Cultures and Comparisons:
Strategies for Learners

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Abstract: This article suggests a set of strategies for developing the sociocultural competence of language learners. These strategies extend the notion of coping strategies, or strategic competence (Savignon, 1972, 1983, 1997), to include the intercultural dimension articulated in current goals for U.S. world language education. Adopting the integrative, communicative perspective of language development reflected in the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (National Standards, 1999), this article offers classroom strategies for teaching and learning with particular reference to the goal areas of "cultures" and "comparisons." This proposal is grounded in a theory of language inseparable from culture—one that views ability in both a first language (L1) and subsequent languages as the result of socialization and the language classroom as a site of exploration in the development of communicative competence. Suggestions for classroom implementation of strategy training are supported by classroom research (Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002).

Key words: communicative competence, cultures and comparisons, language and culture, learning strategies, sociocultural competence

Language: Relevant to all foreign languages

Introduction
Drawing on data from the findings of an experimental study of intercultural strategy training with a group of secondary-level learners of English in Russia (Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002), in this article we propose a set of strategies for developing the sociocultural competence of language learners. These strategies extend the notion of coping strategies, or strategic competence (Savignon, 1972, 1983, 1997), to include the intercultural dimension articulated in current goals for U.S. language education. Adopting the integrative, communicative perspective of language development of the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (National Standards, 1999), we propose classroom strategies for teaching and learning with particular reference to cultures and comparisons. Our proposal is grounded in a theory of language as inseparable from culture—one that views language ability in both a first language (L1) and subsequent languages as the result of socialization and the language classroom as a site of exploration in the development of communicative competence. Our aim is to provide a list or taxonomy of strategies to help learners develop intercultural competence. We have deliberately kept our taxonomy simple—yet theoretically grounded—in the hope that it will encourage classroom teachers to consider the strategies it describes, give them a try, and recommend ways in which they can be improved.

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Cross-Cultural Understanding

Cross-cultural awareness has long been among the goals of foreign or world language programs in U.S. schools. However, data to support the attainment of this goal has remained elusive. While wide-ranging claims are often made for the value of what is sometimes considered to be the culture component of language study, representation of that value may consist of little more than the recognition of a few isolated historical and geographical facts, holiday customs, and food preferences associated with speakers of a language other than English. When an attempt is made to associate more than one national culture with a language (e.g., Spanish, French), the focus on any one group, as well as the similarities and differences among different groups, is correspondingly reduced.

Meanwhile, the need for mutual understanding within as well as across national boundaries has never been greater. Early in this 21st century, dramatic events have focused the attention of the entire world on the divisions and distrust with which we live both at home and abroad. Multiculturalism and diversity is a fact of life, and people are quick to signal differences as well as similarities with those around them. In our communities, our schools, our workplaces, and even our homes, our mutual well-being is best advanced through understanding of and cooperation with those who may differ from us in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, or physical and mental ability. Exploration of such differences and mediation of sometimes conflicting needs and interests is the goal of a democracy. Schools play a key role in meeting that goal.

The need for U.S. education to promote cross-cultural awareness is perhaps best conveyed in the words of students themselves. As an introduction to the concept negotiation of meaning (Savignon, 1983, 1997), participants in a freshman seminar at The Pennsylvania State University were each paired with an international graduate student for the purpose of exploring cultural differences and similarities. They were asked to note the communication problems they encountered, along with the strategies they and their partners devised for dealing with them. Among other things, students were asked “Would you like social behavior, community, and scholarly conduct to be a bigger or smaller portion of the first-year seminar?” Their responses included the following:

It is very easy for someone in a specific culture to limit themselves from the views of outsiders. Many people do not have the opportunity to see different cultures. This seclusion causes misunderstanding in why people are different. When given the opportunity to view another culture, much can be learned. Not just about the different culture, but how the other culture views you. This project gave me a small look into Chinese culture, but also a chance to see how my culture is viewed.

