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Using language classes to prepare for study abroad: Confronting the challenge of ethno-culture

Abstract

As growing numbers of students study abroad and choose locations that are not considered the home of the dominant ethno-culture for a given language, language and culture educators are faced with a two-fold dilemma. On the one hand, they must help students acquire the linguistic and cultural skills to cope in practical, day-to-day situations likely to be encountered whilst overseas. On the other, they must teach such practical knowledge in a way that recognises, models and explains the linguistic and cultural variations that occur between people that use a common language.

This study contends that an approach to language and culture teaching that reflects the many areas where a language is spoken affords all students (both those studying in traditional and non-traditional locations) greater potential for intercultural learning. By employing inquiry-based learning practices, teachers and students can both customise and diversify their learning experiences. Challenges and barriers to implementation, namely matters of resources and attitudinal factors, are discussed and strategies for overcoming them are suggested.

1. Introduction

In the Issues in Language Program Direction volume dedicated to study abroad, Sharon Wilkinson argued that working backward from the study abroad (SA) experience has tremendous value for rethinking our language and culture curricula: “The view from abroad can prompt us to reflect on classroom traditions that might otherwise go unquestioned” (Wilkinson 2007: xvi). When one teaches in a program that requires students to complete a year of in-country study as the capstone experience of their degree, Wilkinson’s provocation for language teachers becomes more of an imperative than a suggestion. Furthermore, as somebody who teaches and coordinates a French language program that prepares students to study in Switzerland and Quebec in addition to ten different locations in France, I have had to consider the impact of our language and culture teaching on students not identified as the target audience for most textbooks. Since those studying in non-traditional locations are particularly vulnerable to being underprepared for what they might encounter and thus are at greater risk for experiencing the shock that comes from the confrontation of expectations and realities, this process is even more important (Wells 2006). Yet, in both the collection of essays referenced above and in
much of the literature about both language and culture teaching and SA preparation, there exists a tendency, indeed I would argue a bias, toward teaching language as the linguistic vehicle of a single national culture. If, however, we are to use SA as the lens for examining our programs and preparation, we are likely to be confronted with not only the challenges students face in using language in an immersion situation, but of trying to use language in settings that are culturally and linguistically different from one another and from what is often presented as authentic cultural and linguistic content in most beginner and intermediate-level classrooms.

This study considers the implications of what can, might, and arguably should occur at the nexus of two salient debates in language and culture teaching and SA facilitation. On the one hand, there is the question of using beginner and intermediate level language classes to equip outbound students with the necessary preparation for their time overseas. On the other, there is the matter of diversifying our teaching to untether language and culture instruction from the notion of a hegemonic ethno-culture. When these two questions come together, we are left to consider how to diversify lower-level language and culture teaching to prepare students to study abroad in non-traditional locations or areas that are not recognised as the seat of the dominant ethno-culture for a given language.

Although this study is largely informed by experiences in and examples from Francophone Studies, the issues addressed are equally likely to resonate with colleagues in other language areas. In Hispanophone Studies, Spain and the variety of Latin American and Caribbean nations (in addition to the growing diasporic population in the United States) present Spanish teachers with challenges potentially greater than those confronted in Francophone Studies. Indeed such debates in language pedagogy stretch back almost 100 years (Luquiens 1917). Even when working within a particular national framework though, linguistic and cultural variations within a single nation-state mean that the principles of diversified and non-hegemonic language and culture teaching are still applicable and worthy of consideration.

In what follows, I further explore the issues of linguistic and cultural preparation for SA and the diversifying of language teaching. Illustrative complications arising from non-traditional study abroad locations are introduced and strategies for dealing with them (which have been trialled at the University of Technology, Sydney [UTS]) are proposed. Central to the approach has been a concern for turning this program of diversification and accommodation of particular groups’ needs into beneficial intercultural and linguistic learning opportunities for all students. By embracing the principles of inquiry-based learning all students stand to benefit from a new approach to the curriculum.

