

SOCIAL OBSTACLES TO INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN AMERICA'S LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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In contrast with debates over language pedagogy or aptitude, this paper examines seven societal obstacles which impact the success of classroom language learning and the development of intercultural competence in American language classrooms. These include expectations for teacher preparation, language proficiency and target language use; curricular legitimacy; and school and home language climate. It is argued that these first six obstacles ultimately stem from the seventh: The challenge of sensitizing Americans to the value of seeing the world through the language-culture of another. The paper then discusses implications of this situation and offers potential, preliminary solutions for creating a more effective climate for developing language proficiency and intercultural competence in America's language classrooms, although it is unlikely that substantive progress can be made without acknowledgment of the role of national linguistic identity.

INTRODUCTION

Although plurilingualism and multiculturalism are widespread in many parts of the world (Grosjean, 1982; Lüdi & Py, 2002), the U.S., despite recent renewed lip service, lags behind in developing second/foreign language proficiency and concomitant intercultural competence in our K-12 students. As recent work by Reagan & Osborn (2002) suggests, if teaching methodology and student aptitude aren't to blame, then what is? In a vicious circle, reinforced from within, nationally, and from without, internationally, Americans often fail to see the value of learning other languages and exploring their cultures, perhaps in part as a result of their immigrant past, which has served to reinforce a monolingual national linguistic identity. This attitude may be reinforced from without at the international level, as they witness people from around the world rushing to learn their language, as the language of modernity or professional discourse. Witness the many academic conferences or university websites which use English, even when not held in an English-speaking country¹ (Calvet, 2002; Grin, 2005;

¹ Similarly, despite being headquartered in (French-speaking) Lausanne, Switzerland, like many other international organizations affiliated with the international Olympic movement (whose official languages remain English and French), the *Fédération équestre internationale* (International Equestrian Federation), despite its name, seems to have abandoned French and adopted an English-only approach to its website.

Phillipson, 2003; Tonkin, 2008; Truchot, 2008; Wright, 2006). This situation, however, in no way excuses American myopic, monolingual-monoculturalism. If Americans were, as politicians now claim, genuinely concerned with understanding and being understood better by their global neighbors, they would invest the effort in learning (not just studying) another major world language, such as French, the second most widely studied foreign language in the world today, rather than relying on the trite—and *untrue*—“Oh, but they all speak English over there.” So how, exactly, do these macro-social obstacles in the U.S. play themselves out in educational contexts at the micro-level, ranging from language teacher preparation to language classrooms, in ways, which subtly and not so subtly, undermine the development of actual second language proficiency and intercultural competence?

In this paper, I show that there are social obstacles that reach well beyond immediate differences in classroom methodology and learner aptitude, and that impact the ultimate success of classroom language learning and its efforts to develop intercultural speakers: “someone who has a knowledge of one or, preferably, more cultures and social identities and has a capacity to discover and relate to new people from other contexts for which they have not been prepared directly” (Byram & Fleming, 1998, p. 9). In addition, I discuss the implications of this state of affairs and offer some potential, preliminary solutions for creating a more effective climate for developing language proficiency and intercultural competence. The seven social obstacles that I touch on here are:

- What is the commitment to rigorous standards for language teacher preparation—from the professional association to licensing authorities and teacher preparation institutions?
- What are reasonable proficiency levels to expect from non-native speaking language teachers?
- What are reasonable expectations concerning target language use at various levels of classroom instruction?
- What is the place of language-culture learning within the curriculum, whether decided at the local level or imposed from above? In other words, what is the curricular legitimacy of the language-culture class?
- Even in schools where the language-culture class has a legitimate place in the curriculum, what is the school language climate, regarding attitudes to studying other languages and their cultures, especially through the intercultural lens of critical reflection on one’s own culture?
- How are school attitudes reinforced or subverted by the home language climate?

- And finally, faced with a situation in which English currently reigns as a de facto lingua franca, how can Americans (even in the American Heartland) be sensitized to the intercultural value of escaping their own world view and seeing the world through the language and culture of another—of engaging in dynamic exploration of “The Third Place”?

