

# “Teaching Culture” – How Far Have We Come?



[Editor's note: A lively, on-going discussion of the nature of “culture” and its place in the language classroom has taken place during the last half century. The Northeast Conference has been deeply involved in these conversations, having dedicated four volumes of the *Reports*<sup>1</sup> and numerous articles to the subject. Although much has been said, surprisingly little agreement has occurred on the definition, scope, and use of “culture” in the teaching of foreign languages. We invite you to look back over some of the major issues and to compare them with your own thinking on this important question.

A compelling discussion of the meaning of the “cultural objective” in the language curriculum occurred in the 1955 *Reports*. In the following excerpts<sup>2</sup>, we also find references to collaboration in other disciplines (the “Connections” goal in our foreign language standards) and to concerns with assessment and teacher development:]

“In recent months the Modern Language Association has published numerous statements concerning the aims and benefits of foreign language study. Distinguished people from many walks of life have been asked why they think it is important to study foreign languages, and most of them [...] have stressed the point that foreign language study gives an appreciation and understanding of other peoples and other cultures. Foreign language teachers generally express agreement with this point of view.

## The “Cultural Objective”

There is something less than general agreement among language teachers, however, concerning the way in which the cultural objective should be reached. Some language teachers believe that the study of language and literature in itself gives cultural understanding. Others think that the objective can best be achieved by requiring students to learn the principal facts concerning the history, geography, politics, literature and art of a country. Some feel that the reading of diaries and travelogues brings keen insights. Others prefer to confront their students with generalizations concerning national character made by novelists and essayists. Others place equal stress on such generalizations but insist that they should be formulated by behavioral scientists. Still others insist that they have no time to deal directly with the cultural objective; they trust it will be achieved by serendipity. In view of this difference of

opinion it is not surprising that William Parker, Secretary of the Modern Language Association, should have found that the problem raised by the cultural objective is at the moment “one of the liveliest issues among foreign language teachers.”

[...] [Unfortunately,] we have never — or hardly ever — stopped to ponder together the question of what we really mean by the *cultural objective*.

## The “Best” or the “Complex Whole?”

We can go a step farther and narrow the source of our disagreement to the single word *culture*. If we think of *culture* as meaning what Matthew Arnold called “the acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world,” then there is no doubt that the dissemination of culture is, as it has always been, a primary function of teachers of language and literature. However, the word *culture* has other meanings. E. B. Tyler, writing at about the same time as Matthew Arnold, gave a much broader definition: “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” The key words in these two definitions are *best* and *whole*, and it is in the confusion of these words that our difficulty lies.

The fundamental issue before us is this: Which of these definitions do we have in mind when we speak of the *cultural objective*? Should we confine our activity to our traditional task of elevating and enlightening our students, of refining their minds, morals and tastes by presenting to them the example of the best expression of a foreign people? Or shall we accept the responsibility of giving them a faithful picture of the *complex whole* of a society? We must choose between these alternatives. [...]

## A Decision Must Be Made

[...] We should state forthrightly that when we say we teach a foreign *culture* we mean that we teach an appreciation of the best, of the most valued aesthetic and intellectual expression of a foreign people. Or we may decide that we want to accept the greater responsibility of trying to communicate to our students a knowledge and an understanding of the *complex whole* of a foreign *culture* in the much wider sense of the word. If this is our decision it should be reflected in our

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What do we conceive the *cultural objective* to be? What responsibility do we accept for it?

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teacher training, in our attitudes, in our textbooks and classroom materials, in our teaching programs. Either of these decisions may be accepted logically and honestly, but the decision must be made. [...] What do we conceive the *cultural objective* to be? What responsibility do we accept for it? These are questions that must be answered by us language teachers. It is hoped that the discussion devoted to this report at the New York meeting of the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages will center about these questions. [...]

## And After the Decision?

If we language teachers believe generally that our cultural objective should be kept within the traditional limits of acquainting our students with *the best that has been known and said*, then [...] [there is little to be done]. If, however, we believe that it is our responsibility to teach an understanding of the *complex whole*, then we must seek answers to serious complicated, practical questions: How can time and space be found in the crowded curriculum to carry out the larger objective? How does one go about teaching an understanding of the “complex whole?” How should teachers be trained to undertake the task? What materials reveal the nature of a culture? Can we devise valid tests to measure cultural understanding? Above all, what authority is there to portray for us a valid description of the *complex whole* of any culture? [...] [Further,] do we risk proposing to sacrifice the great humanistic values of belles lettres for the sake of giving students a hash of half-baked social science, or are there large quantities of other inert material which can be sifted out of the curriculum to make room for the latter without excluding the former? [...]

