Static and Dynamic Views

Static and dynamic views of culture and intercultural language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, cultural knowledge is becoming more and more important for language teaching and has increasingly been included in curriculum documents, syllabuses and textbooks. This growth has come about because we have begun to recognize that culture is embedded in even the simplest language (Liddicoat 2000) and is an inseparable part of the way in which we live our lives and the way we use language. Culture shapes what we say, when we say it and how we say it from the simplest language we use to the most complex. It is fundamental to the way we speak, write, listen and read.

For the language learner, culture is an important part of being able to communicate successfully and appropriately in another language. Kramsch (1993) has pointed out that every time we speak we perform a cultural act. This means, that everything we say has the potential to be misunderstood or misinterpreted in an intercultural situation. Also, everything we say has social consequences. What we say is interpretable by the people we speak to as friendly, polite, interested, concerned, etc, however, the frameworks in which people from different cultures interpret the talk they engage in can differ greatly.

While culture is now usually included in language teaching and language teaching documents, its definition and treatment is not consistent. Culture can mean be thought of in many different ways and the ways in which we think about culture affect the ways we teach culture and the ways our students learn it. The challenge confronting the teaching of culture in modern languages is to identify an approach to teaching culture within language which achieves the educational goals we have set for ourselves (Liddicoat et al 1999). One useful way to begin thinking about approaches to teaching culture is to think about the culture we teach either as static or as dynamic.

Static culture
The static view of culture treats cultural knowledge as either facts or artifacts. We learn information about a country or people, their lives, their history, their institutions or their customs or we learn about the cultural icons these people have produced, such as their literature, their art, their architecture or their music. In each case, a cultural lesson is viewed as
teaching pieces of information about the culture which are often separated from the other material being taught in the language. As such, the cultural component is self-contained and is often very remote from the language itself. This separation of language and culture in the static view means much of the information taught could be taught as effectively outside the language classroom. The teaching of the history, institutions and arts of a people or country is often covered in the mainstream curriculum without reference to language. Even literature taught from the perspectives of plot, character and theme is often felt to be taught as effectively when reading is done in translation as in the original language.

The static view of culture also has its own definition of cultural competence, which is largely based on the ability to recall information. Cultural knowledge is usually associated with some particular assessment task or project and the long term usefulness or use of the information is not really considered, although it is usually assumed that the information once acquired will continue to be known in the future. The core problem here for the teaching of language and culture is that there is no clearly articulated link between cultural knowledge and language use, nor of the way the information taught will affect the learner as a user of the language. We can see the static view of culture more clearly if we examine some of the sorts of cultural information presented in typical language textbooks. The examples below come from the early chapters of the German textbook *Kontakte* (Terrell et al. 1996). *Kontakte* was chosen because it places a strong emphasis on culture and treats culture in a way which I believe is typical of many current textbooks for adult learners.

*Extract 1*

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Kultur ... Landeskunde ... Informationen
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Extract 1 shows a very clear example of culture as static information. The cultural input contained in this activity is very limited and involves factual knowledge about the German train system, like how fast the train travels. Essentially this is a listening comprehension task, with some pre-listening activities, rather than a cultural task and again the cultural information,
such as it is does not truly reflect the needs of a user of German, except perhaps to know the vocabulary item *InterCity-Express*.

**Extract 2**

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**Kulturprojekt**  
Geographische Lage und Klima

Arbeiten Sie mit einem Weltatlas und lösen Sie die folgenden Aufgaben.

1. Identifizieren Sie den Breitengrad ihrer Universitätssstadt, und suchen Sie große europäische oder nordsüdikanische Städte, die ungefähr auf dem gleichen Breitengrad liegen.
2. Identifizieren Sie die Breitengrade Hamburgs und Wiens, und suchen Sie nordsüdikanische Städte, die ungefähr auf dem gleichen Breitengrad liegen.

Extract 2 presents what is in reality a simple reading comprehension task and finding the necessary information is not particularly language based. It could be done as effectively with an English atlas as with a German one. The North American bias is problematic in an Australian context and the task is of little relevance for Australian learners, however, this is a common problem in textbooks available in Australia. The point here is that the tasks produce little useful or usable cultural knowledge of a user of German as a second language.

**Extract 3**

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**Porträt**

While this example may look more ‘cultural’ because of its subject matter, it too is primarily a reading passage containing snippets information about an historical figure, who is unlikely to be known by the students. Again the relevance and usefulness of the cultural content to a language user is very limited.
We can also see the static view of culture in many exercises which do not address culture as such. In such activities language is presented as culturally decontextualised facts and the actual conditions of use, an element of cultural knowledge which is very important for the learner, are not addressed. Such tasks seem to be the consequences of viewing culture only as static pieces of information separated from language. The following common French exercise, based on the question Ça va? and its possible answers, is a good example of the approach.

