
Living With Ambiguity: Toward Culture Exploration in Adult Second-Language Classrooms

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On the basis of personal experiences with immigration and current conceptualizations of culture in anthropological and culture teaching literature, this article outlines an approach to cultural instruction in adult second-language education, named "culture exploration," which calls for the recognition of ambiguity embedded in cross-cultural encounters. Culture exploration consists of employing techniques of ethnographic participant observation in and outside the classroom and holding reflective, interpretive, and critical classroom discussions on students' ethnographies. It is argued that through culture exploration students can develop an understanding of humans as cultural beings, of the relationship between language and culture, and of the necessity of living with the uncertainty inherent in cross-cultural interactions. Through this process of naming their experience of the target community culture and reflecting on it, it is hoped that students will be in a position to develop their own voice and will be empowered to act to fulfill their own goals in their new environment.

En s'appuyant à la fois sur ses expériences personnelles d'immigrante et sur les conceptualisations actuelles de la culture que l'on retrouve en anthropologie et dans d'autres domaines reposant sur l'étude de la culture, l'auteure présente une approche à l'enseignement culturel aux adultes dans des cours de langue seconde. Nommée "l'exploration culturelle", l'approche veut conscientiser les interlocuteurs sur l'ambiguïté inhérente dans la communication transculturelle. L'exploration culturelle consiste en l'emploi de techniques d'observation ethnographique par le participant, tant à l'intérieur de la salle de classe qu'à l'extérieur. Par la suite, ont lieu des discussions qui portent sur les projets ethnographiques des étudiants et qui impliquent la réflexion, l'interprétation et l'analyse critique. Ilieva maintient que l'exploration culturelle permet aux étudiants de concevoir les humains en tant qu'êtres culturels, de comprendre le lien entre la langue et la culture, et d'accepter l'incertitude inhérente dans les interactions transculturelles. L'on espère que les étudiants, en évoquant leur expérience avec la culture de la langue cible et en y réfléchissant, seront en mesure de trouver leur propre moyen d'expression et d'atteindre leurs buts dans leur nouvel environnement.

Introduction

Culture is widely acknowledged as playing an important part in second-language classrooms (Atkinson, 1999; Byram, 1989; Courchène, 1996; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Kramsch, 1993a; Sauv , 1996; Whalley, 1995). As Kramsch, Pennycook (1995), and others point out, however, many prevalent approaches to culture teaching seem to focus on the presentation of cultural "facts" and discrete sets of behaviors and do not take into account the complexity and ambiguity of cultural experiences. This article suggests an approach to cultural instruction that attempts to tackle this complexity. The approach, which I call *culture exploration* (Ilieva, 1997), builds on ideas developed in the works of Byram (1989), Byram and Cain (1998), Byram and Esarte-Saries (1991), Byram, Esarte-Saries, and Taylor (1991), Byram and Morgan (1994), and Kramsch (1993a, 1993b) and thus is aligned with current inquiries in possible ways of integrating language and culture in language instruction.¹ I argue here that culture should be approached in a language classroom so as to facilitate learners' gaining awareness of humans as inherently cultural beings and "positioned subjects" (Rosaldo, 1993) and to allow the development of skills to investigate culture, question cultural presuppositions, think critically with respect to cultural norms, and learn to live with the ambiguity inherent in cross-cultural encounters.²

First I wish to explicate the conceptualization of culture that informs the approach. An exploration of conceptualizations of culture in anthropology (Ilieva, 1997) points to a contradiction that, I believe, teachers and learners must learn to live with. On one hand, given the multitude of definitions present in anthropological literature (compare especially Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Keesing, 1974), adopting a single definition of culture would be a gross oversimplification. A single definition would simply not account for the complexity of the phenomenon of culture. On the other hand, a coherent and bounded conceptualization of the term is necessary for its productive use in the classroom. In this sense, I find Geertz' (1973) definition of culture as "the fabric of meaning in people's life" useful to work with. It seems to offer a compromise that could relieve teachers of the burden of presenting a bulk of cultural information to familiarize students with dubious generalized cultural patterns, while allowing them to be rigorous in searching for and negotiating the cultural meaning of any utterance or activity addressed in the classroom. Thus a fruitful approach to culture in the language classroom would be to view it as the meaning assigned to objects, events, and relationships in a particular context or situation by participants in or observers of the situation.³ This is the approach adopted in culture exploration. The struggles over cultural meanings, acknowledged in current conceptualizations of culture in anthropology (Baumann, 1996; Keesing, 1994) and cultural studies

(Hall, 1980; Bhabha, 1994), are also taken into account in the context of culture exploration.

