

Review of *Cultura-Inspired Intercultural Exchanges: Focus on Asian and Pacific Languages*
(《Cultura-Inspired Intercultural Exchanges: Focus on Asian and Pacific Languages》书评)

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1. Introduction

Cultural knowledge and communicative skills have become increasingly important in the field of language instruction. Interacting with cultural competence figures in four of five World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, namely Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities, published by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)¹. Language instructors have felt stronger demand to integrate culture in language classes. The *Cultura* project, created in 1997 by French instructors at MIT (Furstenberg, Levet, and Waryn, 1997), revolutionized pedagogical approaches for cultivating intercultural competencies in foreign language classrooms. It has become one of the most influential telecollaboration models designed to develop intercultural learning within a language class. When it was first developed, the *Cultura* project was set up as a telecollaboration project that facilitated culture learning for MIT students learning French in the US and French university students learning English. In the classic version of the model, students at each site respond to a set of questionnaires that consist of three types of tasks: word association, sentence completion, and reactions to hypothetical scenarios in their own language. Then, students perform comparative analysis of their own entries and those from the other site, hypothesizing the reasons behind any differences, and testing their hypothesis through interacting with peers and course materials. Students expand their understanding of the hidden

¹ c.f. <http://www.actfl.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/World-ReadinessStandardsforLearningLanguages.pdf>

characteristics of their own and the target culture, develop curiosity and openness in the process of the discovery, and themselves become cultural anthropologists.

The *Cultura* pedagogical model of language and culture teaching has inspired many similar projects, reported mostly through edited chapters and journal articles (e.g., Chun and Wade, 2004; O'Dowd, 2003) and in the context of European language classrooms. This edited volume expands the reach of the model with a *focus on Asian and Pacific Languages*, providing a welcome contribution to the literature of the *Cultura* model and enriching the literature on teaching and research in intercultural competencies. The greatest strength of this volume is its documentation of *Cultura* implementation and research on learning gains in three Asian and Pacific Languages, namely Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino. Not only does this volume provide theoretical guidance on designing and researching the effect of *Cultura* implementation on language and intercultural competencies; it is also very beneficial to language instructors who desire to initiate or are in the process of implementing *Cultura*-inspired projects. The task descriptions, the explanations of the motivations behind task selection, the task guidelines and instructions to students, assessment options, reflections on challenges, and speculations on possible solutions provide a menu of options which practitioners can directly adopt or adapt. More importantly, the message throughout the volume is that perfect success is not required, or even to be expected, on one's first attempt at implementing the *Cultura* model. The struggles and challenges shared in the volume's chapters are not likely to deter any educator who is truly interested in enhancing cultural education for their students. Quite on the contrary, this volume is likely to encourage the educators who are undecided about experimenting with intercultural telecollaboration to get their feet wet with the support of the powerful *Cultura* model, especially educators teaching Asian and Pacific languages.

In this review, I first synthesize elements of the volume chapters that may benefit language instructors and action-researchers in their own implementation and research of *Cultura*-based models. Following that, I provide summaries and critiques for each chapter. Last, I reflect on what I see missing in this volume and share some recommendations on future practice. I conclude with an overall evaluation of the volume.

2. Volume synthesis

One big takeaway from reading this volume is: **There is no one way to teach culture and there is no one way to implement *Cultura*.** For foreign language instructors, this section of the review lists the collaboration partners and sites, language used in the exchange, exchange and reflection tasks, and challenges reported in different

projects. For language action-researchers, I summarize theoretical frameworks, constructs and effects investigated, and analysis methods across empirical studies reported in the volume.

First of all, in terms of collaboration partners and sites, the volume provides examples of telecollaboration between two programs in one university (Chinese students in the MBA program and students in the Chinese program at a US university in Chapter 5), two sites in one country (Filipino programs at two US universities in Chapter 6), between the US and a European country (e.g., France in Chapter 1 and Germany in Chapter 4), between the US and sites in Asia (e.g., Taiwan in Chapter 4, China in Chapter 5, and Japan in Chapter 7).

