

Development and Supervision of Teaching Assistants in Foreign Languages

***Joel C. Walz
Editor***

THOMSON
—★—
HEINLE



AAUSC
Development and Supervision of Teaching Assistants in Foreign Languages
Edited by Joel C. Waltz

Copyright © 2000 Heinle, a division of Thomson Learning, Inc.
Thomson Learning™ is a trademark used herein under license.

Printed in the United States of America
3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 06 05 04 03 02

For more information contact Heinle, 25 Thomson Place, Boston, MA 02210 USA,
or you can visit our Internet site at <http://www.heinle.com>

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage and retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

For permission to use material from this text or product contact us:	
Tel	1-800-730-2214
Fax	1-800-730-2215
Web	www.thomsonrights.com

ISBN: 0-8384-5124-1

Thinking Culturally: Self-Awareness and Respect for Diversity in the Foreign Language Classroom

*Madeleine Cottenet-Hage, John E. Joseph, and
Pierre M. Verdaguer
The University of Maryland*

The word *culture* derives etymologically from *colo*, the Latin verb for tilling soil, and has gone through numerous metaphorical transfers before arriving at its present range of meanings. But within nearly all those meanings one can still detect the trace of two underlying agricultural facts: first, that farmed land is more productive than unfarmed land; second, that there is no single “right” way of farming, but rather a variety of local customs that presumably reflect local topographical and climatic conditions. A farmer of flat bottom land who emigrates to a country of rocky hillsides will be well advised to learn something of the local “culture” (in the etymological sense); if he stubbornly insists on doing things as they were done back home, he risks starving himself and his family.

There is a moral here for foreign language students and teachers alike. *Cultures* in the modern sense develop in significant part in response to local conditions. That part of language that is culturally determined often appears to reflect these conditions, though never obligatorily or completely. Never-

theless, the knowledge of a language one might gain in the absence of cultural knowledge would be highly incomplete — a meager thing indeed. To take a very simple example, an American student who learns that the French words *pain* and *vin* correspond to “bread” and “wine” has learned part but by no means all of their meaning (on *vin*, see Barthes, 1957, pp. 74–77). The word *pain* has a totally different value to most French speakers than “bread” has to most Americans because of its place within the broader framework of culture. Here, “bread” is one member among many others of the starch food group, and is often eaten less for its own sake than for its convenience in holding sandwich fillings; it often is not served with meals in American restaurants, and one may be charged extra for it. In France and many francophone cultures, on the other hand, *pain* remains the staff of life, the one food that should never be omitted from any meal. It is the sustenance of both body and soul — with inevitable resonances of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, even for non-Catholics — and provides a sort of communion among all people, of whatever social class. Its unique status is reflected in the special set of strict standards and price controls placed upon it by the French government; special price controls on bread in the United States are unimaginable. The sort of cultural “meaning” we see in the case of *pain* could be documented throughout the language, including at the level of grammar — where an obvious example would be polite and informal second-person address, discussed later in this chapter.

Gaining cultural knowledge has an additional value beyond supplementing knowledge of the language: it is the most direct route to *self-knowledge*. People have always wondered which aspects of human experience are attributable to nature (heredity) and which to convention (environment). In learning what is not universal in our culture, we learn what is not constrained by nature. We then become like the farmer who, now conscious of two different ways of plowing, can for the first time evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Because culture is basic to meaning and because the study of culture contributes substantially to self-knowledge, teaching culture must be an important part of our curriculum. We must prepare TAs so that they can teach culture with as much guidance, thought, and creativity as they put into teaching grammar and vocabulary. Such preparation will be one of the main focuses of this chapter. The other main focus has to do with an additional fact about language classrooms: they are often the location of cultural clash, particularly when foreign TAs confront their first classes of American

students. We shall argue that such clashes should be anticipated, prepared for, and in fact *exploited* for their very real value in bringing contrasting facets of the two cultures out into the open.

