



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
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## Teaching Culture: Beyond Language

Curriculum Unit 84.03.06  
by Deborah Peck

What is culture? According to Ruth Benedict, “Culture is what binds (people) together.” (Brown, p. 46). Culture is all the accepted and patterned ways of behavior of a given people. It is that facet of human life learned by people as a result of belonging to some particular group; it is that part of learned behavior shared with others. Not only does this concept include a group’s way of thinking, feeling, and acting, but also the internalized patterns for doing certain things in certain ways . . . not just the doing of them. This concept of culture also includes the physical manifestations of a group as exhibited in their achievements and contributions to civilization. Culture is our social legacy as contrasted with our organic heredity. It regulates our lives at every turn.

The goal of this unit is to demonstrate to foreign language teachers how they can incorporate the teaching of culture into their foreign language classrooms. In this curriculum unit, I will define the different types of culture; demonstrate its relevance to second language learning; and give suggestions as to when and how both formal and deep cultures can be incorporated into the already existing curriculum of a beginning language course. Although this unit is intended for use in my introductory French and Spanish classes, parts of the unit are interdisciplinary.

Of what value is culture to second language learning? For the foreign language teacher, the reasons are many. Culture shapes our view of the world. And language is the most representative element in any culture. Any item of behavior, tradition or pattern can only be understood in light of its meaning to the people who practice it. A knowledge of the codes of behavior of another people is important if today’s foreign language student is to communicate fully in the target language. Without the study of culture, foreign language instruction is inaccurate and incomplete. For foreign language students, language study seems senseless if they know nothing about the people who speak it or the country in which it is spoken. Language learning should be more than the manipulation of syntax and lexicon.

Humanistically, the study of different cultures aids us in getting to know different people which is a necessary prelude to understanding and respecting other peoples and their ways of life. It helps to open our students’ eyes to the similarities and differences in the life of various cultural groups. Today, most of our students live in a monolingual and monocultural environment. Consequently, they become culture-bound individuals who tend to make premature and inappropriate value judgments. This can cause them to consider the foreign peoples whose language they are trying to learn as very peculiar and even ill-mannered. In 1980, the President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies stated, “Foreign language instruction at any level

should be a humanistic pursuit intended to sensitize students to other cultures, to the relativity of values, to appreciation of similarities among peoples and respect for the differences among them.” (Wilkes, p. 107)

When should the study of culture begin? Should culture be postponed until students can study it in the target language? Won't special emphasis upon culture be wasteful of precious class time? Shouldn't cultural materials be postponed until students have greater maturity and greater language competence? Ideally, the study of culture should begin on the very first day of class and should continue every day there after. Because of the large decrease in enrollment in second and third year language courses, the concept of culture can be communicated to only a small number of students unless this is done in the earliest phases of their instruction.

What type of culture should be taught in the foreign language classroom? Nelson Brooks has identified five meanings of culture: growth; refinement; fine arts; patterns of living; and a total way of life. He believes that patterns of living should receive the major emphasis in the classroom. It is patterns of living that are the least understood, yet the most important in the early phases of language instruction. He labels this meaning of culture as culture 4 and defines it as follows:

“Culture 4 (patterns of living) refers to the individual's role in the unending kaleidoscope of life situations of every kind and the rules and models for attitude and conduct in them. By reference to these models, every human being, from infancy onward, justifies the world to himself as best he can, associates with those around him, and relates to the social order to which he is attached.” (Brooks, p. 210).

From the point of view of language instruction, culture 4 can be divided into formal culture and deep culture. Formal culture, sometimes referred to as “culture with a capital C”, includes the humanistic manifestations and contributions of a foreign culture: art; music; literature; architecture; technology; politics. However, with this way of looking at culture, we often lose sight of the individual.

The most profitable way of looking at culture is to see what it does. Deep culture, or “culture with a small c,” focuses on the behavioral patterns or lifestyles of the people: When and what they eat; how they make a living; the attitudes they express towards friends and members of their families; which expressions they use to show approval or disapproval. In this sense, culture is a body of ready-made solutions to the problems encountered by the group. It is a cushion between man and his environment. If we provide our students only with a list of facts of history or geography and a list of lexical items, we have not provided them with an intimate view of what life is really like in the target culture.

### **How to incorporate culture into the Foreign Language classroom**

Now that the what, why, and when of incorporating culture in the foreign language classroom has been established, a focus on the how is needed. Better international understanding is a noble aim, but how can the transition be made from theoretical matters to the active, crowded, and sometimes noisy foreign language classroom? One problem in all classroom work is the involvement of students' interest, attention, and active participation. Learning activities which focus on active rather than passive learning are the best.

Traditional methods of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom have been focused on formal culture and passive learning. Students do need both a geographical and historical perspective in order to understand contemporary behavior patterns but this can be done with “hands on” activities. Beginning foreign language students want to feel, touch, smell, and see the foreign peoples and not just hear their language.