I will discuss these seven societal obstacles to successful classroom language-culture teaching-learning within the U.S. context.

Issue 1: What is the commitment to rigorous standards for language teacher preparation—from the national, professional association to state licensing/certification authorities and teacher preparation institutions?

In the United States, the standards of the national professional association, in a collaborative effort between the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) and the National Council on the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), call on foreign language teacher candidates to demonstrate *knowledge* (what they know), *skills* (what they can do), and *dispositions* (what they are willing to do) in the *content area* (language and culture), *pedagogy* (planning, implementing, and assessing instruction), and *professionalism* (engaging in ongoing professional development and knowing the value of language learning). Standard 6.b: *Knowing the Value of Language Learning* is intriguing. It states: “Candidates know the value of foreign language learning to the overall success of all students *and understand that they will need to become advocates with students, colleagues, and members of the community to promote the field*” [emphasis added] (ACTFL, 2002, p. 36). This immediately raises the issue of whether, for example, math/science teachers have to “advocate” to maintain their fields’ legitimate place in the curriculum. What does this tell us about the values of the American education establishment—and of American society more broadly?

The U.S. does not have a nationalized education system. Instead, each state is free to develop its own criteria for teacher licensure/certification. The licensing (or certification) authority is the state body that determines who is qualified enough to teach in the state’s public school system. Furthermore, as Kramsch reminds us, America’s “decentralized school system, financed mainly by local property taxes, ensures the perpetuation in schools of the local social class structure and local ethnic and racial distribution” (Kramsch, 1998a, p. 83), and, I would add, their values. In the case of the state licensing authority’s commitment to rigorous standards for language teacher

preparation, this can lead to significant discrepancies between states with respect to what is considered sufficient content knowledge to teach. For example, a Spanish teacher candidate in a border state with a large Latino population, like California, must demonstrate higher proficiency in Spanish and its cultures than Spanish teacher candidates in interior states such as Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky. And, when foreign language teacher candidates from one of these interior states cannot pass the state licensure exam, they may be encouraged to apply for teaching jobs in the South instead where their score would be high enough to meet the state standards. Given these discrepancies, it is not surprising that individual states may or may not assess oral proficiency. Many states, for example, stopped requiring foreign language teacher candidates to pass the Praxis II-Productive Language Skills test of speaking and writing when too many candidates were unable to pass it; they decided to require only the Praxis II-Content knowledge test of listening, reading, grammar, and culture, instead.

While ostensibly committed to rigorous standards for language teacher preparation, teacher preparation institutions can, at the same time, become disenchanted with changing licensure procedures. These attitudes may manifest themselves toward the process in general (*Well, when enough people start failing the new test, they'll get rid of it, just like they did with the last one.*) or with respect to the licensing of specific languages (*Those new standards are unreasonably high for students in language X. We'll tell her just to get her degree in the language. Then she can teach in a private school and/or get alternative licensure, and she won't have to take all those education classes, besides.*). In addition to the legitimate recognition that it takes L1 English learners more instructional hours to reach a given level of proficiency in some languages than in others (Omagio Hadley, 2001, p. 26), one also senses in the second attitude the fear of possible repercussions if a department's students are not able to achieve the new standard, as well as the traditional disdain that Colleges of Humanities hold toward Colleges of Education.

So, with respect to Issue 1, what is the result of the discrepancies surrounding commitment to rigorous standards for language teacher preparation, our first societal obstacle to developing language proficiency and concomitant intercultural competence in America's language classrooms? Fortunately, the professional association and institutions of higher education seeking program accreditation under the professional association's ACTFL/NCATE Program Standards remain committed to high standards and Advanced language proficiency. However, the professional association and the language teacher preparation program can implement these rigorous standards only if they have sufficient social/societal support from the state licensing agency, from the

schools that accept student teachers and then hire program graduates, and finally from the teacher preparation institutions, as a collaborative, cross-college endeavor (Pearson, Fonseca-Greber & Foell, 2006; Colville-Hall, Fonseca-Greber & Cavour, 2007), during and beyond a successful accreditation process.

