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Reflections on Effectively Implementing Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this research project is to explore the perceptions and attitudes of past and current foreign language students regarding the relevancy of culture within foreign language education. The first portion of this paper contains a literature review from a variety of international research articles discussing the necessity, implementation methods, and assessment techniques for implementing culture within the foreign language classroom setting. While the research from the literature review emphasizes for researchers and educators the importance of including culture within the foreign language curriculum, very little research has been recorded regarding the perceptions and beliefs of foreign language learners. Thus, I will compare my own experiences as a foreign language student to that of being a teacher candidate within a foreign language classroom with the results of my research study. In addition, I will compare some of the methods and practices of my own mentor teacher from my student teaching with the findings of the literature review. Finally, my research seeks to discuss past and current foreign language students’ definitions of culture, background in learning a foreign language, and their own attitudes regarding culture from their own foreign language learning experiences through a formal, 10-question survey. In conclusion, I make comparisons from the literature review, my own experiences, and the results of my study for future implications regarding the implementation of culture within the foreign language classroom.

Keywords: culture, foreign language learning, students’ perceptions, students’ beliefs

Language: relevant to all languages
Effectively Implementing Culture in the Foreign Language Classroom

According to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the five main standards for the focus of foreign language education are as follows: Communities, Communication, Cultures, Comparisons, and Connections (ACTFL, 2015). Through learning about the culture of a speaker or speakers of a different language, one is able to make comparisons and connections between their own culture and background, and that of the culture of the target language. This shift toward an emphasis on the cultural understanding in foreign language learning has led to numerous studies regarding the relevancy and necessity of culture within foreign language education. The literature review portion of this study will seek to examine some of these research articles and what they say about defining culture, the importance of culture in the foreign language (FL) classroom, how to effectively implement culture, and developing appropriate assessments to measure cultural understanding.

While these research studies often apply to educators as a means for creating effective teaching practices, very little studies have been done which consider the viewpoints and the perspectives of the students of foreign languages, which is the focus of the research portion of this study. This research project seeks to compare and contrast findings from the literature review, my own experiences as both a student and teacher candidate for foreign language, and the methods of implementing culture practiced by my mentor teacher during my student teaching internship. In addition, my research findings and my own personal experiences will be compared and contrasted with a research study involving 43 participants in a 10-questions survey regarding their own experiences in foreign language learning. The purpose of this study is to compare research studies on effective teaching practices with my own experiences, while placing an emphasis on the perspectives and beliefs of previous and past students within their own foreign
language education. My hope is that the findings of this study can further attribute to the creation of effective and authentic methods for implementing culture within the foreign language classroom.

**Literature Review**

*The Need for a Definition of Culture*

According to the National Standards for foreign language education proposed by The American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), “knowledge of the cultural contexts in which languages are spoken is essential to achieving true mastery of a foreign language” (ACTFL, 2015). In their research, authors Omer and Ali make an analogy of an iceberg regarding foreign language education. The analogy claims that the language itself should be considered the ‘top’ of the iceberg, that which is seen above the surface; while culture is the part ‘underneath’ that does not appear but is essential for a complete, whole understanding (2011). Perhaps one of the greatest struggles foreign language educators face in attempting to include culture in the foreign language classroom is finding an operational definition of “culture” to work with. Research by both Renate A. Schultz and Dennis O. Durocher Jr. claim that finding a definition of culture to implement into the curriculum is what can often cause issues and create potentially ineffective instruction (2007). While several definitions for culture exist, the argument Schultz makes is that there is a lack of agreement on “how culture can and should be defined in the context of foreign language learning in the context of concrete instructional objectives”, essentially asking not only how to define culture for foreign language learning, but also asking “How can educators create some sort of measurement system to be able to concretely teach students and to be able to base assessments off of?”.
In the article “The Effect of Culture-Integrated Language Courses”, authors Omer and Ali define culture from their research as “an integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships and expected behaviors of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group; and the ability to transmit the above to succeeding generations” (2011). While this definition is well-written in the sense that it appears to cover all aspects regarding culture, it needs to be defined and categorized more precisely to be able to fit into the context of foreign language education. Omer and Ali also reference the European Council’s framework regarding cultural features, which consists of seven fundamental items: 1. a community’s daily life, 2. Social life standards, 3. People’s relationships with one another, 4. social values and beliefs, 5. Body language, 6. Social traditions, and finally, 7. Behaviors about social customs (2011). While this framework better categorizes specific aspects of culture, it is still a long definition for culture which is difficult to compartmentalize into concrete, definable objectives within a curriculum for foreign language education.

In describing his views about culture in regards to foreign language learning, Schultz states that culture consists of “cultural patterns that are systematic and shared, and that cultural patterns can change over time” (2007). While this view notes the significance cultural patterns when discussing culture—which should be considered—how can it be applied to foreign language learners? While this definition is far less complicated than the aforementioned definitions, it is also too broad and needs to be more defined and specific for an educator’s purpose. In his article “Teaching Sensitivity to Cultural Difference”, Dennis O. Durocher Jr. provides an excellent definition from his research in what he calls ‘subjective culture’. He defines subjective culture as consisting of two parts: an ‘invisible component’, which is comprised of assumptions, values,
and beliefs; and a ‘visible component’, which consists of behaviors (2007). This very similarly follows along with the iceberg analogy proposed by Omer and Ali, except that Durocher’s ‘iceberg’ refers specifically to aspects of culture, without even discussing language.