## ***Cultural Islands***

From the first day of class teachers should have prepared a cultural island in their classrooms. Posters, pictures, maps, signs, and realia of many kinds are essential in helping students develop a mental image (all are available from Gessler Publishing Company). Assigning students foreign names from the first day can heighten student interest. Short presentations on a topic of interest with appropriate pictures or slides add to this mental image. Start students off by making them aware of the influence of various foreign cultures in this country. Introduce students to the borrowed words in our English language or the place-names of our country. This helps students to realize they already know many words in the target language (i.e. poncho, fiesta, rodeo). Some of the foods they eat are another example of the influence of foreign cultures (i.e. taco, burrito, chili).

A good introductory activity is to send students on cultural scavenger hunts to supermarkets and department stores and have them make lists of imported goods. You might also want to take students on a tour of a local Hispanic community. Subsequent activities might include: sending students out to interview shop owners; inviting bilingual students to your class to tutor students or to talk about a certain topic and maybe help narrate a slide show; inviting guest speakers (contact local Spanish Cultural Association).

## ***Celebrating Festivals***

Celebrating foreign festivals is a favorite activity of many students. Even though this activity takes a lot of planning, it works well as a culminating activity. My Spanish-speaking students start by bringing in recipes from home and then we put our own cookbook together (See bibliography for Cooper's book). We then prepare for the festival by drawing posters, decorating the room, and preparing some of the foods in our cookbook. At Christmas time, we fill a pinata with candy and learn some folk songs and folk dances (Most textbooks have songs at the back of the book). This kind of activity enables student to actively participate in the cultural heritage of the people they are studying.

## ***Kinesics and Body Language***

Culture is a network of verbal and non-verbal communication. If our goal as foreign language teachers is to teach communication, we must not neglect the most obvious form of non-verbal communication which is gesture. Gesture, although learned, is largely an unconscious cultural phenomenon. Gesture conveys the "feel" of the language to the student and when accompanied by verbal communication, injects greater authenticity into the classroom and makes language study more interesting. Gerald Green in his book *Gesture Inventory for Teaching Spanish* suggests that teachers use foreign culture gestures when presenting dialogues, cuing students' responses, and assisting students to recall dialogue lines (Examples of dialogues and appropriate gestures are given in the book). At the beginning of the year, teachers can also show foreign films to students just to have them focus on body movements.

## ***Culture Capsules***

In Ursula Hendron's article on teaching culture in the high school classroom, she suggests using culture capsules. The culture capsule teachers through comparison by illustrating one essential difference between an American and a foreign custom (i.e. dating, cuisine, pets, sports). The cultural insights from the culture capsule can be further illustrated by role playing. For example, Hendron suggests teaching dating customs in Spanish-speaking countries by creating an illusion of a plaza mayor in the classroom with posters, props, music or slides. Students pretend to be young Latin-Americans and act out a Sunday paseo.

Brigham Young University also publishes culture capsules entitled “Culturgrams” for over eighty different countries. Each “culturgram” is divided into sections on family lifestyle, attitudes, customs and courtesies, and history. After studying these, students can compare and contrast the foreign customs and traditions with their own.

### ***Cultural Consciousness-Raising***

Attitude is another factor in language learning that leads to cross cultural understanding. Helen Wilkes believes that the totality of language learning is comprised of three integrated components: linguistic, cultural, and attitudinal. As foreign language teachers, we all teach the basic sounds, vocabulary, and syntax of the target language. Above we have seen methods of introducing culture into the classroom. The remainder of this paper will focus on effecting attitudinal changes.

Most foreign language teachers would agree that positively sensitizing students to cultural phenomena is urgent and crucial. Studies indicate that attitudinal factors are clear predictors of success in second language learning. However, effecting attitudinal changes requires planned programs which integrate cultural and linguistic units as a means to cross-cultural understanding. The following method for effecting attitudinal changes is adapted from Helen Wilkes’ article “A Simple Device for Cultural Consciousness Raising in the Teenaged Student of French.” The organization of the notebook can be a useful tool in any discipline, but it can be of special importance in the foreign language classroom as a cultural consciousness raising tool. Helen Wilkes suggests that from the very first day of school the foreign language teacher should have students begin organizing their notebook. The notebook should be divided into four sections: El Vocabulario; Los Ejercicios; La Gramática; Un Poco de Todo. Each section of the notebook will have an illustrated title page.

## **Section I—El Vocabulario**

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Students’ first homework assignment should be to look up names of Hispanic products in the supermarket, names of wines or liqueurs, Hispanic recording artists, Hispanic restaurants. They can cut the names out from magazines or newspapers and paste them or write them on the title page of “El Vocabulario” section. The next day in class, the teacher should help students to pronounce these names. The benefits of this approach are immeasurable. Students immediately focus on phonology and oral production without having to worry about memorizing lexical items at the same time. Secondly, students see the immediate usefulness of their foreign language class. Students love to leave class the first days with a list of words they have already mastered. Naturally, this helps to increase student motivation and gives important positive feedback.

