

# Intercultural Communication in the English Language Classroom Reflections of an EFL teacher

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## **Introduction**

When I was given the opportunity to teach an applied language course with a focus on intercultural communication in the English Department at the University of Graz, I felt excitement but also a feeling of trepidation. I was excited to have the chance to teach a language course which allowed me to explore the concept of culture in more depth since I often felt that the cultural aspect of language teaching was often neglected in my other language courses, due to time and curriculum constraints. However, at the same time, I also could not shake a feeling of uncertainty and even dread as to how I was actually going to teach a full semester course on the subject: where was I to turn for ideas and material to produce a coherently structured course with a syllabus that not only made sense to me but also to my students and fellow colleagues.

Up until that point, my experience with teaching the subject had been cultural awareness raising activities that I had incorporated into my courses when the opportunity arose. My main sources were Tomalin & Stempleski's *Cultural Awareness* (Tomalin & Stempleski 1993) and Utley's *Intercultural Resource Pack* (Utley 2004) which offer useful, practical activities for language teachers on culture and Singelis's *Teaching About Culture, Ethnicity & Diversity* (Singelis 1998) which provides ready-made activities and training exercises for teachers in general. In addition, I had attended some in-service training seminars on intercultural communication partly because the topic fascinated me personally but also because I wanted to find ways to incorporate the subject into my classes. Added to all that, I was an expatriate who had been living abroad for more than 10 years and had done some extensive travelling during that period. But was that enough to qualify me to teach a course on a subject of increasing importance in our constantly growing global society? And what would my methodology be or better yet, was there even a methodology for teaching intercultural communications in an EFL classroom?

## **Defining Culture**

Before I tried to find answers to the above questions, I decided I first had to make sure what my understanding of the term 'culture' was. I hoped this, in turn, would give me some clarity on which materials and teaching approaches I would use in my course. I knew for

certain that I did not want to approach the concept in the way that it is most commonly understood, namely, as achievements of cultures, like in art, music and literature. This understanding of culture is sometimes called 'Big C' or 'culture one'. A broader definition of the word was needed and I found one that I really could relate to in, at what I thought at the time, the most unlikely place, the field of anthropology.

Through my reading about culture, I discovered that anthropologists were the first to try to define the term (Seelye 1993: 15). However, they were unable to come to any agreement on one common definition thus the term culture has been left to be interpreted in a broader sense than described above. This second understanding of culture is sometimes referred to as 'little c' or 'culture two' and it encompasses learned beliefs, values, assumptions etc. of a people that manifest themselves in their language and behavior or as Sowden paraphrases it 'how people live or aspire to live in their world' (Sowden 2007: 306). This was a definition I could work with because it did not constrain me to any set curriculum I had to cover and allowed me a lot of freedom.

### **Designing an Intercultural Communication Course in an EFL context**

With a broad understanding of the concept of culture in mind, I then set off to look for course curriculums that addressed intercultural communication in an EFL context. This time my search was a bit more difficult. I found a lot of on-line syllabi for intercultural communication courses taught at American universities, but their target audiences and often purposes were different to mine. The Common European Framework (CEF) provided some interesting ideas for incorporating cultural issues in the language classroom but again a general framework was missing. In the end, Tomalin and Stempleski's adaptation of Seelye's 'seven goals of cultural instruction' turned out to be the most valuable and useful framework for me to work with and my course goals are based on theirs.

My key goals, which at the same time provide the general outline of my course, are:

1. to investigate the concept of culture and its various levels
2. to explore students' perception of their own culture, which is a prerequisite for developing intercultural awareness
3. to examine the role culture plays in both verbal and nonverbal communication
4. to develop tolerance towards otherness, empathy and a deeper understanding of different assumptions, values and beliefs, as well as of why and how these they have developed

I have certainly not reinvented the wheel with my list of goals, but I must admit that it took me quite a while to put together the above outline which has evolved over the years I have taught the course. I would now like to explain quickly my rationale behind the goals and how I approach them in an ELT context at the tertiary level.