Issue 2: What are reasonable proficiency levels to expect from non-native speaking language teachers?

Given what we have just seen in Issue 1 and the obstacles posed by varying definitions of “rigorous standards” as well as the impossibility of implementing a single standard across the board, we turn to the question of what is in fact a reasonable proficiency level to expect from non-native speaking language teachers. We will explore this question from a comparative perspective, i.e., not only the professional association and the state licensing agency, but also professional association expectations for foreign language teachers in the U.S. versus Europe, foreign language teachers versus second language teachers, and language teachers versus other working adults.

In the U.S., the professional association ACTFL/NCATE calls on foreign language teacher candidates to demonstrate Advanced-Low proficiency on the ACTFL scale. In other words they must be able to narrate and describe in the past, present and future in paragraph-level discourse, to handle an unanticipated complication, and make themselves understood by native speakers not accustomed to dealing with non-native speakers. The association considered Advanced-Low the lowest proficiency level at which teachers can still provide their learners with the in-class immersion experience that the standards also call for; lower proficiency levels, i.e., the present tense sentence-level of the Intermediate speaker would not be able to support immersion pedagogy. It should be noted, however, that it is typically only the foreign language major who has spent a full academic year abroad who achieves Advanced-Low; foreign language majors who do not spend a full academic year abroad typically finish their undergraduate career at Intermediate-High, according to data from Swender (2003, p. 525).

In contrast with the U.S., where Advanced-Low represents a clear improvement over Intermediate, in Europe, Advanced-Low (approximately B2) is low, compared to the European standard of C1 on the ALTE/CEFR scale, or approximately Superior on the ACTFL scale. C1 speakers can express themselves fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions, use language flexibly and effectively for social and professional purposes, and formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate

contribution skillfully to those of other speakers. Indeed, on the ACTFL scale, hypothesizing and supporting opinions are categorized as Superior level skills.

To what can we attribute this difference in professional association expectations for language teachers in the U.S. and Europe? The major difference is social context. In contrast with Europe's awareness of the existence, necessity, and *value* of plurilingualism (at least in dealing with other member states, if not their own linguistic minorities), the United States has long been able to fall back on its continent-wide swath of (real or imagined) monolingualism. As has been said, perhaps attitudes would be different if they spoke another language in the state next door.

Quite apart from the discrepancy in proficiency expectations between European and American professional associations, another interesting discrepancy arises when we compare acceptable vs. unacceptable/marginal proficiency levels for other professions in the rural U.S. In contrast with a major research university in the western U.S., which recognizes the empowering effect it can have on ESL students to have a fellow L2 English speaker teach the advanced grammar class, in small, private institutions in the American Heartland, the residual trace of a non-native accent can disqualify even the most highly qualified language teachers and language teacher educators with Superior proficiency from teaching ESL. Similarly, beyond the language teaching profession, other L2 English speakers working in the Heartland are cited for job-related communication problems, attributed to limited English proficiency, even when they possess the Advanced-Low proficiency considered unrealistically high for American foreign language teachers. Are these actual proficiency issues? Or do they stem from failure to achieve intercultural competence and unwillingness to explore the third place. As Goodall emphasizes: the descriptors presuppose a *sympathetic* interlocutor (G. Goodall, personal communication, Jan. 29, 2010). These examples are reminiscent of Shuck's (2001) findings about English-speaking university students and their international TAs, all with high TOEFL scores, needed to qualify for classroom duty. In her analysis of the poetics of complaint among American college students, she found that despite the students' peer-group refrain of *And you couldn't understand a word he said!* the students were actually able to provide coherent summaries of class lectures, when interviewed individually.

In light of these examples, it is perhaps not surprising that ACTFL had to settle for Advanced-Low, instead of its original goal of Advanced-Mid, as it sought to establish a reasonable proficiency for non-native speaking language teachers. Yet when we compare the professional association and the state licensing authority, we find that state

standards are typically not as high as the professional association, despite lip-service to high standards in K-12 settings. State licensing authorities may decide that anything from Intermediate-High (i.e., present tense, sentence-level question-answer on familiar topics, and understandable to native speakers accustomed to dealing with non-native speakers; approximately B1) all the way down to “Not tested” is a reasonable proficiency standard to expect from foreign language teacher candidates.

