



LOTE and the Five Cs: A Reflection on Teaching World Languages

SUMMARY

This article provides information and resources in support of foreign language study and includes outlines for lessons that engage students and touch upon the five Cs of World Readiness Standards for LOTE: communication, culture, connections, comparisons, and communities.

“To have another language is to possess a second soul.”
– Charlemagne

Students study a foreign language in order to become productive 21st century global citizens who are prepared to communicate and interact with people of diverse communities, are culturally competent, and are aware of varied perspectives of world events. Many colleges report that they look more favorably upon applicants who have completed long sequences in one or more languages (O’Toole, 2002). The linguistic and cultural knowledge obtained in language courses increases career readiness and opportunities in international markets and promotes national security, economic security, and social justice in society.

Although knowledge of at least one foreign language has long been recognized

as a vital 21st century skill (P21), the misconception that language classes consist solely of endless grammar drills, page upon page of written translations and memorization of dialogues continues to negatively impact the support and growth of world language programs in our schools. We often hear that learning another language is no longer important or necessary because “people in other countries speak English” or “computers can translate for us.” I have even had an administrator tell me “I don’t care if it’s on the list of core subjects and required in New York State. It’s not listed as a core subject in this district so I’m not going to treat it like one.”

After counting to 10 in several languages, my response to the first two statements would be to remind the speaker that English is the second or third language spoken by many people in other countries and to inform him or her that computer translations consisting of

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more than a short phrase or two are notoriously inaccurate. As for the administrator, I believe he was reminded that the district did indeed include languages on the latest list of core subjects and that he could not overrule the Board of Regents nor could he ignore the National Association of State Boards of Education, which recommended that, based on “a substantial body of research,” foreign languages should be incorporated into instruction beginning in the early years and given adequate time and resources for program development (NASABE, 2003).

While studies continue to show that sequential second language study has an incremental impact on raising English language test scores (actfl.org; Cooper, 1987), students are too often taken out of language classes for “extra help” as standardized testing season approaches. Those with learning challenges are especially targeted for removal from their language classes or sometimes not allowed to take a second language at all. This may be based on a misconception that students with lower reading and writing test scores would struggle in second language

classes. In language classes we use four skills to achieve proficiency: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Students who may have trouble with reading or writing can demonstrate their ability to effectively communicate using speaking and listening skills. These students are able to thrive in our classrooms while being given multiple opportunities for participation, a wide range of experiences, and the ability to make connections with other cultures and communities.

We have tailored our instruction toward giving students the ability to bring a global viewpoint to their education, experiences, and future careers. We counter the widespread “When will I ever use this?” question by practicing the skills they will need to use in real life situations. Rather than just memorizing lists of vocabulary, our classes actively practice scenarios involving interaction with speakers of the target language in order to achieve specific goals: obtaining medical assistance; arranging for travel necessities such as transportation, lodging, and food; socializing with people from other countries in a culturally accepted manner; finding and completing

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official forms; reading and understanding information from signs, ads, and articles, etc.

“Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going.”

— *Rita Mae Brown*

The study of another language provides an opportunity to understand and respect diverse cultures while reflecting on similarities and differences with one's own. Research has shown other benefits, including enhanced problem-solving skills and general cognitive growth (Schulz, 1998), development of the skills and habits essential to the learning process, creative inquiry, and critical thinking (Curtin, 1994) and providing a competitive edge in the global economy (Hayward, 2001). The assumption that everyone in the international business community speaks English leads many to think that foreign language learning is unnecessary. While Americans are often impressed with how well their foreign counterparts speak English it may be interesting to stop and think about how much others might appreciate it if we spoke their language. Knowledge of another language can help a business professional or anyone to establish a deeper rapport with members of another language community.

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.”

— *Nelson Mandela*

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has identified World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages and broken them down into five key areas: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities (actfl.org). Based on their awareness that the selected skills would and do incorporate the areas of connections, comparisons, and communities, the creators of the New York State Standards for Languages Other Than English (LOTE) narrowed the focus to two requirements:

- Students will be able to use a language other than English for communication, and
- Students will develop cross-cultural skills and understandings. (*www.p12.nysut.gov*)

In classes throughout the state, both modern and classical language teachers demonstrate real world usage of the lessons they teach by incorporating practical applications of the material into their activities. Research shows that doing so not only allows students to improve their language skills but also enables them to understand diverse cultures

through exposure to what the ACTFL Standards identify as perspectives (meanings, attitudes, values, ideas), products (books, tools, foods, laws, music, games), and practices (patterns of social interactions). Such experiences increase the probability that students will develop a positive attitude toward the target language and toward speakers of that language. The comparative ease of accessing authentic resources through technology has made planning and implementing lessons that integrate culture and communication far less complicated than in the past.

