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Learners' perceptions of culture in a first-semester foreign language course

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Research on the place of culture within the foreign language curriculum has shown that current teaching practices often consider culture as simply something to be added on instead of effectively integrating it (Durocher, 2007; Knutson, 2006; Kramsch, 1993; Magnan, 2008; Omaggio Hadley, 2001; Perraudin, & Porfilio, 2011; Schulz, 2007; Wilbur, 2007). This study takes an emic perspective to explore how the experience of a first-semester foreign language course can shape learners' understanding of culture and perceptions of the interconnection between language and culture. Twenty-two students, native English speakers, enrolled in four first-semester French courses, were interviewed three times during a semester. The four instructors were interviewed at the end of the semester. Data analysis revealed that a majority of the participants viewed language and culture as separate entities, that they were mainly concerned with linguistic competence and possessed an incomplete understanding of the concept culture. Based on these findings, pedagogical recommendations are discussed to support the development of learners' understanding of the intrinsic link between language and culture.

INTRODUCTION

The intrinsic link between language and culture is apparent in the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999) and is widely accepted and recognized by the foreign language teaching profession (Agar, 1994; Block, 2003; Byram, 1993; Kramsch, 1993; Omaggio Hadley, 2001; Schulz, 2007). However, researchers have voiced concerns that current teaching practices within the foreign language curriculum consider culture as simply something to be added on instead of effectively integrating it (Durocher, 2007; Knutson, 2006; Kramsch, 1993; Magnan, 2008; Omaggio Hadley, 2001; Perraudin, & Porfilio, 2011; Schulz, 2007; Wilbur, 2007). Lantolf and Johnson's (2007) call for a reunification of language and culture in the teaching of foreign languages implies that a "dichotomous mind-set" (p. 889) regarding language and culture continues to exist in the profession.

And what about foreign language learners? Although research has pointed to differences between students' and teachers' views about the nature of language teaching (Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Martin & Laurie, 1993;

Siebert, 2003) and on beliefs about what constitutes culture (Chavez, 2002, 2005), there remains a lack of information on how learners understand the place of culture in foreign language study. This study aims to provide an account of how the experience of a first-semester foreign language course can shape learners' understanding of culture. Learners' perspectives on learning about French culture and their perceptions of the interconnection between language and culture were explored through interviews with students enrolled in a first-semester French course. Data analysis showed that most participants possessed a dichotomous view of language and culture as well as a lack of understanding of the relationship between language and culture, which affected the outcome of their learning experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining culture

In order to discuss perceptions about culture, the very notion of culture must be defined, although any endeavor at defining such a concept can be considered in itself problematic because of the myriad of descriptions of what constitutes culture (Breen, 2001, cited in Block, 2003; Chavez, 2002; Hinkel, 1999). Chavez (2002) and Durocher (2007) discuss the dichotomy that many definitions of culture maintain, such as little-c (or subjective) and big-C (or objective) culture. In his discussion of the difficulty of defining the concept, Block (2003) described Tomlinson's (1999) definition of culture, namely the construction of "meaning through practices of symbolic representation" (p. 18), as rather broad. In Block's view, although the definition suggests individual engagement in enacting culture, it fails to explain what constitutes the practices. In contrast, Seelye's (1993) claim that culture "embraces all aspects of human life from folktales to carved whales" (p. 22) provides a more complete illustration of what constitutes the notion of culture because it includes the artistic, scientific and humanistic contributions of a society as well as its beliefs, behavior and values (Brooks, 1971) without perpetuating a dichotomous view of culture. This conception of culture is also found in the Standards' (1999) definition of culture as "the philosophical perspectives, the behavioral practices, and the products—both tangible and intangible—of a society" (p. 43) and will be the one retained for the purposes of the present study because most recent editions of foreign language textbooks in the United States are articulated around the Standards (Byrd, Hlas, Watzke, & Montes Valencia, 2011).

Culture in the foreign language classroom

About 20 years ago, researchers (Henning, 1993; Webber, 1990) observed that many foreign language textbooks approached the teaching of culture through the presentation of facts and products that differ from the home culture rather than encouraging the development of a critical understanding of the role of language in

cultural practices and perspectives. About a decade later, Hedderich (1999) remarked that culture remained on the sideline in the teaching of foreign languages. Maxim (2000) explained that the continued presentation of cultural facts instead of the development of a critical perspective of the target culture was based on the dichotomies found in the discipline of foreign language teaching itself. Indeed, he pointed out that it was separations such as "language versus content, lower division versus upper division, form versus meaning, spoken versus written language, cultural fact versus cultural inquiry, simplified versus authentic texts" (p. 12) that resulted in the presentation of culture as a fifth component distilled at specific times in the classroom. Culture was thus separated rather integrated into the language learning experience as simply an add-on.

