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Digital Ethnography for Culture Teaching in the Foreign Language Classroom



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Abstract

With the increasing recognition of the importance of developing intercultural competence in foreign language education, there is now much discussion amongst scholars and teachers as to how to move beyond fact-based approaches to teaching culture by promoting more interpretive and reflective learning within a critical frame. Whilst study abroad is often seen as the ideal context for promoting such learning, this paper considers the possibilities of enacting a digital ethnographic approach to culture teaching within the foreign language classroom. Such an approach involves engagement with online resources in the studied language for the purposes of identifying and interpreting diverse linguistic and cultural forms, as well as critiquing problematic cultural representations. This paper begins with a brief overview of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning, and then goes on to consider three main approaches to teaching culture with the use of computers and mobile devices. The paper then puts forward a number of concrete pedagogical suggestions for the implementation of a digital ethnographic approach to teaching culture in the foreign language classroom which emphasizes interpretation and critical reflection.

Keywords: technology, culture, digital ethnography, intercultural competence

Introduction

Technology has made significant contributions to education and it is bound to play an increasingly central role in the coming years. In foreign language (FL) education, the advantages of technology have been widely investigated (e.g., Abrams, 2002; Ducate & Lomicka, 2013; Furstenberg, Levett, English, & Maillet, 2001; Mitchell, 2016), and scholars are continuing to explore how new technological tools and modalities can be effectively incorporated into teaching and learning. Whilst much research on the role of technology in language education has been devoted to the four traditional skills (Stockwell, 2007, 2012), an increasing amount of work has also looked at the potential for promoting intercultural learning (e.g., Belz & Thorne 2006; Garrett-Rucks, 2013; Godwin-Jones, 2019;

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Liaw, 2019; O’Dowd, 2003; Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018). Within the U.S. context, in particular, there has been a notable upsurge in interest in intercultural learning since the publication of the Modern Language Association (MLA) report in 2007 (MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, 2007). This report proposed the development of translingual and transcultural competence as the primary goal of FL education, in order to facilitate openness to difference and consideration of alternative perspectives. This has had an important impact on the work of language teachers, though some have lamented that lower-level course educators still spend much time teaching grammar while neglecting the development of in-depth cultural knowledge (Dema & Moeller, 2012; Garrett-Rucks, 2013, 2018).

A further issue is that the MLA policy document primarily promotes study abroad experience as the principal means to gain deep cultural understanding, and there are only a few direct references to the potential role of technology and the Internet for promoting intercultural learning (Guth & Helm, 2012). Given the fact that study abroad affords opportunities for language learners to hone their abilities to observe and interpret new cultural behaviors and meanings, the emphasis on study abroad is understandable to some extent. However, Garrett-Rucks (2013) reports a statement by the American Council of Education, suggesting that universities “can’t count on study abroad as the major vehicle of internationalization” (p. 193). Thus, there is clearly a need to consider how technology—specifically the use of computers and mobile devices—might be utilized in the classroom to promote ethnographic exploration of new linguistic forms and meanings, as well as different cultural perspectives. While much of the work linking ethnographic techniques and intercultural learning assumes a study abroad context, this paper considers the possibilities of enacting a digital ethnographic approach to culture teaching within the FL classroom. In this article, digital ethnography refers to the application of ethnographic techniques in digital spaces (e.g., forums, social networking sites, etc.) with the aim of fostering understanding of the “other” and developing an in-depth account of the observed cultural practices (Varis, 2016).

This paper begins with a brief overview of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), and then goes on to consider three main approaches to teaching culture with the use of computers and mobile devices. The paper then puts forward a number of concrete pedagogical suggestions for the implementation of a digital ethnographic approach to teaching culture in the FL classroom which emphasizes interpretation and critical reflection.

CALL and MALL: A Brief Overview

The expression “Computer-Assisted Language Learning” emerged in the early 1950s when CALL as a field of study began to claim its independence from Computer-Assisted Instruction. Over the years, researchers and educators have labeled CALL with many different terms, for instance, “Technology Enhanced Language Learning,” and “Intelligent Computer Assisted Language Learning.” It was only after the 1980s that the term CALL became more prevalent among language experts and educators (Rahimi & Pourshahbaz, 2018).

