EXPLORE, REFLECT AND DISCUSS: INTERCULTURAL ACTIVITIES FOR THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

The term ‘intercultural’ is one of the latest of a seemingly infinite list of buzzwords that language teaching theory and practice thrive on. It follows venerable predecessors, such as ‘communicative’, ‘reflective’, ‘task-based’ and ‘learner-oriented’. Like many of these terms, the meanings of ‘intercultural’ have shifted as the concept has been adopted and adapted by an ever wider community of language educators. The origins of the word lie in a concern for what happens when people from different backgrounds, who share a common language, still miscommunicate because they do not share a set of beliefs, attitudes and assumptions about what is ‘normal’ behaviour.

Take, for example, an Englishman and a Brazilian woman who are relatively fluent in a common language, either English or Portuguese. They would be able to talk to each other, but they might have different expectations about how conversation works. The Englishman is used to people speaking in well-defined ‘turns’, with short pauses in-between speakers’ contributions. The Brazilian woman is more used to overlapping turns, when one speaker begins before the other has finished speaking. They might understand each other’s words, in Portuguese or English, but the Englishman might think that the Brazilian is rude, pushy or arrogant because she keeps interrupting him. The Brazilian woman
might think the Englishman is reticent, aloof or dull, because he does not join her conversational ‘dance’. Their communication problem is an intercultural one—a mismatch of cultural assumptions about how communication works. There is now a small industry of intercultural language programmes and training materials that describe ‘typical’ communication patterns of Europeans, Latin Americans, North Americans and Asians—particularly aimed at businesspeople who have to cope with multinational negotiations or who work in multicultural teams.

Intercultural language education embraces such concerns, but it now goes beyond a narrow focus on miscommunication and workplace negotiation. The blossoming of global communications and the increase in migration mean that many people—both adults and children—are now directly engaged in communication across cultural boundaries. Anyone with access to the internet is at some point faced with the necessary strangeness of an encounter with someone whose national, ethnic, faith and social background will influence the way he or she communicates. Intercultural language education, then, is a response to the more general need to equip learners with the ability to meet differences in attitude, belief and behaviour with respect, openness and sympathetic curiosity.

The language classroom is a privileged site for intercultural exploration because it affords the time and the space for sustained and reflective encounters with ‘otherness’. In turn, intercultural education offers language teaching a new set of contexts, purposes and motivations, namely, to explore other cultures and to mediate when intercultural miscommunication does occur. Obviously we cannot prepare learners for each and every specific kind of intercultural miscommunication that might one day occur, so intercultural language educators aim to teach ‘decentring’ skills, and to develop the kind of *jogo de cintura* that will encourage learners to see their own culture through the eyes of another.

Typical intercultural activities combine language tasks with ethnography and critical thinking. For many language learners today, intercultural exploration blends internet research and chatroom discussion with a fresh, systematic, reflective investigation into familiar aspects of one’s own culture. I have been in regular contact with members of a group of South American teachers who have set up a forum for discussion called ‘intercultural voices’ (see the web resources at the end of this article). I have also recently published a handbook, *Intercultural Language Activities*, that gives around 80 ‘recipes’ for doing home ethnographies, that is, descriptions of cultural behaviour, that cover topics such as domestic life, public spaces, sport, food, politics, religion and fashion. Part of the book also covers setting up intercultural discussion groups with ‘online partners’ in other countries. Various agencies, like the British Council, now help teachers to find partners for online exchanges. Inevitably, as the book was edited, some activities ended up on the cutting-room floor.
The following activity did not make it into the final version of the book, but its focus on field-work and the exploration of one’s own culture gives a flavour of many of the activities that do appear in print and illustrates their format.

**Intercultural field research**

**Outline:** This activity encourages you and your learners to explore public places in your own culture. If you are involved in an online intercultural exchange, then you can compare notes with partners elsewhere.

**Focus:** To observe, describe, reflect on and compare interactions in a chosen public space.

**Level:** Intermediate and above.

**Time:** 30-40 minutes in the first lesson; time outside class to do the observation; 40 minutes in the second lesson to prepare a presentation; a third lesson to present findings.

**Preparation:** You can use the schedule on the right and adapt it to the needs of your own group of learners. This activity involves groups of learners visiting a public place in their own time and reporting their observations to the class – and, if appropriate, to their partners online.