Not all projects use learners' input from one site as authentic language material for the other site, as is the practice in "classic" *Cultura*. For example, Chapter 4 reports an exchange between Taiwanese students and French students in which learners at both sites used English, their target language, as their medium of communication -- with the result that the entire exchange was conducted in "learner language." Chapter 5 describes how learners of Filipino language from two US universities across the Pacific used their target language, which was also their heritage language, in an exploration of Filipino-American identity.

Different projects used different arrays of exchange and reflection tasks. The most prevalent of these are input tasks (word association and sentence completion tasks), the analysis of similarities and differences, and hypothesis stipulation. Other exchange tasks reported include self-introduction (e.g., the "About-Me Bag" in Chapter 3); scenario interpretation; cultural artifact comparison; and reflection on news or press articles, pictures, videos, and films. The original questionnaire items used in MIT's *Cultura* were adapted to fit differing instructional foci (e.g., business context in Chapter 5) and existing curriculum thematic topics (e.g., family, school in Chapter 7). The descriptions of the tasks are detailed enough for language instructors to replicate. Chapters 5 to 7 on Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese language projects also provide screen shots of online forums including instructions. Chapter 7 has extensive appendices detailing goals and instructions for each task in both English and Japanese. These are valuable resources.

Another very useful component in all the projects reported is the authors' reflections on challenges in implementation, which include difficulty in cross-site communication due to learners' lower level language proficiency, decreased student motivation over time, cross-site school scheduling issues, technology issues, large class sizes, unmanageable numbers of postings, and course content issues. These challenges on the one hand remind the reader of the complexity of *Cultura*-type telecollaborative

exchanges, and on the other hand provide comforting reassurance that it is okay to experience challenges and make continuous improvements to one's project.

Researchers in second language studies and action-researchers may note with interest that the predominant theoretical framework reported in the volume is Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence (ICC) framework (Chapters 1, 3, 4 and 7), followed by Byram and Fleming's (1998) and Kramsch's (1998) concept of "intercultural speakers" (Chapters 3, 4, and 7). Chapter 5 borrowed Kramsch's (1993) idea of the language classroom as cultural laboratory and culture as an integral part of communicative competence – linguaculture (Krasner, 1999). Chapter 3 used constructs from the field of psychology (i.e., extimacy and exotopia) to explore learning gains in cultural understanding and discovery.

The commonly investigated constructs that manifest the effectiveness of *Cultura* include: students' ability to understand their own culture and the other culture, exploration of cultural identity, ability to interact with cross-cultural counterparts, linguistic competency, and metalinguistic reflective ability. Cultural knowledge and skills under investigation include cognitive and affective skills. Cognitive skills investigated include: ability to describe, explain, interpret, relate, compare and contrast, form hypotheses, and discover hidden characteristics of one's own culture through the eyes of others. Affective skills include: willingness and ability to adjust one's assumptions and interpretations, curiosity and openness to alternative perspectives, willingness to suspend belief or disbelief, and valuing and respecting others' perspectives. The most frequently investigated learning gain in the volume is cognitive cultural knowledge and skills, namely, the ability to describe, interpret, compare and contrast, form hypotheses, and discover. Chapters 4 and 6 also investigate the effect of media.

When examining the process and effect of *Cultura* projects, the main analytical methods reported are: word frequency tallies, online forum posting tallies, discourse analysis in general, and speech act analysis in particular. The data collected include students' postings, teacher observations, and student reflections and evaluations of their experience. All projects collected multiple sources of evidence and provided examples of learning gains. Unfortunately, none of the projects reported systematic evaluation of each student's learning gain, so it is unclear whether all students in the projects achieved the learning targets or outcomes.

3. Chapter summary and critiques

The volume starts with an *Editor's Introduction*, which provides a bird's-eye view of the volume, following which the volume is organized in three major parts that

comprises seven chapters: Part I: Introduction to the *Cultura* Model; Part II: Research on Acquisition of Intercultural Communicative Competence in *Cultura*-Based Models; and Part III: Best Practices in Implementing the *Cultura* Model for Asian and Pacific Languages.

