

***Revisiting Assumptions about
Foreign Language Instruction in
Diverse Student Settings***

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Abstract

Through pedagogically sound practice, a diverse student body can become part of the solution we have sought to help all language learners develop deep cultural fluency. In this article, I suggest the need to reconceptualize certain assumptions we hold about foreign language education, namely, the need to (1) teach language use as socioliterate practice; (2) change our focus from a monolingual ideology to a view of the classroom as a multilingual, border-crossing space; (3) explicitly address and problematize classroom diversity rather than try to minimize it; and (4) revisit our role as teachers in the foreign language classroom. These conceptual changes can positively impact our pedagogical practice by helping us focus on language as a multifaceted, social activity; negotiate concepts in the students' shared language; teach and encourage the use of critical thinking and cultural analysis; and, finally, by giving the teacher the role of agent of change in the overall process.

Introduction

For almost as long as foreign language has been taught in North America, theoreticians and practitioners alike have felt the need to defend its place in the K-16 curriculum. Because there are other, apparently more relevant, disciplines to fill limited instructional time and space, some have wondered about the value of teaching and learning a foreign language (Lantolf & Sunderman, 2001). One of the stronger arguments which has helped solidify its place in the curriculum has been the contention that through foreign language education students are exposed to other people's values and ways of seeing the world. Such exposure, many have suggested, expands students' view of themselves and of others and enables them to become better rounded individuals and citizens of a democratic society and of the world. McCrossen (1943), for example, argued over sixty years ago that "Foreign languages, perhaps more than any other force in American educational life, combat provincialism, insulate one against propaganda and chauvinism and one-sidedness or viewpoint,

and help one toward a broader vision in becoming a wee bit of a better citizen of the world” (p. 99 quoted in Lantolf & Sunderman, 2001, p. 10). Such is still our aspiration at the beginning of another century. There is, unfortunately, little evidence that the teaching of foreign languages, in and of itself, has helped accomplish this broader goal of open-mindedness, understanding, and appreciation of others and their cultural and social backgrounds. It has been difficult to help foreign language students—in the past, primarily middleclass, college-bound, Caucasian students—see past their own socio-cultural assumptions, values and practices for a variety of reasons. Helping a fairly homogeneous, monolingual group of students walk a mile in someone else’s shoes has been particularly hard considering that the people wearing the shoes may live literally thousands of miles and oceans away from where they live. In addition, teachers have felt the need to implement, by curricular mandate, a “pedagogy of coverage” (Guilherme, 2002) which focuses primarily on teaching the linguistic system. Finally, the “messy” nature of teaching a foreign language, not just as “communicative competence”, but as the deeply social activity that it is has eluded many of us. Many foreign language teachers who have attempted to help students develop cultural understanding primarily through the use of artifacts, events, dates, places, and other surface level “cultural” knowledge have reached the conclusion that such knowledge is at best limited and at worst detrimental to the students’ development of true cultural fluency (Kramsch, 1997). The problem with this kind of “tiny truth” approach is “not so much what students don’t know, but what they think they know” (Shumway, 1995, p. 252) Although the teaching of culture as content, rather than process, has often been the approach used to encourage cultural understanding, unfortunately, it has not worked (Storme and Derakhshani, 2002). Out of our own experience, observation, and research, most of us have come to accept that in order for students to understand the deeply social and cultural nature of their own language as well as that of someone else, they need to participate in a kind of culture-rich, analytical environment which goes beyond the learning of cultural facts and stereotypes. Our awareness of these issues has been raised, in large degree, by the work of authors such as Michael Byram (1989, 1997a, 1997b, 1999) and Claire Kramsch (1983, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1998) as well as many others, who have produced both evidence for change and some very sound proposals to promote the kind of deep cultural understanding students need to become successful participants in a democratic and globalized world (see especially Kramsch, 1997). Now, it seems, the world has come knocking on our door. The progressively larger presence of a diverse student population in K-16 institutions is an encouraging sign that not only are classrooms reflecting more equitably the makeup of society at large but that, indeed, the term “foreign” in foreign language may soon need to be revisited. As a group, students enrolled in any given foreign language class nowadays may already speak as many as ten or more home/ primary languages and probably fall into at least two or three of the four categories outlined by Shrum and Glisan (2005): “(1) those who have no home background other than English; (2) those who are second- and third-generation bilinguals schooled exclusively in the United States; (3) first-generation immigrants schooled primarily in the United States; and (4) newly arrived immigrant students.” (p. 334). As mentioned in

