

What is culture?

KEY IDEAS

- Culture can be seen as practices or as information
- Culture plays a central role in the way meanings are interpreted
- Cultures are characterised by variability and diversity
- The intercultural is not the same as culture but is a process which goes beyond the idea of 'knowing a culture'
- Culture is fundamentally related to language

The way in which we understand culture, just as the way we understand language, affects the way we teach culture in language learning. In developing our stance, there are two fundamentally connected issues to consider:

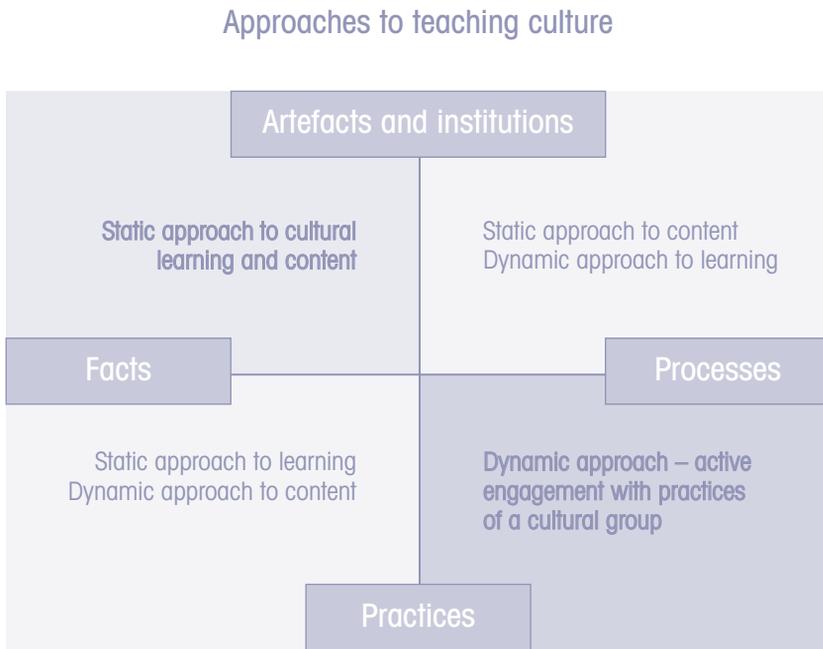
- what we understand culture to be
- how we understand the place of culture within language learning.

Understanding culture

One way in which culture has often been understood is as a body of knowledge that people have about a particular society. This body of knowledge can be seen in various ways: as knowledge about cultural artefacts or works of art; as knowledge about places and institutions; as knowledge about events and symbols; or as knowledge about ways of living. It is also possible to consider this aspect of culture in terms of information and to teach the culture as if it were a set of the learnable rules which can be mastered by students. When translated into language teaching and learning, this knowledge-based view of culture often takes the form of teaching information about another country, its people, its institutions, and so on. Culture is not, however, simply a body of knowledge but rather a framework in which people live their lives and communicate shared meanings with each other.

Static and dynamic learning approaches to culture

In thinking about how to teach culture in the language classroom, it is useful to consider how the ways in which culture is presented can be categorised. The diagram below (adapted from Liddicoat, 2005) is one way of thinking this through.



One dimension is the axis of culture as facts or as processes: that is, whether culture is seen as a static body of information about characteristics of a society or as a dynamic system through which a society constructs, represents, enacts and understands itself. The second axis represents the way in which culture is conceived in terms of educational content. It makes a distinction between artefacts and institutions and practices: that is, whether culture is seen in terms of the things produced by a society or as the things said and done by members of a society.

The most static way to approach the teaching of a culture typically emphasises artefacts, institutions and factual knowledge. Both the approach to culture learning and the content itself are static. The lower left quadrant adopts a static approach to the nature of learning, but a more dynamic approach to the content, whereas the top right quadrant is static in terms of its content, but dynamic in terms of its approach to learning (eg as in activities in which learners engaged with cultural artefacts in a hands on way). The most dynamic approach to culture is represented by the lower right hand quadrant, which sees learners actively engage with the practices of a cultural group.

