

# MAKING CONNECTIONS AND COMPARISONS: INTEGRATING FOREIGN LANGUAGE WITH OTHER CORE CURRICULA



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Until recently, connecting with other disciplines has not been a strong point of foreign language curriculum and instruction. Planners in other core areas often fail to recognize the potential contributions that our field can provide. As the latest state frameworks and national standards attest, however, these interdisciplinary links can avail a powerful nexus for students among the issues that they study (see, for example, Nebraska Department of Education, 1996; National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996). Encouraging students to make these associations will prove invaluable, as foreign language education takes its much-coveted place among the core subjects offered in schools. Drawing from both standards and current interdisciplinary unit theory, this article first explores two necessary components of a theoretical framework helpful in designing and implementing appropriate curricular plans. Second, it presents aspects of a hypothetical unit appropriate for the foreign language class and explicates the issues under consideration. Finally, it discusses briefly the implications of the components for curriculum developers, teachers, and teacher educators.

## Background

Within the past decade, a growing number of scholars within the core content areas have included interdisciplinary curricula within the list of needed reforms (Lonning, DeFranco, and Weinland, 1998; National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 1991, 2000). During the same period, others have noted that the hurdles faced by planners in integrating aspects of course content constitute a challenge of considerable scope (Davison, Miller, and Methany, 1995; Lonning and DeFranco, 1997). Within the field of foreign language education, as well, some researchers have looked for ways to move effectively beyond the traditional barriers of the classroom, in terms of pedagogy and instructional content (Biron, 1998; Gehlker, Gozzi, and Zeller, 1999; Osborn, 1998; Overfield, 1997). These trends reflect the values offered by the framers of the *Standards*

for Foreign Language Learning:

The conscious effort to connect the foreign language curriculum with other parts of students' academic lives opens doors to information and experiences which enrich the entire school and life experience. Those connections flow from other areas to the foreign language classroom and also originate in the foreign language classroom to add unique experiences and insights to the rest of the curriculum. (National Standards for Foreign Language Education Project, 1996, p. 49)

Contemporary educational thought is decidedly pro-interdisciplinary, and as Shrum and Glisan (2000) point out, linking language with content in language courses is a worthwhile goal. However, desire alone is insufficient to direct efforts of this type to successful fruition. A model for initial planning stages of curriculum development in foreign language courses is crucial.

Jacobs (1989) produced a most influential volume related to designing and implementing effective integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum, noting "[i]n contrast to a discipline-field based view of knowledge, interdisciplinarity does not stress delineations but linkages" (p. 8). Ackerman (1989), within the same volume, proffered intellectual and practical criteria to be considered as a "framework for teachers and curriculum developers deliberating over whether to adopt a curriculum integration approach for some portion of their instructional program" (p. 25). Perhaps most influential within his discussion are the concepts of validity for, validity within, and validity beyond the discipline. Briefly stated, these criteria require an interdisciplinary theme or organizing center, one that is not a contrived connection but, rather, is important to the fields of study involved. Its function is to facilitate the learning of other concepts within the individual disciplines and to give the student a "metaconceptual bonus" (Ackerman, p. 29; see also p. 27-30). These criteria contain, however, both the genesis of new ways of thinking about such units and the limitations of current models for foreign language classes.

As Lonning, DeFranco, and Weinland (1998) point out, the "[s]election of appropriate themes seems to be the key to providing instruction that is potentially more

meaningful when taught in an interdisciplinary fashion than when the concepts are taught separately" (p. 312). The model that they propose for the integration of math and science includes moving from standards and state frameworks, through a revision and evaluation process in selecting an applicable theme, to a refinement of activities that balance mathematics and science content. In an analogous fashion, units in the language classroom can be interdisciplinary as they move from the usual textbook chapter topics to overarching and extendible curricular themes.

Yet, as the newest standards challenge both the traditional grammatical and even solely communicative approaches to foreign language education, curriculum planners may well find it perplexing to design an appropriate interdisciplinary theme for the foreign language class. Simply put, which themes or topics can be included under the broader traditional banner of "culture," for example? Given new directions in the field, how far is it appropriate to deviate from time-honored categories when they seem too rigid? Understandably, Shanahan's (1998) contention that there are minimally five major approaches to the concept of culture with relevance for the foreign language classroom points to a lack of absolute clarity about "culture" as the point of departure for non-linguistic course content. He includes capital "C" culture and lowercase "c" culture, cultural studies which include political aspects, cross-cultural communicative facets, and an ecumenical cultural approach which focuses on the affective rather than the oppositional approaches of the primarily cognitive notions of culture.