When I first taught the course, I took it, more or less, for granted that my students would know which understanding of 'culture' was being addressed in the course. Although I myself had required some time to come up with a definition and an understanding of the term, I assumed my students would have fewer difficulties because of previous coursework they had done. I soon found out that my assumptions were completely wrong and also that awareness raising exercises alone did not provide enough input and guidance for them to discuss the topic. Language activities that sensitized students to various cultural aspects had been my approach to the topic when incorporating it in my other language classes. Theoretical input was also necessary to provide students with useful examples and terms which they could use to discuss the topic. Feedback from students on combining cultural awareness raising tasks with theory proved to be very positive. A common comment from students was that they felt they developed a deeper understanding of the topic through this approach because the tasks reinforced the theory and vice versa.

Concerning goal 2, which aims to help students reflect on their own cultural standpoint and which is also the second part of the course, I must admit that students are often surprised by it since most expect the course to be about other cultures and/or interacting with other cultures. I have found this goal to be incredibly important for developing students' intercultural awareness because they should try to come to terms with their own cultural standpoint before they explore other cultures. We spend some time discussing the nature and stages of cultural identity as suggested by Lustig and Koester (Lustig and Koester 2000: 3-8) and students are often very shocked by how much they have taken their own culture and cultural identity for granted. This second part of the class often ends with the students writing a short paper about the influences that have shaped their cultural identity.

Since this course is offered within in the language program, goal 3 is also of great interest to the students. We discuss the differences in communication styles using the indirect/direct or high context/low context dichotomy as our springboard for discussion and analysis. At this stage we also begin to discuss other cultures and their communication styles using this contrastive approach. Although I know this approach has been criticized for 'oversimplify[ing] the richness and variety within cultures' (Guest 2002: 154) amongst other reasons, if used thoughtfully it can also be a very useful tool that provides students with some

guidelines that they can they either accept or reject. When using dichotomies to address intercultural issues, I always use them as extreme points on a continuum. I have also found that students as well as the teacher must be reminded that communication takes place with individuals and not whole cultures.

The final goal is addressed throughout my course through the various discussions, cultural awareness raising activities, texts, projects and on-line discussions at our website for the course <http://scc.uni-graz.at/>. Some of the projects that have taken place over the past years can be viewed on our website under the heading 'projects'. The projects have covered many different areas of intercultural communication from writing reviews about films that have intercultural communication (i.e., *My Fat Greek Wedding*, *Born in Absurdistan* or *East is East* to provide a few examples) for teachers teaching an intercultural communication class to holding mini-training sessions in class about a certain skill or principle in a particular country that was related to the topic of communication (the powerpoint presentations can be viewed on our homepage) to interviewing organizations and individuals about the intercultural training they provide or have received, respectively. The purpose of all of the projects has been to put theory into practice. Recently, we received a very positive comment on our website on one of our projects from an Iranian living in the USA. He was so surprised at how 'accurate' the presentation on Iran was done by 'outsiders' that he asked if he could use parts of it in a presentation he had to do on his country.

### **Conclusion – a Look to the Future**

A new semester is shortly about to begin and again I am asking myself the same questions I did when I set out to put the course together for the first time. Perhaps that is the nature of teaching a subject that can be so broadly defined and interpreted. Taking Seelye's words to heart that '[t]he parameters of a culture-based instruction are limited only by the experiences and imagination of the teacher-guide' (Seelye 1993: 22-23), I have decided to do a new project with my students in collaboration with the bilingual school in Graz. The project involves young adult literature (my other area of interest) and to what extent it can be used as a teaching tool for exploring culture and more specifically cultural values. I am very curious about the outcome and how my students and the high school students react to the cultural content of the literature.

In conclusion, I can say that my intercultural communication course has been a constant challenge for me to teach on my different levels and because of this, I have had the chance to explore new areas and approaches to language teaching that may have remained,

otherwise, closed to me. If you are teaching a similar course and would like to compare teaching approaches or ideas, please contact me at [jennifer.schumm@uni-graz.at](mailto:jennifer.schumm@uni-graz.at) .

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