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## ATTITUDES OF U.S. FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS TOWARD TEACHING CULTURE

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### Biodata

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## ATTITUDES OF U.S. FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS TOWARD TEACHING CULTURE

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### Abstract

The *National Standards for Foreign Language Teaching* delineate broad goal areas for foreign language teaching in the U.S. with the overarching goal of “educating students who are linguistically and culturally equipped to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad” (NSFL, 1996). These five goal areas *Communication, Culture, Connections, Communities and Comparisons*, frame national language curricula. However even with such a stated focus on preparing students to function in a multicultural, multilingual world, previous research has shown that *language teaching* often is solely prioritized in foreign language classrooms in the United States. This study examines whether or not contemporary foreign language teachers from across the U.S. still engage in the common practice of teaching about culture at the surface level or whether or not they lead students to a deeper understanding of how cultural products, practices, and perspectives are related.

*Keywords:* culture, classroom, K-12 learners, National Standards for Foreign Language Learning, perspectives

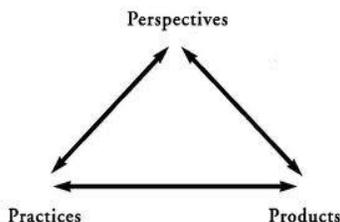
As high school students enter foreign language classes in the United States they are often optimistic about learning about the cultures of the languages they will be studying. Parents, teachers and administrators believe that foreign language classes provide an environment in which students learn to eventually interact in international settings in their future careers. Within the language teaching profession itself, the teaching of culture has been elevated to a central role within the curriculum and seeks not only to expose students to the target cultures they are studying, but also to help them develop intercultural skills to function within any culture in which they find themselves (Phillips, 2003).

The *National Standards for Foreign Language Learning* have a stated focus of preparing students who are “culturally equipped to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad” (NSFL, 1996). Within the five goal areas identified in the National Standards, *Communication, Culture, Connections, Communities, and Comparisons*, not only is there a goal dedicated to culture, but at least one sub-standard under each of the other goal areas deals with culture. According to Phillips (2003), the broad goal of teaching culture is to have students “gain knowledge and understanding of other cultures” (p.164). The standards that fall under the culture goal specify that students should demonstrate awareness of *a*) the relationship between practices and perspectives, and *b*) the relationship between the products and perspectives of target cultures (Phillips, 2003). Thus, the goal related to teaching culture in K-12 settings is to have students know how to understand how a given group’s world view is related to the tools they use and the things they do.



Practices are defined as, “patterns of behavior accepted by a society” (NSFLL, 1996) and refer basically to behavioral norms in a given culture. Products are tangible items used by a culture or non-tangible concepts or ways of doing things (NSFLL, 1996). The standards establish a link between products, practices and perspectives, or underlying belief systems of a culture. This relationship is often represented in the triangle diagram of products, practices and perspectives. Such a framework scaffolds teachers’ abilities to understand that “culture” is a multifaceted concept in which these components are all related (Cutshall, 2012).

Figure 1. *Visual representation of the relationship between cultural practices, products and perspectives*



(NSFLL, 1996)

The assumption that the teaching of language is inseparable from the teaching of culture has been present in language teaching literature for decades since Brooks (1964) and Seeyle (1894). Despite the fact that this focus on culture has long been present, and has been incorporated into the standards since 1996, foreign language courses that put a primary emphasis on language remain prevalent (Damen, 2003). When “culture” is incorporated into foreign language classrooms it is often still addressed at the surface level and only cultural products are presented ...and even the presentation of these artifacts occurs as a supplement to the language curriculum (Castro, 2004; Cutshall, 2012; Crawford & McLaren, 2003; Kramersch, 2005). An urgent need for American students to understand worldviews currently exists (Kramersch, 2005) and foreign language curricula must focus on more than just linguistic elements. Language teachers today must change the notion that teaching a new language or culture is simply helping students translate their reality into a simple word in a new language (Durocher, 2007; Lange, 1998; Jordan & Walton, 1987) and find ways to facilitate student ability to develop the tools to analyze and understand new cultures.