**Procedure:**

1. Explain that the learners, in pairs or groups, are going to explore some public places of their choice, observe the behaviour and interactions that take place there, and then report their findings to the class (and, if appropriate, to their online partners).

2. Brainstorm with the class the kinds of place that they might visit and observe, e.g.
   - a local shop, supermarket or shopping mall
   - a bar or restaurant
   - a bookshop or library
   - a community centre or gymnasium
   - a cinema, theatre or concert hall
   - a dance class
   - a church, temple, synagogue or mosque

3. In pairs or groups, the learners choose their preferred location and discuss the issues involved in this kind of visit, e.g.
   - Will permission be required? If so, who from?
   - How will the learners record their observations – in a notebook, using a camera or audio recorder?
   - Will the learners interview anyone? If so, what questions will they ask?

4. The groups or pairs discuss in more detail the kinds of people and the kinds of interaction they expect to observe in their chosen location. They devise a ‘schedule’ to guide their observations, based on the one below.

5. Outside class, the groups or pairs then visit their chosen location, describe the place and observe the behaviour and interactions that occur there, and take notes or recordings.

**Observation schedule**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time and location:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of activity:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Describe the people who were involved:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did they communicate with each other?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What kind of things did they say?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kind of behaviour was expected or allowed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kind of behaviour was not allowed?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
6. In the next lesson, each group or pair collates its observations, and devises a report on the findings to present to the rest of the class. In some cases, the teacher might suggest preparing an ‘etiquette guide’ based on the observations, e.g. recommended rules on how and how not to behave in certain public places, like a library, cinema, church, etc. Useful language for such a guide includes:

- **In this situation, you can…**
- **…is permitted**
- **…is encouraged**
- **…is expected**
- **However, you are not allowed to…**
- **You must never…**
- **…is completely unacceptable!**

7. In a following class, the pairs or groups present their findings to the class. If the class is participating in an online intercultural exchange, they can share and discuss their findings with their online partners too.

My own students in Scotland have used this kind of project to explore aspects of their own culture, local and global. Some have spent time ‘loafing and lurking’ in Starbucks in Glasgow, observing the kind of customers who come in, and how they interact with bar staff. They have noticed that this franchise of coffee shops has a special language of its own – ‘tall’, ‘grande’ and ‘venti’ – and it encourages its customers to use ‘Starbucks language’ when they order, for example, ‘a skinny grande latte to go’. The students present their findings to the students and then they have posted their findings online, and discussed them with learners in Argentina and Taiwan who also go to coffee shops and observe the customers and interactions there. Together, they come to an understanding of café culture across three continents.

This kind of exploration, reflection and discussion can, at best, uncover what the anthropologist Michael Agar calls ‘rich points’, that is, those points in our culture when understanding depends on the realignment of different values, attitudes and beliefs. As someone who was raised as a Protestant in Scotland, for example, the kinds of behaviour expected in Brazilian Catholic church ceremonies – and even evangelical services – was very mysterious to me! Even the negotiation of the security procedures that operate in cities when you try to enter a bank and find a teller can be strange for a newcomer to Brazilian culture. Other ‘rich points’ can be found not in public spaces but in the domestic sphere. In Brazil, I had to learn to leave doors open so that air circulates in people’s houses. As someone raised in draughty homes in a cold climate, I was taught firmly to close doors automatically behind me. This behaviour was reinforced from childhood by parents and grandparents using expressions like, ‘Were you born in a field? Shut that door!’ Much of my early life with my Brazilian wife revolved around me resolutely closing doors that she equally resolutely re-opened.
Our lives are patterned by an infinite number of intercultural variations in behaviour, attitudes and belief. We cannot teach our learners all these differences, great and small, momentous and trivial. But we can use intercultural language education to explore, reflect on and discuss our own behaviour, attitudes and beliefs – and compare them with those of others. By identifying ‘rich points’ we can then look afresh at our own experience of life, and open our minds and hearts to the experiences and cultures of others.

References


Web resources

To set up intercultural online partnerships, you can look at:  
http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-ie-school-partnerships.htm
http://www.epals.com
http://www.tandemcity.com/index.php

For a South American perspective, see:  
http://interculturalvoices.wordpress.com

For more on the language of Starbucks, you can look at:  
http://www.wikihow.com/Order-at-Starbucks