Although most of the examples we cite pertain directly to the teaching of French, we have tried to formulate our methods and conclusions in such a way that they should be applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to teachers of all languages. Furthermore, because considerably more attention has already been given to incorporating francophone material into the teaching of French, we will focus our remarks on the treatment of diversity *within* France. It might be objected that the teaching of culture in a “world language” like French, Spanish, or English is very different from the case of a language that appears to be more culturally unified, such as Japanese, Italian, or Swedish; we would argue, however, that this is to overlook the very real diversity that exists within any society large enough to constitute a nation. One can always find separate cultures distinguished by some combination of social and economic status, race, religion, geography, politics, age, and sex. Nevertheless, we agree strongly that any French or Spanish course must cover a wide range of francophone and hispanophone countries.

Our chapter has three primary goals. The first is to describe the method we call “thinking culturally” and to provide an illustration of a lesson using this method. The second is to explore the reasons we believe an “anthropological” approach to culture to be superior to the didactic approach to Culture that continues to characterize most language textbooks and classrooms. Finally, the third goal is to show how the language classroom can function as a laboratory for the discovery and celebration of cultural diversity and how TAs can be guided toward this end.

Teaching TAs to Think Culturally

The expression “near-native” has become a watchword of the teaching profession. All instructors are expected to be as near-native as possible with respect to the oral and written mastery of the language they teach. However, there is no equivalent expectation in the area of culture, since no one is ever requested to be culturally near-native. It is nonetheless generally understood that effective language instruction, which relies essentially on so-called near-native language skills, is not possible if the instructor does not have a good understanding of one or more of the major cultures within which a given language is spoken natively.

As we noted above, the syntactic, lexical, and cultural dimensions of a language are sufficiently interconnected that it is artificial to separate these components. In this we disagree completely with Brewer's (1983, p. 150) assertion that, at least for purposes of lower-level instruction, "language structure is a discrete and practically culture-free entity." The awareness of how much of the cultural dimension inherent in any text is inevitably lost in the translation process has contributed to the rejection of translation as the cornerstone of contemporary language-teaching methodology. The earlier predilection for translation was in part a manifestation of the Western ideological context within which the languages were taught. Translation is first and foremost an exercise whereby cultural differences are vastly lessened, if not nullified, because when a text is translated, the cultural dimension inherent in this text is "naturalized," in the legal sense of the term: to turn something alien into something domestic, and therefore culturally acceptable. If we consider this context of officially accepted national superiority — cultural, ideological, racial, or otherwise — it is clear that it was difficult if not impossible to acknowledge fully the right to cultural "otherness." We would define such a context today as essentially ethnocentric and inimical to cultural diversity.

When we try to identify our priorities for lower-level courses taught by TAs, it seems that we should first determine which cultural "elements" should be "taught" alongside the language and which should not, or at least what kind of activities designed to promote cultural awareness should supplement language teaching in the classroom. We may also want to ask ourselves whether the notion of "teaching," when it comes to culture, is relevant. Do we actually "teach" when we rely on strategies meant to develop a greater sensitivity to a foreign culture? Ideally, we would like TAs to focus in class on activities promoting greater awareness of similarities and differences between the target culture and the students' own culture — for example, by first observing typical everyday situations (receiving compliments, table manners, dating, hygiene) and attitudes (toward education, sex, food, work, leisure), and then drawing conclusions from these observations. Depending on the level of the class, a variety of documents can be used to that end: posters, slides, videotaped materials showing physical surroundings or allowing observers to see how people interact on specific occasions, scenes from films, and so forth. This approach, anthropological in nature, is encouraged by researchers such as Carroll (1987). Its obvious advantage is that it fosters a spirit of neutrality on the part of the observer, since it is not

Défense de marcher sur les pelouses (Keep off the grass) or *Prière de jeter les papiers dans la corbeille* (Please don't litter). They are also asked to substitute *nettoyez* 'clean up' for *nettoyons* 'let's clean up' and to evaluate how significant the difference would be.

- 4) Finally the class focuses on the means by which the message — cooperation and solidarity, rather than authority and rule enforcement — is conveyed. Students discuss the mixture of social classes in the picture, as indicated by clothing, suggesting an integrated neighborhood and harmonious class relations. They comment on the use of soft, pleasant colors and the cartoonlike drawing style, designed to create a utopian, therefore seductive image. The use of an American icon, a Santa Claus figure with a reindeer, rather than a traditional French Père Noël, is a puzzling and more ambiguous pointer in this visual text, one for which students are encouraged to explore alternative explanations.