What does that look like in today's classroom? Over the years we have created lessons incorporating communication, culture, comparisons, connections, and communities, although we did not always identify them using those terms. Opportunities for interlingual and interdisciplinary connections now present themselves more frequently as we are increasingly encouraged to create learning communities and demonstrate connections between disciplines.

“You can never understand one language until you understand at least two.”

— *Geoffrey Willans*

Today's students are expected to successfully compare and contrast information from several sources in order to

draw their own informed conclusions. This is a technique we can and do frequently employ in our classes. Depending upon the topic under discussion, students can find source material from countries which use the target language and compare the perspectives contained within to those they have seen or experienced in the United States.

I was first able to appreciate how well this can work during a unit on hobbies and leisure activities. It was baseball season, and as usual I made copies of an article from a New York City Spanish language newspaper. As the class was reading, several students commented that they had seen this game and noticed that the story emphasized the performance of Latino players. This led to a discussion of how viewpoints and perceptions in media are often designed to reflect the customers they serve as well as local, national and regional interests. While some students concentrated on critiquing the Spanish language journalists for the cultural pride they demonstrated in their reporting, others pointed out that English language journalists are also guilty of choosing to emphasize the accomplishments of the players who are “local favorites.” Several students observed that newspapers will frequently devote more space to and print more pictures in stories about popular teams or players and that broadcast

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journalists can choose their highlighted games and scores while relegating others to a shared graphic. Students soon realized that every culture has the same tendency to reflect the opinions and attitudes of its people.

With this in mind, students were asked to rewrite (in Spanish) an existing sports article or write an original one based on a game or match they watched on television. If it was an original report, they were to avoid any preferences shown by the announcers during the broadcast, although they could make note of them in the story while still providing a balanced account of their own. As they worked on this project they began to realize that the articles were not necessarily biased but merely reflective of the regional preferences of the majority of the target audience. The students also found it difficult to avoid writing more about their favorite player(s) than they did about anyone else.

An optional assignment was given to afford students the chance to do additional research on how the same news story was reported by sources from two different countries where the target language was spoken. While quite a few stayed with sporting events (the World Cup is a favorite,) a small number compared stories about global warming, AIDS, and American politics. The different perspectives on the cause and impact of global warming and AIDS built their awareness of the priorities in

those countries, and they were sometimes surprised or even angered at how our government was viewed.

The difficulty of the materials used will reflect the level of proficiency of the class. It is now possible to find online stories written in simpler terms for beginning students, and the advanced classes can appreciate more detailed reporting. Comparing English and second language articles about the same topic helps build vocabulary for beginning students, while higher-level classes are challenged by weighing the information reported from two different countries where the target language is spoken.

Building upon the idea that what is learned in one area can be transferred to another, I worked with the Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) teacher to provide parallel classes. While my classes were studying a unit on health and wellness, her classes were in the middle of a lesson on nutrition, healthy eating choices, and the food pyramid. To provide my classes with the opportunity to not only supplement our material but also connect that information to the FACS curriculum, I was able to find a copy of a *Guía de la Alimentación Saludable* (a guide to nutrition and healthy eating) online. I printed copies of the healthy eating/healthy life guidelines for my students and asked them to compare the suggestions in the *Guía* to those they had been given in FACS

class. They were able to identify the call for specific physical activities in the Spanish guide (walking briskly outdoors, doing stretching and breathing exercises), the difference in the amount of water one was being advised to drink by each (four to six glasses vs. six to eight glasses per day,) and the recommendation to take time for oneself each day in the English guide.

I invited my students to consider how the food pyramids for each culture might compare. After they shared their ideas, I projected the pyramids side by side and asked them to describe what they saw. Most of them immediately recognized the similarities and identified the products pictured in each section. Others pointed out the differences, especially the inclusion of beer and wine (with the note that it was optional for adults) and a recommendation for daily exercise on the Spanish pyramid. They talked about which specific foods were used to illustrate a particular category (fruits, vegetables, meats, grains, etc.) on each, and that led to another discussion about the types of foods primarily used to prepare meals in different Hispanic countries versus what we typically consume.

Students next worked in groups of two or three to prepare posters in Spanish with their own version of a “Top 10 Healthy Habits” list and suggestions for a week’s worth of balanced meals for someone their age. (The meals in

particular generated discussion about cost and availability of components). Students shared the projects in both their Spanish and FACS classes, and we had the added public relations value of seeing Spanish language materials displayed in the halls. The nutritional component of this lesson laid the foundation for making other comparisons and provided resources which we were able to use when developing visual aids for our food unit.

One of the activities students at all levels of proficiency enjoy is exploring the differences between the original and translated versions of stories. Fairy tales are always a big hit, especially when they discover that the Disney versions of the stories they know best are nothing like the earlier accounts of the tales. Classes like being challenged to determine the English titles of movies and books which, when translated into or back into another language, become almost unrecognizable. (This idea can be used for a popular quick activity using the names of sports teams during playoff season).

