



Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal

ISSN: 0123-4641

caljournal@yahoo.com

Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas
Colombia

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Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal, núm. 9, septiembre, 2007, pp. 200-2012

Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas

Bogotá, Colombia

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Inquiring into Culture in our Foreign-Language Classrooms

Damaris Castro¹

Abstract

This article presents some theoretical reflections about the concept of culture and its paramount importance in foreign language classrooms, as a basis for examining curriculum as inquiry, a facilitative tool to incorporate culture in courses in the Bachelor's degree in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language at the National University of Costa Rica (UNA). Feasible solutions to common problems that teachers face when trying to incorporate culture in their classrooms, are also discussed.

Key Words: Culture, curriculum as inquiry, foreign language classrooms, cultural context, inquiring, cultural misunderstandings.

Resumen

El artículo presenta algunas reflexiones teóricas y de aplicación pedagógica sobre el concepto de cultura y su trascendental importancia en las clases de lengua extranjera como base para examinar la idea de **currículo como indagación**, una herramienta facilitadora para incorporar cultura en cursos del Bachillerato en Enseñanza del Inglés de la Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica (UNA). El artículo también analiza posibles soluciones a problemas comunes que los profesores enfrentan al tratar de incorporar cultura en sus clases.

Palabras claves: Cultura, currículo como indagación, aulas de lengua extranjera, contexto cultural, investigación, malentendido cultural.

✦ Received 02-03-07/Accepted 09-08-07

1 I would like to express my gratitude to Sherry Gapper, for her support, encouragement and help throughout the preparation of this paper and for being an inspiration for many of us at UNA.



Introduction

Most of the research on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) deals with aspects such as learning theories, learning and teaching methods and language production in general. In the past decades, a trend has focused on dealing with the issue of culture and how it affects SLA. While some of the most influential SLA theories still do not fully address culture as a key element in the process of learning (e.g. Krashen, 1995; McLaughlin, 1988); others, such as Hinkel (1999), Robinson (1988), and Seelye (1984) do consider culture a cornerstone to achieve a complete command of the language.

Many in-service teachers in Costa Rica were taught following the ideas of the authors mentioned above, thus transmitting this knowledge to their students in the classroom. However, although in some cases the theory attempts to see culture as another component of language learning, as is the case of grammar or writing, this has not occurred in many Costa Rican second language (L_2) classrooms.

This proposal stems from the need to make culture part of language learning, and is based on the concept of curriculum as inquiry (Short, 1993). It attempts to provide UNA teachers (or any others who also see the need for it) with an additional tool to include culture in their classes. Although the concept of curriculum as inquiry has been used in relation to various areas of study, such as science (Short, 2001, p. 29), writing (Harklau, 1999), or time zones (Wells, 1995, p. 240), among others, its direct link to culture is notably absent from the literature. This article attempts to develop this missing link. It presents a literature review mentioning some of the authors who have been influential in the L_2 field, in relation to culture and second language acquisition. Furthermore, it also proposes curriculum as inquiry as a way to meet students' needs in terms of exploring the concept of culture in the L_2 classroom.

Aims

The objective of this paper is to present some theoretical reflections about the concept of culture and to propose a way to incorporate culture into our L_2 classrooms, with the intention of making students aware of the meaning of words in a cultural context, developing their communicative competence when interacting in a second culture and offering teachers, who claim not to know how to teach culture, with another option to include culture in their classrooms. Although we are aware that it may not be possible to provide our



students with all of the tools needed to successfully interact in that second culture, the intention here is to develop an awareness of the issue so that as second-language teachers, we can give our students at least some opportunity to explore and become informed about the existing cultural differences. Even if instructors can only foster a little curiosity in students' minds, it would be enough to enable them to develop strategies to look for the information that they require. Three main sections follow: A literature review that provides theoretical foundations about culture and different studies related to it; a description of the language program at the Costa Rican University; and finally, a literary review on curriculum as inquiry and its possible contribution to the above mentioned program is included.

