

Mai Hunt
Department of Hispanic Studies
The Theory and Practice of Foreign Language Teaching
16 May 2017
Center for Language Studies: Blog Post

Teaching Culture and Language Through Politics

Before arriving to Brown to start my PhD in the Department of Hispanic Studies, I spent two years in Madrid, Spain working with the Fulbright Program as an English Teaching Assistant and with the regional government, the *Comunidad de Madrid*, in the Office of Secondary Education. Many factors led to my decision to move to Madrid beyond my academic interests in Spanish literature. As I have written about previously in LANG2900, during my sophomore year of college, I worked at the Escuela Amigos, a Spanish/English bilingual elementary school in Cambridge, MA. The teachers at Amigos emphasized a “bilingual” experience in which both Spanish and English were treated equally, and as a result, they created a community where differences became tools for learning rather than handicaps that needed to be overcome. This was critical for the classroom environment, which included not only first generation, Spanish heritage speakers and native English speakers with no connection to the Spanish speaking world, but also first generation children of families that spoke neither Spanish or English at home and thus were grappling to learn two foreign languages simultaneously at school. Working at Amigos, I came to see that the students were growing up in an environment where *culture* just as much as *language* was valued and shared, where people of different ethnicities were accepted as equals who could work together without having to hide their origins. I often found myself humbled by the students and their attitudes toward the world, as they saw each other without labels or qualifications. While they may not have realized it, they were learning that Spanish and English were equally important in their lives and in our community, which will put them in a position as adults to fight prominent racial and ethnic divides in our society.

My work at Amigos motivated me to pursue post-graduate opportunities centered around language and education. Spain presents a very interesting case study on bilingual education because as a country, they share four official languages, each associated with regions of the country that were at one time, and still aspire to be, independent countries. Since the economic crash of 2008, difficult economic conditions, particularly high unemployment rates in young adults, have prompted changes in the education system. Funds are increasingly directed to English language programs with the long-term goal of stimulating the economy. Parents are fighting to ensure that English language instruction does not overshadow the importance of Spanish language in the curriculum. In regions where schools were already bilingual (Spanish with Catalán, Gallego or Euskera), the regional language has been replaced with English, meaning that children are being educated in two languages, neither of which is their primary language outside of school. Currently in Madrid, all public primary schools are fully bilingual. As a result, as students who entered the public education system after 2005 move up through the system, all public secondary schools and baccalaureate programs are also becoming fully bilingual. In my opinion, the system works well, producing university bound students who are on average competent and comfortable in English. The greatest consequence of this system, however, is that all subjects become fully oriented toward Anglo-Saxon and American culture

and history. Taking English classes past language acquisition means reading only British and American literature. In Social Studies, it means learning about political systems in these same countries. Spanish culture, thus, takes a back seat and is marketed as an educational tool that is less interesting and less helpful for students looking for employment.

While working in Madrid, I helped coordinate and implement a region-wide program called [Global Classrooms](#), which is part of a global program based in secondary schools all over the world. Global Classrooms is “an innovative educational program that engages middle school and high school students in an exploration of current world issues through interactive simulations and curricular materials. Global Classrooms cultivates literacy, life skills and the attitudes necessary for active citizenship [...] At the core of *Global Classrooms* is Model United Nations, wherein students step into shoes of UN Ambassadors and debate a range of issues on the UN agenda” (*Global Classrooms*). Because Global Classrooms is used all over the world, its core purpose is to repurpose Model United Nations as a year-long curriculum as a tool for teaching English as a foreign language. Its main objectives are to practice public speaking, teach the fundamentals of debate, practice academic research, use longer writing assignments in English, to understand global issues and the functions of the UN. Particularly in Madrid, Global Classrooms is designed to engage students in global issues while having fun, practicing English and interacting with students from other bilingual schools throughout the city. Every year, students are each assigned a country to represent in order to debate a shared topic, ranging from increasing the role of women in governance, loan reform in the INF, to achieving universal access to health care. Global Classrooms accomplishes all of this, not by teaching English language, but by using the discovery of other cultures and politics as a means through which English can be practiced, where emphasis is placed on communicative interaction and production of spontaneous, unrehearsed language output.

