

# When Culture Kills? Food Allergies and the Foreign Language Curriculum



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Churros, crêpes, marzipan. Such foods are the staples of the foreign language classroom in which teachers endeavor to expose their students to the target culture through the use of food. Although, traditionally, food has been an ingredient of the foreign language classroom—from candy treats to meals—very little has been written on the subject from the standpoint of the language curriculum. Perkins (1978) proposed a gastronomic jaunt through history and geography utilizing European food as the central focus of a culture unit. Food may be mentioned in relation to culture in a methods course (Shrum & Glisan, 2000) and in the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999), perhaps in terms of its historical inclusion or as it can be included in sample progress indicators. This relative dearth in the literature is surprising, given that historically over 58% of foreign language teachers have reported that they use food as a part of their practices (Eddy, 1980).

Food allergy issues, moreover, are absent from the discussion in the field of foreign language education. Frequently, food allergy issues have been directed to prin-

cipals (Muñoz-Furlong, 2002) or related in terms of nutrition to behavioral issues (Pescara-Kovach & Alexander, 1994). However, as food allergies continue to increase among the school-aged population, teachers must have an awareness of the potential dangers, including even the possibility of fatality, of allergic reactions. In this article, I outline the significance of the problem and then offer a brief self-quiz for language teachers, with each answer supported by detail and illuminating the issues involved. I conclude with a number of recommendations as to curriculum and instruction and suggestions for further study by interested individuals.

## The Significance of the Problem

The specifics of what goes on physiologically may not be fully understood in regard to food allergy, but researchers note that the immune system of a person predisposed to food allergies produces proteins called IgE (Immunoglobulin E) antibodies in response to exposure to the allergenic substances. These IgE antibodies are able to detect the allergenic substance when the person is re-exposed (S. Sicherer, personal communication, January 15, 2003). Shelov & Hannemann (1998) describe it as follows:

Each time an allergic person is exposed to an allergen, her immune system produces an antibody called IgE. The more of this antibody she makes, the more allergic she is. It may take weeks, months, or years to make a large amount of IgE, but once she has built up a reserve, her body will begin exhibiting allergic symptoms. When the allergen comes into contact with the IgE on the surface of the so-called mast cells (located in the nose, skin, eyes, intestinal tract, and bronchial tubes), these cells release chemicals—particularly one called histamine—that cause the allergic symptoms. (p. 558)

Schools are seen by many parents as unresponsive or over-reactive to food allergy issues (Collins, 2000). Often, in an attempt to shield themselves against law-

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suits, schools adopt rather draconian measures such as banning all food products from all classrooms. Though at times such a precaution may be warranted in individual classrooms, it is usually the case that a reaction is not life threatening, as explained by the American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology (ACAAI) (1999):

The most common symptoms of food allergy involve the skin and intestines. Skin rashes include hives and eczema. Intestinal symptoms typically include vomiting, nausea, stomach cramps, indigestion and diarrhea. Other symptoms can be asthma, with cough or wheezing; rhinitis, often including itchy, stuffy, runny nose and sneezing; and rarely anaphylaxis, a severe allergic reaction that may be life threatening (p. 2)

Severe food allergic reactions can be, and have been, fatal in the school setting. As Collins (2000) points out, one study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that four of six children who died as a result of anaphylaxis were exposed to the allergen in the school, and the frequency of anaphylactic reactions is rising and expected to continue. The reasons for the increase may not be fully understood and are debated. Understandably, the possibility of an anaphylactic reaction leads many schools to choose a classroom ban on some or all food products. Bans may result, however, in nothing more than a false sense of security, since it is the ingredient that is not listed on a package, or the cross contamination of food, that may be the source of the exposure.

A student with a food allergy can react to food being prepared in a nearby classroom without actually coming in contact with the food, perhaps because the allergen is aerosolized through the cooking process. Another possible exposure is due to contact with trace amounts of the food left on a cafeteria table or by casual contact with someone who had the allergen on their hands (perhaps from eating a sandwich) or lips (as could be the case with a kiss from someone who had eaten the substance). Though these scenarios may not be common, the danger certainly cannot be summarily dismissed. Furthermore, some parents fail to see the safety issue and instead feel that their rights are being violated because their children are not allowed to bring whatever food they choose (saying, perhaps, “All I can get my child to eat for lunch is peanut butter”). Therefore, whether a ban is in place or not, it is important for all teachers and school profession-

als to have a working knowledge of food allergies. To the point, in one sample, nine accidental ingestions occurred in the classroom compared to only two in the cafeteria, while another study indicated that teachers most often took control of incidents of allergic reactions in schools (Norman, 2000).

