

This article should not be reprinted for inclusion in any publication for sale without author's explicit permission. Anyone may view, reproduce or store copy of this article for personal, non-commercial use as allowed by the "Fair Use" limitations (sections 107 and 108) of the U.S. Copyright law. For any other use and for reprints, contact article's author(s) who may impose usage fee.. See also [electronic version copyright clearance](#)
CURRENT VERSION COPYRIGHT © MMXV AUTHOR & ACADEMIC EXCHANGE QUARTERLY

Cultural activities in Spanish college textbooks

Silvia Rodriguez Sabater, College of Charleston, SC

Silvia Rodriguez Sabater, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Spanish at the College of Charleston.

Abstract

This article examines cultural activities in introductory Spanish college textbooks, their emphasis on the second language culture(s) products, practices, and perspectives, and whether they foster cross-cultural comparisons and reflection. The data indicates that most activities promote the personal expression of the learner's cultural views of products and practices, as well as the second language cultural factual information of products. Suggestions on how to adapt cultural activities to include perspectives, cross-cultural comparisons, and reflection are provided.

Introduction

Although enrollments in Spanish college courses have fallen recently, over 80% of students studying Spanish in US colleges and universities are enrolled in introductory courses, that is, first and second-year courses (Goldberg, Looney & Lusin 2015, 25). The main objective of these courses is introducing the language and culture(s) of the Spanish-speaking world, as introductory courses reflect the presence of a linguistic and cultural general education requirements (Goldberg, Looney & Lusin 2015, 7). In fact, most introductory textbooks highlight the acquisition of the second language (L2) and the development of the L2 cultural awareness and competence as their main goals (Byrnes, 2012). Given that most college students of Spanish learn about Spanish-speaking cultures in their first years of study, it is critical to know the kinds of activities textbooks provide for students to be able to develop the L2 cultural awareness and competence.

It has been claimed that textbooks should present a variety of activities to guide learners in their development of the L2 cultural awareness and competence, and that those activities should focus on products, practices, and perspectives (The National Standards Collaborative Board 2015), as well as cross-cultural comparison and reflection (Dema & Moeller 2012; Ros i Solé 2003 among others). Products are the aspects of the culture, a dish such as paella, while practices are the customs, traditions, or conventions such as la sobremesa (the custom of sharing conversations at the table right after a meal with family and friends over coffee or wine which can last hours). Perspectives are the attitudes and beliefs of a product or practice that is reflected in the behavior, opinions, and convictions of the people of a culture and help understand the product or practice. For instance, understanding that the purpose of la sobremesa is to strengthen friend and family ties. In the same way that knowing grammar and vocabulary alone is not equivalent to linguistic competence, knowing the objective aspects (products and practices) of the L2 culture(s) does not equal cultural competence because perspectives are also needed to appreciate the L2 culture(s) (Kramsch 2014).

This article examines the types of cultural activities in introductory Spanish college textbooks, their emphasis on the L2 culture(s) products, practices, and perspectives, and whether they foster cross-cultural comparisons and reflection. An analysis of the data indicate that most activities promote the personal expression of the learner's cultural views and immediate environment of products and practices, as well as the L2 cultural factual information of products. Few activities foster cross-cultural comparison,

reflection, and the connectedness between products, practices, and perspectives. Suggestions on how to adapt cultural activities to include perspectives, cross-cultural comparison, and reflection are provided.

Cultural material and L2 textbooks

Learning an L2 cannot be separated from learning the culture of the target group of speakers (Kramsch 2014; Méndez García 2005) and textbooks nowadays include culture as part of their contents. The reasons are clear: the acquisition of culture enhances the learners' knowledge of foreign communities, familiarizes them with the behavioral patterns of the target societies, promotes attitudes of respect and tolerance, fosters reflection upon one's culture, emphasizes the relative role of one's cultural assumptions, and develops intercultural competence (Méndez García 2005, 57). Since textbooks have the potential to influence learners' views and teachers' lesson planning (Hatoss 2004; Snider 2005), they need to provide cultural activities from the first day of class even if it has to be done in the L1 to start (Bennett, Bennett & Allen 2003). Beginner linguistic competence cannot be confused with L2 culture(s) knowledge because, in fact, learners are able to use other cognitive skills and previous knowledge to carry out cross-cultural comparisons, reflect and find connections between cultural products, practices and perspectives (Ros i Solé 2003, 144).