**Extract 4**

 Ça va?  
 Ça va.  
 Ça ne va pas.  
 Ça va mal.  
 Ça va bien.  
 Ça va assez bien.

What would you say if:  
 You had just won a lot of money?  
 You had lost your locker key?

This extract gives a number of answers to the question grouped according to grammatical features. The two questions involve discriminating between positive and negative responses. At the same time answers such as Ça va or Ça va bien seem rather inadequate ways to encapsulate one’s feelings on having one a lot of money. In this exercise, the ways in which the question is used in French and the ways in which it is answered are not dealt with at all and the questions provide misleading information about conditions of use. The cultural component underlying the language is missing.

**Dynamic culture**

The dynamic approach to culture involves seeing culture as a set of practices in which people engage in order to live their lives. The practices are variable. Not everyone within a culture does everything in exactly the same way. Instead the practices represent a framework which people use to structure and understand their social world and communicate with other people. As such, culture is not about information and things, it’s about actions and understanding. In order to learn about culture, it is necessary to engage with the linguistic and non-linguistic practices of the culture and to gain insights about the way of living in a particular cultural context. Cultural knowledge is not therefore a case of knowing information about the culture; it is about knowing how to engage with the culture.

In the dynamic view of culture, cultural competence is seen as intercultural behaviour. It is the ability to negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries and to establish one’s own identity as a user of another language. Cultural knowledge is, therefore, not limited in its use to a particular task or exercise, but instead it is a more general body of knowledge which underlies how language is used and how things are said and done in a cultural context. As such, it resembles very closely other types of language knowledge. It is also very closely linked with language and, therefore, can
only be taught effectively in the language classroom.

In order to understand better what culture as practices may look like, let’s return to the Ça va? extract from above, but in a slightly different format.

**Extract 5**

Ça va?  
Ça va.  
Ça va bien.  
Ça ne va pas.  
Ça va mal.  
Ça va assez bien.

This question and the answers given are things that French people actually say to each other. They are typically said at the beginning of a conversation, just as the question *How are you?* is in English. However, the choice of answer has interactional consequences which need to be addressed in the ensuing conversation. If the answer is *Ça va* or *Ça va bien*, it is acceptable to move on to some other talk. It is not necessary to talk about why things are all right. However, the other answers all indicate something is wrong. In French, as in many other languages, it is usual to talk further about what is wrong rather than moving on to a new topic. The issue is not that some of these things show that one is feeling good or bad, but rather how you respond to someone who claims to be feeling this way. Not to follow up an answer such as *Ça va mal* sounds uninterested or dismissive and can have interpersonal consequences. It is not a case of knowing facts about French culture; it is a case of knowing how to function when speaking French.

Culture interacts with language at a number of levels some of which can be thought of as being close to ‘pure’ culture others are closer to ‘pure’ language (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Points of articulation between culture and language (adapted from Crozet and Liddicoat (1999).](image-url)
World knowledge is the least attached to language. It refers to the cultural knowledge we have about how the world works. Genres are top level language structures and vary as cultural perceptions about what is an appropriate text, whether written or spoken, vary. What is considered good, elegant, or logical in one language/cultural context may not be thought of in the same way in another language/cultural context. Pragmatic norms refer to norms of language use, especially to politeness. It involves knowledge of the ways in which particular utterances are evaluated by a culture. For example, French *Donne-moi le livre* and English *Give me the book* may ‘mean’ the same thing, but they cannot be used in the same contexts. The French version would be considered adequately polite in a broader range of contexts than the English version. Norms of interaction refer to what it is appropriate to say at a particular point in a conversation, and what someone is expected to say at this point. This concerns issues like: what is the appropriate and expected answer to a question such as “How are you?” as in the example discussed above, what is the appropriate thing to say before eating, how acceptable it is to be silent or to be talkative. The last level concerns the ways in which we encode ideas, concepts and relationships in language, including things like appropriate registers (eg formal - informal), appropriate amounts of physical contact, appropriate personal space, etc. What this shows is that there is no level of language which is independent of culture and, therefore, which are not open to cultural variation.

In the discussion below, I will consider the consequences for teaching and acquisition that come from viewing culture as something dynamic. I will do this by examining a process of language teaching known as Intercultural Language Teaching (ILT), which is based on a dynamic view of culture, and then by considering how dynamic culture is acquired by learners who are instructed using this method.