Thus, through a directed decoding, which can be as short as 15 minutes or as long as an entire period, and can be conducted in French as early as the second semester of instruction, students are made aware of changes taking place in French society regarding the relations between citizens and the "administration," traditionally thought of as "them" or "it," that is, some coercive entity separated from and dominating the private lives of French individuals. Building a new sense of *collective* responsibility can thus be seen as an interesting and necessary development in a country that is about to embark upon a new "joint venture," cooperation with a united Europe. Neither the novelty of this campaign, nor the somewhat naive social didacticism of the poster, may strike American students unless the instructor can, in leading the discussion, bring in the historical context in a few words. Again, this can be done simply and rapidly — and increasingly so as students become used to such exercises in "thinking culturally." (Along similar lines, see Scanlan, 1980.)

Can culture and Culture Ever Be Reconciled?

Within this anthropological approach, which favors the analysis of the cultural context, it has become commonplace to reinforce the difference between *culture* and *Culture* (see Hofstede, 1980; Morain, 1983). This differentiation, though clearly practical, is nonetheless potentially harmful. Briefly, we could say that we "teach" *Culture*, in so-called civilization

courses, for example, which usually focus on artistic trends as well as historical, social, and political developments. In such courses the notion of Culture is closely linked to that of History (the emphasis being on the *emergence* of major trends, including again artistic, sociological, and political phenomena). What matters is that the outlook is primarily diachronic and that it reveals the complexity and richness of the Cultural background of a nation. Activities encouraging cultural awareness in the classroom, on the other hand, revolve around the notion of *culture*, meaning whatever composes our daily environment. From this point of view, it is interesting that in her introduction, Carroll (1987) indicates that the form of cultural/anthropological analysis that she has chosen — and which is probably the dominant one today — must not involve ecological, geographical, economic, religious, or historical considerations. It is therefore the opposite of the diachronic approach described above. We can naturally infer from this division that Culture entails the acquisition of knowledge (one learns about artistic trends, for example, which implies some form of memorization); *culture*, on the other hand, is understood as whatever composes our everyday environment, and simply requires a process of observation and interpretation on the part of students who can, for example, learn how to analyze behavioral patterns. It can also be added that the process by which Cultural knowledge is transmitted within the classroom is mostly didactic, whereas the *cultural* approach is not.

This division emphasizes a type of hierarchy between the two cultures. In spite of the fact that observing and interpreting cultural situations requires more acute analytical skills than the “study” of Culture, Culture is globally perceived by the academic community — often including TAs — as more worthwhile than *culture*. The reason is clear: this division coincides with the traditional rift between literature and language. Literature and Culture are regarded as pertaining to a sphere of higher pursuits, whereas the process by which *culture* is analyzed tends to be perceived as a more frivolous endeavor. So even though language and *culture* may be seen as complementary, they are still considered to be a somewhat inferior subject matter.

The preparation of TAs, therefore, should address not only the type of *culture* to be “taught” in the language class and the methods for implementing such forms of “teaching,” but also the various implications inherent in this two-tier hierarchy. It is essential to understand why it is so difficult to escape negative or positive categorization.

One can expect graduate students who have been studying a foreign literature to have to some extent internalized the sense of hierarchy that is reflected in this categorization. If we consider the European context, it should first be pointed out that the use of the word “culture” is relatively new and not as widespread as one might imagine, even today. France is an interesting case in point. It is a country where democratic education has, since the end of the nineteenth century (the beginning of the Third Republic), focused on the acquisition of Culture, which is perceived as the road to social success. In today’s France upward mobility is still largely determined by criteria of a Cultural nature. In other words, the French educational system — much more so than its American counterpart — still largely favors the most “Cultured” individuals and thus perpetuates the idea of a Cultural *élite* that is deemed essential for the good of the nation. This educational system, of which the French are by and large still very proud, is seen as democratic because it aims at identifying those individuals, regardless of origin (at least theoretically), who will eventually become part of the national *élite*.

