



# MEDIATING CULTURE(S) IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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## Abstract

What one understands culture to be trickles down into the practices of teaching culture. The establishment of cultural studies and globalization as the dominant paradigms lead to a shift in the aims of foreign language teaching due to teachers and students acknowledging new societal realities. Culture can no longer be fathomed only as high or national culture but rather as a sum of daily practices and routines, as well as interpretative patterns regarding art, literature, politics and so on. The above-mentioned aspects have to be taken into consideration in a discourse and student-centered teaching approach. Culture-based learning resorts to a broader and more nuanced perspective of the meaning of culture. This paper aims to examine past and present traditions of integrating cultural aspects in class, as well as assess students' previous experience in dealing with cultural aspects in order to establish a broad view of the status quo. Furthermore, the paper will consider a range of possible means to integrate culture-based learning while teaching foreign languages and consider the practical implications of using the method. As this approach fosters empathy and cross-cultural communication, culture-based learning can prove a stepping stone to developing valuable soft skills, especially in an academic setting.

**Keywords:** *foreign language teaching, culture-based learning, cultural studies, cross-cultural communication, soft skills*

## INTRODUCTION

The banal observation that culture plays a tremendous role in shaping our assumptions about how language works, is acquired, or molds one's worldview implies a multitude of practical consequences for the teaching process as "language and culture are inseparable. Language arises from cultural circumstances and is simultaneously involved in creating them. We use language to name the elements and perspectives of the world that are important to us and thus create mental images that determine the further acquisition and use of languages" (Roche 2013: 282).<sup>1</sup> However, dealing with cultural aspects has been long mostly ignored or marginalized in class as other skills such as listening, reading, speaking or writing, which are also included in standardized testing, dominate. Needless to say, until the latter part of the twentieth century teaching grammar was a main focus of foreign language classes. This is not to imply that integrating culture in the teaching process is a recent occurrence. From the factual or the communicative approaches (the 60s and 70s) to the intercultural one (the 80s), how one has sought to mediate culture has mirrored the change in our understanding of culture. The most recent development is that of cultural-based learning which seeks to train learners to recognize and be able to participate in cultural discourse. This approach will be the paper's focus as it is more suitable for the globalized setting in which learners nowadays live and is also a practical means to train interpersonal skills. The second part of the paper uses a survey carried out in October 2023 amongst students regarding their experience with cultural aspects during foreign language classes in order to establish the extent to which cultural-based learning is integrated in the teaching process in Romania.

Two aspects have had a fundamental impact on the way in which culture is perceived and mediated in the classroom: the cultural turn and globalization. Historically, language, culture and nationality have been understood to be largely synonymous as "Language is, as it were, the outward manifestation of the spirit of the peoples; their language is their spirit, and their spirit is their language; the two can never be thought of as identical

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes originally in German have been translated by the author of this paper.

enough. How they actually come together in one and the same source, inaccessible to our understanding, remains inexplicably hidden from us” (Humboldt 1927: 159). For centuries, as the views of Humboldt or Herder for example eloquently demonstrate, culture has indisputably been linked to the way of thinking and feeling of nations. A broader understanding of culture as mass culture has become the norm in the later part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches from fields such as anthropology, literary criticism, art theory or political science just to name a few, cultural studies have changed the way in which one understands culture by examining the role it plays in shaping societal power structures and identities. Moreover, this perspective challenges the static view of culture, drawing attention to the dynamic aspects, such as the ever-shifting meaning of societal discourse and placing it at the junction between race, class and gender. Cultural identity and meaning are hence not fixed, but rather in a continuous process of negotiation between different positions and cultural traditions, and the result of complicated intersections and cultural connections (Hall 2002: 218). Consequently, the understanding of culture to be explored during foreign language class is not only that of national culture or high culture, but also of mass culture.

What emerges is the view that cultural meaning is a form of social pact and the result of societal negotiation, a process through which one attributes meaning to the world. As our cultural background is “what enables us to perceive reality, certain situations and actions, including our own actions and experiences, as somehow meaningful” (Altmayer 2017: 12), students ought to be trained to recognize culturally attached meaning as such. If culture constitutes negotiated and accepted meaning, this undoubtedly also implies that the result of the negotiation is not the same across countries or societal groups. Learners *a priori* have certain perspectives and interpretative resources that can be considered specific to their national culture (ibid: 14). These often internalized and unquestioned views and values will come into play in the learner’s understanding and reaction to the target culture. It is thus one of the aims of contemporary foreign language teaching to enable students to challenge their own underlying cultural assumptions, train them to recognize others and be able to productively engage with another culture.

