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Using Culture to Enhance Foreign Language Learning

Submitted by: Kerry Maggie Morris and Ashley Westerbeck

Abstract

The thesis is concerned with the contribution and incorporation of the teaching of culture into the foreign language classroom. More specifically, some consideration will be given to the why and how of teaching culture. It will be demonstrated that teaching a foreign language is not tantamount to giving a homily on syntactic structures or learning new vocabulary and expressions, but mainly incorporates, or should incorporate, some cultural elements, which are intertwined with language itself. Furthermore, we will show how teachers incorporate culture into the classroom using current techniques and methods. The main premise of the paper is that effective communication is more than a matter of language proficiency and that, apart from enhancing and enriching communicative competence, cultural competence can also lead to empathy and respect toward different cultures as well as promote objectivity and cultural discernment.

Introduction

We share a similar experience with respect to Spanish education throughout our lives. We enrolled in beginning level Spanish in 7th grade and continued to take classes all throughout high school into college. We both have few memories of learning culture in middle and high school, aside from the two or three days devoted to the major celebrated Mexican holidays such as “El día de los muertos” and “Cinco de mayo”. Other than that, there were often one or two days of the school year noted as “cultural days” in which the students brought in the recipe and dish of a Spanish treat, such as *churros* or a Latin

American dessert. This incorporation of culture into the classroom was more or less centered around food, which in turn, led to a class period of soda, snacks, and twenty-two, hyperactive students, wired from ingesting large quantities of sugar. Thus, the cultural significance was subsequently hidden under colorful tablecloths, paper plates and caramel custard, also known as flan in Hispanic countries.

During the summer of 2008, after our junior year of college, we completely immersed ourselves within the Spanish language and culture. Enrolling in classes at La Universidad Nacional, we studied a variety of subjects while living with host families in Heredia, Costa Rica for three months. Although our fair complexions, light colored eyes, and mannerisms were immediate giveaways that we were *gringas*, or Americans, we were still able to circumvent a typical tourist’s vacation to a foreign country. We were not tourists, but rather members of a family and a community. From this extraordinary opportunity, we were able to go beneath the surface and live among the natives on a deeper and interconnected level.

After our summer abroad, we went straight into the classroom as we embarked on our 15 week-long semester of student teaching. Having had three years of instruction in the classroom and a total immersion experience in Costa Rica, we were undeniably prepared and eager to put our knowledge and experience into practice. Over the course of those several weeks in which we were in a position to teach the young adolescents in our classes the Spanish language, we were able to share our experiences abroad with our students. Whenever the moment presented itself, we enthusiastically incorporated anecdotes, stories, realia, and the

like into our lessons to ensure that our students received as much cultural exposure as possible. Many times we were able to illustrate ideas from the text with our own prior knowledge based on our summer abroad, which enabled students to see and hear about other cultures from the first-hand experience of their teacher. Because we loved our time abroad, it was never a chore relating stories to motivate and engage our students on a cultural topic. Thus, we realized that the very essence of our own enthusiasm carried over to the students because we had such a strong connection to the cultural topics of which we were speaking.

As a result of our summer abroad and the aforementioned educational experiences, we wanted to explore how culture is represented and presented in the middle and high school foreign language classroom today. Therefore, we chose a topic that is both very meaningful to us, but more importantly, an essential component in foreign language learning for students of all ages. This study explores the importance of using culture to enhance Spanish language acquisition and the manners in which the concept of culture is portrayed and perceived by teachers and students in middle and high schools.

Throughout the course of our research, we have focused on answering three major questions:

1. How is culture incorporated and taught in the classroom?

This question explored whether the cultural topics presented by teachers were explicitly evident (prompted by the teacher or the text, for example) or embedded within the material. Additionally, we investigated the trigger of the cultural topic. Our objective was to determine to what extent the trigger set off by a student's question, a teacher comment, or the material itself. To answer this question, we also examined how much time, as a percentage of the total class time, was spent on culture during any given lesson.

2. How does a teacher's background and experience abroad influence the way culture is presented?

This element of our research involved gauging the diversity of cultural topics presented, how culture is represented in the classroom, how culture is incorporated into the daily lesson, and the measurements used to assess the effectiveness of cultural topics.

3. How does the incorporation of culture in foreign language lessons guide students' opinions and beliefs regarding culture and its role in their education?