Literature review

Definition of culture

Despite the fact that researchers do not agree on the definition of the term *culture*, there seems to be a general consensus about its importance in foreign language classrooms and SLA in general. Robinson (1988) claims that "many educators emphasize the importance of 'practicing culture' in the classroom rather than trying to define it" (p. 7). As this author states, this practice is also going to be shaped by the concept that each one of us has about the term. The article goes on to present four definitions commonly found when examining the term "culture" (p. 7-13):

1. The *behaviorist definition* views culture as the set of patterns that are shared and that may be observed. It refers to the behavior exhibited by a group of people in terms of actions and events.
2. The *functionalist definition* conceives culture as a social phenomenon which presents the rules governing and explaining events and which also makes it easier to provide cultural descriptions and develop awareness.
3. The *cognitive definition* deals with the knowledge shared by a cultural actor and other actors; at the same time it helps them organize and interpret the world.
4. The *symbolic definition*, as its name suggests, refers to the system of symbols used by the individual to assign meanings to different elements and events.



Although some authors try to disassociate all of the above-mentioned definitions, from my perspective it would be more useful to integrate them, thus providing students with a more complete view of what the concept of culture contains. Taking these definitions into account, we can gather that each individual's concept of culture is formed while developing in his/her native culture or in the different cultures where he/she interacts as he/she grows up. In the first instance, observation and experience in our native culture enables us to build a set of conceptions that will be the basis for interactions with others. This set of conceptions will inevitably shape our concept of culture itself, which will be used to measure all other cultures against. This is where opportune instruction could be helpful; through instruction, students may find a middle ground where they may compare and contrast cultures for a better understanding of cross-cultural differences. Byram (1991) has pointed out (as is also mentioned in Lantolf (1999, p. 29)) that “the goal of culture instruction cannot be to replicate the socialization process experienced by the natives of the culture, but to develop intercultural understanding” (p. 19). This means that in our L_2 classrooms, we need to promote a sense of appreciation and understanding for cultural differences, rather than asking students to blindly imitate patterns of behavior and interactions. In the ideal setting, students would be able to identify contrasting reactions to a given situation, and from there they could determine a corresponding *modus operandi*, which will be based on knowledge rather than on simple imitation. Theory seems to tell us that our native culture teaches us what elements should be really important to us, what we should pay attention to, and what we should ignore.

Cultural awareness

The key is to enable our students to develop an open mind, so that they have the ability to consider a wider range of significant situations as users of language within a culture. This can be clearly exemplified by noting the words that are important for one language or another, as in the classical example known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Sapir, 1921), mentioned by Seelye (1984), when he stresses that our language is a reflection of the “reality” of the community where the language is spoken, as illustrated by the Eskimo culture (p. 21). He says that the environment of this group caused them to require many words for different types of snow. This is also seen in other languages. In Latin America for example, there are many words for a number of fruits known elsewhere only as “bananas.” Many *Latinos* feel almost offended when they



hear a foreigner use the word “bananas” for “*plátanos, guineos, cuadrados, maduros,*” or whatever other names each particular region uses for these products. The need to differentiate among them has caused the language of this group to have many more words for them than other languages where this need does not exist.

Common difficulties

Knowledge of these cultural differences is by no means an easy task. Developing a sense of cross-cultural understanding is a practice that may take a lifetime, simply because it involves so many different elements. It is quite complex even if you have all possible resources working for you. Some of the difficulties that teachers may consider when deciding whether to include culture in their classes are time, evaluation, teachers’ preparation, and resources.

Time: There never seems to be enough time to cover all the content of a regular course, and even less if you try adding a cultural component.

Evaluation: Finding a way to assess cultural competence may seem difficult. If you compare it with linguistic competence, it seems to be even harder to find a way to evaluate it. Therefore, many teachers find it easier to simply omit the explicit teaching of culture, thus resulting in a less complex class to plan.

Teachers’ preparation: Many instructors feel they cannot teach something that they do not actually know themselves, either because they have never traveled to the target culture or because they have never studied the topic in depth.