A Personal Story

I first developed a concern with culture learning as a result of my personal experiences as a recent immigrant to Canada, and in this section I elaborate on these. I studied English as a foreign language for over 10 years and taught it to adults for seven years in my native country, Bulgaria. I came to Canada in 1992, confident that as a fluent speaker of the English language, also equipped with ample information about Canadian society, its history, and its institutions, I would have few difficulties in coping with the new environment. Of course, I expected that there would be differences between me and the Canadians I would meet. But I assumed that I could predict them on most occasions. I knew, for example, that Canadians are “generally” punctual and that I should telephone ahead and arrange an appointment before visiting someone, rather than just dropping by unannounced. Unfortunately, however, such information did not help me much, and problems surfaced immediately after my arrival. They consisted mainly in my understanding the words when speaking with my interlocutors but not understanding the underlying meanings. For example, an invitation by a new friend to have coffee together resulted in each of us paying her own bill;⁴ my long and detailed answers to the question “How are you?” more often than not took most Canadians greeting me by surprise; discussions with a Canadian on common words like *forgiveness* led me to the realm of *religion* and *sin* instead of to the comfortable—for me—understanding of the term as *excusing a minor offence*. I was in shock. Countless incidents of this type in my everyday dealings with people led me to believe that there was something wrong with either me or my knowledge of English and of Canada. I was frustrated. I felt disappointed and deceived by an educational system that had led me to expect that knowledge about a language and culture received in a language classroom or from a variety of written texts allowed one to live effectively in a community of that language and culture.

Things are not getting much easier, regardless of my learning new concepts like *mainstream* or *political correctness*. Sometimes my verbal and/or nonverbal conduct still produces a look of shock on the face of my interlocutors, and I am often led to interpret this look as the result of a cultural gaffe I have committed. Interestingly enough, however, the behavior I then assume to be more culturally appropriate in similar situations with other Canadians is often not interpreted as such. On reflection, I realize that I must have come to Canada with “the belief that national cultures with high degrees of internal consistency exist and that reliable predictions can be made on the basis of similarities and differences between cultures” (Whalley, 1995, p. 237). I am aware now that uncertainty will always accompany me in

my interactions with Canadians, but my desire to feel comfortable in my new country triggered a search for ways to assist adult immigrants to a country (like myself) in their everyday dealings with a culture through language and culture classes.

Ambiguity

The approach to cultural instruction that I advocate attempts to aid students in learning to live with the ambiguity that accompanies them in their everyday dealings with a new culture. I base my insistence on the need to make them aware of the impossibility of providing language learners with a body of “knowledge” to act on in any situation. This approach is based on my personal experiences with immigration and on the following line of thought:

The paradox of communication is that it presupposes a common medium, but one which works ... only by eliciting and reviving singular, and therefore socially marked, experiences. The all-purpose word in the dictionary ... has no social existence: in practice it is always immersed in situations, to such an extent that [its] core meaning ... may pass *unnoticed*. (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 39, emphasis added)

Furthermore, ambiguity is central to current conceptualizations of culture in anthropological literature. Rosaldo (1993), for example, urges social analysts to recognize that “much of life happens in ways that one neither plans nor expects” and people “often live with ambiguity, spontaneity, and improvisation” (p. 91). He concludes that in such cases the fixed cultural expectations, static structures, and social norms, given too much primacy in cultural interpretation, cannot explain behavior. In culture education theory, the “contradictions and inconsistencies within culture [which] often make culture learning a multiple choice question” (Whalley, 1995, p. 236) and the necessity to “go beyond training for the predictable to preparation for the unpredictable” (Byram, Esarte-Saries, & Taylor, 1991, p. 8) have also been recently recognized (compare also Kramsch, 1993a, 1993b; Sauv , 1996).