The uncertainty about defining culture arises with good reason, since for both language educators and others alike, it is described in diverse ways. Lessow-Hurley (1996) pointed out that:

Culture is something we all have but often find difficult to perceive. Culture, like language, is dynamic, changing to meet the needs of the people it serves. All cultures have coherent, shared systems of action and belief that allow people to function and survive. (p. 95)

Goodman (1992), on the other hand,

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points to culture as the “learned, socially-transmitted heritage of artifacts, knowledge, beliefs, values and normative expectations that provides the members of a particular society with the tools for coping with recurrent problems” (p. 338). Though the definitions offered by many are not mutually exclusive, such a “catch-all” category is difficult to use in planning interdisciplinary units with other core curricula, even given the theoretical power and applicability in those other fields of Ackerman’s validity criteria (1989) and Lonning, DeFranco, and Weinland’s (1998) theme based, disciplinary balance model.

## The Foreign Language Curricular Domain

It is quite difficult, if not impossible, to separate meaningfully the linguistic content of the foreign language course from its concomitant cultural components. As Kramsch (1993) explains:

One often reads in teachers’ guidelines that language teaching consists of teaching the four skills [reading, writing, listening, and speaking] ‘plus culture.’ This dichotomy of language and culture is an entrenched feature of language teaching around the world. It is part of the linguistic heritage of the profession. Whether it is called (Fr.) *civilisation*, (G.) *Landeskunde*, or (Eng.) *culture*, culture is often seen as mere information conveyed by the language, not as a feature of language itself; cultural awareness becomes an educational objective in itself, separate from language. If however, language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed both as enabling language proficiency and as being the outcome of reflection on language proficiency. (p. 8)

However, Moore’s (1996) research of foreign language classrooms supports the claim that culture is still treated in this context as a curricular “add-on,” rather than an integral course component. As new standards call for integrating aspects of the “Five C’s” (Communication, Comparisons, Communities, Cultures, and Connections) into language curricula, therefore, what is needed is a reinvigoration of curricular development, and particularly a reconsideration of issues appropriate to cover within a language class. The model proposed below serves as one theoretical starting point.

The curricular domain of the foreign language course can be represented as cylindrical (see Figure 1). As depicted, the course represents a progression from

first language use (L1) to second language (L2) use. Note well, however, that the movement is not linear. In fact, within the language course, most teachers will agree that the journey is recursive, involving much review and relearning. Both linguistic and “cultural” items are embedded in the curriculum, as well. Some of those cultural items may be historical, political, paralinguistic, behavioral, economic, or representative of other categories commonly referred to by practitioners in employing the term.

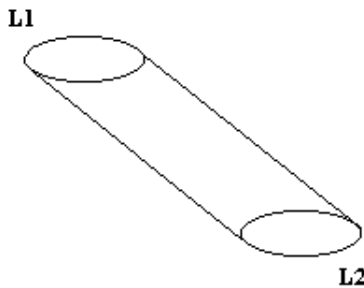


Figure 1. Curricular domain of the foreign language course.

It is particularly important to recognize, however, that some cultural items included in the foreign language curriculum are more comparable to those of the home culture,<sup>1</sup> whereas others resemble the cultural values of the target culture.<sup>2</sup> If one bisects the curricular domain (the cylinder) and allows for the dichotomous representation of target and home culture, a graphic representation of one model for interdisciplinary unit development emerges (see Figure 2). It is possible, certainly, that some curricular component would represent both target and home cultures, and the model will allow for evaluation of such issues. The model presented here advances the understanding of necessary conditions for interdisciplinary themes to be appropriate in the “core” language classroom. The constituent elements of the themes must include connective validity, comparative integrity, or both.

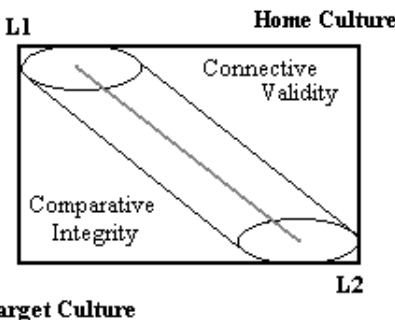


Figure 2. Model for the evaluation of elements for foreign language interdisciplinary units.

Both connective validity and comparative integrity are focused on achieving a balance among elements of disciplinary epistemology (see Reagan, 1999) and multicultural perspectives. Themes possessing both should resonate as “authentic” with both academics and members of the represented culture.

