

Assessing Cultural Learning: A Study of Portfolios

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I have been interested in developing a course focused on cultural learning in my teaching context. In this paper, based on the literature review of intercultural competence and portfolios, I would like to come up with a course plan for next year.

Assessment cannot and should not be separate from teaching/learning, but it is the aspect that is given least attention in cultural learning. In this paper, I would like to consider the portfolio assessment, the holistic assessment integrated with classroom instruction.

1. Intercultural competence

There are various approaches to cultural learning. In this section, I would like to consider 'intercultural competence', which has become indispensable within foreign and second language setting. There are also various ways of understanding intercultural competence. I would like to introduce M. Byram's model (1994, 1997, 2000) briefly, because it answers both of the following questions: (1) What knowledge and what attitudes and skills are involved? and (2) How does one assess intercultural competence?

1.1 Intercultural competence

According to Byram (1997, 2000), intercultural competence and linguistic competence are two dimensions of intercultural communicative competence. Byram argues that, for foreign language learners, intercultural competence is composed of the following elements:

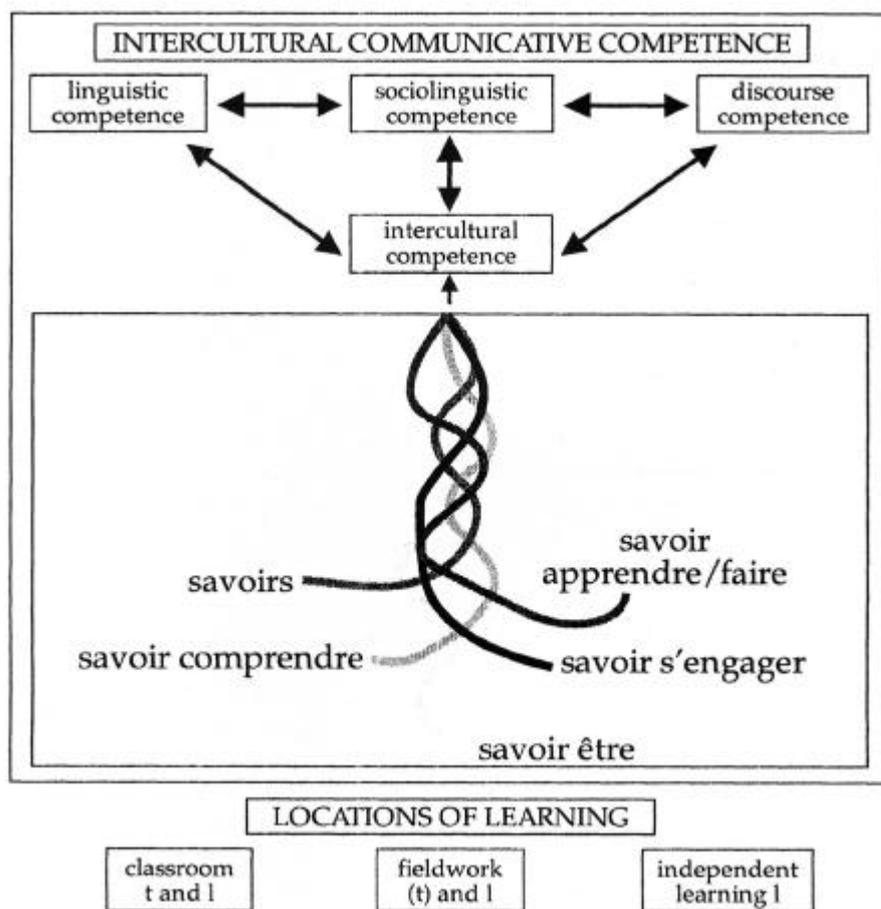
- attitudes (curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own)
- knowledge (of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocuter's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction)
- skills of interpreting and relating (ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own)
- skills of discovery and interaction (ability to acquire new knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction)
- critical cultural awareness/political education (an ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries)

He also argues that each component of intercultural competence is inter-related with others, as the following figures shows:

	Skills interpret and relate (<i>savoir comprendre</i>)	
Knowledge of self and other; of interaction: individual and societal (<i>savoirs</i>)	Education political education critical cultural awareness (<i>savoir s'engager</i>)	Attitudes relativising self valuing other (<i>savoir être</i>)
	Skills discover and/or interact (<i>savoir apprendre/faire</i>)	

Figure 2.1 Factors in intercultural communication³

Byram (1997: 34)



Byram (1997: 73)

Byram's model seems to give us a lot of suggestion. It is closely connected with European Council's Common European Framework, so when we want to apply the model to our contexts, we should re-interpret it and make a better adjustment in each teaching context.

For example, as for skills of discovery and interaction, in Japanese contexts, learners have less occasions to develop their skills of interaction through actually interacting with foreign people face to face. CCDL, which many PAAL members are interested in, has great potential for overcoming this disadvantage. Also, critical cultural awareness seems to be a life-long objective and very difficult to develop in a single subject or in one course.