2. Survival skills: The importance of preparation

Preparation has been a core concern for study abroad. The University of Minnesota’s ‘Maximizing Study Abroad’ project, which produced guides for program professionals, language teachers and students, exemplifies this point (Cohen et al. 2003; Paige, Cohen, Kappler, Chi and Lassgard 2002a, 2002b). Determining at what stage in their
language learning students are most likely to reap the full rewards of SA (Duperron and Overstreet 2009; Magnan and Back 2007) and devising pedagogical strategies that anticipate or replicate language use in the host society (Dupuy 2007) have all featured prominently in the literature concerned with the articulation of language and culture instruction and SA. Despite this recent research, “articulation between study abroad and the home foreign language curriculum has not always been, and for the most part is not, at the forefront of articulation concerns” (Dupuy 2007: 151). Too often, SA and language instruction are understood in isolation from one another.

Much of the attention in the literature that has taken up the question of articulation has focused on the role of intermediate and advanced-intermediate level subjects. This bias can be attributed to the privileging of the American educational experience (namely its university admissions and graduation requirements in foreign languages) in the SA literature. Where students—whether because they have not had this prior exposure in their education or because they go abroad earlier in their university studies—go overseas without as much linguistic and cultural preparation, however, the focus must shift to beginner and low-intermediate level language study. Thinking about how these initial classes might prepare students to SA is in line with Wilkinson’s (2005) contention that even the first language and culture classes can have a significant impact on student preparation.

If, as Wilkinson (2007) contends, the difficulty of preparation for the typical American model of linguistic preparation for study abroad is that students feel ill-equipped to handle day-to-day tasks of life in another country and another language, students with even less tuition are likely to face greater challenges in terms of both language and cultural norms. Deficits come from an underdevelopment of skills (such as circumlocution and listening), knowledge gaps (often in terms of vocabulary) and attitudinal factors (Redmann 2012). Simple tasks requiring linguistic skills and cultural preparedness such as finding suitable accommodations, turning on utilities, ordering a meal, opening a bank account, navigating public transport and buying groceries can therefore pose problems, to say nothing of the subtleties involved in forming a social network and handling the administrative and educational demands of foreign universities. If we can anticipate that a significant portion of students are likely to study or even travel abroad, it behoves us to emphasise these skills and address potential gaps in practical knowledge, ‘survival skills’, at the early stages of the curriculum. As Miller and Ginsberg (1995: 313) argue, “if we are really to take ‘communicative competence’ seriously, changes must be made in all phases of the curriculum—but especially where study abroad is involved—in the way languages as systems are presented and in the way learning is structured”.

By thinking of the curriculum differently and modifying their teaching accordingly, instructors can foster measures of success via communicative goals in addition to more conventional measures of proficiency such as grammatical accuracy and lexical range. This complementary set of priorities helps to broaden the pedagogical focus beyond language as an abstract entity for its own sake and reinforces for students that successful target language encounters can be gauged via communicative
outcomes rather than more ‘classroom oriented’ metrics (Pellegrino 1998: 97; Miller and Ginsberg 1995). Many beginner and intermediate level textbooks, however, still privilege accuracy in grammar and expression despite being ostensibly oriented toward communicative methodologies. As Redmann (2012: 86) notes, “traditional beginning and intermediate FL [foreign language] courses, with their focus on student mastery of grammatical structures within a controlled language context, do not prepare learners adequately for the challenge of interacting in an immersion environment”. This leads to students carrying the classroom and its ideologies with them into study abroad settings, for textbooks, as Chapelle (2009) and Wieczorek (1994) suggest, are significant arbiters of students’ attitudes toward and conceptions of language and culture.

Similarly disaggregated from language in many textbooks aimed at novice learners is culture. As Kearney (2010: 332) attests, “culture continues to be treated as peripheral to the ‘real business’ of language instruction, a reality that stands in direct opposition to the now near-universal recognition based on theory and practice that culture has a role to play in FL curricula and instruction”. The implicit message of textbook designs that literally push cultural content to the margins via sidebars and cultural notes is that culture is separate from the core curriculum of grammar and vocabulary (Kramsch, 1995). If we acknowledge the interconnectedness of language and culture, however, even introductory classes provide ample opportunity for more broadly and productively exploring what culture is, how it operates and manifests itself in different circumstances, and how it is intrinsic to both basic linguistic survival skills and to the larger intercultural competencies required for successful study abroad experiences. The following examples illustrate how even beginner French classes provide opportunities to combine knowledge-based survival skills and a deeper understanding of culture as situationally contingent.