Alex and I met in the HUB for most of our interactions. We would start off by enjoying a meal just leisurely talking and then we would begin our introspection. Alex first told me about some of the difficulties he had understanding American undergraduates, specifically black people. I didn’t know whether or not to take offense to this, being a member of the Black community; because it was such a generalization. But, because I doubted he meant it in a derogatory way, I just laughed it off and we continued our conversation.

I learned a lot from Jin, in particular, about the Korean language and culture. I was always under the impression that Korean was much like any other Asian language, particularly Chinese. After some in-depth comparisons, I discovered that my original thoughts were quite incorrect.

I met and spoke with a man from a country I had heard of but never really thought of . . . and learned quite a bit about the culture in [Turkey] that I never knew before . . . . [Istal] surprised me several times with remarks about the political situation in America that I had not even thought of . . . . While his difficulty with English made him appear somewhat less able to discuss things in depth, after awhile it became obvious that he was incredibly intelligent and very able to talk in depth, with some help.

Yes. Too many damn racists on this campus. I'm sorry too many ignorant people. They need to be aware of their ignorance.

As language teachers who consider the needs of learners whose futures we will help to shape, we must of course also confront our own feelings of disillusionment and fear, and grapple with issues of inequity at home as well as the role and responsibility of the United States within the international community. The challenge of the international climate we face today is by no means new. Although the actors do change, the script is familiar. At the turn of the 20th century, German was far and away the most popular choice of a modern language among American schoolchildren. Two world wars later, enrollments had plummeted. Many teachers of German lost their jobs or were assigned to teach other subjects. Today we must contend with the curricular consequences of a generally heightened nationalism, sometimes accompanied by distrust of persons felt to be “foreign” or “other.” There may even be expressions of outright hostility toward languages and cultures associated with nations who disagree with American international policy. Images of French wine being emptied into the gutters of major U.S. cities undoubtedly affect enrollment. And
those involved in Spanish language programs—currently the most popular choice for world language study in U.S. schools—must contend with the many different and sometimes conflicting cultural associations that continue to present a challenge for teachers and textbook writers alike.

**Communication, Cultures, and Comparisons**

The project Goals 2000 marked the first time in U.S. history that the federal government had addressed issues of curriculum and assessment. The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (National Standards, 1999), which resulted from the Goals 2000 project, are represented in terms of five different goal areas known as “the 5 Cs”: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. Each goal area consists of two or three standards and sample progress indicators for grades 4, 8, and 12. The drafting of these standards was guided by the project’s statement of philosophy:

Language and communication are at the heart of human experience. The United States must educate students who are linguistically and culturally equipped to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad. This imperative envisions a future in which ALL students will develop and maintain proficiency in English and at least one other language, modern or classical. Children who come to school from non-English backgrounds should also have opportunities to develop further proficiencies in their first language (National Standards, 1999, p. 1).

Based on this guiding philosophy, the goals of foreign language education are expressed in terms of curricular goal areas. Eleven standards are categorized into five different goal areas, with the development of competence in any one area intrinsically linked to the development of competence in another.

Together, the 5 Cs reflect a focus on what learners can do with the language. They represent a holistic, communicative approach to language learning, signaling a move away from the pedagogical representation of language ability as consisting of four skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, writing) and components (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) to encourage consideration of the discourse and sociocultural features of language use. Culture is viewed as integral to language (see Atkinson, 2002; Hall, 2002; Savignon 1983, 1997). Schwartz (2002) sees in the content of the national standards a reflection of the communicative curriculum proposed by Savignon (1983, 1997, 2001).

Attention to personalizing the new language and making it one’s own, is central to the learner-centered approach of the 5 Cs (Met, 1999; Overfield, 1997). Experience serves as the basis of learning within each of the 5 Cs. For example, through connecting the language with other disciplines (standard 3.1), and using the language to gain new perspectives (standard 3.2) and new experiences in a second language (L2) community (standards 5.1 and 5.2), learners create their own experiences and develop their own insights. To summarize then, the national standards are based on a communicative approach to L2 learning and teaching with a strong basis in second language acquisition (SLA) theory and research.

