to compare both the meanings and significances of cultural patterns within the C1 and C2.
5. Communities requires attention to identity as a performance: No utterance gesture can be considered correct unless it suits the location in which it is uttered and the performer who utters it.

More practically, this reading of the *Standards* establishes a new set of requirements for curriculum development: Each curriculum must situate itself at particular loci within the C2 and raise its learners’ consciousness about how fields of culture are constituted—how they implicate identity positions, cultural competencies, a knowledge

base, and the agency of individuals and the group. Our unique mission is to teach how language is particularly significant in these elements of culture. At the same time, our curriculum must be built across levels to emphasize the multiliteracies of the field of culture.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson et al., 1994) is, of course, contested today as a model for actual learning because it assumes a stable base for cognition. Nonetheless, it can serve in the present context as a heuristic for understanding how classroom tasks confront learners with increasing logical complexity. A typical representation of Bloom's (see examples at <http://www.officeport.com/edu/blooms.htm> or [http://www.odu.edu/educ/roverbau/Bloom/blooms\\_taxonomy.htm](http://www.odu.edu/educ/roverbau/Bloom/blooms_taxonomy.htm)) shows a pyramid with six levels, conventionally labeled (base to apex) as (a) knowledge, (b) comprehension/understanding, (c) application, (d) analysis, (e) synthesis, and (f) evaluation. A newer revision reverses (e) and (f), probably because basic English has shifted.

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## Assessing Intercultural Capability in Learning Languages: A Renewed Understanding of Language, Culture, Learning, and the Nature of Assessment

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The teaching of culture has always played an important role in the teaching of languages. Traditionally, it has been presented as the “cultural component,” which was generally separate from and subordinate to the teaching of the language itself. This cultural component frequently comprised a generalized body of knowledge about the target country and its people, ranging from literature and the arts (high culture) to aspects of everyday life. Although this body of knowledge was intended to enrich students' understanding of the target language, it remained external to and separate from the students' own first language(s) and culture(s). It was not intended that students would engage with this cultural knowledge in such a way that their own identities, values, and life-worlds would be challenged and transformed.

In contrast to this *cultural* orientation, an *intercultural* orientation to teaching languages seeks the transformation of students' identities in the act of learning. This is achieved on the part of students through a constant referencing of the lan-

guage being learned with their own language(s) and culture(s). In so doing, students decenter from their linguistic and cultural world to consider their own situatedness from the perspective of another. They learn to constantly move between their linguistic and cultural world and that of the users of the target language. In this process, they come to understand culture not only as information about diverse people and their practices but also, and most importantly, as the contextual framework that people use to exchange meaning in communication with others and through which they understand their social world.

Language learning within an intercultural orientation has been gaining ground in languages education in Australia since the release of *A Report on Intercultural Language Learning* (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kohler, 2003) and its subsequent incorporation in the National Statement for Languages Education in Australian Schools (MCEETYA, 2005). The national plan for languages education, which was developed for the

period 2005–2008 to accompany the national statement, supported several collaborative national, professional learning programs that invited teachers of diverse languages, from kindergarten to year 12, to explore what this orientation might mean in their practice (see, e.g., Scarino et al., 2007, 2008; Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009).

Within an intercultural orientation to teaching languages, the goals of language learning extend beyond developing cultural awareness to the development of an intercultural capability. The former is understood as knowledge about specific cultures or culture in general that remains external to the learner; the latter is understood as engaging learners in developing the capability to exchange meaning in communication with people across languages and cultures in a way that foregrounds their positioning in the language and culture that they are learning. This attention to the exchange of meaning across languages and cultures as the essence of communication calls for a renewed understanding of language, culture, and learning, on the one hand, and of assessment, on the other hand.

In the research and development experience with these programs, it is the process of assessing intercultural capability that has emerged consistently as the most significant challenge for teachers. Some of the specific questions that have been raised include the following: What exactly is this “intercultural capability”? How does it relate to knowledge of language and culture? Can it be assessed? Should it be assessed? How can it be elicited through the assessment process? What constitutes evidence of its development? How do we judge it? How can intercultural capability be assessed objectively when it involves values? These questions point to deeply held understandings about the nature of language and language learning and its goals (i.e., the nature of developing intercultural capability as a goal and as the construct of interest) and about what is and is not permissible and possible in assessment in particular institutional contexts. The challenge for teachers then relates closely to their understanding of language and its relationship with culture and learning, which, in turn, influences the assessment process.

In this commentary I consider three inter-related aspects of this renewed understanding, which is focused on people interpreting and making meaning across languages and cultures:

1. The notion of *stance*, used to capture the overall framework of knowledge, understanding, and ethical dispositions of teachers toward the na-

ture of language learning within an intercultural orientation;

2. a necessary reconceptualization of language that includes its relationship with culture and learning;

3. a reconceptualization of the assessment process.

In the discussion, I foreground language use in communication as well as the acts of teaching, learning, and assessment as interpretive acts.