The questions we used to frame the parameters of our research that focused in answering this question were the following:

- a. Do students appreciate the importance of learning culture?
- b. Do students believe their teacher regards cultural education as an integral component of language learning?
- c. To what degree did students believe the learning of culture to second language acquisition is significant?
- d. Has learning about another culture changed students' attitudes about other societal customs, traditions, and ways of life?

According to the New York State Department of Education there are two standards for Modern languages. The first standard gives guidelines for communication skills and the second standard provides guidelines for cultural skills. The second learning standard, "Culture" is characterized by the following: "effective communication involves meanings that go beyond words and require an understanding of perceptions, gestures, folklore, and family and community dynamics. All of these elements can affect whether and how well a message is received." For the purpose of this research, we are using this description as a means for characterizing the word "culture" as it subsequently appears in this paper.

Methodology

Schools were chosen using a convenience sample based on proximity to the university and our previous involvement with the schools. We worked with two local school

districts at both the middle and high school levels. Within each school, we worked with one middle school and one high school Spanish teacher, for a total of four teachers which were observed. In order to maintain the anonymity of the schools used during our research, we will refer to them as school “A” and school “B” throughout the remainder of our paper. At school “A”, there are three Spanish teachers, one at the middle school and two at the high school. We chose which high school teacher to work with based on who responded first to our request to conduct research in his or her classroom. School “B” also employs three Spanish teachers, two at the middle school and one at the high school. The middle school teacher at School “B” was chosen based on his or her class schedule, which included a more diverse student body with students at two different levels, as opposed to the other teacher who only taught one level. We decided upon a sampling of four classes per level per school offered through the day. This pattern could not be followed at High School “A” as the teacher only offers two classes at this level. At the middle school level, only eighth grade students were studied, while at the high school level, ninth through twelfth grade students were studied.

Participants.

School “A” is a small suburban school district with a combined total of 501 students in the middle and high schools (grades 6-12). Of this cohort, we worked with a total of 60 students enrolled in Spanish classes, 39 from the middle school and 21 from the high school. All middle school students surveyed were eighth graders, while the high school students were enrolled in Level II Spanish. This school boasts a 100% proficiency rate on the New York State Second Language Proficiency Exam and a 27% free or reduced lunch rate.

School “B” is a small suburban school district that serves 657 students in the middle and high schools (grades 7-12). We worked with 49 middle school students and 40 high school students for a total of 89 students. The middle school students surveyed were all in eighth grade while the high school students were in grades 10-12 (levels 3-5). At this

school, 85% of students receive passing scores on the NYS Second Language Proficiency Exam and 21% receive free or reduced lunch.

It is important to mention that during the course of our research, we included an additional teacher observation in our data. This was incorporated based on the hypothesis that we derived from our observation of how teachers’ experiences abroad impact their classroom. We chose to observe a teacher from middle and high school “C”, on the basis that this instructor had not lived abroad in a foreign, Spanish speaking country. The only data collected from this school dealt with the average amount of minutes spent by this teacher discussing culture during a class period. Student surveys and teacher questionnaires were not administered at this school.

Data Collection

Data was collected using three types of instruments, student surveys, teacher questionnaires, and observable cultural incidence tally forms.

Student Surveys

Surveys were created using a variety of question types in order to elicit varying responses. These differing types include open-ended questions, Likert items, and multiple-answer questions. The middle school survey (see Appendix A) consists of eleven questions while an additional question is included in the high school survey (Appendix B). The additional question addresses students’ perceptions about the connection between learning culture and language acquisitions—a relationship that is more applicable at a higher level.

We administered the student surveys during class time during a period of 10 to 15 minutes (depending on the level and student completion rate).

Teacher Questionnaires

The teacher’s survey is a twenty-one-question questionnaire developed to mirror student questions in order to derive comparisons of both cohorts and their responses to both instruments (see Appendix C).

In order to provide teachers the opportunity to frankly and fully answer each

question, all questions are open-ended. Questionnaires were distributed to teachers who were able to complete them on their own time and return them to us during our subsequent class observation.

Observable Cultural Incidence Tally Forms

We also conducted four observations of each teacher over the course of one week to determine the amount of time spent on cultural topics during any given class period, the types of cultural topics discussed, and possible triggers for the discussion of the cultural topic. Observable cultural incidences were tallied minute by minute on a form designed specifically for this purpose (see Appendix D).

In order to identify data by which comparisons could easily be drawn, all instruments are organized to address six major categories: culture in the curriculum, resources, relevance, representation in the classroom, instruction, and assessment.