Stockwell (2007) conducted a review of technology choice for teaching language skills in four top CALL journals and found that there is a great variety in the technologies used by learners and educators. Examples of reading tools in computer-based environments include programs that present glosses, conjugators, and online dictionaries. With respect to writing, the Internet prompted a shift from individualized to collaborative writing activities (Rahimi & Pourshahbaz, 2018). Email exchanges, wikis, and blogs have been found to support students’ writing skills and collaboration. Examples of applications of CALL for speaking skills include voice chat, audio-conferencing, and speech recognition software. Last, commonly used technologies for listening skills include online videos and podcasts. Podcasting has mainly been investigated in relation to MALL and has become a popular tool

in the FL classroom due to the learning “anytime and anywhere” feature (Ducate & Lomicka, 2013). Generally, mobile learning has been described as more spontaneous than CALL since it promotes continuity, facilitates use across different contexts, and places learning directly in the hands of the student (Stockwell, 2016).

Similar to Stockwell (2007), Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richardson, and Freynik (2014) summarized technology tools and their effectiveness for FL teaching and learning by focusing on empirical studies comparing the use of newer technologies with traditional pedagogical methods. Measurable impact in FL learning was noticed in studies that focused on computer-assisted pronunciation training, while other technologies tended to emphasize deeper student engagement and motivation. The authors concluded that in the CALL field actual increases in learning or proficiency have yet to be demonstrated. Liaw and English (2017) examined technology applications to foster successful L2 reading and discussed the challenges for reading skills in the technology age. Shadiev, Hwang, and Huang (2017) looked at research, published from 2007 to 2016, addressing MALL in authentic environments. Their analysis demonstrates that mobile devices were useful for informal language learning, gaining new contextual and cultural knowledge, recalling vocabulary, facilitating listening skills, and vocabulary acquisition.

In Stockwell’s (2007) review of technology choice for language learning, language areas (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) and the four language skills are extensively addressed, but the potential of technology to promote intercultural learning within the context of language skills is given less consideration. In the same vein, Golonka *et al.* (2014) and Shadiev *et al.* (2017) found that culture was among the least researched topics in the empirical studies analyzed. This may reflect the tendency within some areas of SLA to see “language learning” and “intercultural learning” as having different ontologies and epistemologies (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013b). However, given that mobile devices in particular have given individuals almost unlimited exposure to diverse ways of communicating (within and across languages) with people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, becoming an effective communicator now necessitates the ability to actively reflect on how culture influences meaning-making from diverse perspectives. This paper now turns to main approaches to teaching culture with technology.

Main Approaches to Teaching Culture with Technology

In the domain of FL education, culture has been defined in multiple ways. Some define culture learning as an acculturation process that prepares students for accepting alternative patterns of values and behaviors (Mantle-Bromley, 1992). Others describe culture learning in terms of a “third place,” a position where students gain unique insights into their own culture and the target culture, both from an inside and outside perspective (Kramsch, 2013). Byram (1997) focuses on the intercultural speaker, in contrast with the native speaker, as a model for competence in culture which includes the ability to understand another speaker’s meaning, while comparing and contrasting with one’s own meanings and culture. Another well-known way of viewing culture teaching and learning is in terms of engagement with three Ps, products, practices, and perspectives (Moran, 2001). The multiple definitions and the lack of conceptual clarity around the notion of culture is one of the major barriers for classroom instruction. From a teacher’s perspective, understanding what culture, whose culture, and how culture should be taught in the classroom has become a significant endeavor.

Guth and Helm (2012) have identified three main approaches to teaching culture through technology. The first one is the “access and production” approach, which focuses on the use and development of multimedia content. An example of this approach can be seen in a study conducted by Garrett-Rucks (2013), which explored how digital cultural resources, including authentic texts and pre-recorded video

interviews, contributed to beginner French students' intercultural sensitivity. The analysis of students' online discussion boards indicates that participants' intercultural sensitivity toward specific cultural practices (i.e., greetings and education) increased, especially owing to the pre-recorded interviews. Likewise, Romjue and MacDonald (2018) describe the creation and use of the "Intercultural Classroom," a free online site that includes authentic videos recorded in Chile, to promote language learners' intercultural competence. The authors point out that this project may help students shift their perspective from ethnocentrism toward ethnorelativism and engage in reflective practices. While these studies demonstrate how culture learning can be fostered with the use of computer-mediated instructional materials, a potential issue with this approach lies in how multimedia content is used. Simple exposure to a recorded interview illustrating a FL speaker's perspective does not necessarily result in culture learning, as learners need to be actively engaging with information at a deep level and also reflect on their own values and beliefs.