Of all of the definitions for culture provided through the research articles in this literature review, I feel that Durocher’s definition of subjective culture is the most applicable to foreign language education. He categorizes culture into four main components: assumptions, values, beliefs, and behaviors, which are four areas which can be defined in greater detail and which can more readily be applied to the culture associated with a specific language. This simplified definition is similar to the definition used by ACTFL for the Cultures standard of the five essential standards for foreign language education, where culture is simply defined as the “products, practices, and perspectives” associated with a particular language (2015). One could categorize Durocher’s assumptions and values under the ‘perspectives’ category of ACTFL, while his ‘beliefs and behaviors’ falling under the category of ‘practices’. However, one thing Durocher does not include in his definition is the idea of ‘products’, which can be more specifically defined as the authentically created materials of a specific culture, such as literature, artwork, music, and a variety of other artifacts. Another item to consider when talking about the implementation of culture, which Schultz notes in his research, is that cultural learning should be considered a process, rather than a teacher providing students with factual information to memorize. This mentality will be later addressed within the research study of this project. Thus, with a better sense of what ‘culture’ is in regards to foreign language education, the next questions we must address is: Why is culture so essential to foreign language learning?

*The Relevancy of Culture in Foreign Language Learning*
Michael Byram discusses the significance of students learning about culture within foreign language learning in his research article entitled “Language Learners’ Perceptions of a Foreign Culture”, where he claims that changing the focus in foreign language from merely transferring messages into the cultural meaning behind even the simplest of messages will help contribute to the general education of all learners within an international community (1990). Additionally, Byram also states that emphasizing the importance of foreign language learning and the cultures associated with it should be considered equivalent to the ‘practical skills’ students learn throughout their education. From his research Byram also discovered that other British educators found that “foreign language study offers insight into another culture, and as such, is concerned with the human and social areas of experience,” which provides another reason for why culture within foreign language can be considered practical knowledge for learners. While Byram’s study specifically refers to the education of students from England, his views can be applied to foreign language education programs across the globe.

Larisa Nikitina further enforces Byram’s belief in the practical skill application of culture within foreign language learning, as she notes that in her home country of Malaysia, foreign language learning is compulsory for students who are proficient in English (2011). Currently in the United States, students are encouraged to take a foreign language in order to have a greater chance of being accepted into a good university, and some high schools require students to take two or more years of a foreign language in order to graduate with an honors diploma, but currently foreign language is not compulsory in the United States. Currently, some school districts which lose state funding are forced to reduce ‘extracurriculars’, including foreign languages, which completely opposes the research findings of authors such as Nikitina and
Byram in the importance of foreign language education in order to create culturally-aware, global citizens.

Omer and Ali provide an excellent explanation as to why culture is an absolute necessity to be included within foreign language education, as they state, “language should reflect the culture of the society in which the language is spoken, and every culture should contain linguistic features” (2011). The authors provide a “hand in hand” viewpoint regarding language and culture, which is also supported by countless additional research journals. In the research from their 2009 study, authors Alstaedter and Jones specifically focused on the “Cultures and Comparisons” standards from ACTFL for foreign language education, where within foreign language learning they emphasized a comparison between the culture of the target language they were learning with their own culture through the means of an inquiry-based Webquest (2009). Omer and Ali also specify three specific advantages of teaching the target culture within the foreign language setting: 1. learning about the target culture creates cause for students to learn the target language, 2. cultural studies increase students’ concerns about the countries of the target language, which raises their motivation toward learning, and 3. including cultural features in education is important to the general education process of students, which closely mirrors the views of Michael Byram (2011).

Finally, Omer and Ali summarize the significance and relevancy of culture from the results of their own study, where they noted that almost all of the participants stated they had “gained a positive contribution from knowledge about a different culture for the quality of their daily lives” (2009), thus proving that it is entirely essential for culture to be integrated within the curriculum of foreign language education to not only contribute to the development and
understanding of a foreign language, but to also contribute to the creation of a globally-aware world citizen among students.

*Implementing Culture into Foreign Language Education*

While numerous studies over the past four decades have shown the importance and relevancy of bringing culture into foreign language education, many educators struggle to implement culture in an authentic, lasting way which makes a difference for students’ learning. Dennis O. Durocher Jr. approaches this subject and claims that there are three primary reasons that the integration of culture remains a challenge for educators. His first reason, which is a reason I can concur with based on my own experience, is that teachers do not have time to implement culture within an “already overcrowded curriculum”. Secondly, he states that some teachers do not teach culture because they fear they don’t know enough about the target language culture. Lastly, Durocher Jr. claims that culture is sometimes neglected because it “involves dealing with students’ attitudes”, meaning that some teachers do not want to have to cope with the opposition and potential for argumentation from some students who may have opposing views or opinions (2007).

While I can agree with Durocher Jr.’s first two claims, I do not feel that the third claim is justifiable, because one of the greatest purposes in education is allowing students to think freely for themselves based on their knowledge and learning, and to support their own opinions, even if it means having a view apart from the teacher’s. While some students may be hesitant or show opposition to some of the practices and customs of a different culture, it is often because that culture is misunderstood and an entirely foreign concept to that student, which is why it is the role of the teacher to provide the student with the knowledge and understanding to be able to view that culture with a different perspective, and to make *comparisons* between the two.
Knowing what a basic definition for culture within foreign language learning is, and understanding the significance of integrating it into foreign language curriculum, the next issue to address is how. How can educators implement culture in a way that is authentic and impacting on students’ learning, and which can be measured by definable objectives? Unfortunately, as noted by researchers Omer and Ali in their study, and as evidenced by my own foreign language learning, many teachers resort to the “cultural excerpts” found within each of the chapters of the course textbook they use (2011). More often than not, this cultural unit consists of a video about a particular country or region which speaks the target language, along with a worksheet to be filled out as students watch the video. I experienced this personally as a high school student learning Spanish, while I also experienced it later as a teacher candidate where during a field observation, I observed the exact same worksheet and video activity from the teacher with her students, with the same exact textbook, 5 years later. While the videos with native speakers associated with these cultural activities may be authentic, the part in which the students are expected to participate is not. Merely filling out a worksheet along with a video can apply to any video for any class subject, and the information student ‘learn’ will be lost as soon as they turn the worksheet in.