Within such a context there is relatively little room for the acceptance of the concept of *culture*. The latter is mostly perceived as a cheapened form of Culture. One may recall that the Cultural centers known in France as “Maisons de la culture,” instituted by André Malraux in the 1960s, had the ambition of democratizing “Culture” by making it available to every citizen. It probably would not have occurred to Malraux, who was the minister of culture and therefore the guardian of French Cultural integrity, that there was another way of defining the concept of culture. It was as a reaction to this national policy that in the late 1960s a very famous French comedian, Jean Yann, started his daily radio program with the slogan: *Quand j’entends le mot «culture» je sors mon transistor!*, which roughly translates as: “When I hear the word ‘culture,’ I get out my radio!” The “cultural” implications behind the slogan are mostly lost in the translation; a cultural equivalent might be: “When I hear the words ‘classical music,’ I think of the Beatles!” The point is that associating “radio” with “culture” is not incongruous in the United States, where the anthropological acceptance of the latter word is widely used — unlike in France, where radio and television are generally seen as the prime instruments of Cultural debasement.

Making sure that TAs understand the bias against *culture* is essential, particularly if their courses of study have focused mainly on literature, one of the fundamental pillars of Culture. Without such understanding, it is

doubtful that they can achieve the distance necessary to promote an atmosphere conducive to cross-cultural analyses in their classrooms. What is more, attitudes regarding culture and Culture can themselves serve as components of the larger investigation of cultural difference.

The Politics of Culture

Any discourse on culture, including that which takes place in the foreign language classroom, is fraught with potential political dangers. These should, we believe, be pointed out directly to both American and foreign TAs as part of their initial preparation. If possible, they should not simply be laid down in the form of axiomatic rules, but instead should be discussed at some length in order to tease out the specific cultural content underlying them. After all, the very fact that these are “political dangers” is part of American culture of the late twentieth century — yet there is no guarantee that either American or foreign TAs will recognize this truth.

First, any discussion of “national” culture presents obvious dangers of overgeneralization and stereotyping. It also leads quite naturally into statements that perpetuate a long-discredited romantic idealism, and that at the very worst can border on racism. This is true regardless of whether the culture in question is being praised or denigrated. As we shall discuss further on, the observations that it is valuable for an instructor to make are those related directly to his or her own immediate milieu and experience. Culture, like language, is a social phenomenon that is nevertheless embodied in individuals, despite our idiosyncrasies. The point is not for the TA to become an amateur anthropologist, but rather the equivalent of an anthropological “consultant” (what used to be called an “informant”). It is the students who will be cast in something more akin to the anthropologist’s role.

Second, despite the preceding observation, *not* to discuss culture is even more dangerous; for it will result in students trying to impose their own cultural framework onto the language they are learning. Needless to say, it can only be an imperfect fit, leaving students with the perception that the target language and the people who speak it are inferior. (It is hard to see how, under such circumstances, anyone could *fail* to reach this conclusion.)

Third, our insistence on a relativistic treatment of cultures means that one must not automatically impose a moral judgment when confronted with

a cultural difference. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the reality that moral judgments do exist and are a powerful force; neither should we exempt ourselves from making and expressing our own moral judgments, provided they are buttressed with accurate information and substantial reflection. We are thinking in particular of cultures in which human rights are conceived in a fundamentally different way than in modern Western societies — cultures where, for instance, slavery or genocide are being practiced. To treat slavery or genocide in a relativistic, value-neutral way is amoral, regardless of whether one's observations may make no immediate difference. The same could be said of personal or political repression based upon race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, or ideology; yet here already the matter of what constitutes "repression" leans toward the realm of personal opinion, and probably no culture, however "civilized," could escape criticism for some kind of oppression of this sort.

A balance must be sought, such that the language classroom does not serve as the instructor's political soapbox or "bully pulpit," but neither does the instructor appear to condone the most heinous violations of human rights by passing them over in silence. Since the latter case will be the exception rather than the rule, our emphasis in this chapter will be on making the teaching of culture less judgmental, and more anthropological. Even in the case of slavery, our model should be the anthropological study of a slave-holding society in which, after making clear her loathsome aversion of slavery, the scholar goes on to give as dispassionate an account as possible of her field observations.