As Chavez (2005) points out, although the Standards (1999) have made culture an integrative part of foreign language learning, we can still find a division between two types of culture. As Durocher (2007) explains, objective culture (Standard 2.2, culture with a capital C) or products appears in most textbooks whereas practices and perspectives (Standard 2.1, culture with small c) are not as prominent. As a consequence, although learners at the introductory level do acquire some culture because they can recognize products such as food, music, and works of art of the target culture, they "lack practice in identifying how language use in an authentic text indicates cultural significance" (Maxim, 2000, p. 12).

Researchers have identified several reasons that explain why the teaching of culture continues to be problematic. For Omaggio Hadley (2001), it is the lack of time and the teachers' fear of not knowing enough about culture that leads to a lack of integration of culture in the curriculum. Wilbur (2007) considered instructors' training as she reviewed foreign language teaching methods courses syllabi. She found that, although the teaching of culture is included in the majority of syllabi, how to assess cultural knowledge is not apparent and as a result might be perceived as less essential. Also considering teachers' training, Schulz (2007) argues that beginning teachers are not provided with enough support to develop their competence in linking practices and products to perspectives. Schulz's claim has recently been confirmed by Byrd et al. (2011) who in their worldwide survey of 415 teachers and 64 teacher educators at all levels, found that during their training teachers "are not provided with opportunity to develop the skills needed to examine the perspectives underlying products and practices in a sufficient enough manner to teach them effectively to students" (p. 19). In addition, as Meredith (2010) observes, connecting product, practices and their underlying perspectives is a complicated prospect at best.

Learners' beliefs about the place of culture in foreign language learning

The issues presented above regarding the teaching of culture and the instructors' preparation to relate products, practices, and perspectives to the target language, raises the question regarding perceptions of the place of culture in foreign language

learning. For Kramsch (1993), the teaching of culture lags behind in the foreign language curriculum in part because of the conception of foreign language learning, often undertaken in the United States for a utilitarian goal. Consequently, knowledge of practices and products in connection to the language are popularly deemed all that is necessary for successful language acquisition. As Bennett (1998) points out these popular views limit the development of critical perspectives because "understanding objective culture may create knowledge, but it doesn't necessarily generate competence" (p. 3). Kramsch made her observation about the utilitarian view of language learning nearly 20 years ago. As evidenced by the report published in 2007 by the MLA Ad Hoc Committee and the Executive Council, language learning often continues to be perceived as providing a tool to communicate thoughts and information but less often as the foundation for linguistic and cultural competence.

Research using The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire developed by Horwitz (1985, 1988) has provided insights on learners' beliefs about the nature of foreign language learning. As shown by the results of several BALLI studies conducted at the introductory level of language instruction (Fernández, 2007; Horwitz, 1988, 1999; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Siebert, 2003) in various languages (American learners of French, Spanish, German, Japanese, English as a Second Language and English as a Foreign Language), learners tend to converge on the belief that learning grammar and vocabulary are the most important components of learning a foreign language. Results consistently show that between 35% and 40% of participants do not consider that knowledge of the foreign culture is important, suggesting that cultural understanding is not seen as necessary for language learning (Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Siebert, 2003). For Omaggio Hadley (2001), such attitudes toward culture on the part of the learners explain why instructors might overlook culture. However, due to the nature of the BALLI as a static questionnaire, studies have not shown to what extent the foreign language learning experience can shape learners' understanding of culture and their perspectives on its incorporation in language study.

For this reason, Chavez's (2002) study on the expectations of learners of German regarding the teaching of culture in their foreign language course is more informative because of the qualitative component it contains. Using a mixed quantitative and qualitative questionnaire, she found that students are drawn to learning about practices and products rather than perspectives. In addition, the qualitative portion of her study reveals learners' indecision as to the place of culture in a foreign language course with some participants viewing language and culture as interconnected whereas others wishing it to be completely separated as exemplified by the quote: "this is a course on language *not* culture" (p. 136).

