



Students' Culture in the Classroom

Cecilia Silva

Tohoku University

Reference Data:

Silva, C. (2007). Students' Culture in the Classroom.
In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.) *JALT2006 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT

The present article describes classroom activities wherein the teacher made use of students' culture as a resource. The activities were accomplished by Japanese university students of Spanish as a Foreign Language and the aim was to make students apply the structures learned in class. The theoretical framework is represented by cultural constructionism, whose basic principle states that individuals learn particularly well through creating objects that express their cultural identity. The practical approach is task-based language teaching, which tries to create a link between the classroom and the outside world language use. Based on those practical and theoretical aspects, four classroom activities (self-introduction as famous people, brief explanation of folk-tales, weather and haiku, and conversation about students' favorite Japanese books and films) were designed so as to make students take advantage of their own cultural objects in a real situation of communication that aimed at using the syllabus points. The paper closes by suggesting that using the students' culture as a resource for interaction can be a useful connection between the students' world and the new language.

本稿では、教師が学習者の文化を学習のリソースとして活用する教室活動について言及する。活動はスペイン語を外国語として学習する大学生によるものであり、その目標は学生に教室で学んだ文構造を使わせることであった。理論的枠組みは文化構成主義による考え方であり、その基本的原理は、個々の学習者は自分の文化的アイデンティティを表現する対象を作り上げることを通じ、よい学習効果が得られる、というものである。実践上の手法としては、タスク中心の言語教授法を用い、教室とその外の言語使用を結びつけることを試みている。上記のような実践的、理論的側面に基づき、4つの教室活動(自分が有名人だとして自己紹介をする、昔話の短い説明をする、天気と俳句を語る、学習者の一番好きな日本の映画と本について会話する)をデザインした。その目的は、シラバスに示した要点を使うことを目標として、学習者の文化を反映した対象を、実際のコミュニケーションにおいて利用させることであった。本稿の結びとして、インタアクションのためのリソースとして学習者の文化を使うことで、学習者の世界と新たな学習言語が有益に結びつく可能性があることを示唆したい。

The present article refers to classroom tasks wherein the teacher made use of students' culture as a resource. The proposed tasks were accomplished by Japanese university students of Spanish as a Foreign Language. Using students' culture as a learning device was perceived as important because:

- a. Students feel comfortable when speaking about their own culture.

- b. It is possible, when working with beginners, to get a good combination between the new language and the students' culture.
- c. It is normally difficult for beginners to use the new language to refer to the new culture, and it is difficult for teachers to design activities that lead students to "do something" with the target culture in the target language.
- d. Students' culture provides opportunities for students to create shared bases of knowledge about different object of interests.

In practice, the approach of this work is "task continuity" (Nunan, 1989, p.119), classroom work consisted of a several activities linked by a thematic line and dependant in terms of content and skills; and the task focused on "oral interaction", i.e. application of acquired structures and production of utterances with a communicative purpose. The theoretical framework is represented by constructionism, which in the educational field states that knowledge is not passively received but built by individuals and that learners should be encouraged to engage in dialogues, as a classroom construction (Gergen, 1999, p.167-193).

The present work will address to the following points:

1. Theoretical frame: cultural construction.
2. Description of classroom tasks: "I am famous" (self-introduction and first semester syllabus points), "I want to tell you about ..." (folk-tales: introduction of people using third person form, and description of people, animals and objects), "What's the weather like"

(haiku: simple present verbs and expressions related to weather and climate) and "My favorite book/film": complex task for which we designed a Model for Oral Interaction so as to consider the steps for guiding students into the integration of syllabus points.

