

“Culture learning is the process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. It is a dynamic, developmental, and ongoing process which engages the learner cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively” (Paige, R. M., Jorstad, H., Siaya, L. Klein, F., & Colby, J., 1999).

Strategies for Teaching Culture in Grades K-8

Mari Haas

Teaching about the cultures of the people who speak the target language is an essential part of teaching languages. As Galloway (1998) explains, “Perhaps our mission itself requires a context shift: from ‘I teach language (and culture if there’s time)’ to ‘I teach culture, through the tools of its language.’” Paige (1997) defines culture learning as anchored in three fundamental learning processes: (1) the learners’ exploration of their own culture; (2) the discovery of the relationship between language and culture; and (3) the learning of the heuristics for analyzing and comparing cultures. Byram (1988) looks at the “context” of cultural encounters, including time, place, person and circumstance. “External context” refers to the setting of the encounter, (such as an office, a living room, the street corner, an archeological site in Mexico) and internal context, which refers to the cultural meanings the participants bring to the encounter (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). Several authors (Mitchell, 1988; Damen, 1987; and Kramsch, 1993) hypothesize that the protective environment of the classroom allows the students to experiment with the language and make sense of it and the culture for themselves. Ellis (1992) adds that the teacher’s role, the students’ roles, the tasks the teacher uses and the purpose/outcome of the learning also contribute to the classroom context.

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Exploring One’s Own Culture

Before students and teachers can really understand another culture, they need to learn about their own culture. Considering the products, practices and perspectives of their own families, for example, can open new pathways in their knowledge about family artifacts, foods, patterns of behavior and appreciation of their family’s cultural traditions and values. This exploration can lead to comparisons of their own families with those of the target culture and result in a wealth of information about what “culture” means and the why’s and how’s of culture.



Activities for Teachers

Teachers' thoughts and actions are shaped by their own cultural perspectives. "In order to answer eventually the broad question of how our cultural perspective influences our work in the classroom, we begin with specific introspective information gathering. . . [to] locate ourselves by region, ethnicity and family system" (Perry & Fraser, 1993, p. 101). To begin this information gathering, use the following set of questions to elicit basic cultural information:

- Where were you born?
- What language(s) or dialect(s) were spoken in your home?
- Where did you grow up?
- Describe your neighborhood.
- What is your ethnic or racial heritage?
- Was religion important during your upbringing? If yes, how?
- Who makes up your family?
- What traditions does your family follow?
- What values does your family hold dear?
- How do members of your family relate to each other?
- How is love/caring expressed?
- How is your culture expressed in your family?

Teachers can seek out a partner teacher and share their answers to the above questions, as well as ask "why" and "how" questions to their partner as they come up. They can then reflect on what similarities or differences there are in their two families. As teachers learn more about their own cultural realities and those of others, they can reflect on the information and possibly understand alternate definitions of family. Partner teachers could also complete the collage and web activities suggested for the students.



Activities for K-8 Students

1. Have students draw pictures of themselves; then on a separate page have them draw a picture of their family (that does not include them). Ask students to label their family members in the target language. The student-artists can then present the drawing of their families to the class by explaining their relationships to the rest of the people in the family, for example, "I am Robert and Carolyn's daughter; My grandmother is my mother's mother; I am John's sister."
2. Divide the students into pairs and ask them to compare their pictures/families. Pre-teach the language that the students need to compare their pictures. At the end of the activity the partners tell the class what is similar and what is different about their families: "In my family there is a grandfather but in my partner's family there is no grandfather."
3. Using the same family picture ask the students to draw symbols of the country from which their family originated: a flag, any special foods, objects, traditional clothing, celebrations. Also ask them to label their pictures in the language of origin if possible or in the target language. Have students show their pictures and talk about the symbols they included in their picture.
4. Ask students to choose a tradition, belief, or way of doing things in their family that they enjoy. Provide the students with materials for collage (tissue and other colorful papers, feathers, styrofoam pieces, buttons, toothpicks, pipe-cleaners, glue, tape, pieces of cardboard and any other materials available). Ask them to create their favorite tradition on the cardboard and to write about it briefly on an index card (if appropriate to their language level). After each member of the class describes what they created, ask the students about the similarities among their collages.

Figure 1

Web Activity		
	I am...	
I use, I have, I make, I eat...	Student's Name or Picture	I do, I celebrate...
	I think, I value, I like...	