## **Section II—Los Ejercicios**

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The title page of this section should be illustrated with a map of Spain or Puerto Rico or Mexico. Students can use an atlas to trace their maps. These beginning maps should be very simple, and should only include bordering countries, bodies of water, rivers, mountains, and capital city. This will help students to develop the concept of separate and distinct countries within continents. (Most of my students have no concept of this in 7th or 8th grade.) Questions can be asked as a follow-up assignment in which students must infer answers from studying their maps (i.e. climate, sports). These maps can be added to during the year. A culminating

hands-on activity might be the preparation of a large relief map.

### ***Section III—La Gramática***

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The title page of this section might be a map of the world illustrated with Spanish-speaking countries. The teacher can pass out a world map and have students look up the names of Spanish-speaking countries for homework. The next class period can be spent locating the Spanish-speaking countries on the map. Student awareness will broaden as they begin to realize that Spanish is a world language, not just the language of one or two countries.

With this information on Spanish-speaking countries in the world, students can begin to learn a variety of grammatical constructs. Constructs might include: *El tren va a Madrid* or *Quiero ir a Madrid*. This technique is most successful because students are not trying to memorize lexical items that have no meaning to them. Spanish translations of jingles and proverbs are also fun and can teach grammatical structure at the same time.

### ***Section IV—Un poco de todo***

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This section might be illustrated with symbols associated with Hispanic customs and traditions (i.e. flags, Mexican foods, famous landmarks in Latin America or Spain, bull fights, etc.) This section is specifically designed for cultural materials. Students can keep the words to songs in this section. They can sketch slides of famous places or they can cut out ads for products. If these can't be found, teachers can bring in Spanish magazines and newspapers for students to use (i.e. *Ma-ana*, *El Diario*). Current event newspaper clippings can be given as homework assignments and then displayed on boards. Students can also give media reports from T.V. or radio (i.e. *SIN*, *WLVH Radio 94*).

All of the sections of the notebook are intended as a point of departure for teaching culture and can be adapted to any foreign language. Students are immediately involved in the people, countries, and products of the language they are studying. They immediately begin learning meaningful vocabulary and grammatical structure without the frustration of memorization. Students are actively involved in illustrating their title pages and contributing information to the class via the media. Motivation should be high because students will naturally become more interested in those things they know something about.

Throughout the year, the teacher should continue to add to the notebook sections with material incorporated from textbook units. Using real pictures of people and places instead of flash cards is a good idea. Teachers can find plenty of pictures from magazines. Showing students a picture of the Cathedral of Mexico to teach that *“ésta es una iglesia”* creates a mental image while learning a new lexical item at the same time. Grammar is the key to communication but it can be presented in a much more meaningful and interesting way than some of our textbooks suggest.

Students need to feel positive about what they are doing and studying. Even less gifted students can contribute by bringing in clippings and drawings. They take pride in their notebooks when they've worked so hard to illustrate them. Recent studies demonstrate that if students have positive attitudes, they will do well.

Foreign language teachers should aim at developing interest and awareness. If all a teacher has accomplished is a smattering of lexical items, nothing at all has been accomplished. Successful teachers prefer to see their students leave class at the end of the year saying: Quiero ir a Mexico or Me gusta la comida.

In conclusion, the teaching of culture should become an integral part of foreign language instruction. Culture should be our message to students and language our medium. It should begin on the very first day of class and should continue every day after that. This does not imply that linguistic constructs will be ignored. Many elements of culture are imbedded within the language itself (i.e. tú vs. usted). Basing dialogues on situations that are authentic (using body language) is as important as linguistic structure and semantics. Using pictures as much as possible, preferably ones from target language magazines is advocated. While pictures cannot teach the sounds or structures of a language, they can often show what language stands for. Lastly teachers should concentrate on active learning and should give students more hands-on experiences so that they can feel, touch, smell, and see! These kinds of activities will keep students motivated and will result in positive attitudes, greater awareness, and academic success.

### ***Independent Activity Sheets***

#### *CULTURAL NAMES*

##### **DIRECTIONS:**

Write the names of each of your classmates below. Ask each of them what cultural groups their parents and grandparents are from and list them next to their name. At the bottom of the page total the number of cultural groups in the whole class. Decorate the classroom with flags or symbols for each cultural group.

#### *NAME CULTURAL GROUP*

Class Total:

#### *CULTURAL NAMES:*

#### *NEIGHBORHOOD EXPLORATION*

##### **DIRECTIONS :**

Walk around your neighborhood and make a list of streets and stores that are named after people. Next to each name write the cultural group that the name comes from. Ask your teacher or parents for help. This will give you a record of the groups that have been or still are in your neighborhood.