This prevalence of relying on the textbook to teach culture is evidenced by Byram’s study, where he tested 3rd year secondary school students on the source of their knowledge about French culture within their French class. The two main sources the students claimed were the textbook and the teacher herself. However, Byram notes that students chose the textbook as the more influential source of knowledge, because the textbook is what influenced the teacher’s lessons in class, as well as her use of exams provided by the textbook. Students claimed that there was an obvious focus on language learning within their classroom, rather than a focus on
culture, despite the fact that some students expressed that they would prefer to learn something
different involving culture (1990). However, these students also talked about influences outside
of the classroom which helped to shape their cultural learning and understanding of French
culture, such as visits to France (because this study takes place in England), media such as
television and magazines, friends and relatives, and occasional meeting with French people in
England. Luckily, these students have some access to direct aspects of French culture because
they live in an area where that authentic culture is more accessible. However, these are important
factors and influences which foreign language educators should take into consideration when
thinking about the best ways to bring culture into the foreign language classroom. Michael
Byram suggests that teachers implement authentic materials such as documents, field work,
audio and video recordings (1990); all of which can be found through on the internet, which
contains thousands of authentic websites, videos, and materials which educators can bring into
the classroom to give students a more authentic experience regarding the culture of the target
language.

When discussing measurable objectives to consider when implementing culture into
foreign language learning, it is important to consider how students ‘learn’ culture, and not just a
list of facts. From his 1990 study, Byram proposes two specific ways of learning regarding
culture: The first being assimilation, where students assimilate a new cultural experience within
the context of the cultural-specific thinking they already possess, and the second being
adaptation, where with the assistance of pedagogical aid, students learn to adapt their existing
ways of thinking, or they adopt new ways of thinking to cope with new cultural experiences.
Considering these two ways of learning culture, Byram later proposes his idea of the language
learner as an ‘ethnographer’, where the student explores individually to understand the foreign
language culture on its own terms, rather than being directly taught information from a textbook (1990).

Considering Byram’s two theories for learning about culture, assimilation and adaptation, it is then important to think about what kind of objectives and goals teachers want to set for what they want their students to learn and understand about culture. In his research study regarding assessing cultural understanding, Renate A. Schultz describes three ‘realistic’ goals for culture learning for foreign language learners: “1. Acquiring knowledge and information about selected patterns of the target culture, 2. Developing an understanding or the ability to explain the interrelationships between cultural patterns within a larger cultural context, and 3. Developing appropriate behaviors in real or simulated cultural situations” (2007). These three suggested goals set up some more definable, measurable outcomes with which students can be expected to reach from their cultural learning. With these goals in mind, teachers can set up situations and activities where students can learn as well as show their learning about culture, such as simulated conversations, through the use of a journal, through reading and analyzing authentic literature, and many other activities. With the understanding of how language learners learn and understand culture as well as having some set objectives in mind for how to measure and gauge that cultural understanding, the next question that must be asked is: How do educators assess for cultural understanding?

Assessment for Cultural Understanding

Depending on which aspects of culture a foreign language teacher decides to focus on, there are several means by which culture can be assessed through a variety of activities. One important thing to note, however, is that when it comes to culture, traditional forms of assessment such as tests and quizzes do not really show true cultural understanding, but rather a
mere memorization of some facts and information by students. Schultz supports this reasoning in his research by stating that traditional assessment for culture does not work as well as other alternative assessments such as self-assessments, reflective journals, diaries, and student portfolios (2007). In this manner, students can show their understanding in a variety of ways, allowing them to present their own individual opinions and views in comparison with their cultural understanding.

Two different approaches which can be used to assess students’ cultural understanding and knowledge are through the use of inquiry-based Webquests, and through small group video projects. The inquiry-based Webquest model is supported by researchers Laura Levi Alstaedter and Brett Jones in their article “Motivating Students’ Foreign Language and Culture through Web-Based Inquiry”, where the authors note their design and implementation of a Webquest for small groups that aligned with ACTFL Standards to assess foreign language culture learning (2009). The researchers define a Webquest as an “inquiry-based activity in which some or all information that learners interact with comes from resources on the internet”, which they claim is more beneficial to students’ learning because students are engaging in a construction of meaning in comparison with merely being ‘told’ information. In the construction and planning of their Webquest, the researchers mentioned six ‘critical attributes for its design: an introduction, a clear task, informational sources, a description of the process, guidance on how information should be organized, and a conclusion (2009).

From the research and the participation of students in their Webquest study, Alstaedter and Jones discovered both benefits and some drawbacks form the use of a Webquest. Some of the benefits they found were that the Webquest enhanced students’ motivation and engagement in learning, it enhanced the development of higher-order thinking skills, helped students to
organize and apply the knowledge they acquired, and it provided scaffolding in cooperative group learning. Therefore, the benefits of a Webquest overall allow students to be more engaged and involved in their own learning, with guidance from the activity’s instructions. However, some of the drawbacks the researchers found were that some students did not want to work in groups, and would have preferred to work by themselves, while other disadvantages showed that for some students, the increased ‘learner autonomy’ in doing the task on their own had a negative effect on their motivation. Finally, the researchers noted that while some students enjoyed the engaging activity, some students still preferred a more traditional instructional approach with a grammatical focus (2009). Yet despite some of these drawbacks, Alstaedter and Jones learned that overall, students found the Webquest “stimulating, relevant, and useful; a tool that enhanced their progress and knowledge”. Along with the Webquest, students were asked to complete a reflective essay about aspects of the culture they had learned from the Webquest, and overall students met the ACTFL Standards of Culture and Comparisons through both parts of the Webquest Activity.