The *Editor's Introduction* gives the context of how this volume was motivated, specifies its contribution and the gaps that it aims to fill in the literature, situates the *Cultura* model in the larger context of telecollaboration, summarizes the strengths and limitations of *Cultura*-based exchanges, provides a summary for each chapter, synthesizes commonalities among the projects, and highlights the specific findings for Asian and Pacific languages reported in the volume. The summaries of strengths, limitations, commonalities, and Asian and Pacific languages findings are particularly insightful.

The two chapters of Part I introduce the *Cultura* model through very different approaches. The first chapter, written by two of the original founders of the model, Giberte Furstenberg and Sabine Levet, features a biographic description of the initiation and evolution of the *Cultura* model and provides reflections and recommendations for its implementation. The lengthy name of the chapter gives a good idea of the content: "*Cultura: From Then to Now. Its Origins, Key Features, Methodology, and How It Has Evolved. Reflections on the Past and Musings on the Future.*" This chapter is a must-read for anyone who is interested in the research or implementation of the *Cultura* model. Not only did the authors document the key features of the model but also the motivations for each feature, including lessons learned from the past and how the features of *Cultura* have been modified and added to over time.

The chapter's abundant insights will inspire great respect among readers for the authors' design choices and their recommendations on how *Cultura* can be successfully implemented. The recommendation that struck me was the paramount importance of scaffolding (e.g., providing very specific instructions and guidelines). Another important recommendation (clearly based on the authors' past experience) is that teachers prepare students for interaction styles in the target culture that they may not be comfortable with. For example, the authors would sometimes give examples of "French students being 'overly' critical of each other, to show that this is not directed at them personally, but that 'being critical' could be viewed as a cultural trait" (p.15.)

The authors provide valuable assessment strategies for *Cultura*-based exchanges as well, including using portfolios to assess attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Such portfolios can include students' reflection logs, essays to reflect upon and synthesize what they have learned, and end-of-semester presentations. The authors' suggestions for

utilizing peer assessment and feedback represent best practices in the world of learning assessment.

In addition to the above, Chapter 1 provides an abundance of useful insights related to the integration of online exchange (forum and/or chat) material into classroom instruction, managing student roles, and sustaining interest and goodwill between exchange partners.

Chapter 2: A Meta-Synthesis of Cultura-Based Projects is the second chapter of Part I. Though it purports to be a meta-synthesis of *Cultura*-based projects, it is more of a technical report of survey results collected from instructors who have previously conducted *Cultura*-inspired projects. Results from 18 survey respondents, including recommendations for methodological flexibility in adapting *Cultura* to different educational contexts, challenges encountered in various projects, and strategies for implementation, are echoed in the following chapters. The results provide a big picture of the array of *Cultura* implementation options. The quantitative and qualitative responses were meticulously analyzed but the presentation of data is distracting. The many charts and tables in this chapter seem disproportionate given the small number of responses.

Part II of the volume consists of two chapters (Chapter 3 and 4) that represent the kind of research on acquisition of intercultural communicative competence in *Cultura*-inspired models. These two chapters provide example research frameworks, research methods, data collection and analysis means that can be used for documenting and researching the impact of the *Cultura* model on language competencies and intercultural competency development.

Chapter 3: A Tale of Two Cultures investigates how a *Cultura*-inspired exchange between English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Taiwan and France fostered the development of intercultural competency, measured by psychological constructs of *exitimacy* (Lacan, 1986) and *exotopia* (Bakhtain, 1984), as well as Byram and Fleming's (1998) definition of "intercultural speakers." Learners at two sites completed tasks including self-introduction, word association, art selection and explanation, and news article reading and reflection. The project report concludes with an account of a visit by two Taiwanese students to France during which they demonstrated their competence as "intercultural speakers."