Similar perceptions and opinions about the place of culture in the foreign language classroom were expressed in interviews conducted during a study that investigated how American college students of French perceived instruction affecting their cultural assumptions about the French language and people (Drewelow, 2009). In this article, I expand on Chavez's findings about the perception of the place of

culture in foreign language learning from the learners' perspective. I use qualitative data collected from interviews to allow particular perceptions to transpire and to let individual voices become visible (Richards, 2009) with the goal of providing additional insights into this issue. The following research questions are the main focus of this article:

1. *What are learners' perceptions of the focus of an introductory foreign language course?*

2. *How do learners perceive the connection between language and culture during language learning?*

METHODS

The data from four first-semester French courses at a large American university in the Mid-West were collected during individual online chat sessions between the participants and the researcher at three different times during a semester of instruction (week 4, week 8 and week 13 of a 15 week semester). Each chat session was conducted in English and lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. The use of Instant messenger (IM) as a data collection tool was motivated by the flexibility it provided for both the researcher and the participants as they were able to choose the most convenient time and location for them. Consequently, each set of interviews was conducted over a 3-day period, allowing for a snapshot of the students' perceptions at the time of the interview. Using IM also guaranteed anonymity on both sides. Participants received instructions to create an IM alias without their first or last name but that included the codename randomly assigned to them. The researcher IM alias was also stripped of identifying signs (Uresearcher).

The interviews were semi-structured, with a set of pre-determined questions (see Drewelow, 2011 for the interview protocols) to allow comparisons between the participants' answers across interviews but also to grant "sufficient flexibility to probe some aspects in depth" (Richards, 2009, p. 186), depending on the answers provided. The focus of the original study was not on the teaching of culture or the place of culture in foreign language teaching. Consequently, the questions asked during the interviews were geared toward the elicitation of information pertaining to the participants' perception of the alteration of their cultural assumptions. Questions focused on whether or not students had discovered new information about the French people that they were unaware of before, how they had learned this information, and whether they had discussions in class relating to the French people or culture. Participants were also asked about the images of the French people and culture that they were forming based on the material or information provided by the instructor. I adjusted the interview protocol for each of the three interviews as I reminded participants of what had been said in previous interviews to accommodate their shifting perceptions. This interviewing method, called responsive interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), required on-going analysis of the transcripts.

In addition, at the end of the semester I interviewed the instructors teaching the first-semester French sections participating in the study. These interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted about 30 minutes. Among the set of pre-determined questions I asked the instructors (see Drewelow, 2011 for interview protocol), several addressed how they taught culture, what were their objectives when teaching culture and how they thought they portrayed the French people in their respective classes.

Participants

The participants in the 3 chat sessions included twenty-two students, (14 females, 8 males). There were 20 undergraduates (first-year: 8; second-year: 5; third-year: 3; fourth-year: 4), one law school student and one graduate student. Thirteen had never studied French before and nine were false beginners with previous experience studying French, ranging from one semester to a total of 4 years (between middle-school and high-school). None of the participants had participated in study abroad. All the interviewees were native English speakers as were the four female teaching assistants teaching the sections. The instructors' teaching experiences ranged from one semester to four years and all had spent some time studying abroad.

The curriculum

The curriculum of the first-semester French course was based on the textbook *Paroles* (Magnan, Martin-Berg, & Berg, Rochette Ozello, 2006). This program "encourages students to work with intellectual, personal, and cultural content in all four skills" and "enables students to work with authentic linguistic and cultural materials from all over the francophone world" (p. iii). The curriculum focused "on speech acts in both oral and written expression" (p. iii) to "promote cultural proficiency as well as linguistic proficiency" (p. v). Throughout the textbook, boxes entitled *Aperçus culturels* [cultural glimpses] provided cultural and sociolinguistic background to the grammatical structures and the vocabulary presented in each lesson. *Paroles* also included sections entitled *Ouverture Culturelle* [cultural gateway], which provided the possibility of studying various parts of the francophone world more in-depth. Students were given various authentic documents and completed communicative activities (web-based or task-based) designed to develop their knowledge of the francophone world. Assessments were based on written tests, oral interviews, at-home written compositions and a skit written and performed by the students. By the end of the semester-long course, learners were expected to have a basic knowledge of French grammar, a greater understanding of francophone cultures and of American culture as seen by foreigners (especially by native speakers of French), an ability to read with basic understanding general interest articles in newspapers, magazines, simply structured poems and stories written in French as well as an understanding of clearly-articulated native French speech.

Four different teaching assistants taught the four sections of the first-semester French course that participated in this study. However, they all followed the same department-approved syllabus and gave the same assessments. In the syllabus, two days were devoted to *Ouvertures Culturelles*. The reading *La France et les Français* [France and the French] was covered at week 9 in one class session and *Paris et les régions* [Paris and the Regions] at week 14 also in one class session. Although all sections followed the same syllabus, the classroom experiences of the participants varied because of the instructor. The researcher did not observe the classes and thus cannot account for the instructor variable and how each approached culture on a daily basis.