3. A brief conclusion regarding the use of native culture in general and the fourth task in particular.

Cultural construction

When this author thought of a classroom task three aspects were considered: (1) the task should make students face a problem, a situation that requires them to integrate elements, make a synthesis and elaborate something, (2) to accomplish those operations the task should contain a story, virtually the best way of organizing human experiences, (3) the story should be the channel of their culture, which would require them to represent their culture in the target language. Such task implies "construction", subjects build something; "interaction", the constructed object is the result of the classroom interchange; and "culture", such construction implies taking the culture as a resource in the classroom. Therefore, the theoretical frame chosen to support the task is cultural constructionism, more specifically, socio-cultural constructionism. Constructionism, as a theory about learning, maintains that people learn best when they are active participants in construction activities, and these design activities give them more involvement in the learning process. In education, constructivists support the notion that knowledge is not supplied by teachers but constructed by learners, and constructionists go even further

when they affirm that learners construct something external and shareable. Social Constructionism enforces the idea that social relations and social activities produce shared outcomes. Therefore, the social setting, social relationships, shared goals and artifacts, and shared cultural aspects are critical aspects in the learning process. When learners are engaged in the creation of artifacts that express their cultural identity, we should mention Cultural Constructionism.

When the individual constructions that express cultural identity are enhanced by shared activities the social setting becomes a community of learners, and we are dealing with Sociocultural Constructionism (Gergen, 1999, pp.167-193).

The ideas commented in this paper adhere to the sphere of cultural constructionism: “individuals learn particularly well through creating objects in the world that express their cultural identity and have shared meaning within their home cultures” (Hooper, 1998, cited in Pinckett, 2000). A cultural construction could be a drawing, a personal website or any other project that is an expression of cultural identity, and at the same time facilitates an engagement with new knowledge. This paper considers, as cultural objects, the reconstruction of stories that students made in Spanish. In the following point we are describing four classroom tasks: three of them aimed at using specific points of the syllabus, the fourth task was intended to consolidate most of the syllabus points acquired during the term.

Classroom tasks

In this article this author has adopted the following definition of task: “...any structure language learning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified

working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task.” (Breen, 1987, p.23 cited in Nunan, 1989, p.6). Below there is a description of the classroom activities accomplished by 150 Japanese first year university students of Spanish as a Foreign Language in 2005, divided into three classes of 40, 50 and 60 students. This article concentrates mainly in the fourth task.

1. “I am famous”

In this activity students practice self introduction and apply all the syllabus points covered during the first semester. Students work in groups of three and speak during six minutes: one of the students pretend to be a famous Japanese person and the other two students ask him/her questions.

2. “I want to tell you about ...”

In this activity students have to use: verbs in the third person singular and in the present tense; adjectives for making descriptions of people, animals and objects; and nouns that refer to professions or life styles. Using all those elements, in groups of three or four, students tell Japanese folk-stories in Spanish.

3. “What’s the weather like”

In this activity students work in groups with “haiku” in Japanese and Spanish and apply two specific points of the syllabus: expressions related to the weather (What’s the weather like) and simple present verbs (What do you do in winter, spring, etc?)

4. “My favorite book/film”

The approach was “task continuity”, i.e. several activities linked by some thematic line and dependant on content and skills, which focus on the creation of an authentic

environment for oral interaction (Nunan, 1998, pp.118-132). The main purpose is to get students to talk about their favorite films and/or books with their peers. In the following points there is a detailed description of the oral interaction activities. As it was a complex task, it was necessary to design a model so as to specify activities and components.

Model for oral interaction

The classroom task “My favorite film/book” comprised several steps. In order to define an order for the activities, the author designed a model based on the following elements: a task containing 5 linked activities, reconstruction of stories, and oral interaction (Figure 1).

Analysis of the model

The point of departure of the task is a story. Activity 1: following a guide/warm-up questionnaire (Worksheet 1), students should write a report about a Japanese film or novel they like. Thus, students are led to choose elements from a text, organize them and make an understandable synthesis of interest to them. Students use their available linguistic resources, the basic grammatical structures studied in two semesters so as to answer the questions of the guide and also use the dictionary quite profusely. Students had two weeks to fulfill this assignment, most of them write in Japanese and then produce another report in Spanish, i.e. they take advantage of two writing systems.