Working with the Cultural Material in Language Textbooks

Most first-year language textbooks include cultural information in the form of "cultural notes" appended to each chapter. TAs, especially nonnative speakers of the language being taught, rarely know what to *do* with this material, especially when it is not concerned with Culture. Examining the cultural notes found in one widely used French textbook — one that we find admirable in many ways — we discover a range of topics that, on the surface, simply aim at providing students with necessary background knowledge on certain aspects of the society to which they are being introduced. It should be pointed out that similar cultural notes, with similar shortcomings, are to be found in all the most widely used language textbooks. Surveys of them

may be found in Arizpe and Aguirre (1987), Joiner (1974), Levno and Pfister (1980), and Moreau and Pfister (1978). All these surveys cite numerous examples of textbooks containing stereotyped, idealized, prejudiced, and just-plain-wrong information; and we have little reason to believe that the situation has since improved significantly.

The first major shortcoming of the notes is precisely that they are didactic in nature. They are first and foremost aimed at “teaching” culture and virtually preclude any interpretative process. So even though they provide information that is not Cultural, the didactic process by which such information is provided is typical of the very traditional educational approach that, since it aims at promoting Culture, is closed to cross-cultural interpretation.

Well into the 1940s a reader entitled *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants* (Bruno, 1976) was universally used in French schools. In many ways it can be regarded as one of the sources revealing the spirit that still pervades cultural notes today. This textbook is organized around a story line, the trip of two children from Alsace-Lorraine to Marseille. Aside from its patriotic and moral aspects, what is striking is its extraordinary didactic dimension: information is provided on every possible occasion during the trip. The cultural notes of our textbooks are very much the products of this tradition, emphasizing the importance of “learning” what is seen as being specifically national. Within the French educational context this tradition has always been perceived as the preliminary foundation students should gain to have access to Culture, and therefore be successful in life. In spite of appearances, cultural notes are thus directly linked to the acquisition of Culture.

This in turn explains why those notes are so often irrelevant. Since they are not written from a cross-cultural perspective but from an essentially ethnocentric one, American students frequently cannot relate to the information they contain, unless of course this information is first properly “explained,” presumably in English, since cultural notes touch upon concepts that could not be tackled in the target language at the lower levels. Let us briefly consider some specific examples in our sample textbook.

Most notes are designed to provide the kind of didactic information that one might find in guidebooks. They touch upon geographical and climatic characteristics, the relationship between continental France and its overseas territories, francophone areas and countries, travel, and so on. Offering an overview of a particular aspect of the target society (or societies) is innocuous enough except for an obvious shortcoming: this approach lends itself to

reductive and somewhat simplistic interpretations. One of these cultural vignettes, for example, aims at defining national traits, no less. The French are thus inevitably described as individualistic, sociable, private, respectful of tradition, and so on — traits that can be ascribed equally well (or poorly) to all Europeans, and, for that matter, to Americans. The problem, however, is that such notions are not necessarily understood in the same way in all cultures. It should also be noted that the *Culture/culture* distinction is manifested nowhere so much as in the coverage of *France* relative to the rest of the *francophone* world.

Overall, the central characteristic of many of these notes remains their marked cultural specificity. The notes entitled "*La classe ouvrière*" (the working class), "*Paris et le reste de la France*" (Paris and the rest of France), "*Les agents de police*" (the police), to take just a few, reflect unmistakably a fundamentally French outlook. This outlook is revealed as much by the choice of the topic itself as by the manner in which it is presented. There can be an underlying and not readily identifiable perspective inherent in the note "How do the French relate to their police?" How do they perceive the Cultural and political status of their capital (which implies understanding the notion of centralization)? How do they understand the function of a town center?

Similarly, the concept of the "working class" and its multiple and complex connotations is mostly unknown to American students, who are used to dealing with rather different class determinants. Inevitably, the ideological slant and the brevity of the cultural notes are such that the contention that they can be used successfully as a basis for classroom discussion cannot be taken seriously. Indeed, it is extraordinary that "cultural notes" should still constitute the backbone of the "teaching" of culture at the lower levels. In many ways, relying on them is thus counter-productive. As long as they remain omnipresent, TAs have to be aware of their insidious dimension. Unless they can learn to critique the slant of these notes, it would be best for TAs not to use them at all.