#### *STREET NAMES : CULTURAL GROUPS :*

#### *STORE NAMES : CULTURAL GROUPS :*

#### *CULTURAL ARTIFACTS*

##### **DIRECTIO NS:**

An artifact is an object or a thing. Some artifacts are of special importance or meaning to a cultural group. Ask your parents or grandparents if they have an artifact from their cultural group that you could bring to school to tell the class about.

ARTIFACT :

WHERE IS THE ARTIFACT FROM ?

IMPORTANT OR INTERESTING INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARTIFACT :

CULTURAL SCAVENGER HUNT

DIRECTIONS :

Many of the things we buy are made in other countries. Read the labels on your clothes, shoes, household appliances, and other objects in the house. List where they come from.

OBJECT : COUNTRY :

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR CLASSMATES

DIRECTIONS :

Many times we think we know students in class because we see them every school day. But there are many things about our classmates that we probably don't know. Make a list of questions to ask students you don't know very well. Interview them using your questions.

As a conclusion to this activity each of you might introduce the person you interview to the class.

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

What do you like to do in your spare time?

If you could make three wishes what would they be?

## Teacher Bibliography

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Brooks, Nelson. "Teaching Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom," *Foreign Language Annals* , Volume 16. New York: ACTFL, Inc., 1983. Good discussion of the many different meanings of culture and classroom procedures for incorporating them.

Brown, Ina Corine. *Understanding Other Cultures* . New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963. Dr. Brown examines the many different ways societies approach and solve the problems common to all human beings.

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Kramsch, Claire J. "Culture and Constructs: Communicating Attitudes and Values in the Foreign Language Classroom," *Foreign Language Annals* , Volume 16. New York: ACTFL, Inc., 1983. Interesting techniques for promoting cross-cultural understanding.

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Narganes, Joseph and Dr. Richard I. Javert. *Hispanic Culture Capsules* . New York: Gessler Publishing Co., Inc., 1976. Each culture capsule contains crosscultural statements, notes, and activities for cultural involvement.

Wilkes, Helen. "Title Pages: A Simple Device for Cultural Consciousness-Raising in the Teenaged Student of French," *Foreign Language Annals* , Volume 16. New York: ACTFL, Inc., 1983. Wilkes describes how title pages in a notebook can be utilized as vehicles for the introduction of surface culture.

Williams, Shirley Ahlers. "Spanish Cultural Materials with a Local Focus: The Chicano, Cuban, and Puerto Rican Connection," *Foreign Language Annals*, Volume 1. New York: ACTFL, Inc., 1978. Suggestions, resource guides, and bibliographies for utilizing community resources in the teaching of Hispanic culture.

## RESOURCES

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Brock, Virginia. *Pi-atas* . Nashville: Abingdon, 1966.

Interesting account of the origin of pinatas, including complete instructions and three short amusing stories. Grades 4-9.

Cooper, Terry Touff, and Marilyn Ratner. *Many Hands Cooking: An International Cookbook for Girls and Boys* . New York: Crowell Co., 1974.

Easy to prepare recipes from 33 countries.

Hunter, Ilene, and Marilyn Judson. *Simple Folk Instruments to Make and to Play* . New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977.

Collection of simple instruments for children to make, along with description of methods and materials. Easy to follow instructions.

Meilack, Dona A. *Papier-mâché Artistry* . New York: Crown Publishers. Inc., 1971.



Good collection of crafts made from papier-mâché.

Orlick, Terry. *The Cooperative Sports and Games Book: Challenge without Competition* . New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Excellent resource for teachers and parents, emphasizing team work and skill sharing. Over 100 games, some from around the world.

di Prima, Diane. *Various Fables from Various Places* . New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1960.

A collection of fables from 14 different peoples and cultures. Grades 7 and up.

Temko, Florence. *Folk Crafts for World Friendship* . Garden City: Doubleday and Co., Inc. 1976.

A colorful celebration of handicrafts from around the world. Excellent descriptions and illustrations for each craft method, origin, and customs relating to it. Informative, clearly written, and easy to follow for young readers.

U.S. Committee for Unicef. *Publications and Educational Materials: Catalog 1989-81* . New York UNICEF, 1980.

14" high cardboard figures in the festival attire of their regions. Information is included on clothing depicted and the festival being celebrated.

## LINGO

A trilingual game played like Bingo using basic foods. The game may be played in English, French, and Spanish.

## SING CHILDREN SING SERIES

12" LP recordings featuring songs from 6 countries, sung by a children's chorus.

## 1984 WALL CALENDAR

A calendar of children's art listing dates for holidays of all the world's religions, national holidays, and other celebrated days.

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