The authors used two main research methods in their investigation: word frequency counts of social process words (e.g., family, friends) and personal pronouns, as well as deductive content analysis. The analysis showed that, through the exchange, students were able to discover the aspects of culture that were valuable to them and the

hidden aspect of culture made transparent to them through their cross-cultural partners' observations. In other words, they were able to discover the parameters and the contour of their own culture through the comparative observation made by themselves and their cross-cultural partners, a demonstration of exotopia. The two Taiwanese students visiting France demonstrated their competency as "inter-cultural speakers" through discovering and explaining the differences between the foreign culture and their native culture, though no examples were given showing students being able to "accept that difference and see the common humanity beneath it" (Byram and Fleming, 1998, p. 8), another key aspect of the construct of the "intercultural speaker."

The authors' effort in bringing the theoretical framework from another discipline (psychology) and the use of social process word frequency analysis is refreshing and truly commendable. As a reader, I feel the author can further enhance the study in the following ways: First, fully unpack the psychology construct of interest. The meaning of extimacy and its relationship with exotopia remain elusive throughout the chapter. This is probably because of the abstractness of the construct and its multifaceted nature. Does it mean identification or discovery of things or values important to oneself? Does it mean valuing "otherness" and accept others' perspectives? Does it mean any internalization process, using one's own experience and background to interpret what they see in other cultures? Or does it mean all of the above? If so, what are the examples for each of these facets? Second, social process word frequency counts may provide some sense of the "unsaid" cultural behavior or value. Providing example sentences in which the words occur may make the arguments more convincing.

The volume's fourth chapter, *Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence Through Online Exchanges* by Dorothy Chun, reports on a project that explored the manifestation of ICC as defined by Byram (1997) in a telecollaborative exchange. The exchange was between 23 university students in the US studying German sociolinguistics and 23 university students in Germany studying English. In the chapter, the author first reviews the literature concerning the construct of ICC, examples of how ICC has been examined in studies of telecollaboration, and assessment of ICC. The author addresses two research questions: (1) how does the language style produced in the asynchronous forum differ from that produced in synchronous chats, and (2) how do learners demonstrate ICC through using speech acts? Learners in this study engaged in three main exchange activities: (1) word association; (2) an asynchronous forum that compared word-association responses from the students at the two sites; (3) synchronous chats.

The author analyzed data using four methods: (1) word frequency counts of the forum entries and mean length per sentence statistics; (2) sentence type (statement versus

question) analysis; (3) discourse analysis in general and speech act analysis in particular; (4) comparing learners' reaction to the chat experience with the discourse analysis.

The results show that, relatively speaking, learners produced more questions in the chat than in their forum postings, indicating a more dynamic interaction and exchange in the synchronous chat than in the forum. The speech acts that emerged in the exchange exemplified ICC in the following aspects: showing curiosity and interest in the other culture, reflecting on one's own culture, and maintaining conversation involvement. The author gives concrete language samples purporting to exemplify each of these speech acts; however, it is not clear whether and how the usage of these speech acts demonstrates ICC. There is no evaluative analysis showing when the usage of the speech acts demonstrates desired language output. There are also no examples showing students' gain and growth in ICC through the process of the telecollaborative exchange. The only example that shows that students are reflecting on their own culture and have changed their attitudes is in this truncated quote in the conclusion section: "*I [used to think] that Americans...but maybe we are more similar to the Germans [after all].*"

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 constitute Part III of the volume: *Best Practices in Implementing the Cultura Model for Asian and Pacific Languages*. Chapter 5: *Intercultural Learning on the Web: Reflections on Practice* details the exchanges in the "China-USA Business Café" between Chinese and American business students through two cohorts in 2008 and 2009. The 2008 exchange took place between seven Chinese business majors visiting the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM) and 10 business majors at UHM. The 2009 exchange involved 18 UHM students taking Business Chinese and 15 students in a Chinese vocational college. Both cohorts completed a series of tasks: word association, sentence completion, situation response, comparison of authentic language materials and reflection. Throughout the activities that promoted cultural discovery, students could also participate in a "Working with language" forum and further explore their interests in language and culture and build social networks through an open discussion forum.

