

The Cultural Conundrum: Assessing Outcomes

Claims about shifting the emphasis of foreign language study from linguistic forms in isolation to language use embedded in cultural context have been prevalent long before the turn of the 21st century. The call for a content-based and contextualized approach to foreign and second language teaching can be traced back to the 1970s when sociolinguists such as M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan (1976) stressed the interrelationship of language and cultural context. Halliday and Hasan have long argued that language structures and words only transmit meaning when they occur within a social context. This assumption has found widespread support among second and foreign language scholars such as Elizabeth Bernhardt (1991), Claire Kramsch (1993 & 1995), Zena Moore (2001) and Janet Swaffar, Katherine Arens, Heidi Byrnes (2005).

The Case for Assessing Students' Transcultural Facility

In general, researchers and practitioners in FL acquisition support the idea that language is a primary transmitter of culture and that language study has to be practiced in tandem with its socio-cultural context in order to produce speakers of foreign languages who are able to function appropriately within the foreign language and culture community. The multidimensionality of language and language learning has been paralleled by economic globalization, Internet access worldwide, and concomitant mass migrations both within and across national borders. Such trends have turned comprehension or at very least, awareness of the cultures of other languages into a necessity.

Our major professional organizations concur. The *National Standards of Foreign Language Learning* (1999, 2006) brought forward by the *American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages* as well as the MLA report from May 2007 titled *Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World* in addition to summarizing the need and the purpose for foreign language and culture learning, also provide guidelines as to what a foreign language curriculum in the 21st century should look like and which aspects it should entail. The 5 C's of Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons and Communities are placed at the center of the ideal curriculum aiding foreign language students in becoming what the MLA report calls "speakers who have deep translingual and transcultural competence," a goal to attain by integrating content- and standards-based learning in the foreign language classroom at every level of instruction.

Such clarion calls for teaching language and culture as one intertwined entity have not, however, proposed how a combined pedagogy of language and culture can be assessed. In part, a lack of a common definition of what culture is remains a stumbling block. The *Standards'* distinction of culture in products, practices, and perspectives has been commonly accepted by researchers and instructors alike. However, many practitioners and researchers miss a consensus regarding what topics the products, practices, and perspectives should entail, what cultural aspects should be presented at which level of foreign language instruction, and what knowledge should result. Some have looked at command of cultural information as a criterion (Bernhardt and Kamil, 1998; Herron, Dubreil, Cole, and Corrie, 1999; Peters, 2003), others at shifts in attitude toward the language group studied (Robinson-Stuart and Nocon, 1996; Storme and

Derakhshani, 2002).

This paper illustrates the basis for an assessment approach that rewards development in particular modes of analysis in student writing about materials they have viewed or read. The goal of such an assessment would be to encourage critical thinking about what constitutes cultural features. The approach rewards students for indications that they can identify manifestations of similarities and differences within their own and the target culture studied. Thus, instead of reaching a consensus on *what* students should know about a culture, this approach to assessment would attempt to pinpoint how their learners analyze a wide range of cultural topics, express their impressions and opinions and whether or not by doing so they develop and enhance their cognitive approaches to similarities and differences in another social environment that uses another language.

Without a doubt, incorporating such cross-cultural reflection and intellectually challenging content into the foreign language classroom poses challenges to current practices in assessment. Regardless of the goals, materials, and methods that characterize their classrooms, at present most foreign language teachers monitor and test students' linguistic progress and related content learning throughout the course of a semester. However, if we take the MLA Report and its call for translingually and transculturally competent students literally, these practices will need to be augmented. It will take a new set of criteria for rewarding students who demonstrate translingual and transcultural facility. Content and form are no longer the sole factors to be assessed.

The criteria I propose for identifying transcultural awareness are anchored in the premise that students will develop that intellectual breadth only if provided with exposure to authentic manifestations of cultural behaviors that originate in the country or countries

whose languages are being studied, Moreover, ideally such exposure focuses on manifestations of similar issues, preferably in related stories or illustrations from the same cultural context. In today's classroom media access enables such exposure.

How I Arrived at these Conclusions

Utilizing films in the language classroom poses multiple options for watching the responses of different social groups of different ages to an evolving situation.

