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Creating Connections in Foreign Language Education: A Teacher's Perspective

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*This article is a high school Spanish teacher's perspective on the current state of foreign language education in Georgia. Particularly, the author considers the need for more connections to be made in foreign language education, including explicit links between students' experiences and the relevance of language study, more integration of the fluidity of language and culture, and further dialogue between K-12 practitioners and university faculty.*

As a high school classroom teacher of Spanish over the past ten years, I have worked with many different kinds of students. These students, who attend a large, suburban high school in Georgia, come from diverse backgrounds of many different races, creeds, and belief systems. Yet even with this diversity of students, the vast majority of students I have taught enter the high school Spanish classroom with very little knowledge of other cultures, and therefore with little rationale for why it is important to learn a foreign language. Most students in my classes take a foreign language because it has been required in Georgia for a high school College Preparatory Diploma. As I saw this phenomenon year after year, I quickly realized that part of my job as a foreign language teacher was not only to teach these students the basics of speaking Spanish, but also to teach them why it was important that they learn Spanish, as well as why they should continue to learn foreign languages after leaving my classroom. The main focus of my teaching is to hook my students into the idea that language learning is fun, possible, useful, and necessary. In this paper I will focus on the importance of cultural connections and understanding for students in the classroom as well as the connections necessary to create phenomenal, expert foreign language teachers. With these goals in mind, we as language professionals can indeed produce foreign language learners who see the importance of continuing language study as well as foreign language teachers who can, in turn, perpetuate these same goals.

Most of my high school Spanish students have little knowledge of the rest of the world. Historically, we have asked our social studies teachers to teach our students world civilization and cultures within an impossibly short timeframe. In addition, we have also left social studies teachers with the primary task of instilling citizenship in our nation's students. But what constitutes a citizen, particularly a productive or 'good' citizen, is rapidly changing, and social studies teachers cannot complete either of these tasks alone within the timeframe they are given. In order to be a good citizen in today's world, we must have a deeper understanding of cultures outside our own, and we must be willing to see our world as a complex whole rather than the 'us

versus them' or 'they should be like us' mentality. Throughout our history, we as American citizens have been sheltered from the rest of the world, insulated by oceans as we live our lives. But as the world becomes smaller, seeing us more economically interdependent with other countries and militarily intervening in other parts of the world, we have begun to see the importance of becoming less ethnocentric and more willing to see the value of other cultures. As the MLA report (2007) points out, our government began to see the necessity for enhanced cultural understanding during the United States military's interventions in the Middle East during the past decade, when both military personnel and journalists had language and cultural breakdowns. These are areas where foreign language study can be a positive influence in the K-12 educational project: assisting our colleagues in social studies in instilling an appreciation for and tolerance of other cultures and, in turn, helping to create better citizens.

### **Connections between Language and Culture Create Meaning**

Georgia's high school requirement of two years of foreign language instruction will not create native-like speakers of Spanish in even the best of classrooms, and it is impossible to think that these students will gain an understanding of the 'how' or 'why' of Spanish-speaking cultures. Like our colleagues in social studies, our contact hours with students are insufficient. Typically, there is only time to learn what Spanish-speaking cultures look like at a superficial level, not the deeper understanding of 'why' or 'how' they look that way. In my own teaching experiences, I have never had the time to teach much more than the typical Spanish cultural activities already present in many Americans' minds, such as Pamplona's Running of the Bulls or Mexico's Day of the Dead, or a bit of Culture (with the capital 'C' marking high culture), such as art and literature. Although high cultural knowledge is important in language learning, exposure to and discussion of culture (with the lowercase 'c' marking the culture of everyday practices) is also fundamental so that students may see the immediate value in being linguistically and culturally competent in the second language. One activity that would both demonstrate the need for such competencies (i.e., the need to communicate) and be a tool to foster these competencies would be to invite native speakers from the local community into the foreign language classroom. Such classroom guests could speak expertly about the cultures they left behind in coming to the United States and could explain the personal and social meanings of their cultural practices. Ideally, these guests would become educational partners who visit over an extended period of the academic year rather than only visiting the class one time like an exotic outsider. Additionally, we might also use the myriad resources that the internet affords us, such as authentic videos on YouTube, to show everyday life as it happens in other cultures. Such resources would help students have a better understanding of cultures as they are today and point them towards translanguaging and transculturalism (MLA, 2007, The Goal: Translingual and Transcultural Competence section, para. 1), which is what I now see as my goal as a Spanish teacher.

As a brand new classroom teacher ten years ago, I, like many new teachers leaving the Ivory Tower of the university, had the naïve idea that my students would leave my classroom with a level of linguistic and cultural competence that would permit them to participate in any typical situation in the Spanish-speaking world. I was very disappointed to find that this was not the case. I quickly had to reassess my thoughts of what I could expect from my students as well as what my role as a Spanish teacher really was. Not only am I charged with teaching Spanish, but I must also be a cheerleader for language study. I must instill in my students a love for

language and cultural understanding. Only then will students leave my classroom and continue to search for ways to continue these studies and increase their translingual and transcultural competence over time.