When students in French classes are taught the numbers up to 100, they are almost invariably taught that the numbers 70, 80 and 90 are known as soixante-dix, quatre-vingts and quatre-vingt-dix. In Switzerland, these numbers are identified as septante, octante [or huitante depending on the area] and nonante, whereas Belgium follows the Swiss model for 70 and 90 but adopts the French designation for 80. If these variations are presented (either in class or in a textbook), they are often treated as an aside and teachers will almost invariably employ the French (referring to France) terms. For students who are intending on studying in Switzerland or Belgium (or who might simply have contact with French-speakers from those areas in other locales), however, mastery of these variations constitutes an essential part of their survival skills that could be used anytime they trade phone numbers or ask how much something costs.

Being able to order breakfast in a café could also be considered a basic survival skill. To equip students for this task, textbooks and teachers routinely point out that in France, le petit déjeuner typically consists of juice, coffee and pastry or bread and jam, and supply students with the vocabulary to order such fare. For students studying in Quebec though, the morning meal is le déjeuner (lunch in France) and
consists of fare more akin to an Australian or American breakfast. These students need not only to know about this cultural and terminological difference with regard to the name of the meal, but must also learn the vocabulary to order their eggs as they like them prepared.

As these examples show, teaching language for practical purposes and as imbricated in culture—even at the most basic levels and for utterly practical purposes—requires us to be attuned to the cultural context in which that language is (to be) used. What we understand by ‘survival skills’ in a given language for study abroad purposes therefore needs to be appreciated in a more pluralistic way if students studying in non-traditional locations are to be accorded the same preparation as their peers studying in conventional locales. Diversifying language teaching is therefore both an ethical principle stemming from the equal valuing of cultures and peoples and a matter of equity in responsiveness to students’ educational needs.

3. Diversifying language and culture teaching

Robert Train (2011: 147) argues that language education in particular “deals very poorly with [the] plurality of diversity of language, culture, and speakership within and between human beings”. This has resulted in what Miller and Ginsberg (1995: 298) have identified as a folklinguistic theory about language that holds that “there is one correct way to say things”. In Miller and Ginsberg’s findings, students who have gone through traditional language education (in this case Russian) “exhibit... judgmental attitudes towards social or regional dialects that deviate from the educated register they are taught as representing ‘authentic’ Russian” (1995: 301). Auger and Valdman (1999) contend that the materials teachers use in language instruction play a central role in fostering these beliefs. Such prejudices not only go against the ethos of SA as being open to new cultures and ways of doing things, but can also impede students from using their language skills in-country (Dupuy 2007). Consequently, language teachers, especially those preparing students for SA, should be conscious of their approach to the questions of ethno-culture and linguistic prescriptivism.

That language and culture classrooms should include not only cultural information about, but also texts that model the regionally and nationally based sociolinguistic variations is hardly a new idea. Scholars with a vested interest in an area-studies approach to language and culture pedagogy have championed a more inclusive approach to language teaching (Auger and Valdman 1999; Chapelle 2009). As Chapelle (2009) has noted, however, the principle of inclusivity vaunted in most upper-level classes (for instance those dealing with postcolonial literatures and cultures) has not generally translated into changes in approach with regard to teaching for those only commencing their study of the language.

Resistances to diversifying the French language classroom are numerous. In the first instance there is the fact that up until the 1960s, France was still functioning as the centre of a colonial empire for most French-speaking regions. For those outside of these areas who learned French as foreign language and who may have
participated in SA programs themselves, France’s status as the leading destination for students seeking to learn French (Wells 2006) has led to a self-perpetuating cycle of recognising France as the place to learn French. Furthermore, the ideologically-loaded term ‘standard French,’ which would seem to indicate a version of French that is not tethered to a particular ethno-culture, is one that privileges “the notion of a minimally variable and maximally homogeneous’ language that is in reality a version of French that all but a few native speakers in France would be able to automatically and consistently produce” (Train 2011: 151). On a more pragmatic level, there is the matter of ‘fitting in’ all the content that one is supposed to cover in a semester. This has often translated into utilitarian approaches where, owing to the logic that most Francophones worldwide will at least understand ‘standard French,’ students are served well enough by the language of a hypothetical educated speaker from North-Central France.

If, however, students are to spend a year interacting with actual residents of their host city—be it Montreal, Lausanne, Toulon or Caen—who are likely to include people from a variety of age groups, educational backgrounds and origins (including people who are themselves non-native French speakers or Francophones from still other areas), the use of only a limited range of models sets students up both for a confronting experience during their time abroad and for a need to rethink their folklinguistic theories.

