

STARTALK Network for Program Excellence

Chicago, October 16 – 18, 2008

Notes on Roundtable Discussion # I

Cultural Ways of Learning and Teaching

Arabic Group

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How is Culture Taught?: The discussion started with a general question on how we teach culture in our Arabic classrooms. In light of the pedagogical consideration of teaching in the target language, how does culture perspectives, practices and products are presented to learners? There was an animated discussion in support of English use in exchanging cultural knowledge whether in a specially designated session or during the regular sessions of language instruction. Another group were not in support of using English but rather let culture knowledge be disseminated and enlaced in language acquisition using the target language.

In Which Context and Whose Culture?: The discussion lead to other issues such as when and in which context should culture be discussed. There was a sense of agreement that cultural issues are always present in any use of the target language; there is no fragment of language use without cultural features. The discussion was enriched by raising the issue of “which” regional Arabic culture is to be the focus. Given the diversity and multiplicity of Arabic people and geographical distribution, the audience was engaged in a very constructive debate. Similarities were made to other language such Spanish and even English with their wide diverse distribution amongst ethnic and geographical milieus. Audience was eager to agree on a definition of what is cultural in general and what is specific and limited to a small regional locale. There was an agreement that it is healthy to present varieties of cultural features on one issue but not to overwhelm the learners, especially at the beginning levels. On the issue of whose culture, there was a short discussion of the necessity of understanding the culture of the learner and possible erroneous understanding of the target language. Examples are sighted from the gender relationship and ways of greetings.

Presenting Culture: The question of the manner in which Arabic culture is highlighted in Arabic language classroom has stirred a hot discussion. Some teachers indicated that they go to class with an Arabian dress, bring ethnic food to class, or display authentic artifacts and products hoping to stimulate a discussion and create an interest in Arabic culture. Teachers in the audience have raised the possibility of personal bias in presenting Arabic culture. That is more related to native speakers than non-native ones. All agreed that a teacher should be familiar with as much knowledge about the regional Arabic cultures other than her/his own. That is includes vernacular expressions as well as food, social traditions, religion, etc.

Assessing Culture: The discussion has dealt with the question of assessing cultural performance of the learners. Some of guidelines were discussed, especially with regard to greetings in a culturally appropriate manner. Knowledge of what is acceptable and not acceptable was discussed along with the culture comparison and connection with language and belief. Dealing with such topics revealed the shortage of Arabic-specific studies and research in the area of the pedagogy of cultural teaching in language classrooms.

Topics for Roundtable Discussions

Unit Design Projects for Novice Teachers

These are the questions that we discussed during the round table discussion.

- What is a curriculum?
- The difference between a curriculum and a text book.
- What do mean by a Unit?
- What is a theme?
- How can a theme be the key to unit design?
- Topics as parts of the unit?
- What are the components of a unit?
- How can we integrate the standards in the unit and instruction?
- How we can create an articulated curriculum and how many units should we include per semester/year?
- Who decided on what topics or themes? Ideas from world language state curriculum.
- What language skills, culture, and materials should we teach?
- Assessment as part of developing the units
- Students input! How important?
- Examples