In my own classroom, I try to create a meaningful ambience of language and culture. Each day in my classroom, I encourage students to speak in Spanish about their previous day's activities in order to help them begin to think in Spanish. I especially try to focus on students' experiences with the target language outside of the classroom. Many of my students have jobs after school, and the vast majority of these students find one reason or another to use Spanish while at work. I make a point to applaud my students' stories of language use, and this gives the students a feeling of pride and of purpose. One student in particular has an afternoon job at Chick-fil-A. Everyday he speaks Spanish to his coworkers who prepare the food at the restaurant. Through this everyday practice, this student has a command of the Spanish language that is far beyond that of his classmates, and the friendships he has forged with his coworkers has afforded him insight into other cultures. This student does not necessarily know the literary periods of Hispanic literature, but he has a better understanding of current Hispanic cultures (with a lowercase 'c') than my students who are more versed in literary studies. Students like this young man are able to see the importance of being able to communicate with others in Spanish, and he is proud of the fact that he can do so. The main focus of my teaching is to hook my students with the idea that language learning is fun, possible, useful, and necessary, as demonstrated by the students' own stories of language use. If we are to create students, or citizens, who are tolerant of others, able to compete on the world stage, and represent our country with a less ethnocentric view of the world, we must find ways to help students see why it is important to deeply understand other languages *and* cultures as well as how these two concepts are intertwined. In fact, the MLA's report (2007) cites Daniel Yankelovich, who described "the need to understand other cultures and languages" as one crucial need we must address in our educational system so that we may become "less patronizing, less ignorant of others, less Manichaeian in judging other cultures, and more at home with the rest of the world" (Background section, para. 3). My students' stories of language use outside of the classroom and their ability to function with people of other cultures is proof that this is possible, meaningful and to their advantage.

High school foreign language students must come to understand why it is important to learn a foreign language. It is not enough for them to take a foreign language simply because it is required (although a language requirement is important to get students into the classroom at the beginning of language study). For the most part, high school foreign language study is narrow in its scope and approach. Most of our foreign language classes focus solely on the study of language itself, with little thought given to the cultural knowledge that is important to understand the language and its use. The emphasis on grammatical concepts of the language comes at the expense of important lowercase 'c' cultural knowledge, that is, the everyday cultural practices of those who speak the target language. That lower-case 'c' culture content, as suggested previously, serves as an important hook to link foreign language learners to the course content. If the classroom teacher can show a cultural connection to language and grammatical concepts, the students then have a better understanding of both the language and the culture. For instance, Arabic/Moorish influence in Spain has greatly influenced the Spanish language throughout its history. Connecting study of the Moors in Spain to the study of the language itself can create a better understanding of both the historical connections between language and culture as well as serve as an impetus to discuss the current view of Arabic and its speakers in Spain today. As a

language professional, I believe one should not disconnect language learning from cultural understanding. Language is a reflection of culture, and if we teach language removed from its cultural context, we are doing our students a disservice; we are only giving them part of what they need in order to achieve translingual *and* transcultural competency.

The MLA hit the nail on the head when its report described how our universities also have a narrow view of language education. Future language teachers majoring in a foreign language at the university level often learn the language in a disconnected way; “language” classes in the early semesters of their programs focus on acquisition rather than the connection the vocabulary or grammar has to the culture the language represents. It is only after language has been acquired (or at least the prerequisites completed) that future language teachers proceed to more culturally-based coursework, which often focuses on literary study. This divide between language and content (i.e., explicit cultural studies) within the university foreign language departments create language teachers who have a narrow view of language teaching and learning, relying on the logic “because that is the way I learned a foreign language” to guide their own practice. In turn, the textbooks in the field cater to this narrow view of language study, focusing primarily on language acquisition rather than language as a cultural product. As a university student, it was only after I attained a certain level of proficiency in Spanish that I had the opportunity to take classes in culture, literature and linguistics. I was not taught language in the context of the culture it represented, but rather as if sentences were mathematical equations laid out by the textbooks and college instructors. This is the way many of us were taught, and this is the way, I believe, many of us teach. Most of us teach language the way we learned language, and the cycle is perpetuated over and over again. Language learners become language teachers and language teachers teach the way they were taught, which often means dividing language from cultural content.