**Intercultural Language Teaching: presenting dynamic culture**

In order to teach culture as a dynamic set of practices, Intercultural Language Teaching has established for four main activities for culture acquisition:

- acquisition about cultures
- comparing cultures
- exploring cultures
- finding one’s own ‘third place’ between cultures

An important dimension of ILT is that it is only possible to understand another culture by comparing it with one’s own. Learning about one’s own culture is an important part of this process, because we often do not realise that our ‘natural’ ways of behaving are culturally determined. As a result, in order to learn about another culture, we need to learn about our own. We also cannot expect learners to abandon or ignore their own culture when they communicate in another language. The ultimate goal of ILT is not to assimilate learners into the target culture, but for learners to develop for
themselves an intercultural position which moves beyond their own culture, but is not always like the target culture. This position is often called the ‘third place’ (Kramsch 1993, Crozet et al. 1999). It is a position between the two cultures from which one can interact comfortably with people from the other culture while maintaining one's own identity. In order to achieve these goals, ILT argues for a set of principles for developing an overall approach to teaching culture within language.

1. Culture is integrated into other language skills not a separate skill
   Often culture has been considered to be a fifth macro-skill, which is introduced once the skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing have been established. At its most extreme, this view considers culture as something that learners will pick up by themselves when they go to the foreign country. This is the case, for example, in the different ways European languages use pronouns for ‘you’ or Japanese uses plain, neutral or honorific verb forms. In these cases, the formal grammar involved is not exceptionally complex and is fundamental to using the language, however without a good understanding of the culture in which the forms are used it is impossible to use the forms correctly. Explanations that one form is more polite than another may not really be helpful, because often what is involved can be a different idea of politeness (Wierzbicka 1985).

2. Culture is taught from the beginning
   Because culture is fundamental to language, we need to start teaching culture at the very beginning of language teaching. If we leave teaching the culture until later, learners will have created an understanding of context for the language they are acquisition — an understanding they will later have to unlearn. Language is not learnt in a cultural vacuum which can be filled in later, rather learners create their own cultural assumptions as they learn (Kramsch 1993). An absence of input about culture leads to a cultural space which is filled by uninformed and unanalysed assumptions based on assumptions and understandings from the learners’ first culture.

3. The bilingual speaker is the norm
   In developing an approach to language teaching which focuses on intercultural communication, consideration needs to be given to the sort of speaker we wish to create. In the past, language teaching has usually aimed at making the learner as much like a native speaker of the language as possible. This is both an unrealistic goal, in that language teaching hardly ever achieves it, and also an inappropriate one. It is inappropriate because it does not reflect the social and cultural reality of using a second language.

Instead of aiming for a native speaker norm, language teaching can more profitably aim for a bilingual norm: that is developing a speaker who is comfortable and capable in an intercultural context. Bilingual speakers’ needs are different from those of monolinguals (Crozet, Liddicoat and Lo Bianco 1999). Bilinguals need to navigate between the languages and
cultures they know and they need to create identities for themselves which work in these contexts. In order to become competent bilinguals, learners need to know what native speakers mean when they adopt certain behaviours but they do not have to reproduce these behaviours in the same way. This means we have to think about ‘productive competence’ and ‘receptive competence’ separately (Kasper 1998). As receivers of language, second language users need to be able to understand what native speakers mean in native speaker-like ways. As producers of language, however, many second language users do not want to behave in native speaker-like ways, may not feel comfortable doing so, or may not need to do so.

4. Language acquisition involves intercultural exploration
Most learners have not had opportunities to learn about the ways in which their own culture works and how their own language reflects their culture and without this knowledge it is difficult to come to terms with a different culture. The most important cultural acquisition that can come about in the language classroom is acquisition that cultures are relative not absolute. Exposure to another culture provides an opportunity for comparison with one’s own culture. In situations where language acquisition may be too limited for learners to develop high levels of language proficiency, a deeper understanding of one’s own culture and the ways in which cultures vary may be the most long-lasting outcome of language acquisition (Crozet et al. 1999).

5. Acquisition to continue to learn
It is true that we cannot teach everything about culture. Cultures are complex things and they vary from person to person, from group to group and over time. There is no way to transmit such a complex and dynamic thing in a classroom. What we can do in the classroom is help learners develop ways of finding out more about the culture they are acquisition by analysing their experiences and developing their awareness.

Developing intercultural competence
The aim of I.L.T is the development of intercultural competence through the acquisition of another language. Intercultural competence means centrally being aware that cultures are relative. That is, being aware that there is no one “normal” way of doing things, but rather that all behaviours are culturally variable. Applied to a particular language it also involves knowing some of the common cultural conventions which are used by speakers of the language. The emphasis here is on some. Given the volume, variability and potential for change of the cultural conventions, it is impossible to learn them all and certainly well beyond the scope of any classroom acquisition. Because a learner can only ever acquire some of the cultural conventions, an important part of intercultural competence is having strategies for acquisition more about culture as they interact. Developing intercultural competence is an on-going process of acquisition and the primary tool for this development is reflecting on one’s own
linguistic behaviour and that of one's interlocutors.