To explore these options while being a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin I volunteered to teach an interdisciplinary course taught in English, Dr. Katherine Arens' *The Movies Go To War*. This course, a large section with generally 60+ students each semester, is a German Civilization lecture - discussion class, cross-listed with University of Texas departments as a freshman elective. The course, developed with a media focus and a comprehensive on-line format, presents war films from the United States and Europe to introduce how to "read" films - and more specifically, the genre of war films - as part of cultural history and memory construction in different countries during different historical periods.

Soon after I had started teaching this class, I realized that although undergraduate students brought cultural and visual literacy to class, to talk about their insights based on this literacy, students needed cognitive practice in identifying details that contribute to larger patterns in a given film, such as attitudes identifiable in the way film characters talked about the enemy and how that enemy was depicted visually. The exercises and objectives in this course developed by Professor Arens laid the groundwork for students' noticing and commenting on such attitudes and their manifestations in visual and acoustic

features. For most of the students, developing the ability to recognize in body language, dress, or responses to a given situation as changing images of the heroic or the courageous individual was hard. Often students recalled differences but were unable to illustrate them by recalling shifts in attitude constructed by a camera's gaze or two characters' verbal exchange. Even fewer could articulate the relationship between these images and political or social events in a country during the time period in which the film was made.

Thus, while teaching this lower division class in German Civilization, I began to appreciate how important it is for students to engage in critical thinking and cultural analysis and wondered whether these same approaches could be applied to foreign language classrooms. Instead of just watching a movie and chatting about its plot or characters, a common approach in many classrooms, particularly at the elementary and intermediate levels, would it be possible to ask students to identify and express plot, filmic, or script features that spoke to the cultural issues of the time and place?

In short, I started by applying Arens' concepts to a foreign language setting to see whether and how some of the teaching tools and strategies of the lecture class in English could also benefit students in German foreign language courses. As a result of my experience in making such adaptations in my intermediate German classes, I concluded that, like literature, movies construct information to affirm or critique accepted behaviors and ideas prevalent in the society that produced them.

Research on Media Use to Teach about FL Cultures

Researching the use of film in the classroom, I found that film is seen to provide context, to appeal to the cognitive and the affective spheres, and to make authentic language and cultural issues available (Dodds, 1997; Martinez-Gibson, 1998). At the same time I also found a striking absence of classroom-based research about utilizing film in the foreign language classroom.

Many articles describe the use of film in the foreign language classroom to practice listening, speaking, writing, and reading. However, in regard to influencing students' attitudes about culture acquisition, I am aware of no studies that examine how film can improve foreign language students' cross-cultural understanding of values, attitudes, and behaviors in authentic materials reflecting the target culture(s).

Among researchers who explore cultural issues empirically, Herron and Hanley (1992) looked at whether the use of video made a significant difference for children's introduction to a foreign culture. Their work indicated that fifth-graders learning French were more successful in acquiring and retaining information about the target culture when they watched instructional French videos before reading about specific cultural information. They concluded that videos can act as powerful advanced organizers.

Herron, Dubreil, Cole and Corrie (2000) looked at this same issue in a study with first-semester college students of French. They found that instructional video not only increased those students' linguistic skills but also improved their cultural knowledge over the course of a semester. This result was supported by a post-test exam administered to a control and an experimental group. The performance of the experimental section revealed significantly superior comprehension and recognition of textual information related to

cultural products and practices. However, the study did *not* explore whether these students' had markedly increased their ability to generate inferences about cultural phenomena learned about as information. Nor did it consider how students assessed those practices.

My own research attempted to explore this missing research dimension -- to explore the extent to which critical thinking about culture can be fostered by media exposure to a prime time continuous family serial, a popular German language program about people living on a street in a major German metropolis. If differences in perception and writing style occurred during the course of one semester, how might one assess those changes as possible indices of students' cognitive responses to cultural features of this German program (Hammer 2008)?

The study's design focused on students' ability to evaluate visual features and verbal behaviors of people in various social contexts and to link tokens to typologies -- types of behaviors that characterize one group and distinguished it from another. In other words, I explored whether students were able to read behaviors and attitudes among a variety of socio-economic groups as social-semiotic systems. At the same time, I was interested to see whether fourth-semester foreign language students could use German to write and reflect about similarities and differences between situations, attitudes, and behaviors of people in this program and in similar genres in the United States. Ultimately, I was interested in examining whether students' modes of inquiry into culture changed and whether their language use in expressing perceptions about culture changed during the course of one semester of watching *Lindenstraße*.

