Using online projects to guide students’ sociolinguistic and intercultural learning

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Introduction

There is more to learning a language than simply learning the grammar. Language classrooms, in general, tend to prioritize the acquisition of vocabulary and language structure over the communication of social information. Yet a strong command of a language’s pragmatic system can be just as important as command of the linguistic system. A breakdown in the linguistic aspects of communication can result in information being misrepresented, which can occasionally be dire but which more frequently can be recognized and repaired. A breakdown in the social aspects of communication, however, can result in miscommunications of intentions and identities. This can come with real social consequences: for example, the tendency towards indirect politeness in American English can result in Americans coming across as wishy-washy and insincere when speaking Russian, while Russian-language tendencies towards direct politeness can result in Russian speakers coming across as blunt and rude when speaking English (Thomas, 1983).

Most language educators are fully aware of the importance of the social aspects of language use, of course. Yet they are also stuck at an impasse, because to thoroughly teach the sociolinguistics of a target language seems nearly impossible. After all, the sociolinguistic system of a target language is highly complex and highly contextualized, with social preferences and tendencies varying from community to community. And, at the end of the day, classroom time is quite limited. It is unsurprising, therefore, that many language teachers identify study abroad, rather than classroom time, as the best setting for sociolinguistic and cultural learning, given that
being immersed in the target culture seems as though it ought to be the best opportunity for this sort of learning.

Yet cultural learning on study abroad can be highly variable (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009). What is more, study abroad is still relatively uncommon, with only approximately 10% of students studying abroad before they graduate (Institute of International Education, 2017a); of those, nearly 40% stay only for the summer term, while only 2.3% stay as long as a year (Institute of International Education, 2017b). Furthermore, obstacles like socioeconomic status (Lörz, Netz, & Quast, 2016) and disability (Institute of International Education, 2017c) appear to create barriers to going abroad. Sojourns abroad, therefore, are not a reliable source of cultural learning, and going abroad is not a practical solution for many language students. So how, then, can cultural and sociolinguistic learning be made both consistent and accessible?

This study examines whether it is possible to empower students themselves to investigate target communities and thereby engage in cultural and sociolinguistic learning. I guided participants drawn from the students of the Summer Language Institute through an online course training them in culture and sociolinguistics. After they completed this course, they carried out an investigation of an online culture, specifically paying attention to language use and identity performances within that culture. The participants in the project were periodically interviewed to explore their cultural attitudes; they also periodically filled out surveys measuring their sociolinguistic awareness and intercultural competence. This was done in order to answer the following questions:

1. Does participation in an online cultural training program with a subsequent qualitative investigative project increase sociolinguistic awareness?
2. Does participation in an online cultural training program with a subsequent qualitative investigative project increase intercultural competence?
3. Does participation in this program give students the tools necessary to investigate and learn about the target culture and target language independently?
Literature review

Culture teaching is often discussed as central to language teaching. The ACTFL standards for language identify culture as one of their “Five Cs,” meaning that it is one of the skills that must be acquired in order to produce a capable language speaker (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015). Yet these calls to teach culture often do not define what “culture” is. The Standards call culture the “products, practices, and perspectives” of a given group. Some scholars define culture narrowly, as in the following:

Culture is that residual realm left over after all forms of observable human behavior have been removed. It consists of the inner, invisible thought life of human beings either as individuals or in some difficult-to-imagine collective sense, as in notions of ‘collective purpose’, ‘shared values’, and ‘intersubjective realities’. What people actually do, how they behave, the institutions they construct [...] however, are not a part of culture. (Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, & Kurzweil, 2012, p. 4)

Others, meanwhile, define it broadly: Hannerz (1992) defines culture, simply, as “meaning.”

