Culture Learning in a Changed World: Student Perspectives

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In this paper, the author explores the views of a group whose perspectives have not often been included in discussions of new directions for foreign language education - students. Drawing from a larger ethnographic, discourse-analytic study of the nature of culture learning for one group of college students and their teacher, this paper presents data from interviews with students about their broad orientations to the role of culture in foreign language education as well as their more specific views of the culture learning process in the French class they were taking at the time. The approach used in the class, global simulation, engaged students in several culture learning processes, including being exposed to multiple perspectives, being able to try on those points of view, and engaging in self-reflection. The results of this study outline what today's college students expect and desire in terms of the cultural dimensions of their foreign language education. Additionally, the results suggest one approach that can successfully engage students in the kind of learning about culture that the Modern Language Association's report advocates.

The Modern Language Association's Report

The Modern Language Association's (MLA) recent report, entitled "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World" (2007), outlines a set of recommendations concerning the content and delivery of foreign language instruction in higher education. Citing the U.S.'s "language crisis" (Background section, para. 1) in relation to globalization and the altered sociopolitical climate of a post-9/11 world, the report re-examines and suggests change for American approaches to foreign language instruction in higher education. In making its recommendations, the committee accords considerable weight to the role of culture in a transformed approach to language education writing, "[a]s recent world events have demonstrated, deep cultural knowledge and linguistic competence are *equally* necessary if one wishes to understand people and their communities" (Background section, para. 5, emphasis added). The report advances the notion that language and culture are inextricably linked, mutually constitutive and constantly evolving human phenomena, and recognition of this fundamental relationship shapes the committee's recommendations. The report addresses structural changes, namely an overhaul of the two-tiered system, or "divided house" as Byrnes

(2002, p. 118) calls it, that separates language and literary instruction, which would make it possible to foster "cultural inquiry at all levels" (MLA, 2007, An Integrative Approach with Multiple Paths to the Major section, para. 1).

The report also supports a re-evaluation of general views of language and culture within foreign language departments and outlines what is meant by "transcultural understanding," including discussion of "one possible model" (An Integrative Approach with Multiple Paths to the Major section, para. 2). An overarching goal articulated in the report is to put aside an often unattainable native speaker standard of linguistic and cultural competence, and to encourage rather that students develop "the ability to operate between languages…, to function as informed and capable interlocutors with educated native speakers in the target language" and "to reflect on the world and themselves through the lens of another language and culture" (The Goal: Translingual and Transcultural Competence, para. 1). Transcultural understanding, then, as the report describes it, introduces a new option for language learners. Rather than being seen as deficient speakers because they do not meet a native speaker standard, learners are viewed as developing their knowledge and skills in multiple languages and cultures and their competence and abilities *across* languages and cultures.[1] Central to the development of translingual and transcultural competence, according to the report, is to "systematically teach differences in meaning, mentality, and worldview as expressed in American English and in the target language" (The Goal: Translingual and Transcultural Competence, para. 2). According to the committee, this kind of competence necessarily "challenge[s] students' imagination" and "help[s] them consider alternative ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding things" (The Goal: Translingual and Transcultural Competence, para. 2). The committee does not endorse any one pedagogical approach that would satisfy these goals in all teaching and learning contexts (most likely because a one-size-fits-all model is unrealistic); however, the "one possible" model of cultivating transcultural understanding it proposes involves the interpretation and analysis of the "cultural narratives" that are apparent in all forms of cultural representation (An Integrative Approach with Multiple Paths to the Major section, para. 2).

One of the most potent arguments in favor of the approach advocated in the MLA's report, one that I advance in the discussion section of this article, is that students' needs and interests are no longer adequately addressed by the predominantly functional content of early stages of language education or the literature-dominated model of advanced language study in U.S. universities.[2] While the MLA's report states that "[m]any factors in the world today make advanced study of languages and cultures appealing to students and vital to society" (Transforming Academic Programs section, para. 3), it is worthwhile to elaborate and emphasize today's student's perspective, desires and expectations concerning foreign language and culture learning at the university-level, especially since this is a perspective that has largely been overlooked. How do entering college freshmen, who were only 11 or 12 years old when 9/11 happened and who are coming of age in the oft-cited "post-9/11 environment," conceive of transcultural understanding? How do these students, who live in a "global" world characterized by ever-expanding possibilities for communication, conceive of cultural learning and how do they expect it to figure in their foreign language studies in college? More specifically, how do they react to the language courses that they take and the way that culture is treated in these courses? In the interview data I collected in the fall semester of 2006 as part of a larger ethnographic, discourse-analytic study of the nature of the cultural dimensions of language learning for one group of learners and their teacher,[3] students were invited to share their perspectives on these very questions as they spoke with me about their general orientations to

foreign language education and about their specific views concerning the French class they were taking at that time, a class that had an explicit goal of engaging students in learning about culture and gaining cultural literacy. In order to set the stage for interpreting their remarks, however, certain clarifications are in order.

