

The advantages of language travel programs for the understanding of difference:

An Argentinean example.

In his writings on “Intercultural Communication”, Byram Kramsch points out that “before the Second World War, the term ‘culture’ meant knowledge about great works of literature, social institutions and historical events, acquired through the translation of written texts”(1). And he explains that the rise of linguistics and of the social sciences after this crucial event, along with the demands of market economies, gave prominence to spoken language and to communication across cultures in situations of everyday life (1). In this global context, the discipline of intercultural communication was developed, initially, by Georgetown University linguist Robert Lado and anthropologist and US Foreign Service Institute (FSI) officer Edward T. Hall in the late '50's. Since then, some of the major facets of human interaction that intercultural communication has helped to define were: the socially conventionalized roles adopted by participants, their expected norms of interaction and interpretation, the way they construct a shared sense of reality; the stereotypes they entertain about each other, as individuals and as members of a social group; their non-verbal and paraverbal behavior; the attitudes, values and beliefs they share with the social group they belong to; the way their language reflects these deeper discourses; amongst many others (2).

Therefore, under the premise that ‘culture is communication and communication is culture’ (1), intercultural communication approach and techniques have been integrated to second language classes syllabuses’. While this inclusion has been an important step forward for the teaching of a second language, in this article I want to explore the advantages of total cultural

immersion experiences to develop a deeper sensibility and understanding of cultural differences, as one of the most successful ways that intercultural communication can be put into practice.

Before engaging in the Hispanic Studies PhD at Brown, I taught Spanish as a second language in different settings. One of the most compelling experiences that I had in this field was being part of the Spanish as a Second Language program lead by my undergraduate university back home in Argentina. This program offered intensive Spanish classes for US college students during their winter break -summer in the South American country-. While these students had taken language classes in a traditional setting at their US university, at this program they had access to a great amount of learning and practice of both language and culture for a short period of time in a Latin American city environment.

In the five years that I participated, I was witness of how quickly students engaged and many times became passionate about Argentinean customs and how their willingness to learn the language was deeply motivated by the possibility of using it in real situations and meeting native people during their stay. Both the opportunity for total immersion in a Spanish speaking country, as well as the way the program was designed, proved incredibly effective for the student's improvement of language skills and the development of cultural knowledge and sensibility.

The program¹ followed a CLT approach where themes and grammar structures taught in class were directly related to the authentic use that students would have to face during their stay

¹ For more information on the program described, please read:

-Menegotto, A. (1998), "Del aula a la calle: la integración de objetivos y la transferencia de habilidades en el Programa Mar del Plata", en Julia, T., M.C. Losada y J.F. Márquez (eds.), *Español como lengua extranjera: enfoque comunicativo y gramática*. IX Congreso Internacional de ASELE (1998), Santiago de Compostela, 863-874.

-Cortés, Adriana M. and Menegotto, Andrea, "Los contenidos culturales en los cursos de español como lengua segunda y como lengua extranjera: la experiencia del programa Mar del Plata", Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, Argentina. Available in: http://cvc.cervantes.es/ensenanza/biblioteca_ele/asele/pdf/10/10_0191.pdf

in the city. Students had classroom lessons in the morning and meetings in the evenings. While classes were taught by experienced professors, in the evenings, students were divided in groups of four or five and assigned a “cultural assistant”. The figure of the cultural assistant was a key component of this experience. This role was filled by a native college student, who was majoring in literature and/or language. This dynamic provided the foreign students the possibility of interacting with a native peer, similar in age and interests, who was also formally trained in his/her own language and culture.

Students had four weeks of classes, twenty formal hours of classes a week, along with at least twenty expected hours of social interaction around the city, which usually turned into more hours because they were living in a Spanish speaking town and every tiny interaction they had with locals necessitated the use of the second language. They were involved in weekly projects where they had to choose a topic of their interest that they could investigate in the field and then deliver a presentation at the end of the week in front of their classmates and professors. So, with the excuse of investigating either the Argentinean beach customs, the eating out options in town, the cultural -theater, music, performing arts- offered during summer season, the artcraft on leather, the life of a veterinarian, or even a hair dresser or a street artist, students enjoyed plenty of time of real cultural and language interaction. The cultural assistant served as the link that facilitated local information to help them discover interesting things about what they wanted to learn from the local culture. In other words, they had to navigate this new place on their own, with a little help from their native peer who also facilitated access to social life and events.

Students learned plenty of new vocabulary related to travel, tourism, transit signals, and how to move in a foreign city, but also specific vocabulary related to the topics they had chosen. I remember, for instance, a student who loved to cook and had designed a whole week project

around the topic of Argentinean barbecue: “asado”. Her group loved the idea and visited different restaurants with her and talked to many “parrilleros” to find out about the different techniques for grilling the meat, different cuts that Argentineans usually include in the diet, and eating rituals around the meal, such as “un aplauso para el asador” (claps for the cook) during eating. They ended up knowing about the art of “asado”, and to use the specific terminology such as “arrebatar” (burn the meat) or “asado al asador”(a local technique to grill) much more than including myself, despite being an Argentinean. And this experience also led to learning very much about social practices such as family gatherings, national celebrations, but also to look into the historical physiognomy of a third world country whose main income had been the exportation of grains and meats since the 19th century.

Body language was also a huge discovery for American students. First, most of them adopted with enthusiasm the Argentinean way of saying hello and goodbye, always with one kiss on the cheek -both men and women- regardless of whether you have known this person for a long time or it is your first time meeting him/her. They also had to go through some uncomfortable situations of miscommunication, which I find to be particularly pedagogical in developing cultural sensibility. On one occasion, in a buying interaction, one student asked the local sales clerk where she could find some specific product around the area, to which this person answered with a movement of his hand under his chin similar to the one that Americans use to insult one another. The student felt awkward and left the store, to later find out that this expression was used by Argentineans to mean “I have no idea”. This sort of cultural miscommunication situations -mostly possible through an experience of total immersion abroad- help students to more organically develop the notion that, just as there is no global language, there is not a unique and common way of expressing and interpreting thoughts and/or emotions either. This helps students

to think about their own cultural identity and how many things they acknowledge as given, which actually has to do with where they were born and in which system they were raised. By immersing in different cultures -and this would apply to any culture, of course, my Argentinean example being just one case-, students learn to see themselves as “the others”, decentralizing their position in the world, and learning to think critically about the judgments and stereotypes on which they had based their ideas and relations with people from different cultural backgrounds.

For some students this experience was a fun exotic vacation where they got to learn some of a foreign language and eat much “asado” and where everything had “jamón y queso” (ham and cheese), but for most of them, this was an actual life changing experience, where they got to access a whole new way of thinking of “the other” and of themselves, which would lead them to engage in future relationships with people from other cultures with a deeper sense of awareness and respect for their mutual differences.

Cited works

-Kramsch, C.(2001). “Intercultural communication”. In *The Cambridge guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages*. Retrieved from http://revproxy.brown.edu/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/cupteacheng/intercultural_communication/0