### **Marginalization of Culture in the Curriculum**

Explanations for why culture maintains a marginalized position within many language curricula have been identified in the literature. First of all despite the fact that teachers may be aware that there is more to “teaching” culture than presenting facts, when they obtain an instructional position they may resort to teaching foreign languages in the same way they were taught (Castro, 2004; Sercu & del Carmen Méndez García, 2004). Next, teachers may assume that students will become culturally competent as an incidental result of learning a language (Schultz, 2006). Another explanation for the lack of emphasis on teaching about culture is that foreign language teachers themselves have limited to no experience abroad (Cutshall, 2012; Shrum & Glisan, 2010; Kramersch, 2005). Teachers also stray from meeting objectives related to culture because the relationship between language and culture is unclear for learners (Shrum & Glisan, 2010). Finally, although the standards emphasize an integrated approach, textbooks continue to present culture in small sidebar notes which simply result in reinforcing stereotypes

(Cutshall, 2012). “Lack of stated goals and outcomes, absence of curricular organization, deficient or non-existent assessment tools, and unfocused learning strategies are some of the major reasons why culture learning has not been successfully included in language instruction” (Lange, 2003, p. 274)

### **Process vs. Information Acquisition Approaches to Teaching Culture**

Within the foreign language classroom the traditional approach to teaching culture has been the dissemination of factual information about target cultures (Shrum & Glisan, 2010). Historically, instead of addressing the complexities of culture and its relationship to all aspects of everyday life and language, second language textbooks have presented “cultural tidbits” emphasizing similarities or differences between the background of the learners and the target populations (Damen, 2003). In an attempt to encourage learners to accept their cultural counterparts, second language textbooks often homogenized cultures presenting, “pictures of happy, well-scrubbed, blue-jeaned folk drinking Coca-Cola in scenes that might be found in Dallas, Madrid or Paris” (Damen, 2003, p.75). Culture’s relative importance to the linguistic aspects of language curriculum is evident in the positioning of cultural information in contained “boxes at the end of the lesson” (Damen, p.74). This approach can be problematic when students actually try to deal with individuals from any given cultural or subcultural background who differ from the homogenized version presented in textbooks in a myriad of complex ways.

In contrast to this traditional “information acquisition” approach in which teachers relay cultural facts and demographic information to learners, the *perspectives, practices, products* paradigm presented within the National Standards is a “constructivist approach to learning about culture in which learners construct their views of culture through social interaction and interpersonal communication” (Shrum & Glisan, 2010, p.156).

Language educators have called for a process based approach to teaching culture that recognizes that it is impossible to relay all possible information about any cultural group because of subcultural and individual complexities (Smith, Paige & Steglitz, 2003). Unlike traditional approaches that seem to generalize across cultures, a process based approach recognizes vast disparities in perceptions, value systems and worldviews and assumes that different groups creatively meet their needs in distinct ways. In order for language learners to understand cultural differences, they must understand their own cultures and then interpret the behaviors of others “from the perspective of the culture being studied” (Smith, Paige & Steglitz, 2003, p.112).

Fundamental learning processes incorporated into a model of language teaching in which culture is the core of the curriculum would include the following three aspects: “the learners’ exploration of their own culture; 2) the discovery of the relationship between language and culture, and 3) the learning of the heuristics for analyzing and comparing cultures (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein & Colby, 2003).

M. Bennet (1986) proposes “Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). According to this model “intercultural competence is... the ability to recognize oneself operating in cultural context, the identification and appreciation of cultural differences, and the development of general strategies for adapting to cultural difference” (Bennett, Bennett & Allen, 2003, p.246). Such a model does not prepare students to interact in a single target culture, but provides instruction so that students can develop the means to understand any given differing cultural contexts in which they need to function. According to this model, individual learners can progress from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelevant stage as they learn about others. While in the

ethnocentric stage, in which people “people unconsciously experience their own cultures as central to reality” there are three phases: denial, defense, and minimization (Benet, 1986). In the state of *denial* individuals live in culturally isolated groups and do not consider that there could be other ways of meeting needs that differ from their own. At the *defense* stage there is understanding that cultural differences exist however these differences may be perceived as threatening. During the *minimization* phase of ethnocentrism, people assume that all humans are similar however these comparisons are made based on their own cultural perspectives.

