

Through a cultural lens, darkly: Revelations on adaptability, perspectives, and applications for language teacher education

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Abstract

If language acquisition implies understanding of cultural perspectives, practices, and ideas with the ability to respond appropriately and flexibly in varying contexts, then we must see the importance of preparing language teachers for the realities of the profession and the demands of performance based assessment. Language is how we understand ourselves as well as communicate to minds other than our own. Inevitably we tend to view the world through individually constructed and socially imposed cultural lenses. Becoming aware of the presence and impact of these lenses constitutes the first step toward successful and meaningful interaction. Unfortunately most media and textbooks offer scant treatment of clichéd situations and cultural facts in isolation, yielding possible misinterpretations of different cultural groups. Materials for teacher preparation do not begin to explore candidate beliefs, attitudes, or understanding, thus actually reinforcing prejudice and an already myopic view. Furthermore, there is need for curriculum design tools to guide teachers in creating performance based lessons and assessments, which demonstrate learner understanding of cultural perspectives, practices, and products. Examination of research on cross cultural adaptability and perspectives yields various applications for teacher education programs, both for language and literacy courses as well as curriculum and assessment for language learning and teaching.

Introduction

If language acquisition implies understanding of cultural perspectives, practices, and ideas with the ability to respond appropriately and flexibly in varying contexts (Doughty & Long, 2003), then we must see the importance of preparing language teachers for the realities of the profession and the demands of performance based assessment. Language is how we understand ourselves as well as communicate to minds other than our own. Inevitably we tend to view the world through individually constructed and socially imposed cultural lenses. Becoming aware of the presence and impact of these lenses constitutes the first step toward successful and meaningful interaction. Unfortunately most textbooks and other materials offer scant treatment of clichéd situations, low level drills of rote memorization, and cultural facts in isolation, yielding possible misinterpretations of different cultural groups. Culture in the classroom tends to be limited to projects on the more tangible products of culture tend to be left for a “Friday frill or filler”, an afterthought. Cultural perspectives and practices are not integrated into the curriculum, much less

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seen as a way to design curricular units. The result are tasks that do not encourage flexible and culturally appropriate responses from students.

Possible reasons for the superficial treatment of culture are twofold. First, teacher candidates as well as in-service educators have not examined cultural perspectives, either their own or of the culture they teach. Courses in multicultural education and cultural awareness are plentiful, albeit falling short on issues of adaptability, risk-taking, and tolerance of ambiguity. These are essential for communicating with people from another culture and engaging in situations the learner is likely to encounter in the culture. Materials for teacher preparation do not begin to explore candidate beliefs, attitudes, or understanding, thus actually reinforcing prejudice and an already myopic view. Teachers are unable to create situations that explore cultural perspectives, beliefs, values, and practices if they have not engaged in this inquiry themselves. Second, for this shift to occur in their instruction, there is need for curriculum design tools to guide teachers in creating performance based lessons and assessments, which demonstrate learner understanding of cultural perspectives, practices, and products. The initial interest and rationale for this investigation was always present and obvious because it is a problem all too common in the profession. The urgency for it manifested in order to address National Accreditation concerns for the teacher preparation program and our content area standards.

NCATE Standards and the National Standards for Foreign Languages (5C's)

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education in consortia with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2002) have developed standards for teacher preparation adopted by colleges of education seeking national accreditation. Three areas

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of teacher candidate performance are knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Knowledge is demonstrated by understanding content area material, major theories and practices, and when to apply them. Skills are determined by how candidates select and use materials, curriculum and methods as appropriate to goals and needs, and their ability to collaborate with other professionals. Dispositions are how the candidate values the use of appropriate content pedagogy so that all students learn optimally, as well as how they value language learning and intercultural competence and diversity in content. Candidates must demonstrate evidence in these three key areas in all of their teacher education coursework. More specifically for foreign language education, there are content area standards developed in collaboration with NCATE and ACTFL. Of the six standards, standard two deals with cultural understanding. Candidates must demonstrate that they understand the connections among the perspectives of a culture and its practices and products, and they integrate the cultural framework for foreign language standards into their instructional practices. Furthermore, they must demonstrate knowledge of cultural products and practices through perspectives. Finally, they must design curriculum and performance assessment to guide and inform instructional practice. These standards for preparation align with curriculum and instruction expectations for the classroom and the standards for foreign language learning.