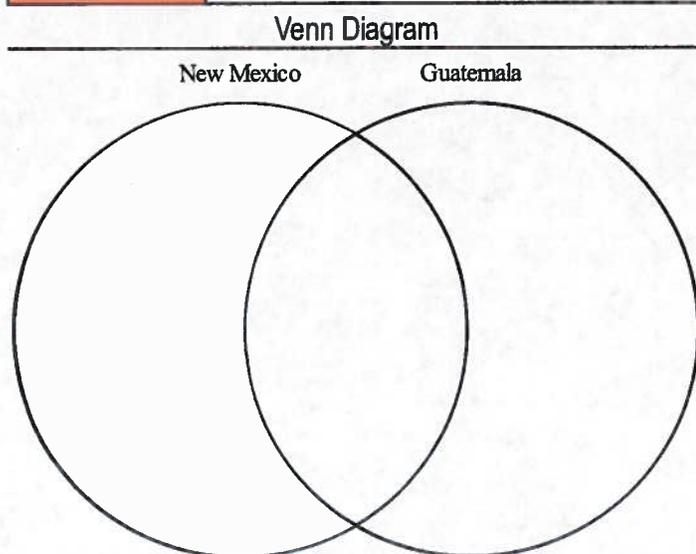
5. When they are finished, the students can complete a web activity (see Figure 1) by thinking about what they have learned about their family culture. Alternately you can use the webs as a guessing game by leaving the center circle blank. Post the webs on the board or walls and let the students guess which web belongs to which student.

Figure 2

KWL Chart		
What I know	What I want know	What I have learned

6. Other graphic organizers can also be used to investigate cultures. A KWL chart (see Figure 2) can work as a summary of information that students know or have found out about their own culture or that they have learned about the culture they are studying. A Venn diagram (see Figure 3) or a T Chart (see Figure 4) works well to compare the students' culture with that of students in the culture they are studying.

Figure 3



Discovering the Relationship between Language and Culture

Often the real meaning of the same word differs substantially among different languages. Words are bearers of culture in their own right. The word, *familia*, for example, is easily translated as “family.” However, do Hispanics mean the same thing by familia as our U.S. students mean by “family” (Galloway, 1998, p. 131-132). “The Puerto Rican concept of family may go beyond the extended family to kin-like relations with friends (*compadres/comadres*), while the U.S. American definition of family may include only the nuclear family living at home” (Hidalgo, 1993, p.101). In other societies, such as the Navajo, who are matrilineal, children use the word for “mother” for both their mother and her sisters and they call the people of their mother’s clan, “brothers and sisters.” In Zaire, the Mbuti consider their entire hunting camp to be a family. Each child calls several women “mother” and several men “father” (Sault, 2005). One elementary school student defines the word family in this way, “A family is people who care about each other. They may be a man, woman and children or two women and children or two men and children, or many other combinations. Most people who belong to a family learn to love each other or love each other to begin with” (Families, 1996, p. 9). *Casa* (house) is another word that holds very different connotations in different cultures. To explore the relationship between language and culture, explore with your students words in the target language that may have different connotations in English.

Analyzing and Comparing Cultures

“Cultural understanding is necessary for appropriate intercultural communication, which of course is a primary purpose of language instruction. Moreover, cultural understanding undergirds appreciation of daily life practices and cultural products—whether aesthetic or utilitarian nature—and facilitates the development of empathy and positive attitudes. Cultural understanding may begin with awareness that cultural similarities and differences exist among people both around the world and in their own community. . . . Cultural understanding requires knowledge and information: the “what” and the “why” (Montgomery County Public Schools, 1994 p.4).

Activities for K-8 Students

1. After reading a cultural story or studying a target language-speaking culture, create a T Chart (See Figure 4) or Venn diagram (see Figure 3) for the students to use to compare their cultures with those of students in the target language-speaking country.

Figure 4

T Chart

New Mexico Student	Guatemala Students
We eat cereal and fruit for breakfast.	They eat tortillas and vegetables for breakfast.
We have running water in my home.	The women and girls go to the well to fill ceramic pots with water that they carry home on their heads.
We buy my clothes at a store.	The women and girls weave colorful cloth for traditional clothing.