Resources: Many teachers claim that it is difficult to find resources to illustrate, represent or obtain cultural information, so that students can feel like they are participating in the culture.

Why culture?

But why is the teaching of culture really important? There are many different things that can be accomplished through the teaching of culture. First, we may start by mentioning the fact that teaching culture to our students may reduce what Seelye (1984, p. 96) calls a “clash of values.” That is, the different ways in which each culture sees, interprets or solves one particular situation. According to Seelye, we could prepare ourselves (or our students, in this case) to become sensitive to cross-cultural differences, when a command of the



language, personal attributes or willingness to interact with members of the other culture may not be enough. Although we would not be able to anticipate all of the possible problematical situations, we could provide our students with the chance to foresee some of the difficulties they might have, thus allowing them to think of possible solutions or ways of understanding the situation. Students could analyze cases that have caused people problems either in their native culture or in the target culture, and look for possible explanations. By sensitizing L₂ students to some situations, at least part of the cross-cultural misunderstandings could be prevented.

Another reason for teaching culture is to prepare students in their process of learning their second language. According to McLaughlin (1988), Selinker first brought up the term “interlanguage” in 1972, through his mentalist view. Since then, the term has been redefined and used in different ways, but here we will refer to his original idea of interlanguage as a system of structures that the students construct as they develop a better command of the target language; that is, the series of language forms that a student produces and which ideally resemble the target language more and more. The true purpose of teaching a L2 should be to help our students reach native-like proficiency in the target language, and one way of doing that during their interlanguage process would be through the teaching of culture.

The concept of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) could also be helpful here. Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993, p. 3) define it as “the study of nonnative speakers’ use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language....” (For further references, see Bardovi-Harlig (1999), Kasper and Dahl (1999), Kasper and Rose (1999, 2001, 2002), Gass and Selinker also (2001) discuss the importance of interlanguage pragmatics. They state that “interlanguage pragmatics, in dealing with how people use language within a social context, must take into consideration not only how a language is used (i.e., how grammatical forms are used to express semantic concepts), but also what it is being used for and who it is being used with” (p. 248). It may appear that interlanguage pragmatics sounds like a whole new course in itself; however, students may benefit from studying cases where they are exposed to situations of this type, to develop strategies which they could resort to when facing a similar experience.



A final reason for teaching culture in a foreign language classroom (especially for those who would later become ESL teachers of students who might eventually work with native speakers from the target culture in multinational companies) would be to get students more involved with the target culture. There are times when students do not seem to be interested in what is happening in class. Giving students the chance to learn about a different culture may be all that is required. This “human side” of language may get students’ thoughts back into their classrooms. They may identify with one situation or simply find a challenge in a piece of information that is new to them, especially if they themselves decide on what topic to research.

Learning through Inquiring

Curriculum as inquiry

Researchers in educational fields are always trying to find innovative ways of teaching second languages, in response to the ever-changing conditions all over the world. In this section, consideration will be given to the concept of curriculum as inquiry as presented mainly by Kathy Short (1993, 2001), as one way to include culture meaningfully in our L₂ classrooms of the English major at UNA. In her proposal, Short (2001) argues that “inquiry involves becoming immersed in a particular topic and having time to explore that topic in order to find questions that are significant to the learner and then systematically investigating those questions” (p. 23). This may come as a challenge to many teachers because it involves not only a change in the way a class is traditionally conducted but also a change in our own set of beliefs. This can be achieved, principally, as the author says, if we act similarly in class to how we “live as inquirers in the world,” where we could even end up finding the real research question in the last stages of the inquiry rather than starting off by having a question, as is usually the case in traditional teaching.