The second key aspect is the fact most learners nowadays live in a globalized society, where the lines between nations have been blurred, and as such they are faced with the hybridization of culture on a daily basis. Cultural globalization does not simply imply a standardization one's scope of understanding, but far more that meaning and practices previously established locally and individually are reassessed within the global framework, thus resulting in new cultural forms, which redefine cultural similarities and differences beyond conventional ethnic-national categories (ibid.: 8). This results in new transnational social networks and hybrid more unstable cultural identities, which are more permissive to outside influence in comparison to the previous nationally bound ones. As Claire Kramersch explains "globalization has changed the nature of the game and is putting into question the modernist tenets of our profession. In our late modern era, scholars are concerned that globalization is bringing about deep changes into our ways of thinking, learning" (Kramersch 2014: 297). However, one looks at globalization (politically, ideologically, or societally), it linked the world in a way never seen before. Cultural globalization makes use of a broad understanding of culture, where daily routines, media consumption, technological usage as well as mental representations of symbols from film, literature, or music are seen as an important source of ascribed meaning and world interpretation (Altmayer 2023: 25). This has two practical consequences for the learner: their lifestyles and routines often incorporate contact with other cultures and the classrooms themselves tend to be more diverse. To give just a brief example, consider the students' answers when asked about their meals. Would it not be very likely that they regularly consume not only traditional food from their country but also international dishes such as pizza and pasta? This means that the focus has shifted towards daily life, investigating practices and meanings associated with mundane activities, thus recognizing the importance of a wide variety of cultural artefacts.

### **THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO TEACHING CULTURE**

Before taking an in depth look at the different approaches to integrating cultural aspects in teaching foreign languages, one ought to consider the aims of doing so. The nine fundamental principles of the communicative approach

are action orientation, task orientation, competence orientation, multilingualism orientation, authenticity, content orientation, learner orientation, promotion of autonomy and intercultural orientation (Ende et. all. 2017: 26-33), the latter relating to the task of making learners more sensitive to the interaction with a foreign culture. The intercultural orientation is based on the cultural ideals of teaching foreign languages as it “contributes to the peaceful coexistence of people in the spirit of the Charter of the United Nations. Cultural studies play a central role in this by focusing on the reality of the target language countries and the cultural identity of the people living there” (ABCD-Thesen 1990:60). As such, intercultural orientation unlike the other principles of the communicative approach strives not to train a better linguistic ability, but rather transferable interpersonal skills:

The primary task of cultural studies is not to provide information, but to raise awareness and develop skills, strategies and abilities in dealing with foreign cultures. The aim is to better assess foreign cultural phenomena, put them into perspective and relate them to one’s own reality. In this way, prejudices and clichés can be made visible and reduced and a critical tolerance can be developed. (ibid.: 61)

Developing tolerance and an open attitude towards perceived otherness seems a crucial skill to develop in today’s interconnected and globalized society. How has this desideratum been approached historically?

More traditional methods established in the 50s sought to convey a broad and systematic knowledge of the language itself and thus included cultural aspects only as extra materials. Factual information such as statistics, diagrams or texts focusing on history, geography or politics accompanied the class as a separate segment, facing students with never-ending series of data and facts (Padrós, Biechele 2003: 23). The aim was for students to learn and reproduce key facts about the country whose language they were learning. Typical assignments are reading or studying texts about the country’s history, political system, or famous personalities, analysing data in an essay, or even watching a documentary. This relates to a standardized vision about culture, which is seen as homogenous, and clearly related to a country and/or geographical area. Some drawbacks of the **factual approach** to teaching culture are that it does not take cultural heterogeneity into account and thus

reinforces stereotypes, focuses on exceptional individuals rather than normal people and is generally not practice oriented.