- Invite a person/exchange student/immigrant to your classroom for the students to interview. Ask the invitee to bring in any artifacts (musical instruments, clothing, a craft, etc.) that they have from their country. They could also bring photos, maps, etc. Work with the students to prepare interview questions. Ask them to use questions similar to those they wrote about in their culture webs.
- When you have a market, restaurant or store simulation in your classroom, invite people who speak the target language to participate in role-plays and interact with the students. They can be waiters, sellers at the market or store sales people. (Idea adapted from Alysa Dupuy, a French teacher in Princeton, New Jersey)
- Fill a magic bag or a magic-mystery box (Curtain & Pesola, 1994, p. 304) with pictures or realia from a target country. For a unit on Guatemala use maps of North, Central and South America and Guatemala; include pictures showing: the geographic features in the country such as volcanoes, mountains, lakes; Maya numbers and glyphs; Maya women weaving colorful cloth for clothing, men and boys carrying heavy bundles of wood using tumplines around their foreheads, and Maya women and girls carrying water jugs on their heads; ancient Maya pyramids; Maya cornfields or milpas. You could also include illustrations of the Spaniards in Guatemala and examples of the Spanish Colonial contribution to the architecture, animals and food. For older students you may wish to provide information and articles on the recent mudslides in Guatemala and ways students could help those affected by the slides.

Ask students what they think is in the magic bag. Invite a student to reach into the bag and take out one picture or object. Describe the specific picture to the students. Place

the picture on the board or the wall. As students pull out more pictures, describe them and put them in a logical order. Repeat your descriptions of previous pictures each time a student takes a new picture from the bag. Ask students to answer “why” and “how” questions, such as:

- What are the pyramids made of?
 - What were the pyramids used for?
 - How do you think the ancient Maya constructed the pyramids?
 - What tools do we use today that did not exist in the time of the ancient Maya?
 - How do you think the ancient Maya acquired such advanced knowledge of astronomy?
 - How do you think the presence of the Spanish explorers in Mexico and Guatemala changed the Maya ways of life?
 - Why do the boys use a tumpline to carry wood?
- Provide small groups of students copies of the pictures from the magic box and ask them to sort and categorize the pictures by your criteria or their own.
 - Visit the second grade Maya project in *Maya Beauty, Daily Life and Hieroglyphics* on the web: <http://schools.cbe.ab.ca/b143/maya/index.html>. Have students in your class create their own glyphs and a replica of a Maya house.
 - The Mayan creation myth (see box next page) lends itself to Action Storytelling with masks of the animals. The teacher tells the story once. The students practice the story series with the teacher. Then they act it out following the teacher’s directions. A myth is a story of unknown authorship that people told long ago in an attempt to answer serious questions about how important things began and occurred; myths generally involve nature and the adventures of gods and heroes. After students have role-played the story, they can write their own creation myths. You could also provide students with copies of other creation myths for the students to compare with the Mayan creation myth.

Cross-Cultural Competence

Have you ever made a faux pas in the target language or culture? Cultural missteps can cause more grief to the learner than a grammatical error in the target language. “Knowing how cultures differ in the meanings of words—such as friendship, work, family—may be as important to constructing meaning from utterances or print as knowing how the endings on verbs affect meaning. Understanding how to politely agree or disagree, how to persuade peers or persons in authority, or which questions are taboo and which acceptable, are important aspects of language use that traditionally have achieved less instructional time than has explicit

Mayan Creation Myth

- In the beginning were only Tepeu and Gucumatz.
- These two sat together and thought; and whatever they thought came into being.
- They thought earth, and there it was.
- They thought mountains, and so there were.
- They thought trees, and sky, and animals. Each came into being.
- Because none of these creatures could praise them, they formed more advanced beings of clay.
- Because the clay beings fell apart when wet, they made beings out of wood; however, the wooden beings caused trouble on the earth.
- The gods sent a great flood to wipe out these beings, so that they could start over.
- With the help of Mountain Lion, Coyote, Parrot and Crow, they fashioned four new beings.
- These four beings performed well and are the ancestors of the Quiché.

Take your class to an anthropology or history museum to write poems using lessons you have prepared or lessons from Luján's book. If a fieldtrip is not possible, post pictures of artifacts in the classroom and invite students to tour the class museum and choose an artifact as the focus of their poem. Hopefully the students will have learned enough information to include some Maya practices and/or perspectives in their poems.

2. In the computer lab or classroom, have the students go to the Maya Ballgame Web site, <http://www.ballgame.org/main.asp>, to explore its interactive elements. Ask them to respond to the practice of playing the ball game or other information on the site. They can also compare the Maya ball game to our soccer or football games today.
3. Purchase the book *Abeula's Weave* written by Omar S. Castaneda and illustrated Enrique O. Sanchez. Use the lesson plans available at the Maya marketplace/literature lessons site, http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/curriculum/socialstd/grade3/Abuelas_Weave.html. The lessons ask the students to gather data about a market in Guatemala and compare and contrast the Guatemalan market to one in the United States. And, by reading literature about children from Guatemala, students will gain a better understanding of the Guatemalan culture. There are questions to answer, graphic organizers to complete, and illustrations to draw.

instruction in vocabulary or grammar. Yet, cross-cultural competence can be as important, or perhaps even more so, than grammatical accuracy in establishing and maintaining the kinds of long-term interpersonal relationships that can result in a myriad of successful interactions, from business transactions to deep friendships" (Met, 2001, p. 37-38).