How exactly can this be carried out? The topic can be either brought to the class by the teacher or it can result from interaction with the students, perhaps because one experienced something that struck him or because he has been wondering about something that would end up being a question for other students as well. Either way, whether the teacher proposes the question or the students propose the topic, the teacher encourages discussion about it and the students are asked to investigate their own questions. Each student (or group of students, if they share points of view) takes some time to investigate



his questions; he bases his inquiry on his way of thinking and the perspective he has about the situation, as well as on the means he has or needs to find the answer that he is searching for. The teacher may check on students' progress as the class progresses and they all may agree on an appropriate time to present the final results. This is an enriching way of learning and sharing knowledge, because it offers a wide variety of information and as many perspectives as there are students in the classroom.

Short (1993) proposes that this form of approaching learning puts into practice three types of knowledge: 1) personal and social knowledge, 2) knowledge systems, and 3) sign systems. *Personal knowledge* refers to the type of knowledge that each student brings into the learning situation, based on personal experience and the background knowledge or information that each has, in terms of how we perceive, feel and interpret information. This is the basis for the inquiry; it is what students first take into account to start their search for information. The second type, *knowledge systems*, refers to those systems which everyone puts into practice "to structure knowledge so they can make sense of the world" (Short, 2001, p. 24). From this point of view, what is valuable is the way that each system offers for analyzing and assigning meaning to the world. Last, Short (2001) has included *sign systems*, "alternative ways of creating and communicating meaning with others such as language, music, art, movement, and drama (Eisner, 1982; Leland & Harse, 1994)," (p. 26). To do this, students could use any and all systems available at any point in a way that they can serve the needs that they have throughout the inquiry.

Impact on meaning

As teachers we can observe that each particular student's knowledge is a key aspect in the process of learning. Students start from what they already know and then see what information needs to be updated, completed or reformulated. If we let them to do this, we are making *meaningful learning* possible (Ausubel, 1968). According to this concept, when students use part of their knowledge as a basis for acquiring new information, it allows them to create "links" between the different concepts that they have, thus resulting in an easier way to remember things. This is extremely important in an L₂ classroom because learning through experience could be retained longer than if students just memorize bits and pieces of information that are delivered to them by the teacher in a somewhat isolated manner. Take the case of culture, for example,



where curriculum as inquiry allows students to look for those cultural aspects that are really interesting for them. As Wells (1995) put it: “the most effective learning takes place when the learner, faced with a question or problem arising from an inquiry to which he or she is committed, is helped to master the relevant cultural resources in order to construct a solution” (p. 233). For this author, knowledge could be co-constructed by interacting with others, to be later internalized and reconstructed as personal pieces of information.

Spiral of knowledge

Collaborative relationships are another key concept in curriculum as inquiry, because students are constantly involved in looking for information to complement their own knowledge as well as giving and receiving information from their classmates. This means that new concepts and “understandings” that the students formulate are never permanent; they can be reconstructed every time students receive or look for new information related to the topic they are dealing with. As Short (2001) says, “We don’t inquire to eliminate alternatives, but to find more functional understandings, create diversity, and broaden our thinking” (p. 27). Students can acquire new concepts and new ways of interpreting them. Their knowledge could be represented by a spiral; in this analogy students may be faced with a similar concept or situation and still react differently to it, thanks to the knowledge they have acquired. Imagine if we used this to look for cultural information in an L₂ classroom; it would allow many different topics to become part of the class. It would contribute greatly to the general knowledge that students have at the end of the course. The purpose of curriculum as inquiry is to create a setting for collaborative and long-lasting learning environments.

Pedagogical proposal

This proposal does not entail treating culture only as an isolated subject in the UNA English major, but rather including it across the different subjects that students take throughout the program. If students had the chance to investigate—even a little—about culture in each one of the classes they take, that would result in a much higher number of instances in which students are exposed to cultural aspects with which they would otherwise remain unfamiliar. Especially if we consider that each subject focuses on somewhat different content areas, they would allow for a wider range of possibilities that students can inquire about. For example, in a pronunciation course, the teacher mentions



accent variation, and one student may wonder about the reasons for this; from there, different questions may arise and a topic for inquiry may be developed, relating different accents and how this affects interaction with different groups in the U.S., Canada, Australia, England, etc. These same students may be writing about industrial facilities in the U.S. in a composition class, and from there a whole new cultural aspect may be studied, if they compare their industrial facilities to those of the target cultures. In their linguistics course, they could comment on body language and kinetics, another area lending itself to a wide variety of subtopics to be covered in culture studies.