The second approach to teaching culture through CALL is the "communicative and collaborative" approach (i.e., telecollaboration) which exploits the affordances of the Internet and those technologies that allow for interactions among language learners in geographically distant locations. This approach views learning as a social activity through which intercultural competence is developed (Guth & Helm, 2012). This approach is exemplified in the work undertaken in the *Cultura* curricular initiative (Furstenberg *et al.*, 2001). In this project French and American students observed, compared, and analyzed perspectives and resources from their own culture and exchanged viewpoints. This practice led to the development of an in-depth understanding of students' own culture as well as the foreign culture. Results revealed that participants acquired a method for understanding another culture and over half of them found telecollaboration the most positive aspect of the project. Furstenberg *et al.* (2001) argue that telecollaboration holds enormous promise in bringing to the forefront the hidden dimensions of cultures. Similarly, O'Dowd (2003) reports on a year-long email exchange between Spanish and English university learners which led to the development of intercultural competence. The author explains that students who developed intercultural communicative competence skills found a receptive audience for the expression of their own cultural identity and engaged in respectful dialogues. Those students who were not successful in the intercultural exchanges lacked the ability to view their own culture from a new perspective. Telecollaboration can open up the classroom to authentic intercultural communication at a low cost while also contributing to students' digital literacy (Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018). However, developing exchange activities and finding a fitting partner class might be challenging. Nevertheless, in these studies the development of cultural knowledge becomes an interactive cross-cultural process in light of students' own experiences.

Last, the "bridging" approach to culture teaching focuses on exposing students to what Thorne (2010) calls "intercultural communication in the wild" (p. 20), which is the use of unstructured online activities. De Nooy (2006) points out that while teacher-structured activities (e.g., email exchanges, discussion boards, etc.) expose learners to authentic culture, they are limited as they only afford opportunities to communicate in the role of students. Activities where communicative exchanges are less controlled, instead, might help learners step out of their "student shoes" and engage in informal meaning-making processes. This bridging concept has been associated with Van Lier's (2004) ecological approach to language and culture learning, a continuation of Vygotsky's (1980) sociocultural theory which supports engaged critical inquiry and claims that developmental processes take place through interactions in social and cultural environments. In these interactions, educators and language users become the mediators who facilitate a continuous process of learning while students are engaged in a process of discovery and reflection. Using ecological constructivism as the theoretical framework, Ducate and Lomicka (2013) investigated French and German learners' use of mobile devices for formal and informal interactions with the target language and culture. Although some activities were teacher-structured, other tasks had learners communicate on social networking

sites on open topics for anyone to read. In this self-guided process, participants were able to “stumble and learn” (p. 458), discover new information that they had not planned on finding, and participate in informal exchanges in online language communities. This model of culture learning might not suit younger learners; however, in the context of higher education it is extremely relevant since portable technologies are widespread among college students.

Although the studies described above are successful examples of the use of technology for culture teaching and learning, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) explain that in some instances technologically focused activities have failed because the intercultural itself was not considered in the designing of the task. That is, engaging with the other is sometimes seen as the goal of the task rather than the means for critical reflecting on how people see the world and, importantly, how learners’ perceptions are informed by their own cultural positioning. Thus, a risk of technology for teaching culture is that sometimes educators might be overly optimistic and believe that students’ use of a tool will automatically result in the desired forms of learning.

In designing learning experiences for the classroom, it is important for teachers to critically evaluate the extent to which the use of a particular device or platform provides opportunities for learners to actively engage in processes of careful observation, interpretation, and reflection. A scaffolded digital ethnographic approach in the language classroom may help educators in engaging language learners in meaningful cultural interpretations and purposeful reflections. As it will be elaborated below, this entails paying deliberate attention to ways of structuring communication, use of cultural referents, and expression of cultural stereotypes.

Suggestions for Implementing Digital Ethnography in the Classroom

Digital ethnography is an approach to capturing practices in digital spaces. As explained by Varis (2016) one advantage of digital ethnography is that “field sites are accessible and data available for the ethnographer potentially all the time, even on the go, if smartphones or other mobile devices are used” (p. 63). Such an approach is particularly suited for CALL and MALL since learners can take advantage of their devices and the Internet and position themselves as ethnographers whilst remaining in the classroom.