What accounts for this difference? At least three implicit or explicit social assumptions underlie the difference between what the professional association and the licensing authority consider reasonable proficiency expectations for non-native foreign language teacher candidates. First, beyond the professional association, achieving Advanced-Low is often perceived as an infeasible goal. Consequently, states, and even some language advocates, fear the risk of a language teacher shortage because of the ‘unreasonably’ high standards. This seems to be especially true in states where the language teaching profession is pushing for an extended sequence of language study. In return, teacher educators in other fields voice the opinion that the push for K-8 language study is nothing more than a thinly veiled attempt at job creation for language teachers. Third and most insidiously, however, is the unexpressed admission that functional proficiency is not even the actual goal; instead, the language class is nothing more than an academic exercise, serving as gatekeeper for university admission (Reagan & Osborn, 2002) or university graduation, depending on the major (Roebuck & Wagner, 2008). For example, Bachelor of Arts candidates may be required to take three or four semesters of a language in contrast with Bachelor of Science candidates for whom two semesters are considered sufficient and in the Colleges of Business or Education, foreign language study may be deemed entirely unnecessary or irrelevant to their course of study. The short-sightedness of eliminating language-culture study for future Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies teachers, however, will become apparent in the next paragraph.

The result of Issue 2, obstacles to reasonable proficiency levels for language teachers, is that as long as the state licensing authority continues to set lower licensure standards than the professional association, language teacher candidates deemed linguistically unqualified by the professional association become licensed to teach and get jobs, especially in high demand languages like Spanish—thereby perpetuating the cycle to a new generation of learners (Fonseca-Greber, 2007). Admittedly, however, the issue of sufficiently qualified classroom teachers is not limited to foreign languages, as the following exchange, reported to me by a student teacher, reveals:

Social Studies Teacher: ...the country of Africa.
FL Teacher Candidate: The country of *South* Africa?
Social Studies Teacher: No, no, the country of Africa. It's like Australia. It's a country and a continent.

If this licensed, practicing social studies teacher had been required to meet a language requirement as part of her College of Education requirements, and if she had taken French to fulfill it, she might have known that Africa is made up of numerous independent countries, many of them French-speaking, and she could have spared herself modeling this example of intercultural incompetence to her young colleague.

Issue 3: What are reasonable expectations concerning target language use at various levels of classroom instruction?

This third issue examines what constitutes reasonable expectations for classroom target language use, through the lens of the professional association and classroom reality. Here the professional association is unequivocal. ACTFL/NCATE Standard 3a states, "Candidates use the target language to the maximum extent in classes at *all* levels of instruction" [emphasis added] (ACTFL/NCATE, 2002, p. 21).

Not surprisingly, classroom reality often reveals a much different story. A series of recent studies show that classroom target language use is often minimal, initially as low as 5% in one study (Bateman, 2008). This tendency toward less than maximal target language use was found across teaching contexts, from student teachers to practicing classroom teachers and college instructors (Bateman, 2008; Eyler, 2008; Wilkerson, 2008). While in the case of student teachers and classroom teachers, this often relates to insufficient language proficiency (Bateman, 2008) and correlates with complexity (Eyler, 2008), other more insidious factors also seem to be at play. For one, Reagan & Osborn (2002) signal instructional purpose. If the language class is valued primarily for its academic gate-keeping function, despite lip service to developing actual proficiency and intercultural competence, there is little incentive to "enforce" maximal target language use on either side of the teaching-learning equation. Moreover, in some schools, "English-only" attitudes from monolingual teachers or school directors can further hamper maximal target language use, even in the case of proficient well-intentioned student teachers and/or their mentor teachers.