The National Standards for learning foreign languages in the United States are (ACTFL, 1996/1999; National Standards, 1999/2006) are Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. These are also known as the Five Cs. The National Standards are integrated goals that entail moving away from rote memorization of forms in isolation of context and toward flexible communication with other people in a variety of contexts and content

areas with an understanding of other cultures. These standards signaled a shift from passive mastery of drills and forms to authentic performance. These goals surpass past practices in language teaching history of mastering codes or linguistic systems and move the learner toward using the language in real life contexts within the culture. In spite of professional development efforts as well as teacher training since 1996, these Standards are still misunderstood. Most teachers do not see what is implied within them for assessment design and instruction. Most often, teachers believe their instruction is Standards based, claiming that an activity or exercise fulfills a standard, retrofitting a drill task under the heading of one of the five Cs on a lesson plan or chart paper. It is clear there is a disconnect between acknowledging the standards and practicing them. Some think that having their students memorize the book dialogue or answer predictable questions from the text is the communication standard. For many teachers, instruction and assessment remain separate entities, whereas in a standards based curriculum, they are seamless and co-existent. The Communication standard tends to be misunderstood as content, lists of vocabulary and grammar drills, with Culture limited to facts or products. As stated before most materials do not enable teachers to make the shift the standards require for effective curriculum and assessment decisions (Eddy, 2006a). When culture appears in the curriculum, it is via activities that might be engaging, but not effective or representative of products or situations they may encounter in the target culture. Teacher need materials and training on the design process that will move them to think like an assessor, rather than an activity planner (Wiggins, 2006). Teachers continue to invest energies in isolated and predictable skill practice, rather than planning for real world scenarios that demand flexibility and cultural perspective. These standards for teacher preparation and instruction opened a line of inquiry which shaped the investigation as well as the applications to teacher preparation courses and

ongoing professional development. Questions that guided the inquiry were 1) Do world language teachers demonstrate flexibility, openness, and understanding of cultural perspectives?, 2) How can world language teachers illustrate practices and perspectives in their language class, and 3) What does curriculum and assessment design driven by cultural perspectives look like?

Methods

To examine these questions, subsequent changes to teacher preparation curricula, and materials development, multiple types of evidence were collected. Combining research methods and sources of data offer a range of perspectives and often innovative design models (Denzin, 1997; Flick, 1992; Wiggins, 1998).

I administer the Cross Cultural Adaptability Inventory (Kelley & Meyers, 1995) to teachers in the foreign language education program. The CCAI identifies current strengths and weaknesses within four critical skill areas important for effective cross-cultural communication and interaction. Based on existing research, the CCAI instrument provides insight into the ability to adapt to new situations, interact with people different from oneself, tolerate ambiguity, and maintain a sense of self in new or different surroundings. This tool has been used with multinational corporations, expatriates, study-abroad programs, immigrant programs, diversity programs, and classes on cross-cultural issues. This instrument has never been used to analyze cross-cultural adaptability of teacher candidates, until now.

The four critical skill areas of the CCAI are as follows: Emotional Resilience: to measure the ability to rebound and react positively to new experiences; Flexibility and Openness: to measure

the ability to adapt to different ways of thinking and behaving that are encountered in the cross-cultural experience; Perceptual Acuity: to measure the extent to which a person pays attention to and accurately perceives various aspects of the environment; and Personal Autonomy: to measure whether a person has an evolved system of values and beliefs and at the same time respects others and their value systems.

Following the CCAI, teachers submit assessment tasks for a given unit and their curriculum plan. In guided class discussion, they identify and address a problem or issue by responding to input on curriculum, coverage issues, cultural perspectives, and assessment, in the dialogic inquiry process of Problem Posing (Bailey, 1996; Schleppegrell & Bowman, 1995). Finally, they complete a survey, exploring questions on the national standards, assessment practices and what the standards imply for curriculum and assessment.

Analysis

The CCAI is an anonymous, coded 50-item questionnaire that takes 10-15 minutes to complete. This questionnaire is written at a 9th grade reading level and the format is a 6-point Likert scale. Using SPSS the data was compiled and analyzed.