Culture Learning in Foreign Language Education

The MLA's report is very much in line with theory in the field of foreign language education, which has also increasingly been focused on transforming foreign language instruction, at least partially, through a reconceptualization of the role of "culture." Theory has focused mainly on generating models of culture learning and outlining the underlying processes of this learning (e.g. Kramsch, 1993; Moran, 2001, Byram, 1991). Kramsch's work (Kramsch, 1993; Kramsch, Cain, & Murphy-Lejeune, 1996; Kramsch, 1999; Kramsch & Lam, 1999; Kramsch, 2002; Kramsch, 2005) on the topic has been extensive, first emphasizing the primacy of text and context, and extending to discuss dialogue across cultures, third spaces[4] and the transformative potential of foreign language learning. Moran (2001) stresses the need for experiential learning in his model of culture learning in language education, and Byram (1991) proposes a model for intercultural competence. Across these models, there is a focus on a kind of shift that occurs, or a new space that opens up, as a result of language and culture learning. This space, referred to as a "third place" by Kramsch (1993, 1999) and as an "intercultural" domain in Byram's (1997) work, is theorized to offer new perspective on both familiar and unfamiliar cultures. This notion of gaining perspective on cultures by occupying an intercultural space is salient in situating the data presented in this paper precisely because this shift (i.e., a movement to occupy, however temporarily, a "third place") relates to the MLA's report, in that the transcultural understanding the committee advocates rejects a native speaker standard and a dichotomized view of culture (foreign vs. native) in favor of transcultural being and belonging. Furthermore, the notion that culture learning in foreign language education involves a shift in perspective is pervasive in the interview data I collected. (More detailed discussion of what gaining perspective meant to students in the class I studied is presented below).

Theory of culture learning continues to develop; however, as Paige et al.'s (2003) extensive literature review on culture learning and language education reveals, and as Byram and Feng (2004) have noted, virtually no classroom-based research has been undertaken to investigate processes of culture learning in the foreign language setting, and studies that attempt to understand students' needs or interests concerning culture in language education by asking students themselves are nonexistent. It is in an attempt to begin to fill this gap and to give voice to these very important stakeholders - students - that this paper is offered.

Methods

Setting and Participants

The class where data were collected for this study was a fifth-semester, intermediate-level French course at a U.S. university. A content-based approach was employed in order to prepare students for more advanced study in content areas. This level, which was called a "bridge course" by the French department in which it was housed, was content-based in the sense that its basic principle was to privilege meaning over linguistic form based on the belief that language learning is more successful when it occurs in context (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche,

1989/2003). Since this course was the first in the French department's sequence where meaning was privileged over form-focused instruction, the teacher for the course told me that she had to encourage students to "forget the language" and to focus on communicating meaning. The first half of the semester engaged students in the study of the French experience of World War II through a global simulation approach (Levine, 2004) where students learned about historical events and then applied that knowledge to the writing of the first-person fictional memoirs of a character they created.

While some of the class's activities resembled what might be thought of as a more traditional approach to the study of history (i.e. identifying important dates, events, and key historical actors), the global simulation introduced a creative and experiential dimension to the class's activity. In addition to writing their characters' memoirs, students took on their fictional personae and interacted with their classmates' characters during in-class activities. Once a week during these Café de Retrouvailles (*Reunion Café*) activities, students were provided with a short prompt, which often mirrored the prompts the teacher gave for each week's memoirs writing, and were expected to speak through the voice of their characters and direct conversation with little assistance from the teacher. In the second half of the course, students addressed "youth-related" issues such as education and music with attention to cross-cultural comparisons, yet it is the first half of the semester and the global simulation project particularly that are discussed most by students in the interview data presented below.

There were fourteen students[5] in the class, eleven of whom were interviewed. All students were in their first or second year of college, and were between the ages of 17 and 19. Students showed enthusiasm for learning French, which is not surprising since this course level was the first beyond those necessary to meet the university's language requirement. Among the students in this class, life experiences and language learning experiences varied widely. Two students were raised in multilingual households, while others were not exposed to language learning until they reached junior high school. Several students had already traveled to France and other countries as tourists, while one student had lived and been schooled abroad for several years. So while students' views are certainly not generalizable to all young people, these students' comments begin to illuminate some shared orientations toward the cultural dimensions of foreign language education.

Procedures

The student perspectives that are examined in this paper, part of a larger study of the nature of culture learning for a particular teacher and her students, were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews. I began to interview students individually at the mid-point of the semester and interviews continued until the end of classes. During interviews, I collected background information about the students, elicited their broad views of the role of culture in foreign language education at the university-level as well as their perspectives on the class they were taking at the time. An interview protocol was developed and during interviews, I inquired about the same general topics (such as previous language learning experiences, approaches to writing the memoirs, etc.); however, in some interviews I probed for information when a particular theme seemed important. One student, for example, mentioned that she decided to approach the major extended assignment of the first half of the semester by fashioning the main character of her creative writing as closely as possible after her own personality and experience. In this particular case, I decided to ask several more questions to understand what resulted from this approach to writing. Interviews were conducted at the university's library in private study rooms and ranged from approximately 30 to 60 minutes.

Once interviews were completed, I catalogued them by creating video logs that noted the main topics of each interview and the time codes at which these topics arose. While video logging is a part of organizing data, it is also an analytical procedure. Choosing which themes to note in the logs was partially informed by my developing understanding of what was occurring in the classroom I studied (as recorded in analytic memos that were composed throughout the data collection period) and also driven by the content and trajectory of each interview. Once themes were identified in individual interviews, I began to look at themes across the set of interviews. This set of themes is presented in the following section, and students' perspectives concerning culture in foreign language education and in their particular course are presented in their own words.

Data: Students' Perspectives

Views of the Content and Organization of Foreign Language Education in the U.S.

Separation of language and culture. In order to elicit students' perspectives on the content and organization of foreign language instruction, I asked whether they thought that one necessarily learns about culture while learning a foreign language. With the exception of Cheryl, all of the students said that one does *not* necessarily learn about culture while learning a foreign language. Given the extensive anthropological and linguistic literature that posits language and culture as inextricably linked (Duranti, 1997; Geertz, 1973; Whorf, 1956), we might wonder why such a separation of language and culture seems possible for students.