In the following, I first elaborate on these views and present an argument for the conceptualization of cultural instruction in second-language education as *exploration* that takes into account inconsistencies in culture. I then outline the goals and features of the culture exploration approach.

Culture Teaching or Culture Exploration?

Because naming is a source of power (Bourdieu, 1991), how we name our approach to culture in language education is important because it affects how we perceive and handle our task. I would like to argue that the legacy of the term *culture teaching*, as well as current contentions in the fields of culture

instruction theorizing and cultural anthropology, make it imperative that we reconceptualize our understanding of what goes on and should go on in the classroom when culture is addressed.

Legacy of the Term Culture Teaching and Current Theories of Culture Instruction

Many prevalent approaches to culture teaching seem to focus on the *presentation* of cultural “facts” (compare Nostrand, 1978; Seelye, 1993; Stern, 1983, 1992). Theoreticians like Brooks (1971), Damen (1987), Lafayette (1978), Nostrand (1978), and Seelye (1993) appear to have identified culture eagerly with patterned behavior and focused on teaching culture so as, presumably, to allow students to behave “appropriately” in the new culture. Culture teaching theoreticians present lists of arbitrary inventories of topics (Brooks) or themes (Nostrand) and developed techniques like culture capsules, culture assimilators, and culture clusters (Lafayette; Seelye, 1974, 1993), which seem to have led to the treatment of culture as a separate skill in the language classroom.⁵ Overall, in these approaches is embedded the assumption that culture *can* be taught and learned via imparting *information*. As a result, today the most common method of presenting culture appears to be through dialogues and role-plays that describe the seemingly easily isolated values and behaviors of a generalized “national” group and through expositions in textbook materials on topics such as the geographic environment and history of a people, their literary and scientific achievements, and the institutions of their society.

This approach demands that students absorb a vast number of unquestioned and uninterpreted “facts” that throw little light on the meanings of the presented events or phenomena for different groups of target culture-bearers. In addition, it pays no attention to the students’ perceptions and understandings of these phenomena. A common positivistic assumption appears to have been that eventually culture teaching, relying on systematic accounts of cultural data provided by anthropologists, will be able to provide students with *the* knowledge with respect to *the* situations in which cultural misunderstandings could occur (Stern, 1983, 1992). In other words, I argue that how the term *culture teaching* has been used seems to suggest that culture can be taught by presenting certainties, fixed knowable items, and concrete answers to questions such as *why*, *what*, and *how*. This way of approaching culture could lead to stereotyping and equip students with some static sets of problematically generalized features pertaining to a culture (Kramsch, 1993a).

One reason I resist using the term *culture teaching* stems from accounts of the unreliability of “experts” to provide “authoritative” sources of cultural knowledge. For example, Sauv  (1996) tells us of a project in which she was involved where five white, middle-class, well-educated ESL teachers at-

tempted to create a chapter of cultural *dos* and *don'ts* for newcomers to Alberta. As she writes,

We discovered that, for all we had in common, we had *major* differences in our understandings of what was appropriate and inappropriate in the *most common* of situations: what time to arrive for dinner, when to start eating, gift-giving, and so-forth. (p. 18, emphasis added)

Kramersch (1993b) provides a similar account of discrepancies in the perceptions of a homogeneous group of culture-bearers of the significance of national culture markers. More recently, she explicitly problematized the notion of the native speaker and suggested that we should focus in our classrooms on the development of intercultural speakers rather than aim for our students to achieve native-like proficiency (Kramersch, 1998).

Finally, as mentioned above, through the current mainstream approach, "students are taught *about* culture; they are not taught how to interact with culture" (Crawford-Lange & Lange, 1984, p. 145), which, especially in the case of adult second-language students, is extremely important. These students need to learn to live and work in the new cultural environment after having spent long years being enculturated in their native culture and thus carry with them a "stock of metaphors" (Kramersch, 1993a, p. 43) their native community lives by.

