

Preparing International Preservice Teachers for Culture Teaching: Leading Them to the Ground Level

by Bryan Meadows

University-based language teacher education programs in the tri-state area host international students from all parts of the world, and students entering such programs seek guidance on how to address culture standards in their future teaching. Specifically, they may seek knowledge about American culture that they can present to their future students in EFL contexts.

In my position as teacher-educator, it would be easy to present students with conventional treatments of American culture. This would entail bulleted-item lists detailing national characteristics set against a contrastive Other: *individualism* vs. *collectivism*, *speaking directly* vs. *speaking indirectly*, for example. I might provide students with information about topics commonly invoked in conversations about American culture: national holidays (e.g., Thanksgiving Day), important political and civic figures (e.g., George Washington), and significant events at the national level (e.g., The American Revolution).

This is easy to do, but is it enough? Current thinking on national cultures (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Holliday, 2011; Risager, 2012) draws our attention to the diverse ways people practice national cultural identities in real situations of everyday life (i.e., “on the ground”). When we leave the conversation about national cultures at the level of grand generalizations, we leave out the complexities that characterize the globalized, interconnected communities for which English language teachers prepare their students. One way to address this disconnect is to cultivate in preservice language teachers an inclusive approach to teaching the target culture.

Teacher education programs are ideal places for preservice teachers to reflect critically on how they conceptualize a target national culture and how they will represent that to their future students. One important exercise is for preservice teachers to carry out empirical mini-research projects on questions about U.S. culture that interest them. International preservice teachers in my context have explored a range of topics: gun culture, sports affinities, child rearing, law enforcement, and knowledge of U.S. historical figures, among others. Preservice teachers collect data through any combination of interviews, surveys, participant-observation, and online research; they analyze the data and present their findings in a brief oral presentation. What the exercise underscores for the preservice teachers is that variation at the ground level complicates the comfortable generalizations that many of them are used to. For example, one preservice teacher, investigating gun culture in the United States, reported being surprised at finding that not all of her interview participants appreciated guns. She also found in her data that attitudes toward guns correlated with the generational age of her participants.

The mini-research projects create a platform for us to enact an inclusive approach to culture teaching. In our discussion of their findings, we frame the counter-examples they found as variants in the diverse ways in which individuals realize American culture in their everyday lives. Far from dismissing them as outliers or “exceptions to the rule,” the preservice teachers are encouraged to incorporate the variations into their understanding of American culture in order to enrich the overall picture they can present to their students.

When preservice teachers are inclusive about cultural variation and diversity, they are compelled to acknowledge the important role that context plays in how people practice their cultural lives. Agar (1994) recommends that language teachers qualify their claims at the national level with the phrasing: “except when they are/do not” (e.g., *Americans are*

individualistic, except when they are not, or Americans speak directly, except when they do not). In light of their findings, preservice teachers begin to recognize the limitations of broad, general claims about national cultures.

It is through these kinds of exercises and classroom conversations that teacher education programs can better prepare preservice EFL teachers for culture teaching that is representative of the rich, multi-layered national cultural communities language students eventually will enter. Culture teaching for a globalized landscape calls for an inclusive lens that embraces, rather than erases, the complexities of cultural life on the ground.

References

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