Cheryl, the only student who affirmed the link between language and culture learning said:

> Definitely I think more so at the college level well let me see when I was in high school there were some sections about francophone countries but it was mostly like food…[6] but I think definitely here and especially with [my current instructor] in my other classes too…social beliefs what to say what not to say…understanding of the differences with French culture.

While Cheryl believed that language and culture learning occur together, she still made a distinction between the college course she was taking at the time of the interview and her previous learning in high school. She characterizes the cultural elements of her high school language learning as having to do with "some sections about francophone countries" and the more stereotypical elements of culture like food, while her experiences with learning culture in her college class are described as an exploration of "social beliefs" and "what to say what not to say." Other students, while they did not agree with Cheryl that language and culture learning necessarily occur together, also compared the way they learned French before coming to college with the way they were learning as part of their university-level class. Grace, for example, said that in high school she responded mostly to the teacher's questions and that instruction was through the frame of grammar. In her college French class, on the other hand, she said:

> it's actually like speaking about French culture in French or speaking about French history in French and it's more like a class…it's almost like I could have taken this class in English because it's difficult trying to express like literary ideas or historical ideas in French.

Grace's comments in this excerpt on the separation of language and culture and the privileging of language to the exclusion of culture in early stages of language instruction in the U.S. were similar to those made by her classmates. While instruction may segregate language and culture,

this does not mean that students view language and culture themselves as separable. Susan, for example, explained that one does not necessarily learn culture while learning language, but at the same time, she does not think that "word English equals word French. There's definitely a lot of culture embedded in the language." Overall, students showed an awareness of the separation of language and culture in foreign language instruction that is cited in the MLA's recent report and in the foreign language learning literature more broadly.

Approaches to teaching culture. Several students highlighted the fact that culture may be addressed in some ways by language classes at any level, but it is the way that cultural content is addressed that counts most from their point of view. This idea was reinforced when Brina mentioned that in her French classes before arriving at college, culture was not "explicit" like it was in her college course. She spoke with me during the interview about the essentialized notions of culture that are sometimes included in French language classrooms as part of culture learning, like baguettes, the Eiffel Tower and berets. Brina's comments allude to a practice that is common in the field of foreign language education when an attempt to include culture amounts to a simple add-on to the "real" business of learning the linguistic code. This relegation of culture to the periphery of language learning activity may lead to the essentializing of culture. Grace very poignantly stated:

> I think maybe there are certain things that um people just know because it's common knowledge about like certain foods or um I mean there are certainly stereotypes that may have some truth to them but I don't think that's that counts as really learning about the culture.

Grace's comments echo other students' responses that they have experienced foreign language instruction that, even when some attempt is made to include culture, does not engage them in what they consider to be "real" cultural learning. When Grace says approaches that emphasize stereotypes about cultures don't count as "really learning about the culture," there is an implication that alternative approaches would better correspond to her vision of what does count as culture learning. Grace explains in this excerpt what culture learning is not, and like many of her classmates, she had difficulty in articulating what exactly culture learning *is* in foreign language education. However, students were able to describe in great detail their experiences in the class they were taking, offering insight into what culture learning is, as we will see below.

Many of the students who were interviewed said the class they were taking represented a departure from their previous language learning experiences, even other classes they had taken at their university. Cheryl, for example, said that while there was cultural content in previous classes at her university, the treatment of this content was more "intense" in the class she was taking at the time of the study. Eskey (1997) discusses the terms "engagement" and "depth" as ways of describing the connection students have with material in content-based learning, which may be akin to the "intensity" that many of the interviewees cited as they discussed their learning in their class.

While the students' comments presented in this section concerning approaches to the cultural dimensions of foreign language education are somewhat vague, there is a sense that those approaches that make culture an explicit focus and delve into it deeply (or "intensely") are preferable among students to those that essentialize and stereotype culture. In the next section, we see that students also conceived of the cultural dimensions of foreign language learning as related to the language teacher.

The teacher's role in cultural education in foreign language classes. How the cultural dimensions of language learning are addressed in foreign language instruction is seen by these

students, then, as related to the level of language learning (beginning vs. more advanced) and to an overall approach to culture ("intense" or not). Students also cited the teacher's knowledge and approach to teaching as factors determining the nature of cultural learning in the language classroom. When I commented that some foreign language practitioners believe that culture learning is impossible without a certain degree of linguistic mastery, Cheryl disagreed:

> I think it depends on the instructor that you have because some instructors I think are flexible in terms of making sure that I guess you might know what's on the curriculum but you know they'll interject like their own personal experiences or tell you this is the way it is in France.

Cheryl clearly states that the teacher plays an important role in facilitating cultural learning. She also implies that culture may not always figure officially in the curriculum, but a teacher who shares her cultural knowledge and experience may supplement the more language-oriented objectives of a program with cultural elements by being "flexible." Also apparent in Cheryl's remarks is a view of the language teacher as a cultural informant, someone who can relate personal experiences or who can impart knowledge about "the way it is in France." When asked whether one necessarily learns about culture when studying a foreign language, Sydney indicates that the most important factor, in her view, is the teacher's approach. She said:

> I think it depends a lot on who's teaching you, um how they incorporate cultural you know standards or norms into the way they're teaching because it's very easy to just be taught the language without the culture and I feel like I got that a lot in high school with Spanish…we just [focused on] the language and it's kind of flat you know what I mean….so I think it depends a lot on the professor how they go about teaching it if they make it a point where you know instead of giving you some ridiculous exercise that yeah you're learning but if they give you something you know out of a book or out of an article to read and to work with and just you know the way they set up class if they make it a point to include you know the kind of cultural psyche especially of France they definitely have their own way of thinking like if they make it a point to include that then it is but it doesn't not necessarily.