Despite this diversity of approaches to culture, however, culture curricula tend to be quite similar across language classes. Textbooks often utilize a product-oriented and nationalist approach to culture, including perfunctory sidebars about great artists and writers that came out of particular dominant national groups or reproducing narratives of national heritage, while sidelining multiculturalism as narratives that stand apart from the dominant stories of particular linguistic and national groups (Kramsch, Howell, Warner, & Wellmon, 2007).

Recently, discussions of culture teaching have moved away from discussion of concrete knowledge and moved towards discussions of skills. Culture teaching is often now conceptualized as the teaching of intercultural competence (ICC), the ability to effectively and appropriately interact with members of other cultures (Deardorff, 2006, pp. 247–248). This is, of course, still a rather ambiguous description, and so a large number of theorists have attempted to concretize the
construct, leading to a diverse body of models of (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). While these models of ICC differ from one another in a number of ways, both minor and significant, there are certain consistent elements to their definitions of ICC: empathy, flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity, and curiosity are central in most of these models.

Interestingly, language ability is not present in many of these models of ICC. Yet crucial to intercultural competence is the ability to effectively communicate, to use language in a way to appropriately position oneself in relation to others. Broadly speaking, the sociolinguistic elements of a given language are what allow a speaker to do this: a speaker who can control sociolinguistic aspects of the language can accordingly align or disalign themselves with certain social roles or identities. Therefore, some theorists have in fact placed sociolinguistic ability and awareness in their models of ICC (e.g., Deardorff, Byram).

In this project, I relied upon the process model of intercultural competence developed by (Deardorff, 2004, 2006) This model conceptualizes intercultural competence as an iterative process, in which individuals’ attitudes and skills result in shifts in internal and external behavior, which in turn contribute to the development of further skills and attitudes. The model is presented below.
Defining sociolinguistic competence is similarly difficult. In this project, sociolinguistic competence approached as a construct similar to intercultural competence: it consists of a blend of attitudes, skills, and knowledge which feed into internal and external outcomes. No models of L2 sociolinguistic competence that I was able to locate take into account all these facets of sociolinguistic competence; some, such as Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell (1995) account for knowledge, but minimize the role of skills and do not discuss attitudes at all. The following model, developed for and used in this project, accounts for the multiple components of sociolinguistic competence.

**Figure 1.** Deardorff’s (2004, 2006) process model of intercultural competence
### Attitudes
- Curiosity and discovery
- Respect for diversity
- Desire for integration

### Knowledge
- Pragmalinguistic knowledge (knowledge of pragmatic forms in the L2)
- Sociopragmatic knowledge (knowledge of the social roles and rules that govern appropriate pragmatic usage)
- Knowledge of variation (knowledge of the rules that link pragmalinguistic forms to social information)
- Critical cultural awareness (awareness of own cultural identity and others’ cultural identities)

### Skills
- Speech awareness
- Social awareness
- Linguistic and paralinguistic ability and fluency

**Figure 2.** Holistic model of sociolinguistic competence

A number of studies have examined the question of how these competencies can be taught. Some of the most promising literature on teaching intercultural and sociolinguistic competence suggests that project-based learning is an effective way to develop these competencies. In project-based language and culture learning, participants actively engage with the target language and/or culture in a goal-oriented, concrete way. In particular, certain studies have had students engage in qualitative studies of the target culture, observing and gathering data on naturalistic interaction; these projects have been beneficial for students’ cultural and linguistic skills (Blattner & Fiori, 2011; Jackson, 2006, 2008; Roberts, 2003).

This study has students carry out a study of Russian speech culture. The nature of the study is grounded in linguistic anthropology, a field that looks at the function of language in cultural contexts. The participants in the study are taken through a course that introduces them to linguistic anthropology and to the principles of ethnographic inquiry, after which they carry out a small investigation of their own.

What sets this project apart from other studies that have students carry out qualitative studies for the purpose of learning is that these investigations happen entirely online. While prior studies have relied on students living in the cultural context under investigation, the participants...
in this study instead are classroom learners, engaging with social media in order to investigate the target culture.