Having both completed and created a Webquest activity, I am in agreement that it is an extremely beneficial tool for learners to help their understanding of culture. However, much like Alstaedter and Jones had their students complete a reflective essay after the Webquest had been completed, there must be a secondary component to the Webquest, where students must apply the knowledge they have gained from the activity. This could take form as a small group presentation, a reflective essay, a journal entry, a creative writing assignment based off of the information from the activity, or even a drawing or artistic rendering of one important piece of information that stood out to students. If students are only participating in the Webquest where they must fill out information, they are indeed learning and adapting to new information, but
then what are they going to do with that information? Essentially, Webquests are great activities to get students actively engaged in their learning, and allowing them to be autonomous in doing so, but then there must also be some type of secondary application for the knowledge they gain from the Webquest activity, to show what they have learned and apply it to their existing knowledge.

Another form of assessment which is beneficial in learning about culture is a group video project created and performed by students, with some parameters and a rubric set by the teacher. As a Spanish language student I participated in several group video projects for a variety of topics throughout my time in high school, and as a teacher candidate now understand why they are great tools to assess for learning. Video projects allow for students to show writing ability in the creation of a script, speaking ability as they act out the script, while also applying cultural knowledge and other topics that may be included the video, allowing for several of the ACTFL Standards to be applied in one project.

The idea of the video project as a means of assessment is supported by author Larisa Nikitina in her 2011 study “Creating an Authentic Learning Environment in the Foreign Language Classroom”, which took place in a University setting in Malaysia, where students in groups of four to six created eight video projects total about any topic they had learned throughout the year. One of the things Nikitina mentions is the absolute necessity of a scale or rubric with which to guide students on the requirements and expectations of what aspects of language and cultural learning needs to be shown in the video. For the video project she presented to students, her rubric consisted of measurements the following: language use, content, creativity, team work, a work-in progress report, a listing of the stages of the project, and a list of
any problems the group encountered throughout the project (2011). Each of these criteria were given a set amount of weight toward the overall grade of the project.

While Nikitina chose to allow her students to choose “any” topic for the project, this could absolutely be beneficial for students to present an original video regarding cultural aspects of a foreign language. This could include music, food, a play based off of authentic literature, holiday traditions, religious significance, culture-specific traditions, and a variety of other aspects of culture. In this way, students could learn about various aspects of culture on their own, and later ‘teach’ the information to the rest of their peers through the use of the video project. Like the Webquest, the video project allows for learner autonomy and for students to be able to express their creativity and understanding of material simultaneously in a way that makes sense to them. As a future Spanish educator, I plan to use video projects with all levels of my Spanish learners, because they are a great tool that allow me to assess students’ knowledge and understanding, while also providing students with a means to have fun and be creative with the material they have learned.

In conclusion, it is important to consider which aspects of culture educators want to cover within the foreign language curriculum, while also keeping in mind the various ways in which learners can learn and understand culture. Educators must create clear, measurable objectives in regards to which aspects of culture they want students to learn, and must plan on how to assess students on those goal and objectives. When planning for assessment, it is essential for foreign language educators to consider authentic, alternative forms of assessment rather than traditional forms, as they allow students to be more in charge of their own learning and understanding, while also allowing them to be creative and less pressured in showing what they know and
understand, by allowing them to apply their knowledge in tasks such as journals, portfolios, reflective essays, and video projects.

While the information provided by the literature review allows for insight for educators and administrators to the significance of culture and how to implement it into the classroom, there is very little information of how *students* feel about learning culture. While Michael Byram provides some insight from his study about students’ knowledge of French culture, his article is written in a way that the information is geared toward what teachers need to change, and not necessarily what the students feel and want for their own learning. Therefore, the next portion of this project will include a discussion of my own personal experiences as a foreign language student, and as a teacher candidate for Spanish education, along with the experiences and methodology of the mentor teacher who I am currently working with. Then, the purpose, methodology, and results of my study which focused on students’ perceptions and attitudes toward culture in foreign language learning will be addressed and analyzed, until a conclusion is formed about how to apply the results of the study to the contribution of foreign language education regarding culture.

**Personal Experiences with Culture in Foreign Language Learning**

I began taking Spanish during seventh grade and continued to pursue it through high school, until I decided I wanted to teach the language I had fallen in love with in college. As a teacher candidate in college, through many of my language-focused educational classes I learned a variety of methods and materials I could use to implement culture in the foreign language classroom. I learned about websites with authentic music, art, and even some virtual tours I would be able to use in the classroom. In these classes we discussed some important films that authentically reflected Spanish culture, whether it be a documentary or a film based off of an
important piece of Spanish literature. However, after learning about all of the ways in which I could effectively implement culture into the classroom with my own students, I realized I truly did not receive an authentic experience regarding Spanish culture in my own foreign language learning.

As a junior high school and high school student of Spanish, I hardly recall any cultural lessons within the classroom. The main types of lessons I recall I would break down into 3 categories: food, holidays, and video lessons (as designated by a chapter from the textbook). I remember in eight grade Level 1 Spanish, we had a day where everyone had to make (with the assistance of parents) and bring in an authentic Mexican or Spanish dish. Everyone had to give the name for their dish and say which Spanish-speaking country the dish came from, and then everyone got to walk around the room and try some of everyone’s special dish. Afterward, I remember we discussed which dishes we liked and which we did not like. This doesn’t seem like too awful of a lesson, however, I realized much later that I couldn’t consider that lesson very cultural because I didn’t learn about why those dishes were significant. I knew that mole poblano sauce was from Mexico and was made from chocolate and ‘chiles’, but I couldn’t explain why it was important to Mexican culture. While food does, in fact, represent an important cultural aspect for many countries, the cultural significance needs to be explained so that the lesson doesn’t merely turn into a “try new foods” type of day.