Lindenstraße is a prime time continuous family serial that first aired in 1985 on a

weekly basis, still broadcasts with new episodes. The serial is about a neighborhood in Munich and depicts the every-day life of Germans and immigrants to Germany from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Each television program in the serial has about three episodes involving a problem or conflict to be resolved, generally with reference to current political, historical and social issues discussed in Germany.

The subjects of my dissertation study were four classes of fourth-semester German taught by three different instructors with three or more years of teaching experience in the University of Texas lower-division program. Starting with the fifth week in the semester, students viewed four 30-minute episodes of *Lindenstraße* in class during bi-weekly intervals and completed response papers immediately following each viewing. The subsequent class hour was spent in a combination of small group work and class discussion about aspects of students' impressions they identified in a homework assignment. Two randomly selected classes used only German, the other two classes only English for this work.ⁱ

One measure I used in my data gathering involved reading essays written as homework assignments after the class viewed an episode of *Lindenstraße*. The four essays were written in German and students could refer to online study guides describing characters in the segment shown. While key ideas and some vocabulary from the segment had been introduced by each teacher and questions answered after viewing, no specific directions were given students other than that they comment on cultural issues they observed in that particular episode and reflect about the degree to which it might be comparable to or different from situations and responses they might see on TV or experience personally in the United States (see Appendix A).

Teachers of each class read and graded these essays according to the rhetorical and grammatical norms established by the coordinator of these classes and the resultant grades counted for twenty per-cent of the students' total grade. Thus participants were motivated to take the task seriously and almost without exception, the essays addressed cultural issues in a substantive way. As the focus of my dissertation was on students' apprehension of cultural issues, it was essential to reread copies of the uncorrected originals and assess them on the way students articulated their insights about what they identified as cultural issues illustrated in *Lindenstraße*.

In other words, to assess their performance in respect to possible increases in cultural apprehension over the course of a single semester, I could not use the assessment criteria of the cooperating instructors. My focus had to be on what students said about culture. Deciding what to reward and how became the central conundrum and challenge of my project. To my knowledge, no such model existed.ⁱⁱ

Considerations in Assessing Development of Student Perceptions about Culture

Here, is one segment of my data, more specifically, samples from students' response papers. These segments illustrate the problem facing those who want to reward cultural literacy. They are translated extracts from the first two paragraphs of one student's summaries written after viewing two *Lindenstraße* episodes – one in the 5th and one in the 12th week of the semester (for the German originals, see Appendix B at the end of this paper). In the discussion of these excerpts that follows, I reconstruct the differences my dissertation advisors, Janet Swaffar and Katherine Arens, and I noted on our initial readings and comparisons of both essays and the tentative inferences we made

as a result. After encountering similar differences in the work of most other students, we established measures for assessing a student’s changes in perspective about culture. These two essay excerpts from the same student represent a rather typical case study of the larger trends noted in essays selected at random and assessed in my dissertation.ⁱⁱⁱ

FIRST ESSAY	FINAL AND FOURTH ESSAY
<p>In this episode I saw a lot. First Iffi’s baby was crying in the middle of the night. Jan did not get up because he was not sure whether the baby was his. Later, we saw Lisa and Murat. Murat was angry, that his sister was murdered to protect her honor. Lisa is scared of Murat’s father. She thinks he does not like her. Lisa asks Gabi to be her adoptive mother and she has dinner with the family...</p> <p>This episode has many cultural topics. One was that Lisa and the Turkish Murat wanted to marry. There are tensions when a Turkish person marries. These tensions also exist in the U.S. but I think that it is not so difficult here. But it was not incredibly hard for Lisa and Murat, so I don’t know.</p> <p>I understand the problem with Jan’s and Iffi’s baby. That happens often in the U.S. as well. Also, many men pretend to sleep when their baby cries. That is the laziness of men.</p>	<p>This episode has three important storylines. The first storyline deals with Paul’ circumcision of which Paul is afraid. The second storyline is about Jack’s and Roberto’s romance. The third storyline is about Bruno’s relationship with Isolde who has skin cancer. Dr. Dressler visits Bruno to help him.</p> <p>A very big cultural topic in this episode is circumcision. It was a very serious issue. Alex and Gabi were against it because it is unnatural. Andi says that circumcision is a normal practice in the U.S. or in Turkey. As a woman I do not worry much about circumcision. I am also not religious - that is why I do not understand why one would change their body for God. I think it should be the boy’s choice and decision.</p> <p>The topic of circumcision is also about parental rights when parents are divorced. Shouldn’t both parents have the same rights and power? My parents are not divorced that is why I don’t know how it would be dealt with in America.</p>