In this excerpt, Sydney says that a teacher's approach determines whether culture enters into foreign language learning. In describing possible approaches, she distinguishes between a "ridiculous exercise," where one might be learning about linguistic form, and more authentic texts taken "out of a book or out of an article," suggesting that approaches that do not integrate culture are simply language exercises, whereas teaching that is able to incorporate cultural dimensions is more authentic or meaningful. Sydney also comments in this excerpt on the teacher's ability to "set up class" in a way that includes "cultural psyche," which implies that it is not only content or pedagogical approach that impacts cultural learning, but a teacher's knowledge of and orientation to culture that count as well, echoing Cheryl's remarks that the language teacher might also act as a kind of cultural informant.

In interviews, students were well-aware that language and culture are often separated in foreign language education; however, this meant from the students' perspective that something was missing, that learning was not as deep or meaningful as it could be. Katie, for example, saw instruction that focuses exclusively on linguistic form as tantamount to learning how to translate, and Sydney's comments point to the inadequacy of approaches to culture in foreign language education that do not somehow address culturally-shaped "ways of thinking." Her characterization of the potential linking of language and culture in language education as going beyond a "flat" kind of instruction suggests that Sydney was not satisfied with the lack of access

to the *dimension* that culture lends to language learning. At another point in the interview, Sydney expressed her opinion that a good deal of foreign language instruction attempts to form students into "polite tourists," a practice that she did not appreciate given her interest in understanding culture beyond a surface level.

In this section, students' remarks have revealed that they are aware of the separation of language and culture that tends to dominate in foreign language education in the U.S., that they view culture learning as highly dependent on the teacher of a language course (her approach, knowledge, and ability as a cultural informant), and that, for at least some students, foreign language instruction does not integrate culture in a way that satisfies their needs and interests. In the next section, further discussion of students' broad views of culture and foreign language education is presented.

Views of language requirements, monolingualism and multilingualism. Responses to a question about university foreign language requirements further extend our picture of students' broad views of the cultural dimensions of foreign language learning in higher education. When students were asked why they think many U.S. universities have language requirements, their beliefs about societal orientations to language and culture learning in the U.S., as well as their own personal orientations, were revealed. Heather, Grace and Cheryl offered the following comments:

> I think a lot of [universities] say you know they want people to have a global perspective and I think that kind of implies that culture is tied in with language but I guess you know mostly because they want people to interact with people in other cultures and have a broader sense than just the United States. (Heather)
>
> Maybe the position of language learning in a university setting is sort of to make us not think so egocentrically maybe um because there is sort of an attitude out there that's like well everyone speaks English so why should I bother um and I think that often it does encourage you to explore another culture whether or not you actually learn about it in the class although I feel like classes here are probably pretty good at introducing you to at least some aspects of the culture. (Grace)
>
> Um well I think in terms of I guess America's supposed to be a leader in education and most of the times you know we're not as you know well-versed in global issues er and I know that in a lot of other educational systems um you know people are multilingual from the time they start kindergarten um even like when I was in middle school like we didn't start learning languages until 7th grade…I think [American universities are] trying to kind of catch up to other countries that definitely have more versatility in the global market… it took too long to actually happen but I think when it comes down to being competitive not necessarily I don't think it's necessarily like the aesthetic value of you know being a global citizen I just think it's America wants to stay on top and I guess that's one of the ways they can do that. (Cheryl)

These three students explain the presence of language requirements in U.S. universities in different ways. Heather and Grace view language requirements as a way of encouraging students at universities to broaden their perspectives, to decrease egocentrism, to be exposed to difference, and to increase their ability to communicate and interact with a wider range of people. Heather specifically emphasizes a "global perspective" that universities seek to instill in

students through language requirements. Cheryl, on the other hand, identifies a more pragmatic goal in instituting language requirements - to enhance American competitiveness in a global market. Discourses of globalization, then, appear to permeate these students' perception of language learning in U.S. universities, with one student attaching "global" concerns to the cultivation of broader "perspective" and another to greater participation in a broader "market."

Woven into these students' remarks about language learning and globalization is some discussion of culture. For Heather, cultivating a "global perspective" ties culture to language learning. Heather also says that one of the goals of foreign language education at universities is to encourage students to interact and better relate "with people from other cultures." Grace expresses a similar point of view as Heather, but she also states that one of the goals of foreign language education is simply to foster interest in culture, even if in-class culture learning is limited. Cheryl's comments speak more to different motivations that might be behind being able to interact with people from other cultures. Rather than some "aesthetic value of being a global citizen," Cheryl believes that learning about culture is a way for Americans to remain competitive. Several students made claims like Grace's and Heather's that part of foreign language education is the development of a broader perspective, and students overall agreed that language requirements are necessary in the U.S. to encourage students to take language courses.

Several students attributed American egocentrism to the dominance of English in the world. Grace suggests that the belief that English dominates in the world might cause some Americans to believe that learning other languages is unnecessary, leading universities to impose requirements. She shows awareness, as do several of her classmates (like Cheryl) however, that multilingualism is the norm in most places in the world: "kids in other countries sometimes learn two or three more languages." Heather also comments on the role of English and its dominance in shaping orientations to language learning in the U.S. She says that because of the United States' geographical isolation from many countries, speaking other languages is not necessary: "Here it's definitely not necessary…except maybe Spanish in some places." Complex language ideologies that are common in American society and that position English as an international language driving globalization, and other languages as consequently less important, were consistently drawn upon by these students to explain the current state of foreign language education in the U.S.