The projects and the pedagogies reported in this chapter have several distinct features:

1. Linguistic knowledge was explicitly addressed through in-time teaching and learning. When the students questioned the grammatical correctness of the authentic input, in a job ad for example, instructors quickly acknowledged students' observations of language usage and addressed their confusion about the difference between the "canonical" language they had learned in school and the "real-life" language seen in the authentic artifacts.

2. Differentiated instruction, i.e., setting different goals for learners with different language proficiencies. For example, learners at the ACTFL Intermediate Low level of Chinese were asked to learn 10 new words and use them in complete sentences to describe cultural discoveries, while Advanced level learners were asked to write a series of linked paragraphs to describe cultural similarities and differences, to hypothesize the underlying cultural perspectives, and to reflect on how their participation in the exchange affected their cultural knowledge and their behavior in the target cultural context.

In this project, student learning gains can be categorized in terms of both linguistic gains and ICC gains. In terms of language, there are examples of metalinguistic awareness taken from postings related to word association (e.g., recognizing the phenomenon of polysemy in English words) and discovery of the differences between grammatical structures in the authentic context versus textbook examples. In terms of ICC, there are examples showing students' ability to describe similarities and differences of cultural artifacts in the target and native cultures, and to hypothesize and explore the possible sociocultural bases for the observed similarities and differences. Students' reflection and questioning of their own understanding of cultural values served to expand that understanding, thus achieving *Cultura's* identified goal of "seeing oneself through the eyes of others." One example reflection is: "*It seems that meaning of a 'free country' is more complex than I once thought. However, in business, sometimes what appears to be 'free[dom]' is really just a lack of oversight in the regulatory policies of the country.*"

The authors acknowledge the challenges posed by learners' low level of reading proficiency, which prevented learners of Chinese from reaping full benefit from the exchange. Organizational challenges are also acknowledged.

Chapter 6: UH-UCLA Filipino Heritage Café and the Fil-Ams' Quest for Identity, is another interesting adaptation of the *Cultura* model representing a collaborative project between two university sites (University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and University of California, Los Angeles) that involve learners of one language – Filipino. The project intends to help students explore their cultural identity. Students at both sites completed a series of tasks: self-introduction, word association, sentence completion, and reflection on materials in three topic areas: Filipino family material, images of Filipinos in the media, and celebrations and traditions. Students summarized and analyzed similarities and differences in perspectives posted online and discussed some of the topics in the classroom. A frequency count of the postings showed that the forums functioned as a place for reflection and analysis, but not so much as a venue of interactive communication. The author also noted differences in the quality and quantity of postings based on student characteristics such as gender and status in the university

(undergraduate versus graduate students). Students' evaluation and comments showed evidence of learning gains in understanding the multiplicity of voices regarding identity, culture, and beliefs, as well as in cognitive and writing skills to perform comparisons, form hypotheses, and explore questions of culture.

Chapter 8: A High School Japanese and English Intercultural Exchange Project: Design, Implementation, and Evaluation, described a telecollaboration and intercultural exchange project between high school students at two sites, one in the US, learning Japanese, and one in Japan, learning English. There were over 60 students at each site in this project. The projects clearly specified learning outcomes and the appendices provide the actual task instructions in both English and Japanese, which are a great resource for language educators. In the project, students first gave a self-introduction in the "Online Café" forum. Then they were asked to complete a questionnaire of word association and sentence completion, an analysis of similarities and differences, and a self-reflection in each of the thematic units (e.g., family, school). Due to technological issues and school calendar schedule differences, only two out of five thematic units were carried out. The end-of-course evaluation showed the benefit of the exchange in increasing students' interest and motivation in language learning for the US students and awareness of cultural diversity for the Japanese students. The challenges that the project experienced are illuminating: students' involvement and forum postings dwindled as the course progressed and the reflective postings did not show high-level analytic skills. The authors attributed this to the following factors: forum participation had a minimal impact on students' grades; group sizes were unmanageable, and the large number of postings hindered interactions (and thus student motivation); students often targeted instructors rather than their cross-cultural counterparts as the audience for their postings; students lacked adequate critical lenses through which they might conduct textual analysis; and students' low level of language proficiency demotivated them in comprehending authentic writings from their peers. The importance of instructors' scaffolding to help develop students' intellectual maturity and language proficiency is emphasized in the chapter. Another insightful observation is that students are much better able to perform comparison and reflection tasks when instructors use video prompts.