The root of the problem, therefore, lies to a great extent in the differentiation between *culture* and *Culture*, which is largely an artificial distinction. After all, in order to understand *culture* one has to become familiar sooner or later with notions of a *Cultural* nature, since even the physical objects that compose our immediate environment have historical resonances, some with profound emotional overtones — the word *pain*, discussed earlier, is a case in point. We could say, in other words, that

Culture fits into a broader concept known as *culture*. This does not mean that everyone within the target cultural context is necessarily aware of this interrelationship. However, TAs, like all other language instructors, should be. From the perspective of their training, therefore, what should be advocated more than the standard distinction between *culture* and *Culture* is the link between the two and the constant overlapping of *Cultural* elements of a historical, literary, or artistic nature with the global cultural background against which a language is spoken. Strictly speaking, there is *no* opposition between the two. It is therefore essential that the preparation of TAs focus on the need to reassess the complementarity between *culture* and *Culture*.

The Need for Critical Self-Awareness

Many foreign language departments employ foreign TAs in their lower-level foreign language courses. While their presence might well be perceived as an asset on account not only of their language skills but also of their knowledge of the foreign culture, we shall use their case to highlight some of the difficulties attached to the teaching of culture in the classroom. This will help us make recommendations regarding the preparation of both foreign and American TAs to be better cultural informants and interpreters.

Unquestionably, native-speaking TAs bring to the classroom a wealth of firsthand knowledge of *one* native day-to-day *culture* that few nonnatives can ever possess. As for *Culture*, native TAs do not necessarily come equipped with a broad and accurate knowledge of the vast interdisciplinary body of *Culture* as defined by the history, the literary and artistic productions, the institutions and laws, and so on, of their nation. In this respect, nonnatives may be just as knowledgeable, since there is nothing to *Culture* that cannot be acquired from studying and reading, and indeed nonnatives may profit from the objective “outsider’s” understanding and perspective they bring to bear upon that knowledge. We will therefore concern ourselves solely with the question of *culture*.

What TAs, native or nonnative, usually lack is a critical perspective on their own experience. As a result, they tend to assume that what is true of themselves and their own group — family, peers, friends, region, class — is true of the nation at large. They will therefore present a limited and subjective experience as general truths. Consequently, they will need to be shown how to look at their own experience critically, and to become aware

of the autobiographical, sociological, economic, and geographic determinants that have shaped their own lives. Unless they can assign specific boundaries to the information shared with their students, such as “a small town in the south of France,” “a middle-class Protestant family,” “the generation born after 1960,” that information runs the risk of being inaccurate if not grossly misleading. In this case, TAs will merely compound the problem that plagues the teaching of a foreign culture and repeat the mistakes often made by experienced teachers of a language and by most textbooks, by insisting on the reality of *Difference* and ignoring the reality of *Diversity*.

A specific language-related case is the use of polite and informal address (*tu* vs. *vous*), for example, within families. Here is a cultural feature that varies widely according to social class, region, age, and sex — so much as to defy any attempt at generalization. Yet the average native TA, lacking exposure to milieus other than that to which he or she was born, is unlikely to be aware of the full extent of this variation, and may present the patterns of his or her own family as being universally valid. Students may be taught, then, that in French families *tu* is used reciprocally among all members, when in fact some families (particularly of the upper middle class) still place a strong value on the use of *vous* to members of the parents’ and especially the grandparents’ generation. This is a particularly salient example because of the unique power of both *tu* and *vous* to give offense when used inappropriately, which is to say against the rules of the specific “subculture” at hand.

An uncritical acceptance of their own cultural practices and norms by native TAs will frequently translate in the classroom into value-laden assertions, judgments privileging the home culture as “good,” while the American culture is seen as “lacking.” Students may perceive this in a general way as a “superior attitude” and are almost certain to resent it (and justifiably so). Even a simple item such as coffee may become an occasion to celebrate loudly the aroma and body of the Latin American “café” served in small cups to the appreciative native, and to dismiss the American beverage served in large mugs as weak and flavorless.

Needless to say, this is counterproductive, since our objective is to promote not just the knowledge of *Difference* but a nonjudgmental acceptance of *Otherness* and *Diversity*. In this respect, American TAs often do a better job, provided they themselves do not hold a somewhat romanticized

or, conversely, jaundiced view of the foreign culture, in which case the objectives outlined above will not be met either.