**Methodology**

*Participants*

The participants in this study were all students of the Summer Language Institute (SLI) at the University of Pittsburgh, studying in the summer of 2018. The SLI is a “domestic immersion” language program. A domestic immersion program is one in which participants do not study the language in a cultural setting where the target language is spoken, which sets it apart from a study-abroad program. However, the domestic immersion program is constructed so that the number of contact hours with the language is dramatically higher than in a standard classroom setting; students generally study the language for upwards of four hours per day, have class multiple times per week, and have activities outside of the class that take place in the target language. The SLI is, therefore, a demanding and rigorous program, one which participants noted as being exhausting; however, it is also perceived by students as being more effective for learning the language, a perception that has been supported by measurements of students’ language outcomes (Freed, Segalowitz, & Dewey, 2004).

Participants in this study were split into two groups: a focal group and a reference group. These two groups, it must be noted, were not perfectly matched, and as such comparisons between them are imperfect. Members of the focal group were self-selected: they volunteered for the longer study, which means that they were likely more motivated to learn culture. Additionally, they may have been more academically inclined, as they were willing to spend their limited free time on study beyond what they were doing in the classroom. The reference group consisted of those who
did not volunteer for the project; the reference group was also drawn from participants who were studying a wide variety of languages, rather than just Russian, and who were studying at all levels. Therefore, the reference group is not a true comparison group; rather, it is intended to give a general idea of SLI students’ learning trajectories.

The focal group consisted of five participants. All five participants were studying Russian at the intermediate level or above. These participants were taken through an online course about culture and sociolinguistics prior to their participation in the SLI. After completion of this course, they carried out an online sociolinguistic investigation looking into topics of their choice. They completed surveys of their intercultural and sociolinguistic competence at three points; additionally, they were interviewed at three different points.

The reference group consisted of 12 other students in SLI, studying various languages at various levels. These students did not participating in the online course. These participants filled out surveys of intercultural competence at two points: once towards the beginning of SLI, and once towards the end. Their scores gave an idea of how SLI, without any additional interventions, contributed to students’ intercultural competence and sociolinguistic competence.

**Measurements of intercultural and sociolinguistic competence**

ICC and sociolinguistic competence were measured using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, as per the recommendations laid out by the ICC experts surveyed in Deardorff (2006).

These competencies were measured quantitatively by means of a survey measuring intercultural and sociolinguistic competence. The survey was administered online via the service
Qualtrics. Participants moved a slider to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with a statement; the scale ranged from -100 (maximum disagreement) to 100 (maximum agreement).

Qualitative measurements of sociolinguistic and intercultural competence were based upon data drawn from interviews and assignments. Deardorff’s process model of intercultural competence was used as the primary framework for measuring ICC, while sociolinguistic competence was evaluated using the model of sociolinguistic competence presented in Figure 2. The program NVivo, a service designed to assist in analyzing qualitative data, was used during the analysis process.

In my analysis, I focused on individual growth in ICC and sociolinguistic competence from the beginning of the program until the end of the program. As such, in the qualitative analysis, I compared pre-test scores to post-test scores. In the qualitative analysis, meanwhile, I focused on the ideas and perspectives that had changed over the course of the program.
Online course and project

The students in the focal group carried out an online course before their participation in the Summer Language Institute, then carried out an online investigation over the course of the SLI.

The online course was built in CourseWeb, University of Pittsburgh’s learning management system. It lasted four weeks overall, with each week grouped into a separate model that explored a particular theme.