## THE NOTION OF STANCE

The notion of *stance* draws on the work of the educational researchers Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1999). It refers to the position that teachers and researchers take toward knowledge and its relationships to practice. It is intended to capture the way we position ourselves (both physically and intellectually)—“the ways we see and the lenses we see through” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, pp. 288–289). It recognizes that teaching and learning are complex, holistic activities that occur among people within unique social, cultural, and historical contexts. Teachers (and indeed their students) work within their own dynamic frameworks of experience, knowledge, and understanding and their own distinctive personal, social, cultural, and linguistic makeup, in interaction with their diverse communities. Their cumulative experiences, beliefs, ethical values, motivations, and commitments contribute to their personal stance and identity as teachers. It is through their personal stance that they interpret and make sense or meaning of what they do in their practice of teaching, learning, and assessing.

The notion of stance is used to suggest that the move toward language teaching and learning within an intercultural orientation is not simply a new methodological prescription but a way of reunderstanding the very nature of language learning and teaching and its assessment. It is also used to suggest that seeking to change practices in teaching and learning languages entails engaging with deeply held and often unquestioned understandings of those involved in the process.

## A RENEWED UNDERSTANDING OF LANGUAGE

Developing a renewed understanding of language within an intercultural orientation is complex for at least two reasons. First, in languages education, the relationship among language, culture, and learning is always dynamic. Second,

developing a renewed understanding does not mean discarding past understandings but reorganizing them within a more complex and integrated framework of understanding language.

Traditionally in second language learning, language was understood as code, and the diverse languages of the world were understood as multiple codes, each of which could be analyzed into atomistic units that were subsequently brought together into larger units. Language was a means for expressing preexisting thought. Culture was viewed as a body of knowledge about culture (the history, geography, and literature of the speakers of the target language) that was subordinate to the language itself and necessarily removed from the experience of learners. In the languages curriculum, this understanding was presented as a prescriptive set of linguistic forms and structures and items of cultural knowledge that provided the substance and scope of learning and the "content" to be assessed.

From the late 1970s on, language as a system for communication began to incorporate the dimension of variability in the purpose and context of language in use. Culture was understood as the "sociocultural contexts of language use." However, in the languages curriculum, this dimension was often rendered as fixed descriptions of functions and notions, with accompanying inventories of possible roles and contexts for participants in communication. This kind of specification meant that the promise of genuine communication in learning languages was again reduced to the specification of a range of categories intended to capture, albeit more comprehensively, the substance and scope of the learning and the "content" to be assessed. The variability of purposes and contexts in the act of genuine communication needed to be controlled for the purposes of developing curriculum. The focus of learning languages remained on gaining an additional means of communication that was necessarily subordinate to the learners' first language.

More recently, language has been understood as a social practice. This framing is intended to capture the understanding that genuine communication takes place among people as social beings within their own life-worlds and trajectories of experiences. Language is understood as more than simply a structural grammatical system, or "language in use"; it is understood as communication among people as participants in interaction. This understanding of language is usually captured in the curriculum as integrated tasks through which students learn to accomplish acts of communication. Interaction toward genuine communication,

understood as the exchange of meaning across languages and cultures, however, involves more than "tasks"; it involves not only action but also the reciprocal processes of interpreting and making meaning with diverse people. Such communication in an additional language means entering a new world of meanings without leaving behind one's own world, captured in the first language or languages. The first language provides a constant reference point for understanding the world of meanings made available in the language being learned. In learning an additional language, students are simultaneously and equally in the world of their first language(s) and the world of the new language that they are learning, with the possibility of constantly moving backward and forward across the space between the two languages and their respective worlds of meanings.

The space for constant questioning, comparison, and contrast that this movement affords creates a dialectic that opens up the possibility for students to come to a fuller understanding that, when they communicate, they do so from their experiential situatedness in their own language and culture, as do all others with whom they communicate. They appreciate that, in communication, they interpret people and the world through the frame of reference of their cumulative experience within their own language and culture. In any interaction, students participate simultaneously as performers and audience, contributing their own meanings and seeking to understand those of others, and considering how their contribution influences others and how others' contributions influence them. As a consequence, they learn to decenter from their own social, linguistic, and cultural world and thereby come to a different understanding of themselves in relationship to others. The focus on the reciprocal interpretation and making of meaning across languages and cultures captures the lived reality and experience of communication in general.

Intercultural capability references this capability to interpret, create, and exchange meanings in communication between people and across languages and cultures. In languages education, the process involves both learning how to communicate in an additional language and learning how to analyze the process to better interpret and understand human communication—specifically, how language and culture come into play in interpreting, creating, and exchanging meaning. In any act of communicating and, equally, in any act of learning, people (as young persons and as learners) are engaged in interpreting self (*intraculturality*) and other (*interculturality*)

in diverse contexts of social and cultural interaction.