Traditionally, the ethnographic investigation aims at observing and coming to understand the behaviours, meanings and values of a particular group, as enacted in everyday life (Lenihan & Kelly-Holmes, 2015). This involves the careful description of behaviours, with the investigator aiming to put aside one’s own assumptions in order to take up an emic perspective that enables the construction of understandings of other people and cultures (Green, Skukauskaite, & Baker, 2012). Ethnographic descriptions need to be “thick” rather than “thin.” While the latter term refers to factual accounts about a community without interpretations, thick descriptions strive at explaining “the meaning behind the outward expressions or symbols of the culture” (Tuttle & Tuttle, 2017, p. 81) and are motivated by a critical outlook on the examined topic.

Within the context of language education, Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan, and Street (2001) note that when learners immerse themselves in a community where the studied language is spoken, an ethnographic point of view can offer a rich perspective, and not just a superficial one. These authors have argued for the importance of learning methods of data collection and analysis, such as constructing field notes from direct experience and audio/video recordings, building connections between obtained data and existing knowledge, and engaging in contrastive analysis (Green *et al.*, 2012). One practical difficulty is that language educators themselves may have limited knowledge of ethnographic methods (Roberts *et al.*, 2001), or they may see the purpose of ethnography as the simple

deduction of facts about a target cultural group (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, & Colby, 2003). In implementing a digital ethnographic approach through computers or mobile devices in the classroom, it is important that learners see the purpose of tasks as more than just arriving at simplistic cultural generalizations based on essentialist notions of culture. In line with recent critical approaches within intercultural education, learners need to be encouraged to adopt a critical investigatory stance toward cultural practices, values, and representations (e.g., Dervin, 2016; Liddicoat, 2016; McConachy, 2018). This entails a shift from essentialized descriptions of the “other” to a more open and intersubjective perspective (Dervin, 2016). Students’ inquiry and engagement with culture become the focus and essentialist understandings are challenged in contrastive and reflective practices (Dema & Moeller, 2012; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013b). Students can shift their positioning from passive “receivers of knowledge” to active researchers who engage in the discovery of cultural aspects and hidden layers about the studied culture. This process involves leaving ethnocentrism aside, which is a critical step to help language learners explore insider points of view and engage in reflective questioning.

Below, I suggest a number of concrete tasks for teaching culture through digital ethnography.

Image/photo ethnography task

One concrete activity that can be easily implemented in the classroom is an image/photo ethnography task. Such a task involves students using their mobile devices to search for Internet images related to particular topics (e.g., work, free time, dress code, etc.), on social networking sites or other online search engines. It is likely that students will find diverse information on the same topic, thus supporting the understanding that cultural practices and habits vary within and across language users. The exploration of diverse representations of culturally salient symbols and practices can be an important catalyst for learning. As Green *et al.* (2012) explain: “central to the ethnographic logic-in-use are moments where ethnographers are confronted with a surprise or something that does not go as expected” (p. 310). The use of the Internet and students’ mobile devices provides a multitude of content as opposed to static and single representations often found in language textbooks. Thus, students may become aware of the restricted touristic discourse, the factual information, and the shallow treatment of diversity within pedagogical materials (Kramsch & Vinall, 2015).

In this kind of digital ethnographic activity, teachers can scaffold investigation and learning by providing reflective questions such as those below.

Image/Photo Ethnography Task

Think about your prior understanding of the chosen topic, how does it compare to what you have found online?

Have you seen this topic in the language textbook or in other settings? How does the topic differ or how is it similar?

What information can you gather about this topic from this image?

Try to find different images of the chosen topic. From your perspective, what is the meaning behind this new finding? How does it relate to your previous finding?

What are some similarities and differences between the chosen topic and your own habits and practices?

What is not represented in this image? Why?

Students may continue in this data collection process and in the investigation of cultural layers within digital images/photos while taking field notes and developing thick descriptions on the chosen topic. With thin descriptions, students are simply developing factual accounts about what they are learning and encountering. Through thick descriptions, they move beyond superficial reports, and include in-depth investigations, interpretations, and reflections. These reflections are guided by the teacher’s questions and include students’ voices.

YouTube/video ethnography task

Another activity for language learners involves data collection through online videos. Almost two decades ago, Carel (2001) utilized a multimedia package, *The Virtual Ethnographer*, with high school students enrolled in advanced French courses for inquiry-based learning. By engaging in virtual fieldwork, which included viewing videos recorded in France, participants reported that “observing and being a part of the culture” (p. 155) enabled the discovery of new cultural aspects and the ability to draw informed conclusions. Nowadays, platforms as Facebook, Vimeo, and YouTube enable learners to easily find videos produced by language users from around the world. In this activity, the teacher suggests keywords and specific search terms for discovering video content on current events and students construct fieldwork records while connecting their existing knowledge with the newly found information. Examples of current keywords are #coronavirus and #climatechange. The teacher may choose to pose the following questions to students:

YouTube/Video Ethnography Task

Why did you select this specific event? Why is such event important to you?