4. Ways forward: Strategies, consequences and implications

Given the practical realities of being unable to have location-specific language classes, ways for accommodating students intending to study in both traditional and non-traditional locations for a given language must be found. Since SA is typically a university-level activity and the students involved have both adult intellectual capacities and the ability to be self-steered learners, tertiary-level language and culture teachers can capitalise on these capabilities to create learning opportunities that will serve a greater variety of student needs, particularly in terms of preparation for SA. The examples that follow reflect some of the strategies that have been implemented across the French Language and Culture program at UTS.

One approach has been the adoption of inquiry-based learning which has students orienting their learning to the problem they identify for themselves. As defined by Magnussen, Ishida and Itana (2000: 361), inquiry-based learning is an approach that is “flexible and open, and draws on the varied skills and resources of faculty and students, in which faculty are co-learners who guide and facilitate the student-driven learning experience... this includes an interdisciplinary approach to learning, problem solving, critical thinking, as well as an assumption of responsibility by students for their own learning”. In the context of linguistic and cultural preparation for SA, the problem to be ‘solved’ is how to cope (and thrive) in a given environment.

In practical terms, this means structuring individual assignments around choices. A third-semester activity requires students to write to a potential landlord in their
host city. They must read classified ads for accommodations that will not only orient them to the local vernacular pertaining to real estate (a studio in Quebec, for instance, being referred to as an 1½), but will also familiarise them with the areas of town and property features popular with students. In this task, students are prompted to use their own future circumstances to direct their learning toward both survival skills and a localised understanding of language usage.

Although inquiry-based learning works well for assignments that students complete alone and hand in to their teacher, whole group or in-class activities—especially when these activities are based on textbooks and other commercial learning packages—are frequently subject to a ‘majority rules’ philosophy that privileges a particular variant of Hexagonal French. This, as Salien (1998) argues, is for reasons of practicality linked to not wanting to confuse students. As adult learners whose learning objectives include preparation for real intercultural communication, students should nonetheless be encouraged and challenged in their acceptance that linguistic variation (be it lexical, phonetic or morphological) is a normal feature of all languages. Exposure to such variations from the very start of the curriculum normalises this feature and helps to prevent students from seeing variants as ‘spanners in the works’ when (and if) they are subsequently introduced.

To show how this takes place in a limited but illustrative fashion, I return to the examples of counting and breakfast discussed above. For the numbers 70, 80 and 90, the teacher introduces each of the forms in context and then, following the principles of inquiry-based learning, encourages them to adopt and practice (both on their own and with peers in class) the variant most appropriate to their anticipated situation abroad. Thus, following the recommendations of Auger and Valdman (1999: 408), “the imparting of local features for active control” is made context-specific for all students. In terms of receptive skills, students interacting with each other provide inputs that showcase linguistic diversity and thus collectively contribute to the development of adaptability as listeners and readers for their peers. With the example of breakfast, ‘catering’ to a particular group of students by introducing the vocabulary required to order a Québécois breakfast has the benefit of providing all students with lexical items needed to assist them in the intercultural task of describing what would be a typical Australian breakfast. When confusion arises in peer communication, students are encouraged to negotiate meaning across the misunderstanding—an invaluable skill in immersion contexts.

Although diversity in peer inputs is important in that it provides students with an opportunity to familiarise themselves with variants via both receptive and productive skills, inputs controlled by the teacher (for instance listening comprehension passages) are just as important in the pedagogical process. This is particularly true in the case of oral texts, which best highlight the linguistic diversity that students are likely to encounter in ‘real world’ situations. By introducing ‘the diverse voices of the Francophonie’ (Auger and Valdman 1999) from the very start of the learning process, students do not become unadaptably accustomed to a single type of speech.
In adopting a strategy of inquiry-based learning, teachers and program directors are likely to encounter several challenges. The first, and perhaps the greatest practical impediment to implementation, is the lack of resources to support such a program. As Chapelle (2009) has noted, Canadian content in beginner-level French language texts and workbooks published in the United States is scarce. Observation suggests that the same is also true of content dealing with other Francophone regions outside of France. For resources published in France, the presence of information about regions outside of the Hexagon or examples coming from these areas are almost altogether absent, and if not, are largely tokenistic. Consequently, teachers must source for themselves a variety of authentic materials from elsewhere in the world that cover the topics in their programs and which are at an appropriate level of difficulty for novice learners. Supplementing or substituting textbook and/or audio-visual materials in this way thus demands much in terms of time and effort.