This renewed understanding of language and culture in the context of an intercultural orientation in learning languages resonates with Shohamy's (2006) notion of "expanding language" and seeing the process of "linguaging" as dynamic, personal, expressive and creative, with no fixed boundaries. It also resonates with Kramsch's (2006), "symbolic competence," in which she highlights that:

Language learners are not just communicators and problem-solvers, but whole persons with heads, bodies, and minds, with memories, fantasies, loyalties, identities. Symbolic forms are not just items of vocabulary or communication strategies, but embodied experiences, emotional resonances, and moral imaginings. We could call the competence...symbolic competence. (p. 251)

Language use extends beyond being an interactional accomplishment or a social practice to include a focus on how languages reciprocally reflect and constitute the life-worlds of people in the increasingly plurilingual and pluricultural contexts of our contemporary world.

It also encompasses Gadamer's (1976) hermeneutic consideration of language and his recognition that people live in and through language. For Gadamer, language is not only something that people speak; it is also something that people inherit. He stated:

in all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own... In truth we are always already at home in language, just as much as we are in the world. (pp. 62–63)

He emphasized that the assumptions (or, in his words, "fore-understandings") that inform people's interpretations of the world are historically situated and mediated by their particular languages and cultures. In coming to understand others, people need to discover and question these fore-understandings. In so doing, they come to appreciate how all interpretations are mediated by people's own languages, cultures, and histories. The mutual interpretation discussed above, the essence of communication, requires what Gadamer (2004) called the "fusion of horizons" (p. 305) as people strive to understand each other.

It is Halliday's (1993) account of language and its relationship to learning that connects language, culture, and learning:

When children learn language, they are not simply engaging in one kind of learning among many; rather,

they are learning the foundation of learning itself. The distinctive characteristic of human learning is that it is a process of making meaning—a semiotic process; and the prototypical form of human semiotic is language.... Whatever the culture they are born into, in learning to speak children are learning a semiotic that has been evolving for at least a thousand generations. . . . Language is not a domain of knowing; language is the essential condition of knowing, the process by which experience becomes knowledge. (pp. 93–94)

Language (and culture) is integral to the experience of learning. In learning in any area and, indeed, in learning language itself, learners depend on language. Learning involves the reciprocal interpretation of meaning in and through interaction with people and texts, and all interpretation is linguistic. However, language is more than just a container for information, for it brings with it cultural histories that structure the dialogue of learning among people and their personal engagement with the world.

In languages education, this understanding of language, culture, and learning needs to be considered particularly in relation to assessment. This is so for two main reasons. First, there is a need to warrant the claims made by the field about the so-called gains in "cultural understanding" that result from language learning; second, assessment ultimately plays an institutional role in education inasmuch as it defines what constitutes valued learning.

#### A RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

This renewed understanding of language, which foregrounds both the mediation of meaning and the person and his or her own life-world as agent interacting with others, poses a major challenge for assessment. A traditional assessment paradigm is not sufficient to capture this understanding of language, culture, and learning within an intercultural orientation because it focuses on testing "content" through "objective" procedures. In the interest of fairness, it makes every effort to remove the person and subjectivity. Student performances are then referenced either to the performance of other students or to a predetermined standard. By comparison, even though assessment within an "alternative assessment" paradigm receives various interpretations (Fox, 2008), all seek to expand on this traditional understanding of assessment by focusing on finding diverse ways of demonstrating what it is that students know. The alternative paradigm allows for formative

assessment for learning as well as summative assessment of learning, recognizing the power of assessment to form or shape learning and individuals. It allows for diverse evidence for diverse learners and the valuing of the process of learning as well as the product. It also recognizes that assessment is a dynamic, ongoing process of coming to understand students' performance over time and, for that reason, involves the collection of multiple performances over time to provide evidence of growth and learning.

In languages education, assessment has traditionally involved the assessment of knowledge—knowledge of language, of culture, of subject matter—and of how to use all forms of such knowledge. This knowledge is understood as objective, factual, and independent of the knower. Assessment of language learning within an intercultural orientation needs to elicit students' knowledge of the target language and culture(s) and how to use it, recognizing that this will always be referenced to the languages repertoire of students. In other words, assessment involves attending to knowledge as referenced, understood, appraised, and judged by the knower. It means foregrounding people as culturally variable in their interactions, their interpretations of meanings, their judgments, and their choices in the use of language.

In assessing intercultural capability in language learning it is necessary to develop processes that capture its variable, culturally contexted, interpretive nature. Such procedures are akin to data gathering and analysis in research; they range from the transient (analyses of moment-to-moment interactions, conversations that probe students' meanings, observations of students in interaction) to a range of ongoing written work (e.g., projects, quizzes, self-reports, summaries of accomplishments, portfolios, and learning logs).