As an individual moves toward an ethnorelevant stage, or stage in which “people consciously recognize that all behavior exists in cultural context, including their own,” they recognize the restriction their own perspective places on their experience and seek out cultural difference as a way of enriching their own reality and as a means to understand others” (Bennet, 2003, p.243). Benet defines three phases of ethnorelevance which include: acceptance, adaptation and integration. In the acceptance phase, individuals are able to accept that different cultural contexts can lead to different behaviors. During *adaptation* people are able to consciously differentiate behavior in order to participate more fully in a second culture. As part of the *integration* phase a person begins to consider the ability to understand events or practices within their cultural context as part of their own personal identity, which becomes less fixed and more fluid.

A process based approach to teaching culture would provide students with the tools to move to an ethnorelevant stage of cultural understanding. The DMIS process based model presents culture “not as the acquisition of content or a body of knowledge, but rather the ability to shift cultural perspective” (p.252). The goal for teaching culture within such a model would include helping students develop the ability to understand their own cultures so they can become beings who understand those they come in contact with from a variety of cultures. This model deems the understanding of cultural differences as imperative “for the development of cultural awareness” (Bennet, p.253).

## Purpose

This study examines contemporary K-12 U.S. foreign language teacher attitudes about teaching culture by addressing the following two questions:

1. Do teachers think it is more important to teach universal aspects of culture or to teach students how different belief systems result in different cultural practices and products?
2. Do teachers think it is as important to teach culture as it is to teach language?

These questions are designed to examine current perceptions of actual teachers in U.S. foreign language classrooms in an attempt to understand their alignment with the ACTFL’s National Standards for Foreign Language Learning.

## Methods

In order to answer questions about teacher attitude toward teaching culture a survey instrument was designed that consisted of two parts (Appendix A). The first section was a series of likert scale items in which participants were asked to rate how strongly they agreed with a series of twenty statements about language teaching. A five point scale was used with *Strongly Disagree* being the lowest possible rating and *Strongly Agree* as the highest. These statements were designed to gauge teacher’s opinions on different aspects of or approaches to teaching culture.

In addition to the likert items, participants were asked to rank 16 learning objectives according to their perceived order of importance. Objectives ranged from teaching about grammatical structures, presenting cultural artifacts, and facilitating student understanding of the relationship between cultural practices, products and belief systems.

US K-12 Foreign Language Teachers were identified through school district websites from different regions throughout the United States. Selected teachers were emailed an invitation to participate and 113 participants responded to the online survey. This sample exceeded the required sample needed for power of a moderate effect.

Likert type items were placed into subscales for comparison. To explore possible differences that may exist between the survey subscales, t-tests were performed to analyze if specific differences occurred across participants' ratings with respect to the five survey subscales. Analyses found that ratings were significantly different across subsets of survey scales.

Likert data items were grouped into categories for a means analysis which revealed that as a group, these practicing teachers agreed more strongly with the statements prioritizing teaching the similarity of cultures ( $m= 4.98$ ) than with the statements related to prioritize teaching about cultural differences that are based on belief systems ( $m=4.73$ ). In reference to the goal area of "teaching culture" practicing teachers rated the objective of linking products, practices and perspectives lower ( $m = 4.72$ ) than statements about presenting artifacts alone. When asked to rate both statements about language teaching and the teaching of culture, teachers agreed more strongly with statements asserting that their primary objective was to teach students linguistic components of a language ( $m=4.36$ ) than to statements about the priority of teaching about language and how it is linked to culture ( $m=4.21$ ).