A line of reasoning that would support my argument that a reconceptualization of the term *culture teaching* is needed has developed among language education theorists in recent years. For example, Sauv  (1996) wonders how possible it is to teach culture when we cannot ever be fully conscious of it; she feels more comfortable with the notion of enabling the acquisition of culture than with the idea of trying to teach it.

Furthermore, some have argued the impossibility of teaching culture in the classroom in its complexity and totality (Byram, 1989; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Harklau, 1999; Kramersch 1993a; Zarate, 1986). First, culture comes into being in the "tangible experiences of everyday life" (Kane, 1991, p. 243). Therefore,

Sociocultural contexts cannot be reduced to an inventory to be "mastered" like grammatical knowledge [because] they are not only too rich and various but also in constant flux as people reshape them through speaking and other forms of social action. (Kramersch & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p. 5)

Harklau (1999) calls culture "an elusive construct" and points to the position teachers are often placed in in the classroom to "reify their own interpretation of [the target] culture, making static something that is in constant flux, and making unified something that is inherently multiple" (p. 110). She also observes that many topics in ESL writing classrooms enforce a

polarized view of the relationships between the target culture(s) and the students' native culture(s).

As Kramsch (1993a) points out, the current general rethinking of language as social practice calls for new ways of looking at the teaching of language and culture through the replacement of the presentation and "prescription of cultural facts and behaviours by the teaching of a process that applies itself to understanding ... 'otherness'" (p. 206). The point I wish to reiterate is that conceptualizing the approach to culture in the language classroom as "teaching" has until now implied a static viewpoint that I find problematic. A powerful argument that supports my view that talking about culture teaching is misleading is found in Crawford-Lange and Lange (1984), who believe that the acquisition and dissemination of cultural *information* place severe limitations on the learning of culture. As they put it,

An information-centered, culture-teaching strategy implies that the culture under study is closed, final, complete.... [It also] eliminates consideration of culture at the personal level, where the individual interacts with and acts upon the culture.... Although culture contains knowable facts, these facts are in constant flux. More important to an understanding of culture than the collection of facts is an appreciation of culture as a constellation of phenomena in a continual process of change, brought about by the participants in the culture as they live and work. (pp. 141-142)

The Predicament of Culture

Another line of thought in the direction of renaming the approach to culture in language education stems from an understanding of what culture is understood to be in current anthropological literature. Conceptualizing culture in semiotic terms, Geertz (1973) suggests that "as interworked systems of construable signs (... [or] symbols), culture is not a power ... to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally *attributed* ... [but] a context ... within which they can be intelligibly ... *described*" (p. 14, emphasis added). In other words, culture does not give clear-cut answers as to why, how, and what culture-bearers are doing or saying, but provides the background for plausible interpretations of their actions. More recently, other anthropologists perceive culture as having an essentially changing character and process nature (Street, 1993) and as characterized as much by multivocality, diversity, conflicts, and contradictions as by consistency (Rosaldo, 1993). In fact, at present anthropology—strongly influenced by developments in postmodern theories—recognizes the contested reality of culture and conceptualizes it as a negotiation of meanings among particular individuals in particular communities locked in an interplay of power relations (Baumann, 1996; Clifford, 1988; Keesing, 1994; Marcus & Fischer, 1986). Such conceptualizations of the term make it impossible in my understanding

to *teach* culture as the term has been overwhelmingly used until now in theories of cultural instruction. Rather, the current conceptualization of culture in anthropology seems to impose a view of approaching culture in the classroom as a process enveloped in uncertainties to be experienced and processed by the students.

Thus I suggest that another way of perceiving the place of culture in the classroom is needed, a way that leaves behind the legacy of the term *culture teaching* and draws attention to the ambiguity of cross-cultural encounters, a way I call *culture exploration*. I perceive the difference between culture teaching and culture exploration as follows: whereas the first seems to impose views of the target culture on the students and is prescriptive, the second simply aims to ask questions and assist learners in approaching, naming, and understanding their own as well as the natives' experience of the target culture and in searching for possible interpretations of it. Thus culture exploration attempts to offer the support students need to develop their own voice and act to fulfill their own goals in the new environment.