Assessing intercultural capability involves several dimensions:

1. Communicating (in speaking and writing) in the target language, in which students negotiate meaning through interpreting and using language in diverse contexts while interacting with people with diverse social, linguistic, and cultural life-worlds. The focus is on the accuracy, fluency, appropriateness, and complexity of language used in the exchange as well as on how students negotiate meaning in interaction and how they manage the variability demanded by the particular context of communication;

2. Eliciting understanding of the way peoples' dynamic and ever-developing enculturation af-

fects how they see and interpret the world, and interact and communicate; how the first language(s) and culture(s) come into play in exchanging meaning; and how they themselves and those with whom they communicate are already situated in their own language(s) and culture(s);

3. Eliciting students' meta-awareness of the language–culture–meaning nexus in communicative interactions and their ability to analyze, explain, and elaborate their awareness;

4. Positioning students as both language users (performers) and learners (analyzers).

Assessment within an intercultural orientation to language learning requires a renewed understanding of the multiple ways of eliciting evidence of language learning, as well as an expanded understanding of the nature of evidence to be gathered and the way this evidence is judged and warranted. This is best achieved when assessment is understood as an ongoing process of inquiry (i.e., gathering and analyzing data to inform teachers' and students' own understanding of learning; Delandshere, 2002) and each experience becomes another opportunity for students to learn. Similarly, for teachers, each experience of teaching, learning, and assessing becomes an opportunity to better understand the complex and interpretive nature of teaching, learning, and assessing languages within an intercultural orientation.

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## Making Culture the Core of the Language Class: Can It Be Done?

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The questions of what role culture should play in the foreign language curriculum, how it should even be defined, and how to teach it have been raised time and time again. No real consensus has emerged and certainly no simple answers. There are many obvious reasons for this, all of them raising other questions.

One is that culture is a highly complex, elusive, multilayered notion that encompasses many different and overlapping areas and that inherently defies easy categorization and classification. We have always attempted to classify it, starting with the worn-out differentiation between “culture with a capital C” and “culture with a small c,” to the newer “five Cs” principles, which themselves include the “three Ps” of products, practices, and perspectives. Although these categorizations tend to reassure us and provide us with a much needed road map and compass, they also beg the question “Can culture be sliced into such discrete elements?”

Another well-known difficulty in trying to resolve the tension between language and culture is that “culture” in general still often presents an enigma for us language teachers. Because it is the traditional domain of anthropologists and not ours, we have always been uncomfortable fully embracing it. Even though we always assert that we teach language *and* culture, we tend to focus, at least in beginning and intermediate courses, on language teaching, leaving “culture” at the periphery. The very link between the two remains an elusive abstraction, with the result that language and culture are often divorced from each other—this, at a time when the humanities in general

have become increasingly aware of the impossibility of separating language from culture or modes of thought.

The situation has certainly improved over the last few years. One can see it in our textbooks, in which the old “culture capsules” (as if culture could ever be encapsulated!) are fast disappearing. One can also see it in the conceptual shift taking place in language classrooms, in which culture is no longer viewed simply as pieces of factual information to be presented or explained by the teacher but as a process that will allow language learners to develop not just knowledge about the other culture but a close understanding of how culture permeates and shapes the behaviors and interactions of people.

The Internet obviously has played a very large role in transforming our traditional ways of “using” and incorporating culture in the language class, as it has brought the outside world right into our students’ homes and into our classrooms, providing students with direct and equal access to the complex, rich, and multifaceted world of the target culture via an abundance of texts, images, and videos. That richness notwithstanding, the same old questions of how to “incorporate,” “integrate,” and “infuse” foreign language classes with culture and “what culture” to teach seem to persist even in this medium.

Yet, a profound change has taken place in the last 10 years: It is the growing realization, brought on by the globalization of our world, that our students will work and interact with people of diverse cultures and will therefore need to be able to communicate effectively across boundaries

that are not just linguistic. This means that our mission as language teachers is more important than ever and that our goal should no longer be limited to helping students develop and achieve linguistic and communicative competence. Our foreign language curriculum needs to expand not just to include intercultural competence but also to make it the main objective of the language class. That necessity was made very clear in the May 2007 Modern Language Association (MLA) report "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World." It emphasized the importance of developing students' translingual and transcultural competence and added that "not surprisingly, 'the need to *understand* other cultures and languages' was identified by Daniel Yankelovich as one of five imperative needs to which higher education must respond in the next ten years if it is to remain relevant" (MLA, 2007, p. 235; emphasis added).

The big question, of course, is how to develop our students' transcultural competence. Is this even achievable in a language class? The following discussion provides details on a project that was started at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) 12 years ago and that shows that it can indeed be done. I refer to an intermediate language class whose central and specific focus is to develop students' intercultural understanding. I first briefly describe the key components of this course and then focus on the role played by technology, both in terms of how students learn about the other culture and what role teachers take. I then extract from this specific experience several broad questions that lead me to redefine what it means to teach culture, particularly within a technological environment, and to recalibrate the place of culture in the foreign language curriculum in general. In other words, my position is not that of a theoretician but that of a practitioner who provides a view "from the trenches."