The cultures goal area includes standards that address learner understanding of how the products and practices of a culture shape its perspectives. These perspectives are in turn reflected in the language. An understanding of how culture shapes language is seen to be of primary importance for language learners. The connections goal area addresses use of the language to learn new content and information beyond the classroom. Thus the context of language use is not limited to the language classroom. Learners should use the language as a tool to access and process information in a diversity of contexts. As they use the language in different settings, learners can discover the “distinctive viewpoints that are only available through the foreign language and its culture” (standard 3.2). The standards included in the comparisons goal area are designed to promote understanding of the interrelatedness of language and culture through a comparison of the world language and culture learners are studying with the English language and American culture with which presumably they are already familiar. Through such comparisons, language learners not only increase their awareness of linguistic features of syntax, morphology, and phonology; they also develop a more sophisticated understanding of what is meant by culture and the factors which comprise it (see Schwartz, 2002).

Early discussions of culture in language teaching focused on the distinction between culture in the anthropological sense of patterns and perspectives in daily life as opposed to the artistic and literary achievements of a particular civilization (Lado, 1957). The two were sometimes distinguished as small-c and capital-C culture, respectively. More recent discussion underscorings the strong links between language and culture (Byram, 1989, 1998; Kramsch, 1993) has prompted proposals for various integrative approaches to teaching foreign/second languages. Victoria Saphonova, director of the Euroschoo research center in Moscow, has introduced a sociocultural approach to teaching modern languages that she defines as “teaching for intercultural communication in a spirit of peace and a dialogue of cultures” (1996, p. 62). In addition to the grammatical, discourse, and strategic features of language use in the L2 curriculum, she emphasizes the importance of sociocultural competence. A major objective of sociocultural education via both L1 and world language study in
Russia is to prepare learners for intercultural communication. Efficient and successful intercultural communication is seen to result only when learners assume their roles both as open-minded representatives of their L1 community and as subjects engaged in a dialogue of cultures.

The emergence of a focus on sociocultural competence can be seen in other European nations as well. The free flow of people and knowledge within the European Union itself has increased both the need and the opportunity for language learning and intercultural understanding. The result has been experimentation with an array of programs that place new demands on both learners and teachers (e.g., Schalkwijk, van Esch, Elsen, & Setz, 2002). In continental Europe, where communicative competence in three languages or more can be the norm, learner autonomy is essential to language education. To meet these needs, network-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) serves to create discourse communities that enable learners to interact and to negotiate meaning across geopolitical boundaries (e.g., Brammeris, 1996.)

**Dialogue of Cultures**

A dialogue of cultures is said to occur wherever cultures are in contact. In a culturally heterogeneous class, the same fact or event will (and should) be understood differently by persons of different cultural backgrounds. Immersion into a dialogue of cultures begins with a text. A text can be anything with meaning, including a written story or news item, an individual utterance in a communicative event, or even a sign or symbol (a drawing, a thing, or activity). Actual physical presence in a world language context most certainly offers a particularly rich context for the interpretation of texts. However, immersion in an unfamiliar cultural environment does not guarantee readiness for intercultural communication. This is where world language classroom learning plays an important role. Preparation for dialogue should begin well ahead of such immersion. The challenge for teachers lies in selecting appropriate world language texts as well as devising ways for learners to produce their own texts as subjects in a dialogue of cultures.

Given the increasingly dynamic nature of culture in the 21st century, a major concern to emerge for teachers has to do with the content of teaching materials and their relation to the culture of the future. Most current world language culture studies remain past and present oriented (i.e., they represent “what was” and “what is”). The problem with this is that cultures are never static. To be sure, not all aspects of culture change at the same rate. Such things as values, norms, role distribution (e.g., patterns of male dominance), and historical heritage change more slowly than do fashion, food, transportation, or language. However, the dynamic nature of culture means that by the time learners participate in intercultural communication, some of what they have learned about a particular world language context may be incomplete or even outdated.