A search of international film databases will provide you with lists of movies as well as a brief synopsis of each plot. A synopsis can be used to provide clues to the title when students are stumped or can be used alone for more advanced students to use as the basis for their guess. How well would you do

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if the list you saw included the English language movies “My Father is My Mother,” “My Poor Little Angel,” “The Devil Emperor Returns,” “Two Men and A Dream,” or “Adam Goes to School?”

In two of these, the title includes a reference to a popular actor or character. *Devil Emperor* was how Arnold Schwarzenegger was identified in “The Terminator” in several Asian markets, so the phrase appeared in many of his subsequent movies to let the audience know that he was the star. Adam Sandler became so popular in certain markets that titles were rewritten to show that it was a Sandler movie. (As for the others, they are “Mrs. Doubtfire,” “Home Alone,” and “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.” If you got that last one wrong, we have something in common.)

I have to say that this is a great pre-holiday or shortened period activity. Students began to search websites on their own for movies and television shows and bring their finds to class to play “Stump the Teacher” or to use in challenges with other classes. Bonus: They also found movies and shows from the target countries which they wanted to watch, which is how many of them discovered the original Spanish language version of “The Orphanage” (El Orfanato). They couldn't wait to tell their friends how scary it was and how much of the dialogue they actually

understood without looking at the subtitles.

While on that subject, I should mention there are also excellent comparisons to be made when talking about cultural perceptions and norms in genres such as horror, comedy, mystery, etc. What is it that makes us laugh? What do we fear? While students will recognize that physical comedy is almost universal, jokes don't always have the same impact in translation. What kinds of “monsters” are portrayed in other cultures? Does blood make something scarier or does the sense of impending danger make things worse? How are women portrayed? If you don't understand a cultural reference, can you still enjoy most of a performance?

That last question underscores something we always emphasize in our classes: You don't have to be able to translate every word to understand the plot or to figure out what is happening. When students become engrossed in something they make a concerted effort to follow the story. We can see this in the beginning level classes when we show them familiar stories which have been dubbed into the target language or even reimaged. The original French version of the film “Beauty and the Beast” had many special effects later copied and made more family friendly by Disney, and the class was thrilled to point them out. A made-for-TV musical version of “Cinderella” produced in Puerto Rico

featured a talking magic oven and a fairy godfather, but the students knew the original story and enjoyed pointing out the differences between versions. They also added new words to their vocabulary after hearing them repeated in the show.

“Learn everything you can, any time you can, from anyone you can; there will always come a time when you will be grateful you did.”
— *Sarah Caldwell*

When students are shown or find examples of how facts can get “lost in translation” based on possible national bias or cultural norms reflected in the tone of the piece, they begin to understand how people think. In the past, we were restricted to finding copies of newspapers or magazines which were usually out of date or relying on made-for-the-classroom materials. Today, most major international publications have websites where their current editions are available for view. Events such as the Olympics, World Cup, and Academy Awards always have major international coverage as well as multi-lingual websites. Finding out about election practices in other countries and then seeing an “outside” perspective of our own elections and political situations can be both enlightening and disturbing. It also provides an excellent interdisciplinary connection with social studies or global studies teachers. LOTE teachers and

science teachers can examine coverage of stories about space exploration or recent scientific breakthroughs. Connections can be made with health teachers to compare how English language and target language media cover medical issues such as the Zika virus. Finding differences and similarities between celebrations of family milestones such as births and weddings allows students to share personal stories and connect within the school community as well as learn about other countries. (There is a lesson plan for this last idea on the NYSED website: www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/standards.htm).

Finding broadcasts in the target language and contrasting not only story content but also body language, tone, and general demeanor of the reporters adds to student appreciation of different cultures. It also provides opportunities for reinforcement of basic conversational and informational skills: asking who, what, where, when, why, and how during news reports; reviewing weather expressions and application of the metric system; reflection of cultural norms in the editorial pieces. Television commercials can also be useful cultural barometers, asking students to decide who is being targeted by the ad, how the advertisers are promoting the product, and what are the physical and personality characteristics of the people in the ad.

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“In every national crisis, our nation has lamented its foreign language shortfalls. But then the crisis goes away, and we return to business as usual. One of the messages of 9/11 is that business as usual is no longer an acceptable option.”

— **Senator Paul Simon**
***Washington Post*, 10/23/01**

In recent times we have seen the word “foreign” become a derogatory term, used whenever someone wants to convey a sense of mistrust and potential danger. During my long 40-year career in teaching, I have gone from being a Foreign Language teacher to a World Language teacher to a World Language Other Than English teacher and finally to a teacher of Languages Other Than English. The job is the same, but we use different words to describe it. Every day we remind our students that although people use different words, they are still people. And most importantly, they should remember that a language is only foreign until you learn it!

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