If we are going to accept the responsibility of communicating to our students a complete and objective understanding of foreign peoples it is obvious that we can turn to no authority who will draw up blue prints for us. There is no one authority. Some people know more than others about the nature of culture in the wider sense, some know more about specific cultures, some know more about the relationship of language and literature to culture, some know more about effective

means of imparting cultural insights to students...but no one person, no one group of people knows all this.

However, by working with teachers and scholars in other fields, by reducing the importance of traditional boundaries of departments, divisions, disciplines and fields, by pooling our resources, we may eventually be able to produce better answers to important questions. Cooperative research projects, joint teaching projects, mutual aid in organizing teaching materials, an increased flow of information across disciplinary barriers: there are many ways in which we could increase our knowledge of foreign peoples and our ability to teach our students about them.

### But First: The Decision

But the fundamental issue is our first responsibility. What do we mean by the *cultural objective*? Will we concern ourselves with the *best* only or with the *complex whole*?

[Five years later, in 1960, G. Reginald Bishop, Jr. cites in the Forward to that year's volume of the *Reports* (Bishop, 11-13) the need for a "rapprochement with the anthropologists in a discussion of language as a cultural phenomenon in the anthropological sense." He goes on to say:]

"[...] The Committee was convinced that following this discussion a study of the pedagogical implications of this fresh point of view might prove most valuable for foreign language teachers at all levels of instruction. Accordingly the title, *Culture in Language Learning*, was adopted for this year's Conference. [...] The Executive Committee believes that language is a pattern of human behavior devoid of any pre-existent rationale, that

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language is an infinitely complex and ingenious means by which people communicate with each other, and that as such, it is one of the most authentic and subtle cultural manifestations and can therefore be viewed profitably in some of the ways in which anthropologists view culture as a whole. Thus the assignment of Working Committee I, composed entirely of anthropologists, was to give us an anthropological definition of culture; Committee II was asked to discuss language as an expression of man's culture. And Committees III, IV, and V were asked

to point up the implications of the two introductory reports so far as foreign language teachers are concerned and to discuss the pedagogical problems involved in penetrating the cultures of Western Europe, Classical Antiquity, and the Slavic lands respectively.

[...] We are fully aware that the several meanings of the word culture lend ambiguity to the title [*Culture in Language Learning*] as it now stands. A clarification is therefore in order. In this study we do not refer to culture in the Arnoldian sense of "the best that has been written and said" though most of us would agree with Castiglione's courtier that, "The true and principal ornament of the mind in every man is letters." Nor do we speak of culture as the refinement and discipline of our moral and intellectual nature as does Alfred North Whitehead when he begins his book entitled *The Aims of Education* by stating that "Culture is activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling." Culture as it is used in this study refers to the sum total of patterned manners, customs, norms and values which are characteristic of a society. Language in this sense is inseparable from culture, and we as language teachers deal every day with a highly refined cultural phenomenon which we alone are equipped to discuss. While our *primary* aim is assuredly not to teach culture in this anthropological sense it seems fair to say that to date we have been somewhat unsure about how to handle this very important dimension of our discipline, that to neglect it impairs much of our language instruction while to include it in the language program will increase the interest and the value of our studies, and that by so doing we shall contribute more effectively toward producing people who are distinguished for their enlightenment and intellectual discipline — that is to say cultured in the Whitehead sense of that term."

[By 1972, an anthropologically-oriented definition of culture seems to have grown in popularity (although the reference below to "high" culture courses suggest that professional development opportunities were not yet aligned with that definition). The problems of *what* to teach and *how* to teach it remained elusive, as noted in the Preface of the 1972 *Reports* (Dodge, 10-11) written by Mills F. Edgerton, Jr. By linking language and culture, while proposing that solutions might be found in collaboration with colleagues in other fields, Edgerton again presages the perspectives of the "Connections" goal in today's standards. He writes,]

"The Board of Directors of the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages approved the

Chairman's plan for a Conference on language-in-culture because it was aware of the general surge of interest among classroom teachers in more complete, accurate and realistic presentation of the "whole" language they teach. To teach what words mean to people we must teach what the worlds of those people are like. For the most part, everyone lives — and dies — in terms of patterned, social, *learned* perception and behavior. The words we use to communicate with one another stand for concepts we have learned. It is naïve to choose to believe, as some people — both old and young — do, that the human being is a free spirit, that he is not 'programmed' from childhood on by his culture. It is clear too that, by and large, language can be used for communication only insofar as the words that make it up refer to patterns of perception and modes of behavior that are in some sense shared by its speakers.