Findings

Culture in the Curriculum

The first category, culture in the curriculum, probes, about the parameters used by teachers to guide the decision-making process of choosing the cultural topics to explicitly incorporate into their lessons. In Middle School A, the teacher did not plan to discuss cultural topics beforehand, but touched on them when the opportunity presented itself, pointing out the relevance to the students’ lives and noting comparisons between our society and that being discussed. The teachers in High School A and Middle School B tested prior knowledge through oral questioning and then challenged students to not only make comparisons with their own experience, but to also think about why similarities and differences between cultures exist. In High School B, the teacher did not contrive cultural topics nor assess prior knowledge of cultural awareness.

Resources

The second category is concerned with the resources teachers are consulting to investigate the cultural information they share with their students. Teachers were asked if they teach primarily from any one particular source

(such as a textbook) or if they draw on a variety of research tools, including personal experience. This category also explores how teachers incorporate current events, and how educators ensure they are drawing information from up-to-date material. We found that the majority of the cultural information conveyed to their students by the teachers in the four schools is based on the personal experiences they gained abroad. All teachers also utilized as secondary, supplemental material online resources, textbooks, short stories, and current events.

Table 1.

How is culture presented or taught in your class? (Top three choices)								
	MS “A”		HS “A”		MS “B”		HS “B”	
Readings/text	6	15.3 8%	1 4	66.6 7%	4 9	100 %	2 4	60.0 0%
Music	2	5.12 %	0	0.00 %	1	2.04 %	3	7.50 %
Movies /TV	7	17.9 5%	2	9.52 %	3 7	75.5 1%	1	2.50 %
Artifacts	6	15.3 8%	0	0.00 %	4	8.16 %	1	2.50 %
Pictures	3 5	89.7 4%	4	19.0 5%	1 5	30.6 1%	1 6	40.0 0%
Cultural days	1	2.56 %	2	9.52 %	3	6.12 %	0	0.00 %
Power Point	2 4	61.5 4%	1	2.63 %	0	0.00 %	7	17.5 0%
Projects	4	10.2 6%	0	0.00 %	0	0.00 %	1 1	27.5 0%
Notes	1 6	41.0 3%	1 2	57.1 4%	7	14.2 9%	1 5	37.5 0%
Other	7	17.9 5%	1 2	57.1 4%	2 3	46.9 4%	1 4	35.0 0%

Relevance

The third category focuses on the beliefs of culture’s relevance and instrumentality in the classroom and more specifically, how much time is devoted to its instruction. We asked teachers how much they value teaching culture, how they incorporate the culture into the lesson, and how much time as a percentage of a typical

class period they generally spend discussing culture.

In Middle School A, the teacher firmly stated that one cannot learn a language without learning about the culture. She informed that she usually talks about culture once per class explicitly during vocabulary introduction or review. In High School A, the teacher indicated she feels that it is essential to learn the culture with the language and for that reason touches on a cultural topics about six or seven times, or about ten to fifteen minutes, during a class period. In Middles School B, the teacher believes that culture is important in order to gain a better comprehension of the language but is less important within the curriculum based on the lack of representation on state proficiency and Regent’s examinations. Furthermore, this teacher believes to spend five minutes per lesson discussing culture. In High School B, the teacher affirms there is a great need for learning culture in the foreign language classroom and spends five to ten minutes per class on cultural topics. Although teachers self-reported spending an average of five to ten minutes daily teaching culture, our observations reveal otherwise. In a class period of forty-four minutes, the teachers in middle and high schools “A” spent no more than 3 of those minutes discussing culture. Similarly, in middle and high schools “B,” teachers spent no more than 3 of the forty minute class period on cultural topics.

Table 2:

Culture Observations								
	MS “A”		HS “A”		MS “B”		HS “B”	
Observation 1	6/44		7/44		0/40		4/40	
Observation 2	0/44		3/44		0/40		3/40	
Observation 3	3/44		0/44		3/40		1/40	
Observation 4	3/44		0/44		3/40		3/40	
Average	3/44	6.8 2	2.5/44	5.6 8	1.0/40	2.5 0	2.7/40	6.8 8

We then turned to our asking students to rate how important they believe cultural instruction is to them personally, to their teachers, and how often they learn about culture.

In table 3, the majority of students agree that it is “somewhat important” to learn about other cultures, with students in high school “A” ratings the highest in the “very important” category. Of all the students surveyed, a combined three believe that it is “not important at all” to learn about other cultures.

Table 3.

