



Teaching Concerns

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Foreign Language: It's More Than Just Language

by Jann Lacoss

Culture plays an integral part in the foreign language classroom. From polite and familiar forms of address, to literature, to different forms of the verb "to go", culture creeps into lessons in both subtle and obvious ways. TAs and faculty members met for a Bring Your Own Brainstorm lunch in October to discuss how culture influences language and how to use culture effectively in foreign language lessons.

One obstacle facing foreign language teachers is getting students to overcome the perception that culture is more than just "high" culture ("Culture"). Although literature, art, music, and other forms of "Culture" provide insights into the perceptions of native speakers and can be taught at all levels, teaching idioms, proverbs, even theatre etiquette also gives students useful understandings. Since perceptions of people from different cultures often vary, incorporating cultural "tidbits" into language lessons helps to ease the transition to a different mindset.

*How do we, as teachers, incorporate culture into language teaching and get across to students that they **need** to pay attention to the cultural aspects of language?* Participants suggested the following ideas and activities:

- ◆ Use poems to teach intonation, constructions, grammar.
- ◆ Assign authentic texts - a chapter, story, poem - as a self-esteem booster; students realize that they can do more than just the

exercises in the book. Confidence and a sense of accomplishment are good motivators.

- ◆ Use a scene from a play to help immerse students in both culture and language; it's a good window on culture in states that have a history of repression.
- ◆ Center "teaching conversations" around cinema: students delve into multiple aspects of the culture and language.
- ◆ Use television techniques (Jeopardy, talk show, news show, etc.), a form that students are familiar with, to explore both language and culture.
- ◆ Use role play for dialogues and supply props to enliven the atmosphere of impromptu dialogues.
- ◆ In another form of role play, have students become characters from another culture. Students make a ten-minute historically accurate presentation using first person.
- ◆ Use maps to teach geographical awareness and other cultural concepts. Visual and audio aids reinforce material covered in the lesson.
- ◆ Use positive reinforcement to build confidence.

Introducing students to a target culture motivates them to travel to the country. Teaching games and songs, using children's books and menus, and showing television commercials give students a taste of life in another culture. Participants agreed that instructors could easily share their ideas for incorporating culture into foreign language lessons by setting up departmental files of exercises.