Candidates report high degree of emotional resiliency and it is significantly related to perceptual acuity ($r = .51, p < .01$) and personal autonomy ($r = .43, p < .01$). Thus candidates show they can bounce back when faced with unfamiliar situations, have a strong sense of self and their own beliefs, and are aware of cultural diversity. At the same time, candidates' level of flexibility is statistically and significantly associated with a positive perceptual acuity ($r = .60, p < .01$).

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Further, personal autonomy is significantly and positively related to perceptual acuity ($r = .46, p < .01$). However, they do not report high levels of flexibility and openness. Specifically, flexibility openness was not statistically and significantly related to emotional resiliency ($r = .27, p > .05$) or personal autonomy ($r = .07, p > .05$). Thus, in this sample, candidates report awareness of diversity, of people, ideas, and beliefs different from their own but they reported having an inability or resistance to apply that knowledge and awareness, to move on it, to be flexible to that diversity and adapt to different ways of thinking and behaving as the context requires. Awareness without Application, Action, or Adaptation falls short of what teachers need to know and be able to do with regard to curriculum and assessment design.

Examination of assessment tasks and student work samples revealed grammar in isolation, low-level drill, repetition of the same item test type, predictable oral tasks, lack of critical thinking tasks, and projects that do not demonstrate a real life purpose or cultural context for its use. Teachers were shocked that most of their tasks were drill/mastery and then were immediately motivated to change these tasks to performance based assessments framed in a cultural context. In group discussion, the line of inquiry revealed further questions on what tasks for the culture standard should look like, demonstrating a misunderstanding of culture as the backbone for curriculum design. Survey results showed they cannot explain the national Standards, do not understand the difference between products, practices, and perspectives, or how to use culture to explore recurrent themes in the curriculum. Less than half of teachers used the standards for developing curriculum and assessments.

The need for a paradigm shift

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To function appropriately in any given culture requires high adaptability, tolerance of ambiguities, ability to handle incomplete information, negotiation of meaning, problem-solving without cues, flexibility in varying contexts, and using language in situations different from how one is taught. Classroom assessment and instruction, whether for the teacher or student must not continue to present cultural facts in isolation, clichéd situations or practices out of context, or scant treatment of cultural perspectives. Materials for teacher preparation need to explore beliefs, attitudes, and understanding of cultural products, practices and perspectives they will teach. Performance based assessment tasks require students to solve problems, create a new product (Gardner, 1983/1993), and use the content in a different context. All of these tenets are encouraged and practically demanded by the Standards. This kind of assessment, although recommended by the profession, is largely misunderstood by the profession that cannot make the important paradigm shift from tests of rote memorization to assessments that require transfer of culturally embedded concepts and flexible application of a language repertoire for use in the real world. As long as culture appears on the sidelines and not the purpose for unit design, the shift cannot occur and lessons will continue to be anchored around a grammatical form. There is a need for curriculum design tools for creating performance based units and assessments which demonstrate learner understanding of cultural perspectives and practices. The proposed design model uncovers content by unpacking the Culture standard first, then using the Communication standard as the performance assessment system. I created this design model to enable teachers to uncover cultural perspectives as sustained inquiry and the purpose for knowledge and skills via performance assessment evidence.

Design Tools

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In our experiences across the lifespan, recursive themes reprise and resurface, allowing us to spiral concepts, skills, and lessons learned and apply them to different contexts and situations with flexibility and adjustment. It is this flexibility and high adaptability that is required when faced with new situations in a culture. To understand a language and culture, it is not through the predictable face of rules and rehearsed memorized bits; it is through exploration, participation, risk taking, negotiation, and reflection, forming new connections and experiences via continuous interaction along the lifespan of the learner (Eddy, 2007).

One possible tool to facilitate the shift so essential to realizing the Standards is UC ADAPT (Eddy, 2005, 2006a, 2007a, 2007b), a curricular design model that reveals cultural practices and perspectives within recurring topics and themes, using them as the purpose for performance assessment evidence and transfer of knowledge and skills to new contexts and situations. UC ADAPT stands for Uncovering Content: Assessment Design Aligning Performance and Transfer (Eddy, 2007a).