A second challenge concerns entrenched attitudes among both teaching staff and students. Regardless of whether students have studied the language before, many of them will harbour received attitudes about what version of the language they should be learning (Chapelle 2009; Salien 1998). Such negative stereotypes stem from largely uninformed media representations and the opinions, whether explicitly or implicitly communicated, of those with some knowledge of the language. The exclusion or limitation of non-Hexagonal content from authoritative sources such as textbooks insinuates that such matters are irrelevant to the study of French (Chapelle 2009). Teachers, who have their own inculcation into language practices and attitudes, also have a part to play in the fostering or dispelling of such perceptions. It is therefore imperative that when linguistic or cultural variations are being introduced, they be presented to students in the most neutral terms possible. Efforts must also be made to repeatedly model all forms presented (‘turn to page huitante,’ for instance). This is not to say that teachers should deny their own inclinations to use given terms or to speak in their own voices, but these patterns, whether largely conforming to the patterns presented in textbooks or standing apart from them in some ways, need to be acknowledged and contextualised for students as being the result of the teacher’s own development as a language learner.

A third concern stemming from the adoption of inclusive, inquiry-based language learning relates to assessment. If students are prompted to adopt the variants most appropriate for their future needs, should they be assessed on whether or not they employ a particular set of culturally appropriate forms? Short of having students stipulate their intended SA destination at the beginning of every assessment, instructors would be at pains to recall who is preparing to immerse themselves in which environment. Moreover, students may perceive inequality in assessment if students going to a particular destination are rewarded for using a form deemed simpler to master (for instance more often using the informal instead of the formal constructions in Québécois French) while others would be penalised for failing to use the more challenging alternatives correctly. One solution has been to distinguish between assessment and feedback. Students supplying any correct variant that they
have encountered in their studies receive credit for its proper use, but students who employ variants that would be out of place in their SA context also receive feedback to that effect and encouragement to develop their competence in the use of more situationally-appropriate forms.

Since the inquiry-based learning model has been introduced at UTS, students who have returned from their year abroad have noted that they felt more prepared to cope with the linguistic and cultural challenges of their study abroad experience. Informal surveys of returned students (from all Francophone SA locations) saw their self-assessment of their cultural preparedness jump from 3.25 out of 5 in 2010 to 4.29 in 2012. Even students who have not yet gone overseas have noted (in their end of semester feedback) that the opportunity to get to know about other Francophone cultures was a welcome and interesting part of their learning experience. Continued monitoring of cultural as well as linguistic preparedness and student feedback is continually considered when making adjustments to the curriculum and teaching methods.

One of the criticisms that might be levelled against an approach such as this, which privileges national or regional target cultures and their linguistic particularities, is that we are merely reproducing a focus on ethno-cultures rather than promoting an intercultural approach. Indeed, this is Wandel’s (2001) reproach of attempts to integrate information about India into English classes in Germany. If, however, intercultural competence is understood as “behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately (based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes) to achieve one’s goals,” a pedagogy that urges students to use the most appropriate language to communicate with a given population surely promotes these aims (Deardorff 2006: 254).

5. Conclusion

If SA has posed challenges for language and culture teachers who prepare students for their in-country experiences, it has also presented opportunities to rethink some of our basic assumptions about what and how we teach. Non-traditional SA destinations in particular have incited re-examinations of the curriculum to counter ethno-cultural bias toward traditional SA destinations and the linguistic variants prominent in these locations. In endeavouring to respond to the needs of students who will study in non-traditional locations, however, opportunities to diversify language and culture teaching—to the benefit of all students—become apparent. By adopting the principles of inquiry-based learning and encouraging rather than shying away from linguistic forms that students are likely to encounter whilst overseas, teachers can promote both helpful attitudes toward language (learning) and assist students in the development of linguistic and cultural competencies that will be instrumental in their day-to-day activities abroad. Although such approaches require extensive development in terms of recourses and necessitate a clear framework for assessment and feedback, student learning needs, informed by the SA experience, drive the curriculum.
Notes
1. It is nonetheless common practice for instructors to supplement the textbooks with other materials and information that emphasizes culture as a lived and variable phenomenon.

References


