

## IC? I See! Developing Learners' Intercultural Competence

by Elaine Phillips, Ph.D.

*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes. — M. Proust*

Traditionally, the teaching of culture in the foreign language classroom favored the presentation of target culture (C2) *products* (Big C culture) and, more recently, *practices* (little C culture). Influenced by the proficiency movement, teachers began to emphasize pragmatic issues and sociolinguistic “facts” (how to take the floor or interrupt, for example) to help learners avoid communication breakdown when interacting with native speakers. With the advent of national and state standards (ACTFL, 1996; TEA, 1997), the cultural scope has been further expanded to include *perspectives*, how people perceive things, and the interrelationship between C2 practices, products, and perspectives. While each of these issues is extremely important, this paper suggests that additional components are also crucial in the development of students’ intercultural competence (IC). IC involves the individual’s ability to “understand culture as a broad organizing and socially constructed concept” (Social Sciences Education Consortium, 1999, p. 120). It includes knowledge (insight and awareness of the native culture, or C1, and the C2), positive attitudes towards the foreign culture, and culturally appropriate behavior (Byram, 1994). Clearly, the addition of two key elements can greatly enhance current cultural instruction: knowledge of the C1 (culture as a socially constructed concept) and the development of positive attitudes toward the C2. Additionally, both of these components promote the teaching and understanding of perspectives and the interrelationship with products and practices called for in state and national standards. We argue below that explicit attention must be given in the foreign language classroom to the development of self-awareness with regards to culture and to positive attitudes towards the C2. Furthermore, students must be taught a process for cultural exploration that involves observation, description, and hypothesis-refinement. We begin with an overview of current practice and implications and then offer recommendations for helping learners to “have new eyes.”

### **How We Teach Culture**

Researchers such as Wright (2000) contend that the most common approach to teaching about the target culture in the foreign language classroom is a one-way transmission of facts—the providing of information about the people, products, and customs of the target culture. Galloway (1985, in Omaggio-Hadley, 1993) identifies four common approaches to culture instruction: the Frankenstein approach (“a taco from here... a bullfight from there”); the 4-F approach (folk dances, festivals, fairs, and food); the Tour Guide approach (historical sites, major cities, etc.); and the “By-the-Way” approach in which teachers share travel anecdotes or offer bits of information to illustrate a point. Although these techniques all provide the opportunity to share cultural basics with learners, they stop far short of providing a holistic view of the C2. Indeed, the presentation of culture as a set of learnable “facts” may promote the notion of culture as a static construct, and it fails to “recognize the variability of behavior within the target culture community, the participative role of the individual in the creation of culture, or the interaction of language and culture in the making of meaning” (J. Moore, 1991 in Paige

*Those who have attained basic knowledge of a second language alongside a list of cultural facts remain, for all intents and purposes, monolingual, having merely glimpsed the target culture and the language informing it.*

— G. Hoecherl-Alden, 2000

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et al., 1999). Ignoring cultural variation promotes stereotyping. For example, do *all* French families celebrate Epiphany with a *galette des rois*? How important is *Cinco de Mayo* in the life of the average Mexican family? Furthermore, “facts” change over time, particularly with regards to daily life. Consider characteristics of the typical C2 household today compared with that household a decade ago.

A fact-oriented approach to culture learning, born as it may be from lack of time, lack of training, or lack of materials (Z. Moore, 1996), has been soundly rejected by scores of foreign language educators who worked on the development of national foreign language standards, individual foreign language association standards, and the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Languages Other Than English. New standards value culture learning as one of the 5 Cs (Communication, Cultures, Comparisons, Connections, Communities); they also include Culture as an equal partner with Language in the Comparisons Goal; and they embed culture in each of the three remaining goals. However, although teachers believe strongly that culture learning is critical to language learning, a recent survey also revealed an apparent lack of systematic, in-depth teaching of culture and found that those surveyed generally had no conceptual cultural framework they used in organizing instruction (SSEC, 1999). The proverbial “Culture Friday” and cultural tidbits casually imparted apparently dominate classroom instruction, in spite of teachers’ belief in the importance of culture.

