

RUNNING HEAD: LOCATING CULTURE

Locating Culture in Unexpected Places

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### Locating Culture in Unexpected Places

As faculty development specialists at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) in Monterey, California, we work with foreign language teachers from approximately 28 different countries, many of whom have never taught before. As they work toward getting grounded in the various communicative approaches to language teaching, many—most, in fact—express an interest in and concern about how to teach their culture to their generally monolingual English students. These novice teachers understand, even at this early period in their development as language teachers, that language and culture are really interdependent, that the one makes the other possible. Yet they also understand how complicated and vast the subject really is. Where do they begin? What does “teaching culture” look like? Is it enough to bring in some cultural artifacts, perhaps a little food and drink, some music, or to lecture periodically about the holidays, gestures, and religious practices that they believe set their cultures apart from other lifeworlds?

These questions challenge us also, and, as colleagues, we are not always in agreement about *how* to frame the teaching of culture. One of the more recognizable models we have used to help raise instructors’ awareness of the shades of meaning that “culture” implies is Weaver’s (1986) diagram of the “cultural iceberg.” This model distinguishes between those aspects of culture that are visible and accessible to everyone—the “surface culture” that anthropologists have referred to as culture with a “Big C”—and the attitudinal and behavioral norms belonging to the submerged realm of “deep culture” (culture with a “little c”) that, though serving as the underpinnings for a given culture, require more intimacy to see and understand. We have also employed the “cultural onion” model advanced by Trompenaars (1997), which emphasizes the

layers or the *complexity* of culture. Both models help bring teachers to the awareness that there is very much more to culture than music, costume, food, and dance—in short, those elements that most stand out as being *exotic* or otherwise *different* from their learners' own cultures and experiences.

Whether language teachers focus on Big or little “C” culture, there are certain risks involved. Both the “iceberg” and “onion” models imply homogeneous and static qualities to cultures, even though experience and common sense argue for diversity and dynamism among the members of the given cultural group. What is more, when we place undue emphasis on surface or “Big C” culture, we drive home the idea that a foreign (in every sense of the word) culture is something to behold; foreign language learners get the message that the target culture is something they might *learn* but not necessarily *live*. This is not to suggest that the teaching of (or about) visible culture is not valuable or useful; it is only to suggest that directing lopsided attention to the *products* of a given culture may not help learners to develop the kind of understandings they need to function effectively or otherwise achieve agency in the target language.

Kumaravadivelu (2003), who has done some of the most prominent work in the area of teaching culture, worries that focusing on cultural identity is often narrowly associated with national identity or linguistic identity, and tends therefore to perpetuate stereotypes. He worries, too, that the traditional approach to teaching culture treats learners as a “tabula rasa,” that is, it ignores the fact that learners bring their own cultural traditions, experiences, and perspectives into the classroom, all of which, presumably, will influence their learning. We take his point, but we are also concerned about another tendency we have seen in traditional approaches to teaching culture, namely that by coaxing learners into continuous comparisons of their own cultures and traditions with those of the target culture, teachers unintentionally encourage an “us” and “them”

relationship with the target culture. Comparison for the sake of comparison is an essentially unproductive activity, leading perhaps to recognition of certain aspects of the target culture, but not to anything like a redrawing of learners' own imaginative boundaries that would take them toward deeper understanding and enhanced L<sub>2</sub> competency.

We propose an approach to teaching culture that is closer to Claire Kramsch's (1993) notion of "a third culture," an imaginative zone within the L<sub>2</sub> classroom where multiple cultures and perspectives intersect. One way to achieve that goal is to encourage learners to embark upon a real journey to discover cultural meanings, first in the teaching materials we provide them, and later in the world outside the classroom. This is an intellectually challenging activity, but very rewarding because culture—more specifically, widely shared attitudes and beliefs—is really *everywhere*, though often not obvious to L<sub>2</sub> learners. Hence the title of our CATESOL 2006 presentation, "Locating Culture in Unexpected Places": we encourage learners—and teachers—to adopt the perspective of ethnographer or even cultural critic and try to *interpret* what they see. Understanding is the primary aim here; when comparisons do come into play, they are *productive* comparisons that lead to reflection and self-understanding.

#### The Presentation: Highlights and Discoveries

In discussing resources for developing classroom activities that explore cultural themes, we noted that there are signs of widely shared attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs—those things that we generally associate with "small c" culture—all around us, yet native speakers are often so habituated to them that they give them little thought. Advertisers and marketers, on the other hand, are profoundly alert to the core beliefs of a given society and use this awareness to create powerful tools for selling products. Print and television advertisements are therefore particularly

rich carriers of hidden cultural notions, and can be an inexhaustible resource for classroom activities that engage learners in analysis and discussion.