The process of developing intercultural competence is cyclical, as shown in figure 2.

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Input → Noticing → Reflection

Reflection ← Noticing ← Output
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Figure 2: a pathway for developing intercultural competence

As with all language acquisition, acquisition culture through language begins with input. For any acquisition to take place, however, particular elements of the input have to be noticed (Schmidt, 1993). As mentioned above, our cultural conventions are often invisible to us and noticing a cultural difference can be made more difficult because of this. The promotion of noticing is one of the key tasks of the intercultural language teacher. Once it has been noticed, the input is available for reflection and experimentation. In ILT it is important for the student who has noticed a difference in the input to reflect on the nature of the difference and to decide how to respond to that difference; that is, how far the learner will modify his/her practices to accommodate to this new input. This decision is then introduced and leads to output in the language using a modified set of norms. This initial modification is not, however, the final stage as the output itself provides opportunities for new noticing (Swain, 1985). This noticing may be a positive or negative evaluation of the new modified practices by the learner: the new practices may feel comfortable or uncomfortable, or it may be a noticing of a native speaker’s response to the modified practices of the learner, which indicate that the modification has been either successful or unsuccessful. These noticing become the target of further reflection, which again becomes realized in the output of the student, and so in a (potentially) continuous cycle of acquisition.

We can think of the process of cultural acquisition in ways which are analogous to language acquisition processes. The learner begins with a knowledge of the practices of their own first culture and gradually acquires an approximative system of practices (cf Nemser, 1971) which vary from the starting position as the result of exposure to new input. The approximative system, like interlanguage, can contain rules which are identical to those of the first culture, rules which are derived from the target culture and rules that belong to neither culture, but which are learner's accommodations to their noticing of and reflection on the input. We can think of these approximative systems as intercultures, with each interculture being a new step in the development of a set of intercultural
practices, as in figure 3.

Figure 3: progression in developing intercultures

While this acquisition is progressive, it is important not to think of it as linear or staged. It is not true that each new interculture will be progressively closer to the target (in this way intercultures are unlike interlanguages). It is possible at any stage of development that a new interculture will be less close to the target. This will happen when a learner adopts and uses a practice which they feel is uncomfortable and will move to a more comfortable position, or where the reactions of native speakers indicate that a particular practice is not working adequately. The end point of cultural development is not the L2 cultural practices, but rather an intermediate intercultural ‘third place’ developed between the L1 and L2 sets of practices. As such, evidence of less ‘native-like’ practices should not be considered ‘back-sliding’ or a regression, but rather the result of ongoing intercultural development. In other words, less ‘native-like’ practices may be the result of progression in learning.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of how it may be presented in textbooks and curriculum documents, culture is dynamic. Culture is embodied in what people do and the ways in which they use what they know. It does not reside in the knowledge itself. When we come to learn another culture, we need to learn it as a dynamic process, not as a static set of facts isolated from our experience and use of the language in which it is embodied.

Speakers use culture dynamically not statically and learners need to learn culture dynamically not statically. In order to do this, learners need to have opportunities to engage with, use and manipulate their cultural knowledge in their communication rather than passively reproducing it. It is in this engagement with culture in communication that language learning has a unique position. Only through exposure to a new culture in the context of its language can learners fully develop their intercultural competence by discovering for themselves their own ‘third place’.

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Notes
1. Train travel
   - What is the name of the railway company in your country?
   - Do many people travel by train?
   - How do business people and tourists usually travel?
   - Why are aeroplanes an important means of transport in North America?

You will listen to a text about train travel in Germany. Listen to it well and answer the following questions.
   - What is the new very fast train called?
   - How fast does it go on average?
   - What advantages does it have?

2. Work with an Atlas and find the following information:
   - Identify the latitude of your university town and find large European or north African cities which are at about the same latitude.
   - Identify the latitude of Hamburg and Vienna and look for North American cities which are at about the same latitude.

3. Portrait
   Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), scholar and politician, was among other things a philosopher, linguist and educational reformer. He was a friend of famous Germans such as Goethe and Schiller and conceived the Humboldt University of Berlin. His brother Alexander was a naturalist and geographer.

   Tegel is a suburb of Berlin. The Humboldt Castle is located there. The famous classical architect Karl Friedrich von Schinkel built it for Wilhelm and Alexander. In the park of the castle, there is also the grave of the von Humboldt brothers.

4. How are you?  Okay
                   Not good
                   Bad
                   Good
                   Quite good.
REFERENCES