What is the result of this third issue? First, from the perspective of second language acquisition, learners in such settings receive insufficient input to acquire functional

proficiency. But here the societal obstacle is that functional proficiency is neither the academically expected—nor the socially acceptable—result, in a country where the national linguistic identity is (imperial) monolingual. In this regard, the U.S. and France have more in common, despite the language difference, than either one has, for example, with Switzerland, where the national linguistic identity is resolutely plurilingual, at least with respect to its own four languages -- (Swiss) German, French, Italian, and Romansh (Gacond, 2006). It is this monolingual-monocultural national linguistic identity that, consciously or subconsciously, gives rise to the refrain, all too familiar to American language teachers, *I had ten years of French but I still can't...* (Kramsch, 1998a, p. 74). Through the lens of national linguistic identity, one wonders, is it that Americans can't, won't, or don't want to speak another language well?

Issue 4: What is the place of language-culture learning within curriculum, whether decided at the local level or imposed from above? In other words, what is the curricular legitimacy of the language-culture class?

Issue 4 explores the place of language-culture learning within the school curriculum, whether at the local level or imposed from above in response to state standards and calls for accountability from the political area. In other words, what is the curricular legitimacy of the language-culture class? Curricular legitimacy can best be viewed as a continuum. The present discussion will examine three points along the continuum: language-culture programs possessing (full) curricular legitimacy, those possessing limited curricular legitimacy, and those lacking curricular legitimacy.

For a language-culture program to possess full curricular legitimacy, it must be on a par with other content areas. In other words, the language-culture classes must take place daily; be required of all students, not just the college-bound; and be a state assessed area, just like the other academic core content areas of Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies. Consequently, very few language-culture programs possess full curricular legitimacy. Even if the class occurs daily (or at least on the same schedule as the other core content areas, in the case of block scheduling) and even if at least a minimum sequence of study is required of all students, there are very few, if any, states in which foreign language is a state assessed area. Teachers often hear the question, *Is this going to be on the test?* and they know what is going through the students' heads, *Do I need to bother to learn/remember this?* Consequently, if the language-culture class is not going to be on the high school graduation test, the message this sends to students and their parents is clear: the language-culture class is not as important as the Math or Science class.

In second position are language-culture programs possessing limited curricular legitimacy. These programs may take a variety of forms. In the best case scenario, the language-culture class may meet every day and state foreign language professionals may even have created state content standards for language learning, aligning them with the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (NSFLEP, 1999); however, the state does not deem Foreign Language worthy of being a state assessed area, on a par with Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies. From there on down, a variety of less encouraging scenarios occur. For example, Math and Science may be offered every day but language (increasingly often, Spanish only) may be offered only every other day, alternating with physical education—even in “good” schools. Or, administratively, rather than being housed independently or with the other core academic subjects, Foreign Language faculty can find themselves housed in what the school labels the “Department of Electives: Art, Music, Physical Education, Spanish, French.” And, as often happens, a focus on food and films so that students see the classes as fun, thereby protecting program enrollment, may not help the image of foreign language classes in the eyes of administrators, in an era of standards-based accountability.

Finally, there are language programs which lack curricular legitimacy. These are programs which, while occurring on schools grounds, do not form part of the formal curriculum, even marginally as in the case of programs possessing limited curricular legitimacy. Language programs lacking curricular legitimacy are not limited to “blighted” or underfunded schools either. Sometimes they appear in surprising contexts. For example, one elite, private, forward-thinking elementary school in the rural American Heartland decided, rather than hiring a licensed language teacher, to hire an administrative “language coordinator” instead. The job of the *salaried* language coordinator was to arrange for after school babysitting, disingenuously titled “cultural/academic enrichment” to be provided *free of charge* by university students who were studying the language, regardless of whether they were planning a language teaching career. Even in a society with unequal access to healthcare, it is unlikely that someone who had just lost their health insurance benefits would call the local university to inquire if their students are no cost health service providers.

Underlying this fourth societal obstacle to language proficiency and intercultural competence is the question of *value*. These differing degrees of curricular legitimacy show that, as the saying goes, “you get what you pay for.” And schools are willing to pay for—or assess—what they *value*. Would program models lacking, or possessing

only limited, curricular legitimacy be acceptable for Math or Science²?