Students' reports become class contents for four interlinked activities which are described below (2, 3, 4 and 5). In the activity number 2 the teacher works with the

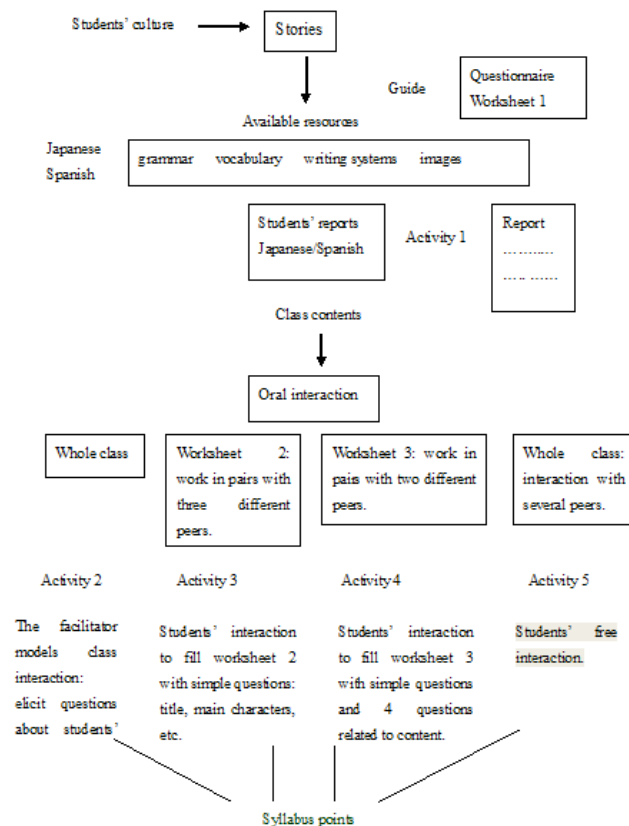


Figure 1. Model of Oral Interaction for a task based on five interlinked activities

whole class and she makes questions about the films they had seen or the book they had read: Which is your favorite movie? What is the name of the main character? Where is he/she from? Then, the teacher demonstrates by asking several questions to one student and then, she demonstrates the activity again by encouraging two pairs of students to ask questions about their reports. Finally, all the students stand up, and holding their reports, work in pairs to communicate and share their ideas.

In the following activity, number 3, students receive a guide (Worksheet 2, see Fig.2). First, the teacher makes students practice all the corresponding questions: title, main characters, and others. Then students stand up and interact with three peers so as to fill the worksheet (see in Appendix 1 an example of Worksheet 2 filled by one student).

For the activity number 4 the students receive another guide (Worksheet 3, see Fig. 3) containing the same items as in the previous one plus four questions related to the content of the book or film chosen by each student. Once again, students practice the appropriate questions and the facilitator devotes some time to help them understand and practice the four new questions: theme of the story, why they like it, feelings, and relation to Japanese culture. In order to make sure students can include those new questions in the oral interaction, the worksheet 3 contains a column that they have to fill with information from their first report. Then, students stand up and ask two peers (not the same as in the previous activity) about their favorite film or novel so as to fill the remaining columns (see in Appendix 2 an example of Worksheet 3 filled by one student).

Finally, in the fifth activity students interact without using any memo, report or worksheet: it is intended as an informal conversation among friends who talk about their favorite movies and books. Learners work during about 50 minutes in each activity.

As explained in the previous point, the approach followed in the classes is “task continuity” (Nunan, 1989, pp.118-132): a set of activities that are sequenced so as to pursue the general aim and also according to their complexity. The components of the accomplished task are the following:

- Goal: integration of a great deal of the syllabus points. From the pedagogical point of view, students are expected to use, in a situation as close as possible to a real one, most of the points they studied so far.
- Topic: participants talk about their favorite film or book.
- Input: students received a warm-up questionnaire (written in Spanish and Japanese) and also two worksheets to be filled during oral interaction.
- Activities: the task included a written activity (reply to a questionnaire), a controlled oral activity, a non-controlled oral activity (fill two worksheets), and free interaction with peers.
- Procedures: individual written report and peer interaction. Participants are encouraged to adopt a conversational turn-taking pattern, i.e. instead of asking all the questions of the worksheets as in an interview, two participants alternate their questions and answers and they also use the response “and you?”.

- Teacher role: provide students with guides, worksheets, and make sure students understood all the questions, words and instructions.
- Learner role: conversational partner, learners share the cultural background and this aspect makes the interaction more fluent. All of the students had to ask questions and reply to them about the book or film they had read.
- Setting. The task was intended as an informal conversation among friends. The interaction takes place in the classroom, which has become an informal place where friends meet to talk, learners are standing, to encourage them to walk and interact with each other.
- The formulaic openings and closings. As the practice has been structured as if it were a friends' meeting, they should use informal expressions (hello, bye, okey).