Few studies have addressed the inclusion of cultural products, practices and perspectives in textbooks (Bateman & Mattos 2006; Young 1999). In fact, these studies indicate that most of the cultural content primarily examines products, and to a lesser extent, practices, but does not address cultural perspectives involving attitudes, values, and beliefs. Moreover, Bateman and Mattos (2006) indicate "merely studying the practices and products of another culture without addressing the underlying perspectives yields only superficial cultural understanding" (4). Learners need to have cultural activities that offer opportunities to achieve the standards (The National Standards Collaborative Board 2015). This means demonstrating an understanding of the relationship between the cultural practices and perspectives, the products and perspectives, and the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.

Beginning textbooks should introduce facts and have learners become acquainted with the target cultures (Selami 2000). In fact, Jernigan and Moore (1997) have suggested starting with connections to the familiar culture and gradually move to the unfamiliar L2 culture(s). Others have indicated that textbooks should provoke divergent opinions, discussions about perspectives, attitudes, and values (Bennett, Bennett & Allen 2003; Herman 2007; Ros i Solé 2003) that offer chances to reflect on the L1 culture while learning the L2 culture(s) (Lafayette 2003). Textbooks should also provide opportunities to compare and recognize similarities and differences between the learner's culture(s) and the L2 culture(s) (Bateman & Mattos 2006; Bennett, Bennett & Allen 2003; Jernigan & Moore 1997; Selami 2000). Few studies have examined cultural activities in particular.

Method

This article examines the types of cultural activities found in frequently used beginning Spanish college textbooks. The main research question is: Which types of cultural activities are found in introductory Spanish college textbooks? Additionally, do activities emphasize the L2 culture(s) products, practices, and/or perspectives? Do activities foster cross-cultural comparisons and reflection of the learner's own cultural experiences and the L2 culture(s)?

Five major publishing houses in the United States were asked to supply their current best-selling introductory textbooks. The corresponding food chapter in each of the textbooks [1] was analyzed following Bateman and Mattos (2006) for its treatment of a single cultural theme. The topic of food was chosen because it is commonly found in introductory textbooks, has a strong cultural appeal, reaches into all aspects of life, and therefore has potential for all types of cultural activities examining products, practices, and perspectives, comparisons among cultures, and reflection. First, publishers' introductions were read to identify the theoretical background. All textbooks mentioned the communicative approach and a strong cultural component as their main objectives. Then, activities of cultural interest were analyzed. Based on the literature recommendations and my own teaching experience, a coding was developed to categorize the cultural activities by objective and learning aim (products, practices and/or perspectives).

The coding has six types of objectives: 1. personalization of the learners' culture or their immediate cultural environment without any implied comparison to the L2 culture(s). 2. personalization of the learners' culture or their immediate cultural environment with implied comparison to the L2 culture, 3. factual information about the L2 culture in the form of identification, matching or true/false questions, 4. direct comparison between the learners' and the L2 cultures(s), 5. reflection about the learners' and/or the L2 culture(s) (inclusion of question why), and 6. reflection about culture as a human phenomenon. These objectives can refer to cultural products, practices and/or perspectives.

Findings and Discussion

The findings indicate that the textbooks offer some opportunities for the development of the L2 cultural awareness and competence in the form of cross-cultural comparison and reflection activities. The most frequent activities, however, emphasize products and practices of the learners' culture, which is a personalization of their immediate environment, and L2 culture factual information of products in the form of identification, matching and true/false statements.

In these personalized activities, for example, learners need to complete and share, in Spanish, a list of their food preferences or answer questions about their favorite Hispanic dishes. The purpose is purely communicative to practice the linguistic structure and vocabulary while exchanging real information about the learners' personal tastes but they do not encourage the awareness and development of the L2 culture(s). Adding the question why? would allow learners to reflect on their own culture and immediate environment (Galloway 2001), which is a first step towards developing this awareness. In the factual information activities, for example, a common task is to indicate if a series of statements are true or false according to a text. Other activities ask learners to fill in the blank to complete sentences, while others ask learners to read a text and select the correct answer.