**Figure 3.** Landing page of online course
The first week of the course focused on discussing culture as a whole, particularly asking the participants to engage in reflection upon their cultural identities and understandings about the nature of culture. The assignments this week focused upon stereotypes, asking students to analyze stereotypes about Russian and American culture and reflecting upon the personal and emotional impacts of stereotyping.
The second week of the course had participants reflect upon the role of language in shaping culture, as well as the way in which culture shapes language. The central assignments this week involved taking a linguistic-anthropological approach to analyzing Russian language; for example, the students analyzed the relationship between Slavic cultural history and kinship terms. The students also analyzed two Russian YouTube celebrities’ performances of Russian culture, thinking particularly about how they used their Russian identities for humor.
The third week of the course had participants think about how language and culture might be explored. The central assignments this week consisted largely of reading, in which the students read a chapter from an ethnography of Russian speech in the late 1980s and reflected upon the researcher’s methods. Additionally, they read about ethnography as a methodology, and they considered how their own unconscious biases might affect their writing and thinking.

Figure 6. Week 3 of online course

The fourth week of the course had participants begin to explore language data, analyzing it from a linguistic-anthropological perspective. There were several reflective essays in this unit. Additionally, participants carried out one assignment in which they gathered data from the
comments section of YouTube videos that featured Eurovision performances, concentrating on discourses of nationality from commenters and reflecting on why these discourses emerge in this context. Finally, they also began their investigation of an online space of their choice, which became their project.

**Figure 7.** Week 4 of online course

This online course was intended to be completed by the first week of SLI, with most participants succeeding in completing it in that timeframe. During SLI, the participants carried out an online investigation. They were able to semi-freely choose the topic of their investigation; the only conditions were that they had to work with Russian-language data, that they had to look directly at interactions amongst internet users, and that they had to focus their investigation on some aspect of Russian language use. Their goal in these projects was to collect authentic Russian
data and contextualize it in the internet space they were investigating, and use that to encourage reflections on the sociolinguistic and cultural patterns visible in interaction over Russian-language social media. This data collection and subsequent reflection was intended to raise the participants’ awareness of the arbitrariness of culture, but also about the possibility of cultural participation, given sufficient observation and information-gathering.

The participants’ project topics are listed in Table 1.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Project</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Diminutive use amongst fashion vloggers on YouTube</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Discourses of nationalism amongst advocates of Russian reclamation of Alaska</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Terminology describing LGBTQ+ individuals used by Russian-language speakers online</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Styles of humor amongst late-night hosts in Russia</td>
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<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Discourses of militarism in military journalism</td>
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Table 1. Focal group’s projects

Results

First, quantitative analysis of the reference group’s survey data showed that participants in the Summer Language Institute saw at least one significant benefit. There was a statistically-significant increase in sociolinguistic awareness between the beginning and the end of participation in the SLI: the students saw an average increase of 16.22 points between pretest and posttest (t = -2.259, p < .05). There was not, however, a statistically-significant growth in ICC; there was an increase of 8.63 points between pretest and posttest, which was not enough to reach significance (t = -1.739, p > .05).

The focal group was too small to reliably run inferential statistics on. However, the focal group saw an average increase of 24.02 points between the pretest and the posttest on their measurements of sociolinguistic competence. They also saw an average increase of 15.37 points on their measurements of intercultural competence between the beginning and end of the study.
Because of the different sizes of the two groups and the non-random assignment into one group or the other, a statistical comparison between the reference group and the focal group would not be appropriate. Summary statistics are provided instead below, with the caveat that the conclusions that can be drawn from them are limited.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reference group</th>
<th>Focal group</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sociolinguistic awareness</td>
<td>16.22</td>
<td>24.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural competence</td>
<td>8.63</td>
<td>15.37</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Table 2.** Quantitative measurements of growth in sociolinguistic awareness and ICC for two groups of participants

Qualitative analysis of the focal participants’ data is ongoing at this time. However, the analysis that has been carried out so far seems to support the dual role of SLI and the online course/project in supporting sociolinguistic growth, accompanied by the importance of the online course/project for cultural growth.