S1: Similarity of Cultures mean = 4.98	S2: Difference of Cultures mean= 4.73
Students should compare other cultures to examine how they are similar.	Students should understand that other cultures have different beliefs.
Students should understand that people from different cultures are inherently alike.	
Students should compare other cultures with their own.	Students should understand different belief systems guide ways of thinking.
S3: Linking Practices and Products to Perspectives Mean = 4.72	S4: Practices and Products Mean = 4.73
Students should understand how cultural products and artifacts are related to a belief system.	It is important to share cultural artifacts with students such as food, clothing, and holidays.
Students should understand why culture clashes occur.	Students need to understand basic demographics about the country they are studying.
	Students should know about the architecture and buildings of the target culture.
S5: Culture in Language Study mean = 4.21	S6: Language as Grammar mean = 4.36
Culture should be a major part of the foreign language curriculum.	My primary responsibility is to teach students to use language in grammatically correct ways.
Students should recognize that cultural beliefs are obvious in language use.	

The second section of the survey asked participants to rank a series of learning objectives. Instructions for this section specified that teachers were to “number the following learning objectives in the order in which you would consider these skills most important to teach with #1 as the *most important* item and #16 being the *least important* item.

To analyze the section ranking objectives, mean scores were calculated for each individual objective. Then objectives were grouped into related subgroups and an average was calculated for each group. Group means fell into the following order from most important to least important objectives to meet in the foreign language classroom: 1) Objectives related to Language (m=5.96), 2) Objectives related to Comparing cultures similarities (m=7.46) 3) Objectives related to understanding cultural differences (8.29), 4) “traditional” approaches toward teaching culture (9.56) and 5) objectives related to understanding underlying belief systems of other cultures and how they are related to practices and products (9.59).

Individual rank	Subgroup Rank
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**RESULTS OF RANKING LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

**1. Language for Language**

**5.96**

Be able to interact with members of the target culture to accomplish specific tasks

5.61

Use language in a grammatically correct way

6.3

**2. Compare**

**7.46**

Compare other cultures with their own to see how the cultures are similar

5.13

State ways in which people from all over the world are inherently alike.

8.13

Identify instances in which their counterparts all over the world do the same types of things

9.13

**3. Contrast**

**8.29**

Contrast other cultures with their own to see how they differ

6.04

Articulate how other cultures and subcultures have very different beliefs that they do

8.96

Analyze the reason culture clashes occur in a given situation

9.89

**4. Traditional**

**9.56**

Identify representative architecture and/or famous buildings from the countries they will be studying

11.56

Provide basic demographic information about countries where their target language is spoken.

10.22

Identify traditional cultural artifacts such as clothing, food and holidays.

8.49

Demonstrate interest in learning about other cultures by participating in periodic culture day activities.

8

**5. Belief Systems**

**9.59**

Demonstrate understanding of instances in which peoples’ belief systems

9.74



guide their actions and ways of thinking.

Explain how a particular product or artifact is related to the belief systems of a group of people 11.16

Give examples of instances in which a given culture's beliefs are reflected in the language that they use. 7.87

## Discussion

Analysis of both types of items reveals a similar trend in teacher perceptions. First, teacher participants rated language teaching as the most important objective in their actual classrooms within the survey items. Within the likert scale items teachers on average agreed more strongly that it was important to teach “language”, i.e. grammar teaching, than to teach about culture or the relationship between language and culture. This is consistent with research findings that suggest foreign language teachers continue to “focus on the explanation and practice of targeted language forms and the treatment of culture.... tasks as “throw in activities” (Warford & White, 2012, p.400).

Secondly, on both types of items teachers prioritized the teaching of cultural similarities over the teaching of cultural differences. This finding suggests that teachers may be promoting the homogenization of cultures as they attempt to “foster empathy” for members of the target culture (Damen, 2003, p.75).

On both sets of measures, teachers more strongly agreed that it was important to teach about cultural practices and products than to teach students to link cultural products and practices to the underlying belief systems to which they are connected. For likert scale items, teachers prioritized items such as sharing artifacts such as food, clothing and holidays, demographic information, and architecture. As they ranked learning objectives, those related to traditional methods for teaching culture were ranked higher than those related to teaching students to analyze how belief systems are related to cultures, those deemed important by the national standard. This supports Warford & White's (2012) claim that “mainstream language instruction... continues to be custodially concerned with the four F's treatment of culture learning” defined by Kramersch (1991) as “food, folklore, festivals and facts” (p.412).