Many cross-cultural comparison activities are, in fact, the personalization of the learners' cultural products and practices or their immediate environment with an implied comparison to the L2 culture(s). Examples include an activity about tipping in Hispanic countries where learners are to talk about tips in the United States, which after reading about this practice in Hispanic countries suggests an implied comparison without trying to understand the reasons behind it. Similarly, in a reading activity about coffee in Cuba, learners are asked to talk about the role of coffee in their own culture, which after reading about Cuba's also suggests an implied comparison.

There are also direct comparison activities of products and practices between the learners' culture(s) and the L2 culture. Examples include naming differences between meal times in Hispanic countries and the United States, or comparing Andean dishes with other dishes the learner is familiar with. There is one activity where learners are to compare Caribbean food with food in other Hispanic areas, which asks learners to observe differences among Spanish-speaking cultures. These types of cross-cultural comparisons do not ask the learners to analyze the reasons for these products and practices, which may leave learners with the wrong impression why these products and practices are just the same or different. Learners are often aware of heterogeneity within their own culture but tend to view other cultures as relatively homogeneous (Galloway 2001; Herman 2007). Learners should be encouraged to compare their own culture(s) to the L2 culture(s), and make comparisons among the Spanish-speaking cultures (Bateman & Mattos 2006).

There are few reflection activities. These activities allow learners to think about the reasons (perspectives) behind the products and practices. For instance, after reading about coffee and coffee plantations in Cuba as world heritage sites, learners are to respond why they think they are world heritage sites and whether they know other world heritage sites. Another example is a reading about Cola-Cola in Latin America (made with sugar) and the U.S. (made with high fructose). Learners are asked why they think that is. These types of activities where learners reflect about culture(s) by thinking of reasons (perspectives) behind cultural products and practices help them start developing the L2 cultural awareness and competence.

With personalization and identification activities as the bulk of cultural activities, learners have few opportunities to reflect about the products and practices and to understand the reasons behind them

(perspectives). Learners are not fully working towards reaching the standards just a superficial cultural appreciation. Achieving the cultural standards means demonstrating an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives, and between the products and perspectives of the culture studied. More activities, however, are designed at developing an understanding of the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own. Most of these comparisons, however, are about products and practices.

Suggestions

Although culture is recognized as a crucial component in L2 learning and teaching, cultural activities in Spanish college textbooks are still majorly centered on products and practices, and the personalization of the learners' immediate environment. There are few opportunities for cross-cultural comparison and reflection leaving culturally untrained instructors and their students with what is already in the textbook. Instructors who wish to adapt cultural activities to achieve these goals should include a variety of activities and, whenever possible, "ask why to show how products are only the tip of a culture's iceberg and that underneath the explicit product everything is connected and makes sense" (Galloway 2001, 21). In other words show the connectedness between products, practices and perspectives.

As in any area of teaching, objectives need to be clearly defined, materials selected, and activities created with multiple steps including an overview, discussion of the product and practice, comparison between the learners' culture(s) and the L2 culture(s), followed by a reflection. This can be done with a provocative question that leads to discussion (Galloway, 2001, 26) or a cross-cultural comparison using semantic maps or columns followed by creating hypotheses of reasons for similarities and differences between the two semantic maps or columns (González 2001, 75-82; Galloway 2001, 35). These kinds of suggestions should be incorporated in textbook activities to give learners more opportunities to think and reflect about the perspectives behind the products and practices and to make cross-cultural comparisons. When textbooks go beyond activities on products and practices and include perspectives, cross-cultural comparison, and reflection, they help learners develop their L2 cultural awareness and competence (Bateman & Mattos 2006; Ros i Solé 2003).

Endnotes [1] Textbooks:

- Blanco, José A. and Donley, Philip Redwine, Late. *Panorama*. Boston, MA: Vista Higher Learning, 2013 (4th ed.).
- Blanco, José A. and Donley, Philip Redwine, Late. *Vistas*. Boston, MA: Vista Higher Learning, 2012 (4th ed.).
- Caycedo Garner, Lucía, Rusch, Debbie and Domínguez, Marcela. *¡Claro que sí!* Boston, MA: Heinle Cengage Learning, 2013 (7th ed.).
- De la Fuente, María José, Martín Peris, Ernesto and Sans Baulenas, Neus. *Gente*. Boston, MA: Pearson, 2012 (3rd ed.).
- Dorwick, Thalia, Pérez-Gironés, Ana M., Becher, Anne and Isabelli, Casilde A. *Puntos de partida*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2012 (9th ed.).
- Heining-Boynnton, Audrey L. and Cowell, Glynis S. *¡Anda!* Boston, MA: Pearson, 2013 (2nd ed.).
- Jarvis, Ana C., Lebrede, Raquel and Mena-Ayllón, Francisco. *¿Cómo se dice?* Boston, MA: Heinle Cengage Learning, 2013 (10th ed.).
- Potowski, Kim, Sobral, Silvia and Dawson, Laila M. *Dicho y hecho*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012 (9th ed.).
- Spaine Long, Sheri, Carreira, María, Madrigal Velasco, Sylvia and Swanson, Kristin. *Nexos*. Boston, MA: Heinle Cengage Learning, 2013 (3rd ed.).
- Terrell, Tracy D., Andrade, Magdalena, Egasse, Jeanne and Muñoz, Elías Miguel. *Dos mundos*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2010 (7th ed.).
- Young, Dolly, J., Berne, Jane E., Muirhead, Pablo and Montoya, Claudia. *¡Vívelo!* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011.
- Zayas-Bazán, Eduardo, Bacon, Susan M. and Nibert, Holly J. *Arriba*. Boston, MA: Pearson, 2012 (6th ed.).

References

- Bateman, Blair and Mattos, Marilena, "An analysis of the cultural content of six Portuguese textbooks," *Portuguese Language Journal*, Vol. 1 (2006)
- Bennett, Janet M., Bennett, Milton J. and Allen, Wendy. "Developing intercultural competence in the classroom." In Dale L. Lange and R. Michael Paige, Eds. *Culture as the core*.

- Perspectives on culture in second language learning, 327-270. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2003.
- Byrnes, Heidi, "Of frameworks and the goals of collegiate foreign language education: critical reflections," *Applied Linguistics Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2012)
- Dema, Oxana and Moeller, Aleidine J., "Teaching culture in the 21st century language classroom," *Faculty Publications: Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education*. Paper 181 (2012), 6 May 2015, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/teachlearnfacpub/181>
- Goldberg, David, Looney, Dennis and Lusin, Natalia, *Enrollments in languages other than English in United States institutions of higher education, Fall 2013*. New York: Modern Language Association, 2015.
- Galloway, Vicky. "Giving dimension to Mappaemundi: the matter of perspective." In Vicky Galloway, Ed. *Teaching cultures of the Hispanic world: products and practices in perspective*, 3-63. Mason, OH: Thomson Learning Custom Publishing, 2001.
- González, Olgalucía G. "Deepening cross-cultural learning in the classroom." In Vicky Galloway, Ed. *Teaching cultures of the Hispanic world: products and practices in perspective*, 65-94. Mason, OH: Thomson Learning Custom Publishing, 2001.
- Hatoss, Aniko, "A model for evaluating textbooks," *Babel*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2004)
- Herman, Deborah M, "It's a small world after all: from stereotypes to invented worlds in secondary school Spanish textbooks," *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2-3 (2007)
- Jernigan, Christine G. and Moore, Zena, "Teaching culture: a study in the Portuguese classroom. Implications for National Standards," *Hispania*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (1997)
- Kramsch, Claire, "Teaching foreign languages in an era of globalization: Introduction," *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (2014)
- Lafayette, Robert C, "Culture in second language learning and teaching. Anthropology revisited." In Dale L. Lange and R. Michael Page, Eds. *Culture as the core: perspectives in second language education*, 53-69. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2003.
- Méndez García, María del Carmen, "International and intercultural issues in English teaching textbooks: The case of Spain," *Intercultural Education*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2005)
- National Standards Collaborative Board. *World-readiness standards for learning languages*. Alexandria, VA: The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015, 6 May 2015, <http://www.actfl.org/publications/all/world-readiness-standards-learning-languages>
- Ros i Solé, Cristina, "Culture for beginners: a subjective and realistic approach for adult language learners," *Language and Intercultural Communication*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (2003)
- Selami, Abdel Latif, "Teaching towards cultural awareness and intercultural competence. From what through how to why culture is?" Paper presented at the 34th Annual Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. Vancouver, BC: March 14-18, 2000.
- Snider, Daren, "Communicative and non-communicative activities in first-year college German textbooks," *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German*, Vol. 38, No. 2, (2005)
- Young, Dolly J, "The standards definition of culture and culture instruction in beginning and intermediate Spanish textbooks," *Northeast Conference Review*, Vol. 45, (1999)