Sicherer, Noone, and Muñoz-Furlong (2001) suggest that more than six percent of young children are affected by food allergy. For school-aged children, the rate of five percent may be more accurate (S. Sicherer, personal communication, January 15, 2003). At that rate, one student in every class of 20 would have a food allergy. Sicherer, Noone, and Muñoz-Furlong (2001) have also shown that food allergy significantly impacts quality of life and is clearly life-altering for the student and his or her family; they have argued that awareness in schools must be increased. As foreign language educators continue to offer elementary- through secondary-level courses of study while food allergic reactions are on the increase, and as language educators continue to utilize food to expose students to the target culture, attention to this often overlooked medical and educational issue becomes crucial.

### **Food for Thought: A Food Allergy Awareness Quiz**

Although I do not advocate eliminating food activities in the foreign language classroom, an awareness of facts regarding food allergies is certainly critical. Therefore, I offer the following questions to help the reader gauge her or his own awareness. Each question is followed by a discussion of pertinent related points.

Question 1: *Which of the following symptoms are possible indicators of an allergic reaction?*

Hives	Itchy nose or eyes
Warmth of the skin	Increased heart rate
Coughing	Fainting
Change of voice	Feeling of dread
Vomiting	

Answer: All of the above are possible indicators of an allergic reaction, in addition to wheezing, tightness of the throat or chest, nausea, shortness of breath and others. The symptoms may occur immediately or may be delayed up to 2 hours. Such a delay might mean the appearance of symptoms even after the child has left the classroom.

Question 2: *If a child has an allergy to walnuts, can she or he safely eat pecans in class?*

Answer: Probably not. Walnuts and pecans are related tree nuts, but more importantly, any nut could potentially

result in a cross-reaction and could be life-threatening. When nuts are processed they could be misidentified or could come in contact with other kinds of nuts and trace amounts could be present. Finally, when someone has an allergy to one tree nut, there is a significant risk that s/he will be allergic to more than one tree nut.

Question 3: True or false: *The safest way to deal with food allergies in the foreign language classroom is to always take students to a restaurant for food.*

Answer: False. Restaurants are the most significant source of danger for food allergic persons, according to Steve Taylor of the University of Nebraska Lincoln (U. S. Food and Drug Administration, 1994). One study published in the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* reported that in 32 cases of fatal food allergy-induced anaphylaxis, 47% came from restaurants or similar settings and 18% were in “ethnic” food, including 6% in Mexican food (Bock, Muñoz-Furlong, & Sampson, 2001).

Question 4: True or false: *Prepackaged food from the store is safe, if I read the ingredients label carefully.*

Answer: False. Although reading labels is helpful, often food is recalled because of contamination in the processing facilities or ingredients that would not appear on the label. The Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN) issues recall alerts via e-mail to interested persons. In 2002, the number of advisories totaled 110, on average more than two a week (D. Scherrer, personal communication, August 8, 2003).

Question 5: *Which of the following statements is true?*

- a) *Few schools have food allergic children.*
- b) *The most common food allergies seen in schools are peanuts and milk.*
- c) *Schools have system-wide plans for dealing with food allergies.*

Answer: B. A study published in the *Annals of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology* found that more than half of schools surveyed had at least 10 food allergic children, the most common allergies were to peanuts and milk, while shellfish, tree nuts, eggs and wheat were also common. Most schools did not educate their staff about proper avoidance strategies and few had even school-wide policies, much less district- or system-wide approaches (Rhim & McMorris, 2001).

Question 6: *True or false: The best plan for a language teacher is to have the food allergic student not participate in any activities involving food.*

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***“In theory, a food allergic child may be protected under either ADA, IDEA, and/or Section 504...”***

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Answer: Emphatically, this statement is false. Such an educational intervention may seem the proper way to proceed, but in fact it is discriminatory and depending upon how courts and others interpret the guidelines, can be seen as a violation of the student's rights. In the section that follows, I briefly outline the guidelines given schools in related issues and explain how these directives may apply to the foreign language classroom.

### **Food Allergy, ADA, IDEA, and Section 504**

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) prohibits discrimination solely on the basis of disability in providing public services, including education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides federal financial assistance to educational entities to guarantee services to children with disabilities, including a responsibility to provide a free, appropriate public education (FAPE). IDEA requires an Individualized Education Program (IEP) document to be developed along specific guidelines. Finally, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs that receive federal financial assistance. The impairment in the case of Section 504 must substantially limit major life activities.