A cursory comparison of the two essays reveals distinct differences. Repeatedly, we noted development in given styles of accountability with regard to the assigned topic – cultural features reflected in *Lindestraße* and, together with my advisors, a decision was made to

think in terms of a scale from 1 to 3 points:

3 - Unambiguous/clear/present

2 - Partially unambiguous/clear/present

1 - Ambiguous/unclear/not present

For the "Unambiguous" or three point award, our criterion was that the writer provide enough information for the reader to follow without speculation/interpolation. We agreed that in the case of an "Ambiguous" ranking the reader must speculate or interpolate about the writer's intent in including information. How would such a ranking apply to this essay pair?

We identified four rubrics that we saw as recurring features of the essays to which the scale applied: thesis and related rhetorical organization, content referentiality, the writer's acknowledgment of a point of view vis-à-vis the source text, and the resultant interpretive substance exhibited in conclusions drawn, interrogation of clichés in the source text or the writer's thinking and the like. In the four sections that follow, I illustrate the application of these rubrics in assessing the differences found between the first and last essay sample above.

Thesis and Related Rhetorical Organization

The first paragraph in essay #1 makes no effort to assess the program in its entirety. It is, in fact, a somewhat random and achronological inventory of people and events viewed only piecemeal from the three segments featured in the episode. One segment is not mentioned at all. In contrast, essay #4 acknowledges three storylines in succinct fashion by identifying the problem posed in each segment. While no overall

theme for or thesis about the episode is identified, such as “sources of anxiety in German culture” or “conflicts these German’s experience and how they cope,” the essential issue of each segment is characterized.

Thus, while not yet presenting the reader with a thesis to be explored in the subsequent paragraphs, this student had moved from a relatively disorganized reconstruction of events to the ability to focus on and articulate main ideas. Applying these comparisons to the general realm of organization (addressing the topic, presenting a thesis), this student was judged to have moved from a 1 point level in the first essay to 2 points or even 2.5 in the fourth.^{iv}

Content Referentiality

With regard to depiction of content, raters found a similar trajectory of progress for the following reasons. First, some errors of fact occur in essay 1. To illustrate, in the first paragraph the statement “Murat was angry that his sister was murdered...” is only partially true. He is “angry” or upset when he reads about the murder of an unrelated woman, not his sister. As a whole, the relationships throughout are presented somewhat disjointedly and are hard for the reader to follow. For example, “Later we saw Lisa and Murat” fails to make clear that this couple is in a storyline entirely separate from the one concerning Iffi and Jan. The fact that Murat is Turkish is only stated at in the second paragraph. In such ways the way the writer references content in this first essay is difficult to follow. At best, a partial rendering or 2 points might be awarded

In the second paragraph of final essay, however, a considerable difference can be observed in the coherence with which references to people and events in the program are

recounted. As a reflection of the content of the particular episode viewed, the final essay conveys information with considerably more clarity than that demonstrated in essay 1. Foregrounding of a major idea occurs with circumcision identified as the “very big cultural topic” addressed in the segment. In doing so, the writer has contextualized for the reader the reactions of Gabi (as noted in essay 1, Gabi’s adopted mother) and Andi (Gabi’s husband). In the sense that content has been referenced for the reader by distinguishing major and minor issues and connections between people, their reactions to and involvement in events in the source text become more transparent, this learner has progressed to a level 3.

Acknowledgment of Source and Writer Point of View

In the first essay the writer does engage in expressing a point of view as an opinion – one paragraph dealing with the view that “there are tensions when a Turkish person marries” and that these tensions also exist in the United States, a second paragraph ruminates that “many men pretend to sleep when their baby cries” because they are lazy, a trait shared by men in Germany and the United States.