Features and Goals of Culture Exploration

Culture exploration consists of applying ethnographic techniques—or more specifically, participant observation—inside and outside the language classroom and reflective-interpretive-critical dialogue in the classroom. In developing this approach I found the ideas elaborated in the works of Byram and his colleagues (1989, 1991, 1994, 1998) and Kramsch (1993a, 1993b) particularly helpful.

In developing his culture teaching model, Byram argues for the need to incorporate methods of cultural analysis—that is, ethnographic fieldwork—when teaching culture. In the context of one component in his model, students are presented with aspects of the target culture and “are to experience and analyze it in a way analogous to the duality of participant observation (Spradley, 1980)” (cited in Byram & Esarte-Saries, 1991, p. 385). Following observation, students produce oral or written accounts of the target culture that serve to develop students' language proficiency and their grasp of the relationship between language and culture. One advantage of this approach to culture is that instead of a model of teaching and learning where information is transmitted from the teacher to the students, “the ethnographic fieldwork model is oriented toward developing a particular mode of thinking” (pp. 383-384) that would allow students to investigate culture on their own. Furthermore, by concentrating on teaching “ways of knowing” about culture, the problem and need to describe and select from a particular culture on the uncertain basis of prediction of students' needs is eliminated. Besides, through this approach, language-learning and familiarization with the target culture take place simultaneously.

Kramersch (1993a) calls for the recognition of complexity and the tolerance of ambiguity in language and culture instruction. Most innovative in the context of language learning is her notion that culture is *conflict*; it is a "struggle between the learners' meanings and those of the native speakers" (p. 24). In this respect, Kramersch is not satisfied with the mere transmission of cultural information and demands that teachers focus on the *negotiation* of this information by the learners. She insists on the recognition of what she calls "a third place" (compare Bhabha, 1990) that Kramersch believes students create for themselves from the interaction of their understandings of their native and the target culture. Kramersch (1993b) sees the aim of cultural instruction in assisting students to acquire not an understanding of another "national group," but "an understanding of 'difference' per se" (p. 350) as well as in addressing the issue of

how learners can use the system for their own purposes, to create a culture of the third kind in which they can express their own meanings without being hostage to the meanings of either their own or the target speech communities. (1993a, pp. 13-14)

Within the framework of the search for the third place, Kramersch suggests a four-step approach to cross-cultural understanding that involves: observation and interpretation of the host culture (C2); examination of how the native culture (C1) interprets C2; identification of the different categories and norms of interpretation used in C1 and C2; and acceptance of the incommensurabilities and the performance of an imaginative leap based on common human experience. This approach seems to offer a constructive framework for focusing on culture in adult second-language teaching contexts, and I see culture exploration as one way of implementing it in the classroom.

The goals I set for culture exploration, which I believe will be served by introducing students to ethnography, are developing an awareness of the relationship between language and culture and awareness of oneself as a cultural being and "positioned subject" (Rosaldo, 1993). Geertz (1973) argues that one is initially unable to grasp the meanings of the acts of people of other cultures because of "lack of familiarity with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs" (p. 13). Through ethnographic description, we will attempt to restore the context of production, reception, or in fact negotiation of cultural meanings and thereby try "to make the acts of [culture-bearers in a particular situation] as intelligible to us as they are to them" (Rice, 1980, p. 235). Geertz suggests that we can gain empirical access to symbol systems not by arranging abstracted entities into unified patterns, but by inspecting events. Inspecting events, however—and I would add of the linguistic representation of these events—can only take place through their conscious observation, and conscious or participant observation constitutes a major part of the ethnographic process. Therefore, I suggest that we need to assist students

to develop—initially in the classroom and later in fieldwork outside the language course—the perspectives that are characteristic of participant observers. More specifically, they need to develop duality of purpose: engaging in the activities appropriate to the situation and at the same time observing themselves and others in the situation; and record-keeping: keeping a detailed record of observations, experiences, and feelings in the situation (Spradley, 1980).