But the teacher who seriously wants to teach not only symbols and rules for combining them — words and grammar — but the reality that those symbols represent finds himself hamstrung. Either there are no courses in the culture that interests him, at least none readily available to him, or the formal courses he has to choose among deal exclusively with 'high' culture: literature, painting, music, etc. Rarely will be found a course [...] which tries to deal coherently with the whole fabric of life in a foreign culture. In any case, courses are not a complete answer. A culture is not something dead and mummified that can be carved up and packaged into a course. The teacher needs an introduction to a whole way of living, and he needs, above all, to discover how to keep on learning, how to continue to enrich his knowledge of that culture by regular, thoughtful reading. But here again, he is stopped by the sheer mass of the material available to him in raw form. Which books should he read? Which magazines should he try to keep up with? What kinds of use can he make of his insights? These are the questions that have guided us in preparing the 1972 Northeast Conference [...].

It is the hope of the Board that teachers of foreign languages will increasingly collaborate closely with their colleagues in English, history, sociology, philosophy, religion, geography, etc. No one can ever know all a teacher would like to know about a whole people and its way of life. (Imagine, for example, that you are in a classroom in France and that you must explain the United States to French *lycéens* in their last year of studies!) If we make wise use of the human and intellectual resources that are at our elbows, our colleagues will surely do the same and we and our students will all benefit."

[In 1976, the Northeast Conference turned to a different approach to teaching culture in the classroom—using the cultural contributions of ethnic groups within the United States which represent the more commonly taught languages — French, German, and Spanish. The “Communities” goal of today’s Standards had roots in such initiatives by professional organizations. As Philip Arsenault noted in his Preface to that year’s volume of the *Reports*, (Born, 11):]

“[...] Foreign language teachers most often associate culture with the historical and geographic background of the speakers of a language — a chapter or course labeled ‘civilization.’ The contents of this volume offer for the foreign language teacher’s examination another view of ‘backgrounds.’

For generations the languages of many peoples who came to settle in the United States have been taught in classrooms at all levels of instruction.

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### How much more meaningful to bring to the attention of our own students the heritage of American speakers of the languages which we teach.

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However, a review of where they came from and when they arrived, how they fared, what happened to their languages, and their contributions to the society of which they became a part has been generally overlooked in foreign language classrooms. At best, these topics have been treated by teachers of history, geography, sociology, and the arts. How much more meaningful to bring to the attention of our own students the heritage of American speakers of the languages which we teach. Ideally, this challenge might better be met through team efforts when foreign language teachers enlist the support of their colleagues.”

[By 1988, the choice of “small c” culture over “large C” culture had been widely accepted. The profession had moved from the need expressed in 1955 to find one answer, one definition of culture, to a more pluralistic view. However, the problem of how best to communicate that culture to students remained. There was active discussion about how the teaching of culture in foreign languages might serve as a guide for building the modern curriculum. ACTFL had tried, unsuccessfully, to establish proficiency guidelines for culture. As Richard Williamson, Chairman of the 1988 Conference noted,]

“As we look ahead to the future, we ask ourselves: Can a new integration of language and culture be an even more

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powerful organizing principle for foreign language education than language proficiency has been already? [...] When ACTFL justifiably abandoned the proficiency guidelines for culture because culture did not fit the same mold as language proficiencies, the subject inevitably appeared too complex and too problematical. As a result, it tumbled to the bottom of the professional agenda. This is unfortunate, but the situation is not entirely bleak. Though a coherent conceptual framework in which language and culture are fully integrated has not yet been devised, several possible models have been suggested and some exciting teaching strategies have been developed. If one of our most cherished goals is to foster understanding of nations, culture, and other peoples, then we must ask ourselves: How can the study of a second language provide students with the ability to understand other cultures? What might characterize an “international curriculum,” or a “culture-based communicative” curriculum? Is it possible to define the objectives of language courses in cultural terms? Should cultural understanding be the primary justification for the study of foreign languages? If so, how do we teach it and measure it? By posing such questions and others, by giving center stage to the subject of a new integration of language and culture, we shall reaffirm its important position in our professional priorities.”<sup>3</sup>