the WGBH video, *Valuing Diversity in Learners*, students may be at different levels, come from a variety of backgrounds, and have a variety of needs including the need for different instructional strategies. While, at a macro level, foreign language educators applaud and welcome the increasing equality of access of such a diverse student body, at the program- or classroom-specific level, these same educators still have far more questions than answers about how to deal with student diversity in their professional practice. Diversity has become a “problem” teachers must address. As Clarke and Silberstein (1988) have noted, “For teachers, day-to-day reality can be characterized as a series of problems to be solved: obtaining some level of orderly progress, covering the material, [and] attacking persisting language problems” (p. 686). To the long list of standing issues that language teachers need to deal with, the more recent student linguistic, cultural, social, and socioeconomic diversity of students imposes itself as something which cannot be ignored. Partly because it is only now coming to the pedagogical fore, widespread classroom diversity can be said to fall into the category of “problems for which there are no prescriptions, even though they may have solutions.” (Clarke & Silberstein, 1988, p. 697, authors’ italics). The obvious question, then, is: so, what are the solutions? In order to find some of them, of necessity, we will need to revisit some of our constructs of and assumptions about what it means to teach a foreign language, as well as our pedagogical choices in teaching it.

Foreign language learning as socioliterate development

True linguistic competence in a foreign language, or any language for that matter, entails more than a person’s ability to use the linguistic system to communicate sounds or read words. The meaning or meanings of a word or expression exist, in the first place, because there is a linguistic community that attributes meaning(s) to it. And the several possible meanings of each word are deeply intertwined in the development of that community, its history and shared value system; they are, in Rogoff and Angelillo’s words, a result of the “integrated constellations of community practices” (2002, p. 211). Consequently, we cannot really assume that a person has communicative competence in a language unless that same person has at least a basic grasp of the social and cultural contexts in which the language is situated and within which such a community developed and has maintained itself. For example, although a person may have developed great linguistic proficiency in Portuguese with the help of a very comprehensive dictionary, such linguistic knowledge will probably be inadequate once the person attempts to address a speaker of a Portuguese-speaking community past the most basic of needs. The social nature of language is truly inherent to its very existence. According to Atkinson (2002) “obviously but nontrivially, language is social—a social practice, a social accomplishment, a social tool” because “language never occurs apart from a rich set of situational/historical/existential correlates, and to separate it out artificially is to denature it” (p. 529). In spite of the social, cultural, and cognitive nature of language in general, however, language learning has long been conceptualized primarily as a cognitive activity that takes place in the heads of individual learners on the basis of comprehensible input. Most research on second language learning, until recently, has focused primarily on the processes by

which learners internalize, process, and use language, independently of the social milieu in which language learning and use takes place. However, as Atkinson (2002) has argued: Cognition is not a private activity that occurs exclusively in the confines of an independent, isolated cerebral space, but rather that is at least a semipublic activity produced as part of a substantially open system. Whenever we participate in social activity, we participate in conventional ways of acting and being that are already deeply saturated with significance. (p. 531) Consequently, if our goal is for our students to become *de facto* members of a new linguistic community rather than speakers of a disembodied linguistic system, our approach to foreign language teaching needs to include both the cognitive as well as the social aspects of language learning and use. Rather than maintaining our “obsession with the decontextualized, autonomous learner” (Atkinson, 2002, p. 526), and knowledge of the linguistic system as the *bona fide* meaning of linguistic competence, we need to reconceptualize our activity as language teachers as we and our students engage in the profoundly social activity language and language learning constitute. The obvious pedagogical implication of this view of language learning as literate practice is that, indeed, students need to understand the “linguistic and cultural-historical repertoires” (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003, p. 22) and be exposed to the ideas, assumptions, values, experiences, and expectations of the linguistic community or communities that use the language they are learning. A diverse student body can be of great help in that regard. If we do, indeed, believe that language learning is an activity with both cognitive and social components, and language is nothing if not a sociocultural activity, then we have reason to rejoice that we have a classroom community in which we can enact those principles. It is “through the participation in culturally mediated, historically developing, practical activity involving cultural practices and tools” (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003, p. 21) that people develop their first language literacy. In the classroom, where students are developing their foreign language literacy, all can benefit from a speech community with students who may have different culture-specific patterns of interaction and socialization backgrounds. If we approach such diversity explicitly and thoughtfully, we can help all students understand the deeply cultural and social nature of language in general and, by extension, of the foreign language they are learning in particular.