In comparison, the final essay has developed some sophistication in distinguishing between what the source text presents and the writer’s viewpoint. Thus the author notes “Alex and Gabi were against it [circumcision] because [they think] it is unnatural. Andi says that circumcision is a normal practice in the U.S. or in Turkey.” The writer then notes her view is “as a woman” who is not “religious” and consequently cannot understand the idea that one changes their body for God. She proposes that the boy in question should decide but does not provide her rationale for this assertion. Her

last paragraph raises the question of parents' rights in a divorce situation, but claims inadequate background knowledge to judge the case.

This essay did not examine some broader implications of the Murat and Lisa segment -- whether or not the depiction of Turks was or was not similar to what one might expect in the United States. No mention is made of possible parallels (or lack thereof) that a viewer might infer from situations depicted in this segment, for example, styles of family relationships in Germany and the United States. But this fourth effort did distinguish between source text and author with somewhat greater precision than had characterized the first essay and the author examined issues with a greater degree of seriousness. For these reasons it was ranked one but not two steps higher on the rubric for point of view – a partial but not a completely unambiguous effort to go beyond “I don’t know” to “I can infer. . . .” or “I see parallels between. . . .”

Interpretive Substance Exhibited in Conclusions Drawn

In our assessment the weakest feature of both the first and the fourth essays excerpted here was the absence of conclusions beyond description of parallels and efforts to interrogate clichés in *Lindenstraße* or in the author’s own thinking. To illustrate, neither essay engages in observations such as the probability that circumcision would be an unlikely topic on a mainstream U.S. television program or that Murat’s and Lisa’s negotiations with all their relatives reflect the importance of relationships between Turks and Germans – and that, while the topic of interracial marriage occurs in North American films and television, the specific issues concerning the different cultural practices of Turks and Germans would not be the likely focus of such programs in the United States.

In short, neither essay interrogated perceived clichés in the source text or the writer's thinking, nor were efforts made to hypothesize about how a single case, such as Murat's and Lisa's prenuptial arrangements, might have possible general implications about German culture. Neither essay looked at whether specific types of events, viewed in the socially marked context depicted in *Lindenstraße*, constituted indications about distinctly different or shared American experiences the author had read about or experienced. For these reasons neither essay received more than the minimum ranking with regard to development in expression of interpretive substance.

In Summary:

The four categories briefly described here were developed into an assessment scale that proved to be relatively simple to apply. As all essays addressed the same media material, raters could focus on how students executed their assigned task -- writing about how they reacted to the media presentation of people and events as manifestations of cultural features. The insights in the essays were far-reaching but almost all of them could be qualitatively categorized under one of the four rubrics described above: 1) organization of ideas (major to minor points), 2) accuracy in referencing the source text's content, 3) identification of a point of view expressed in the media source and distinguished from that of the writer, 4) substantive inferences that avoided stereotypes or facile generalizations.

This assessment approach is based on the idea of connecting language instruction with cultural studies. In this paper I have proposed an alternative to viewing culture as information and rather to see it as students' perceptions of cultural content expressed in a

second language. By rewarding conceptual changes and students' expression as stages in a progression of ability to identify the nub of a cultural issue and to refer accurately to the way the source text illustrates events, statements, and behaviors that illustrate that issue, we reward the espoused goal of transcultural learning.

To implement such an assessment involves applying qualitative measures that reward students for recognizing the difference between their viewpoints and those expressed in the source text and for developing the expressive capability to interrogate cultural clichés and draw inferences that avoid stereotypical thinking. This paper has tried to illustrate that it is possible and vitally important that the profession begin to assess increases in students' ability to write in these ways.

Notes

I also collected data from the following additional sources: 1) post-viewing response papers in German, 2) attitude questionnaires administered at the beginning and end of the semester, 3) beginning- and end-of-semester sessions in which I ask students to free associate about cultural questions and their subsequent written reflections on these associations, and 5) my journal of classroom observations to identify both student responses and individual differences in instructional approaches that record my impressions during visits, as well as coordination and organizational developments occurring throughout the semester (See Hammer 2008).