Similarly, during my sophomore year of high school, we were asked to choose a partner where each pair was asked to find an authentic Spanish recipe to make and bring into class. Along with the food itself we were asked to type up a recipe along with the directions on how to make the food in Spanish. My partner and I made a type of “flan” which tasted like a type of lemon cheesecake, which our classmates enjoyed but our teacher did not. While I feel this
activity was great in bringing authentic cuisine as well as practicing the grammar of Spanish commands in writing the recipes, I cannot recall what the exact name of the dish was or where it came from. Again, I didn’t research or understand the cultural significance of the dish I was preparing, only being able to try a variety of different foods.

The next set of ‘cultural’ lessons I can recall as a Spanish students are the superficial ‘holiday’ lessons, where we would spend a day or two learning about a day such as Cinco de Mayo, el Día de los Muertos, the Tomatina Festival, la Navidad (Christmas), or the running of the bulls. Often these lessons consisted of short informational video, a worksheet that was filled out, and sometimes a small hands-on activity that went with the lesson. For example, when learning about El Día de los Muertos (the day of the dead-the Spanish version of Halloween), we learned about the significance of the day, various symbols used for the celebration in the cemeteries, and we go to try ‘pan de muerto’, a dish typically made and served during the festivities. We also decorated a paper skull, which were all hung up in the hallways outside of our Spanish classroom. While I understand more about the significance of this event now, having created and taught a lesson about it for one of my college educational courses, back in high school I would have forgotten most of the information we had ‘learned’ within a week of learning it after we had moved on to something else. I consider these food lessons to be superficial, in that I didn’t gain any knowledge toward my cultural understanding of the Spanish language.

The next and final set of lessons I experienced were the ‘cultural video’ lessons which contained one cultural lesson for each chapter of the textbook we used. During class we would be handed a worksheet that was to be filled out as the 10-15 minute video was played, and usually it was played twice to ensure everyone would be able to get the correct answers for the
worksheet. Generally these videos consisted of a native speaker from one of many several Spanish-speaking countries talking about their native land, important facts about their country such as agriculture, products that came from their country, things to do, and sights to see. The worksheet which followed along with the video often focused on listening for certain vocabulary words, answering multiple choice questions, and two short answer questions where you had to respond to a simple question based on information from the video. After the video was played twice, we would pass our worksheet to a partner and we would peer-grade as the teacher went over the answers. After that, the worksheet would be turned in, and we would move on to the next lesson. Unless we watched a video about a specific holiday or event, there was generally no discussion about that specific country or any new information provided by the teacher. Essentially, the worksheet was the ‘proof’ we had gained cultural understanding, until we moved on to the next Spanish lesson. While the materials provided for these short video lessons may have been authentic, the learning portion on the behalf of the students was not.

As a student of the College of Education and a teacher candidate, I have learned ‘how’ to teach culture in my classroom, and I also get to experience other techniques from my mentor teacher with whom I am currently student teaching. I am currently working with Level 2 and Level 3 Spanish students, which consist primarily of sophomores and juniors, as well as a couple of seniors. One of the first lessons I taught by myself was a cultural lesson about famous Mexican artist Frida Kahlo and her paintings. I used a Prezi presentation to teach students about her life, the significance of her artwork, and some of the important characteristics of her artwork. Then, I had students break up into group of two or three and gave each group one of Frida’s paintings, without the title or any of the background information. Students were asked to come up with a title for the painting, explain what they thought the painting was about and why the
artist painted it, and were asked to name some of the elements they recognized from what they had previously learned. Some students were very intuitive and creative, while others were silly and just wanted to show off to friends, but overall, the lesson was a success! I know I enjoyed the lesson and I feel that a majority of the students enjoyed the lesson because it was one where they were able to apply information they had learned along with their own thoughts and opinions.

Three important cultural lessons which my mentor teacher implements are lessons for El Día de los Muertos, El Día de San Valentín (Valentine’s Day), and a large literature unit for Spanish 3 in which she explores various poems and legends about Spain’s history and cultural background. While I did not get to experience El Día de los Muertos personally, she explained to me that they celebration takes place over 2 days in class, and she puts students into small groups, and each group is assigned a ‘role’ for the celebration. One group will be in charge of the food, another group is in charge of music, one is in charge of authentic decorations, one is in charge of building the altar, and another is in charge of bringing ‘personal materials’ to be placed on the altar. Each of these groups are necessary in the completion of the celebration as a whole, and each group also must explain the significance of their ‘part’ in the festivities. For example, the group in charge of the decoration would most likely talk about ‘papel picado’ and ‘calacas’ (perforated paper and skeletons), both of which are symbolic and significant to Mexican culture and the celebration of the Day of the Dead.

Another fun cultural lesson is for ‘El Día de San Valentín’, where students get to learn about authentic ‘piropos’ (pick-up lines) and ‘sentimientos’ sentiments. She has students work in small groups to translate these verses in English, and each group shares with the rest of the class. What is interesting about some of these pick-up lines or sentiments is that most of them do not
translate literally in English, and many of them feature cultural quirks or elements which we do not recognize as English speakers. One notable difference is that in American culture, we are used to the phrase “cats have nine lives”, but in Spanish-speaking countries (most notably in Spain), they believe that cats have seven lives. After going over all of the pick-up lines and sentiments, the small groups created their own pick-up lines and shared them with the class. Later, the students created paper valentines with some of these pick-up lines along with short, sweet phrases reminiscent of the candy heart popular in the U.S. for Valentine’s Day.