Data analysis

The use of IM as a data collection tool allowed for instant written transcripts of the interviews. I examined the students' interview transcripts line-by-line using the exploratory content analysis approach recommended by Auerback and Silverstein (2003). In an initial pass at the data, I highlighted similar comments expressing learners' perceptions and subsequently classified them into recurrent thoughts. These groups of thoughts were then categorized into themes based on the most salient. One of the themes that emerged from this data analysis was that a majority of the interviewees (17 out of 22 at the time of the first interview and 11 by the third interview, including 7 of the original 17) believed that they did not talk about culture in their class.

The original study for which data was collected aimed at assessing how instructed learning influenced learners' cultural assumptions. However, the interviews showed that students were attempting to make sense of their cultural learning experience. In their comments, they organized, filtered and structured their perceptions (Oxford, 2011) of discussions pertaining to the French people and in the process revealed perspectives on the teaching and learning of culture. Participants were never asked directly about their opinions of culture or their definitions of the concept. Nevertheless, their comments showed strong opinions on the topic, rendering the findings of this study quite significant not only in terms of the potential implications for foreign language teaching but also because the data emerged from questions that were not geared at eliciting viewpoints on the teaching and learning of culture.

I opted for a comparative case study approach to the data rather than a quantitative approach because the patterns and themes that emerged from the preliminary data analysis described above revealed commonalities in the participants' discourses (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). These provided a more in-depth understanding of the learners' experiences, which will significantly add to the body of knowledge on this topic from a qualitative perspective. Thus, I searched the IM interviews for instances of how participants defined culture, how they perceived their foreign language experiences related to learning about the culture and how they made connections between language and culture learning. Once isolated, I examined

the participants' utterances for evidence of how their perceptions of their learning experiences shaped their reality or meaning regarding language and culture (Mills et al., 2010).

To address the research questions, I started by exploring the recurrent themes that emerged from the data, thus presenting an overall representation of the participants' perceptions regarding the place of culture in foreign language learning. I also compared the participants' understanding of culture in their classes with how their instructors reported teaching culture in their transcribed interviews. I then examined the connections participants made between language learning and culture by focusing on specific learners whose responses, while not being representative of the entire sample in the study, illustrated the development of cultural understanding through language acquisition.

Before presenting the findings, I would like to point out that because interviews are co-constructed interactions between researcher and the interviewees, there remains an element of subjective interpretation both from the participants' own understanding of the questions asked and the researcher's interpretation of their answers and perceptions. The findings reported and discussed below reflect only the experiences of the participants in this study and my interpretation of how they constructed meaning. They are nevertheless informative because they provide an account on how foreign language learners can perceive their foreign language instruction.

FINDINGS

Learners' perceptions of the focus of a first-semester French course

The main recurring theme in the participants' comments was the grammar and vocabulary focus of the course regardless of the section in which they were enrolled. As already revealed above, the majority of the participants (17 at week 4 of the semester, 11 at week 13) in this study perceived their French courses throughout the semester to be principally about language acquisition. During the first interview, one student explained: "We do little discussion of French people in class because we're mired in grammatical basics." Another concurred by stating: "we haven't really talked about French culture yet in class, it's mostly been basic verbs and nouns." At the third interview, one learner continued to see her course as mainly about language even though her comment showed the interconnection between language and culture: "in learning the vocabulary we learn the proper ways to ask and say things and sometimes our TA will tell us about how things are said in normal conversation but nothing really different." Her use of the expression "nothing really different" revealed that she concentrated on the linguistic aspect of the lesson not realizing that it was also about the acquisition of cultural competence.

Supporting the perception that the course solely focused on language acquisition was a secondary reason: it was so elementary that students believed that they did not posses the tools to discuss advanced topics. This is exemplified in the following comment from the first interview:

> We haven't discussed the French people much. Just a quick reference or two. [. . .] I don't see how you can avoid that when you are teaching numbers and simple sentences, it is going to come across somewhat elementary.

A related belief emerged mid-semester in the following comment: "In class we mostly just try to say a few things to each other." In his last interview, another participant remarked on the place of culture in the elements covered in the course: "The things we have been working on haven't really dealt with French culture."

A third theme that emerged from the examination of students' instances was the belief that culture should not be the focus of a first-semester foreign language course. During the first interview, one participant stated that "we are just there to study the language, we don't discuss French current events or anything." This belief also emerged in the comments of two other participants during the second interview: "We don't really learn much about the French culture, we are really just learning the language" and "We focus on the language, not so much on cultural info, isn't it how it should be?" The last comment is interesting because it is a question directed at the interviewer that invites a confirmation of the belief that a first-semester foreign language course should concentrate on linguistic acquisition. By the time of the third interview, six students indicated that they did not believe culture had a place in a first-semester French course, because their goal was first and foremost to acquire the language. One of them was particularly adamant that grammar should be the main focus, as she explained: "I would rather learn more grammar and be more aware of technical things and then find out about culture later." These participants expressed the belief that culture should be taught in a separate, more advanced class.

