

Integration of Culture in the Teaching of French as a Foreign Language at the University Level in Uganda

Harriet K. Haggerty*

University of Calgary

This qualitative case study allowed insights into the integration of culture in the teaching/learning of French as a foreign language at Makerere University in Uganda. Twenty-one students learning French at the advanced level and their four lecturers participated in this case study. The researcher recruited the participants through purposive sampling. She collected data by means of an open-ended questionnaire, focus-group discussion, and interviews. The results from this case study showed that language and culture are interdependent and interrelated so teaching the two separately would lead to losing the essence of either language or culture. The findings also revealed that the lecturers used the Internet, prescribed texts, and authentic documents as the main sources of culture teaching materials. The results suggest that the teaching of the French language enabled the students to appreciate the French and francophone culture(s) as well as the differences existing between the French/francophone culture(s) and their own.

Key words: Culture, culture teaching, intercultural competence, foreign language teaching, French as a foreign language

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Learning a new language does not only involve the acquisition of linguistic and communicative competence, but also entails: a) an increase in the learners' familiarity with the language's background, b) an expansion of the learners' cultural awareness, and c) intercultural competence (Sercu, García, & Prieto, 2004; Thanasoulas, 2001). Language learning and teaching is an interpersonal and intercultural process whereby learners come into contact with the teachers and other learners of diverse personal histories, experiences, and outlooks, either face-to-face or virtually (Kramsch & Hua, 2016). Kramsch and Hua (2016) argued that language learning and teaching have close connections with the field of intercultural communicative competence, especially where the notion of culture is concerned. Therefore, the purpose of integrating culture in the teaching of a foreign language is to enable learners to acquire the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with the speakers of the target language. However, teaching a foreign language and its culture in a multilingual and multicultural country like Uganda is quite challenging (Ismaili, 2015; Wagaba, 2010). Learners come to class with a diversity of cultural communication styles, multicultural values, and nonverbal communication behaviors, which may

*harriet.namukwaya@ucalgary.ca

be unfamiliar to foreign language teachers. This cultural diversity in the language classroom poses challenges when it comes to explaining certain cultural aspects of the target language (Ismaili, 2015).

In order to improve the intercultural communicative competence of learners and to accommodate their cultural backgrounds, teachers need to raise the learners' awareness of the differences in cultures that may create discomfort or cultural shock. For example, greeting with a kiss, and eating snails, as is the case in the French culture, may create discomfort in learners of the language. Teachers need to accommodate their learners' cultural backgrounds to establish a shared understanding between the teacher and the students (Al-Amir, 2017; Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002). Byram et al. (2002) referred to this shared framework as intercultural competence. This is why language teachers need to be interculturally competent to enable students to navigate between their cultures and the target language culture (Byram, 2013; Cushner & Mahon, 2009; Kramsch, 1993), and understand culturally different norms of interaction, as well as people's values and thought (Saville-Troike, 2003).

In Uganda's context, Ugandan lecturers train most foreign language instructors. The instructors have, in fact, never had actual contact with the French speaking communities¹. This lack of contact implies that they may not know how to incorporate culture in the language classroom since they may lack adequate training (Gonen & Saglam, 2012), and may base their teaching of cultural aspects on only what is presented in the prescribed texts. The purpose of this case study was therefore to investigate how Ugandan lecturers of advanced French at Makerere University incorporated the culture of the target language in their teaching.

Methodology

The study explored how Ugandan lecturers integrated culture in their teaching of French at Makerere University in Uganda. The researcher opted for a qualitative case study design (Merriam, 1998) because such a design would enable her to not only focus on a particular aspect of foreign language teaching (culture teaching), but also to make a comprehensive description and analysis of how lecturers taught various cultural aspects of the French language. The researcher used purposive sampling to select participants, believing that they would provide the required information by virtue of their knowledge and experience (Bernard, 2002). Twenty-one students of advanced French, between the ages of 20 and 25 years, and four lecturers participated in the study. The participants were from different sociocultural backgrounds as Uganda is a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual society (Kabanukye & Kwagala, 2007). The students were enrolled in three different years of study (i.e., first to third year), all studying French for various personal and professional reasons. The four lecturers had taught French at the university level for over five years and had varying academic qualifications: three held master's degrees and one had a doctorate.

The researcher collected data by means of a focus-group discussion, a questionnaire, and interviews. The researcher used the questionnaire and focus-group discussion with the students, and one-on-one interviews with the lecturers. The researcher used a focus-group discussion to obtain detailed information about personal and group perceptions and opinions on culture learning, as well as the challenges faced in the learning of French culture. Conscious of the possibility that students may withhold personal opinions about the topic during the group discussion, the

¹ Information informally gathered by the author during the pedagogical trainings that she conducted with the teachers of French in Uganda.

researcher administered a private, open-ended questionnaire to get elaborate information (Züll, 2016). Additionally, the researcher conducted interviews with the lecturers in order to find out how they integrated the French and francophone culture(s) in their teaching. The data collected allowed the researcher to examine the teaching approaches and materials the lecturers used in the teaching/learning of the French culture. The data also allowed the researcher to examine their selection criteria of these materials, as well as the challenges the students faced in studying the French/francophone culture and French in general.