*Cultura* was developed at MIT in 1997 by a team from the Foreign Languages and Literatures Section—Sabine Levet, Shoggy Waryn, and me—thanks to an initial 3-year grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Since then, it has been adapted to other languages, connecting students in the United States to students in China, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, and Spain. It was conceived as the third semester-long course in a French language sequence, with the goal of enabling students to access and understand core but essentially invisible aspects of a foreign culture—namely, the attitudes, beliefs, and values that underlie it. Because the ultimate goal was the development of intercultural compe-

tence, it quickly became clear that the best and most apt medium would be the Internet and its communication tools because of the synergy between the field of *intercultural* communication, which implies encounters between people, and the *Internet*, which facilitates such encounters.

The course assumes two sets of classes—MIT students taking French and French students at a French University, or Grande Ecole, taking an English class; it assumes as well two sets of teachers, one at MIT and the other at the partner school in France (for more information, see <http://cultura.mit.edu>). Following a common calendar and interacting via a common Web site, students take a collective intercultural journey. Together, they compare and analyze a large variety of digital textual and visual materials from their respective cultures and then exchange perspectives about these materials via online discussion forums to collaboratively gain a better understanding of their respective cultures.

The students' journey starts with them answering and comparing a set of three questionnaires designed to highlight cultural differences related to concepts and modes of interactions between people in a variety of contexts. It continues with students analyzing a large array of other materials that are meant to gradually expand the students' cultural investigations and that include a comparison of American and French media, films, literary excerpts, images, and videos.

At the core of *Cultura* are the asynchronous forums where students on both sides of the Atlantic, working at a common pace, exchange their perspectives about each of the materials above. In the forums, students (including the foreign students who are part of the class and who bring yet other perspectives) compare the French and American materials, share their observations, ask and respond to questions, make hypotheses, raise paradoxes and contradictions, and revisit issues to understand the other point of view in a constant and reciprocal process of inquiry. Along the way they create a web of connections between different types of materials while providing each other with a wealth of cultural information, in search of more expanded and in-depth understanding of the other culture. In the course of their online conversations (based on the analysis of single documents as well as the cross-analysis of several documents), students across the Atlantic explore how and why such notions as *individualism/individualisme*, *success/réussite*, *democracy/démocratie*, or *freedom/liberté* are viewed differently. They discuss their various attitudes toward privacy, hierarchy, government, or religion;



they debate what kind of behaviors are “expected” within a variety of contexts and interactions; they reflect about notions such as formality versus informality, implicit versus explicit, and about the importance of context in understanding people’s attitudes and behaviors; and they share their views about current topics such as the environment, unemployment, or terrorism. In the process, they discover the underlying values inherent in their own culture as well as in the other.<sup>1</sup>

Now, a course such as *Cultura* that focuses on the development of students’ intercultural competence is still quite rare, especially at a low-intermediate level, but as an increasing number of telecollaborative projects shows, it is no longer unique. In view of the MLA mandate, the number of similar courses is bound to increase. That leads me to reflect on this experience of “teaching culture in a language class” and to reexamine the place of culture in the overall foreign language curriculum.

First, the project demonstrates that making intercultural understanding the main focus of even a low-intermediate class is indeed possible. The only requirement, although a crucial one, is a strong and engaged partnership between the two collaborating teachers.

Second, it highlights the central role played by technology. Here, the Web-based exchanges (and the constant mode of inquiry they entail) provide the essential conduit for students to develop real in-depth understanding of the other culture. The online discussion forums also fundamentally change the way they learn about the other culture, as students are now provided with a multiplicity of viewpoints and a real insider’s view of the other culture that were simply unattainable prior to this.

Third and as is evident, the use of technology, in turn, generates a new methodology, where students themselves, by virtue of being involved in a dynamic, interactive process with their foreign peers, gradually construct their knowledge and understanding of the other culture. The *Cultura* classroom becomes the place where students—speaking only French, a French newly enriched by the postings in the forums—become the real actors of their own learning, as they bring with them the outside “voices” of their foreign peers, share with each other what they have learned from their online discussions, and try to decipher and interpret the meaning of their partners’ messages.

Fourth, taking such an approach clearly implies a new role for the teacher because the teacher is no longer the sole purveyor or transmitter of information or the only voice of authority. The

teacher’s role is therefore not to “teach culture” in the traditional sense but to help students bring patterns to light and gradually put together the cultural puzzle—in other words, to teach the students to ask the right questions themselves and to facilitate the experience of self-learning.

Now, this new form of teaching culture inherently raises anew the all-important question of assessment. Traditionally, students have been assessed on the basis of a finished product, whether it was a paper, an exam, or a project. However, because the focus is now on a process of discovering, the question arises: “How does one assess process?” I will not dwell on that topic except to say that new modes and tools are required to aptly assess what students have learned and understood as they went along their journey. Portfolios and reflection logbooks are appropriate tools, as Byram (1997) suggested. However, it is incumbent upon us to find others, as well as to think about who should be the evaluator. Should it be the teacher alone? If we answer affirmatively, the teacher in the end once more becomes the sole arbiter. However, are we not then contradicting, at least to some extent, our very philosophy of teaching toward transcultural understanding and the methodology we deploy for doing so?