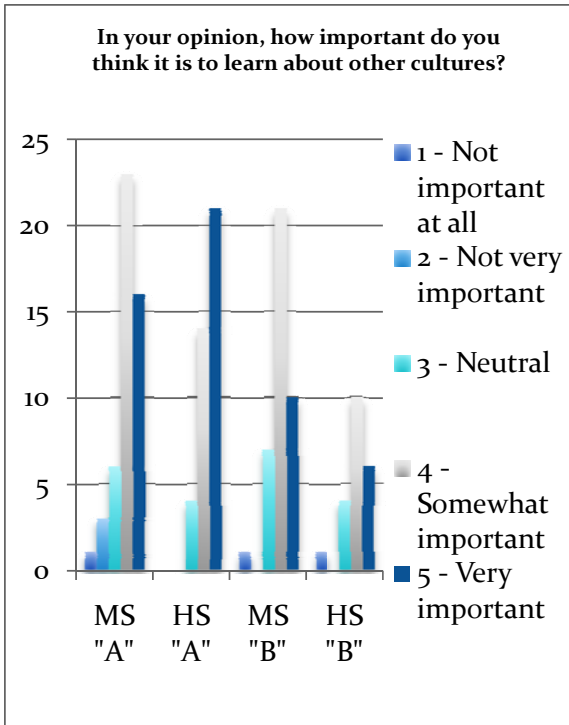


Table 4 follows a similar pattern with the majority of students rating the learning of culture as “somewhat important” to their teachers with middle school “A” having the highest ratings in the “very important” category. Table 4.

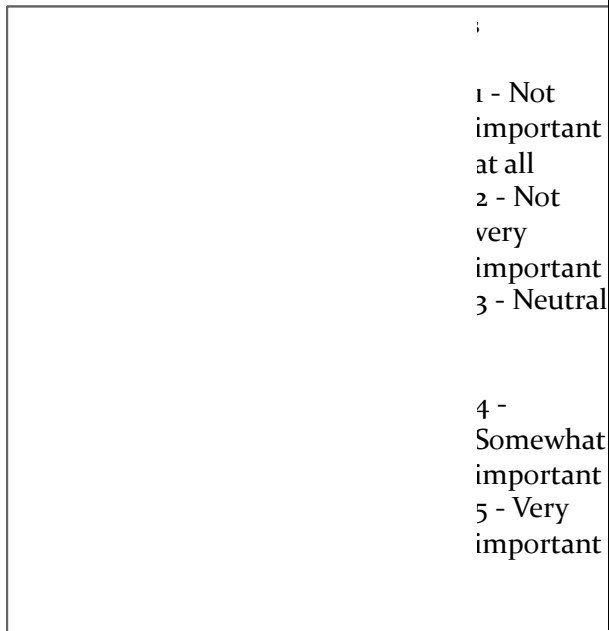
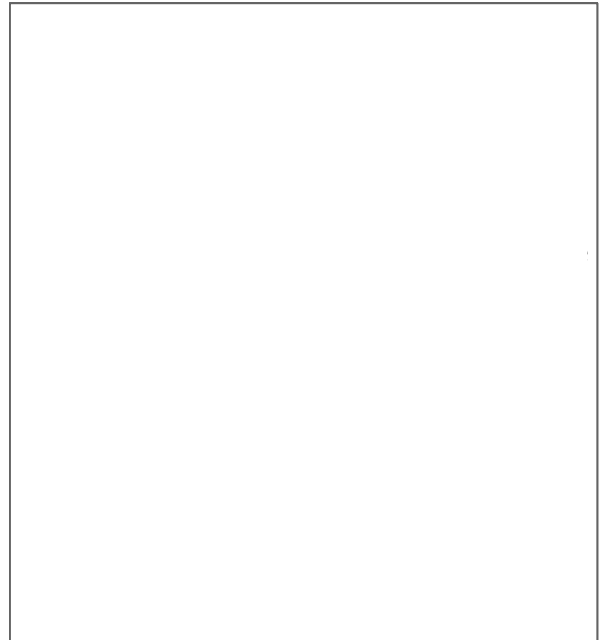
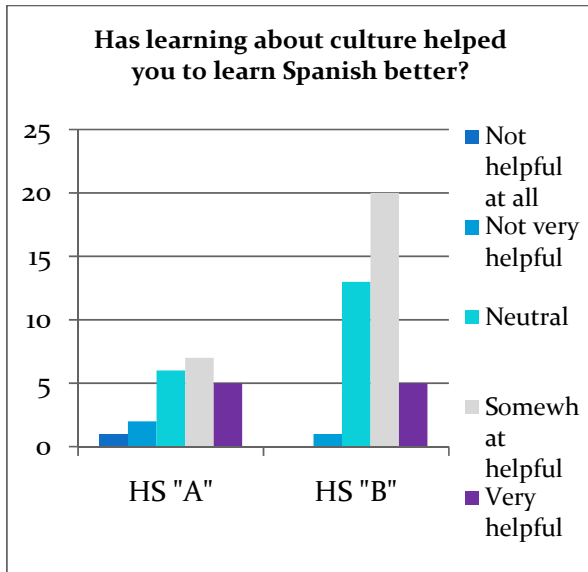