### **Why We Teach Culture**

Most methodologies with which foreign language educators are familiar focus on the development of language skills and do not address the teaching of culture per se. Historically, when cultural issues were addressed, they frequently concentrated on great literature, history, or geography and were designed to broaden students’ general liberal arts background. Sociolinguistic issues became more important with the introduction of communicative approaches to language teaching. Today teachers, parents, and syllabi alike assert that an important goal of studying other languages and cultures is to emphasize learning about other peoples’ way of life, and states across the country have supported language education in the interest of national security. “The prevalent assumption is still that language study itself will automatically lead to cross-cultural understanding and, by extension, to world peace” (Robinson-Stuart & Nocon, 1996, p. 432). Unfortunately, research does not bear out this supposition. Although favorable attitudes toward the target culture are positively associated with language acquisition (Schumann, 1975), research does not find the reverse to be true: language study alone does *not* appear to promote positive attitudes toward the target culture and its people (Robinson-Stuart & Nocon). In fact, studies have found that foreign language study has no positive effect on attitudes about the speakers of the L2 (Nocon, 1991) and, in some cases, that attitudes are *more* negative after a semester of language study (Mantle-Bromley & Miller, 1991)! Others (Hall & Ramirez, 1993) found that learners tended to compartmentalize their attitudes towards the study of the language and their attitudes towards the people who speak the language. Apparently, without specific instruction in seeking similarities between the native and target cultures, students fail to develop empathy for the native speakers of the language they are learning. Hall & Ramirez (in Robinson-Stuart & Nocon) attribute this to the “fact that students do not perceive of themselves as cultural beings, that is, as having a culture” (p. 433).

*[C]ulture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.*

— Kramsch, 1993

Since there is apparently no “magic carpet ride to another culture,” (Robinson, 1978) it is vitally important—in addition to targeting products, practices, and perspectives—that culture education address components vital to the development of learners’ IC including cultural self-awareness and favorable attitudes towards the C2. The next sections of this paper present recommendations for doing so.

### **Developing Cross-Cultural Awareness**

*There’s a great difference in knowing that my gaze transforms and becoming aware of the ways in which my gaze transforms. — R. Carroll, 1988*

Several authors offer models of intercultural sensitivity or acculturation, describing stages through which learners commonly pass as they become familiar with a C2. Hanvey (1975), for instance, describes four levels of cross-cultural awareness beginning with Level 1 in which the C2 is seen in a very stereotyped manner common after brief exposure as a tourist. “Conflict” occurs at Level 2 as the learner becomes more familiar with the target culture and

*It is the assumption of sameness that triggers facile interpretation, immediate judgment, and turgid culture-ranking criteria.*

— V. Galloway, 1999

differences in values and behaviors are discovered. The learner may feel frustrated and use words like “weird” or “crazy” with regards to the C2 because, at this level, the C2 is still viewed through the framework of the native culture. As the instructor helps students with cultural analysis and provides them opportunities to understand the “cultural coordinates of another, legitimate, reality” (Galloway, 1992, p. 96), they move to Level 3 where they recognize the cultural event as an alternate behavior, different from the C1, but not “wrong.” Milton Bennett’s (1993) six-step Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity contains four steps whose application to the classroom have been explored by Janet Bennett (1993). In *denial*, learners believe that there are no real differences in cultures: Tokyo is basically just like New York City. The level of *defense* follows in which the learner lives in a dualistic world where differences are perceived as bad. The C1 is exalted; the C2 denigrated. In the stage of *minimization*, the learner accepts that there are differences but focuses on cultural universals and believes that underneath, we’re really all alike. At the stage of *acceptance*, the learner recognizes the logic of another culture and is willing to withhold judgment. She is intellectually curious and believes that the C2 is neither better nor worse. It is important to note that distance between the stages of *minimization* and *acceptance* is great with movement from stage three to stage four requiring a major shift in perspective from reliance on absolute principles to an acknowledgment that other valid “realities” exist (F. Klein, personal communication).\*

J. Bennett (1993) cautions that intercultural instruction must be appropriate to the learners’ current stage so as not to be threatening. As most students begin their language classes at the stage of *defense*, she recommends beginning with similarities between the C1 and C2. Others believe that our attempts to build “bridges” to the target culture are doomed to fail because “bridges” (descriptions, explanations, culture notes, etc.) represent reality as seen from the outsider’s perspective and thus can never be completely accurate (Galloway, 1999). Kramsch (1993) believes that differences matter most: “What we should seek in cross-cultural education are less bridges than a deep understanding of the boundaries” (p. 228). This paper does not attempt to take sides on the issue of whether beginning cultural instruction should focus on similarities or differences. We do agree, however, that the goal of helping language learners move towards Hanvey’s Level 3 or Bennett’s stage of *acceptance* must begin by helping them understand that they are cultural beings and that their perceptions of the world are culturally-bound.