ⁱⁱ Models suggested by Celce-Murcia (2000), Colombio (2002) or Caudery (2002) evaluate linguistic features and students' morphosyntactic development. Although these are all valuable models, they concentrate on linguistic and meaning-making strategies not changes in students' articulation and thinking styles. Nor do models reward links between students' perceptions of people and events and their ability to identify a social system of related values, attitudes and behaviors expressed by different subcultures and groups in a foreign culture.

ⁱⁱⁱ Not all of the essays written during the study were analyzed. A random sample of sixteen students was made, four from each of the four classes, and their first and fourth essays assessed.

^{iv} In actual practice the second rater and I discovered that while we might differ in the subsections of our ultimate rating rubrics, the totals within each rubric were strikingly similar and we could easily resolve any minor discrepancies by discussing our respective rationales for a given rating (see Hammer 2008, Chapter 4).

Appendix

Appendix A – Directions for Response Papers

- *Bitte auf deutsch!*
- *Bitte auf dem Computer schreiben!*
- *Bitte mindestens 1,5 Seiten!*

1. **Briefly** summarize what you have seen! **No more than 5 sentences!!!**
2. Provide at least **five** more paragraphs about the following:
 - a. What are the social and cultural topics and issues that are portrayed? Please describe as many as possible.
 - b. What other cultural aspects did you recognize in the episode (e.g., people's behaviors, patterns of every-day life, conflict solving strategies, etc.)?
 - c. What is your personal reaction towards the issues discussed in the episode? Did you expect such topics to be part of German culture? Do you think that this is representative of German

culture? Does it help you to understand German culture better? Does it make you like German culture better?

d. What cultural similarities **and** differences to your own culture did you recognize?

Appendix B - Extracts from initial paragraphs of one student's summaries written after viewing two *Lindenstrasse* episodes – one in the 5th and one in the 12th week of the semester with two intermittent viewings after which essays two and three were written.

FIRST ESSAY FOURTH AND FINAL ESSAY

In dieser Episode habe ich viele gesehen. Zuerst hat das Baby der Iffi in die Mitte von der Nacht gewiegt. Jan hat nicht aufgewacht, weil er nicht sich das Baby seiner war. Später haben wir Lisa und Murat gesehen. Murat war böse, dass seine Schwester für Ehre gemordet wurde. Lisa hat Angst vor dem Vater des Murats. Sie denkt, dass sie gefällt ihm nicht. Lisa fragt Gabi ihren Adoptivmutter zu sein, und isst Abendessen mit der Familie

Diese Episode hat viele kulturelle Themen. Ein war, dass Lisa und der türkische Murat heiraten wollen. Es gibt Spannung beim Verheiraten eines Türken. Es gibt auch diese Spannung in den USA, aber denke ich es heir nicht so schwer ist. Aber es war nicht unglaublich schwer für Lisa und Murat, deshalb weiss ich nicht.

Ich verstehe das Problem mit Jan und das Baby von Iffi. Das passiert oft auch in den USA. Auch geben viele Väter vor zu schlafen, wenn ihr Baby weint. Das ist die Faulheit der Männer.

Diese Episode hat drei wichtige Geschichten. Die erste Geschichte handelt von Pauls Beschneidung, über die Paul hat angst. Die zweite Geschichte handelt von die Romanze zwischen Jack und Roberto. Die dritte Geschichte handelt der Beziehung von Bruno mit Isolde, die Hautkrebs hat. Dr. Dressler besucht Bruno, um er zu helfen.

Eine sehr große kulturelle Ausgabe in dieser Episode ist Beschneidung. Es war ein sehr ernstes Thema. Alex und Gabi waren gegen es, weil es unnatürlich ist. Andi sagt, dass Beschneidung in den USA oder der Türkei normal ist. Als eine Frau, Sorge ich mich

viel über Beschneidung entweder Weg nicht. Ich bin auch nicht religiös, deshalb verstehe ich Änderung derjeniger Körper für Gott nicht. Ich denke, dass es die Wahl des Jungen sein sollte.

Das Beschneidungsthema handelt auch von elterlichen Rechten, wenn Eltern geschieden sind. Sollten beide Eltern gleiche Kraft nicht haben? Meine Eltern sind nicht geschieden, deshalb weiß ich nicht, wie es in Amerika behandelt werden würde.

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