Table 5 contains data concerning how often students believe they learn about culture. The results are very wide-ranging, however, most students believe they only learn cultural topics “sometimes” or about once per week. These results are interesting to compare with teacher’s self-reported five to ten minute daily discussions and the “culture observations” chart in table 1. Table 5.

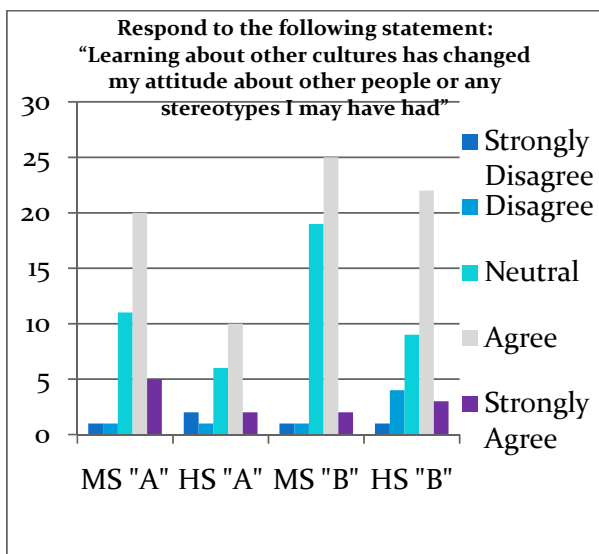


In order to gauge if students believe that learning culture has enhanced their second language acquisition, we asked them, “Has learning about culture helped you to learn Spanish better?” Student responses were highest in the category, “somewhat helpful” and second highest in the “neutral” category. Table 6.



Finally, we asked students to respond to the following statement, “Learning about other cultures has changed my attitude about other people or any stereotypes I may have had.” The overwhelming majority “agree” with this statement while the second highest number of students responded “neutral” to this statement. Several students reported they “strongly disagree” with this statement, and we saw a correlation that these students were the same students who reported that learning about other cultures is, “not important at all.”

Table 7.



Representation in the Classroom

Our teacher, student, and own observations of the representation of culture in the classroom all conclude the same findings. Teachers decorate their classrooms with maps of Hispanic countries, posters of artwork, literature, movies, and music from the Hispanic culture, and flags from various Spanish speaking countries. In addition, teachers adorn their rooms with realia, or authentic materials, from places in which they have visited. For example, realia was seen in the form of a canteen from Mexico, pottery from Latin America, and *Carnaval* masks from Spain.

Instruction

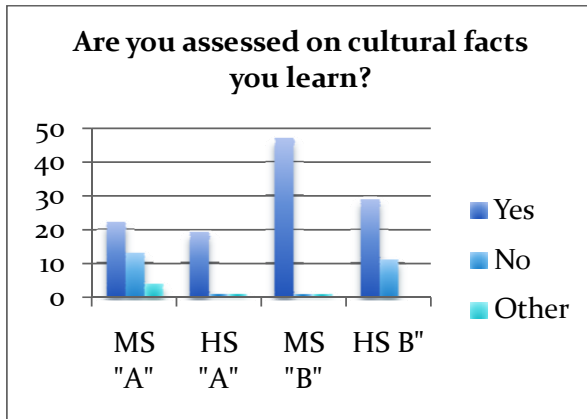
The questions addressing this category deal with the actual teaching of culture. Questions focus on the way culture is incorporated into lessons and more specifically if culture is integrated into the other lessons (such as grammar, reading, or speaking) or taught separately. Through our teacher questionnaires and observations we found that all teachers excluding high school teacher “B” used a varied of methods to instruct culture drawing from readings, lectures, pictures, videos, and music. High school teacher “B” reported she taught culture “as it fits,” addressing the topic when it was presented, usually prompted by a student question.