The problem with representing a culture of the future is, of course, that the future is unknown, making it impossible to select representative teaching materials. In addition, any given world language culture will most likely not be the only other culture with which learners will come into contact during their lives. In the global community of the future, electronic means of communication and population mobility will continue to make contact among representatives of different cultures a daily reality. Thus, we see as a major goal of world language education the teaching of sociocultural strategies.

To suggest a need for strategy training does not mean that participants in intercultural communication are expected to act in a prescribed manner. To the contrary, they should be encouraged to act in a way that they themselves consider to be appropriate. In so doing, they will develop the skills needed for participating in a variety of social and cultural contexts. Communication strategies have received increasing attention since the recognition of their importance in the Savignon (1972) study of beginning adult classroom learners. Rather than enjoin native speaker competence with a few glib phrases, learners are encouraged to make use of the world language equivalent for such expressions as “Excuse me . . .”, “Please repeat . . .”, and “How do you say in Spanish [French, German, etc.] . . .” to establish their presence in a communicative event. Not unlike Savignon, the pioneering British applied linguist Corder (1981) defined strategies as a “systematic technique employed by a speaker to express his [or her] meaning when faced with some difficulty” (p. 103). Citing the identification of “coping strategies” in the work of Savignon, theorists Canale and Swain (1980) proposed strategic competence as one of the components in their well-known framework of communicative competence.

Subsequent research interest in describing and perhaps helping learners to develop communication strategies of various kinds has been strong (Dornyei, 1995; Oxford, 1990). Yet, although sociocultural competence is considered to be inseparable from overall communicative competence, none of the existing descriptions include strategies having to do specifically with cultural performance. Curriculum developers and some textbook writers have, however, included activities designed to enhance learner sociocultural awareness. In Russia, the L2 national curriculum includes a sociocultural component in addition to grammatical and discoursal components. The learner texts and other resources used in this curriculum are prepared by scholars at the national Euroschook research center in Moscow. These materials provided the initial basis for the classroom research that led us to identify the strategies proposed here for adoption in U.S. curricula (Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002). In the United States, similar strategies are
not only implied in the national standards as noted above, they can be found in textbooks that include learner activities reflective of the sociocultural implications of these standards (see Bragger & Rice, 1987; Chastain & Güntermann, 1987; Davidson, Gor, & Lekic, 1996; 1997; Kramsch & Crocker, 1985). Through the integration of such strategy training, world language programs can provide a much needed dimension to the general education of secondary school students whose futures will no doubt be characterized by further cultural exchange and difference.

**Explicit Teaching**

In terms of learner cognitive development, teaching can be of two kinds—implicit and explicit. For explicit teaching to be of value, psychologists have underscored the importance of establishing relationships between motives (i.e., the purpose of the activity) and goals (i.e., a supposed result of the activity) (see, for example, Zinnayaya, 1991). In other words, learners should not only understand the meaning of every assignment, they should also understand its structure and see how the knowledge and experience acquired can be used in future communicative settings. When this happens, direct or explicit teaching of strategies is more fruitful and beneficial for the learners (Dornyei, 1995).

Conducting our research within a postmodern framework (Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002), we base our interpretation of culture on Sysoyev (2001, 2002). Elaborating on concepts described by Geertz (1973) and Tajfel (1978), and reflecting a view generally shared among scholars today, Sysoyev has defined culture as a system of symbols, meanings, and norms passed from one generation to another which differentiates groups of people united by certain characteristics such as origin, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, socioeconomic class, or political views. In the world of the 21st century, people find themselves members of various groups. Such group membership, moreover, is context specific, changes over time and place, and is negotiated among those involved. Adoption of such a multidimensional and multifaceted construct of culture in L2 teaching encourages educators to bypass the established view of world language culture based primarily on geopolitical characteristics (for example, Spanish-speaking and French-speaking or francophone nations). The consequence is that learners discover a spectrum of cultures within the polycultural communities of world language countries and, what is even more important, the commonality that may exist between representatives of different nations. Given the impossibility of anticipating the many different and changing cultures that learners may encounter in a lifetime, the sociocultural strategy training we propose has as its specific goal the preparation of learners for interaction with unfamiliar cultures in unpredictable communicative situations.

