Culture in an Immersion Environment: The AFAP Experience

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The Advanced Filipino Abroad Program (AFAP) is a project administered by the University of Hawaii Filipino and Philippine Literature Program and is funded by the US Department of Education under the Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad Program. This travel abroad program was first implemented in 1991 and since then, it has continuously been in operation for advanced level language learners in rural (provincial) and urban (city) settings. De La Salle University (DLSU) has been host to the program since 2002. The program consists of a morning structured academic component, and an afternoon task-based language use outside the classroom for the learners’ maximum exposure to native speakers and to understand better the culture of the heritage language, Filipino. The relationship between language and culture has been a focus of many studies in the field of teaching, and the two concepts are inseparable.

This paper will discuss how culture is directly and indirectly taught through the various activities of the program. It will center on how the academic structure of the program is complemented and supplemented by events/activities outside the classroom/academic community. The participants are assessed in their knowledge of content and culture after the eight-week abroad program.

The Abroad Filipino Program

The Advanced Filipino Abroad Program is a summer short-term course on highly intensive Filipino language and culture designed for American/Filipino American Fulbright scholars. The crop of the participants is basically of Filipino parentage and a small number of pure American parentage. The scholars have passed all the requirements set by the selection committee composed of the Program Director, AFAP Associate Director, i.e. Drs. Teresita Ramos and Ruth Elynia
Mabanglo, Center for South East Asian Studies (CSEAS), and other members of the consortium of six (6) universities in the United States. Only students with intermediate to advanced proficiency levels in Filipino are admitted in the program. Upon arrival at the DLSU, they are given the South East Asian Studies Summer Institute Proficiency Examination (SEASSIPE) by the In-Country Director as basis for grouping, and an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is conducted by the US Director. Scholars are then grouped into 2 with 2 teachers teaching them alternately. The group, numbering from nine (9) to fourteen (14), is always multi-disciplinary with undergraduate, post-BA and PhD students with different goals for joining the program.

The program curriculum development consides the following important concerns in principles and procedures for planning, delivery, management and assessment of teaching and learning (Richards 2000). The language and culture program calls for a special design to be able to meet its objectives. Instructional materials have to be selected, adapted to the profile of the scholars with different fields of studies, and observe organization of lessons into well-sequenced blocks of topics and tasks or activities. Considered are classroom activities, and tasks beyond the classroom which are content-based, task-based and culture-based, as well. Curriculum has been designed to specify skills/language functions, grammatical elements, cultural/historical aspects with appropriate print, non-print, both print and non-print, authentic materials, strategies/practicum, and assessment/evaluation.

The morning class serves as the structured student-teacher, student-student interaction while the practicum or afternoon activity serves as the venue for cultural immersion and the real world encounter of the learners outside the classroom.

**Setting of immersion**

The program has been implemented at the De la Salle University campuses: Taft Avenue, Manila and Dasmariñas, Cavite. This set up exposes the scholars both in the city and provincial life and cultures of the Filipinos.

**AFAP Curriculum**

The objectives set for the program are as follows:

At the end of the 8-week immersion, the students in the advanced level of Filipino are expected to be able to:

- perform tasks with high level of communication skills for academic and social functions;
- use Filipino language and a support language like English in a combined programmed and non-programmed learning environment maximizing their multiple intelligences;
- appreciate the content/theme bases of the lessons through individual and group leadership in the reading-writing, listening-speaking activities;
• engage in various activities that call for higher level of competency taking into account awareness and sensitivity of one’s own culture and others’; and
• interact with different sectors in the academic, political, cultural, socio-religious world in the two sites of immersion, namely, the urban and provincial.

The team of curriculum developers worked on thematic/content-based design for the weeks of structured lessons - - local life in Cavite and education (Week 1), literature and performing arts (Week 2), history and religion (Week 3), economy and globalization (Week 4), politics and governance (Week 5), and Bicol immersion for research (in 2008) and in 2009, Batangas province (Week 6). The final weeks are set for research presentation and other course requirement completion.

One important feature of any language program is cultural transmission. Culture has taken several meanings (Kelly 1999: 50). It covers all aspects of the ways of life of a society. It is regarded as being best in the art and literature of any particular society, what Matthew Arnold once described as “the best that has been thought and said”.