Assessment

Questions in this section seek to find whether students are held accountable for the cultural material that is taught in their classes, and if they are, how learning is assessed. Also, teachers were asked about the importance of learning culture in the framework of standardized tests and if they would teach more culture if time allowed it. From our teacher questionnaires, we discovered that all four teachers assessed students on quizzes or unit tests; however, the teacher from middle school “A” only assessed culture in the form of extra credit on a quiz or unit test. Our student findings suggest there is some confusion among students regarding their assessment of culture. A greater number of students from all four schools reported that they were assessed on culture than those who reported they were not. In middle school “A,” a high number of students

reported they were not assessed on culture which we believe may be attributed to the fact that it is included as extra credit on quizzes and unit tests.

Table 8.



Incidental Findings

Some of our most interesting findings were ones which we had not intentionally sought out, but rather discovered through the course of our research. We have concluded that there are four major incidental findings, which supplement the pre-determined focal points.

The recognition of culture

We found that students are not always aware of when they are learning culture. The evidence we have to support this finding is that many students answered that they did not actually learn about culture very often, while other students of the same class stated that they spent a significant amount of time on learning culture. We found that many students do not realize that what they are learning is a cultural point unless the teacher explicitly states they are learning culture. At middle school "B" the students work primarily from a textbook that has "cultural notes" every few pages for students to read. In these middle school classes, the students agreed that they spent a lot of time learning about culture and the major source of culture came from the textbook. Similarly, teachers may not always realize how much they talk about culture in a given class period. While conversing with high school teacher "A," he mentioned that he did not "explicitly teach culture," but we found that he did indeed include culture in many lessons.

Experience abroad equals greater enthusiasm

Teachers who have lived abroad or even just visited a foreign country have more excitement about the culture from that particular region. Because of their first hand experience of living among a particular culture, teachers have a stronger connection to the country, which correlates to a greater enthusiasm for the culture. It appeared that teachers who lived in Spain focused primarily on the incorporation of Spanish culture, while teachers who lived in Latin America referenced more Hispanic culture. Because these teachers had the opportunity to live and travel to Spanish speaking countries, their passion for the culture is inevitably stronger. Evidence to support our hypothesis comes from student surveys that stated their teachers taught a lot about culture based on their personal experiences. Also, the display of realia in the classroom further supports this hypothesis since many teachers displayed their personal possessions and pictures from abroad around their classroom. From this hypothesis, we have concluded that it is imperative for a foreign language teacher to travel abroad in order to better grasp the language and culture they are teaching to their students. If teachers have a first hand experience abroad, they can provide a greater sense of appreciation and excitement for the cultural material for their students.

Timing of culture within a unit

We found that there is a greater focus on culture in the beginning of a unit with a gradual and continual decrease of cultural instruction throughout the course of a unit. Many teachers connect vocabulary introduction to culture, which generally occurs with a new unit. Also, we observed that the lesson one day prior to an exam day lacks any incorporation of culture because there is a greater focus on what students will be assessed, which lacks a cultural assessment. At school "C" we observed a lesson in which the teacher introduced vocabulary to students, which was based entirely upon Spanish culture. At middle school "A" we were told there would be "no culture" on a specific class day because they were reviewing for an exam.

Use of Target Language in the Classroom

Another result of observing many Spanish lessons was the discovery that teachers do not spend much time teaching while using the target language. This general lack of incorporation of Spanish into the classroom results in a decrease use of Spanish on the students' part as well. Teachers generally used Spanish when giving classroom commands, however, all other instruction was taught in English. High school teacher "B" used almost no Spanish in any of her classes, not even with greetings or classroom commands. This finding exemplifies how teachers could expose their students to Spanish at a greater level if they were to use the target language to a more frequently over the course of a given class period. The implications, we believe, negatively impact the learning process, creating a more pronounced disconnect between the Spanish language and what the students are learning about the language.

Synthesis

This section serves to summarize the findings for every teacher.

Middle School "A"

The least experienced of the teachers studied, it was obvious that the teacher from Middle School "A" placed a great deal of emphasis the learning of culture in her class. She reported that learning about Hispanic culture is necessary to learn Spanish and makes it a point to mention culture at least once per class period. Our findings were similar, showing that she spent on average of three minutes per class discussing cultural topics. It is clear that her students share similar feelings about the importance of culture when the majority said that it is "very important" to their teacher and "somewhat important" to them. It is interesting that cultural topics are usually assessed in the form of extra credit or participation points, given her belief that culture of is such an integral part in learning Spanish. However, she also mentions that it is not assessed on the NYS Proficiency Exam and therefore spends less time on cultural topics.