What is happening in the video?

What is your interpretation of this event?

What are other interpretations of this event that are different from your own interpretation?

In this fashion, online videos become the research field where students as ethnographers find relevant content to develop critical understandings.

Social networking sites ethnographic interviews

A third activity for the collegiate FL classroom focuses on ethnographic interviews of language users. These interviews may be conducted through social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) or with language speakers selected by the teacher. Alternatively, students may also integrate themselves in online forums and engage in participatory observations to uncover meanings and behaviors in digital social practices (Sole, 2009). For ethnographic text-based interviews, students prepare specific questions for the interviewees and explore a targeted cultural topic. The teacher may also share with students some potential questions for language speakers, as below.

Social Networking Site Ethnographic Interview

Can you share a stereotype of your own culture?

In your opinion, what are the reasons behind such stereotype?

What are three things that come to mind when hearing “American” (or any other nationality) culture?

These questions can help students reflect on their views toward other cultures and understand that each one of us sees the world differently. Following, students reply to the responses, analyze their notes in combination with other resources, and develop ethnographic accounts. Since the interviews are conducted through a written channel, this activity avoids issues related to audio recording, thus making ethnographic interviews easier to implement. Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996) claim that ethnographic interview techniques can be used as a pedagogical tool to promote positive attitudes toward speakers of the target language. Their study shows that targeted data collection through interviews enhanced students’ attitudes toward the study of Spanish as well as their understanding of their own culture and the foreign culture. Differently from ethnographic research carried out by students who study abroad, virtual ethnographic interviews are an example of utilizing ethnographic techniques in the collegiate FL classroom.

A digital ethnographic approach in the language classroom holds great potential for fostering students’

critical intercultural understanding. To facilitate the effective use of ethnographic research through technology tools, the following pedagogical considerations should be considered. First, it is important to instruct both teachers and students on ethnographic techniques by modeling learning activities. Simply sharing definitions with language learners is not enough; instead, the teacher should model how thick descriptions and fieldwork notes can be developed through the examination of culture in digital spaces. Second, pedagogical objectives should be evaluated in light of ethnographic techniques. In other words, the teacher should examine how an ethnographic approach will support learning objectives. Another central pedagogical consideration is accessibility. Thus, the activities should be applicable to a range of mobile devices and non-mobile alternatives may be also be provided. Finally, guidance and training on how technology tools may be used for learning purposes are important since not all students may be aware of how to use their devices for educational purposes

Conclusion and Future Directions

This paper has explored issues of culture teaching and learning in the FL classroom, focusing in particular on the potential of implementing a digital ethnographic approach. As pointed out earlier, classroom-based research and pedagogy in CALL and MALL tend to be primarily oriented toward the acquisition of language skills, and intercultural issues are a secondary concern. This paper has argued that access to the Internet through computers or mobile devices creates the ideal instructional setting to help transform students into digital ethnographers. Students can be encouraged to apply ethnographic techniques to explore symbolic representations associated with cultural groups, cultural practices observed in visual media, and cultural stereotypes articulated and negotiated in online environments. Using CALL and MALL tools, collaboration, and scaffolding, language learners may develop an ethnographic skillset that is useful for more systematically analyzing cultural data and gaining insight into different values and behaviors.

Although this paper has focused largely on pedagogical issues, there is an obvious need for more empirical research on the pedagogical enactment and learning effects associated with digital ethnography for intercultural learning in the FL classroom. Research is needed to understand how the systematic use of an ethnographic approach may contribute to learning about different cultures and perspectives, acquiring an intercultural stance, and developing a sense of critical awareness. Research informed by sociocultural theory and other theoretical perspectives that emphasize the construction of knowledge through technology-mediated interaction may provide useful insights. From a pedagogical perspective, there is also much potential for emerging technologies such as virtual reality to be utilized to completely immerse students in new digital cultural spaces and foster novel understandings of diverse cultures. Such technologies provide fertile ground for pedagogical innovation, as well as empirical understanding of culture teaching and learning processes.

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