To introduce sociocultural strategies, we propose an explicit method consisting of three stages: explanation, exploration, and expression—a familiar sequence in cognitive learning theory that has been used successfully to introduce diverse aspects of a language.

1. **Explanation**: This first stage of explicit strategy teaching is theoretically oriented. The teacher explains to learners the role and importance of a particular strategy in intercultural communication.

2. **Exploration**: This second stage is practically oriented. When a particular strategy has been explained, learners work in pairs or small groups to become acquainted with and study real-life examples of this strategy in communication.

3. **Expression**: For this third and final stage, learners work in pairs or small groups to practice use of the strategy in simulated communicative contexts. At the conclusion of this practice period, learners reflect on their experience and exchange views about the use of the strategy in L2 interaction.

For more experienced learners, the first and second stages of the method may be interchanged or collapsed into a single phase. If they are incorporated systematically into a language program, 5 to 6 minutes of class time might be devoted to sociocultural strategies several times a week. Prior to any actual presentation and practice of sociocultural strategies, learners should: (a) understand the meaning and importance of learning sociocultural strategies, and (b) be generally comfortable taking initiative and risk with representatives of other cultures. With regard to overall learner communicative competence, based on the findings of Dornyei’s (1995) study, explicit teaching of sociocultural strategies would appear to be of benefit to learners at any stage in their language learning. In other words, it is never too early or too late in an instructional sequence to begin.

We propose a total of eight strategies divided equally into two groups: (a) strategies for establishing and maintaining intercultural contact, and (b) strategies for creating sociocultural portraits of an L2 context and the participants in intercultural communication. Each strategy is described briefly below along with a suggestion for classroom implementation and practice. The first four are designed as role-play activities and can be done in the learners’ L1 or L2, depending on their proficiency level.

**Taxonomy of Sociocultural Strategies**

*Strategies for Establishing and Maintaining Cross-Cultural Contact*

1. **Initiating and Maintaining Intercultural Contact**

The task is to make up and role-play a situation in which a representative of culture A initiates conversation with a representative of culture B who is either neutral or positively inclined to interaction. The initiators of the
exchanges should draw the attention of their interlocutors, interest them in culture A, and/or express interest in culture B.

The topics selected for practicing Strategy 1 should be of interest to class participants as well as to U.S. students generally. Examples include American football and activities associated with it—tailgating, for example, or the Super Bowl—as a national pastime; prom and other traditions familiar in U.S. schools; Thanksgiving, Halloween, and other national celebrations. Working perhaps in small groups, they can suggest ways of explaining and sparking interest in the activity they have selected and with guidance learn if similar or comparable traditions exist in a given L2 culture.

To provide a sense of how this activity might actually play out in class, we include below an example from our Russian data. In this situation, the Russian EFL learners had attained a sufficiently advanced level of English communicative proficiency to create their scenarios in the L2. Beginning-level learners would create their scenarios in the L1.

Situation: Igor is an exchange student from Russia who is spending an academic year in residence at an American university. Before one of his classes he becomes involved in a conversation with his classmates, John and Mary, about a forthcoming Halloween party.

Mary: What costume are you going to wear, John?
John: I haven’t decided yet, but I probably will be a vampire. And you?
Mary: Wicked witch. Last night I got a nice dusty wig and a dress that looks like it is a hundred years old. What about you, Igor? Have you given a thought about your costume for the party?
Igor: What is this party for?
John: You know, Halloween, monsters, evil?
Igor: Not really. Is it a sort of carnival? What is it about?
Mary: On the 31st of October, some Americans celebrate Halloween. It is just for fun. They usually dress in weird stuff and scare each other, go from house to house, and say “Trick or Treat” and then take candy. Igor: Isn’t it for kids?
John: It is, but we also enjoy it.
Mary: Yeah, everyone loves it in America. You will enjoy it.
Igor: Cool. I’ll go. Where will the party be? Can you give me a ride?

