

Developing Cross-Cultural Reflections: Exploring French Culture through Stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

The foreign language teaching profession widely recognizes the central place of culture in foreign language learning and the need for learners to develop intercultural understanding and cross-cultural awareness (Agar, 1994; Block, 2003; Omaggio Hadley, 2001; Schulz, 2007; Su, 2011). But how should foreign language teachers go about it? Sercu (2002) observed that the tendency when teaching culture is to focus on facts and information using a teacher-centered approach rather than a student-centered hypotheses-refining approach more conducive to developing critical perspectives. This presentation introduces a series of tasks, designed for the early stages of French language instruction and articulated around the notion of cultural stereotypes. The goal is to propose a practical approach to broaden learners' frame of references, foster interest in the French culture, and encourage critical reflection by providing opportunities for teachers and learners to jointly critique and assess stereotypes across cultures. Stereotypes provide a rich source for the exploration of the notion of culture and the promotion of cross-cultural reflections and understanding in the foreign language classroom because most often stereotyped images of a culture are rendered possible based on information available in that culture. When addressed and brought up to light, stereotypes can trigger a wide range of responses because whether or not they subscribe to them, learners are aware of their native culture' stereotypes regarding the target culture. The proposed tasks are designed to involve both learners and teachers in developing progressively during the first-semester of French instruction a cross-cultural awareness, thus providing a student-centered learning experience where learners and instructors are both providers of knowledge. Using collectively co-constructed images and cultural representations present in their native culture as a foundation, the tasks move from collaborative discovery in the classroom, using songs and cartoons, to increasingly individual creative exploration through digital storytelling outside the classroom.