Given the inseparability of language and culture in interaction, it is more likely than not that in situations of participant observation students will have to attend to language use and meaning. As Kemp and Ellen (1984) observe, however, meaning ultimately resides in cultural context and is expressed only transiently in language. Thus understanding meaning is “a permanent act of ‘contextualization’ in response to the referential function of language” (Kuna, 1991, p. 262). By paying close attention to everyday interaction in observed social settings and by keeping records of what they have seen and their thoughts and feelings in these situations, students will be equipped with material to explore in classroom discussions with a view to voicing their experiences, searching for possible reasons behind those experiences, and starting to recognize the symbolic and contextual meaning of everyday verbal and nonverbal behavior.

I believe that the students’ accounts of observed situations in a target culture could aid them in gaining awareness of themselves as inherently cultural beings. As Spradley (1980) puts it, “descriptive observations ... will include a considerable amount of information about the ethnographer [because] description of any kind is always from some point of view” (p. 76). At the same time, one’s native culture acts as a filtering device, and for immigrants their country of origin and their first language are paramount in making sense of the new surroundings (Damen, 1987). By engaging in ethnography in a group, students will realize that they are positioned subjects. As Zarate (1986) suggests, the observation of a culture depends less on its characteristics than on the position adopted by the observer vis-à-vis the observed. Moreover, in discussing the ethnographic accounts made by students on the same event, Whalley (1995) concludes that

Each account is different because the observer is different. The truths are partial truths because the observer is a “positioned subject,” positioned in her biography and in the social order in the native and in the target culture. (p. 245)

Thus it seems that the students’ descriptive accounts of situations that they have observed and participated in together would offer variations in interpretation that are significant for drawing attention to the learners’ culturally positioned understandings of a given situation.

The second aspect of culture exploration is incorporating the ethnographies of students in classroom discussions. The discussions should help learners to find their own voice(s) in the new culture and to deal with the ambiguity inherent in cross-cultural encounters. I believe that these goals could be addressed if discussions similar to problem-posing discussions inspired by Freire's (1970) approach to education are conducted in the language classroom.

In the context of second-language teaching, Auerbach and Wallerstein (1987) draw on Freire's works to suggest a process that would promote students' critical thinking through "a five-step questioning strategy which leads from the concrete to the analytical level" (p. 4). The steps are:

1. What do you see?
2. What is happening?
3. How does this relate to your lives?
4. Why is there a problem?
5. What can the people in the situation do about the problem? (pp. 4-6)

I suggest a modification of the problem-posing approach that could be used within the framework of culture exploration.

As language learning is a complex process of reinventing oneself through a new language (Becker, 1984), for a new immigrant it is also a struggle to find a new voice, a new identity, and a new place through a new language in a new culture. To be able to do this, language learners must have the opportunity to *name* their own experience in this new culture. In culture exploration, the classroom dialogue following ethnographic fieldwork is the means by which the students' experience could be named and translated into a voice. By offering answers to the first two questions: "What do/did you see?" and "What is/was happening?" students present their summaries and interpretations of a target culture situation they have observed. Because the summaries and interpretations differ from student to student (compare Whalley, 1995), they provide the background for the next step in the culture exploration classroom dialogue.

The next step, a discussion of the type "How does this relate to your lives?" refers to the students' feelings, thoughts, and personal experiences of the observed situation that are addressed in the students' notes when conducting their ethnographies. The fourth question in the problem-posing strategy could be modified by a question of the type "How do you react to that? Is this a problem for you?" Here the discussion searches for the students' assessment of the cultural differences observed and assists them to begin to name (i.e., place within a framework) their experiences and to realize the need to negotiate meanings. In the course of the discussion, students elaborate on the nature of their experience and on the sense of culture shock they felt during the observation or that they feel now in the classroom while discovering possible meanings of the observed situation.

They also discuss their own verbal and nonverbal behavior in the situations and explore the approaches they have taken to manage or express this sense of culture shock. By comparing experiences and becoming aware of differences in perceiving events, students may be led to speculate on possible reasons for these differences. In addressing questions like "Why do you think you react in this way?" and "Why do you think you perceive this as a problem/not a problem?" students may come up with issues like gender, social class, or other identity markers as affecting one's understandings of a situation.⁶ During this stage of the classroom discussion, eliciting students' experience serves to validate that experience and allows them to explore the contradictions, personal confrontations, and conflicts that arise from cultural differences. The process directs the students to fit their individual experiences into a larger cultural perspective that includes such significant positionings as class, race, gender, or sexual orientation, for example. Through this process, the implication of power relations and struggles over meanings in cultural representations are also addressed.