On orientation day, scholars and host families are given parallel session on Philippine culture. We zoomed in at specific topics such as (1) behavior with host families (what is acceptable/unacceptable; what families expect as to decorum at home with family members, how to ask/request for things; time to go home, (2) behavior in school/class (including expectations of the environment such as dressing up, mannerisms, (3) body language of Filipinos, (4) attitudes that may be misunderstood, (5) security and (6) dealing with people of authority such as government/school/university officials.

For the program in the past 2 years, we conducted Cultural Orientation for the scholars, inviting a noted lecturer. Topics discussed via group work were (1) listing down what they think Filipinos and Americans are like, and (2) how they differ from each other. Processing was done by the lecturer. The second activity was a lecture on how to survive and enjoy living in the Philippines taking into account family values, traffic in the city with rules best understood using complexity theory (the real rules are not the ones in city ordinances), keeping one’s cellphone, kidnap cases, water and unique Philippine stuff to experience like eating balut (duck eggs).

These activities bring the scholars to understanding Philippine culture via direct transmission from people familiar with/”in” the culture. On the other hand, AFAP’ers get to know the culture via total immersion outside their classroom setting. The following discusses this cultural immersion beyond the classroom. It is expected that these significant activities concretize Wilga Rivers’ idea (1997): “The real world extends beyond the classroom walls; language learning takes place in and out of the classroom”.

**Homestay**

The students spend four weeks with host families in Cavite and the rest of the period at the
university hotel/dormitory. This component of the program is aimed at making the students live with the Filipino household, get immersed in the food, values, family hospitality. Students spend the late afternoon with their host families after attending class sessions on campus and other activities, and then they go to school in the morning taking the public transport as much as possible or join their host family leave the house for work.

In the letter of invitation to host families, the program encourages them to talk to the students in Filipino all the time. Stated in the invitation is the program’s objective for the scholars to gain cultural enrichment as they live with their families.

In this exercise students get to assimilate Filipino culture as narrated by the host families in their evaluation. Host parents noted that scholars performed the following Filipino acts completely:

- Help in daily household chores
- Use courteous words/expressions at home, e.g. po, opo, ho, oho, magandang umaga, salamat po, kinship terms such as Ate, Kuya, Lola Lolo, etc.
- Bid the family good-bye before leaving home for school
- Show appreciation for the help received at home
- Invite family members to join in the meals

Assessment on how effective an activity is part of any language program. Feedback from students on the homestay is worth listing down:

- The amount of time spent with host family was too short to gain acculturation into Filipino life. I enjoyed my stay with my host family very much. They were extremely supportive and accommodating. They also listened to my needs and communicated so that I would feel comfortable which I enjoyed very much.
- Homestay was a very great experience and encouraged me to communicate with them through the Tagalog/Filipino language. I very much enjoyed our dinner. Meals we had together within the 3 weeks. They really shared their affection for us through various ways. They always asked about our whereabouts and if we were hungry.
- Meals were very fulfilling and were a window into the Philippine culture.
- My homestay was the best part of the program. My homestay family was very friendly and generous as well as very welcoming of our presence as students learning Filipino language and culture. My homestay partner and we really enjoyed our time there talking with Mama Emma and Lola about the daily happenings and frustrations of our time here in the country. In times of sickness and weariness, Mama Emma’s daughter, being a doctor, was able to prescribe us various medicine pills to alleviate our pain.
- Excellent! They were very patient with my broken Tagalog; the kids were fantastic; and I had a chance to meet their extended family and got a sense of a large family that has lived in Cavite for a long time.
- I love them! I felt that I learned so much with my host family that I wouldn’t be able to see
inside the classroom through academics. I really got to practice my Filipino at home with my host family.

- My experience with the host family in Dasmariñas was one of the best experience. I learned a lot from them and they learned from me at the same time. There should be more time given to the students to hang out with the host families because a lot can be learned that way.

For the many years of AFAP engaging host families, we have been getting positive evaluation from both ends, students and families. This component of the program clearly shows how directly culture is picked up, experienced and appreciated by the learners. They got to acknowledge the presence of cultural diversity within a society, Cavite for that matter, as well as Manila City.