Issue 5: Even in schools where the language-culture class has a legitimate place in the curriculum, what is the school language climate, regarding attitudes to studying other languages and their cultures, especially through the intercultural lens of critical reflection on one's own culture?

The fifth issue confronting language programs in American schools—the school language climate—is closely related to the fourth obstacle of curricular legitimacy. Even in schools where the language-culture class has a legitimate place in the curriculum, we may ask what the school language climate is, regarding attitudes to studying other languages and their cultures, especially through the intercultural lens of critical reflection on one's own culture. In other words, do students, teachers, librarians, and administrators view language proficiency and intercultural understanding as professionally useful or personally valuable, e.g., part of a good education? Or are foreign language students, teachers, and student teachers subjected to remarks such as *I studied language X in school, but I've never had any use for it since*; *No, I never studied a foreign language, but I've never felt like that's held me back*; or *Well, actually, I studied French all through high school, but when I went to Paris, they couldn't understand me*. The last reaction could stem either from “monolingual pride” (Kramsch: 1998a, p. 74) or, just as easily, from the “pseudo-French” that is taught for communicative purposes in many, if not most, French classrooms around the country, despite repeated calls for integrating discourse competence and pragmatic variation (Blyth, 2000; Blyth, 2002; Durán & McCool, 2003; Fonseca-Greber & Waugh, 2003a, 2003b; Fonseca-Greber, 2009; Katz & Blyth, 2007; McCool, 1994; Nadasdi, Mougéon, & Rehner, 2005; Nagy, Blondeau, & Auger, 2003; Ossipov, 2002; van Compernelle, 2009; van Compernelle & Williams, 2009; Waugh, Fonseca-Greber, Vickers, & Eröz, 2007).

But even in schools where public attitudes pay lip service to the value of foreign language learning, do their actions reflect their words? For example, are there foreign language books in the school library, not just dictionaries and *501 French Verbs*, but up-to-date, age-appropriate fiction, non-fiction, and media?

² Although the curricular legitimacy of Science as a school subject will not be contested, some scientific content will be considered taboo in some Heartland states, i.e., Darwin and Evolution, and Science standards will not be met or will be modified to accommodate local religious beliefs, e.g., among rural farming populations, who practice Darwin's principles in their fields, but disavow them in other spheres (Kingsolver, 2007, p. 11). See Kramsch for a discussion of pitfalls of the “decentralized school system” (Kramsch, 1998a, p. 83) which characterizes education in the U.S.

Second, are students encouraged, or even allowed, to access international keyboards to assist them in the simplified, accurate production of their written work? Language production aside, use of a keyboard layout in the language they are studying provides learners with an excellent opportunity for developing intercultural competence, as they discover that the American keyboard layout is not the only one in the world—and is not even a particularly effective or adequate tool for typing French, German, Spanish, etc. In contrast, keyboard layouts from other countries reflect the language-specific needs of their users, in readily accessible form. Depending on the language, they can even expose students to the diversity within the larger speech community. For example, France, Belgium, Canada (Quebec), and Switzerland all have different French keyboard layouts. Some of these are even more efficiently designed for typing high frequency French accented vowels than France's keyboard itself. Compare: in France, high frequency *é* is located top row, third key from left, upper case (i.e., in the position of @ on a U.S. keyboard), in francophone Switzerland, *é* is located just under the right, little finger, lower case (i.e., in the position of the semi-colon (;) on a US keyboard). Thanks to the control panel of modern computers, it is easy to change, or alternate between multiple, keyboard layouts and, in the process, discover a world bigger than our own.

Third, are remarks made that foreign language use should be confined to the classroom and not infiltrate « white public space » (Hill, 1999), e.g., hallways and teachers' lounge? Such remarks delegitimize the foreign language as a means for authentic communication, reinforce its role as an academic subject and college gatekeeper, and ultimately stem from the monolingual-monocultural national linguistic identity. Monolingual teachers may label speaking a foreign language outside the classroom as showing off, while at the same time complimenting the physics teacher for her ability to motivate and engage her students, when overhearing them continuing to talk about physics as they walk down the hall together after class.