We found that the majority of her lessons were based on Spanish culture because

her experiences were based in Spain, although we did observe one lesson including cultural points regarding Mexican history. She reported that many of her lessons are based on vocabulary introduction where she explains different usages of the words. Also, she tries to use comparisons between Spanish speaking countries and the United States to make the culture more germane to the students. We did observe that she used Spanish in her classes, especially for basic classroom commands. Based on the level of eight grade Spanish, this amount of Spanish can be appropriate, although there is always room for more.

High School "A"

The teacher from High School "A" has a great deal of firsthand experience, being raised in Europe. He makes sure to mention not only Hispanic culture, but European culture as well. When asked about how he introduces cultural lessons to his students, he said that he usually starts with asking students about their prior knowledge regarding the subject matter. Then, the class discusses the similarities and differences between students' native culture and Hispanic culture and possible reasons for the variations.

He stated that is necessary for students to learn about the culture behind the language to truly learn the language itself. He believes to spend between ten and fifteen minutes discussing culture in any given class period, although we found an average of 2.5 minutes per class. Even though he believes that it is very important to learn about culture, he says he would not spend more time teaching culture. Although the majority of students surveyed reported culture being "somewhat important" to their teacher, they reported that it is "very important" to them.

Middle School "B"

This teacher was the only teacher to use a textbook in his instruction. Many of the cultural points the students learned came from the textbook in sections marked "cultural note". We found that 100% of his students reported that they mainly used textbooks to learn culture. We believe that this is important because it was obvious to his students that they were learning

about culture in the class because it was explicitly stated in the text. Also, students were held accountable for the cultural material because the tests that were given came as supplemental material with the text. He also reported teaching a great deal from his own experiences abroad, especially from Latin America. He believes to spend about five minutes per class period discussing cultural topics, but we observed an average of 1.5 minutes per class was spent on culture. He also stated that he is comfortable with the amount of time he talks about culture with his classes, although there is always room for more.

Like the other teachers, he stated that learning about culture was important for understanding of the Spanish language. However, the important ranked low with the standardized tests that were given at the end of the school year. The majority of his students said that culture was “somewhat important” to their teacher and also to themselves. We noted during our observations that he used Spanish for all classroom commands and started his classes by asking students to talk about the time, weather, and the number of students in the classroom. Given the level of the students, we feel that his use of the target language is appropriate.

High School “B”

Of all of the teachers involved in this study, the teacher from High School “B” had the most contradictory results. She responded that learning culture was ranked high in importance in terms of major concepts. The majority of students agreed, saying that learning about culture was “somewhat important” to both the teacher and to themselves. When asked about time spent teaching culture, she reported that she spent between five and ten minutes discussing cultural topics per class period. However, we found that she spent less than three minutes per class talking about cultural topics. It is important to mention that there is a specific class devoted to talking about culture, Spanish 5, and our observational data could have been inflated because these students were also included in the study.

Furthermore, this teacher reported that she did not use a textbook and instead relied on her own personal experience, from both Spain and Latin America. The majority of students (60.00%) reported that they received their cultural information from a chapter book developed for students to learn about Hispanic culture. To supplement this, our observational data shows that students received a great deal of their cultural instruction when their questions of culture were answered by the teacher.

The last topic to discuss about this teacher is her use of the target language in the classroom. Although she teaches the upper level Spanish classes (3-5), we noticed that she spent the overwhelming majority of the class speaking in English rather than in Spanish. Because target language usage was not something that we were specifically researching, we do not have quantitative research to support these findings.

Limitations

Survey Error

We developed the student surveys in hopes of eliciting honest responses in order to collect valuable and valid data. However, with survey sampling comes unavoidable survey error. The two types of survey error that surfaced as a result of our research were measurement error and nonresponse error. Measurement error most likely emerged from the manner in which questions were worded, which resulted in the collection of inaccurate answers. For example, in question 3, students were given a list from which they were to choose three items as a response. Many students chose only one or two items, instead of the requested number of three items. Therefore, this measurement error resulted in inaccurate answers. Nonresponse error was our highest survey error type. Several questions on the student surveys were open-ended in nature, of which many students left unanswered. Furthermore, for Likert item questions, there were several student surveys in which students chose more than one response, which required one and only response.