This design model uncovers content by unpacking the Culture standard first, because cultural response to those topics drives the curriculum. Next, the Communication standard determines the mode of assessment evidence, Interpretive, Interpersonal, and Presentational, so we use that standard to design the performance assessment tasks. From there, the teacher can make informed decisions on the knowledge and skills needed for that assessment and the instructional strategies and methodology that best match the desired result. UC ADAPT also speaks to a feedback system which helps teachers plan to adjust, continuously informing their practice through assessment evidence.

UC ADAPT guides teachers in uncovering key concepts inherent to the culture studied, within themes that are meaningful along the life-span of the learner and are important to the culture: family life, leisure, personal identification, meal taking, health and welfare, education, and house and home (New York State,1986), to name just a few. Units are designed to explore how a culture responds to these themes, including their values and perspectives on each one (Eddy, 2007b). Culture is not limited to discussion on facts or tangible products. Cultural practices and perspectives are revealed as learners uncover the themes across the checkpoints in articulation, allowing for comparisons with their own cultures and application of interdisciplinary content to real life contexts encountered outside the classroom.

From there, the Communication standard determines the assessment mode (Adair-Hauck, 2006; Glisan, et. al.,2003) and how learners will demonstrate their understanding of the topic as is relevant to the culture. The three modes, Interpretive, Interpersonal, and Presentational, aid in the shift from rote memorization and four skills in isolation to authentic performance. Culturally authentic materials made by and for the culture (Galloway, 1998) provide context for Interpersonal Mode task. For example, these materials could be a real restaurant menu, a news show, an article, advertisement, or a work of art. At the college we use Aesthetic Education as a method which guides teachers to create encounters with works of art for their students within a standards- based curriculum design (Fuchs-Holzer & Noppe-Brandon, 2005). When connecting to a work of art through an aesthetic experience, it enhances the capacity of the young learner to construct meaning, resulting in expanding the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962). This process allows the teacher and subsequently the young language learner to explore ideas

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through multiple points of view (Holzer, 2005), expect unknowns and be flexible to them, and then transfer this understanding into creating performance tasks and activities that support the work of art and deepen inquiry into cultural practices and perspectives. Active negotiation of meaning and solving information gaps via spontaneous, unscripted, and unrehearsed tasks characterize the Interpersonal Mode. In the Presentational Mode, students have time to consult resources, develop, and present an oral or written piece that has value or use to a culture.

The tasks designed within these three performance modes must demonstrate transfer (Eddy, 2006). Transfer tasks are those which ask students to use knowledge and skills in new, different or unanticipated situations or contexts from how they were originally taught (Wiggins & Mc Tighe, 1998/2005). Transfer requires inference, critical thinking skills, and negotiation of meaning; not just amassing of facts and completing a drill. Without transfer, the language learner forgets, misunderstands a concept, or only knows it in the rigid, predictable context in which it was taught. Performance assessment design engages the learner in transfer tasks with less reliance on cues or repeated drill. They teach the learner to expect variation. Using a language appropriately in a given culture requires high adaptability, tolerance of new situations, dealing with incomplete information, and problem-solving with minimal or no cues. (Eddy, 2006b)Tasks which echo these challenges will best prepare students for what people face using language outside the classroom.

The UC ADAPT model gives purpose and coherence to the knowledge and skills one will need later for the assessment, rather than excessive, low level tasks for recall of skills in isolation. Learners remember material better when it connects to a theme that recurs, allowing them to transfer more readily the knowledge and skills acquired. The other standards of

communities, comparisons, and connections describe the knowledge and skills, outlining what students should be able to do in situations outside the classroom, in communicating with people of the culture, and in comparing discoveries within the language and culture to their own.

Conclusion

Key shifts in the foreign language field have yet to happen as fully as they could, due to the need for teacher preparation, professional development and leadership that engages teachers in curriculum and performance assessment design facilitated by cultural perspectives. This requires deeper inquiry on perspectives that shape cultural practices and understanding big ideas inherent in the cultural response to life themes. This investigation and model are possible first steps in reassigning the teacher's role from transmitter of facts and knowledge to facilitator and assessor of performance. Shifting from predictable rules and reliable patterns is necessary on the part of the teacher first, before it can happen in the classroom. The essence of communication is flexibility and spontaneity, being able to transfer what was learned to a situation not encountered previously. Teachers should prepare learners for variables in contexts, new situations, ways to express an idea, and different points of view in solving a problem. This way they can become adaptable, self directed learners within any cultural community.

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