Libro/película			
Libro/escritor?			
Protagonista?			
Cómo es?			
Nacionalidad?			
Dónde vive?			
Edad?			
Novio/Novia?			
Casado/a o soltero/a?			
Cuándo es el cumpleaños de?			
Otros personajes			
Palabra clave			

Figure 2. Worksheet (2) written by students with the answers to simple questions previously practiced.

	Yo		
Libro/película			
Libro/escritor?			
Protagonista?			
Cómo es?			
Nacionalidad?			
Dónde vive?			
Edad?			
Novio/Novia?			
Casado/a o soltero/a?			
Cuándo es el cumpleaños de?			
Otros personajes			
Palabra clave			
Cuál es el tema de la historia?			
Por qué te gusta la historia?			
Qué sentimientos hay en la historia?			
Qué hay de la cultura de Japón en la historia?			

Figure 3. Worksheet (3) written by students with answers to simple questions and four questions related to the content of the film/book.

Relevance of the task

The importance of this task is the fact that students can apply the acquired structures so as to speak about a complex but everyday topic. For replying to the warm-up questionnaire (worksheet 1), filling the worksheets 2 and 3, and talking about their favorite films and books students had to use several of the syllabus points they had studied: ask and give personal information, simple present, likes and dislikes, and adjectives describing appearance and personality. It was a positive aspect to limit the theme of the task to the students' culture because it made them feel more confident and made interaction more fluent as they were speaking about cultural objects everybody was acquainted with. Regarding the

linguistic skills required to perform the task, students were required to master, the oral and written structures learned during two semesters.

The task adopted the form of a guided practice in those interactive practices, which are considered significant by the learners. “Interactive practices” are defined as “goal-oriented, recurring moments of face-to-face interaction, through which we manage our family relationships, engage in a variety of community and work-related tasks, and nurture our social networks” (Hall, 1999, p.138). The emphasis was to make classroom interaction resemble everyday practices because such practices are important to those who engage in them. Therefore, it could be assumed that such practices are also important to second language learners, engaged in expressing their cultural identity in the target language. In the same way everyday practices contain predictable and unpredictable features, classroom practice also contains both aspects. In order to provide learners with some cognitive security and help them to cope with unpredictable aspects, in activities 3 and 4, they work with worksheets. Engaging students in this kind of interaction is an important experience from which participants can discover that they can use the structures learned in class in an informal conversation with friends wherein they interchange features of their cultural objects.

Some of the students comments are the following: “the last activity with a film was interesting”, “it was fun to write a report about my favorite film in Spanish”, “it was good because, as I had to speak about something I like, I could remember how to say it in Spanish”, “it was interesting because I could hear about my classmates’ likes”, “it was

difficult because sometimes it was hard to understand everything my classmates said”, and “as we all talked about something from Japan it was a bit easier to understand what the others said”. Some of these comments, in Japanese, can be seen in Appendix 3. Besides, most of the students had positive comments in terms of “good”, “very good”, “interesting”, “fun”, and “could speak without looking at the report”. Students also mentioned that although it was a difficult task, it was interesting because they could use the structures they had learned so as to refer to their favorite movies and books and they all knew what they were talking about; and some students replied that writing the reports was very difficult and during the oral activity they had a hard time trying to understand their peers’ questions and answers. Certainly, it was not an easy undertaking, but it was worth doing because students applied the syllabus points in a seemingly authentic situation.

Conclusions

This work attempts to show some advantages of using students’ cultural objects (famous people, legends and folktales, haiku, novels and films) in the classes so as to apply and practice specific points of the syllabus. In the tasks 1, 2, and 3 students were guided into taking their own cultural artifacts as mediators in a process of reconstruction: students took elements of their culture, wrote about them in Spanish, with the available resources studied so far, and following a process of reconstruction. In the task 4 about movies and books each student made a contribution by means of her/his report, which became the basis for a rich interaction.