From a strategic perspective, it is difficult to say whether Igor expressed interest in an American tradition or whether Mary and John tried to act as representatives of American culture. Both are probably true. Their conversation begins as one typical between persons of similar cultural background on a familiar topic. Both speakers know what they are talking about and do not need to name the event itself (Halloween). Subsequently, Mary tries to act as a representative of her culture and explains the custom to Igor in a way she thinks will attract his attention: “It is for fun,” “scare each other,” “Trick or Treat,” and “take candy.” This is an illustration of what might be considered subtle ethnocentrism. Mary explains the event from her own point of view and names the things that are interesting and important for her, which is quite natural. Had she looked at the event from Igor’s perspective, she might have said that Igor would be able to meet many people, make new friends, communicate in English, and so forth. As a result of this cross-cultural mismatch, Igor’s response does not show much enthusiasm: “Isn’t it for kids?” In response, Mary and John generalize to give Igor the sense that Halloween is celebrated in all of the United States: “everyone loves it in America” and that it is pleasant: “we also enjoy it” and “you will enjoy it.” Such persuasion proves to work out well and Igor agrees to participate.

The above illustration is of interest from a cultural perspective as well. The Russian secondary students were given the task of conveying some cultural information in their exchanges. As it turned out, all the resulting dialogues were about holidays. It would seem that among this particular group of foreign language learners, at least, the impression was widely shared that culture is concerned essentially with holidays and traditions. Mary and John used “exotic” information about Halloween to attract Igor’s attention, who apparently misunderstood the meaning and thought about the holiday as a carnival. Although there is risk of stereotype, such generalizations and exotic bits of information do however provide excellent motivation for foreign language communication, clearing a path to the consideration of other more complex and perhaps less obvious cultural differences.

2. Anticipating and Identifying Sources of Cross-Cultural Misunderstanding

The teacher gives each group the description of an L2 cultural norm that is unlike the prevailing norm in the United States. Students then use their imagination to enact a scenario to illustrate this cultural difference and then classmates try to identify the source of conflict. Once the cultural difference has been identified, a second role-play can be planned in which one student plays an inexperienced “foreigner” who makes a cultural blunder.

3. Taking Initiative and Responsibility for Eliminating Cross-Cultural Misunderstanding

Ask one participant in each group to assume the role of a person whose limited knowledge of the L2 and culture results in a misunderstanding. The other members of the
group are to identify the nature of misunderstanding and attempt to make amends through the use of questions, clarifications, and so forth.

Since practice of strategies 2 and 3 relies on background information that has been provided by the teacher, a pool of teacher resources is needed. The immediately obvious differences are often highlighted in textbooks and in addition to national holidays include such things as a late evening dinner hour, removal of shoes before entering a private home, and handshaking, embracing, and other greeting practices. Discussion of L2 texts of various kinds, including films and advertisements, will yield many more of particular relevance for learners. Teachers may add to the list by drawing on their own experiences, incorporating examples in guidebooks for studying or working abroad, and asking students to solicit items from friends and parents.

4. Using Diplomacy for the Purpose of Maintaining a Dialogue of Cultures in a Spirit of Peace
To practice this strategy, one student in each pair or group is assigned the role of a person with a particular opinion on a controversial issue. A second student then initiates a conversation on that issue with the purpose of learning his/her interlocutor's views. The goal is to learn the interlocutor's views tactfully, without revealing one's own views.

Topics selected for practicing Strategy 4 should relate directly to issues sparking current controversy among students themselves. These might be issues related to national foreign policy, school regulations, gender equality, or civil rights. The point of this exercise is to learn to anticipate, respect, and manage diversity of opinions and views. In the program we designed for use with EFL learners in Russia, we found that students had no difficulties using diplomacy to keep a dialogue open. They asked questions and learned their interlocutor's views on a range of potentially controversial issues. However, when all students had completed this exercise, they were assigned a new challenge, that of avoiding cross-cultural conflict by changing the topic of the discussion. This strategy was quite difficult for them. Quite often they did not feel comfortable shifting the subject of the discussion to a neutral topic, disguising their own viewpoint. In subsequent individual interviews they said that they would prefer either to state their position (even if it is quite the opposite) or to simply agree with the others. This preference may reflect more general communicative strategies for this particular group of learners. Russians have been characterized as straightforward, even categorical, in their evaluations (Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002).