The 70s have seen the establishment of the **communicative perspective** in which language is no longer regarded just as a system, but more as a means of communication. Thus, the emphasis falls on the learner's ability to communicate in any given situation, especially in mundane ones. Consequently, the teaching of knowledge about the country centred on specific action sequences for which the students had to be provided with the means of expression, with the success of linguistic actions and the understanding of everyday cultural phenomena forming the global learning objectives (Nicolaescu 2021: 248). Typical elements of life in the target culture become part of foreign language classes in order to train the learner's ability to interact in the target culture. Interviews are standard materials used and varying a dialogue could be a typical assignment. Criticism revolves around the fact that chosen topics mostly reflect everyday life and thus are not very complex, being mostly suited for A1 and A2 language levels. Moreover, not all situations can be foreseen and rehearsed in class. As such, the overly scripted type of exercises typical for this approach can stifle creativity and spontaneity.

The **intercultural approach** recognizes that perception is a key element when learners are confronted with a new culture and seeks to sensitize learners to other cultural realities. As such the learners ought to develop strategies which help them interact in an intercultural setting because "when perception is shaped by our different cultural and individual experiences, it can happen that we interpret and understand situations that we are exposed to in another country differently than they may have been intended" (Padrós, Biechele 2003: 46). Since the 1980s, textbook authors have strived to integrate learner's perspectives in the learning process. Textbooks attempted to address both the development of language skills and building culturally specific knowledge:

In this way, learners should acquire strategies to open up foreign meanings and be sensitised to differences. The intercultural approach thus emphasises the fact that cultural comparison also requires an examination of one's own culture and that the learners' ability to evaluate initially unfamiliar contexts can be trained. (Nicolaescu 2021: 249)

While the **intercultural approach** has certainly meant an important step in the right direction, one must consider the inherent focus on cultural differences, which in turn leads to polarization. Culture-based learning strives to overcome this drawback and offer an answer in keeping with times and the realities of living in a globalized world.

### **CULTURE-BASED LEARNING**

Culture-based learning has been largely influenced by the cultural turn and strives to include the ever-shifting meanings of culture in the process of foreign language teaching, a crucial part of cultural interaction and mediation. Stemmed from the belief that understanding culture as high culture (literature, music, art) is no longer possible in the modern world, this approach seeks to challenge learners to recognize cultural discourses built on cultural assumptions and to call them into question. Moreover, focusing on cultural discourse enables the learner to view the target culture as heterogeneous. The main way in which one discovers other cultures is no longer comparisons or contrasts, focusing on difference rather than similarity, but by perceiving interpretative patterns. Ideally, this dialectic approach towards culture should not only prompt a better understanding of other cultures, but also challenge one's assumptions as to reflect on one's own culture. What would be some of the consequences of implementing cultural-based learning in teaching foreign languages? Firstly, sensitizing students to the fact that culture means imagined constructs of meaning accepted by the community and these interpretation patterns can change depending on the societal bubble one encounters. The main advantage of this approach is that students develop critical thinking and are trained to interact with the globalized context they live in by fostering an open attitude towards culture.

There are two main disadvantages to this approach: it is very time consuming, and it has mostly been developed theoretically, only few textbooks providing materials suited to this perspective. Although culture-based learning has been an important theoretical point of discussion in the past 20 years, there is still a considerable lack of materials and scenarios for teachers to make use of in class. While cultural elements should ideally be a part of any language class, teachers often find it difficult to make culture the aim of their lesson, particularly

due to a lack of methods and textbooks which make productive use of the abundance of theoretical wisdom. This is why we chose to focus on some methods that enable students to reflect on cultural aspects and teachers to open up new areas of discussion, as well as work with and challenge student's pre-existing cultural assumptions. These methods imply several phases in which students must be carefully guided throughout the thought process in order to reach the desired outcome, and where the reflection phase is fundamental. **Learning Stations**, **Merry-go-round** or **Speed Dating**, **Identity Molecule** and **Headlines** are versatile means to integrate cultural elements in foreign language class, while also keeping the principles of the communicative approach in mind.

**Learning Stations** is a form of open lesson, where students work independently and rotate through different stations or activities within a classroom. The topic of the lesson is divided into several sub-topics, usually between 5 and 8 and each station focuses on a different aspect of the lesson or subject matter, allowing for varied approaches to learning. This method supports differentiated instruction by catering to diverse learning styles and paces. Typically, stations can include activities such as group work, independent tasks, digital learning, and teacher-led instruction, promoting engagement and active learning. It is important that the students get clear instructions on their goals and a checklist is usually the best way to ensure they work efficiently. As the ample theoretical introduction has made clear, culture-based learning implies training students to identify and be able to partake in cultural discourse. This desideratum can be achieved only by showing students a nuanced perspective on the target culture, while leaving them room to react and reflect on their reactions to the presented materials. In this sense, learning stations present an ideal opportunity for integrating cultural elements into a lesson as the teacher can transform each station into a perspective of the topic. As mentioned, the reflection phase is of crucial importance, as such we propose that the first and last station they visit should serve this purpose. The first station should aim to assess and address the students' knowledge on the topic, as well as their assumptions and pre-conceived notions. The last station should relate to the first in order to motivate students to examine how their knowledge and understanding has shifted as a result of the lesson. While these two learning stations would provide the best outcomes if done individually, a final reflection moment together with the whole class is also advisable. This would offer