### **Developing Self-Awareness**

In the language classroom, cultural content tends to concentrate almost exclusively on the C2. Yet helping students develop their cross-cultural awareness involves focusing on the native culture first. Although most of us know, on an intellectual level, that we are products of our culture, it is very difficult to make the connection on an emotional plane when we’re confronted with a cross-cultural situation which makes us feel uncomfortable or angry or embarrassed or insulted, for example. Because our own culture is transparent to us, we naturally believe that our perceptions are “the way things really are” whereas the mannerisms, behaviors, and values of others we attribute to their “culture.” Students need to recognize that they *have* a culture before they can become open to new frames of reference—or at the very least, to recognizing that there *are* other frames of reference.

*[B]efore learning to understand the culture of the other, I must become aware of my own culture, of my cultural presuppositions, of the implicit premises that inform my interpretation, of my verities. Only after taking this step, which is in fact the most difficult one, can I begin to understand the cultural presuppositions of the other, the implicit premises which inform a formerly opaque text.*

— R. Carroll, 1988

Pre-reading, pre-listening, pre-viewing, and pre-writing activities are now familiar territory. Pre-culture (attitude readiness) activities serve a similar purpose in generating an awareness of culture as a *concept* and in promoting empathy. The literature offers numerous examples of activities engaging students in discovering that they are cultural beings—no easy task! Galloway (1999), for example, suggests activities for helping learners acknowledge their own culture and the subcultures within it. One such activity required students to spend one minute listing everything that composes their identity (e.g., education, abilities, character and physical traits, family). A class profile was then compiled by combining individual responses on the board with tallies kept of the number of references to each. Learners were able to make some interesting observations and to “claim ownership of their own culture’s notion of

\*Hanvey’s Level IV and Bennett’s last two stages, *adaptation* and *integration*, both involve cultural immersion and/or awareness as an insider, and—while certainly a goal towards which teachers may strive—they are less easily attainable given the constraints of most classroom situations.

*First reactions to another culture are often more about “you” than “them”... [O]ur initial reactions, if we pay close attention, tell us more about our own culture(s) and the lessons we have been taught than they tell about those from other culture(s)”*

— Kappler, 1997

‘identity’ (p. 166).” Classes with students of various nationalities would have further interesting discussions of differences in relative frequencies and the presence or absence of individual items. Variation within cultures is also salient in a lesson suggested by Heusinkveld (1985) in which students are presented with a list of twenty or so values (e.g., efficiency, physical beauty, etc.) and asked to rate them according to their importance to “most Americans.” Students quickly discover that no two lists are identical, even when everyone shares the same nationality.

Another particularly revealing activity sensitized second-year Spanish students to the values and perspectives of a different culture. Galloway (1999) asked students to spend thirty seconds observing two photos of a

Salvadoran family at home and then write down one impression. Not surprisingly, what most students noted was the *absence* of material goods they would expect to find in their own culture: indoor plumbing, a refrigerator, etc. When they discussed how they would feel if they were there and why, most indicated they would be uncomfortable, notably due to the outdoor latrine. Learners were asked to observe the photos again and, this time, to reflect on what was *there*, not what was missing. Galloway indicates that the second time students were able to notice “products (material and abstract) valued by the family itself” (p. 161) such as family photos, the cleanliness and tidiness inside and out, and the family sharing conversation and chores. After being shown the inscription written by a family member on the reverse of one of the photos—*This is my mansion*—students were asked to write a letter to the family describing their own “mansion.” Imagine how different those letters must have been than the ones they might otherwise have written!

Al Smith (1995) recommends another activity which helps learners recognize the influence of their culture and reflect on the possibility of alternate frames of reference. He suggests a “culture test” in which students are presented several situations and asked to choose the most appropriate from among three possible responses to each. For example (p. 64–65):

Before entering the house,

- a. you take off your shoes.
- b. you clap your hands to announce your arrival.
- c. you knock on the door and wait for your hosts to open it and invite you in.

Students mark and compare answers, usually discovering that all have the same responses. The teacher then leads learners to reflect on how they knew the “right” answers and to imagine their response to someone who behaved in one of the alternate ways. In fact, all of the responses are “correct” in another culture, so it is interesting for students to reflect on how their own behavior might be perceived by someone with different expectations. Gradually, as learners become sensitized to the influence of their culture on their perceptions and behavior and to the variations within the subcultures with which they are familiar, they should become more open to considering multiple perspectives offered by the target culture(s).