In contrast to the students' awareness that English is viewed by many Americans as a global language exercising a great deal of power, and the concomitant belief that language learning is therefore of little value, was the recognition that the vast majority of the world's population is in fact multilingual, making American monolingualism the marked case. Students were not prompted to talk about the world's multilingual tendencies; in discussing language requirements, however, this point was raised by several students. Cheryl notes that many of the world's educational systems encourage language learning at an early age. Gaby, too, said "it seems like everyone in Europe knows four languages which is intimidating." That these students are cognizant of the pervasiveness of multilingualism is noteworthy since many Americans tend to view monolingualism as standard. An awareness that multilingualism is in fact the norm in the world may normalize or relativize the practice of language learning for Americans of this generation. Gaby's remarks certainly indicate that she views American monolingualism in relation to multilingualism in other parts of the world and that there is something daunting about this situation.

Students' Perceptions of Culture Learning in Their French Class

With the students' broad orientations to foreign language learning and the role of culture in foreign language education in mind, we can now turn to their specific views of the cultural dimensions of foreign language learning as they experienced it in the class they were taking. A variety of questions were posed to students in interviews in an attempt to elicit their perspectives on the ways that they were learning about culture in their French class.

Attempting to define culture. Varying perspectives on culture, and culture learning were offered by students, although it was apparent that defining and discussing the nature of culture was particularly challenging for them. Heather, for example, spoke quite vaguely on the topic, even though she claimed that culture was a main motivation for her learning French. Her trips to France led her to view it as a "picturesque" place, but when prompted for more detail, she had difficulty describing exactly what she meant, only saying that "the European style, differences between European and American cultures" that she had hints about from her travels drew her in, in addition to a kind of "intrigue" that attracted her to this place in the world. In another interview, when asked whether she has goals about what she wants to learn about culture while studying language, Susan revealed some of the things that she considers to be part of culture. She said her goals are related to business, and that even when conducting business in English with a French person, it would be helpful to know something about French culture. Susan says she also likes food, which is a cultural aspect that is interesting to her. She says she's not as interested in art. Like some other students, Susan cites some of the more stereotypically elements of culture like food and art, but she also seems to espouse a view of culture as communication.

These two student responses begin to reveal that defining culture in any systematic way was difficult for students. They sometimes referred to cultural learning by citing stereotypical views that culture has to do with food, art, national monuments, etc. But in several cases, students equated culture with the ability to communicate, seemingly recognizing the intimate relationship of culture and language. Despite this difficulty in explaining what culture is, students were much more capable of describing the cultural learning process through description of what was occurring in their French class.

Exposure to multiple perspectives. One of the broad views concerning culture learning that students expressed is one that is shared by specialists and non-specialists alike - that foreign language learning expands one's worldview. How exactly this is accomplished is less often discussed, but students in the class under study were able to describe in great detail the nature of their cultural learning.

Across interviews students often mentioned that the cultural learning process includes an exposure to a variety of perspectives, a term that they used repeatedly. This could entail exposure to new information, but it could also mean looking at existing knowledge in new ways. Gaby, for example, explained how her study of the French experience of World War II in the class she was taking served to fill in gaps in her knowledge about this period of history:

> I think that the French collaboration was like the best kept secret in like the Western hemisphere like I um when I went I was in France this summer with my dad and we were walking around the île de la cité and I was looking 'wow it's really amazing that these spires like survived you know the bombing' and my dad was like 'I don't think there was much bombing I think they capitulated pretty quickly' and this whole first dossier[7] was just very interesting to me because it was a lot it wasn't learning to communicate things I already knew in French it was really learning in French and I think I learned a lot.

For Gaby, learning in a foreign language class then can be about enhancing one's knowledge.[8] Gaby's comments also suggest that she viewed her learning in the class as authentic because she

was focused on learning unfamiliar content rather than on finding the linguistic means to express knowledge that she already possessed. Cheryl, on the other hand, felt as though she knew a good deal about World War II before her French class. Instead of discovering new information, Cheryl said that in this part of the class, "I learned a lot about things I had already learned but from a totally different perspective and I think that's important." Culture learning, then, can lead to discovery of new information or to the generation of new perspectives on known information. In both cases, however, there is generation of new knowledge in some form.

Many of the students in this class identified exposure to multiple perspectives as a key element of their learning in their French class. Grace, for example, explained that there is a need for a multiplicity of representations to gain a view of culture when she described a French movie she had recently seen that led her to reflect on the way French people dress and interact with family. She was quick to tell me that she knew this film didn't represent everyone in France. She went on to say that the class's global simulation project provided a wide range of perspectives and gave her "a pretty good idea of how people were reacting to the situation and all different kinds of reactions they had and sort of the weird things it brought out in people." Grace's remarks reveal that she does not view culture as a singular or monolithic entity; she hints, rather, that culture is located in a multitude of stories or perspectives, akin to the "cultural narratives" to which the MLA report refers (An Integrative Approach with Multiple Paths to the Major section, para. 2).

In order to access multiple perspectives, several students cited the need for a variety of texts. Sydney mentioned that she was well-aware that reading a few articles on a topic did not reveal the full story, and Leta discussed the importance of multiple perspectives by talking about how much she appreciated the visual representations that the class worked with. She said:

> I think to understand it you definitely like need a visual representation rather than just words like because if not like there you think 'oh this is what it is in France' like if it's just words like you're just like 'oh this is what it is in American terms' so you're able to think about it as it's own culture rather than it's own culture in like what you know.