students the opportunity to find out their colleagues' take on the subject, debate and draw conclusions together. This also presents the teacher with the opportunity to make any necessary supplementary clarifications and enforce the common thread of the topic.

**Merry-go-round** or **Speed Dating** is a well-known and extremely versatile tool used in foreign language class especially for drill exercises and speaking. In order to introduce cultural aspects, the teachers prepare targeted questions which prompt students to interrogate clichés, commonplaces, preconceived notions or even identity related issues. The main advantages of this method is that students interact with several interlocutors within a short period of time and that the time pressure prompts them to answer spontaneously, not offering a carefully thought and appropriate answer (Heine 2017: 54). Thus, they sometimes might even surprise themselves with their on-the-spot reactions, uncovering assumed but unreflected stances. After having introduced the topic of the lesson, the teacher distributes seven to ten questions to be discussed in pairs and sets a sound, which marks the end of each speaking round. Each speaking round can last up to 3-5 minutes, depending on the complexity of the questions and the students' language level. Moreover, the teacher can opt to make the final speaking rounds shorter. Once again, the final reflection round is particularly important to assure the desired conclusions. Some questions the teacher can ask to guide the conversation are:

- What was surprising or new during the discussion?
- Which questions were particularly difficult to answer? Why?
- Did you find out something about yourself? (ibid.: 55-56)
- How have your fellow students' answers changed your outlook on the topic?

**Identity Molecule** is firstly a wonderful thought experiment, which “encourages participants to reflect on the complexity of their own cultural identity, to recognise similarities and differences in the group and the diversity of such affiliations” (ibid: 56). There are three stages to the method: individual, working in pairs and reflection. In the first stage, each of the participants receives a worksheet with 6-9 circles, forming an atom. The atom in the middle is for their name and the surrounding atoms represent five aspects that are important to them for instance family, profession, religion, ethnicity, and so on.

Spontaneity is again key, and students should be allowed just a few minutes to complete the worksheet so that their first unfiltered assumptions are prompted. In the second phase, students present their identity molecule to each other and discuss both positive and negative experiences they have had with certain aspects. This gives them the opportunity to reflect on the fact that the same event can be perceived in a plurality of valid ways. In the final part, the students reflect on the meaning of being part of a majority or minority group. Naturally, this is just an example of how this method can be applied to aspects relating to identity, however, the topic can be changed, and the starting atom can be not the self, but a topic up for debate. For instance, one could start with the classical topic of ecology, more specifically the use of plastic, in the middle atom and explore how each person in the class contributes on a personal level to the effort of reducing mankind's impact on the planet. At first glance, this topic does not seem related to cultural aspects, but the teacher can certainly sway the discussion towards how societal practices and cultural expectations influence the way one deals with a global issue. Particularly in a multicultural setting, learner's answers can offer insight into how personal experience is shaped by cultural norms.

Using **Headlines** is an adaptable tool which can be used on almost any topic as they are some of the most concise forms of expressing meaning, intentionally leaving certain information open for interpretation, headlines can be used to acknowledge and interrogate socially developed rules and norms (Eckardt 2017: 72-73). In the first stage, students work in groups, are given different headlines on the same topic/event. Their assignment is to reconstruct the article based on the clues given by the headline. This phase will draw out the assumptions one has, as well as the meaning intentionally left unspoken, but obvious to the reader. Next, students will present their ideas about the article and address the similarities and differences between their assumptions. In the third stage, students are asked to try and swap certain words from the headlines and assess how meaning and societal implications change when doing so. The teacher ought to prepare some possible words to choose from in case the students do not quickly come up with their own proposals. Another alternative is that every group receives the same headlines and a different perspective from which they should read it. This is an imagination exercise with the leading question being: How would you feel in the shoes of X minority group when reading this headline? Finally, students work in plenum and have one last look at