1.2 Developing intercultural competence

Byram (1997) shows '... three broad, overlapping categories of location for acquiring intercultural competence ... (65)' as follows:

- the classroom
- fieldwork (a pedagogical structure and educational objectives determined by the teacher often in consultation with learners)
- independent learning (can be both subsequent to and simultaneous with classroom and fieldwork; a factor in life-long learning)

It is clear that the objectives of intercultural competence are very demanding and more complex than those which usually guide the work done in classrooms. The limitations of the classroom can be overcome to some degree by learning beyond the classroom walls.

Byram (1997) suggests the following elements, some of which are overlapping, should be considered for planning a curriculum for intercultural competence:

- Stage 1. the geo-political context
- Stage 2. the learning context
- Stage 3. the developmental factor
- Stage 4. identification of objectives
- Stage 5. the ICC threshold
- Stage 6. sequence in the curriculum

I totally agree with Byram's idea that foreign language teaching is context-dependent and that language teaching has to be planned and evaluated with respect to particular contexts.

1.3 How to assess intercultural competence

By using only traditional assessments, we cannot capture many aspects of student's learning performance. The conventional assessments only for assigning a grade, done by teacher alone, conducted outside instruction, are not enough for assessing 'intercultural competence in cultural learning' described in the previous sections. We must rely upon techniques of documentation and self-assessment.

Constructivism makes us consider those kinds of questions. Constructivists think that meaning is created by the learner, not imposed or transmitted by direct instruction, which leads to the need of an authentic assessment.

Based on their idea, the profiling approach to assessment called portfolio has been widely introduced in order to get over the disadvantages of traditional standardized, norm-referenced assessment.

2. Portfolio assessment

A portfolio literally means a large flat case used especially for carrying drawings, documents, and so on. Nowadays, the term is often used in educational settings. I would like to consider the significance of portfolio in cultural learning, based on literature review.

2.1 Definition

I would like to quote a very popular definition of a portfolio used in a lot of previous literature.

A purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas. The collection must include student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection, the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection ... A portfolio ... provides a complex and comprehensive view of student performance in context.

(Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991)

Most of the key words for discussing portfolio assessment are included in this definition. I think that this definition implies the following main purposes of a portfolio use:

- to provide a concrete display of the learner's best work and the learner's development
- to obtain multidimensional assessment information over time
- to share a tool for student and teacher reflection on learning goals
- to encourage dialogue and collaboration among educators and between the teacher and student

2.2 Essential elements of a portfolio

I would like to show the essential elements of a portfolio, which are suggested in a lot of literature, as follows:

- cover letter (It should summarize the evidence of a student's learning and progress.)
- table of contents
- entries: core (items students have to include) & optional (items of student's choice)
- dates (on all entries, to facilitate proof of growth over time)
- drafts and revised versions
- reflections (For each item, a brief rationale for choosing the item should be included.)

For entries, students can choose to include best pieces of work, but also pieces of less successful work which gave trouble, and give reasons why. Reflections can be used for formative and/or summative purposes at different stages in the learning process.

2.3 Portfolio development process

According to Danielson & Abrutyn (1997), portfolio development process covers these stages.

1. collection (save artifacts that represent the day-to-day results of teaching and learning)
2. selection (review and evaluate the artifacts saved, and identify those that demonstrate achievement of specific standards or goals)
3. reflection (reflect on the significance of the artifacts chosen for the portfolio in relationship to specific learning goals)
4. projection (compare the reflections to the standards/goals and performance indicators, and set learning goals for the future)
5. presentation (share the portfolio with peers and receive feedback)

I would like to add the very first and most important stage, 'setting criteria', before the first collection stage. In accordance

with the set criteria between teacher and student, students collect, select, reflect, project, and present their works. That's what a portfolio is. A portfolio is not just a series of works students collect.

2.4 Advantages

I would like to describe the advantageous characteristics of portfolio assessment in terms of the usefulness for cultural learning as follows:

- Portfolio assessment can match assessment to instruction.
- Portfolio assessment can be an efficient tool for demonstrating learning.
- Portfolio assessment can give a profile of various learner abilities.
- Portfolio assessment can improve motivation and involvement in learning.
- Portfolio assessment can develop awareness of own learning and independent learners.
- Portfolio assessment can provide opportunity for student-teacher dialogue.

2.5 Disadvantages

Here, I would like to discuss briefly two major disadvantages, common concerns, to consider.

(1) Time

For students, considerable time is needed to collect, share, and evaluate the information. Teachers also feel that the time needed to design and implement is a serious concern. It takes even more time for teacher-student conference.

There seem to be some ways to reduce the time involved in implementing portfolio assessment. One is to make students responsible for developing their portfolios on a regular basis. Another is to identify the contents, core and optional, and list the items on an analysis form. Of course, it depends largely on the class size.