Towards a multilingual view of the classroom

Foreign language instruction, as part of the North American K-16 educational system, has been accused of a certain elitism. In the past, we have worked with a primarily monolingual student body and a concomitant monolingual ideology. Some contend that while we have long promoted second language acquisition among monolingual English speakers, we have failed to welcome or fully support students who are still developing their English language skills, for example, or students who may already speak one or more languages because of their national, cultural, and/or linguistic background. It has seemed that while we have strongly encouraged students’ ability to speak a second language, what we have encouraged indeed is a notion of a certain kind of speaker (usually a monolingual English speaker), speaking a certain kind of language (usually an Indo-European language) for a certain kind of purpose

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(literary study and analysis or brief foreign encounters in the form of vacations). Although foreign language education has a tradition of using the monolingual speaker as a model (Blyth, 1995), the reality is that multilingual communities the world over are the rule, not the exception. A multilingual classroom, in which students learning a foreign language may, themselves, speak two or more languages, is a much more accurate sampling of society at large and a much better model for foreign language instruction. As highlighted [VIDEO] in the WGBH video, *Valuing Diversity in Learners*, suggests, some students in our classes may indeed be learning their third language. Some may well be learning a fourth language as well. Arguing for the need to conceptualize the classroom as a multilingual speech community, Blyth (1995) contends that: The foreign language teaching profession is caught between a monolingual ideology and a multilingual reality. Students are likely to find foreign language courses increasingly irrelevant and anachronistic unless teachers can find ways to address the growing cultural and linguistic diversity inside and outside their classrooms. It is time to “reimagine” our classroom communities. (p. 174) Further discussing textbooks and other materials used to teach foreign language and how language and culture are portrayed in them, this author concludes that “One of the most insidious but least recognized myths that such textbooks perpetuate is the myth of cultural and linguistic homogeneity, the myth that foreign language speakers are ‘unified subjects’” (p. 169). The diversity that multilingual students bring to the classroom will require that we reconceptualize our classrooms as authentic speech communities. Rather than attempting to have students accommodate to a monolingual, monocultural view of the world and of the foreign language they are learning, an active diverse classroom takes student diversity as a point of departure for cultural and linguistic learning. The focus, then, is on active negotiation of culture and language in the classroom context by starting with the students’ own critical analysis and discussion of their own cultural values and practices (Kramsch, 1997). The fact that most students probably do not come from the same cultural background as the speakers of the target language should not deter us from addressing cultural constructs. By looking inside themselves, at their own values and assumptions and the different ones held by their classmates, students will be better prepared to tackle other ways of feeling and seeing the world. But, perhaps more importantly, students will realize that the concept of one-language-one-culture is, at best, a myth and will realize the enormous diversity of values and perspectives people speaking a single language may have. Such active discussion/negotiation helps students understand the fallacious nature of cultural stereotypes. It opens the door for the kind of dynamic culture in action approach that students need to adopt in order to function effectively in a progressively more diverse world. Although it is clear to teachers and students alike that there is often a need to communicate relevant ideas in the students’ first or classroom common language, there is a sense that the use of the learners’ first language is a form of cheating the system. In his report of a questionnaire study with 600 foreign language students and 163 instructors on first and second language use in the classroom, Levine (2003) argues that in spite of the fact that the “‘recourse to- L1’ position has created a classroom dynamic in which the use of the L1 is at best discouraged and at

worst stigmatized... [a few] scholars have staked a claim for a sanctioned role for the learner's LI in the language classroom" (p. 344). The results of his study reveal that both the target language and the students' first language play an important role in language learning and that "our task as instructors is to identify effective pedagogical principles that both acknowledge and support the classroom as the multilingual environment that it is" (Macaro, 2001, cited in Levine, 2003, p. 356). Similarly, Blyth (1995) argues for the benefit of using the students' LI in foreign language classroom discussions. There is much to talk about to help students start to become literate in the target language that often cannot be articulated in the foreign language simply because the students are not proficient enough it yet to tackle some concepts and ideas. Students and teacher alike need to feel permission to "break" for "English moments" in which relevant topics may be discussed. There is little doubt that we need to discuss nonlinguistic issues, however, according to Kubota, Austin and Saito-Abbott (2003), those discussion topics: Are difficult to incorporate in beginning-level courses because students lack the target language control to discuss them, even if they have knowledge and opinions about them... Indeed, beginning-level instruction might inevitably focus on basic linguistic and cultural skills in order to prepare students for more complex topics to be handled later. However, not all students continue on to advanced study. Some students may leave foreign language with the impression that learning a foreign language entails only how to communicate basic personal needs or facts. This view leaves out entirely the sociopolitical dimension in which language and culture are intrinsically embedded. (p. 21) For this reason, and in order to teach foreign language as literate practice, we need to be able to open the way for the discussion of topics that students may lack linguistic ability to tackle but which are nonetheless essential to their developing literate proficiency. It is at those times in particular that teachers need to remember that the foreign language classroom is indeed a multilingual speech community and that some of the goals for foreign language education go beyond mastery of the linguistic system.