Learners' understanding of culture in their first-semester French course

Although the majority of participants believed that the focus of their French course was on language, all of them reported learning cultural facts or products from their textbook, which was deemed useful and informative in showing cultural differences and similarities (the *aperçus culturels*), and from their instructors, who talked about personal experiences in France. As one student explained: "it's fun to learn about facts, it's like trivia." For the majority of participants, the culture they gained from the class remained tied to facts, numbers and products of the target culture and to the observation of differences and similarities between their native culture and the target culture.

Comparison between the students' and the instructors' interviews showed that the instructors' intentions were to go beyond the presentation of facts and products. However, they were divided on their cultural learning objectives. Two indicated that their focus was to teach about the culture in general "because I know most of them aren't going there," whereas the other two were teaching culture to prepare their students to go abroad, although one of them remarked "I was careful not to be saying 'when you go' because you don't know if they are going to go so I would say 'if you have the chance to go'."

When asked how they portrayed the French people, all four agreed that they avoided "being overt, like here are the French people as a group and here are the differences with us." They all indicated that they tended to teach culture by talking about their personal experiences when "a subject would come up in class and we would talk about it on the spot." It was during these mostly unplanned, spontaneous discussions that the instructors focused on practices or perspectives by asking students to reflect on their reactions through questions such as "why do you say that's weird? And what does it say about us? And if you have a judgment, if you have some kind of value associated with that, why do you have that?". All explained that they attempted to answer students' questions about behaviors as they arose by asking them to reflect on "what does it say about the culture?".

Based on these statements, I wondered why students across all four sections overwhelmingly reported learning facts and products? One consideration is that while unplanned discussions pointed to practices and perspectives, they consisted mainly of instructors' recollections abroad and thus were not geared toward the development of students' understanding of an alternate point of view or a different perspective. In addition, during the planned instances built into the curriculum (*ouverture culturelle*), when culture was clearly the focus of the lesson, instructors concentrated on products as they used games (trivial pursuit, jeopardy) or gave presentations on the topic in order to "cover all the cultural points." Furthermore, all four instructors reported giving the cultural boxes (*aperçus culturels*) as reading assignments but as one of them remarked "I don't know how much they look at those. Like it's got all the 'gestes' [gestures] and stuff but I don't know." Thus, students may have perceived that culture was mainly about products and facts because it was the focus of planned assignments and lessons that were built into the curriculum. Another possibility is that daily lessons contributed to the reinforcement of the language-culture dichotomy. By their own admission, instructors tended to focus on linguistics features rather than on cultural concepts to ensure that their students would be successful on the tests, which favored linguistic competence over cultural knowledge. Consequently, learners may have perceived that the lack of specific evaluation of culture meant that the focus was mainly on language.

As I analyzed the data, the discourse of two participants stood out because it illustrated the difficulty students have defining the concept of culture itself and

identifying what constitutes culture in an introductory foreign language course. Maggie[1] shows a reflection on culture brought about by the process of learning the language itself, whereas Allison reveals that an intrinsic personal definition of culture affected her understanding of what culture is during language acquisition. Although I found only these two instances in the data, they are worth reporting because they point to students' experiences in the classroom.

Maggie was a graduate student and a true beginner. During our first interview, as she reflected on whether her assumptions about French people had changed since the beginning of the semester, she questioned her conception of the culture:

> When you learn the language, it gives you a better sense of the embodiment of culture, or at least it gives you a lens from which to better see the culture . . . […] Given that every culture is made up of individuals, I'm not sure how best to describe my understanding of French people or culture now.

For her, learning the language offered a better understanding of the target culture, however her statement "I'm not sure how best to describe my understanding of French people or culture now" showed that learning a foreign language can also generate some confusion. Maggie appeared to struggle with her understanding of culture in and of itself and, by extension, of the target culture. Her experience is reminiscent of second language learners' experiences as described by Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), who analyzed learners' narratives to show the loss and reconstruction of identity that occurs during second language acquisition, a process Maggie confronted as well. At this point in the semester, she appeared to have lost her initial representations of the target culture. As the semester progressed, she started the reconstruction process as she reassessed her own definition and beliefs about culture. In our second interview, she stated:

> Perhaps what has changed is my understanding about any culture--there is always a variety, not just the stereotype (i.e., not all Americans are pushy and arrogant, not all French people are snooty, etc)[…]   I don't know that I attribute that change to the class—we've not talked a great deal about French culture (in generalities or specificities). . . it could also be that I wanted to do well in the class and better understand French culture and expression spurned [sic] a desire to see French films though that renewed interest in film could be traced back to the class.

