

# Culture's Place in the World Language Classroom

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**Abstract:** This paper will first outline what culture is and what exactly is meant by intercultural communication in the foreign language (FL) classroom by analyzing theoretical texts on the topic. Then, this paper will discuss many studies on learning tasks that integrate culture from both foreign language classrooms in English-speaking countries as well as English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms in other countries. This paper will describe each task and then demonstrate how they bolster students' proficiency in writing or listening and speaking. Additionally, this paper will show that these tasks create a marked increase in students' motivation and excitement to learn a new language.

## Introduction

*It is Madame Ryan's 28th year of teaching, and this is the first year that she is building lessons around Black History Month. She wants to include both modern and historical Black Francophone figures and decides upon ten-minute mini lectures for the next two weeks of class. While she is teaching the mini lectures, the students' role is to be taking notes on the person's greater significance to culture and history as well as important dates in their life. After the mini lectures, the class moves onto the "main" lesson of the day, reading a French novel about capybaras. While Madame Ryan may think that she is integrating culture into her curriculum in a meaningful way, this method treats culture as tangential to the "real" language learning, which is not sufficient.*

Some teachers may be tempted to use this method or avoid teaching culture altogether, and there are many reasons for this. Michael Byram (2013) described some worries that can cause teachers to feel this way. He cited three main problems that teachers have when trying to implement teaching culture: lack of time, lack of resources, and lack of guidance (Byram, 2013). By this, he meant that there is a lack of time in both planning within the curriculum to insert these cultural lessons and activities. Additionally, there is a lack of funding for authentic cultural resources, and a lack of guidance from administration and professionals on how to implement these lessons.

This paper will discuss a few ways that culture can be integrated in the classroom that do not follow the mini-lesson structure that Madame Ryan used above but will still be accessible to teachers and will help overcome these roadblocks. This essay will show the benefits of incorporating these activities in our classroom, which include increased speaking ability, writing proficiency, and engagement and motivation. Specifically, this essay covers presentations on the target culture and using forums to discuss prominent issues affecting one's home and target culture. Target culture describes the cultures of the countries that speak the language taught in the foreign language classroom. For example, in French class, students can learn about

cultural aspects from France as well as countries in Africa like Senegal or islands like Martinique. These would be those students' target cultures. This paper seeks to explain the learning tasks described above and show that there are better ways than Madame Ryan's method to integrate culture into the foreign language curriculum. This is not an expansive list of possible tasks as this is an initial investigation into a few ways that foreign language teachers can integrate culture into activities in the foreign language classroom and many more could be investigated in a future paper.

## **Core Theoretical Framework: Intercultural Communication**

Culture, in Agar's (1994) view, is how others see a group, not necessarily how that group sees itself. It is what other people see as defining features of the population. Perhaps this sounds like a bad thing that could lead to stereotyping, but Agar (1994) stressed that it is specifically created by someone practicing interculturality, not just anyone who interacts with a culture (Agar, 1994). To further define what intercultural communication is, the Ohio State Standards state that, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), an important part of interculturality is: "... the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other language and cultural backgrounds. ICC develops as the result of...self-reflection around language and culture and involves attitudinal changes toward one's own and other cultures." (Ohio Department of Education, 2017, p. 3). The purpose of ICC and the duty of the intercultural practitioner (ICP), or someone that is learning ICC, is to interact with and view members of other cultures respectfully. Through ICC, the ICP will also gain new perspectives, analyze their own culture, and compare it to the target culture. Gaining new perspectives by critically thinking about their own and other cultures is just one way that students can benefit academically from the integration of culture into the FL curriculum. This paper will discuss two learning tasks that follow the framework and standards of ICC to demonstrate a few ways that culture can be integrated into the FL classroom.