Explicit focus on problematizing student diversity

In most discussions regarding classroom diversity, teachers have been led to believe that the primary way to deal with it is to focus on differentiating and individualizing instruction (Shrum and Glisan, 2005). The responsibility of minimizing the effects of diversity falls on the teachers who, through their own means and ingenuity, are asked to deal with diversity by trying to create a methodology that allows them to reach every student in some way (see WGBH video, *Valuing Diversity in Learners*). While this may be necessary, particularly with students with special physical or cognitive needs, it is hardly possible in a classroom in which the diversity may be linguistic, cultural, socioeconomic, and cognitive, among others. Naturally, many of us, unable to wrap our minds fully around diversity or reach each student, have disregarded it and focused instead on the obvious issue at hand: the teaching of the linguistic system of the target language. This approach, while ensuring a common goal, fails to acknowledge that language is more than a linguistic system and students more than just heads learning that system. Clarke and Silberstein (1988), for example, argue that

one of the main epistemological errors in language teaching is that “stability in the form of uniformity is possible and desirable” (p. 696). An emphasis on uniformity fails to capitalize on the asset a diverse classroom can be for multicultural and multilingual development and learning. Rather than addressing diversity by attempting to minimize it or circumvent it, teachers need to bring diversity to the fore theoretically and instructionally so that the multiplicity of backgrounds, values, and views held by the students in such a classroom can be openly and explicitly addressed. Such a classroom is fertile ground for authentic linguistic and cultural learning precisely because it is a microcosm of society at large and, if addressed as such, it can provide the in-house means for deep culture and language-in-the-world practice and learning. The diverse foreign language classroom, a truly rich environment for learning, should not be “sanitized” (Cummins, 1989); instead, it needs to be treated as the “messy reality of day-to-day life” (Clarke & Silberstein, 1988) it really is. As we explicitly articulate aspects of diversity in our classrooms to ourselves and our students, we help make it a true asset and an integral part of the acquisition of broad-based knowledge of language and culture. The problematizing of diversity—the open and critical discussion of the heterogeneity in our classrooms—can be best accomplished through the development of a pedagogy that focuses, as a first step, on student reflection and critical analysis of self and one’s own cultural expectations, practices, and biases—a setting in which “foreign language students can be helped to organize and abstract their cultural constructs” (Kramsch, 1997, p. 471). The creation of a safe classroom environment in which the students can feel free to explore and analyze their own assumptions and values and ‘rotate the axes of... [their] thinking without losing... [their] cultural identity’ becomes, therefore, the sine qua non condition for that to take place (Kelly, 1963 quoted in Kramsch, 1997, p. 475). Especially for students from minority groups who “appear to have developed an insecurity and ambivalence about the value of their own cultural identity as a result of their interactions with the dominant group” (Cummins, 1989, p. 31), such a safe classroom environment will prove invaluable. As students are allowed to reflect on their own values and assumptions, they are better prepared to enter a “dialogue of cultures” (Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002) which, according to Guilherme (2002), can only happen if “cultural knowledge... [is not] viewed as a distant object to be acquired but as a process of reciprocal identification and representation, accomplished mostly through interpersonal relations” (p. 89). Through dialogue, students can create a borderland for ‘critical analysis and as a potential source of experimentation, creativity, and possibility’ (Giroux, 1992, p. 34), where they can get a foothold in the sociocultural dimensions of a second language. According to this same author, “Through reflecting upon and speculating about their everyday observations and their significant incidents or discoveries, students learn about the complexity of social relationships, find out about the difference between appearance and reality, look for underlying normative frameworks that impose meanings, values and beliefs and recognize asymmetrical relations of power that determine the structure they are becoming more aware of.” (Giroux, 1989, p. 81) A critical analysis and dialogue pedagogy becomes essential because it allows the students to be actively engaged with the material, but, more importantly, it forces them to engage

with each other. As Guilherme (2002) has suggested: The critical notion of a pedagogy of dialogue, one that relies on ongoing, reflective and dialectical dialogue, makes it clear that this approach is not about adding a few novel aspects to classroom interaction, but instead is about questioning the very nature of teaching/learning. (p. 48) A planned and structured social engagement can, therefore, broaden students' perspective by giving them "explicit training in strategies for coping with certain social and cultural situations" (Savignion & Sysoyev, 2002, p. 508) outside of the classroom. It is this focus on open discussion and analysis which will help make the multilingual classroom a truly multicultural space as well and prepare students for living successfully in a pluralistic society.