By then, Maggie had realized that she could not assume that each individual is representative of his/her own culture (Bennett, 1998). Her reflection led her to the understanding that there are variations among members of a cultural group. As she offered stereotypes from the point of view of both American and French groups, she

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[1] All names have been altered to protect anonymity.

refused to accept or perpetuate these assumptions. In the process, Maggie demonstrated her realization that perspectives differ among and across cultural groups and can influence perceptions. To echo Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), her new voice was emerging from the self-reflection brought about by the language learning experience.

Like the majority of participants in the study, Maggie perceived that culture was not discussed "a great deal" in class. However, she acknowledged that learning French in an instructional context might have "spurred a desire to see French films" as a means to better understand the culture. When I asked her later on, in the same interview, how often she watched French movies, she responded that her goal was to watch one a week, but she had so far not done so because the one movie she had selected turned out to be an American movie with a French title (*Bonjour Tristesse,* 1958). Maggie's response revealed that she truly intended to gain a better understanding of French culture although her motivation was more academic than personal: she "wanted to do well."

By our third interview, Maggie seemed to have formed, from her foreign language learning experience, a conception of culture with which she appeared comfortable:

> I think this course has problematized (I hate that word by the way) my conception of "culture" . . . so through the course, I'm understanding that language, just because a country or culture may communicate through it, does not create an essentialist cultural identity . . . rather there is room for difference and deviance.

This foreign language course led Maggie to reconsider what she understood culture to be, and she identified the language as the origin of this reconceptualization. The language had become a means (a "tool") to gain an understanding of the behaviors and perspectives of the people and their culture. Through this process, Maggie developed a more critical perspective on culture, one that went beyond the comparison mechanism of purely identifying differences between cultures.

Contrary to Maggie, Allison, a false beginner with 2 years of high-school French and in her first year of study at the university, did not reflect on her view of the concept of culture. Instead, her intrinsic definition of culture remained consistent during the semester and led her to view language and culture as separate entities.

In our first interview, she explained: "we haven't studied much about the culture […]. We've discussed culture in high school French but never about the people just [sic] what their traditions are." Allison's discourse points to a compartmentalized view of culture as she referred to her past language courses. She defined culture as products (the traditions) but did not include the people who performed these traditions. Therefore, Allison's view of culture did not appear to include practices or the perspectives of the people practicing them.

During our second interview, in answer to my inquiry on what impressions she was getting about the French people from the material used in class (book, videos, texts, films, songs), she responded: "We've only watched one film in class so far and it was about a French rapper but I'm pretty sure that was supposed to be a joke. Besides that, we haven't watched anything else." Wondering why she thought that the film was a joke, I asked Allison's instructor about it in our interview what "film about a French rapper" she had shown. The instructor explained that she had played the singer Kamini's music video titled *Marly-Gomont* with the goal of making her students "realize that like here [the United States], there is concern about racism in France." Her intention was to show the perspective of a young French person on the topic of racism. The rapper Kamini, a part-time nurse, became famous in the summer of 2006 when his self-made music video spread to the YouTube Web site and its French equivalents. In the song *Marly-Gomont*, Kamini raps about what he knows: growing up black in a little town of 432 residents in the French countryside. Allison might have considered the video a joke because Kamini raps about cows, tractors and soccer and the video showed him literally raising a roof with the village elders. In any case, her comment showed that her instructor's intention to integrate a French perspective on racism into the curriculum was not recognized by Allison because the video did not present facts but rather an alternate view on a specific issue.

Perception of the interconnection between language and culture

Although a majority of the participants considered their course to be mainly focused on language acquisition, the data revealed instances where learners recognized acquiring cultural knowledge through language acquisition.

For example, a grammar lesson resulted in the acquisition of intercultural competence. Two participants in the same section mentioned "learning about the *vous* and *tu* forms and when you need to use it and how you know what you need to use." However, the connection they made between the linguistic feature and the culture differed. Whereas one saw in the practical use of *tu* and *vous* evidence that the French "are very formal or informal," thereby gaining a perspective on the target culture, the other perceived the linguistic feature as informing practice: "it can be insulting if you use the wrong form upon first meeting someone." However, for a third student in the same section, the interconnectedness of language and culture was not identified as shown by this statement: "we focus mainly on the language and the grammar, you know like the difference between *tu* and *vous*." For this student, the difference between *tu* and *vous* remained at the level of language instead of reflecting a perception of reality and a social practice.