Whether or not teaching culture in language classrooms includes teaching politics is very much debated. Beyond the question of the place of politics in “culture,” teachers and education specialists wonder *how* to discuss politics in the classroom, particularly with any given heterogeneous student demographic. As Claire Kramsch explains, “In sum, the field of intercultural communication grew out of the practical, competitive needs of post-Second World War American international diplomacy and business, and was only later applied to interethnic conflicts within the United States.” (1). If the purpose of learning foreign languages is to increase intercultural competence with the hope of increasing cooperative global engagement, it seems difficult to ignore, not only the important role of culture in this interaction, but even more fundamentally, the role of politics and global political interaction. It is for that very reason the United Nations seems uniquely apt to tackle these issues in a classroom setting. Let’s not forget that the UN was born in this same moment in history to facilitate the very issues that Kramsch highlights in her study. Returning to the previously mentioned phenomenon, where teaching English means only teaching Anglo or American culture, Kramsch also posits, “Until recently, teaching intercultural communication in a TESOL class has been pretty much a one-way street, i.e. transmitting information about English-speaking countries and training non-English speakers to adopt the behaviours of English speakers. Because the student body in most ESL classes is multilingual and multicultural, any comparison between the target English-speaking culture and any one native culture has seemed futile” (4).

Kramsch’s assertion brings me to my main argument in favor of programs such as Global Classrooms: when student bodies are highly diverse, or at the very least not completely homogenous, it seems logical to shape classroom procedures and curricula to reflect that very

diversity. Teaching English does not mean only using British or American based materials, just as much as teaching Spanish at Brown does not necessarily mean exclusively teaching Spanish culture. This broader approach opens many doors for the incorporation of politics in the classroom because it inherently discourages the teacher or language instructor from imposing or insisting too strongly only their personal perspectives and biases. Diffusing the direction of political discourse by asking students to discuss issues or debates from a global standpoint, or from a national perspective that is not their own and not one shared by anyone else in the class, helps avoid falling into a personally charged classroom confrontation and allows students to focus more on *how* and *why* they are expressing certain arguments, rather than simply trying to prove that what they believe is right.

So what does this look like in the context of teaching language at Brown? One of the greatest difficulties of teaching Spanish is that the term *Spanish*, and many of the variants that come with it—*Hispanic* and *Latino/a*—is highly broad term that refers to many countries, regions and a vast geographical area that share Spanish as their common denominator, but not necessarily all other elements of their cultural, linguistic or social histories. How do we relate Spain to Honduras to Ecuador after we establish that in all these countries Spanish is spoken? Furthermore, how do we as instructors teach about countries that maybe we have never been to or have any familiarity with? Rather than trying to enforce a type of pan-Hispanic approach to learning Spanish, I argue that there is much more to be gained by focus: to teach Spanish language through the lens of a specific country, rather than that country through Spanish language. And I believe there is a way to achieve this focus, this specificity, while still exposing students to a variety of Spanish speaking countries and not simply the one that the instructor is most familiar with. Implementing a Model UN like curriculum where students take an active role in their learning, each looking into a specific Spanish speaking country on a shared topic, not only allows them to focus on a more concentrated area of study, but also presents a myriad of opportunities for them to share what they have learned with their classmates. This method increases student interaction while also decreasing the tendency to fall into a teacher centered classroom environment, while still giving teachers the ability to focus the curriculum around specific countries of interest or a topic that is particularly relevant to the students or the current political climate. Lastly, it grants students opportunities to learn about political systems that are not their own, enabling to debate and discuss politics and culture on behalf of another country and not on behalf of themselves, regardless of their personal backgrounds. In doing so, there is the added benefit of practicing public speaking skills and the more communicative practice of language outside of textbooks in an authentic and meaningful way.

Works Cited:

- Global Classrooms Model UN*. United Nations Association of the United States of America. 2017. www.unausa.org/global-classrooms-model-un/about-global-classrooms-model-un. Accessed 30 April 2017.
- Kramsch, Claire. "Intercultural Communication." *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.