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## 2 **Culture in Second Language** 3 **Learning**

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### 7 **Synonyms**

8 Beliefs and values; Civilization (archaic); Social norms;  
9 Way of life; Worldviews

### 10 **Definition**

11 The term “culture” is famously difficult to define. Within  
12 the research on language teaching and learning, the term  
13 “culture” has diverse and disparate definitions that deal  
14 with forms of speech acts, sociocultural behaviors, social  
15 organizations, knowledge constructs, and ways in which  
16 knowledge is transmitted and obtained. Culture is  
17 sometimes identified with and may find its manifestations  
18 in notions of personal space, body language, eye contact,  
19 concepts of time, and various customs and traditions.

### 20 **Theoretical Background**

21 In the early 1900s, linguists and anthropologists who  
22 researched the structure of American Indian languages,  
23 e.g., Franz Boas (1858–1942), found that relationships  
24 among thought, abstract notions, and language as  
25 a means of expressing ideas and concepts was complex.  
26 In the 1920s, following Boas, Edward Sapir (1884–1939)  
27 and his students concluded that a language and the culture  
28 of its speakers cannot be analyzed in isolation. According  
29 to Sapir, language can be seen as a way to describe and  
30 represent human experience and understanding of the  
31 world, and typically, members of a language community  
32 share common systems of beliefs and assumptions in  
33 regard to how the world is constructed. Their views of  
34 objective phenomena and shared beliefs and histories are  
35 communicated through language, and communication  
36 establishes a connection between language and the culture  
37 of a community.

In a number of important studies published between 38  
the 1920s and the 1950s, Sapir and Benjamin Whorf 39  
(1897–1941) further determined that, in different 40  
languages, linguistic systems, discourse (units of 41  
connected speech and writing), and word meanings 42  
demonstrate different ways of looking at the world 43  
and constructing its realities. To Whorf, for example, 44  
differences in word meanings reflected the thought 45  
processes that set American Indian ► worldviews and 46  
beliefs apart from those of Europeans in their definitions 47  
of time, space, and a broad range of natural phenomena. 48  
Although various languages often have distinct grammar 49  
attributes and lexicon (vocabulary), it may be misleading 50  
to define the differences among languages exclusively 51  
in terms of word meanings and grammar rules. 52  
The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity 53  
also applies to a great many abstract features of lexical, 54  
grammatical, referential, and communicative systems. 55

In the 1960s and 1970s, investigations of the 56  
connections between language and culture produced 57  
such impressive and seminal works as those by Dell 58  
Hymes and John Gumperz on interactional sociolinguistics 59  
and Edward Hall on behavior and cognition. In their 60  
publications in the early 1970s, Hymes and Gumperz and 61  
Hymes (1972) advocated the view that the uses of 62  
language and its analyses are inextricable from the society 63  
and its cultural norms. Language users’ social 64  
backgrounds and identities, as well as social meanings, 65  
are conveyed by means of language. Hymes (1972) 66  
noted that in linguistics, a descriptive theory of speech and 67  
interaction has to take into consideration how language 68  
is used in a particular community both in speech and 69  
writing. According to Hymes, language in interaction is 70  
defined by ► social and language ► norms for the use of 71  
speech, as well as their communicative content, linguistic 72  
form, interactional setting, and social goals. Speech events 73  
and speech acts are not universal and are fundamentally 74  
defined by the social structure, ► values, and beliefs, and 75  
the sociocultural order of the community. Hymes (1972) 76  
was also the first to introduce the notion of “communica- 77  
tive competence” that in the last half a century has had an 78  
indelible effect on second language research and pedagogy. 79



80 In the 1980s and 1990s, educational and linguistic  
81 studies investigated manifestations of culture in language  
82 teaching and learning and concerned primarily the effects  
83 of body language, eye contact, and other overt  
84 communicative behaviors. Comparisons of culturally  
85 defined behaviors focused on such common anthropolog-  
86 ical constructs as hand and head movement, eye contact,  
87 lexical references to broad-range tangible and abstract  
88 entities (e.g., measures of distance, shapes, colors, and  
89 time), forms of address, or terms of kinship and personal  
90 relationships that do not exist outside the specific societies  
91 in which they are used. In the 1980s and 1990s, language  
92 teaching methodologies began to include various  
93 techniques for analyzing and teaching cultural behaviors  
94 together with instruction on second language skills. Many  
95 such teaching techniques associated with culture learning,  
96 however, encompassed primarily the anthropological  
97 views of culture and only briefly touched on underlying  
98 cultural assumptions, beliefs, and values (e.g., metaphors  
99 or conversational norms) that are invariably reflected in  
100 language uses and interaction.

101 At present, two parallel strands of research have  
102 evolved to identify the role of culture in society and its  
103 influence on human behavior and language use. The first  
104 strand includes studies of culture as it applies to ► social  
105 norms, ► beliefs, assumptions, and ► value systems that  
106 affect practically all human activities and is prevalent in  
107 the domains of anthropology, sociology, ethnography, and  
108 intercultural communication. Research in these  
109 disciplines examines culture as it applies to the structure  
110 of human societies and organizations, as well as the  
111 differences and similarities that exist in ► social  
112 worldviews. Applied linguistics, and sociolinguistics in  
113 particular, undertakes the study of the interconnections  
114 between language and ► sociocultural norms and societal  
115 frameworks. Specifically, the subdisciplines of  
116 sociolinguistics and pragmatics have the goal of analyzing  
117 how members of particular cultures use language to refer  
118 to, describe, or function within social organizations. For  
119 example, politeness is considered to be a universal feature  
120 of language use in social organizations, but its pragmatic,  
121 linguistic, social, intentional, and conceptual realizations  
122 vary substantially among different languages and cultures.  
123 Even speakers of the same language, such as Chinese or  
124 Spanish, or different dialects, e.g., American, British,  
125 or Indian English, may belong to different cultures or  
126 subcultures and thus have different notions on what it  
127 means to be polite and how politeness should be realized  
128 in speech and behavior.