Evidence that students can discover cultural knowledge from a vocabulary lesson appeared as students discussed learning about the distinction between *habiter* and *vivre*. Maggie explained:

> I didn't know that the French use *habiter* to explain living arrangement but *vivre* when referring to the quality of life. The fact that they do sort of reinforced my perception that life in general and the quality of one's life is important in the French culture.

Thus, the acquisition of vocabulary revealed something about the reality of the concept of living in the target culture, which in turn led Maggie to reflect on values from the French perspective. Similarly, a student in another section stated "We were just learning how to express where we live and who we live with and it makes a difference when you say who you live with and who you share your life with."

Learning numbers through the act of giving phone numbers led a student to realize that practices differ in "many aspects of life that I take for granted." He explained to me that discovering that "they read sequentially in pairs like 01-23-23-04-05 or whatever not 0-1-2-3-2-3 but in groups" made him realize how "endearing the nature of French life is." Discovering the practice of delivering phone numbers prompted this student to develop an alternate way of seeing the world (phone numbers are not universal, each country has a different system). This event is rather significant because it shows that incorporating cultural practices into teaching can provide a basis for the development of cultural perspectives and encourage openness toward the target culture. In addition, it could be postulated that this type of pedagogical methods could affect motivation to learn and continue learning the target language because it might provoke an affective response toward the target culture, as was the case for this student who found French life "endearing."

Although present, these instances in the data were rather rare because students' view on culture remained tied to an understanding of culture organized around the separation of language from cultural practice and perspective as shown in this comment: "If there was a discussion on culture for the classes, I think people might talk more about the French." This remark exemplifies the perception of culture as completely separate from language as discourse and underlines the challenges for the teaching of culture in the foreign language classroom.

DISCUSSION

Although some participants demonstrated an understanding of "how language reflects culture and how culture affects language and language use" (Schulz, 2006, p. 254), the majority tended to follow the language-culture dichotomy evoked by Lantolf and Johnson (2007) and considered the acquisition of linguistic competence as separate from cultural competence. The belief that their foreign language course was mainly about learning the French language with culture as simply an add-on is very much in line with how Maxim (2000) and Wilbur (2007) described the introductory foreign language experience. It supports Magnan's (2008) claim that the way languages are currently taught does not lead students to see that language and

culture cannot be separated and confirms research on beliefs about language learning, which has shown that learners tend to focus on the acquisition of grammatical points and vocabulary (Fernández, 2007; Horwitz, 1988, 1999; Mantle-Bromley, 1995; Siebert, 2003).

In addition, this study provides further insights regarding Chavez's (2002) findings that students tend to focus on products and practices during cultural study. The participants' comments revealed an incomplete understanding of the notion of culture, which was limited to products and facts. Consequently, these learners did not perceive that the very act of learning a foreign language was a cultural event in and of itself because cultural meanings, perceptions of reality and social practices of the target culture are expressed through language (Maxim, 2000; National Standards, 1999). The incomplete understanding of what constitutes culture proved to be problematic because it impaired the possibility of developing cross-cultural perspectives, one of the objectives advocated by the National Standards and by many in the foreign language teaching profession (see *The Modern Language Journal's* Perspective column communicative competence from 2006). Maggie was the only participant whose self-reflection on the concept of culture led her to go beyond the basic identification of differences between her own culture and the target culture and acquire the necessary frame of mind to begin the study of culture (Smith, 2000). However, Maggie was a graduate student, older and more academically experienced than her peers, thus not representative of the general student population beginning language study. The data showed that learners can make connections on their own between language and cultural practices or perspectives (Schulz, 2006); however, the low number of instances suggests that many students at the beginning of language study are not fully equipped for culture study (Smith, 2000). They need to be prepared to engage into developing a solid understanding of the complex notion of culture in order to gain cultural competence that goes further than tangible and intangible products or comparisons of practices to acquire knowledge of the perspectives underlying these practices.

Finally, Allison's case offers an illustration of how foreign language learners may resist the objectives of a lesson because learning about perspectives on a topic from the point of view of the target culture necessitates an evaluation of one's own culture. As prior research has pointed out foreign language learning can challenge students' view and knowledge of their native culture, which can be unsettling and threatening (Dahl, Clementi, Heysel, & Spenader, 2007; Gu, 2010). Thus, instructors have the responsibility to develop activities to first prepare learners to study the culture so resistance to learning new perspectives on specific topics is minimized.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite researchers' efforts in the last two decades to investigate the relation between language and culture in discourse (Kramsch 1998, 2004; Byram, K. & Kramsch, 2008), intercultural learning (Byram, 1997; Schulz & Tschirner, 2008; Hu

& Byram, 2009) and intercultural communication (Scollon & Scollon, 2001), teaching culture remains a challenging endeavor. The participants in this study, like the learners in Chavez's study (2002, 2005) a decade ago, viewed culture as separated from language as discourse, a finding that merits further reflection. Indeed, what may be keeping students from understanding the relationship between language and culture?