## **Developing Listening and Speaking Skills Through Cultural Studies**

A few major goals of a foreign language class are to help students learn how to speak and listen to native speakers speak the language and learn to understand native speakers through listening to them. A cultural research project and presentation is one way that culture can be integrated into how students practice those skills. The study, "The Impact of a Cultural Research Course Project on Foreign Language Students' Intercultural Competence and Language Learning" by Li and Liu (2017) demonstrated this. Their research questions were, "1. Can a cultural research project in a language course help improve foreign language students' intercultural competence? 2. Can this course's cultural research project help promote the students' language skills?" (Li and Liu, 2017, p. 100). This study followed three students from Intermediate Mandarin Chinese 1 and nine students from Introduction to Mandarin Chinese 1 at a small American university in November of 2014 (Li and Liu, 2017).

Students had four weeks to create 15-minute oral presentations with accompanying PowerPoints on an aspect of Chinese culture of their choice. This was done in both English and Chinese (Li and Liu, 2017). Then, they had to write a reflection essay (in English, their native language) about the experience and comparing Chinese and American culture, focusing on one particular aspect or festival in both cultures (Li and Liu, 2017). Once they chose a topic, they had to discuss similarities and differences between the two events, why they think the differences and similarities exist, and two positive things they learned over the course of their research (Li and Liu, 2017).

In doing this study, Li and Liu (2017) were able to answer both of their research questions. Regarding their first question, whether this type of project increases students' ICC, the short answer to their question was, yes, these projects do increase students' ICC. In giving reasons why this was, they stated, "...the project encourages students to study the target language culture beyond the classroom" (Li and Liu, 2017, p. 101). To further explain their point, "target language culture" simply means the culture of those who speak the language that students are learning. This is the same as "target culture." In addition to exposure to more cultural aspects, this project also provided many choices for students because they chose the focus of their PowerPoint and what they discussed for their reflection. These choices encouraged students to find what they are most interested in and pursue that which encouraged and usually necessitated that students sought information outside of the classroom. Additionally, they said that this project has helped students learn more about Chinese culture but also critically examine their own culture (Li and Liu, 2017).

For the second question, they also answered that yes, their project does positively affect language learning. More specifically, the researchers stated that this project, "...improves students' language ability in the aspects of speaking and listening in Chinese and of learning new vocabulary in both Chinese Pinyin and Chinese Characters. This is because... students were required to speak as much Chinese as they could..." (Li and Liu, 2017, p. 103). This acquisition of new vocabulary comes from speaking so much, like they said; however, it could have also come from some of the research they had to do beyond the classroom to decide what they wanted to say in the first place. Thus, a research project and presentation such as this one is helpful in improving speaking and listening abilities through bolstering vocabulary and providing an opportunity to practice using such vocabulary. Lastly, Li and Liu discussed how they have seen students become more motivated to learn and engaged in class throughout this process (Li and Liu, 2017). This increase in motivation and engagement not only helps create a more positive classroom environment, but it can help their acquisition as well because they are fully engaged in the practice in class.

Despite this study showing evidence that cultural projects such as a presentation can increase cultural awareness and language acquisition, specifically improved speaking and listening, there are some limitations. This study only included twelve students from a small university and only lasted four weeks. To determine its significance, this project should be repeated with a larger sample size and over multiple years to see if the same project had the same effect on multiple classes or to see if the effects stayed over time for that one class. Additionally, they did not mention if there was a control group or not, so it is somewhat unclear whether the level of

acquisition was significant compared to what they would learn having not done the project. If there is no control, it is difficult to say if this specific project was the reason for that growth.

## Developing Writing Skills Through Cultural Studies

In addition to speaking and listening, it is important for students in a foreign language class to gain writing proficiency in the target language. Culture and writing practice can be combined by writing about culturally relevant topics to students' native and the target cultures. The study by Manegre (2021) investigated the use of an online forum to communicate with other target language speakers through collaborative writing tasks about cultural events and issues. Manegre's (2021) study focused on whether linguistic knowledge transfers from students with a higher proficiency level to those with a lower proficiency level when students spoke together on forums using their target language (Manegre, 2021). This study focused on two classes of students in secondary school in Spain who spoke both Spanish and Catalan and were learning English. They were all 14 years old and there were 60 students in total in this sample (Manegre, 2021).