### **Professional Connections for Change**

I believe our first step in breaking this cycle is to ensure that language teachers at all levels (K-16), as well as language education professionals, find better ways of communicating with each other, to talk about what is and is not working in the field of language education. Several years ago, I became a member of the Georgia Systemic Teacher Education Program, which consisted of high school foreign language teachers, foreign language education professors, and university-level language professors. The goal of our grant-funded group was to create a pathway between the foreign language professors in the College of Arts and Sciences, the professors in the College of Education, and high school language teachers to help revise the program through which new foreign language teachers would be prepared for the classroom. Before we began to meet, it was not typical for professionals from these three areas to work together. There was a disconnect between us despite the fact we all had an important hand in producing foreign language teachers. When we began to discuss our own objectives and what we felt were important characteristics of a foreign language educator, we quickly made strides in integrating the objectives of each component group. Together, we discussed how language was being taught at both the high school and university levels, and we also discussed the levels of language proficiency that foreign language teachers needed before entering the high school classroom. One of our first tasks was to create a new handbook for foreign language student teachers that explicitly described what was required and expected of foreign language teaching professionals. In addition, we created a website for foreign language educators to use as a

resource for lesson planning, networking and methods for certification. We were also instrumental in the creation of a dual degree program between the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Education at the University of Georgia.

We took these steps hoping they would be the beginning of a new relationship between the Colleges and practitioners in the field as well as an invigorated focus on foreign language education in our state. We wanted to create a better way to produce language teachers who were competent in their language proficiency, cultural understanding, and pedagogy. But this was only a beginning, and since then, there has been very little movement toward continuing what we started. The funding ran out, and to be honest, without funding as an impetus, it is difficult to connect the College of Education with the College of Arts and Sciences, and it is even more difficult to integrate classroom K-12 teachers to have their voices heard. If we had more time to continue working toward our common goals, we could have our message heard by more language professionals outside of our own focus group. I believe that we could have convinced more language professionals to become part of the dialogue between these groups in order to create a consensus of and to share what is necessary to be an effective language teacher. It is still my hope that this will someday come to fruition.

If our goal is to give students the opportunity to have deeper understanding of culture and more profound language competence, another of our goals should focus on beginning language learning at our students' earliest stages of development. This will only come about if all foreign language professionals at all levels work together to advocate for foreign language learning throughout the education system. Beyond the importance of teacher training, another problem arises from the lack of importance that our government often places on funding early language learning. When I first started teaching in 1998, the high school that hired me had a fairly well developed foreign language program, especially for a school that had opened only four years earlier. The middle school that feeds into our high school had two-year French, Spanish, and Latin courses that prepared students for rigorous language study in high school. But over the course of the next few years, these middle school courses floundered, and now all of those two-year programs have been replaced by introductory language courses in French and Spanish that last for nine weeks. These courses give students very little substance toward actual language learning. And over the past few years, lack of state funding for FLES programs (Foreign Language in Elementary Schools) has caused many elementary school programs in our state to disappear. Finally, to put the proverbial nail in the coffin, our State Board of Education recently voted to dismiss the requirement of two years of foreign language for a high school diploma in order to make room for an additional unit of science in the curriculum. Especially in the more rural areas of our state, this is going to create even fewer opportunities for students to study a foreign language when principals must choose to hire required science teachers over foreign language teachers whose discipline is viewed as "optional."

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

What can we do to create a better system for all those involved in foreign language education, both teachers and students? First of all, we must begin language study earlier in our K-12 school system. If we want students to be knowledgeable about other languages and other cultures, we must introduce them to these languages and cultures at an earlier age because, as the MLA's report (2007) points out, few students who begin language study in our universities gain a high level of competency. We must also give students the opportunity to continue language

study with a sequential program throughout the K-12 system. Foreign language must be considered to be as important as the other subjects taught in the K-12 system.

At the university level, foreign language teachers must be trained in new ways. Language instruction must be based upon input from those skilled in: (1) pedagogy; (2) linguistics, literature, Culture (with a capital 'C') and culture (with a lowercase 'c'); and (3) the current K-12 classroom who understand the needs of today's young people. In my experience, there is currently very little connection between these three entities, and without this interconnection, new K-12 foreign language teachers will not leave the university with what they truly need to be effective classroom teachers. Teachers must be trained to become experts in language and its connection to everyday life in the cultures that the language represents. There can be no language without culture because culture creates language and language illuminates culture. Foreign language teachers must be trained to find real-world sources from the cultures of study to present foreign language as a necessary tool to understand today's world.

If we all work together, university professors and K-12 teachers alike, we can create a program of study which produces well-prepared language teachers who understand that language education is comprised of many facets of linguistic and cultural understanding. Better-trained language teachers can produce language learners who also understand the importance of language and cultural understanding, thus perpetuating a new cycle where language learners become more effective language teachers who ensure language learners have a better understanding of other cultures and perhaps a less ethnocentric view of the world. Foreign language instruction can be a means to produce citizens who appreciate and value others, but we must work towards connections (e.g., between students' lives and language study, language and culture, practitioners and theorists) rather than divisions to make such a project possible.

**Judson Bridges completed his B.S.Ed, M.Ed, and Ed.S degrees at the University of Georgia and has been a high school Spanish teacher for ten years. In 2003, Bridges was honored as the Gwinnett County (Georgia) Teacher of the Year. In 2008, he was honored as Georgia High School Spanish Teacher of the Year by the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese.**

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