Finally, with the level 3 Spanish students my mentor teacher like to focus the last month and a half of the school year going over literature, because to reflects a lot of important historical and cultural aspects of Spain. This unit goes over poetry and poetry analysis, Spanish legends, and a short section from *Don Quixote*. She specifically likes to focus on Gustavo Alfonso Bécquer and his poetry for the poetry unit, as he covers several important themes about Spanish culture within his poetry. I am in agreement with my teacher in believing that literature is an excellent tool to help students learn and understand culture, while also improving their reading and writing skills in the target language.

Overall, from my personal experiences as a student, to my learning as a teacher candidate in order to be able to teach Spanish, to my current experiences student teaching in a Spanish classroom, I have learned a lot about what is effective and what is ineffective regarding culture in the foreign language classroom. I did not realize how limited I was as a secondary student in regards to culture until I went to college and had a more focused approach on learning culture within my advance-level Spanish courses, as well as in how to teach culture in my education courses. Currently, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of research studies telling teacher which types of materials and activities to use when implementing culture. Countless articles based on
the experiences and research of educators, administrators, and researchers exist as to the best techniques for effectively implementing culture into the foreign language classroom. Unfortunately, very little research exists which takes into accounts the views and the interests of the students in their foreign language learning. This is the basic mindset which fueled the idea for the research study for this project.

**Research Study**

*Purpose and Design*

The purpose of this research study was to take into account the perspectives and opinions of past and former students’ experiences in foreign language learning, and how they felt about learning culture within their foreign language classes. Because there is so little literature focused on what students think, these views should be taken into consideration because they offer further insight for educators as to what is effective and what is not effective when teaching culture in a foreign language classroom setting. The two ultimate goals from this research were to answer the following questions: 1. Were students able to effectively and authentically learn about cultural from their foreign language learning experiences? and 2. What would students change which would better benefit their cultural understanding of the culture of the target language?

The design for this study was created using a ten-question survey format using the website surveymonkey.com to create the platform for the questions. These questions were divided into three main categories: background information, students’ general perceptions of culture from their foreign language learning, and students’ opinions about culture within the context of foreign language education. The ten questions in the survey consisted of: 3 multiple choice questions (Q-2, Q-3, Q-4), 1 short input data question (Q-1), 1 yes or no question (Q-6), 1 Likert-scale style question (Q-8), and 4 questions consisted of short-answer responses of 1-3
REFLECTIONS ON EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENTING CULTURE

sentences (Q-5, Q-7, Q-9, Q-10). A link to the survey was posted on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter asking for participants 18 years of age and older. There were 46 participants for this research study survey entitled “Culture in Foreign Language Learning”. The only specific background information desired about the participants was age; neither gender nor ethnicity were a needed consideration for this study. The categorized response questions were analyzed based on the frequency of a particular answer, as well as the percentage degrees belonging to each reply. The short-answer questions were broken down and categorized into more defined categories of responses for each question, which were then analyzed based on frequency and percentage degrees for each reply as well.

Results

The data for question 1 “How old are you?” measures the range of ages for participants as well as the frequency for each, as shown in Chart 1.

Chart 1
As shown above, a majority of the participants for this study (40) were around college-age, primarily ranging from ages 18-24, while there were 6 participants ages 25 and older. Notice there is a large age gap for participants past 24 years of age, ranging up to 64.

The next set of questions, questions 2, 3, and 4, focused on the foreign-language learning background of the participants. Question 2 asks “Which foreign language have you taken?” with a list of choices as well as an ‘other’ option where participants could provide a different answer. Question 3 asks “How many years did you take or have you been taking a foreign language?” where students again chose from a given list of ranges of years. Lastly, Question 4 asks “At what level did you take a foreign language?” in which participants were given a list of options to choose from or could respond with an unlisted option under ‘other’. The data for these questions is shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 1-Question 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>63.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>28.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>6.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>2.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What Table 1 does not show is that in addition to the data shown above, three participants also noted that in addition to a spoken foreign language, they also took American Sign Language.

Table 2-Question 3
**Table 3-Question 4**

**At what level did you take a foreign language?**

Answered: 46  Skipped: 0

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>45.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College/University</td>
<td>10.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both H.S. and College</td>
<td>36.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>6.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Choices</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-3 years</td>
<td>56.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6 years</td>
<td>26.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7+ years</td>
<td>17.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 does not show the responses for the three participants who answer ‘other’ as to how long they had been taking a foreign language. The three ranges given were: one person responded to having taken a foreign language kindergarten through their junior year of high school, another responded elementary school through college, and the last said from pre-school through college.

As shown in Table 1, an overwhelming majority of participants (63.04%) took Spanish as a foreign language, followed next by French (28.26%), and then Italian (6.52%). These results were not surprising because a majority of school districts primarily offer only Spanish and France as their electives for a foreign language.

Table 2 shows that a majority of participants (26) only took a language from 1-3 years, while only 8 of the 46 participants have been taking a foreign language for seven or more years.

Finally, Table 3 which responds to the educational level and range in which participants took a foreign language shows that almost half of the participants took a foreign language at high school level, while a close-following majority took a foreign language in both high school and college. Only 5 of the 46 participants took a foreign language at the university level, while 3, as mentioned earlier, took a foreign language from a very early age into high school or college.

With this information in mind, a lot of the responses for the next set of questions are going to have taken place regarding foreign language at either the high school or university level.