### ***Developing the Inquiring Mind***

Recognizing C2 frames of reference, or “perspectives,” lends context and is crucial to truly understanding “facts” about its products and practices. Leading learners to be aware of these frames of reference, however, can be challenging from an intellectual *and* an emotional point of view; this is perhaps one reason teachers avoid it (Omaggio-Hadley, 1993). Another reason is because the norms, values, and “truth” of the C2 lie beneath the tip of the proverbial iceberg. If our own culture is transparent to us, as mentioned above, how easy can it be for *non*-native speaker teachers of the L2 to know and be able to articulate the C2 frame of reference? Although there are some references available for foreign language educators (e.g., R. Carroll, 1988), interculturalists encourage embracing a hypothesis-refinement approach to the teaching and learning of culture where both students and instructor employ investigative procedures to seek “answers” to cultural questions. The teacher is no longer responsible for knowing all and imparting her knowledge to the learner; she is responsible instead for developing the framework and activities through which teacher and students together investigate and learn about the C2—and for guiding them through that minefield. Such an approach engages students in cross-cultural inquiry, developing their higher-order thinking skills.

Using a more student-centered approach does not mean that instructors *never* share information, nor does it involve completely changing the way they teach. It does, however, require them to rethink their *reasons* for doing what they do. “Only with clear objectives for ‘growing the cross-cultural mind’ can a culture lesson (of any kind) be meaningful

and serve the broader goal of culture learning” (F. Klein, personal communication). Artifact study is a good example of how easily learner-centered activities can be incorporated because foreign language educators have traditionally brought products from the C2 into the classroom to share with their students. Customarily, instructors have introduced these items, describing their function and how they fit into C2 customs or traditions. Artifact study simply uses those teacher-presented objects as a source of inquiry. Students create an extensive inventory of questions about the object (perhaps beginning with the 5 “Ws” and continuing from there) and hypothesize about the answers. To help students understand the connection between a product and its function as part of a complex cultural whole, Galloway (1999) used an item from her students’ *own* culture—a Styrofoam cup—to help them reflect on C1 perspectives on such notions as disposability, lifestyle, time, health, mobility, environment, and consumption. Making the connection in the C1 helped learners realize the cultural complexity embodied in a “simple” product.

Techniques such as ethnography and hypothesis-refinement also develop students’ higher-order thinking skills and provide a more objective process for learning about C2 perspectives. Today more than ever, classes have access to “live” native informants through the use of technology—videoconferencing, E-mail, and the Internet—which provide opportunities for interaction with members of the C2. Carel (in press) describes research she conducted using her own interactive courseware called *The Virtual Ethnographer*. In the study, French IV and V level students used the software to observe and analyze the communication style of some native French speakers. *The Virtual Ethnographer* presented “basic information” about Brittany (the region where the speakers live), digitized video clips of the primary subject at work and at home, and biographical information on five additional “native informants” from a variety of different backgrounds. Once students answered a series of questions that guided their analysis of each video clip, they were able to access the analyses of the same clip provided by the additional native informants for comparative purposes. Carel concluded this approach provided learners the “structure with which to explore the French culture and facilitated the development of cultural sensitivity.” One student, for instance, provided the following comments:

*The cognizance of multiple interpretations is a key element of cross-cultural perspectival development.*

— Carel, in press

French people probably get the reputation for being rude because they interrupt. This is where an ethnographer is needed. It is wrong if we look at the French and label them as rude because they interrupt, because we can’t compare the French to our cultural norms. Instead we have to look only at their culture and decide whether or not interruption is a norm for their culture.

Not all student ethnographers showed such cross-cultural awareness, of course; Carel found that students who did *not* access the native informant analyses showed fewer attitude changes. Since they did not access the other French “interpretations” of the clips, they likely failed to take into account cultural norms other than their own.

Since we usually claim *our* interpretation as *the* interpretation of any given situation, Kappler (1997) recommends a tool (ominously referred to as D.I.E.\*) to help learners think through their initial response to a cross-cultural event, e.g., a video clip of a French family conversing over the dinner table to use one of Carel’s examples. In the first stage, learners are to *Describe* the situation (“What are the tangibles that can be acquired through the senses?), *Interpret* the situation (What do you think is happening?), and *Evaluate* the situation (How do you feel about what you think is happening?). The second stage is the most important, for it is here that learners are to imagine other possible interpretations of the “event”: What might a member of the C2 pose as an explanation for what is happening? Students need to *reexamine* their description to look for missing details and to “talk” with members of the C2 or those who know it well, a process that can take months or even years. This fact alone, however, does *not* make the tool impractical, for even the attempt to understand demands an “inquiring mind.” The final stage of D.I.E. involves a reexamination of the original hypothesis in light of the insights gained in stage two.