## Connective validity

To possess connective validity, the central theme and activities of an interdisciplinary unit including a foreign language class must embody the following aspects:

1. Integration of communicative aspects in the skills of reading, writing, listening, or speaking;
2. Subjectification<sup>3</sup> of the domestic (or “home”) perspective; and
3. Attention to the related global or local realities of pluralism, including any role played by language diversity.

These three aspects relate to connections among core subjects.

An integrated, interdisciplinary unit should focus on themes containing elements that can be investigated through sources in the foreign language classroom. Examples are documents, videos, audio recordings, and other media. The language teacher, using those realia as a communicative springboard, can then plan to include activities related to reading, writing, listening, or speaking in any combination. Although all of the activities need not specifically relate to the connections in other courses, the point of connection should involve the acquisition of information in the target language.

These examples assume that the perspective of the material taught largely represents the home cultural values. A theme that draws on international weather phenomena, for instance, may well include cultural aspects from the target language, but students’ understanding will derive mainly from their background knowledge grounded in their home culture. Examples of those aspects include proverbs or idiomatic expressions related to weather, or even culturally relevant concepts such as the German “Hitzeferien,” closing of school due to an excessively hot day. However, the influence of relative perspectives may be less pronounced in material that involves studying the natural world than, for example, studying family issues.

Nonetheless, the unit should also include an attempt to subjectify the “home” perspective. The presentation of material in neutral and natural frames supports what Giroux (1997) refers to as a “culture of

positivism” and leads students to understand, fallaciously, that knowledge is apolitical and beyond the influence of culture. As Giroux explains:

In the objectified forms of communication that characterize positivist public school pedagogy, it is difficult for students to perceive the socially constructed basis of classroom knowledge. The arbitrary division between objective and subjective knowledge tends to remain undetected by students and teachers alike. The results are not inconsequential. Thus, though the routines and practices of classroom teachers and the perceptions and behavior of their students are sedimented in varying layers of meaning, questions concerning how these layers of meaning are mediated and in whose interest they function are given little attention in the learning and research paradigms that dominate public school pedagogy at the present time. (p. 25)

In terms of interdisciplinary connective validity, foreign language courses which do not explore the nature of the “home” perspective as culturally mediated, run the very real risk of transmitting a tacit or explicit characterization of superiority related to the home perspective. Certainly, this is not intentional in most cases. Students grow to understand through the subjectification of the perspective that the information being presented represents a consensus or dominant opinion expressed through various social and cultural filters, not always an unbiased factual representation of the home perspective.

Finally, connective validity suggests that the theme relates to the realities of local and global pluralism. If the theme does not link to internationalization or cultural diversity in some identifiable way, then the connection to the language classroom is likely contrived. As an example, the letter *R* might be proposed as a unit theme. Certainly one could practice words beginning with *R* in the target language and attempt to subjectify the curriculum by noting that the translations of some words beginning in *R* in fact start with a different letter in the L1, thus indicating that there is nothing inherent in the objects themselves that explains their “R-ness.” However, the theme fails at the third point since the letter has no real

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connection to the realities of global pluralism and thus should be rejected.

### Comparative integrity

Comparative integrity suggests that the unit themes or material include:

1. An *emic*, or insider’s, representation of the cultural information;
2. An avoidance of bifurcative categorization (for example, “we/they”); and
3. Articulation of multiple perspectives within the “home” culture.

These criteria can and should be addressed within all core areas, including language. Comparative integrity is vital in unit development, as shown by Wong’s (1993) caution regarding comparative approaches to literature:

A key instructional means of eliciting insight being comparison and contrast, at every turn we need to decide what to compare a marginalized literature to, and to what end. If this is done from a fallacious assumption of one’s impartiality, however well-intentioned, the purpose of broadening the curriculum, namely, to honor the articulation of previously suppressed subjectivities, will be seriously undermined. (p. 112)

In a related vein, several scholars have pointed recently to the inclusion of culturally reductionist or misrepresentative elements within language curricula and texts (Brosh 1997; Osborn 1999; Reagan and Osborn 1998; Wiczorek 1994). In summary, these examinations have called into question the nature of characterizations of “foreignness” within language classrooms. Osborn (2000) for example, raises concerns about English language/American synonymy and geographic fragmentation. The former refers to the way the English language and the categorization “American” are treated as synonyms in language curricula and texts, as in this brief example taken from a curriculum guide: “The students will demonstrate how non-verbal communications of Italian-speaking persons and Americans differ by preparing short skits” (Newark Board of Education, 1994, n.p.) .