This does not mean that students will wander off the topics that must be covered in each course, but rather that we often have the chance to discuss culture-related topics in class, and many times we ignore this opportunity. Through inquiry we could take better advantage of the questions that students bring to class, stimulate their curiosity, and at the same time prepare them for possible situations that they could encounter in the future. From this perspective, it is also worthwhile to stress that the students would be the ones looking for and presenting the information in class. The role of the teacher, as Short (2001) states, is “to establish an environment and provide experiences that have the most *potential* for a particular group of students. But the questions and the curriculum itself are negotiated *with* students” (p. 27). Many times teachers’ concern about covering everything in the syllabus results in “feeding” students too much information to be memorized by the students and forgotten soon after. Through inquiry, the teacher can ensure that students are also learning information that they are truly interested in and that they are going to retain, and teachers can resort to this information to illustrate and exemplify the content matter as well.

Solving common difficulties

If we look back to some of the reasons why teachers hesitate to include culture in their classes—time, evaluation, teachers’ preparation and resources—we see that curriculum as inquiry could provide a solution for all of them.

Time: Most of the research about the topic of study is going to be done outside class. During class, the only time required is to report the information back to the classmates. The teacher can allow students to take 10 or 20 minutes of class-time to present this information. Once all students or groups of students have done so, the teacher may invest 10-20 minutes another day



for general discussion. When this has been completed, then a new topic for inquiry may be brought to the class. This type of dynamics would not weaken the class or defeat its purposes in the syllabus; on the contrary; it could only strengthen it.

Evaluation: There are several possibilities: a. The teacher can decide on assigning the percentage of the final grade that s/he considers appropriate for the inquiry and then divide this percentage by the number of interventions that took place during the term. b. Students can be encouraged to participate in the activities just for the sake of learning from them, rather than receiving a grade for the work they do (as it traditionally occurs); c. Teachers can adopt the criteria outlined by Crawford-Lange and Lange in their article “Doing the unthinkable in the L₂ classroom: A process for integration of language and culture” (Higgs, 1984). They discuss a very interesting approach to teaching culture as a process, and the last stage of the process is the evaluation where students are assessed on their use of the target language through oral (or written) material described as critical incidents, mini-dramas, simulations, dramas, culture capsules/clusters, or any other type of presentation that the teacher deems appropriate. Again, it is at the teacher’s discretion what percentage of the grade to assign to this type of participation. According to the authors, this approach allows for the evaluation of both cultural knowledge and language use.

Teachers’ preparation: As mentioned above, this section of the class is mostly the students’ responsibility: They choose the topic, do research and bring the information to the class. Therefore, should the instructors not be familiar with the information, they benefit as much from the activity as the students do, because although they have to ensure that the activity is going smoothly, they do not have the burden of finding all of the information themselves (however, they can still participate in the process if they are interested). This is an activity where both teachers and students can build knowledge together.

Resources: The use of different *sign systems* in curriculum as inquiry enables students to use any source or type of information that they choose and present the information in class. UNA students, in particular, could interview some of the many exchange students from the target culture who study on campus, as well as looking for information in books, the Internet, magazines, papers, etc. What is important here is that there are no restrictions on the



type of resources that can be used to collect information. In the end, all of the limitations discussed above can be overcome through curriculum as inquiry.

To conclude, through inquiry we could implement an innovative way of learning into our L₂ classrooms. It could allow our students to learn information that is meaningful and interesting to them, that is quintessentially related to their target culture, and thus to their future as professionals and individuals. It will allow them to get involved with the foreign visitors on our campus and it will definitely result in much learning that could only improve the quality of students graduating in this major.

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