Questions 5, 6, and 7 refer to participants’ basic perceptions of culture in general based on their foreign language learning. Question 5 asks participants to “give a brief description of your definition of culture”, while Question 6 is a yes or no question that asks “Do you recall any ‘cultural' lessons in regards to learning your foreign language?” Finally, Question 7 refers to
those who responded ‘yes’ to Question 6, and then asks “Please give a brief description of the topic/any activities/details you remember about any cultural lessons you may have learned.”. Table 4 shows the results for responses for Question 5, while Table 5 shows the data for the responses for Question 7.

Table 4-Question 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Definition for Culture:</th>
<th># of participants out of 46</th>
<th>% of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The shared beliefs, practices, ideals, and experiences (of a group of people)”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Shared customs, traditions, and attitudes (of a group of people)”</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A group of people with the same values, unique characteristics, and history”</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the common characteristics of what makes up a group of people/factors that lead to self-identification”</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the way people act, interact, and live in a defined area”</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Where you come from”</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“the societal norms or products of a society”</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5-Question 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Cultural Lesson</th>
<th># of respondents under that category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food (Superficial-no meaning as to why TL speakers eat that food)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superficial (Basic Holidays or Celebrations of the TL)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Abroad Experience</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation of Literature</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic Customs/Traditions (mannerisms, family life, fashion, business practices, music, etc.)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Videos to learn about Culture</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOT a cultural lesson</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows the categorizations of participants’ definitions for culture based on the short responses given, which were divided up into 7 basic categories. Note that some participants’ responses fell under more than one category, which is why the percentages do not
add up to 100%. Almost half of the responses giving a definition for culture were very similar to “The shared customs, traditions, and attitudes of a group of people”. This is a good, concise definition of culture that could easily be implemented within a foreign language classroom. On a similar note, the next category primarily defined was “The shared beliefs, practices, ideals, and experiences (of a group of people)”, which also allows for a simplified definition for culture, but which covers many of its important aspects. What is interesting is the range of definitions given for this response, from a simple “where you come from”, to a more complex “the common characteristics of what makes up a group of people/factors that lead to self-identification”. However, many participants gave a definition which could easily comply with standards for foreign language education.

Question 6 asked participants “Do you recall any 'cultural' lessons in regards to learning your foreign language?” Of the 46 responses, 33 out of 46 participants (71.74%) responded ‘yes’, while the remaining 13 (28.26%) answered ‘no’. The next question asking about specific cultural lessons was then aimed toward the 33 people who responded ‘yes’ to Question 6.

Question 7 asked participants to “please give a brief description of the topic/any activities/details you remember about any cultural lessons you may have learned”, and of the 33 who responded ‘yes’ to the previous question, 31 responded with a short answer. These responses and descriptions of cultural lessons were categorized into 7 basic categories. Of the 31 responses, 12 fell under the category of what I considered to be a true, authentic cultural lesson, because it featured more specific aspects such as family life, music, and daily life, rather than the ‘superficial’ lesson of a food lesson and a holiday lesson. 14 of the 31 responses consisted of what I considered to be ‘superficial’ lessons, very similar to my own high school experiences as a Spanish student. One participant gained an in-depth cultural experience through study abroad,
and others learned culture through the use of video, though whether or not the video was authentic or from a textbook is unclear. Overall, the responses showed that about half of participants of the 31 who responded received at least one authentic, genuine lesson about culture; while the other half received superficial lessons which did not truly increase their knowledge of the speakers of the target language.

The final three survey questions, Questions 8, 9, and 10, focused on students’ opinions about culture within the whole of foreign language education. Question 8 was modeled as a Likert-style question where students were asked “How important do you feel culture is when learning a foreign language?”, and participants were asked to rate from a 1 (not important) to a 5 (extremely important). Question 9 was a short-answer response question that asked “Do you feel you were adequately able to learn about the cultural background of the foreign language you learned? Why or why not?” For this question, I divided the responses into yes, no, and somewhat; and then divided the explanatory responses as to why or why not into general categories as well. Finally, Question 10 asks “What kind of topics, activities, or projects do you feel would have benefitted your cultural understanding of a foreign language?”, and the short responses for these were put into 9 generalized categories. Table 6 shows the data of responses for Question 8, while Table 7 shows the data responses for Question 10. The results from Question 9 will be discussed below.
How important do you feel that culture is when learning a foreign language?

**Table 6-Question 8**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category for topic/subject/activity for improvement:</th>
<th># of participants who chose this response</th>
<th>% of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A greater focus on history</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More experiential learning or group projects</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The need for current/updated materials and topics</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The need for study abroad or language immersion with native speakers</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of videos</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A focus on the daily life of TL speakers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More comparison between cultures</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A greater focus on ALL aspects of culture (including art, history, music, mannerisms, etc.)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The responses for Question 8 asking participants to rate the importance of culture in foreign language learning were overwhelmingly positive, with 45.65% stating it is highly important, 32.61% stating it is extremely important, and 21.74% stating culture is somewhat important. Although at varying levels, each participant noted that culture is indeed relevant to foreign language learning. These responses further support the claims about the necessity and relevancy of culture mentioned in the literature review.