Leta seems to suggest here that in order to consider a culture on its own terms, images help to break out of a simple translation of American values, views, or beliefs into French ones, a practice that may arise, according to Leta, when only written texts are available. Under the umbrella of providing multiple perspectives in the foreign language classroom, then, is also the usefulness of incorporating various text types (visual, written, oral, etc.) that may serve to reveal a breadth of perspectives and encourage learners to consider cultures on their own terms. Katie spoke of the usefulness of another text type as she told me about the perspectives she was exposed to because the class was "doing the forum thing online." Katie is the only student who talked about the class's online forum activity in the interview, suggesting that this was a particularly important tool for her in making connections with French students and making cultural comparisons. Katie was careful to note that she only really knew two of the students well so she could not really draw conclusions. Katie, like several of her classmates, did not accept any one cultural text, representation, or informant as universal or necessarily representative of French culture.

When a multitude of perspectives are available in a variety of texts, it is likely that students will be exposed to a diversity of meanings. But as Susan indicated, multiple levels of meaning are also important when considering a cultural text. She also emphasized the integral role that teachers play in helping students to interpret cultural meanings and perspectives. Susan told me that her instructor was "good at explaining things on multiple levels," which Susan

associated with her belief that French people spend more time thinking about the philosophical nature of things. To prove her point, she cited an activity where the instructor spent fifteen minutes describing a propaganda poster of Pétain, the leader of Vichy France during World War II. Susan recalled specific details from the picture and remarked that this was a really interesting activity for her "because most teachers would only go into about half of that detail." Susan said that it was obvious that her instructor was coming up with the analysis and description on her own, that she didn't read it somewhere and then share it with the class. What is particularly interesting in this case is that Susan located this kind of analysis and interpretation of cultural texts as hardwired into a French mindset. When I verified this with Susan, she simply said that for the French "that's how you analyze things and that's how you extract meaning from them." While Susan saw the depth of cultural analysis in her class as belonging specifically to French culture, we might speculate that deeper cultural analysis is possible in all foreign language classrooms and that an attempt to address multiple levels of meaning will be welcomed by students.

Students in this class clearly associated their cultural learning with exposure to a wide variety of perspectives and representations, which were analyzed along many axes of meaning. How exactly students made sense of the perspectives they encountered and carried out "analysis" in their class was also something that students were able to articulate in great detail.

Perspective-taking. Part of the process of cultural learning for this group of students is exposure to a variety of perspectives, but mere exposure to a new perspective does not necessarily translate to understanding or acceptance of an unfamiliar point of view. A major element in these students' cultural learning process was the active practice of perspective-taking, or the projection of oneself into an unfamiliar cultural frame of reference. While students never called this activity perspective-taking, their repeated use of the term "perspective" and the strikingly similar characterizations of their cultural learning process suggest that this is an appropriate term.[9] The student remarks discussed below all emerged as responses to the same question about the class's global simulation project, suggesting that this pedagogical approach, whose fundamental goal is for students to simulate an unfamiliar reality, may be particularly well-suited to cultural learning, especially in the foreign language setting where students are physically (and in this case, temporally) far-removed from the target-language culture.

Brina described the act of perspective-taking that occurred during the memoirs writing project by saying:

> …at least semi-realistically [you] could ask how you would have acted in the situation and might feel rather than just reading about the people who were affected and then saying 'oh my goodness they must have felt such and such a thing' you had to try as best you could to sort of stick yourself in that situation which was very hard to I mean I was worried that if somebody who actually went through this read this they would be like 'this is absurd' because like I have no idea…

Brina expresses some discomfort at projecting herself into these historical situations, but she definitely recognizes that this was part of the cultural learning process that contributed to her understanding of the French perspective on this period of history. Here we have an example of how classroom language learning can be experiential, even if it is only "semi-realistic."

Sydney discussed perspective-taking in terms of accessing states of mind. In describing the class' work surrounding the French experience of WWII, she said "you had to go into their mind" in order to write first-person fictional memoirs. Sydney characterized her experience of the class' activity as being plunged into history. She explained that she automatically projected

herself into historical situations and proceeded to ask herself questions about what she would have done, how she would have been, what she would have wanted. She saw these as eminently cultural questions that led to her "immersion" in the culture. She then explained that this process of projecting herself into an unfamiliar cultural context was not uncomfortable for her. In fact, she said that this kind of approach is "the most natural thing to do if you want to answer those kinds of questions."

Heather offered further insight on the process of adopting an unfamiliar cultural perspective when she described her learning during the global simulation as an act of repositioning. Heather says that adopting another cultural frame of reference was helpful in learning about the French perspective on the war:

> …having to really put yourself in that position and try and understand what people were going through I think gave you a much better understanding than just thinking you know 'I can't believe the French would go along with something like the Nazis.'

Heather says that this was a little bit uncomfortable for her, especially the in-class activities where students took on their personae, since she's "not really into acting." Despite this discomfort, she said she learned a lot from the project. Heather's remarks begin to reveal one of the main characteristics of perspective-taking; rather than judging the "other" from an outsider's perspective, putting oneself "in that position" seems to lead to a deeper understanding and, in some cases, to empathy. Cheryl described the writing of her character's memoirs as an exercise in analyzing the emotions and thought processes of someone without passing judgment, "to better understand how things can happen and how things can escalate" and to highlight the "gray area." Nearly all of the students in the class wrote about the nuances of history and the inability to categorically cast judgment on historical players when they wrote the final composition of the memoirs writing project.

