

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF ARMENIA

YEREVAN

A Study of Language, Culture, and Interaction in an Extra-Curricular Debate Club

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
of the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

by
Melissa Brown

2007

The thesis of Melissa Brown is approved.

Robert Agajeenian

Marianne Celce-Murcia

Sivakumar Sivasubramaniam, Committee Chair

American University of Armenia

2007

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to all of my colleagues and professors in the Department of English Programs for their contributions to this study, particularly Elisa Kekejian and Jo Lewkowicz, who got me started in the TEFL program, and Associate Dean Robert Agajeenian, a wise and engaging mentor, and Sivakumar Sivasubramaniam, my endlessly understanding and insightful thesis advisor, who have seen me through to the end. Thanks are due as well to my office mates, Lilianna Edilyan, Talin Grigorian, and Shakuntala Singh Sivakumar, for their patience and support. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Dean Marianne Celce-Murcia, for her boundless energy, wisdom, and caring. It has been an honor and a tremendous privilege to have worked and studied with her. I am grateful as well to all of my students, past and present, and particularly to my debaters, a constant source of joy and inspiration. I am especially grateful to those members of the debate club who agreed to be interviewed for this study for their thoughtfulness and candor. Finally, I would like to thank my family—my son Robert Arzoumanian, for helping me transcribe the interviews in this study and for being a generally excellent sport, and my husband Alexander Arzoumanian, for his encouragement and his example.

Abstract

This study of Armenian university students in an extracurricular debate club explores how opportunities are created for learners of English to engage in the target language and culture. It views language learning as contextualized and socially constituted, taking place through participation in communicative events, and adopts a context-based definition of the target culture, as understood and constructed by the participants themselves. Much of the research work on language, culture and identity has been conducted in ESL settings such as the USA, Canada, or the UK, in which language learning is part of a process of immigration or acculturation or in post-colonial settings in which English has a particular set of social and political connotations. I am interested in exploring the issues of language, identity, and culture in Armenia, a former Soviet republic in its second decade of transition to democracy and a free-market economy, characterized by a significant Diaspora presence, as well as current processes of European and international integration. The project is a longitudinal case study, incorporating observations throughout the course of one ten-week term, a survey of the participants at one session, and small-group interviews conducted after the end of the term. The study finds learners developing their own understanding of the target culture as it is manifested through the target language activity; specifically, they view the culture that parliamentary debate represents as connected to their professional goals, their hopes for the democratization and modernization of their society, and their own desires to participate as free and equal citizens. This understanding promotes learner investment in the activity as a result of the opportunities they perceive it as providing. Learner engagement is further encouraged through the dramatic characteristics of the activity and the collaborative environment that is co-constructed around it.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iii
Abstract	iv
Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter 2. LITERATURE REVIEW	4
2.1 Language, Culture, and Identity	4
2.1.1 Language and culture	4
2.1.2 Individual and social identity	5
2.1.3 Learner identity and social context	7
2.1.4 Intercultural awareness	9
2.2 Shifting understandings of target culture	11
2.3 Promoting engagement through mediation and investment	13
2.3.1. Cultural mediation	13
2.3.2. Investment and motivation	15
2.4 Learning contexts that promote engagement	17
2.4.1 Drama	17
2.4.2 The classroom environment	20
2.5 Methodological considerations	22
2.6 Research questions	26
Chapter 3. METHODS AND PROCEDURES	27
3.1 Contextual setting	27
3.2 Research instruments	29
3.3 Participants	30
Chapter 4. PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS	33
4.1 The target culture	33
4.1.1 Background	34
4.1.2 Debate culture	35
4.2 Cultural and linguistic mediation	43
4.3 Mediation and engagement through drama	46
4.4 The learning environment	55
4.4.1 Learner-teacher interaction	55
4.4.2 Learner-learner interaction	58
4.5 Language learning	65
4.6 Discussion	68
Chapter 5. CONCLUSION	70
5.1 Limitations	70
5.2 Implications for further research	71
References	74
Appendix A	80
Appendix A1: Thesis questionnaire	80
Appendix A2: Interview transcriptions	82
Appendix B	132
Appendix B1: Debate guidelines	132
Appendix B2: Sample debate motions	133

Appendix B3: Scoring sheet	134
Appendix B4: Preliminary rounds results	136