In theory, a food allergic child may be protected under either ADA, IDEA, and/or Section 504, though to date I am aware of no major challenges to a school's approach to dealing with students with food allergies, and specifically not in the foreign language classroom. Thus, the arguments I make below are more general in nature, since litigation has as of yet not resulted in guidelines that are clear in their impact for the classroom. However, given that (1) the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* identify in Standard 2.2 that students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture being studied; (2) ACTFL/NCATE *Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers* specifically mentions food as a cultural product related to that standards (Foreign Language Teacher Standards Writing Team, 2002, p. 8); and (3) our profession has long recognized food as one of the products utilized in exposing students to the target culture, to ban a child from *all* food-related activities based on a disability could be reasonably

interpreted as a violation of the child's civil rights. Ironically, the more severe the food allergy, the more likely such a disability would be seen as protected (since its impact is a major impairment).

Food serves an educational purpose in the field of foreign language education. Among all educators, furthermore, foreign language teachers should be aware of the value of diversity, since it is the nature of what we teach—not language alone, but language history, culture, etc. As a result, though necessitating precautions and adaptations, food allergic children provide us another opportunity to recognize diversity in our setting. Language and cultural diversity have led us to include food in our classroom. Food allergies can lead us to *include* the food allergic child in the class activities, since this form of diversity has pedagogical value, as well.

The teacher would seem to be between the proverbial rock and hard place. Yet, it is the very heart of our professional endeavor that points us in the direction to resolve the dilemma posed by food allergies in the foreign language classroom: communication. Communication among parents, teachers, physicians, school administrators, and school nurses is at the heart of an approach to maximize the safety and optimize the educational impact of food in the language classroom.

### **Diversity as Teacher**

Without question, much attention has been paid to the advantages of embracing diversity in educational practice. Multicultural education, language education, and even character-related educational initiatives have stressed that difference is not a negative factor in our lives. Instead, we can learn from those students who are different than we are. This principle must also be applied in language classrooms that have food allergic students.

I propose a number of principles to be utilized when incorporating food in foreign language classrooms that include food allergic students. My recommendations are purposely general in nature. There is not a simple method for dealing with the challenges a language educator faces, and the varying degrees of severity of food allergies will of necessity require modifications to be employed in each case. No other approach, in my view, will guarantee the important balance among student rights, curricular integrity, and attention to the food products of the target culture.

1. Teachers must educate themselves about food allergies, and keep up to date.

There is much research going on in relation to food allergy, much of it at

the Jaffee Food Allergy Institute at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine (see [http://www.mssm.edu/jaffe\\_food\\_allergy/](http://www.mssm.edu/jaffe_food_allergy/)). Within medicine, research related to impact on quality of life in regard to food allergy may be especially relevant to educators. A primary advocacy source is the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN), online at <http://www.foodallergy.org>. As discussed earlier, FAAN distributes alerts on recalls that relate to food allergy via e-mail that can also be a helpful resource. FAAN has also aided in the production of numerous guidelines for schools and maintains a section on their website related to the management of food allergies in the school setting. Two other valuable resources may be the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology (<http://www.aaaai.org>) or the American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology (<http://www.aaaai.org>). Finally, there are a number of sources, usually geared toward parents or caregivers, which can be of assistance. Three of these are listed in the *Suggested Reading* section at the end of this article.

2. Talk to parents, school nurses, and administrators.

Keeping food allergic students safe when utilizing food in a language classroom will be a team effort. There is simply no way to accommodate every hypothetical situation, thus open lines of effective communication will be the most useful tool available to the teacher. Parents, often by necessity, will be a rich source of information for the teacher and school personnel. They may be aware of alternative ingredients that can serve similar purposes in recipe without causing an allergic reaction.

3. Invite parents to participate in food-related activities and all field trips, where food items can lurk incognito.

As discussed before, restaurants can pose serious hazards for students who have food allergies. Interestingly, food items are also often used in museums as part of displays, including crushed walnut shells in a hands-on display that precipitated a reaction for one student (Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network, n.d.). Though such contacts are likely uncommon, it is helpful to have the student's parent

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along on the trip, if they can accommodate such a request. Certainly, in planning a menu in the language classroom, the parent's involvement can be most beneficial for a successful and safe educational experience.

4. Utilize food as an example of a broader cultural construct, thus making its inclusion less mandatory.

Food is certainly a cultural product, but food often is tied to other cultural constructs such as holidays, events, or even family gatherings. If food becomes only one example of such a broader cultural construct, substituting the food portion of the activity for a food allergic student becomes a modification that may be more reasonable than banning a child from a food-centered activity. In other words, avoid incorporating food for its own sake (detached from the cultural constructs with which it is associated) so that modifications can be made if needed, without excluding the food allergic student. For example, if a teacher plans a curricular unit on "food tasting," the food allergic student would need to be involved along with the others. However, if tasting food were one of a number of activities in a unit on a holiday, a number of options are available to the teacher and the food allergic student. As in all the recommendations, the parent can be a helpful ally in this planning process.