Whether or not the strong statement of personal views is reflective of a more general cultural trait, the purpose of this strategy is for learners to avoid expressing their agreement or disagreement, which, in fact, may be the easiest way out. In other words, the purpose is to prepare them to anticipate situations in L2 use where a potential for conflict might arise and to help them to develop strategies that are commonly used in diplomacy to avoid such intercultural conflicts. It may well be more difficult to hide one's viewpoint than to express it. But not everyone shows tolerance toward representatives of another culture who state their views openly. In order to avoid an intercultural conflict it may be best to "disappear," that is, not express an opposing view. Learning how to shift the subject of the discussion to another topic will give students an additional resource. This does not mean that they will always be expected to withhold their opinion in future L2 communication. However, if they should one day encounter a situation where such may be the best course of action, they will have had practice doing so. For this and the preceding strategies, challenges and questions that arise in the training practice should be discussed with learners to let them explore their reactions and identify personal strategies with which they can be comfortable.

Strategies for Creating Sociocultural Portraits of an L2 Context
Strategies 5, 6, 7, and 8 guide learners toward a more comprehensive understanding of culture as patterns of seeing and doing, patterns that we internalize as natural or normal through the process of socialization that begins at birth. Topics can include such things as dating and marriage patterns, employment opportunities, educational access and funding, religious practice, ethnic diversity, immigration policy, governmental structure, and patterns of political influence, while at the same time keeping in mind differences due to such things as age, gender, and socioeconomic class. A wide range of topics allows learners an opportunity for cross-cultural discovery and comparison of behavioral patterns of particular interest to them.

5. Making Generalizations, Analogies, Contrasts, and Comparisons Between L1 and L2 Cultures
After completion of a study unit on a theme relating to world language context and culture such as "schooling in Mexico," "dating and marriage patterns in Germany," or "health care in France," ask students to prepare as a final project a report on the same topic in their own L1 context for someone from the L2 culture. These reports could include comparison, juxtaposition of L1 and L2 cultural realities, identification of common features, and so forth.

6. Identification and Interpretation of Unfamiliar Aspects of an L2 Culture Through Contacts with Representatives of L2 Cultural Communities: Analysis of Authentic Literature, Video Material, Mass Media
As a class, watch parts of a television show or movie for the purpose of defining typical patterns of dress, food, greet-
ings, and ways of paying for transportation and food in restaurants. For our Russian learners of English, we used segments from the soap opera Santa Barbara and found that on the first viewing they focused their attention almost exclusively on story content, rather than on L2 cultural patterns. Only on the second viewing did they begin to identify patterns of greetings, dress, and social interaction. Conscious awareness of potential cultural differences in the interpretation of the commonplace—of familiar signs, events, and activity—is, of course, the first step in learning to anticipate and negotiate differences. With practice and teacher guidance, students will discover a whole new realm of "hidden" meanings to enhance their communicative competence.

7. Classification, Compilation, and Generalization of Sociocultural Information When Working with Mass Media (Including the Internet) and Reference Literature

Give learners a list of suggested topics for independent study. Their task is to locate material, study it, and prepare a written report. Our Russian learners showed a particular interest in the following topics: environmental protection problems in the United States and China, modern American theatre, and the origin and traditions of Thanksgiving. Interests of U.S. students will no doubt vary according to geographical location, personal backgrounds, age, gender, and special talents. Working in groups on a topic of common interest and then sharing their findings with other class members offers an opportunity to increase the cross-cultural awareness of all.

8. Review of Authentic Cultural Material

At the end of each theme, ask learners to write a review of a newspaper or magazine article or other material on the current topic.