Fifth, such an approach to culture reverses the usual equation between language and culture, raising a new question—the very opposite, in fact, of the traditional one—namely: “What is the place of language in such a culture-based course?” The answer is straightforward. Students in the online discussion forums express themselves in their “native” language or, more precisely, in the language of the country they live or study in, as there are also some foreign students (MIT students write in English and the students in France write in French). This ensures equal opportunity for all students, on both sides, to fully articulate their thoughts and ideas. We found this arrangement to be crucial for enabling them to attain the goal of intercultural competence. What they receive in return is the chance to read completely authentic foreign language texts. This provides our students with the opportunity to constantly learn new, up-to-date vocabulary, to work on grammar in context (the expression of opinion, agreements and disagreements leading naturally to study of the indicative vs. the subjunctive), and to examine the very structure of French and American discourses. A linguistic curriculum can easily be established alongside the main objective and cover many of the grammar points embedded within the online exchanges. It is then no longer a matter of teaching language followed by culture,

but language within a real cultural context, language within culture.

The big question is of course this: “Can an initiative such as *Cultura*, which has been successfully implemented in a single course within a language sequence, be extended to a program with numerous parallel sections and “infuse” the whole foreign language curriculum?” Frankly, I am not sure; it would definitely be a challenge, and the greatest might be resisting our natural inclination toward categorizations. However, it would also be a challenge very much worth considering. A related concern is whether a course of study, such as that suggested by *Cultura*, provides answers for “what culture” to teach within the language curriculum. Although it is clear that culture is the course and that it offers a new holistic approach to the teaching of culture, cultural content is not thereby directly specified. In drawing no separate lines between products, practices, and perspectives and linking all the pieces with each other, teachers lead students through a process that is akin to the process of acculturation itself. Perhaps that is the way we need to think about “teaching culture and language.”

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<sup>1</sup>As Martine Abdallah-Preteuille wrote in her book *Relations et apprentissages interculturels* (1995), “Those who try to better understand the other will also be able to have a better understanding and mastery of their own values and cultural behaviors—after seeing them through the mirror of another culture” (p. 5, my translation).

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## Cultural Immersion in the Foreign Language Classroom: Some Narrative Possibilities

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The major issue currently facing the foreign language (FL) teaching profession in regard to the cultural dimensions of foreign language education (FLE) is that culture continues to be treated as peripheral to the “real business” of language instruction, a reality that stands in direct opposition to the now near-universal recognition based on theory and practice that culture has a role to play in FL curricula and instruction. A true integration of cultural learning into the FL classroom has been problematic for a number of reasons, not least because we hold contradictory beliefs about the kind of immersion required to understand other cultural modes of being. Even as we agree that culture is part and parcel of all forms of FL learning, we persist in our conviction that legitimate forms of cultural immersion (and therefore deep levels of understanding) only occur through direct experience with native speakers of a language in a land they inhabit. Indeed, we expect study abroad to be the primary instrument through which learners gain experi-

ence with and appreciation of other cultures. By extension, what goes on in FL classrooms regarding culture is largely viewed as preparation for the truly authentic cultural experiences that come with travel abroad. As Kinginger (2008) wrote,

[A]mong language educators, an in-country sojourn is often interpreted as the highlight of students’ careers, the ultimate reward for years of hard labor over grammar books and dictionaries, when knowledge of a foreign language becomes immediately relevant and intimately connected to lived experience. (p. 1)

Although recent research has found that study abroad is not the universal remedy for providing students with access to culture and the desired level of cultural (or linguistic) learning (e.g., Kinginger, 2008; Wilkinson, 1998), the unspoken reverse proposition—namely, that classroom environments are incapable of fostering profound cultural understanding simply because they are physically distant from communities of target language speakers—is hardly ever challenged.

In what follows, I question that assumption by discussing some possibilities for creating an environment of cultural immersion and cultural learning in a classroom setting. Specifically, I argue that a narrative approach is a particularly promising option. To set the stage, I clarify how the term *immersion* has been used in the field and why it is instructive in discussing cultural learning in the FL classroom. I then describe what exactly students are meant to be immersed in and unpack the process of culture learning as it can unfold through a narrative approach.

The idea of immersion occupies a relatively established position in FLE in the United States. Inspired by the immersion model developed in Canada in the mid-1960s, programs appearing in the United States in the early 1970s were initially anchored in the same fundamental principles as their counterparts to the north. In contrast to traditional models of classroom-based FLE, an immersion approach is characterized by a generally expanded engagement with the language being learned, both in terms of time devoted to study and the curricular content accompanying language study (Genesee, 1985). It aims to mirror naturalistic first language learning while also attending to the needs of second language learners. Accordingly, immersion programs call for early introduction of the new language (usually between kindergarten and Grade 3), and in total immersion programs, the whole of instructional time and all curricular content is taught in the language students learn. Because language is the medium rather than the object of study and is embedded in other content, language learning is argued to be incidental, yet also more meaningful than in traditional approaches. Although immersion programs aim primarily to develop linguistic proficiency among learners, from the outset they were also concerned with supporting learners in developing positive attitudes toward target language speakers and their cultures and the language learning process itself.