Question 9 asked whether or not participants felt that they were adequately able to learn about culture in their foreign language learning, and to give reasons to support their response.
For this question, 14 (30.4%) said that yes, they felt they adequately learned about culture, while 24 (52.2%) responded ‘no’, and 8 (17.4%) responded with ‘somewhat’. The overwhelming responses for no are not as surprising because they correlate highly with the number of participants who responded with ‘no’ (13) when asked if they remembered any particular cultural lessons. There may be a potential correlation between the remaining number of people of the 24 who said ‘no’ in adequately being able to learn about culture, and those who experienced ‘superficial’ cultural lessons. For those who responded “yes” to Question 9, the most significant response repeated multiple times was that they had ‘spent time in the target language country’, which truly helped improve their cultural understanding. Other positive responses included “previous cultural background from my family”, a “use of movies”, and finally “each language lesson was associated with a cultural lesson”. Only one person responded for each of these last three responses. For those who responded that they were not able to adequately learn about culture in their foreign language learning, the three main responses as to why they were unable to were: “you need true immersion to be able to understand culture”, “we learned superficial information”, and “there were not enough lessons/not enough time was spent learning about culture”. Seven of the 24 ‘no’ responses mentioned the need for immersion, while 4 of the 24 noted they had learned superficial information. This need for true immersion correlates with Michael Byram’s findings in his research study, while the superficial information and lack of cultural information supports the claims of Dennis O. Durocher Jr.

The final question of the survey asked for opinions about what types of topics, activities, or projects would have benefitted cultural understanding. As shown in Table 7, almost ¼ of participants responded with the need for more programs involving study abroad or language immersion with a native speaker, while another nearly ¼ of participants talked about the need to
cover ALL aspects of culture, instead of merely holidays, such as art, music, history, and cultural norms. Other popular suggestions included the need for more experiential learning and group projects and the need to implement more updated and current materials and topics for culture. An interesting note is that a majority of the people suggested language immersion and study abroad as an improvement to better understand language, which corresponds with the majority of people who said ‘yes’ in having adequately learning about culture in Question 9, while also correlating with those who responded ‘no’ for having NOT adequately learned about the culture of the target language because they felt language immersion was necessary.

**Conclusion**

The literature review portion of this research project presented the significance of creating a ‘teachable’ definition of culture to bring to the foreign language classroom, the necessity of including culture in the foreign language curriculum, how to effectively bring culture into the classroom, and how to properly assess students on their cultural knowledge and understanding. The results of this study show that while some teachers manage to effectively and authentically implement culture in the foreign language classroom, many provide inadequate or superficial information that does not benefit learners’ understanding. The background information presented from the first four questions shows that it is primarily high school foreign language courses involved in this study, and therefore it is toward secondary education level foreign language courses the results of this study will best apply.

A majority of the participants of this study are ages eighteen to twenty-four, which is significant when discussing a need to change methodology in the classroom, because a majority of these college students only graduated high school fairly recently, between 3-6 years ago. Therefore the responses of these participants are especially significant because they are referring
to what are most likely currently practicing teachers. In defining culture, a majority of
participants provided a simple definition which applied to all aspects of culture, and which could
easily be aligned to the “products, practices, and perspectives” outlined by ACTFL. The
definition ACTFL provides is fairly general, and educators should consider defining those three
items into more detail so students better understand what each area of culture signifies.

While nearly 72% of all participants noted in Question 6 that they recalled at least one
cultural lesson for their foreign language learning, the responses to the follow-up question
revealed that less than half of those participants experienced a true, authentic cultural lesson in
which they gained true cultural understanding. On the other hand, 22.6% of those who answered
yes remembered a superficial ‘food’ lesson where they gave little detail as to what was learned
from the lesson, while another 22.6% of participants experienced a superficial ‘holiday or
celebration’ lesson, where they learned about an important event, but not to the point where they
could recall or name specific details or the significance of those events. These answers
correspond with the response later asked in Question 9 about being able to adequately learn
about culture, because over 50% of participants responded that they were not able to.

One of the most significant findings of this study was the various mentions of the need
for language immersion and study abroad in order to be able to truly understand the culture of
the target language. A majority of the participants who stated they were able to adequately learn
about culture noted it was because they had spent time in the country of the target language they
were learning. In the same mindset, a majority of those who claimed they were not able to
adequately learn about the culture of the target language stated that they felt they needed ‘true
immersion’ with the culture of the target language to be able to truly understand and comprehend
it.
The results from the final question asking about what would better improve students’ understanding correlate highly with the findings of the literature review. Of the participants, 11% made note of a need for more updated materials and topics, which could easily be supplemented through the use of a Webquest activity in using authentic, current sources to learn about culture, as suggested by Alstaedter and Jones (2009). Additionally, 13% of participants noted the need for more experiential learning and group projects, which is supported through the 2011 research study by Larisa Nikitina. Eleven of the forty-six participants mentioned the need to cover more or all aspects of culture, rather than just a few. This may include aspects of art, literature, daily life, mannerisms, traditions, geography, and historical information; all of which are needed to contribute to a truly authentic cultural understanding. The need to cover all aspects of culture is also suggested by the European Council’s framework of seven fundamental items mentioned in Omer and Ali’s 2007 research study.

Finally, in suggestions for improvement, 24% of participants stressed the importance of study abroad programs and the ability to experience language immersion with native speakers. If a school district is able to send some students on a study abroad trip, it would overall benefit not only their cultural understanding behind the target language, but will also motivate them and benefit their overall education in being immersed in a place and culture completely unfamiliar to them. However, many school districts cannot afford these programs, which is when language immersion can be used. Programs such as skype, Facebook chat, and the mobile application FaceTime allow the capability for target language learners to speak with native speakers. This can be done through a University and a high school setting, and can often benefit both parties, especially if the target language speakers are learners of English.
Additionally, other programs in place of study abroad can include virtual tours using Google Maps and travel website of countries of the target language; while many times there are museums which offer online virtual tours to be able to experience the authentic artwork of a variety of artists. Essentially, the need for immersion in the culture of the target language is what will best benefit students in being able to become culturally competent and globally aware, and foreign language educators should seek to include as many immersion activities as possible within their lessons. Culture is absolutely essential in being able to truly understand a foreign language, and thus a focus in foreign language education needs to shift its focus onto cultural aspects of the foreign language, rather than the current, primary focus on linguistic features.
References