Fourth, are teachers allowed to participate in the state language conference, especially when they are receiving awards? The president of the state language association may be required instead to take a personal day off in order to lead the annual language conference. Similarly, the teachers receiving the state's language department of the year award may be put in the same bind, being denied the opportunity for further professional development, when it is through their dispositions for ongoing professional growth that they created the state's best high school language department of the year.

Finally, and perhaps most tragically, are students bullied for enjoying or excelling at learning other languages and developing an appreciation of their cultures? At some

level, this is perhaps no different from the bullying that academically successful students in other content areas experience in social milieus where book learning is not valued or treated with suspicion. However, the Othering of the language learning experience itself and the marginal position of languages in the curriculum seem to lend a special poignancy to the bullying of the successful language learner and intercultural ambassador.

In the end, as language professionals, we must ask ourselves, do the attitudes *and actions* that make up the school language climate create congruency in support of language study and intercultural learning, or incongruency, resulting in a fifth social obstacle to developing intercultural competence in American schools?

Issue 6: How are school attitudes reinforced or subverted by the home language climate?

Closely related to the issue of the school language climate is that of the home language climate. This sixth issue explores how the school language climate is reinforced or subverted by the home language climate, in attitudes and actions.

Even in settings where schools and other educational authorities at least pay lip service to the value of language learning, this attitude can be subverted by the home language climate. In a recent preliminary study, Atkins and Garcia (2008) found that in the Heartland, limited parental education and limited international experience appeared to correlate with student attitudes devaluing the social, cultural, and/or utilitarian value of French. Similarly, Brown (2009) found, in her study of Heartland college students, that the single biggest predictor of intercultural development, for these students who had had little experience with diversity before college, was contact, e.g., the opportunity to have an international student as a roommate and in the process discover other points of view. Together, the attitudes uncovered in these two studies recall the actions (or *inactions*) alluded to by Kramsch in her discussion of the potential pitfalls of America's decentralized school system (as discussed above). Not only does it perpetuate this "local social class structure and local ethnic and racial distribution" (Kramsch, 1998a, p. 83), with respect to the interaction between school and home language climate, it also perpetuates their values in the schools.

The following example from a century ago shows just how self-perpetuating this cycle can be in the Heartland, and that the Atkins & Garcia (2008) and Brown (2009) results are nothing new. Young Edmond Privat, a francophone Swiss journalist, and

consummate intercultural mediator as a result of these contact experiences, reports the following exchange during his speaking tour of the United States:

Ohio/Indiana, 1907:

Interlocutor: So where were you born?

E. Privat: In Geneva.

Interlocutor: Really? Geneva, New York, or Geneva, Illinois?

E. Privat: No, Geneva in Europe.

Interlocutor: Really! There's a Geneva in Europe too?

(Privat, 1962: 35, transl. mine)

To the interlocutor's first question, Privat replies with the unmarked form, *In Geneva*. Then ensues a stunning, multi-turned, reversal of markedness (Waugh, 1982) as his interlocutor responds, already impressed at the distance travelled, *Geneva, New York, or Geneva, Illinois?* Privat, recovering quickly and foreseeing the next potential pitfall, replies simply, *No, Geneva in Europe*, thereby avoiding the possible confusion between Switzerland and Sweden. His interlocutor is duly impressed to discover that not only is there a Geneva in New York and Illinois, but *a Geneva in Europe too?* Even a local newspaper covering Privat's visit described Geneva as "a small village in the snow-covered Swiss mountains" and reported that Privat was asked to "say a few words in Swiss" (Privat, 1962, p. 35, transl. mine). The myth of one nation, one language dies hard.

Our sixth societal obstacle to the development of language proficiency and intercultural competence is the result of home (and town) language climates such as those described by Atkins & Garcia (2008), Privat (1962), and Brown (2009). While for Privat, the experience led to a consciousness raising and intercultural awakening to discover that Europe was not the center of the world as he had imagined in those pre-World War I days, for the "nationally rooted" (Kramsch, 1998a, p. 84) population explored in the Atkins & Garcia (2008) study a century after Privat's discoveries, this self-perpetuating cycle of disdain for functional proficiency and intercultural competence regrettably remains the norm. This state of affairs leads to the seventh and final point.