Finally, Katie's experience with the global simulation further reveals the potential effects of adopting another cultural perspective in order to understand it. When Katie talks about the memoirs writing project, she says that she created a character that was like herself and that she constructed her character's story by asking herself what she would have done in the same situations. When asked whether this was an uncomfortable exercise, Katie said that there was something strange about thinking that she would have turned her Jewish neighbors in to the police and commented that this was a strange thing to think about oneself. She seemed to be proud, however, that she was able to project herself honestly into an unfamiliar context since she said that many of her classmates ended up with characters who were members of the resistance in the end, which she evidently found disingenuous. Katie's approach to the memoirs project is a strong example of a student projecting herself into the voice of an unfamiliar speaking subject. Katie's experience also reveals that one of the main results of perspective-taking in this class was self-reflection among students.

Lantolf (1999), who asserts that while developing appreciation, understanding and tolerance of other cultures is certainly possible, writes of culture learning that

> a more interesting question, perhaps, is if, and to what extent, it is possible for people to become cognitively like members of other cultures; that is, can adults learn to construct and see the world through culturally different eyes. (p. 29)

In the process of culture learning, then, perspective-taking appears to be one mode of gaining access to and trying on new ways of seeing the world. Narrative writing as a method of encouraging perspective-taking was particularly effective in this class. Sydney, for example, told me that she was comfortable "using a story to discover things or to explore other options," and

while some students said it was time-consuming and difficult to write these compositions, they overwhelmingly agreed that in the end the writing component not only greatly improved their written French, but allowed them to engage with the course content in a deep way. Approaches like the global simulation, and others that encourage extended opportunities for perspective-taking, are promising avenues for foreign language instruction especially in an era where understanding the "other" by viewing the world through new eyes has been increasingly emphasized.

Part of perspective-taking according to students, involved accessing and experiencing the thoughts and emotions of physically, culturally and temporally distant personae, and in some cases, students transformed their understandings and shifted their own perspectives. Grace described the global simulation and the cultural learning that occurred during the activity as not being only about the application of facts: "It was good in like grasping sort of the emotions of the period while the facts were I guess sort of better for learning the actual historical [aspects]." Brina, too, attested to having constructed a "personal connection" through the memoirs writing project "to something that I mean is generally difficult to relate to…and you feel emotionally upset I mean I did just reading about it but to sort of do that next little step 'what would I do if it was me.'" The affective dimension of perspective-taking also appears to be a key element in rendering this learning experiential and self-reflective and moving it beyond the accessing of thought processes alone.

In discussing the global simulation particularly, the students in this class showed evidence of having transformed their understandings and having shifted their perspectives. Cheryl explained how her view of this period of history changed over the course of the project. She says she had always thought of France as a victim, but she came to see the Vichy regime and other agentive "actors" of the time period differently, to consider the gray areas and the complexities of this historical time period, and to explore divergent opinions and experiences. She added, "I just thought it was really interesting cuz I'm really interested in like social movements and like what motivates people to make certain political decisions." Cheryl agreed when I suggested that she was able to make connections with contemporary movements, other historical social movements, and how people organize and exercise control and power. She said that she likes seeing "patterns in history." That her attitudes about World War II were transformed is significant since in many ways culture learning is, as Lantolf (1999) suggested, about the ability to view the world from a different perspective. Cheryl's ability to make connections with her broader interests in social movements, power and control also seems to be part of her cultural learning. Katie also described how her perspective changed when it comes to this historical period. She said she had spoken with her family about all of the things she learned that she didn't know before because "you never really hear about France and World War II." She went on:

> There's this whole set of events that like we've never heard of in America like le Vel d'Hiv[10] or whatever and it's just such a big deal in France and it's kind of like the collective like history and nothing we ever learn about or consider important.

Katie told me that both her father and brother are history buffs who are particularly interested in World War II, so it is a topic that she had heard about in some detail before arriving in her French class. Her transformed understandings as a result of taking this course are further exemplified as she talks about having previously viewed all of the French as collaborators during the war. Through this class she came to develop a more nuanced understanding, and in many

ways, to occupy a third space, as Kramsch (1993) would say, suspending her "American" beliefs to consider other perspectives on the French experience of the war.

Discussion

Students' perspectives were presented in this paper in order to answer two main questions: How did these learners view the cultural dimensions of foreign language education in a broad sense, and how did they view culture figuring in the class they were taking? In analyzing data from interviews, several themes emerged in response to these questions. Concerning students' broad orientations to the role of culture in foreign language education, what was first apparent was awareness among students of a separation of language and culture in foreign language education. We might speculate that the current organization and delivery of foreign language instruction in the U.S. has obscured the intimate relationship between language and culture by artificially separating them. We might further contend that such obfuscation impacts the process and outcomes of foreign language learning, leading to a situation where students believe that language learning can occur absent of culture. Furthermore, the students' comments tell us that attempting to artificially separate culture from language instruction, by simplifying it or by ignoring it entirely, does not satisfy the needs and interests of students. Several students' characterizations of their French class as more "intense" than their previous experiences and comments like Sydney's that instruction that does not incorporate culture is "flat" support the argument that in developing cultural dimensions of foreign language instruction, cursory attention to culture will not suffice. It may be more appropriate, and more in line with student needs and interests, to foster an engagement with language and culture simultaneously and in deeper ways.

Students' comments in interviews also provided insight into the way they viewed the role of the teacher in providing cultural education in the language classroom. A major issue that is raised is whether the teacher is viewed by students as an "authority" on culture and taken as representative of all culture. If the teacher is viewed by students as *the* authoritative voice representing a whole culture, there is a danger that culture will be seen by students as a monolithic and neatly coherent entity rather than the diverse panoply of perspectives that it really is. Given the students' comments in these interviews, it appears that there is a need to better prepare teachers to support cultural learning, especially so that they can represent the diversity of perspectives in a culture and avoid a situation where students view them as exemplifying a culture all on their own.