Geographic fragmentation refers to the depiction of speakers of non-English languages as living in “communities” somehow separate from the American mainstream. As Osborn (2000) explains in reference to textbook maps highlighting states and cities in the U.S. where the “foreign” languages are spoken:

Though arguably such depictions are not blatantly inaccurate, they are certainly misleading. By appearing to limit

linguistic diversity to certain geographical areas in the United States, and failing to carve analogous “holes” in countries where pockets of, by way of example, indigenous language speakers may live, the foreign language textbooks seem to fragment the United States alone into areas of significant linguistic diversity (e.g., part of the *mundo hispánico*). Further, by ignoring linguistic diversity found in every urban area of the United States, the impact may be even more significant, since native speakers of Spanish or other non-English languages who live in urban, but non-highlighted areas (notably Washington, D.C. and Hartford, CT, for example), would appear to be the proverbial outsiders within. (p. 36)

Comparisons of information that is cross-cultural in nature must be evaluated with certain diligence to preclude the tendency toward exacerbating cultural divisiveness.

Language teachers employ the techniques of culture capsules and culture assimilators to highlight cultural issues in the language class, but these techniques tend to stress comparison and contrast of differences, rather than focusing on a metaconceptual whole. Comparison and contrast can become unwittingly oppositional without intending to marginalize a particular viewpoint. Consider the way in which one textbook explained differences in the concept of time:

When invited to dinner, people from Spanish-speaking countries might ask if the time is *hora americana* or *hora latina* in order to know whether or not to be punctual. . . . Which attitude toward time—the North American or the Latin American—makes you feel more comfortable? (Jarvis, Birckbichler, Bonin, & Shih, 1989, p. 49)

Though universals are not likely to be found, the *emic*, or insider’s perspective is critical for comparative integrity. No matter how well intentioned, if the classroom activities, discussions, or presentations represent the target cultural perspective as its agent (rather than allowing for an *emic* representation), the resultant depictions likely are both self-serving and reductionist. As in the case of naturalistic research, it is often difficult to capture the *emic* perspective. Nonetheless, integrated and interdisciplinary units in the foreign language classroom containing matter closely related to the target culture should strive to do so.

The avoidance of bifurcation means eliminating “us” and “them” categories. Though seldom as blatant, assumptions regarding the “American” versus “foreign” perspective constitute the same problem. As dis-

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*...the emic, or insider's perspective is critical for comparative integrity.*

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cussed earlier, there is a tendency within language classes in the United States to treat the medium "English language" and the descriptor "American" as somehow synonymous. These categories, obviously, ignore the mosaic of diversity found domestically. This synonymy becomes even more complicated if you compare "English language," "American language," and language varieties (such as dialects) which arguably are quite different and can compromise the educational value of interdisciplinary units within the foreign language classroom.

Finally, by drawing students' attention to the multiple perspectives within the home culture, curricular planners provide a dialectical understanding of cultural mediation. Simply put, no cultural issue is one dimensional, nor is any culture monovocal. Tensions and resistance exist in all cultural matters, and exploring such facets with students is centrally important to the integrity of the comparison.

### **Applications of the model**

Having explored the criteria that should be adopted for the foreign language class by curriculum planners wishing to incorporate the power afforded by integrated, interdisciplinary units, we now move to a discussion of a hypothetical example. The value of this form of unit development has been established (Jacobs, 1989; Lonning, DeFranco, and Weinland, 1998). The intellectual criteria proposed by Ackerman (1989) are effective for use in math, language arts, social studies, and the sciences. As foreign language courses, however, become part of the core and thus extend the parameters of our curricular domain, the model proposed below will enable curriculum specialists to include appropriate connections and comparisons beyond the traditional course domain.

The theme of *transportation*, for example, can be a worthwhile interdisciplinary focus. While this article does not attempt to describe complete units for other core areas, it does include possible connections for those fields. For example, in social studies courses, students can examine the impact of transportation on civilization, warfare, social relations, and commerce. Literature courses can study the role of transportation in a specific genre or set of related works. Distances and times can be calculated in a mathematics course. A physics teacher might have students construct train bridges and

model airplanes to illustrate the role physics plays in transportation.

To see how foreign language courses approach such a theme, let us examine a hypothetical unit, bearing in mind that it is the overarching theme of transportation, not the particulars of transportation presented in the other fields, that is important. Language teachers or curriculum developers should focus on the interrelationship of language, culture, and transportation. What do we treat in language classes relevant to transportation? Asking directions, reading train or bus schedules, paying fare, obtaining a driver's license, and many other elements are part of such a unit. The treatment of these and other issues should be evaluated in light of the criteria of connective validity and comparative integrity.