all the headlines used throughout the phases and try to identify key words and unspoken assumptions that indicate all the headlines are part of the same debate. For the success of this final stage, it is essential that the teacher select headlines from journals across the political spectrum to highlight how the same topic/event can be perceived. Eckardt (ibid: 72-76) gives concrete examples of how this method can be applied to the Theo van Gogh debate as a means to initiate a discussion regarding multicultural societies and racial profiling. In case this seems too specific, we would offer the example of the topic of poverty covered in textbooks at the B2 language level (Koithan et. all. 2018: 60-61, 134-135). The topic of poverty in Germany in this case can be an excellent opportunity to challenge stereotypes especially prevalent in Central and East European countries about wealth and relative poverty in Western countries. Headlines can prove a valuable tool to engage students and offer a variety of perspectives on the topic, especially in the context of heated debates in European society regarding the proposed unconditional basic income.

While all the above-mentioned methods are time-consuming as they would take up at least 45 if not 90 minutes to implement, they do consider the most important principles of the communicative approach (action orientation, task orientation, competence orientation, authenticity, content orientation, learner orientation, promotion of autonomy) and are adaptable to almost any topic focusing on cultural aspects. Moreover, these methods are well suited for heterogeneous classrooms, where students have slightly different language levels as often is the case in Romania, particularly at university. In this sense, the final question tackled in this article revolves around the extent to which these methods and theoretical perspectives have found their way into the Romanian educational system. As such, we have devised a survey which should reflect the *status quo*.

## **SURVEY RESULTS**

The survey was carried out in October 2023 and tackled the manner in which a broad range of cultural aspects are integrated in language courses in order to assess the extent to which these are a part of routine foreign language classes. Throughout this survey, the term “cultural aspects” was used to refer to all the information concerning the target culture. This includes not only statistical data

but also anecdotal aspects, such as ways of thinking, perception, expectations, and mannerisms of the target culture. In assuming such a broad description of cultural aspects present in foreign language teaching, we have strived to offer students a multitude of answering possibilities which cover all four above-mentioned perspectives. The aim was not to sway respondents in the direction of one view of culture and its role in the classroom. The survey included 10 questions regarding the teaching process (materials, social forms and aims), and 4 relating to the person's experience teaching/learning a language (years, level, and place). While all questions had predefined answers, some also allowed alternative answers, and a comment section was included in the end.

130 medical students, aged 18-25, anonymously volunteered to participate in this survey, the majority of whom have a vast experience in learning foreign languages (49.2% over 10 years and 33.8% between 5 and 10 years) at either school or university and reaching an intermediate (56.2%) or advanced (39.2%) language level. The students feel that both the extra materials as well as the course book only sometimes (60% and 62.3% respectively) focus on including cultural aspects. Information regarding the country's history, cultural expectations and stereotypes ranked top three with the students, while the five most used materials were texts from course books (67.7%) or media (63.1%), videos (60%) and films and pictures (both 53.1%). Assignments typically included essays/written assignments (56.9%), games (52.3%) and multiple-choice exercises (50%) and the majority reported that these were either carried out in groups (40%) or pairs (36.2%). Reading (40.8%), speaking (28.5%) and listening (22.3%) were the skills most often trained. When asked what the aim of including cultural aspects in foreign language classes should be, the vast majority (70.8%) chose preparing for living/travelling abroad, followed closely by intercultural communication (69.2%), and helping students integrate in a globalized society (51.5%).

## CONCLUSIONS

A contemporary approach to mediating culture(s) in foreign language teaching takes into account the challenges that the student faces in globalized society. In this broad sense of understanding the role culture plays in our lives and striving to include it in a productive manner in foreign language class, societal

discourse is just as important as traditional cultural “products”. Thus, some of the recent aims of foreign language teaching are enabling students to identify and decode discourse, as well as provide them with the necessary tools in order to adequately participate in the discourse of the target language. While such soft skills prove useful in a series of contexts such as work, travel, or emigration, training them can prove time consuming. Moreover, educators can feel this approach is overly theoretical and difficult to implement in the classroom setting. The survey reflects the fact that this desideratum remains mostly unaccomplished in classrooms, although the students do see the potential and practical use of implementing discursive methods of teaching culture. Finally, the student’s answers also highlight their interest and intent of using their foreign language skills abroad, where the ability to understand and participate in cultural discourse is essential.

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