[To answer some of those questions, the 1988 Conference was the first one to bring a considerably broader perspective to the issue. In the Introduction to the 1988 *Reports*, Alan J. Singerman makes clear that NECTFL was now in a position to devote an entire volume to the topic of culture (Singerman, 9-10):]

“One fact has become abundantly clear in the last few decades: cultural study is no longer the exclusive province of the professional ethnographers; small “c” culture has found a second home in the foreign language classroom. Foreign language specialists are learning that we too can be competent and effective teachers of the social customs, cultural values, and indigenous idiosyncracies which inform and illuminate our target languages. Some would say “must be,” for few doubt today the cultural nature of language. A consensus has gradually formed around the notion that our students can achieve authentic communicative competence in a foreign language

only if they learn to understand the target culture at the same time; that is, if they learn the language in its cultural dimensions. This basic premise is both the inspiration for and unifying principle of the 1988 Northeast Conference *Reports*.

The question of teaching language as a cultural phenomenon cannot be “covered” in a single, or even several, volumes. We have only endeavored to approach the problem, in both its practical and theoretical dimensions — with the understanding that theory and practice are eminently complementary and equally essential to the understanding and evolution of effective foreign language teaching. [...]

In the introductory chapter of the present volume, Peter Patrikis issues a challenge to the profession, inviting us to reflect together on the very concept of culture in Western civilization, as well as on the place of culture in foreign language education, the current problematics of teaching language and culture, and the ultimate purposes and goals of the teacher. In a second theoretically oriented offering, Angela Moorjani and Thomas Field survey the contributions of semiotics and sociolinguistics to the effective teaching of foreign languages, bringing emphasis to bear on the study of cultural signs and the nature of the communicative act — without neglecting practical strategies for the introduction of semiotic and sociolinguistic approaches into high school and undergraduate curricula.

In the third chapter, Robert Lafayette begins by outlining specific goals in the teaching of culture and proposes basic principles to help both teachers and students develop a “cultural mind-set.” In the ensuing pages he offers examples of proficiency-based materials designed to integrate culture into foreign language teaching throughout the curriculum, followed by practical classroom suggestions for lending a cultural dimension to all aspects of language study. Claire Kramersch, focusing on the principal pedagogical tool in the profession, the textbook, devotes the following chapter to an in-depth analysis of the course text as a “culturally coded educational construct.” She evokes, further, the complex conditions of production of foreign language textbooks, highlights the thorny problems of choosing appropriate cultural content, and reflects on the problem, endemic to most textbooks, of teaching foreign language without an authentic cultural context.

Chapters five and six, authored by Jean-Pierre Berwald and Seichi Makino, respectively, treat the topic of teaching language and culture through mass media. Berwald surveys the whole field,

offering detailed advice on the pedagogical exploitation of a wide range of media and realia: radio, television, newspapers, magazines, mail-order catalogues, telephone books, films, slides, menus, and more. Makino, on the other hand, focuses on video alone, describing various materials developed for the teaching of Japanese. Emphasizing the principle of cultural contextualization, he discusses, in detail, personal materials created specifically to highlight culture and communicative functions at the elementary level.

Aleidine Moeller and Norman Stokle share the vast area of linguistic and cultural immersion experiences. Moeller, concentrating in the seventh chapter on the younger student (elementary through high school), insists on the rapid progress in both linguistic skills and cultural understanding achieved by participants in well-organized study abroad programs. She cites guidelines for program selection, as well as standards for evaluation, and describes a variety of successful exchange programs, total immersion weekends, and foreign language camps. In the companion chapter, Stokle deals with questions relative to study abroad programs at the college level. Drawing upon many years of personal experience as resident director, he emphasizes the critical importance, for maximizing cultural and linguistic immersion, of such matters a choice of lodgings, avoiding the “ghetto syndrome,” and participation in learning opportunities to facilitate their integration into the foreign culture.