For this task, students were enrolled in a course that focused on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals which are goals determined by the United Nations that seek to preserve the planet. In this study, students wanted to focus specifically on Climate Action which was one of those goals. They learned about the topic in class and then had to write about it together on the forum in English, their second language, usually abbreviated to L2 (Manegre, 2006). Students that had a lower proficiency spoke on the forum with students of a higher proficiency and learned from them. While all students were learning about the content from the teacher together, they were also learning the language from each other through writing. Their cultural knowledge and writing abilities were measured by a pre- and post-survey.

Overall, the results affirmatively answered their research question. The researchers state that, "...writing ability and comprehension of the subject in the foreign language equalizes across the groups and that the students with high-level knowledge appear to transfer their knowledge to the students with low-level knowledge" (Manegre, 2006, p. 34). The researcher found that these positive effects applied to both the high- and low-level students who both ended up with similar writing and comprehension skills (Manegre, 2006). To show this, Manegre (2021) stated, "The null hypothesis was accepted  $F(2, 57) = 2.828$   $p = .068$ , which indicates that students with the most knowledge of English language and culture have transferred their language and culture skills to the other students throughout this study" (Manegre, 2021, p. 35). Typically, the p-value must be greater than 0.05 to accept the null hypothesis and this p-value was 0.068. Thus, this study showed that collaboration with higher-level learners on a culturally relevant writing task correlates with an increase in writing proficiency among lower-level learners. One limitation of this study was that it focused on how the writing abilities equalized among the groups, but it does not explain if all groups improved. If there were groups that did not improve, it would be interesting to find an explanation for this. One possible explanation would be that the task may not have been challenging enough, particularly for

the higher-level learners. Overall, the results are still positive and provide one way that collaborative writing can be used in the FL Classroom.

## Conclusion

In terms of listening and speaking, the Li and Liu (2017) article demonstrated that integrating culture into tasks such as presentational speaking can push students to speak more, increase their motivation, and finally, increase their vocabulary. With writing tasks, the Manegre (2021) article showed that using forums to communicate about cultural issues with more proficient classmates is effective in improving students' composition skills. Overall, the best context for language acquisition with regards to culture seems to be focusing on important cultural issues or events that are relevant both to the first language (L1) culture and L2 culture. If they are not relevant in some way to students in their L1 culture, they may be too far out of their realm of understanding, but they still need to be important in the L2 culture. In these two studies, acquisition is important but so is cultural appreciation and respect, so foreign language teachers must also focus on both aspects of learning when planning cultural lessons or learning tasks. Finally, it is not certain if one particular learning task is better than another or if there is one definitive way to "teach culture" but it seems that highly interactive, content-based projects or lessons that focus on comparing and contrasting to one's native culture is a good place to start. Finally, it is difficult to say for certain whether centering culture helps speaking, writing, or listening more but it seems to have a positive effect on all modes.

To return to Madame Ryan, who used mini lessons on Black History Month that were separated from her "main" daily lesson, this paper could give her a few suggestions on how to improve her Black History Month lessons. Using ideas from the Li and Liu (2017) study, perhaps students could each choose one important Black figure from a French-speaking country to present to the class in French. Then, the students could write an essay in English or French, depending on their proficiency level and ability, comparing how Americans celebrate Black History Month here in America to how French people typically celebrate it. Using the Manegre (2021) study as a basis, perhaps Madame Ryan's students could join an online forum or have a pen pal from a Francophone country and discuss ideas of racism towards Black people in both France and America to gain a global perspective on how Black people are treated. Both of these ideas would be more substantial than the previous mini-lesson strategy and would promote growth in speaking and writing proficiency while integrating culture and abiding by state standards of teaching ICC.

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