Observational Data

Upon contacting teachers requesting permission to conduct research in their

classrooms, we described the purpose of our action research and that we were focusing on the amount of culture discussed in a class period. This skewed the results of our data because teachers, conscious of what we were measuring, may have incorporated more culture into their lesson than they had previously intended. Evidence to support this stems from conversations with teachers who informed us when there would be lessons with significantly more or less culture instruction in a given class period, noting that days before unit exams were given, there would be no cultural instruction.

Inability to generalize

The four schools in which we conducted this research share many similar features, which characterize a school. Therefore, our homogenous sample cannot be representative of all schools and hinders the ability to generalize this research. If we had used a more heterogeneous sample of schools, it would allow for stronger and valid generalization of all schools in New York.

Recommendations for teachers

Upon reflection of this research, we have concluded that we have four important recommendations for Spanish teachers at the middle and high school levels.

Experience abroad is crucial

It is imperative that Spanish teachers venture abroad to a Hispanic country, regardless of the purpose of the trip. Be it an excursion abroad to live, work, or merely pay a visit, it is a vital component of being a good foreign language teacher. Students observe the enthusiasm teachers have for a place in which they have stayed and see the importance of learning about other cultures through the experiences of their teacher. The connection a teacher has with a foreign country diminishes the gap between students and the Spanish language in the classroom creating a greater sense of appreciation and understanding of another culture.

Incorporate culture whenever possible

Teachers are encouraged to make a more concerted effort to include cultural instruction

into their daily lessons. The more culture the students are exposed to, the stronger their language skills will be. Furthermore, students will develop a better sense of discernment for the Hispanic culture if they are continuously learning about the customs, traditions, and ways in which other people live.

Use of target language

In the Spanish classroom, the majority of instruction should be given in the target language. Generally, students are only in each class for less than one hour per day thus, teachers must capitalize on the opportunity to instruct in the Spanish language to make the most of their time with students.

Assessment of culture

In order to place a greater emphasis on the importance of learning culture, teachers ought to formally assess culture. If students are held accountable for knowing culture, it will illustrate that it is a topic just as important as others such as vocabulary and grammar. In middle school “A” the teacher assessed culture in the form of extra credit questions on quizzes and unit exams which actually deemphasizes its importance. Extra credit implies that the information in question is less important than the rest of the material, which gives the wrong impression to students.

Conclusion

Finally, we sought to establish the value of learning culture in the Spanish classroom. We wanted to prove it is essential to achieve second language acquisition on a deeper and more profound level and to shed light on the importance of broadening students’ scope of cultural knowledge because indeed, culture and language are undeniably interrelated.

Our greatest finding concerns that teachers and students alike deem cultural instruction important. Teachers consider it “essential” to study cultural aspects in the foreign language classroom in order for greater comprehension of the language. Students also find importance in learning about culture and especially believe that their teachers value the learning of culture. Despite the beliefs that

cultural instruction is an integral component of language learning, time restraints limit the amount of actual cultural instruction in the classroom. Even so, teachers claim they would spend more time incorporating cultural elements into their lessons if time allowed.

The use of realia, or authentic artifacts from abroad, provides students with additional exposure to culture. The presence of realia in the classroom allows students to see objects, first-hand, from those countries of which they are studying. This develops a stronger connection between students and culture because they have tangible evidence of cultural elements of the Hispanic world within their reach. We observed that through realia, teachers were able to tap into students' five senses when displaying their cultural specific artifacts, which inherently strengthens students' relationship with the culture of the target language.

The New York State Department of Education sets the standards for Modern Languages which includes Spanish. Students enrolled in Spanish classes are first tested on their knowledge of the content in eighth grade with an examination called the New York State Proficiency Exam. Student comprehension is measured again with the New York State Regents Spanish Exam in Level III. The focal points of these examinations center around four critical skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Therefore, teachers direct their lessons towards preparing students for these four skills which results in the lack of cultural instruction.

Based on observations of lessons and conversations with teachers, we discovered that there exists a certain pattern concerning the timing of cultural instruction within a unit. Cultural topics are seen more frequently at the beginning of a unit, especially in vocabulary introduction lessons. As the unit progresses, there seems to be a steady decrease of cultural inclusion throughout the course of the unit. Teachers explicitly stated there would be "no culture" the day before a unit exam, since culture would not be assessed on the exam, it would not be discussed in class the day prior to the unit test.

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