When asked about language requirements at U.S. universities, students provided further insight into their broad orientations to culture and language learning. Discourses on globalization and the role of English in the world emerged from their responses, and learning about culture through foreign language education was linked to participating in a "global" world. What these comments seem to reveal is that students associate language learning with the ability to communicate and relate with other cultural groups and with other individuals. Given this view, foreign language education should strive to integrate more cultural content into curricula. Broad discussions of culture were challenging for students, with students struggling to pinpoint what exactly the term means. Culture is a highly complex phenomenon, so we should not be surprised that defining it posed a problem for students. What we can say, however, is that because culture is so complex, we might consider addressing it more explicitly in our foreign language classrooms. Even though definitive answers may not be possible, discussion surrounding the

nature of culture may still be quite fruitful. When asked to describe the learning they were experiencing in the French class they were taking, students were much more specific, and it is in these remarks that we are presented with very valuable information about the ways that culture learning can occur in the foreign language classroom.

Across interviews with students, there was a recurrence of the term "perspectives" in describing the culture learning process associated with the class's study of the French experience of World War II and the global simulation project. Not only did students believe they were exposed to multiple perspectives through a variety of text types, but they also attested to being presented with the opportunity to engage in "perspective-taking" as I am calling it. Such an engagement, carried out through the adoption of unfamiliar points of view led, students said, to a better understanding of emotions and thought processes, a suspension of judgment, as well as self-reflection. All of these are goals that are suggested by the MLA report and that are supported by the theoretical literature on culture learning. What these students' remarks suggest, in addition, is that the particular approach that was employed in their class seemed to facilitate the kinds of processes the MLA report has posited as central to the transformation of foreign language education at the university level. While other pedagogical approaches are likely to also be successful in supporting culture learning in foreign language education, the student responses presented in this paper suggest that the global simulation approach is particularly well-suited to culture learning. Beyond the endorsement of a particular approach to teaching culture, students' conception of culture learning as the taking on of new perspectives through their learning would seem to confirm theoretical models that hypothesize similar processes. Clearly, much more research needs to be carried out in order to further elaborate theory in this realm and to develop practical approaches to teaching culture in the foreign language classroom. These students' voices begin to illuminate their perspective on the process, and they should be taken into account as we attempt to advance theory and practice.

Conclusion

The MLA's report predicts that "more students will continue language study if courses incorporate cultural inquiry at all levels" (An Integrative Approach with Multiple Paths to the Major section, para. 1). The student perspectives presented in this paper would seem to support such a claim. Students are aware of the current division present in the field, and they are able to articulate what they expect from their foreign language education. While they may not be entirely capable of clearly articulating what they believe "culture" to be, the students in this study are much clearer about the process of cultural learning through foreign language education, arguably because they were experiencing successful culture learning in the French class they were taking. Integral to this culture learning, according to students, is the proliferation of perspectives in the classroom and the act of trying on various perspectives. These kinds of activities appear to allow learners to see the world, if only temporarily, through a new set of eyes. In many cases, experiences like this lead to an emotional as well as an intellectual engagement, and for many students, projecting themselves into unfamiliar cultural contexts prompts self-reflection. The student perspective on culture learning is a greatly underrepresented one; however, in hearing their voices, foreign language education may be more likely to undergo its own transformation in order to better meet student needs.

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Notes

[1]   See Cook (1991) on multicompetence, who also argues for a transformed view of language learners and language learning in a movement away from the native speaker/non-native speaker dichotomy and toward a broader range of "multicompetent" identities.

[2]   Byram (1991, 1997) too points out that learners' needs are not met by arguing that the communicative approach to language teaching does not foster intercultural competence given the limited range of communicative acts that are often involved in this kind of teaching and learning. Byram argues that the communicative approach draws on a transactional view of language and communication, whereas the building of relationships through communication is paramount. The student perspectives presented later in this paper begin to illustrate what students do expect from foreign language education at the university level and how these expectations do not seem to currently be met by the communicative approach or other more traditional approaches to teaching language.

[3]   This study took place over the course of one semester and sought to answer the broad question "What is the nature of culture learning for this group of students and their teacher?" In order to address this question, I employed classic ethnographic methods of participant-observation, the composition of fieldnotes and interviewing in an effort to make sense of both the activity I observed and what participants said about this activity. Approximately half of the class meetings over the course of the semester were video recorded, and were therefore available for later transcription and analysis. See Kearney (2008) for extensive discussion of the nature of culture learning in this classroom.

[4]   Kramsch's notion of third places has grown out of Bhabha's (1994) work where the term originated.

[5]   All students have been assigned pseudonyms.

[6]   … indicates that a short piece of the student's response has not been included.

[7]   The two units into which the courses content was divided were referred to as "dossiers" by the instructor, and students consequently spoke of them in this way.

[8]   Her comments also raise the question of experiential learning. While Gaby had been in France ostensibly absorbing French language and culture, it was not until she was back in an American classroom that what she began to sense in France about the impact of World War II was contextualized in such a way that her understanding was deepened. This tends to call into question the assumption that cultural learning is best achieved when a student is immersed in the target-language culture by traveling to a place where the language is spoken.

[9]   The term 'perspective-taking' is not one that I have come across in the literature on the cultural dimensions of language learning; however, this term seems to fit with other scholars' positing of a movement or shift in point of view that necessarily underlies culture learning.

[10]   Katie is making reference here to a well-known event during the war where over 13,000 Jewish people were arrested and detained in a winter cycling stadium, the Vélodrome d'Hiver.

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