As I considered this question, I contemplated my own approach to culture in this study. In an attempt to avoid the dichotomy evoked by the big-C and little-c concept (Chavez, 2002; Durocher, 2007), I favored Seelye's (1993) definition, despite its anthropological and literary orientations and its lack of reference to language (1). This choice was motivated by the Standards' (1999) definition of culture as "the philosophical perspectives, the behavioral practices, and the products of a society" (p. 43). This definition suggests a separation of language from cultural practices and perspectives because it does not encourage the consideration of the role of language in the enactment of cultural behaviors or a discursive view of language-in-use with a built-in cultural component. Thus, in my deference to the curriculum used in the course, which is articulated around the Standards, much like the majority of foreign language textbooks today (Byrd et al., 2011), I limited my own conceptualization of culture. The findings of this study show that the students also followed a similar approach to culture where language is used to communicate thoughts and information, leaving the development of cultural perspective to the acquisition of knowledge about practices and products, and, as a result, some were unable to see the cultural meaning behind the distinction between *Tu* and *Vous*.

In addition, collecting data through IM might have contributed to letting the participants' definition of culture remain unchallenged. Interviewing through IM most likely prevented the development of in-depth relationships with the participants and limited the amount of data collected as one of IM cultural practice is short responses. In all likelihood, face-to-face interviews would have produced more extended discourse from the participants. Typing answers is certainly more cumbersome than strictly speaking. Talking face-to-face would also have allowed a more conversational style and thus would have allowed me to request further elaboration.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The challenge faced in the foreign language classroom is to go beyond the definition present in the curriculum and guide students toward a discursive conception of language. To that end, Byram and Kramsch's (2005) suggestion to "[talk] about how language is used to represent social and cultural realities" (p. 33) seems to be highly conducive to promote such reflection.

One of the objectives of foreign language instruction should be to challenge learners' "view of language study as purely skills acquisition" (Schulz, 2006). In other words, instructors need to educate language learners at the beginning of their study

on the nature of language learning itself and its goals, namely to develop not only interlingual but also intercultural competence (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007). Alerting students to the interconnection between language and cultural practices and perspectives can be achieved through engaging activities that first address the cultural practices of the native culture and then the target culture. The examples cited by the learners in this study show that this objective is attainable within the first few weeks of instruction.

Throughout their language studies, learners can be provided with opportunities to think "about the social, political, economic, and cultural characteristics of foreign language speakers" (Swaffar, 2006, p. 248). In the present study, instructors tended to informally introduce practices and perspectives through personal anecdotes. As revealed by the findings, this strategy did not lead most of the learners to achieve the learning objectives perhaps because it is too passive. Students need to be engaged in tasks that guide their learning. In their article, Perraudin and Porfilio (2011) proposed activities for this very purpose. In addition, comparing native and target culture headlines or print or television advertisements of similar products, analyzing the components of the national emblems and using social networking media such as Twitter to follow up on themes discussed in class would help students actively develop perspectives on various practices in the target culture. Furthermore, the elements covered during class activities should be incorporated clearly and visibly into assessments (Schulz, 2007) to signal to learners that language competence includes cultural competence and to help them to develop the ability to know what to do when and where. In order to reflect on practices and perspectives in the target culture, learners can be provided with opportunities to participate in designing their own learning. Suggestions for cultural topics, comments and self-reflections on issues discussed in class can be posted in blogs or on discussion boards to foster an environment where teachers and learners become joint providers of knowledge. Such practices can contribute to developing an understanding of the images and stereotypes of the target culture that are present in the native culture but also of how the native culture is perceived in the target culture.

This study argues that in order to be prepared to undertake culture study, learners need to gain an understanding of what constitutes culture. Through group work, students can be guided to reflect on their conception of culture by elaborating their own definitions. These could be written on the board as the entire class arrives at a definition that incorporates facts, products, figures, practices and perspectives (big C and little c culture). This process should not stop at the introductory level; a reminder and a refresher at the intermediate level is advisable to dispel lingering beliefs on the nature of foreign language learning.

The successful implementation of these suggested pedagogical practices will necessitate a level of student engagement that may need some substantial encouragement because students may be used to being passive recipients rather than active participants in the design of their own learning. In addition, it will require some reorganization of the curriculum as well as a commitment from faculty and

instructional staff at all levels. In order to effectively teach that language is culture, we need to start with a consideration of what culture is, which should be included in departmental learning outcomes.

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