Since the adoption of the immersion model in some FLE settings in the United States several decades ago (for details see Genesee, 1985, and the directory maintained by the Center for Applied Linguistics at <http://www.cal.org/resources/immersion/>), the concept of *immersion* has evolved in professional discourse.<sup>1</sup> Implementations of the model, mostly at the elementary school level, have retained a focus on linguistic immersion at early ages, with the goal of promoting positive attitudes if not of developing substantial language abilities. Although the cultivation of a general open-mindedness toward

languages and cultures is not an uncommon objective of these programs, the idea that learners are in some way immersed in target language cultures through their language study is not typically claimed. It is usually in referring to more advanced stages of language learning and most often in discussions of study abroad that a now quite common derivative term, *cultural immersion*, is used. Given that research has shown that stays in target language communities do not necessarily lead to significant linguistic or cultural learning, one rightly suspects that the deep engagement that is implied by the term *immersion* does not inevitably occur in study-abroad situations. In the case of classroom-based FL learning, such a meaningful encounter with culture is not even deemed feasible. Let me explain by using the very imagery that the term *immersion* evokes.

Currently, much of what we do with study-abroad programs is akin to throwing students into the deep end of a pool wearing goggles cast in opaque plastic. Students do indeed find themselves surrounded by water, but they often cannot orient themselves or navigate their new environment because they can refer only to what the pool looked like before they were thrown into it. On the other hand, much of classroom-based FL instruction is akin to announcing to students that the pool is closed for the season.

I am aware that such analogies risk overstating the case. Surely, some deeper cultural understandings are achieved through some study-abroad experiences and in some FL classrooms. Yet, in both of these contexts for FLE, opportunities for true immersion are undoubtedly being missed. Shifting our concept to focus less on structural features (such as increased time and enhanced curricular content in the classroom setting or physical location in the case of study abroad) and more on the quality of learners' experiences and the depth of their engagement with language and culture is likely to chart the way forward. Increasingly, the highly variable linguistic outcomes of stays abroad are being interpreted through the lens of students' narrative accounts, thereby focusing analysis more squarely on the nature of their experiences. Similarly, research and practice surrounding classroom-based FLE, especially as it relates to cultural learning, should focus on examining and developing opportunities for meaningful experience as well as reflection.

Refocusing attention on the quality of learners' experiences in an effort to promote immersion and significant cultural learning in the FL classroom will necessarily involve learners' exploration of identities and symbolic dimensions of

meaning-making systems. Identity has in recent years figured prominently in efforts to understand the process of language learning. Work in this vein has emphasized a view of language learners as complex individuals with unique histories and multiple desires for present endeavors and future trajectories, and language learning as a process inherently enmeshed with the negotiation, exploration, and remaking of selves situated in real, imagined, and possible worlds (e.g., Coffey & Street, 2008; Kinginger, 2004, 2008; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Learners' narrative accounts of their language learning have often been the focus of analysis in these studies because they offer insight into the way individuals organize (and often reorganize) a sense of self and attribute meaning to their experiences.

Narrative also serves identity functions and allows for meaning-making on a grander scale, though, and cultural immersion, if we assume it to involve learners' potentially transforming identities or notions of actual and possible selves, must also be connected to their encounters with the larger meaning-making systems present in other languages and cultures. Such a goal is in alignment with recent calls to reconceptualize FLE in a manner that recognizes symbolic and constitutive dimensions of language and language use, in addition to referential and instrumental ones (Kramsch, 2006; MLA, 2007). Beyond learning to do practical things with words, Kramsch (2006) urged that learners be supported in developing symbolic competence, which involves becoming adept in "the manipulation of symbolic systems" (p. 251). This formulation of competence implies that learners build knowledge of symbolic meanings and the ways they are deployed, but it also suggests that they do so not simply to interpret others' meanings but to create meanings of their own. A central concern, then, is to focus on the cultural narratives that students may come into contact with as a result of their FL study and the ways they are engaged in meaning-making practices around these encounters.

In seeking to create environments and experiences in the FL classroom that embrace meaning-making processes and that are conducive to achieving the deep engagement we desire from cultural immersion in the classroom setting, developing a range of options is a necessary initial measure. The possibility I explore here is rooted in the notion that narrative, as a cultural tool that mediates our individual and collective experience of the world, is particularly well suited to the goals of culture learning in FLE. In the FL classroom, immersion in the symbolic world

of speakers of other languages through narrative represents a possibility for learners to deeply process the connections between form and symbolic meaning and to imagine themselves and the world differently.