Conclusion

The central goal of a world language program is to develop a learner's communicative competence in a language other than English. Essential to that development is an understanding of language as inseparable from culture. Language both shapes and is shaped by culture. Access to one is essential for access to the other. This understanding is central to the goals articulated in the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century, represented by the 5 Cs (National Standards, 1999). World language programs must join with other curricular emphases to prepare the next generation of Americans both linguistically and culturally to communicate successfully in a pluralistic society both at home and abroad.

The strategies we have outlined above may or may not be appropriate for all learners in all contexts. We defined them initially with the goals of a nationwide Russian EFL curriculum in mind, a curriculum with a goal of promoting mutual respect and understanding of cultures in context. In so doing, our aim was to make explicit for classroom instruction some ways in which learners can be helped to achieve the sociocultural competence essential to overall communicative competence. American teachers will want to consider both the strategies proposed here and the suggested ways of presenting them in light of their own experience and goals, specifically adapting them to suit their own needs.

References


Outcomes Assessment for Beginning and Intermediate Spanish: One Program’s Process and Results

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Abstract: Outcomes assessment is a process by which an academic unit defines and articulates its program goals and assesses its attainment of those goals. This article chronicles one language division’s efforts at outcomes assessment for beginning and intermediate Spanish. The evidence used for program assessment consisted of WebCAPE placement scores, student satisfaction surveys, learner portfolios, and oral proficiency interviews (OPIs). The results of the project suggest that the target goals for student progress were being met and that students were generally satisfied that the program met its stated goals. The results also suggest areas of improvement to the means by which outcomes are measured as well as areas of improvement to the curriculum.

Key words: intermediate Spanish, oral proficiency, outcomes assessment, portfolio assessment, written proficiency

Language: Spanish

Introduction

Outcomes assessment is a multilayered process by which an academic unit defines and articulates its program goals and assesses its attainment of those goals. The articulation of program goals takes place not only among the faculty within the academic unit, but also, potentially, prepares the unit for accreditation review. In order to assess the effectiveness of a program, it must be established whether the program’s stated goals are being met. If the program’s goals require development, then outcomes assessment must begin with articulation of these goals. Only then may the academic unit begin to address issues of the adequacy of instruments for evaluating student performance and achievement. This article chronicles one language division’s efforts to reexamine goal statements for the purpose of articulation and outcomes assessment.

The core language requirement at the Saint Louis University consists of a three-semester sequence. In Spanish, these courses consist of two semesters of beginning study (Spanish 110 and 115) and one semester of intermediate (Spanish 210). All of these courses meet three times per week with a 1-hour lab.

Early efforts at outcomes assessment focused on an analysis of Spanish Computer Adaptive Placement Exam (SCAPE) data (Brigham Young University, 2000–2001), a survey of factors influencing student decisions, and a correlation of course grades with SCAPE scores. In 1997, ACTFL proficiency levels were identified and assessment practices were established for intermediate and advanced levels. For Spanish 210, Intermediate-Mid was the target proficiency level identified for oral work and Intermediate-High was identified as the target level for written work. Assessment data consisted of learner portfolios and oral proficiency interviews (OPIs). These levels were chosen in a departmental effort to articulate target proficiency levels before the pre-
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*Foreign Language Annals* (ISSN 0015-718X) is published quarterly by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Inc., 700 South Washington Street, Suite 210, Alexandria, VA 22314 • (703) 894-2900 • Fax (703) 894-2905 • http://www.actfl.org • E-mail: headquarters@actfl.org.

*FLA* is a refereed journal dedicated to advancing all phases of the profession of foreign language teaching. Manuscripts to be considered for publication and all other editorial correspondence should be sent to Sandy Cutfall, Managing Editor, *Foreign Language Annals*, P. O. Box 391837, Mountain View, CA 94039-1837. Advertising inquiries should be addressed to Advertising, ACTFL, 700 South Washington Street, Suite 210, Alexandria, VA 22314, or e-mail sueckley@actfl.org.

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Printed by Allen Press, Inc., Lawrence, KS 66044.

Periodicals postage paid at Alexandria, VA and at additional mailing offices.

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POSTMASTER: Send address changes to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Inc., 700 South Washington Street, Suite 210, Alexandria, VA 22314.