Teacher as conceptual agent of change

I have, to this point, proposed a few ways of thinking of and teaching in a diverse foreign language classroom. As is readily obvious, very little of what happens in foreign language education will change because of what is presented in papers like this or through large-scale decision making and/or legal mandate. According to Freeman (1991), "Classrooms are not isolated environments, nor does what goes on in them necessarily reflect in a causal manner the decisions, priorities, or commitments of the wider setting, as curriculum planner might have us believe" (p. 33). The teacher is, not surprisingly, at the heart of any effective local change and no amount of theorizing will make up for the absence of teacher buy-in of an idea and its implementation. As the only true "conceptual agents of change" (Guilherme, 2002), teachers can take an active role in reconceptualizing the relationship they have with their students, the relationships students have with each other, what gets accomplished within the instructional time allotted, and how they bring about the fulfillment of curricular expectations. The mental attributes of the teacher in the areas of knowledge, beliefs, goals, and thinking processes have great impact on teaching. Teachers' beliefs about what they are supposed to accomplish guide their orientation toward class preparation and everything else they do in connection with their professional life (Artzt and Armour-Thomas, 1998). Only if teachers feel empowered to effect change can they encourage their students to do the same. According to Guilherme (2002), teachers themselves must be conceptually and critically engaged in the mission of empowering their pupils by empowering themselves. This notion provides for an informed praxis, by relating theory to practice and vice versa, and deepens their own commitment to democratic principles. By negotiating between the relativity of their own and their students' perspectives and universals which ensure human rights, they forge civic courage, social and political initiative (p. 22). One way in which teachers can start taking action locally is by finding out who their students are. Kroll (2002) makes the point that teachers spend a fair amount of time talking to each other about their students or talking to their students, but seldom do they spend any time talking with their students. If we do not take the students' specific linguistic, cultural, and cognitive background into consideration as we make classroom-specific decisions, we will fail to establish a critically negotiated common ground on which students can stand for further learning. Such a threshold is necessary and it can only be brought about by intentional and focused planning and action on the part of the teacher. One

of the more radical changes teachers may need to make in the diverse classroom may be that of focusing on the creation of an environment of inquiry in which students are engaged in the critical analysis of their assumptions and values and the role language plays at many different levels. Students need to learn to ask questions of themselves and of others. Severino (2001) suggests that while the teacher may feel good about being “Ms.-know-it-all-cultural-liaison,” a better role for the teacher is that of preparing the students to ask the questions themselves. By bringing “broader perspectives on critical issues to their students rather than replicating past blindness to issues of difference and inequality” (Kubota, Austin, and Saito-Abbott, 2003, p. 22), teachers can truly become conceptual agents of change.

Conclusion

Over 14 million people immigrated to the US in the 1990s. In 2003 there were 10.5 million children of immigrants in the school system, and of these, over a quarter was born outside the U.S. (Fix and Passel, 2003). Foreign language educators have many reasons to embrace and capitalize on the rich linguistic, cultural, and social diversity that students bring to the classroom. I have argued for the conceptualization of foreign language teaching and learning as literate practice, for the classroom as a multilingual speech community, for the problematization and explicit critical analysis of students’ diverse backgrounds, and for a change in the role of the teacher as “conceptual agent of change” (Guilherme, 2002). There are, however, many other issues that will come to bear on the successful instruction of a diverse student body. In a pluralistic, democratic and globalized society, the choices educators make matter greatly. For example, the choice of textbooks and other instructional materials and resources have obvious impact on what students read and write, what the classroom discussions focus on, what is assessed and what, in the end, students consider to be their range of linguistic competence. This is the reason why the change we must make, although felt at a local level through the action of informed teachers, needs to be broad and encompassing. The critical dialogue we hope to involve our students in needs to be echoed at all levels of the educational system. Teachers, researchers, administrators, theoreticians, and all those involved in the educational venture need to become true stakeholders in the process. Only then will there be a chance that change will occur locally at the large scale it needs to happen. As Guilherme (2002) has so aptly put it, “The major challenges educational systems have to face are the dynamics of change itself and the interaction between the local and the global, that is, to confront both diversity and universality at an incredible speed” (Guilherme, 2002, p. 3). Most of us, I believe, are up to the task.

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