Data acquired through these interviews suggests that the attempt of the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1996) to elevate the teaching of culture into a position in which it is an integrated part of the foreign language classroom may not have occurred. Although according to Phillips (2003), the redesigned National Standards seek to “refocus teachers' attention upon culture as the core so it may become the central outcome of students learning, long espoused but seldom achieved” (p.163). As long as teachers continue to prioritize linguistic objectives and a traditional information acquisition approach over a process based approach that teaches students to facilitate understanding of why particular groups adapt the behavioral patterns they do, it will be impossible for K-12 students to meet this objective.

Future research should seek to understand the impact that teacher or preparation programs have on teacher understanding of the relationship between practices, products and perspectives. Phillips (2003) also tells us that university foreign language programs have historically included a history/civilization course as part of the major as a response to the need for teaching about the target culture. Many ACTFL/NCATE certified programs use assessments from this course as evidence of meeting ACTFL standards related to the teaching of culture. However, these courses have been “geared to coverage of history and fine arts as a background necessary for courses in

literature” and not focused on teaching the process of developing cross cultural understanding (Phillips, 2003, p.162) collected from the curuse this data to design an additional study that investigates how experiences abroad influences the way teachers integrate teaching about culture in their foreign language classes.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**“Teacher Attitudes toward Teaching Culture” Survey**

**Teaching Culture**

**Page 2**

Please read the statements on this page and indicate how much you agree or disagree by choosing one of the five choices.

The following is a key for your responses:

**1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree**

I want my students to learn that people from all over the world are all inherently alike.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>				

I think it is important to share traditional cultural artifacts with students such as clothing, foods, and holidays.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>				

I plan to teach students about representative architecture and/or famous buildings from the countries they will be studying.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>				

My primary responsibility is to teach students to use language in grammatically correct ways.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>				

I will try to teach my students that their counterparts all over the world do the same types of things they do.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>				

Students need to know how to use language to get things done in different contexts where the target language is spoken.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>				

My students should be able to explain how a particular product or artifact is related to the belief systems of a group of people.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>				

My students should be able to analyze the reasons that cause culture clashes to occur in a given situation.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>				

0. My students should be able to recognize a given culture's beliefs that are obvious in the language that they use.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>				

1. Students should have opportunities to interact with members of the target culture over the course of the language class.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>				

2. My students should be aware that other cultures and subcultures have very different beliefs than they do.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>				

3. My students should compare other cultures with their own to see how the cultures differ.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>				

4. Culture should be a major integrated part of my foreign language curriculum.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>				

5. I think it is great to have a culture day once per week or once per month.

1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree

	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My students should compare other cultures with their own to see how the cultures are similar.					
6.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree				
	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Students should know basic demographic information about countries where the target language is spoken.					
7.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree				
	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My students should understand that belief systems guide personal actions and ways of thinking.					
8.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree				
	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My students need to understand their own cultures.					
9.	1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree				
	1	2	3	4	5
Response	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Teaching Culture**

**Page 3**

Number the following learning objectives in the order in which you would consider these skills most important to teach with #1 being the *MOST IMPORTANT ITEM* and #16 being the *LEAST IMPORTANT* item.

0. Students will be able to:

Rank the items below, using numeric values starting with 1.

state ways in which people from all over the world are all inherently alike.

identify instances in which their counterparts all over the world do the same types of things they do.

identify traditional cultural artifacts with students such as clothing, foods, and holidays.

identify representative architecture and/or famous buildings from the countries they will be studying.

explain how a particular product or artifact is related to the belief systems of a group of



people.

articulate how other cultures and subcultures have very different beliefs than they do.

demonstrate understanding of instances in which people's belief systems guide their actions and their ways of thinking.

give examples of instances in which a given culture's beliefs are reflected in the language that they use.

articulate an understanding of their own cultural practices, products and perspectives.

compare other cultures with their own to see how the cultures are similar.

contrast other cultures with their own to see how the cultures differ.

analyze the reason culture clashes occur in a given situation.

use language in a grammatically correct way.

provide basic demographic information about countries where their target language is spoken.

demonstrate interest in learning about other cultures by participating in periodic "culture day" activities.

interact will be able to interact with members of the target culture to accomplish specific tasks.