In the closing chapter, Barbara Lotito and Mireya Pérez-Erdélyi take up the pedagogical challenge offered by the presence of ethnic neighborhoods throughout the United States. After a thought-provoking probe of the traditional obstacles to the integration of local resources into the teaching of language and culture, they outline procedures designed to prepare students for linguistically and culturally fruitful contact with a minority community. Using the *barrio* as an example, Lotito and Pérez-Erdélyi demonstrate how the preparation for a visit, the visit itself, and post-visit activities can all contribute to both an increase in cultural knowledge and a heightened sensitivity to members of the target culture as individuals — not to mention the enhanced motivation to study the foreign language.

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### Many voices, many perspectives, a few honest disagreements

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Many voices, many perspectives, a few honest disagreements: we do not promise unanimity in pedagogical philo-

sophy, nor unity of method. But all of the foreign language professionals represented in this volume share a simple conviction — the conviction that culture and language are indeed *inseparable*, that both can be taught effectively by dedicated and imaginative teachers.”

[In addition to revealing the expanded scope of topics and concerns encompassed by the term “culture,” Singerman’s synopsis of the 1988 volume’s chapters disclosed a number of significant shifts in perspective by our field. In 1955, Wylie implicitly empowered the MLA to chart the discipline’s direction, define its concepts, and assess the merits of its practice. Singerman (and his volume’s authors) referred to a different sort of authority: *theory* (and, to a less-

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er degree, its counterpart, research). Thus, “decisions” about the teaching of culture arose variously in the 1988 volume from semiotics, research on the textbook as an “educational construct,” and models of language or language acquisition. By 1988, the *Reports* included lengthy bibliographies; in 1955, footnotes often simply quoted speeches or pronouncements of the luminaries of the profession. In other words, we have, in the past forty years, developed and assumed ownership of a “literature” that can be reviewed in dissertations, articles, and books. This literature guides and is informed by our current work. Thus, whereas Bishop cited Castiglione (a statesman and author) and Alfred North Whitehead (a philosopher) in 1960, the 1988 authors reference linguists, anthropologists, and psychologists, along with foreign language practitioners and second-language acquisition researchers.

A second change reflected in the 1988 volume is a preoccupation with the authenticity of the cultural learning experience. Whether through study abroad or via emerging technologies, language students were far more likely in 1988 than in 1955 to encounter direct manifestations of culture, and teachers were obliged to acquire new pedagogical approaches and new abilities in response to this evolution.

Finally, one overall impression left by the volumes devoted to culture in this series, and addressed directly in Singerman’s Introduction, is an apparently unrealized dream of *integrating* language and culture in the classroom. The titles of these volumes are concrete evidence of the goal and our failure to achieve it: in 1960, culture *in* lan-

guage; in 1972, “language-in-culture;” in 1976, language *and* culture; and in 1988, the “integration” of the two.

As the following article by Dolly Young suggests, one obstacle to the successful integration of the two remains our inability

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to define culture. By 1998-1999, one might expect language professionals to have reached a somewhat common consensus as to what constitutes the cultural “component” in the teaching of foreign languages, especially in light of the 1995 publication of the Standards for Foreign Language Learning. But, as Young points out in the following previously-unpublished analysis of a random sample of 9 first- and 10 second-year Spanish textbooks, although culture instruction has become more sophisticated in the last decade, a clear majority of textbooks treat culture as products or behavioral practices. This treatment falls short of achieving the affective goals that learners and teachers value most, that aspect of culture instruction that focuses on philosophical perspectives involving meaning, values, attitudes and ideas, as advocated by the Standards.]

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<sup>1</sup>In chronological order:

Bishop, G. Reginald, Jr., ed. Culture in Language Learning. Reports of the Working Committees, Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1960. Montpelier: Capital City Press, 1960.

Dodge, James W., ed. Other Words, Other Worlds: Language-in-Culture. Reports of the Working Committees, Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1972. Montpelier: Capital City Press, 1972.

Born, Warren C., ed. Language and Culture: Heritage and Horizons. Reports of the Working Committees, Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1976. Montpelier: Capital City Press, 1976.

Singerman, Alan J., ed. Toward a New Integration of Language and Culture. Reports of the Working Committees, Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1988. Middlebury: n.p., 1988.

<sup>2</sup>Laurence Wylie, Chairman, “Report of the Committee on the Place of Culture and Civilization in Foreign Languages Teaching,” in Brée, Germaine, ed. [Originally untitled] Culture, Literature, and Articulation. Reports of the Working Committees, Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1955 (New York, 1960), 1-7.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Williamson, “Toward an Integration of Language and Culture,” Northeast Conference Newsletter, Vol. 22 (September 1987), page 2.