(2) Technical

If we share the burden of assessment with peer teachers, it can cause technical problems. Lack of adequate training and difficulty in evaluating the results can also affect the validity and reliability significantly. Validity (content, systemic, face) and reliability in a criterion-assessment must be given much consideration. I would like to do more research on this topic and come up with a better solution.

For teachers who first introduce portfolio assessment, like me, it seems very difficult to establish criteria, guidelines for interpreting portfolio results, in advance of the class. With time and practice, and especially given clear assessment criteria and individual guidance, students will learn to become better evaluators of their work.

2.6 Lessons from some case studies

We should make best use of the lessons from previous case studies, though they are, to some extent, context-dependent. Guard, Richter & Waller (2002) suggest that we should consider the following points, which can be applied to most of the educational settings:

(1) balance between prescription and student choice

While clear criteria are important for students to develop their products, making choices and being creative are essential motivational factors.

(2) scaffolding as steps towards autonomous learning

A model is recommended, which starts with a high level of support and then gradually withdraws scaffolding.

(3) workload and students' responsibility for learning

Developing students' self-evaluation skills as part of learner autonomy, can be seen as way towards decreasing the teacher workload and increasing students' responsibility for their learning process.

(4) 'real world' connections

If students can choose their own topics, so that the tasks relate to the world of the students and have meaningful processes and outcomes.

3. My course plan

Taking all the contextual factors into consideration, I would like to show my course plan for cultural learning. I would like to give my students more opportunities to gain knowledge, skills and attitudes that will increase their intercultural competence, mainly through their research (field work), presentation and discussion, of course, mainly through their portfolio development. I will use portfolio assessment, not only for grading, but for promoting their autonomous learning.

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an elective course for 3rd grade at a senior high school

100 mins × 20 weeks

objective: Students will have the opportunity to gain knowledge, skills and attitudes that will increase their intercultural competence. multicultural perspective

course outline

1	introduction: study of culture, portfolio(+ rubric), research
2-7	introductory classes: How Australia has been multicultural student-teacher conference (interview): research topic, procedure
8-10	mini-presentation & class discussion summary: portfolio conference
11-18	summer holidays (research paper for school festival) presentation & class discussion
19-20	revised research paper for course summary: portfolio conference

rubric elements

[vertical] (macro)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• increase students' understanding of the diversity of cultures• increase students' ability to explain intercultural issues for their better communication• develop students' cognitive, affective and behavioural skills that improve cultural awareness, appreciation, tolerance
(micro)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• develop a broad, coherent overview of the similarities and differences among international cultures• convey consideration for important figures, ideas and events which influence the values of different societies• reexamine their beliefs and behaviors about social identities (ethnicity, race, class, religion, gender)• increase their ability to locate and evaluate information, and to gain knowledge about other peoples of the world• see nations and cultures not in isolation, but in relation to each other• be more sophisticated in their understanding of the nature of stereotypes and biases
[horizontal]	5--- highest level objectives attained (critical thinking, apply, evaluate & develop) 4--- next highest level objectives reached (demonstrate, illustrate, compare, analyse, objective) 3--- student reaches middle level objective only (comprehend, describe, discuss) 2---adequate levels of competency shown (basic knowledge) 1--- inadequate levels of performance
	Through the portfolio conference based on students' reflection upon the following questions: What do I want to improve in the item? What did I learn from it? What did I do well? How do I feel about my performance? What were the problems?

grading

(1) class participation (active participant: presentation, discussion) (2) portfolio (journal, research study, self-reflection sheet, peer-assessment sheet, class notes)
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4. Concluding remarks

I feel much difficulty in creating rubrics (combining criteria with rating scales to assess individual pieces of work in the portfolio and the portfolio as a whole), because this is my first experience to introduce a portfolio into my class. It is the essential first stage, so we, teachers, should set the criteria ourselves, because the students have no experience with that. Of course, at first, it should be flexible, because the students should participate in decision-making, and because it should be adjusted in accordance with the students' conditions and the teaching situation. One of my supervisors advises that the rubrics should be revised again and again over time, maybe for several years, into a reliable form.

I still have a lot of things to consider and to prepare, such as a students' manual for developing a portfolio. Taking some advice and suggestion from PAAL members at the conference, I am continuing to plan the course next year, so I hope I will talk about the practical stage at next PAAL.

Portfolios take a lot of planning before introducing them to the students. It is crucial to prepare thoroughly and spend a lot of time with students when introducing portfolios.

I would like to mention the potentials of portfolios briefly. Japanese senior high schools will establish a new subject area, 'Information Study', as a required one, next year. Digital portfolios will be introduced in many schools. And, the 'Period for Integrated Study', a new subject, will also be established to conduct interdisciplinary and comprehensive teaching. Our school is planning to introduce portfolio assessment in a large scale. Of course, there has been more and more research on the portfolio in the field of teaching reading/writing.

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