**AFAP immersion to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): Bahay Kalinga and Bahay Tuluyan**

This activity engages the AFAP’ers to experience the life of the less privileged individuals in the NGOs, to communicate/interact/interview people in this setting. These NGOs, Bahay Kalinga and Bahay Tuluyan are under the Municipal Work and Development Office. Bahay Tuluyan caters to abused children, mostly girls from Cavite, with pending cases in court. Bahay Kalinga, on the other hand, is under the municipal office and caters to Children in Conflict with the Law (CICL) and youth at risk.

The program devoted 5 afternoons (or longer in another year) for the scholars to immerse in these institutions, interacted with children with special needs. They got to see a different environment challenging them to be adaptive in many ways.

How does culture come into this activity? The physical aspect of the surround helps define it members’ behavior and perceptions. Since the AFAP’ers were given orientation by our coordinator and social workers before they visit the places, they were cautioned on what language to use, topics for discussion, manner to dealing with the youth at risk, activities which would lift their spirit.

The scholars shared their time, talents, and treasure to the kids in a week of afternoon immersion where they told stories, engaged them in games, songs and dancing, and Filipino food which they brought.

Some comments on this activity include the following:

- NGO kids were shy. Hard to talk to because they were shy and we didn’t know what to talk about with them given their sensitive situation.
- It showed how the other side lives, but it also reinforced differences between Fil-Ams and Filipinos. I wish I could have gotten to know the kids better.
For this particular set up of interaction between scholars and the clientele, a thorough orientation on the nature of the crowd was deemed essential. A special kind of lingo and ethnography was needed to have a lengthy exchange among them. However, the socials element was a relaxing moment for them to bond together in the midst of singing, dancing and eating together.

**Fiestas and field trips ‘lakbay-aral’**

**Fiestas and religious events**

Part of the program is town immersion, the so-called field trips ‘lakbay-aral’ to expose students to the historical and religious events in Cavite, and in the process made them appreciate the past and its glory as discussed in the morning class sessions. On June 23, the scholars joined a procession called KARAKOL (Feast of St. John the Baptist). KARAKOL is a religious celebration of the feast of St. Mary Magdalene. It is a procession of the image of the patron Sta. Maria Magdalena while people join street dancing. Sprinkling water to anyone on the street is part of the tradition, and some AFAP’ers had a taste of this culture. All AFAP scholars, regardless of their religion, including their teachers and administrators/staff joined the dancing along the long narrow street.

Another cultural event that took place on De la Salle University - Dasmariñas campus was the SANGHIYANG where a group of people engaged in this practice were invited to perform. SANGHIYANG is a coined word from “Isa” (one) and “hiyang” (compatible) hence the meaning “compatible whole.” This is a ritual dance famous in Alfonso, Cavite, the purpose of which is to thank God for a plentiful harvest. It is not an ordinary dance activity because dancers here perform on live, burning coals, and so it is called “Sayaw sa Apoy” (dance on fire).

**Field trips**

In the classroom, students get a taste of Philippine history from pre-hispanic to colonization period and the contemporary. One major influence of Spanish colonization was the strategic geographic set up of governance-education-church in the Philippines. After a clear understanding of lesson, the students got a first hand experience of the town structure as evidenced by the nature of the hegemony of the past regime (basically Spanish influence on planning). Walking through the major centers, church at the heart of the town, very close to it, the municipal/government hall, school, and hospital. As part of the Filipino culture, the group first dropped by the church and had conversation with the parish priests before going around the sacred place. A tour and meeting with the town Mayor at the municipal hall made the scholars understand better the written mission-vision of governance in the area. From there, a visit to the public/government elementary school took place. As they marched to the school, they were greeted by a group of school children in the musical rondalla, with their teachers. What a way of picking up cultural traditions, customs, values of hospitality, the arts, organizations and institutions.
Visiting plantation and farm resort was another opportunity to expose the learners to the rich cultural wealth of the Filipinos. The Villa Escudero in Tiaong, Quezon was one perfect setting to experience carabao cart rides, haranas (being serenaded) or the singing of love songs accompanied by indigenous musical instruments, folk dances with their fabulous costumes and bamboo rafting. Fantastic was the lunch of Filipino foods in the waterfalls area with one's feet on the water while enjoying a smorgasbord of Filipino cuisine. A cultural show highlighted the afternoon activity.