5. Purchase food from United States sources, when possible, and read all labels.

Labels are quite confusing, even given strict U.S. labeling guidelines. If one attempts to eliminate sugar products from the diet, an idea becomes clear of exactly how confusing labels can seem. Sugar can be called fructose, glucose, corn syrup, and myriad other ingredient names. The same is true of other foods, and unless a language teacher is very familiar with all the possible target language words that might indicate the presence of an allergen, a dangerous ingredient could easily be missed. As an example, few of us likely know all the target language names for *Glycine max* and ingredients that include it. Though not necessarily listed as an ingredient by its Latin name, *Glycine max* poses a danger for a soy allergic student, and if the parent does not speak the language of study, the teacher's knowledge may be the only precaution in place in screening imported food product labels.

6. Be aware of the emergency plan for student(s), and know where the contact people are during the activity.

For children with food allergies, the school should have an emergency

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***"Consider looking at the cultural impact of food allergy both in the home and target cultures."***

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plan in place. It may include the administration of an antihistamine or the use of an EpiPen® in the case of exposure. For older students, the medication may be self-administered, depending upon local regulations. Be familiar with the specifics and what to do if something adverse should occur.

7. Notify other teachers and school staff of the intent to utilize food.

This recommendation is important both for students in the foreign language class who may go to other classes prior to having symptoms of a reaction, and for students in other classes who may be exposed to the allergen through contact with other students, classroom furnishings (especially if teachers share rooms), or even simply walking by the foreign language classroom (as in the case of aerosolized allergens).

8. Avoid making the student feel that s/he is a problem.

It is important in our zeal to protect students physically that we do not neglect their emotional and educational needs. I have known of schools that segregate food allergic students in various activities or settings, deny them candy treats (at the elementary level) because of a fear of lawsuits, and in general make the child feel ostracized. Instead, teachers should view him or her as an integral resource for teaching about diversity inductively, if not deductively. As discussed, diversity has a powerfully positive educational influence. The food allergic student both benefits from being included in the activity and benefits others by his or her presence there. Precautions are appropriate, but paranoia is not.

9. Consider looking at the cultural impact of food allergy both in the home and target cultures.

Depending upon a teacher's level of comfort, the parents' and student's wishes, and administrative support, it may be appropriate to look at the issue of food allergy in the target culture. Interesting comparisons among food allergies in Chinese society and U.S. settings have noted that cooking methods of preparing peanuts in the Chinese case reduce peanut allergenicity when compared with the U.S. practice of dry roasting (Morrow et al., 2001). Certainly,

such a topic would likely not be covered in great detail, but it could make for a "teachable moment," nonetheless.

10. Reflect on educational practice, both instructionally and critically.

Reflective practice has become a significant feature of teaching in the United States, if not in reality at least in rhetoric. In an attempt to maintain parallelism among teacher educator standards, many of the documents stress the need for teachers to be reflective practitioners (Foreign Language Teacher Standards Writing Team, 2002). Reflecting upon the utilization of food in the language classroom is an appropriate extension of this practice. Critical reflection, as has been argued elsewhere (Osborn 2000), may be even more crucial in our setting since the cultural elements and representations made in the foreign language classroom may have significant sociological impact. Looking at moral and ethical dimensions of education applies as well to the case of the food allergic child in the foreign language classroom.

## **Conclusion**

It is difficult to strike a balance in this article somewhere between communicating the significance of food allergy in terms of student safety in language classrooms, while avoiding a suggestion to language professionals that the prospect of continuing to use food in a language classroom seems ill-advised. Bock, Muñoz-Furlong, and Sampson (2001) have suggested a reasonable prediction of about 29,000 incidences of anaphylactic episodes and 150 deaths annually due to food allergies in all settings in the United States. It is clear from available evidence that neither summary dismissal of concern nor overreaction is warranted. Instead, thoughtful communication, careful planning and ongoing evaluation of our approach to food in the foreign language classroom will keep this most valuable educational experience in our midst into the future, despite the professional challenges it will likely pose. And so should it be. *Bon appétit!*

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## **Additional Suggested Reading**

Barber M.S., Bartoszek S.M. (Contributor), Greenberg E., & Sampson H.A.

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The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network's (FAAN) School Food Allergy Program. The School Food Allergy Program has been endorsed and/or supported by the Anaphylaxis Committee of the American Academy of Allergy Asthma and Immunology, the National Association of School Nurses, and the Executive Committee of the Section on Allergy and Immunology of the American Academy of Pediatrics. FAAN can be reached at: 800.929.4040.

<http://www.healthy-kids.info> is Ellie Goldberg's Healthy Kids: The Key to Basics service, which provides further information and can be a consulting resource for schools and parents.

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