4. Summary of limitations and recommendations

After reading the volume, I felt that there remained several topics that I wished the authors had addressed: (1) how did the author-instructors themselves navigate cross-regional and cross-cultural communication and collaboration? (2) One of *Cultura's* strengths is to encourage students to explore, reflect, and discover cultural nuances on their own. However, it is possible for cultural stereotypes to form in such exchanges if

students take a one-sided view of cultural practices and phenomena. There is only a brief mention of this topic in Chapter 1 and the discussion of this topic is missing from the rest of the chapters. (3) *Cultura* represents a great advance in terms of presenting students the opportunity to interact authentically in the target language. I would love to see further expansion of the model by engaging students in real-world projects that have authentic audiences and meaningful impact in the world.

Last, I would hope to see stronger assessment. Assessment remains a weak link in the research of telecollaboration projects and this is true with the projects described in the volume as well. First of all, the learning outcomes can be made clearer. When complex psychological constructs are used (e.g., ICC), the constructs should be unpacked into operational outcomes in terms of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that language educators expect their students to gain by the end of the exchange. Byram's (2000) categories of intercultural competence cited in Chapter 1 provide some guidance (p. 17). As discussed earlier, I observe five domains of learning gains: knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to one's own culture; knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to the other culture (or target culture); cross-cultural interaction skills; language use skills; and metalinguistic reflection skills. Within each domain, we can specify the abilities that we want students to demonstrate at different levels. In the culture related domain, at a lower level, students should be able to describe, list, and explain; and at a higher level, students should be able to demonstrate curiosity, suspend one's beliefs, and remain open to alternative world views. An example high level interaction skill can be stated as: Students are able to acknowledge where the interlocutor comes from, synthesize and focus the discussion, and provide opportunity and encouragement for the interlocutor's further input. The corresponding language skills can be paraphrasing and summarizing. Students can demonstrate metalinguistic skills by explaining the language use patterns they observed in the interaction.

The second assessment related issue that deserves attention is the alignment between the outcomes and the learning activities. For example if the outcome is for students to be able to generate hypothesis for the observed cultural differences, the activities can be asking students to speculate social, historical, cultural reasons for the cultural differences between the target and native cultures on the forum. To further enhance the achievement of this outcome, the instructors can provide very specific instructions (e.g., "Give two examples," "elaborate with personal experience or historical events"). The instructors may also provide an example and sample languages that can be used in forming hypothesis (e.g., hypothesis, speculation, wonder, could it be, one possible reason can be). Misalignment between the activities and the intended outcome is often the reason for lack of evidence of achievement. If the outcome is for students to be able to *accept* cultural difference and *see the common humanity* beneath it, and the

activity is about *describing* the differences, it is unlikely that students will produce the desired responses. Adopting and adapting *Cultura* learning activities need to be intentional and scaffolded to provide a clear learning path toward outcome achievement.

The third assessment related issue is grading. In most projects reported in the volume, students were graded based on their posting completion, rather than the quality of their postings. This may contribute to the diminishing student motivation reported in several projects (e.g., Chapter 6 and 7). To deal with large number of student postings, instructors can use student reflective learning logs, essays, and presentations that summarize learning achievement as recommended in Chapter 1. Asking students to do self-assessment and peer assessment as suggested in Chapter 1 is a great strategy too. The key is to have students reflect on their learning gain of the target outcomes. Providing evaluation criteria and samples of student work at different quality levels will enhance the consistency of grading. Systematic evaluation of each student against each learning outcome will allow us to conclude how many students have achieved each of the target outcomes and whether it is good enough.

Despite the limitations discussed above, overall, this volume presents a significant contribution to the research and practice in teaching intercultural competence in language classrooms, especially for Asian and Pacific Languages. The insights and reflections from *Cultura*'s originators and practitioners are especially invaluable to fellow language educators interested in teaching culture.

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