A well-designed and well-implemented narrative approach to cultural immersion engages students in the following ways, all of which, incidentally, are similar to themes commonly proposed across theoretical models of culture learning (e.g., Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 2006; Moran, 2001):

1. Gaining access to the frames of reference that others use in interpreting and shaping their individual and collective experience of the world;
2. coming to an awareness of what a point of view is—a kind of cultural tool that mediates our experience of the world;
3. taking on unfamiliar perspectives and attempting to view the world, at least temporarily, through these new lenses;
4. in a reflective movement, denaturalizing one's own familiar cultural perspective and potentially seeing oneself as others do.

Given these forms of engagement, creating an environment rich in cultural narrative is a necessary first step. Because narrative is one of the primary sense-making resources humans have at their disposal, narratives of all kinds are not only abundant but replete with referential and symbolic networks of meaning, including the range of plausible storylines, symbols, and social types that become conventionalized through shared narratives.

Creating a classroom environment that resonates with cultural narratives will require a selection of a variety of representations and texts, where "text" is broadly conceived as including written and aural texts, images, video and film, gesture, and other corporeal texts, in addition to any other semiotic resources available for communicating meaning. Introducing a variety of cultural texts will not only contribute to a sense of being immersed in cultural meanings (and relieve the teacher from serving as the authoritative voice on cultural issues) but will highlight the range of perspectives within a larger linguistic and cultural group. In this fashion, learners come into contact with a web of meanings that address, echo, and contradict each other and are prompted to recognize the complexity inherent in cultures. An encounter with the diverse points of view encoded in cultural narratives may also inspire the fundamental awareness that alternative ways of viewing the world exist and that one's own perspective is not a natural or universal one.

Through extensive exposure to a range of cultural narratives, students will likely begin to notice recurring themes, opposing stances, possible character types, and common plots, but classroom activities and other assignments that invite students to practice with analyzing and interpreting texts will reinforce their ability to identify salient symbols and to “read” their meanings. It goes without saying that students will need support in gradually building a network of cultural references and in analyzing and interpreting texts. Teachers, too, may need help in learning how to perform such scaffolding of students’ developing interpretations and in finding ways to facilitate their students’ taking up other positions in order to interpret cultural texts from a new perspective. With guidance from teachers, students can become familiar with systems of meaning embodied in cultural narratives and develop a sense of more or less plausible interpretations.

Beyond enabling students to fashion and adopt new lenses to decipher cultural texts, we can ask them to construct their own cultural narratives. For example, in the research I conducted in a university-level French classroom in the United States (Kearney, 2008), students who were encountering, analyzing, and interpreting a range of cultural narratives related to French experiences of World War II were simultaneously constructing cultural narratives through the authoring of a first-person historical fiction based on one person’s experience of the war. This kind of extended writing project required students to draw on the rich cultural narratives they were immersed in through their in-class activities and related coursework in order to credibly construct a cultural world for the characters they invented. In creating their characters’ stories, students had to draw on broader cultural narratives, and they had to inhabit another persona and see the world through new eyes.

Because narrative writing of this kind immersed students in a decision-making process for their characters, it led some students to identify quite closely with their invented persona. Some even reported that they made decisions for their characters with the question in mind, “What would I have done?” In nearly all cases, students attested to experiencing a crucially important affective experience alongside a focused intellectual and linguistic engagement. That some students made decisions for their characters by speculating what they would have done themselves suggests that narrative writing, even if it is fiction, can lead students not only to understand other perspec-

tives and experiences but also truly to identify with them. This kind of reflection through language and culture study is what potentially makes language learning so transformational on the individual and the cultural level.

In the past several decades, a great deal of progress has been made concerning the cultural dimensions of FLE. Wide acceptance has been won for the notion that culture does indeed have a place in FLE, multiple models identifying desired outcomes and postulating various dimensions of the culture learning process have been advanced, and at all levels, standards documents and professional dialogue reflect a commitment to addressing issues of culture in FLE into the future. The challenge at hand, however, is to shift opinions about whether cultural immersion can be achieved in the classroom setting and to begin fleshing out a range of approaches that might lead to cultural immersion. Accumulating work that reconceptualizes the language learner and the language learning process signals a change in attitudes about what is possible in classroom environments and encourages a more substantial attention to the experiential dimension of language learning. An integration of approaches like the narrative one described here will likely aid in bringing culture learning from the periphery to the center of FLE, where nearly everyone agrees it belongs.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>The term *immersion* in English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs in the United States has taken on a character that is wholly different from both the immersion model originating in Canada and from applications of that model to FLE in the United States. Whereas immersion programs in Canada have enjoyed widespread parental and community support and therefore been regarded as a form of enrichment education for speakers of English and French in what is an officially bilingual nation, the staunchly monolingual U.S. orientation has meant that immersion education programs in ESL have come to be seen as primarily transitional rather than additive in nature.

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