Issue 7: Especially at a time when English currently reigns as a de facto lingua franca, how can English speakers be sensitized to the intercultural value of exploring the dynamics of "The Third Place," even in the American Heartland?

If English speakers do not feel the same instrumental motivation to learn another language that speakers of other languages do to learn English, given its current status in many parts of the world as a supra-central (Calvet, 2002) lingua franca, how can some of the social obstacles to classroom language study be broken down for classroom foreign language learners/teachers? While it is beyond the power of even the most talented language advocate to change a centuries-long tradition of a monolingual, national linguistic identity, four possible starting points may include: taking a holistic approach to culture, adopting intercultural content-based instruction, fostering language awareness, and opening doors (and minds) to intercultural competence.

Pedagogies that take a holistic approach to culture integrate texts, which while written by target language authors, may also extend learner horizons beyond the usual confines of the French-speaking or Spanish-speaking world, by focusing instead on providing ample opportunity for intercultural reflection, regardless of the country/-tries or ethnicities portrayed. Colapietro (2008) explores such an approach through *Murmure* (Lagrange, 2007), a children's picture book, which powerfully models intercultural friendship at the individual level, despite the ravages of war at the societal level. *Murmure* and other texts set at a "safe" distance (place/time), from daily life (Kingsolver, 2009; Thompson & Phillips, 2009) can offer a less threatening starting point for engaging in intercultural reflection.

Interculturally-oriented content-based instruction (CBI), already common in some parts of the world, is becoming more common in American college classrooms and merits being integrated into high schools classrooms as well. For Spanish, examples include using *ser/estar* and comparative constructions to discuss geography, economic development, and migration patterns (Goodall, 2007). For French, in *Mais oui!* (Thompson & Phillips, 2009), over the course of three chapters, tonic (independent) pronouns, the simple future, conditional, and subjunctive are taught in order to discuss gender inequality, globalization, immigration, and racism, at home and in cultures where the language is spoken (although geographic breadth is often restricted to the colonizers and the colonized). And, in German, the *Konjunktiv I* (Indirect speech) is applied to compare main characters and historical settings (Byram & Kramersch, 2008; Kramersch, Howell, Warner, & Wellmon, 2007).

A third approach to teaching for intercultural competence involves raising language awareness. By exploring the concept of linguistic rights as a basic human right in the face of "the hegemonic spread of English around the world" (Kramersch, 1998a, p. 76) and examining cases of *linguicism* (oppression or discrimination based on language)

and *linguistic imperialism* (Phillipson, 2008; Reagan, 2008), a form of linguisticism, English speakers can come to recognize their uniquely privileged position on the current linguistic map. In addition, in exchange for their “Privilege of the (Native) English Speaker” we must help them recognize their *responsibility* as one, and how they can help redress the “global language gap” in much the same way that the global gender gap has been recognized as a global issue in need of progress (World Economic Forum, 2009), whether by actively training as translators or interpreters or simply conducting themselves as good global citizens—only then can they enjoy the “Privilege of the Intercultural Speaker” (Kramsch, 1998b).

Finally, because not all our learners will have the opportunity—or the desire—to go abroad, it behooves us as educators to teach for intercultural competence in the language classroom. Sen Gupta cautions, “The intercultural experience is not always a pleasant one nor is the journey necessarily a smooth one. Students and educators may find themselves experiencing discomfort, impatience, anxiety” (Sen Gupta, 2003, p. 171). But if administrators of language programs and schools have the courage to encourage their learners to explore their discomfort zones, all involved can discover that open-minded exploration of other ways of speaking, being, and doing as well as engaging in critical self-reflection make one a better American, not Un-American.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, then, directly or indirectly, the first six societal obstacles to teaching and learning in America’s language-culture classrooms (expectations for teacher preparation, language proficiency and target language use, curricular legitimacy, school and home language climate) stem from the seventh: The challenge of sensitizing Americans to the value of seeing the world through the language-culture of another when a monolingual-monocultural national linguistic identity rules at home and global English rules abroad.

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