The intercultural dimension

Knowledge of cultures is important for facilitating communication with people. Therefore learners of languages need to learn about and understand cultures. Understanding culture as practices with which people engage becomes centrally important. This means that in the language classroom it is not just a question of learners developing knowledge about another culture but of learners coming to understand themselves in relation to some other culture. This is why there is a contemporary emphasis on 'intercultural'. Learning to be intercultural involves much more than just knowing about another culture: it involves learning to understand how one's own culture shapes perceptions of oneself, of the world, and of our relationship with others. Learners need to become familiar with how they can personally engage with linguistic and cultural diversity.

There is another way to think about culture in language teaching: the distinction between a cultural perspective and an intercultural perspective (Liddicoat, 2005).

This 'cultural' pole implies the development of knowledge about culture which remains external to the learner and is not intended to confront or transform the learner's existing identity, practices, values, attitudes, beliefs and worldview. The 'intercultural' pole implies the transformational engagement of the learner in the act of learning.

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The goal of learning is to decentre learners from their own culture-based assumptions and to develop an intercultural identity as a result of an engagement with an additional culture. Here the borders between self and other are explored, problematised and redrawn.

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Taking an intercultural perspective in language teaching and learning involves more than developing knowledge of other people and places. It means learning that all human beings are shaped by their cultures and that communicating across cultures involves accepting both one's own culturally conditioned nature and that of others and the ways in which these are at play in communication. Learning another language can be like placing a mirror up to one's own culture and one's own assumptions about how communication happens, what particular messages mean and what assumptions one makes in one's daily life. Effective intercultural learning therefore occurs as the student engages in the relationships between the cultures that are at play in the language classroom. Such learning involves much more than just developing knowledge about some other culture and its language.

The intercultural framework proposed here, then, consists of three intersecting dimensions for understanding approaches to the teaching of culture in language learning:

- the nature of content: artefact-practice
- the nature of learning: fact-process
- the nature of the educational effect: cultural-intercultural.

In learning about culture in the language classroom, we need to draw on our own experiences of language and culture as they are encountered when trying to create and interpret meanings. The ability to learn beyond the classroom is probably more important than any particular information that students may learn about another culture during their schooling. This is because it is impossible to teach *all* of any culture because cultures are variable and diverse. As language educators, we know that what we can teach in the classroom is inevitably only a partial picture of a language and culture. By acknowledging that limitation in our own teaching, we are less likely to develop stereotypical views of the cultures we are teaching about. Learning how to learn about culture means that, as people engage with new aspects of culture, they develop their knowledge and awareness and find ways of acting according to their new learning.

One way of developing intercultural capabilities is through an interconnected set of activities involving:

- noticing cultural similarities and differences as they are made evident through language
- comparing what one has noticed about another language and culture with what one already knows about other languages and cultures
- reflecting on what one's experience of linguistic and cultural diversity means for oneself: how one reacts to diversity, how one thinks about diversity, how one feels about diversity and how one will find ways of engaging constructively with diversity
- interacting on the basis of one's learning and experiences of diversity in order to create personal meanings about one's experiences, communicate those meanings, explore those meanings and reshape them in response to others.

A dynamic relationship between language and culture is always at play. It is through exploration of the interactions of language and culture that this awareness and the ability to act on it can be developed.

Questions for reflection

- 1 Collect the tasks you have used to teach and assess culture for a particular class or module. What do these tasks show about the way you have presented culture in your teaching? Do they show that you have used culture explicitly to develop the interculturality of your learners or do they show a focus on acquiring information about others? Do these tasks explicitly include opportunities for activities such as noticing, comparing, reflecting and interacting?
- 2 How significantly does your stance as a languages educator focus on interculturality?
- 3 How might you modify your teaching to focus more on developing the ability to learn how to learn?
- 4 How would you explain intercultural language learning to parents?