129 The second strand of research in anthropology,  
130 ethnography, and applied linguistics also includes studies

of specific cultures, such as Brazilian, Chinese, Japanese, 131  
or Korean. Such studies examine and describe ► ways of 132  
doing, speaking, and behaving in specific cultural and 133  
language communities, without necessarily undertaking 134  
to identify commonalities and differences among various 135  
cultures. Both research into culture in general and specific 136  
cultures can be useful to language teachers and learners 137  
who seek to raise their awareness of the inextricable 138  
relationships between the culture of the community and 139  
the language usage of its speakers. 140

### 141 **Important Scientific Research and Open** 142 **Questions**

143 In second language pedagogy, a dominant perspective has  
144 emerged that language usage and the culture of its  
145 speakers are closely bound up, and, together, they  
146 constitute a unified domain of sociolinguistic experience.  
147 Many researchers in language learning and methodolo-  
148 gists in language teaching currently hold the view that it is  
149 simplistic to imply that culture can be examined, taught,  
150 and learned through exercises on reading news media  
151 reports and advertisements. Few believe that folklore,  
152 festivals, facts, and foods (the 4-F approach to teaching  
153 culture) are directly relevant to the impact of culture on  
154 learners' linguistic production and interactive behaviors.

155 A substantial body of research has demonstrated  
156 convincingly that various aspects of second language  
157 learning are affected by the interpretive principles and  
158 paradigms in learners' natal cultures. Specifically,  
159 language learners' understanding of conceptualizations  
160 and constructs in second culture is crucially affected by  
161 their culturally defined assumptions, presuppositions,  
162 beliefs, and worldviews. For example, for learners  
163 socialized in the cultures with a strong tradition of defer-  
164 ence to elders, more egalitarian terms of address, such as  
165 the use of a first name, may seem somewhat inappropriate  
166 at best.

167 The teaching and learning of sociocultural and  
168 linguistic norms implicitly or explicitly pervades the  
169 teaching of conversational discourse, social interaction,  
170 and the spoken and written language typically employed  
171 in a language community. Second language learners  
172 inescapably become learners of the second culture because  
173 a language cannot be learned without considering the  
174 cultural context in which it is used (Hinkel 1999).

175 In the current understanding of the place of culture in  
176 second language pedagogy and learning, the work of  
177 Michael Byram has played a prominent role. Byram  
178 (1989, p. 1) noted that culture represents a "hidden"  
179 curriculum in second language teaching. That is, language  
180 teaching can rarely take place without implicitly teaching

181 the culture of its speakers because language invariably  
182 refers to their common and shared knowledge and  
183 perceptions of the world, as well as the concepts of culture,  
184 and cultural learning. Currently, many researchers and  
185 language teaching methodologists largely assume that, in  
186 real terms, communicative competence involves socially  
187 and culturally appropriate language use, which is almost  
188 invariably culture specific.

189 Unlike the foundational language skills, such as speak-  
190 ing, reading, or writing, second culture does not  
191 represent a separate domain of language instruction.  
192 Rather, the learning of the second culture makes learners  
193 better – and more competent – communicators. In  
194 language learning, the foundational sociocultural  
195 principles that determine the norms of appropriate  
196 language use and behavior within the social networks  
197 and paradigms represent the invisible culture (Hinkel  
198 2001). As Stewart (1972, p. 16) comments, “[t]he typical  
199 person has a strong sense of what the world is really like, so  
200 that it is with surprise that he discovers that ‘reality’ is built  
201 up out of certain assumptions commonly shared among  
202 members of the same culture. Cultural assumptions may  
203 be defined as abstract, organized, and general concepts  
204 which pervade a person’s outlook and behavior.”  
205 To members of a particular community and culture,  
206 these fundamental assumptions usually appear to be  
207 self-evident and axiomatic. On the other hand, they are  
208 not always shared by members of other language  
209 communities and cultures whose values are similarly  
210 based on unquestioned fundamental assumptions and  
211 concepts. It is also important to acknowledge that ways  
212 of using language (e.g., speaking, listening, reading, and  
213 writing) and sociocultural frameworks in different  
214 communities may conflict to varying extents  
215 (Hinkel 1999).

216 The conceptualization of culture as inextricable from  
217 ethnolinguistic and personal identity, however, leaves  
218 open the question of whether adult learners can be fully  
219 socialized in a second culture. Learners’ awareness of  
220 sociocultural norms and frameworks and the concepts  
221 they acquire as a part of their socialization into

assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors remain predomi- 222  
nantly first culture-bound even in the case of advanced 223  
and proficient second language users. As many researchers 224  
have noted, language learners cannot simply shed their 225  
own cultural identity and fully adopt another because 226  
their natal culture is a part of themselves, and their 227  
socialization processes have formed and created them as 228  
social individuals (Byram and Morgan 1994). 229

Without an understanding of the manifestations and 230  
outcomes of sociocultural values, norms, and concepts on 231  
speech and behavior in language use, it may not be 232  
possible to become fully linguistically competent in 233  
another language. Being aware of the sociocultural 234  
frameworks does not mean, however, that learners have 235  
to become “native-like,” but an awareness of the second 236  
cultural norms can allow learners to make their own 237  
informed choices of what to say and how to say it. Because 238  
language use reflects the culture of its speakers in a myriad 239  
of ways, teaching the second culture together with 240  
the essential linguistic skills more adequately represents 241  
the connections between language and culture than 242  
teaching second language linguistic skills – or culture – 243  
in isolation. 244

## 245 Cross-References

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