It is undoubtedly very difficult, if not impossible, to teach anyone — including oneself — not to pass hasty judgments on the unfamiliar and not to hold what is familiar as what is good. But awareness is the first step toward more tolerance and understanding. The very difficulty inherent to the development of cultural understanding should therefore become a matter for renewed discussions in TA training sessions specially designed to encourage TAs to think culturally. In these sessions TAs could be asked to present short autobiographical sketches, stressing their education, social background, and so forth. Doing this will make them aware of how their views and interpretations of the cultural reality are framed by who they are and where they come from. The group could then enter into a discussion of how their differences might be reflected in their classroom teaching (style, content, attitudes, and so on). TAs should also be required to confront interpretations of specific social situations (hypothetical or real). Several objectives can be pursued in these sessions. One is methodological: how to lead a successful investigation into cultural items. The other is educational: at this point, the session leader must be able to bring in available ethnographic information — or, alternatively, refer students to available sources, and, better still, bring in a specialist — to allow the TAs to check the validity of their conclusions and cast them in a more theoretical perspective.

Some additional activities for promoting cultural awareness can be found in Morain (1976).

The Classroom as Cultural Lab

Not infrequently, as much cultural information is embodied in *how* TAs teach as in *what* they teach. As the cultural beacon in the classroom, they may contribute to the development of positive or negative attitudes toward the target culture. In order to generate attitudes that are realistic and not counterproductive, foreign TAs must become not only interpreters of their own culture, but enlightened mediators between the two cultures, theirs and their students'.

Such a task requires them to know and understand the American culture as it functions at the microlevel of the classroom. This is often not the case — even with American TAs — hence the many misunderstandings that arise, to the detriment of both language learning and the

development of cross-cultural communication. In the following discussion we shall examine a few of the ways in which ignorance of some basic American values (see Kohls, n.d.) — shared by *most* American students and reflected in classroom behavior — may prevent the establishment of a positive classroom climate.

We have all heard foreign TAs comment, usually with implied if not explicit criticism, on the fact that some of their American students chew gum, bring drinks to class, slouch in their seats, and hand back assignments scribbled in pencil on pieces of paper torn from notebooks. Foreign TAs are quick to interpret such behavior as signs of insufficient interest in the course and disrespect for the instructor. While it is true that not all students behave this way, nor would all American teachers accept such practices, it is nevertheless important that foreign TAs understand to what extent they are seeing signs of a key American cultural value, *informality*. Informal dress, informal greetings, and informal speech patterns when addressing an instructor during or after class are all manifestations of this same tendency to attach less importance to form than in most of the societies from which foreign TAs come, whether they are African, South American, Asian, or European. Indeed, there is a positive value to informality in American culture, as an icon of friendship and solidarity.

We have all observed newly arrived foreign TAs make critical remarks to a student in public or comment on an individual assignment in front of the whole class (whether to praise or condemn it). We have all cringed, together with the class. The TA has just violated a whole set of American norms that are hard to separate from one another. One of them is the right to *privacy* — the very term defies translation into French and many other languages besides. One does not publicly reveal personal information about private individuals without their consent, particularly when the information is potentially damaging to their image and ego. (Note that the fundamental distinction between private citizens and public figures made in libel cases is uniquely American, distinguishing our legal system even from the British common law to which it is most closely related.) The other norm involved is *egalitarianism*. The instructor has upset the fundamental assumption that all individuals in the class are equal by establishing a hierarchy based upon success and failure. This touches upon another fundamental assumption on which the performance of the class is based: that success is within the reach of any individual and that innate differences in ability and intelligence count less than sheer effort. In an American classroom the teacher is careful to

praise a student's effort even though the fruit of that effort might not, objectively speaking, be praiseworthy. But for the foreign TA, not only is the result the tangible evidence of work, but commenting on it in public is his or her right and duty as teacher — as the *authority* in charge. This brings us back to the concept of egalitarianism, which is suddenly brought into conflict with the foreigner's assumption — and experience — that *position* gives you rights over another in a lesser position.

Of course, not all foreign TAs will act in like manner. Many show sensitivity, if only because they are so close to their students in age that they tend to adopt an informal rather than a formal and authoritarian style. Some will even “go native” and become more informal than their American counterparts (who may themselves go native in the opposite direction). Nevertheless, the deep-seated cultural patterns of their own countries may resurface, particularly when a conflict or a stressful situation arises. Deference, rank, acceptance of a superior's right to negative evaluation — all of which are rather foreign to American culture — are intrinsic to many other cultures, and all are effective defenses against the kind of insecurities that beginning TAs are bound to feel from time to time.