Findings

The results showed that language and culture are intricately related. One of the lecturers stated, “the French language and culture are interrelated and therefore inseparable.” This interrelatedness comes from the fact that language is not a code free from culture (Eldin, 2015), but an embodiment of it (Gonen & Saglam, 2012), and a method for the transmission of culture (Moran, 2001). Brown (2007) described this interrelatedness of language and culture by stating, “one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. The acquisition of a second language, except for specialized, instrumental acquisition, is also the acquisition of a second culture” (pp. 189-190).

The results further showed that the Internet (e.g., pedagogical websites such as lepointdufle.net), prescribed texts (e.g., “*la civilization progressive du français*”, 2002; “*la France d’aujourd’hui: Civilisation*”, 1991; “*la France aux cent visages*”, 1995), and authentic documents (e.g., newspaper articles, extracts from magazines, programs from Radio France International) constituted the main sources of culture teaching materials. The authentic materials enabled the students to see language in use in the real world and provided cultural information about the target language (Ahmed, 2017; Brandl, 2008). They also provided the students with the opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes through meaningful and realistic interaction (Brandl, 2008; Richards, 2001; Tomlinson, 1998). The lecturers selected these materials based on the duration of the class (i.e., the shorter the duration, the shorter the text), the cultural theme, the linguistic objective of the lesson, and the communicative task to be accomplished in that particular lesson. One lecturer stated that one-hour lectures allowed him to focus on only the content in the prescribed texts, and that he used materials from other sources, as well as a variety of activities/tasks during two-hour lectures. The lecturers added that during the one hour lectures, they did most of the talking while students took notes, whereas in the two-hour lectures, the roles were somewhat reversed because students usually engaged in communicative tasks as well as presentations.

The findings also revealed that lecturers used various teaching methods: research and presentation, the communicative approach in the form of role-plays and simulations, and guided inquiry learning. The lecturers claimed that not only did these methods enable the students to develop their (socio) linguistic competence but they also promoted learner autonomy. The lecturers also believed that culture teaching involved providing information about daily life and routines of the French-speaking people, creating awareness of cultural differences, teaching students openness and tolerance towards other peoples and cultures, as well as promoting increased awareness and understanding of students’ own cultures. Furthermore, the lecturers associated culture learning with the ability to communicate in French. These lecturers’ beliefs reinforce other studies (Al-Amir, 2017; Bryam & Risager, 1999; Byram, 1997). In fact, Al-Amir (2017) claimed that communicative competence and culture are inseparable; culture is the base of all types of

communication; it determines the rules that govern who talks to whom, the content of the message and the manner in which one conveys the message.

The findings further revealed that three lecturers had a one-month or three months' intercultural training in either France or Reunion, and one had done her doctoral studies in France. These lecturers stated that based on this training, they were able to integrate culture in their teaching of the French language.

Students on the other hand, perceived culture learning as the learning about the customs and traditions of the French speech community, and of culturally appropriate ways to address people from different sociocultural backgrounds (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, & Colby, 2000). This perception calls for an analysis of students' needs at the beginning of every semester to find out students' language needs and expectations so that the lecturers may find ways of integrating those needs in their teaching.

The study also found that students faced challenges with a lack of textbooks since the department had limited copies. Furthermore, students faced a problem of limited hours allocated to the learning of French, which made the practicing of the language, the retention of cultural content, and the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence challenging. To them, French is taught in an artificial environment. There is no community of practice for the French language in Uganda. This is in line with Moran (2001) who posited that in the classroom, one does not encounter directly another way of life; therefore, culture learning is best seen as a lived experience. Conscious of this lack of a community of practice for French in Uganda, the lecturers used a variety of activities/tasks depicting different communication situations to enable students to communicate and use language in a simulated environment. Additionally, the lecturers mentioned that a French club met every Friday, which enabled students to practice the language in a relaxing environment, watch French movies, sing songs in French, and cook French dishes, among other activities.

Implications

From the findings, we can draw the following implications:

1. There is a need to initiate intercultural exchange programs to enable students to learn the language in a culturally authentic environment.
2. For the lecturers, there is a need for refresher courses in the area of culture teaching, foreign sojourns, and intercultural competence training for a longer duration.
3. In order to diversify classroom activities, lecturers may need to integrate computer-assisted language learning in their teaching such as the use of voice- and text-based virtual exchange with native speakers of the target language as language and culture learning tools (Dema & Moeller, 2012; Levy, 2009).

Conclusion

The main objective of the study was to find out how Ugandan lecturers of French integrated culture in their teaching. The study found that the teaching of the French language enabled the students to appreciate the French and francophone culture(s) as well as the differences that exist between the French/francophone culture(s) and their own culture(s). This is in line with Paige et al. (2000) who claimed that cultural learning does not only involve memorization of cultural facts, but also the acquisition of interactional competence, and the learning of how to learn about one's own culture and another culture. In spite of the fact that students learn French in an environment where they do not use it in their daily interactions, the

lecturers use various pedagogical approaches to enable students to learn how to communicate effectively and appropriately in French.

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