**A day in the farm**

This activity was set to immerse the students to the life of the farmers and have a deeper understanding on their day-to-day existence. The group travelled to the towns of Cavite before reaching the farm where they saw the greenness of the surrounds, then went close to the carabaos and other farm animals, and picked some mangoes and other fruits grown by the family which invited the team. Students, teachers and staff trooped to the paddies and saw area where edible snails grow. They spent a great time conversing with the farmers, and the members of the families, got to know their livelihood, economic problems and lack of government support to uplift their lives. As traditional among the Filipinos, lunch was prepared by the host families consisting of local vegetables, fish, meat dishes, fruits and drinks from locally grown herbs and roost of trees.

**Sub-immersion for a week**

As an innovation of the program, sub-immersion (a week stay) in the province per year of the AFAP has been conducted.

Immersion for a week in selected provinces has been an innovation of the program for the past two (2) years; these are in Bicol and in Batangas.

A week was set for the group to immerse in the communities in Polangui and Legaspi in Albay and in Naga City, Camarines Sur. The program in this province was conducted to come out with research data and publication of a coffetable book featuring the rich culture of the place and people. Though the native tongue of the place, Bicolnon, was the primary medium of communication, using Filipino, the national language was found challenging to the scholars, it was a bit helpful as instrument for communication on various topics. Sometimes, they had to get assist for interpreter/s which the Social Action Center, a church linkage, provided.

Bicol is a peninsula in Region V has seven (7) provinces and seven cities. It is famous for Mt. Mayon and other natural resources. Despite Bicol’s beauty and attractions to people, it is often visited by natural calamities like typhoons and volcanic eruptions. The scholars witnessed how people were devastated by the recent series of typhoons and yet they saw their resilience which was worth knowing through their visit and conversations with the locals. The religiosity of the people was also noted, their rich literature, oral and written, as well.
Last year, AFAP had its sub-immersion in Batangas, a Tagalog-speaking region where scholars witnessed production of local products such as panutsa, balisong, embroidery and barong Tagalog, “barako kape” (famous brand of coffee raised in the province), to name a few of its industry. Museum and old house visits were also done, and the group had a lecture on “Subli”, a Batangas dance ritual on fiesta days. To document the wealth of the culture, a coffeeetable book was published where the themes included “Who’s Who in Batangas”, “Religion and Beliefs of Lipeños”, “History of the Province”, “Batangas Cuisine”, “Batangas Hip Hop Culture”, “World War Perception of Victims”, “Education and Family”, “Business and Identity”, “Superstitions Focused on Wedding Rituals of Residents”, as well as the livelihood of the people.

We have made clear that field trips are educational and wonderful opportunities to observe, question, assimilate the people’s ways of life with respect and being sensitive to one’s own culture, too. They are venues for the scholars’ exposure to multicultural and multilingual encounters with the native speakers of Filipino.

In closing, Advanced Filipino Abroad (AFA) continues to be a program which promotes understanding of culture within the context of second language teaching-learning. Because without culture, where do we place language? Classroom discussion of content-based lessons is not enough for the learners to get the whole picture of how the Filipino people live, see the social constructs that evolve within the group, the way they think, feel, believe and behave. The learners have to immerse in the real world, in the field, as complement and supplement in the total learning. In this component of the program, we observed that culture represents “hidden” (Bryam 1989 in Hinkel 2007) curriculum in language teaching, that language teaching can rarely take place without implicitly teaching the culture of its speakers. Through immersion in the homes, Non-Governmental Organizations, field trips on special occasions, and week-long stay in provinces and towns, not to disregard the lectures of noted persons at the sites of encounter with the native speakers or lecturers on special fields, the scholars become more educated and knowledgeable of the Filipino culture as they use the language. The material and non-material culture of the Filipinos get to be inculcated in their minds during the summer term of the program.

Salamat po sa pakikinig.

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