Connective validity can be partly achieved through the use of realia to integrate communicative aspects in the skills of reading, writing, listening, or speaking. Students can examine train schedules, airport information, etc. Information gap activities, readings, and videos, as examples, can also be integrated in the unit, as can the vast resources of the internet. Subjectification of the domestic (or "home") perspective is achieved by recognizing that cultural differences reflect differing perspectives on transportation. For example, the geographical breadth of the United States influences how people here perceive the importance of airline transportation compared to travel by train. As well, the high cost of owning, insuring, and maintaining a personal automobile makes mass transit a necessity for many. In contrast, in European settings the train is more likely the preferred mode of transportation within a single country by persons representing multiple socioeconomic strata. Idiomatic expressions, such as the German "punctual as the federal train" relate to these cultural differences, and should be reflected within the criteria of comparative integrity. The insider's perspective of the importance of train punctuality is likely related, in part, to the fact that so many Germans depend on mass transportation for everyday travel. Cultural pride in efficiency may be related as well.

Finally, related global or local realities of pluralism, including any role played by language diversity, might be addressed in terms of the "shrinking world." Students should understand that advances in technology, including the internet, have led to a global marketplace. As such, international transportation becomes increasingly important as goods and services are exchanged worldwide.

Turning to comparative integrity, an *emic* representation of the cultural information

includes the values of the target culture related to transportation. Differences in the way drivers' licenses are issued, including the reasons for those dissimilarities, the use of mass transportation by all socio-economic classes, and the comparative cost of gasoline are issues deserving treatment. However, teachers should avoid setting up bifurcations of "us and them," since cultural influences of the target culture can be found within the United States as well. German-Americans and *others* in the United States may well share the values of the target culture related to efficient transportation. Bifurcative categorization tends to depict those Americans as somehow "foreign." Articulating the multiple perspectives within the "home" culture, including the concerns of environmentalists about pollution, the logistical need for mass transit in the urban environment, and related issues will also serve to strengthen the integrity of comparisons between home and target cultures. They demonstrate that the United States is neither monovocal nor monocultural concerning issues of transportation.

### **Implications for the field**

As curriculum planners move toward interdisciplinary thematic units, they strengthen students' educational experiences by helping them break down artificial disciplinary barriers imposed by past educational practice. At the same time, however, reaching across disciplines must be approached from a carefully planned and thoughtful attempt to balance the exigencies of academic rigor and sensitivity to realities of cultural pluralism. The politics of school knowledge will continue to influence curricular decisions, and an awareness of the issues raised in developing cross-cultural understanding will empower developers to move forward in a most effective and ethical manner.

Teacher educators and teachers can begin to develop a critical awareness of instructional issues as well. In order to equip students to live in an increasingly diverse society, *how* we present material related to cultural comparisons and academic connections is as important as *what*

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we choose to present. Language classes as part of the core curriculum will indeed be faced with challenges as we broaden our own horizons in addition to those of our students. Interdisciplinary thematic units can serve as a powerful tool for connections and comparisons as we fulfill the agenda set by the newest and most ambitious standards.

## Conclusion

It is unquestionably ironic that second (foreign) language education has come late to the realm of interdisciplinary unit development, since by its very nature, the foreign language field bridges disciplines. The category "culture," in common use, has included strong components of studies of history, political science, food science, literature, economics, media studies, and so forth. Though collaborations with other disciplinary specialists within the academic setting may seem restricted by students' lack of fluency required to discuss complex topics in the second language, in reality the newest standards and mandates provide multiple opportunities for connections and comparisons in the second language classroom. The integration of second language education into the core will be enhanced as practitioners in the field become skilled in curricular development.

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## NOTES

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1 By the term "home culture," I mean the specific cultural context of the classroom and school. It may vary by geographical location within the country and even by other, sociologically relevant, factors. The term should not be considered synonymous with any singular "American" construction.

2 By the term target culture, I refer to the multiple cultural aspects attributable to native speakers of the target language both in the United States and abroad.

3 Subjectification in this sense is to make curricular elements relate to properties or specific conditions of the mind as distinguished from general or universal experience; relating to the nature of an object as it is known in the mind as distinct from a thing in itself (see Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language entries for *subjectify* and *subjective*. Compare with *objectify*). For an excellent discussion of the impact of objectification on curricula and pedagogy see Giroux 1997).