The last stage is a discussion about the question "How do you plan to deal with situations like that?" After the probing discussions in the earlier stages, it is hoped that this question will not lead students to generalize, but rather to take nothing for granted and to search for their own third place in cross-cultural encounters. Having contextualized the students' experiences in the social and cultural system, we have provided the background for students to uncover and understand the variability in their own culturally conditioned behavior and thinking as well as that of others. The goal would be to place the students "in consciously critical confrontation" (Freire, 1981, p. 16) with their native and target cultural experience. This confrontation is the process by which the learner will be able to name, unname, and rename his or her experience and thus start to develop an intercultural or third voice and engage in culture creation.⁷ The process will also allow students to become aware of the uncertainty and ambiguity of cross-cultural encounters. For me, to be able to live with ambiguity is similar to being able to take nothing for granted. Once students have experienced the ambiguity and inconsistency of interpreting events, activities, or relationships through the culture exploration classroom discussions, they will be more willing to probe and not assume that their perceptions and understandings of a situation necessarily coincide with or are in sharp contrast with those of other participants in the situation.

Conclusion

A major goal for both the students' ethnographies and the classroom dialogues in culture exploration is the search for meanings in a culture and their interpretation. The aim, however, is not for students to produce a chart of a culture's characteristics, but to explore different plausible understand-

ings of cultural events and explore themselves in the process of culture learning. Participant observation allows students to discern as many variables as possible in a situation and to learn how to observe and interpret situations. Equipped with ethnographic techniques, students develop the ability to process information rather than acquire it and can look for personal themes in the target culture, that is, themes they encounter in the target culture that relate to their personal circumstances and affect their lives. They are enabled to address the culture as it is lived, experienced, and talked about by real people. Through culture exploration the fluid knowledge of a target culture is jointly constructed in the classroom and becomes a tool not only in finding one's voice, but also in using that knowledge to act on the world. Equipped through the classroom discussions with their new voice (which, it has to be emphasized, is not a fixed entity), learners are motivated to use the new language and new identity to act on solutions or alternatives related to their acculturation in the new language and culture. Thus students are in a position to engage in the creation of their own third culture and act more effectively for their own ends in the context of the target culture.

Notes

¹Developments in sociolinguistics and pragmatics provide the background for the advancement of an argument for the integration of language and culture in language classrooms. With their focus on language as it is used in particular situations and in society in general, these fields prompted the currently widespread communicative approach to language teaching that has brought the attention of teachers and students to cultural influences on processes of language use and the importance of culture for the development of communicative competence (Damen, 1987).

²Such goals are perhaps more readily attainable with somewhat sophisticated learners who may be aware of their membership in a given culture, but my hope is that a similar level of abstraction is possible in classrooms with less advantaged learners.

³This view of culture is a shorthand version of a view I expressed elsewhere (Ilieva, 2000, p. 52).

⁴My assumption, based on previous experiences in my native culture, was that she would pay because she had suggested we go for coffee.

⁵I do not intend to belittle the significant work of these authors, who were among the first to argue the importance of addressing culture into a language classroom. It is thanks to their contributions that discussions on various ways to approach it are possible today. With the risk of oversimplifying their positions, I focus here only on a common aspect in their theorizing that I find unsatisfactory.

⁶An important aspect of such discussion is for students to begin to examine how their native culture and their position within it affect their perceptions of and behavior in various situations. It is especially important that less advantaged students who have not had the chance to explore their relations to the world in which they live are actively assisted by teachers' prompts like, for example, "Is it possible that not all members of your culture would agree with your interpretation of this event?" "Do you think that women in your culture would feel the same way about this situation?" and "Is it possible that poor people in your native country would see things differently?"

⁷This process of culture creation involves a choice on the part of the learner as to what aspects of his or her native and the target culture(s) to occupy a prominent place in the learner's interactions in the new environment.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Kelleen Toohey for her encouragement and useful comments on earlier drafts of this article, Patrick Mathews for his support, and the three anonymous reviewers for their constructive suggestions.

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