The primary focus of the activities was the creation of classroom opportunities for students to practice the target language while engaging in dialogue about a shared base of knowledge: aspects and elements of Japanese culture. Using the students' culture in interactive practices reduce unexpected elements in interaction. It means that students can concentrate on linguistic elements of the target language while talking about things all of them are aware of and due to that reason communication has fewer disruptions. The theoretical framework for this work is cultural constructionism because it refers to learning in a context where learners share and express the same cultural meanings.

Cecilia Silva is currently teaching Spanish at Tohoku University, Sendai. She is interested in media literacy, critical literacy, literature, and cultural awareness in foreign language teaching and learning.

References

- Gergen, K. (1999). *An invitation to social constructionism*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Hall, J. (1999). A prosaics of interaction. The development of interactional competence in another language. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Culture in second language teaching and learning*. Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Pinkett, R. (2000). *Bridging the digital divide: Sociocultural constructionism and an asset-based approach to*

community technology and community building. Retrieved March 8, 2006. Paper presented at the 81st annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000. [Online] Available: <alumni.media.mit.edu/~rpinkett/papers/aera2000.pdf>

Appendix 1

Original version of Worksheet 2, written by students with the answers to simple questions previously practiced.

	Katushi	Hirohaka	Fuka hiro
Libro/película	Moeyo ken モエヨケン	Naucica de Valle de viento	Castillo de Caputa
Libro: escritor?	Ryotaro Siba	Hayao Miyazaki	Hayao Miyazaki
Protagonista?	Toshizo Hijikata	Naucica	Pazu
Cómo es?	collado, inteligente lescrikto	sin pacica joven y bonita	moreno y simpatico
Nacionalidad?	Japon	Valle de viento	la ciudad de wak
Dónde vive?	Japoh	valle de viento	la ciudad de nih
Edad?	treinta y uno	dieci seis	atorce
Novio/novia?	Si	No tiene	No.
Casado/a o soltero/a?	soltero	soltero	soltero.
Cuándo es el cumpleaños de ...?	trece de Enero	once de febrero	diez de Octobr
Otros personajes	Isami Koudoh	Yupa, Nito kushyana	Sita Mitsyca
Palabra clave (キーワード)	fikedaya	suelo	Secreto a nombre

Appendix 2

Original version of Worksheet 3, written by students with answers to simple questions and four questions related to the content of the film/book.

	Yo	Sayaka	Yukiko
Libro/película Cuál es tu libro favorito	Kitano Kunikida	Majo-no-Takuboku	Last Samurai
Libro: escritor? Como se llama el _____	/	/	/
Protagonista? 主人公. Como se llama el _____	Jun	kiki	Ken Watano
Cómo es? Cómo es él?	altí, juve, simpático	Bonita, abierta, simpática	muy guapo
Nacionalidad? De dónde es?	Es de Japon	no se.	Es de Japon
Dónde vive?	Vive en Furano de Hokkaidou	no se.	Vive en Edo
Edad? Cuántos años tiene?	por 5 a 25 años	trece	44
Novio/ovio? Tiene uno?	Sí	No tiene.	No
Casado/a o soltero/a? Es casado o soltero.	Soltero.	Soltero.	Soltero
Cuándo es el cumpleaños de _____?	es el cuatro de Mayo	Es el trece Furano	/
Otros personajes Cómo se llaman _____?	Hotarou, Goro	Jiji Tombo	Tom
Palabra clave Dime una (キーワード)	nieve. invierno.	Magia	Samurai
Cuál es el tema de la historia?	El tema es familia.	El tema es magica.	Bushi-dou
Por qué te gusta la historia?	Me gusta porque emocionante.		ken es muy
Qué sentimientos hay en la historia?	Hay templado	Hay amor, amistado	Samurai
Qué hay de la cultura de Japón en la historia?	Furano.	no tiene	Samurai

Appendix 3

Some comments of the students regarding the task with Japanese films and books.

最後の映画や小説のことが不思議だった。

活劇は、今まで通りでいいと思う。

実際に作られた方が面白い。

さいごの授業について

少しスペイン語を聞き取れてうれしかった。

好きな映画についての文章を自分で作って楽しかった。

最後の、気になる小説や映画とスペイン語で書く課題は

自分の気に入る小説や映画とスペイン語で読めればよかった、と思う。