Activities for K-8 Students

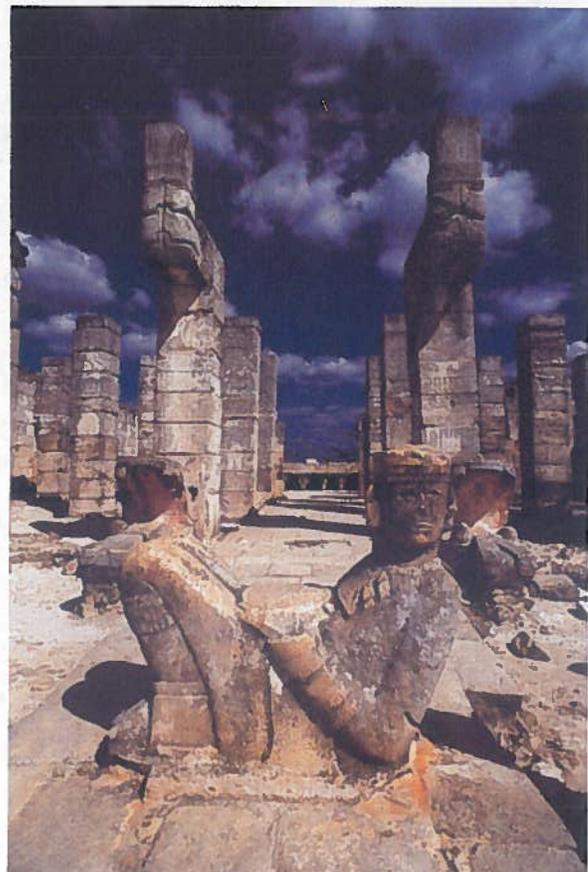
1. Argentinean author Jorge Luján uses artifacts from El Museo de Antropología in Mexico City as the starting point for writing poetry. His book, *La X mágica de México* (1998), includes information about the many indigenous cultures in Mexico. Each activity has a page that describes the culture and a page that explains a writing activity and a picture of an artifact. Luján also gives examples of poems about the artifacts written by young students in his creative writing class for kids. These two short poems were written in response to viewing a Maya Chac-Mool (see picture opposite).

*El Chac-Mool se queda inmóvil pues
Quiere que los quetzales canten en él.
(por Guillermo, 10 años)*

The Chac-Mool remains unmoving as
He wants the quetzales to sing within him.
(by Guillermo, 10 years old)

*El Chac-Mool se toca el ombligo
Para sentir la presencia de Dios.
(por Ana, 10 años)*

The Chac-Mool touches the belly button
In order to feel God's presence.
(by Ana, 10 years old)





Conclusion

“To fully understand another culture, students need to develop an awareness of another people’s way of life, of the patterns of behavior that order their world, and of the traditional ideas, attitudes, and perspectives that guide their world” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2002, p. 10). As culture and language teachers, we need to require that our students use their critical thinking skills as they explore the cultures of the people who speak the target language. They need to reflect, analyze and summarize the information they are learning. We need to provide them with many cross-cultural encounters, ask them to respond to cultural events in the world, and compare and contrast their own culture with that of others. As teachers, we need to integrate the culture scope and sequence with the content and language scope and sequence. Although writing these three scope and sequence documents will take a great deal of time, the end products will be worth it and teachers will have a better understanding of the expectations for their teaching. As Galloway (1998) suggests, we need to be culture teachers who use language as a tool to present rich activities and experiences that help to make students more aware of the products, practices and especially, perspectives of culture.

Mari Haas is a former K-12 Spanish teacher, Adjunct Assistant Professor at Teachers College Columbia University and currently a foreign language education consultant. She holds a doctorate in curriculum and instruction and teaches K-8 methods of teaching foreign languages as well as other courses that assist K-12 language teachers in integrating language, content, and culture into thematic units. Dr. Haas is the author of *The Language of Folk Art*, a curriculum for teaching Spanish in the upper elementary and middle school grades. She has worked with Spanish teachers and core classroom teachers on four National Endowment for the Humanities grant-funded programs on Mexico and New Mexico, and was awarded the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

Nelson Brooks Award for Excellence in Teaching Culture in 2001. As a past president of the National Network for Early Language Learning Languages Dr. Haas has worked with K-12 language teachers around the country and abroad for the last 20 years.

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