Even though more and more classrooms are equipped with advanced technology, relying on “direct” interaction with native speakers of the C2 such as that discussed above may not always be feasible. Jorstad (2000) proposes a hypothesis-refinement worksheet reflecting a variety of sources. The class begins by brainstorming a list of questions related to a cultural text such as the aforementioned video, then offers a tentative “answer” (hypothesis) to each of the questions. (It does not matter that the initial answers reflect the C1 perspective or C2 stereotypes.) Each group chooses a question to research and begins the information-gathering stage using every source of information available to them: library books, textbooks, magazines, newspapers, literature, music, questionnaires, surveys, realia, Internet web sites, film and video, C2 television advertising, etc. In the description and reporting stage, students use a

\*D.I.E. is a tool long-used by interculturalists as a model of debriefing after simulations and other cross-cultural learning activities.

hypothesis-refinement worksheet to list the sources (including dates) beside a brief description of the information provided by each. They then analyze the data to see if any patterns appear. Groups refine their hypothesis, perhaps based on “certain conditions under which the hypothesis would ‘hold up’.” Evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the data sources used, students may also analyze the need for further hypothesis-testing and begin the information-gathering stage anew. This cyclical, process approach to cultural analysis enables learners to understand that there are no quick answers to cultural questions and many possible “realities.”

### **Caveats to Cross-Cultural Inquiry**

According to Storti (1999), human behaviors can be categorized as either universal (e.g., eating so as not to starve), cultural (e.g., eating with chopsticks), or individual in nature (e.g., refusing to eat broccoli). Each person regularly exhibits behaviors that fall into all three categories. While it is useful to introduce C2 (cultural) behaviors to language learners, it may be difficult to do so without opening the door to stereotyping. Paige (1993) distinguishes between stereotyping, taking information (sometimes ill-informed) and applying it to every member of a group, and making a generalization which is a cautious guess about what may be happening in a particular C2 context. It is vital to recognize the categories of human behavior, and the use of generalization, or hypothesis-making, is important in helping learners locate areas of commonality and difference. We are both individuals *and* members of a culture. To ignore the C2 aspect of behavior usually results in applying the C1 frame of reference (I treat you as I would in my culture), a tactic which has historically proven ineffective (Kappler, 1997). Learners may be more sensitive to the dangers of stereotyping if they have access to C2 reflections on their own (C1) culture (mutual false perceptions) where they are sure to discover, “But that doesn’t apply to me!”

*[2]f stereotypes are hardy, it is not because they contain a grain of truth but rather because they express and reflect the culture of those who espouse them.*

— R. Carroll, 1988

Although it is desirable to consider those behaviors we identify with the C2, it is important to avoid portraying the C2 as monolithic. Textbooks, realia, and the media often tend to present a middle-class, mainstream cultural perspective exclusively, so an effort must be made to search out additional sources that include a representative sample of the C2, one in which the social and geographic identities approximate the reality of that culture (Byram and Esarte-Sarries, 1991). As students develop their skills at cross-cultural inquiry, they must learn to ask questions such as, “When, where, and for whom is this true?” As an added bonus, they may learn to apply their skills of cultural analysis to those around them.

To conclude, it may not be possible to bring about world peace through the study of a foreign language. Nevertheless, we *can* help develop learners’ intercultural competence, their ability to see with “new eyes.” Teaching them the process of cross-cultural inquiry may provide them a valuable skill useful at home *and* abroad: a willingness to withhold judgment and the ability to recognize the logic and validity of another culture within its own frame of reference. Knowing about the products and practices of the C2—without understanding its perspectives—is to make the voyage of discovery with one eye closed.

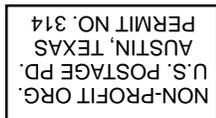
### **For Reflection**

1. Use a process recommended by Carroll, and think of a cross-cultural experience you have had where you felt frustrated or puzzled or amused or angry. Now try to imagine as many explanations as possible for what was actually happening in this cultural text.
2. Think of statements you have made in the past or heard others make about native speakers of the target language that you teach (e.g., *The French are so...*, *The Japanese always...*). Now try to infer the C1 frame of reference (perspectives) implicit in those statements.
3. Do you agree that it is important for your students to become aware that they have a “culture,” a C1 frame of reference that influences what they see, do, and feel? How can you help them be more conscious of it?
4. Think about the cultural topics upon which you focused in your classes last year. Did they reflect the relative importance of those aspects to the culture? Did they include a representative sample of the social and geographic identities of the C2? What could you do to present an even more realistic picture of the C2?

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