Does this mean that foreign TAs need to conform silently to American norms? This is where, we believe, their presence in the classroom becomes invaluable. They may choose to conform, but rather than do so silently they might want to seize the opportunity to *discuss* how and why they experience discomfort, how and why they are tempted to set different class rules, and so on. In lower-level classes, such discussions would have to be conducted in English, but they could remain circumscribed and to the point. The danger, of course, is allowing English discussions to use up precious time for language instruction. For this reason, carefully prepared questions will prevent improvisation and meandering. In more advanced classes (and in some cases as early as the second semester) discussions in the target language provide a marvelous opportunity for language practice with a content that is more appealing and more relevant to students because it calls upon their input, reactions, and interpretations, and makes connections with their own lives. But again, TAs can only lead students into an enlightening discussion if they themselves have been taught to reflect upon both their own experience and the American context, if they themselves have received in the course of their preparation an acceptable theoretical framework that will help them interpret and make sense of the differences that they encounter.

Conclusion

We have argued for increased preparation of TAs in the area of culture and presented a number of points to include in that preparation. The problems faced by American and foreign TAs, despite superficial differences, are fundamentally the same: native-speaking TAs are likely to have an insufficient understanding of the extent to which they can generalize their own experience and of those aspects of American culture that differ from their own. American TAs typically lack enough exposure to the target culture (if not the Culture) to supplement the textbook in significant ways. Both face the same political dimension in the teaching of culture, and both are equally likely to need guidance in developing an understanding of the relative importance of culture and Culture, as well as in developing an appropriately nonjudgmental outlook on cultural diversity. The actual cultural conflicts that arise in the foreign language classroom setting provide an ideal opportunity for the exploration of cultural differences in a way that is maximally relevant to the TA's own experience.

Works Cited

- Arizpe, Victor & Benigno E. Aguirre. "Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban Ethnic Groups in First-Year College-Level Spanish Textbooks." *Modern Language Journal* 71 (1987): 125-37.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Paris: Seuil, 1957. English translation: *Mythologies*. Tr. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
- Brewer, William B. "The Truisms, Clichés, and Shibboleths of Foreign-Language Requirements." *Modern Language Journal* 67 (1983): 149-51.
- Bruno, G. [pseudonym of Madame Alfred Fouillée]. *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants*. Réédition. Paris: Belin, 1976.
- Carroll, Raymonde. *Evidences invisibles: Américains et Français au quotidien*. Paris: Seuil, 1987. English translation: *Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience*. Tr. Carol Volk. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Cottenet-Hage, Madeleine. "Enseigner la culture." *Le Français dans le Monde* 250 (juillet, 1992): 66-69.
- Hofstede, Geert. *Culture's Consequences: Institutional Differences in Work-Related Values*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1980.

- Joiner, Elizabeth G. "Evaluating the Cultural Content of Foreign Language Texts." *Modern Language Journal* 58 (1974): 242-44.
- Kohls, L. Robert. "The Values Americans Live By." Mimeograph distributed by Meridian House International, Washington, DC (n.d.).
- Levno, Arley W. & Guenter G. Pfister. "An Analysis of Surface Culture and Its Manner of Presentation in First-Year College French Textbooks from 1972 to 1978." *Foreign Language Annals* 13 (1980): 47-52.
- Morain, Genelle. "The Cultural Component of the Methods Course." *Designs for Foreign Language Teacher Education*. Ed. Alan Garfinkel & Stanley Hamilton. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers, 1976: 25-46.
- _____. "Commitment to the Teaching of Foreign Cultures." *Modern Language Journal* 67 (1983): 403-12.
- Moreau, Paul H. & Guenter G. Pfister. "An Analysis of the Deep Cultural Aspects of Second-Year College French Texts from 1972 to 1974." *Foreign Language Annals* 11 (1978): 165-71.
- Scanlan, Timothy M. "Another Foreign Language Skill: Analyzing Photographs." *Foreign Language Annals* 13 (1980): 209-13.