In particular, the online course appears to support growth in cultural self-understanding. While intercultural competence is often conceptualized as the ability to engage with and understand a cultural “other,” a number of theorists (e.g., Byram, 1997, 2012) have indicated that self-understanding is necessary for this to occur. Individuals must be able to understand themselves in the context of their culture, must be able to understand the arbitrariness of culture, and must be able to use that self-understanding to assist in taking others’ perspectives. As such, the considerable growth in cultural self-understanding shown by the qualitative data seems to be one of the central ways in which this project supports ICC growth.
Additionally, participation in this project appears so far to foster increased understanding of the links between culture and language. While this project does not seem to increase participants’ specific knowledge of Russian sociolinguistics, there is a growth in understanding of the existence of variation as part of the Russian language, as well as a growth in understanding of the role of variation in creating social meaning. Understanding of this fact is crucial both to increasing ICC and to increasing sociolinguistic awareness.

Conclusions and future directions

As mentioned above, data analysis from this project is still ongoing. However, certain conclusions can be drawn from the analysis that has been carried out so far.

Immersion programs

First, a few generalizations can be made about domestic immersion programs. Participation in domestic immersion programs seems to be tied to increased sociolinguistic competence, although there is not a corresponding increase in intercultural competence. This seems to indicate that participation in SLI, at the very least, increases awareness of and competence in the linguistic aspect of culture — a logical outcome, given the SLI’s emphasis on improving linguistic skills in communicative contexts. However, in accordance with the predictions of scholars such as Kinginger (2010), the limited opportunities for critical engagement with cultural difference mean that ICC development do not rise to the same levels. It is worth investigating whether similar results might be found at other domestic immersion programs, or whether the growth of sociolinguistic competence is fostered by the individual curriculum of the domestic immersion program.
Also worth noting is students’ perceptions of domestic immersion programs. Students consistently evaluated the SLI as better for language learning in comparison to standard classroom settings. Measurements were not taken to see whether this perceived advantage was reflected in actual linguistic outcomes, but SLI participation clearly increased self-confidence and attitudes towards the L2.

**Online investigations**

Participation in online culture classes and online investigations seems to develop participants’ intercultural competence and sociolinguistic competence. Strong gains in quantitative measurements indicates growth in both areas. This is supported by analyses of qualitative data. In this data, participants show considerable development of cultural self-understanding in particular; this contributes to a development of intercultural competence, as participants become more able to articulate their own culture and understand its role in shaping their perspectives, which in turn fosters the ability to take others’ perspectives. Additionally, gains can be seen in participants’ understanding of sociolinguistic variation and critical cultural awareness, which contributes to their sociolinguistic skills.

The third research question is whether or not the participants in this study will be able to continue to learn independently. Participants indicated that they did not gain quite enough experience that they would be confident carrying out another, similar investigation without academic supervision. As such, another iteration of this study will provide more support for independent work, suggesting future directions and providing a framework by which participants can engage with target-language speech cultures.
**Future directions**

The ultimate goal of this research is to develop a course that can be made available to all language students that will give them the tools to investigate language and culture independently. As such, this course will continue to be increasingly refined and developed; in particular, it will be developed to be more automated, with less instructor intervention, with the ultimate goal of eliminating the instructor altogether. Once the course is able to “run itself,” it can be released to all students in order to give them the tools to learn about culture without having to pay for instructor hours or pay to go abroad, increasing access for all students.

The next iteration of this course is being run in Fall 2018, this time in a standard classroom setting. This version of the course is being run with a larger number of participants; it also has a more traditional control group. This is being in order to provide stronger and more generalizable quantitative data. The course was developed and refined using data from the focal participants from the SLI, with ineffective assignments eliminated and others developed further. Additionally, this version of the course has reduced researcher intervention.

Ultimately, students of languages need to be able to access cultural and sociolinguistic information independently, and need to be able to study it on their own. There will never be enough classroom time to train students to function precisely how they themselves want to function, and it is highly unlikely that there will ever be a situation in which all students will be able to travel to their target community to participate in it and learn there. Further development of toolsets and trainings such as this might bring students closer to being able to support their own learning and tailor it to their own needs.
Works cited