With this in mind, we first shared with our audience a three-part task for intermediate-level learners based upon a Citibank<sup>®</sup> advertisement clipped from a newspaper. The advertisement showed a paper-doll figure of a young man dressed only in undershirt and shorts, surrounded by an array of objects: a bicycle, golf clubs, a baby carrier (with baby!), athletic shoes, briefcase, and other accoutrements of a contemporary, upwardly mobile young man. We described the students' progress through this activity which started with small-group examination of the images, then transferred to a new image (a figure of an elderly woman surrounded by blank squares or boxes for learners to fill in), and culminated in a handout showing a blank space in the center (sub-titled, "Draw Your Own Picture Here") that asked students to draw an image of themselves and insert their desired accessories. We emphasized that there were opportunities for discussion at all points in this sequence, with learners being asked to share the thinking behind their decisions. Follow-up activities, we suggested, could include reflective journal writing in which learners examined their own criteria for selecting their accessories, whether those criteria had changed over time, where their criteria had originated and so on. In any case, we suggested that learners be encouraged to suspend comparisons with the target culture and focus rather on self-understanding.

We next shared a television commercial aired during the 2006 Super Bowl advertising the job search site, Careerbuilders.com<sup>®</sup>. The commercial portrays a young, "normal" man at his cubicle surrounded by "a bunch of monkeys" (actually chimpanzees in shirts and ties) who are celebrating (mistakenly, it turns out) a rise in their company's sales. To the young man's chagrin, there is loud partying and free-flowing champagne, all under the direction of a

chimpanzee boss in a pin-striped suit who lights his cigars with money and admonishes the young man to join in the fun. The advertisement closes with, “Want a new job? We’ve got the most.” The ad’s implication, it seemed to us, was that there exists in American society a widely-shared belief that we all deserve a better place to work., and that Careerbuilders.com<sup>®</sup> might be the first step toward job satisfaction and success.

We shared a bit of backstory regarding our development process involving one of our DLI colleagues, a native of China who earned her Ph.D. from an American university and had lived in the United States for several years. After seeing the clip, she considered a while before proposing that the commercial was selling the company as a “fun place to work.” (It bears mentioning here that one of the audience members astutely noted that in Chinese culture, monkeys are often venerated as friends of humans, which helped explain our colleague’s initial difficulty with viewing the partying chimps unfavorably.) In any case, the “You-deserve-better” message we recognized did not resonate with our colleague at all; in a sense, she had been shut out of the joke. This, we believe, underscores the importance of the teacher as a culture guide, one who, through targeted questions/interactions, directs the learners’ attention to layers of cultural meaning that would otherwise be difficult to penetrate.

Co-presenter Amel Farghaly, a non-native English speaker whose English is nevertheless commensurate with highly proficient native speakers, shared an “aha” moment of her own. We had selected a Jack-in-the-Box commercial (“Bread is Back!”) to present for analysis. As we discussed the meanings embedded in the advertisement, Amel discovered that she had taken it at face value: she thought the commercial was just selling a new sandwich. During the play of our conversation, a series of questions emerged—“Bread is *back*?”; “Where has bread been?”—that revealed the commercial to be fraught with cultural connotations she had initially missed.

Through this scaffolded interaction, Amel realized that the advertisement referred, in part, to the series of fad diets that American society has seen, such as the South Beach Diet, and the No-Carbs diet, etc. At the end, she realized the multiple layers of understanding involved and the usefulness of a guide.

At our presentation's end we reiterated the aims of this analytical approach to the teaching of culture: 1) To engage learners in deep, thoughtful conversation (student to student balanced with students to teacher), which has the potential to allow them to confront and explore stereotypes that perpetuate cultural misunderstandings and conflicts; 2) To help learners "read" cultural events and activities in ways that resonate with their experience, thus making their learning experience more meaningful and enduring (after Kumaravadivelu [2003]); 3) To encourage them to be more astute questioners of the world around them; 4) To help learners become better able to function competently and successfully in a multicultural society (or a society that feels quite different from their own). Overall, we hold to the belief that just as learners of a second language experience extension and enrichment of their own lives through contact with the language (and with the teacher who facilitates the process), constant reflection and contact with the other-than-self can change our sense of who we are and who we want to be.

The energy we put into preparing for CATESOL 2006 was more than rewarded by the insights we gleaned during what turned out to be a very interactive presentation. For this, we thank our spirited audience as well as the conference organizers. Should readers be interested in obtaining full descriptions of the activities mentioned above, contact Amel Farghaly (amel.farghaly@monterey.army.mil) or Janette Edwards (janette.edwards@monterey.army.mil).

## References

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