Perspectives and good practices
in English language
teacher training

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Perspectives and good practices
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From cultural awareness to intercultural communication

At the end of this chapter you should be able to:

(1) Understand the complexity of the notion of culture and the relationship be-
tween language and culture.
(2) Promote cultural awareness in the foreign language classroom.
(3) Distinguish between teaching cultural contents and developing intercultural
communicative competence in the classroom.
(4) Design, plan, implement and assess different types of activities to develop
intercultural communicative competence in your classroom.

Cultural awareness is considered by many to be "the fifth skill" since it boosts
the students' ability to perceive, to understand, and ultimately, to accept cultur-
al relativity. There is a great deal of scholarly work which explains the rela-
tionship that exists between language and culture and how this bond needs to be
addressed in the foreign language classroom. However, there is little consensus
on *what,* much less *how*, we should teach it. Unlike vocabulary and grammar,
which are concrete in their content, culture is quite fluid and hybrid as a concept
and therefore difficult to define.

In this chapter you will learn how to raise awareness of cultural differences in
the English language classroom. You will also become familiar with the notion of
intercultural communicative competence (henceforth, ICC), a very complex con-
struct indeed. In this chapter the term ICC is used as in Michael Byram's model
(1997, 2020), as a development of the notion of communicative competence which

involves the ability to interact appropriately and effectively in the globalised world we live in with people from diverse linguistic systems, backgrounds, and worldviews.

There is plenty of literature on good classroom practices for fostering ICC, providing the reader with indications and suggestions on how to make progress in ICC through specific techniques and activities. In this chapter some recommendations will be made to develop ICC in the English language classroom of Secondary schools.

2.1. What is culture?

■ **Food for thought 2.1**

Is this culture for you? Tick the labels that typically define your understanding of culture:

- – Works of art, literature, music…
- – The distribution of physical space in conversations.
- – The way we keep eye contact.
- – Games.
- – The relationship we have with animals.
- – The way people dress, the way they celebrate festivities, their typical cuisine…
- – Music.
- – The roles of people in relation to age, gender, and the working environment.
- – The common conceptions about sin, illness, death…

People often think of culture as a static body of knowledge about the history, geography and the institutions of a given community or a national group. Some others believe culture is the numerous observable characteristics of a group that we can observe with our own eyes, be it their food, dances, music, arts, or greeting rituals. Recent views about culture conceptualise it as a system of rules that affects values, customs, courtesies, rituals, manners of interacting and roles, relationships, and expected behaviours of specific social groups (Witte & Harden, 2011). This system of rules:

(1) Is not static but evolves through time.
(2) Is socially produced and distributed. Thus, different social groups develop different patterns of human behaviour and customs that are learned through interaction by their descendants.

(3) Is expressed through language. That is, culture is encoded in proverbs, phrases, vocabulary, etc.
(4) Is not universally shared. In other words, different languages reflect specific world views.
(5) Is not always visible to the public eye.

Many scholars find the metaphor of the iceberg particularly useful to represent the complexity and the real dimension of the concept of culture because the portion of it which is visible above water is only a small piece of a much larger whole. Thus, socio-cultural facts and products, behaviours and practices –i.e. food, music, festivals, architecture, literature, gestures, greetings, and more– are usually represented in the visible part of the iceberg, while culturally-based perceptions, attitudes, values and beliefs are hidden in the invisible part. This is the case of:

– Body language
– Facial expressions
– Nature of friendship
– Arrangement of physical space
– Conversation patterns in various social contexts
– The use of silence
– Touching
– And many others.

Some of the visible cultural manifestations, primarily known to everyone, have traditionally been the object of attention in the foreign language classroom. However, the invisible forms of culture are equally determinant in foreign language learning since they are the origin of culturally specific communication patterns. Let's take, for example, the use of silence in a communicative exchange. It can mean different things in different cultures. It can be used to intimidate; or to save face; to show respect; or on the contrary, it can be awkward and uncomfortable. That is why the current approaches to foreign language teaching have recognised the relevance of the visible and the invisible representations of culture and the relationship between the two.

Over to you 2.1

Choose a didactic unit of your favourite EFL textbook and check the presence of cultural contents. What can you see? Classify the cultural contents you find in the unit according to the following categories:

–   *Cultural facts and products (e.g. arts, music, films, etc.)*
–   *Socio-cultural practices (e.g. ceremonies, rituals, festive events, etc.)*
–   *Socio-cultural behaviour (e.g. greetings, kissing, manners, etc.)*
–   *Values and beliefs (e.g. importance of time, attitudes towards age, views on raising children, the value of friendship, etc.)*

2.2. The relationship between language and culture

From the above one can derive that culture influences language and the way we communicate, as the social norms and cultural patterns are mainly mediated through language. This link can be illustrated by the origin of some idioms in English such as *to feel under the weather* or *to spill the beans*, for example, which allow insight into past societal practices. That is why many of them can't be translated literally. At the same time, this relation between language and culture is bi-directional, that is, language influences culture as well. This explains why different languages can show different perspectives to see the world around us. Let's take, for example, the linguistic expression of causality and agency in English and in Spanish. While English speakers like to describe events in terms of agents doing things (e.g. *Mary broke the glass*), even for accidents, Spanish speakers are more likely to say the equivalent to *The glass broke itself*. As the examples show, the way speakers express events in different languages has a profound influence in the way they see and understand the world. The previous examples show why it is necessary for the learners to acquire the foreign cultural frames of references to be able to interact effectively and successfully in foreign language socio-cultural contexts.

Unfortunately, teachers do not always have enough cultural experiences themselves. As a result, what most of them usually do is to expose their students to the cultural content present in their textbooks. According to Adaskou et al. (1990), there are four prominent dimensions of culture which are frequently portrayed in EFL textbooks. See Figure 2.1.

The aesthetic and the sociological dimensions of culture are quite frequent in EFL textbooks. The former is usually developed through references to distinguished cultural products, famous artists and historical events. Thus, students are provided with information and images of well-known monuments, paintings, books, cities, museums, films, etc. As for the sociological dimension of culture, it is usually covered in EFL textbooks by the representation of social practices across English speaking countries (mainly UK and USA): the organization and nature of family, of home life, of interpersonal relations, material conditions, work and leisure, customs and institutions, etc.
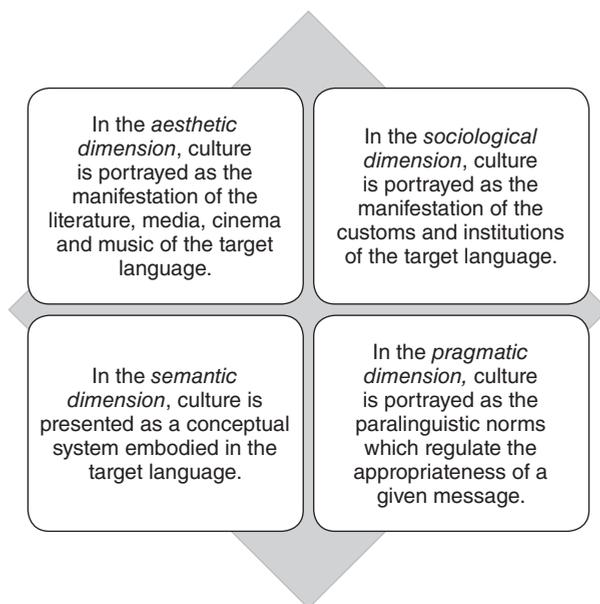
Figure 2.1.   The most prominent dimensions of culture (Adaskou et al., 1990).

The tie between language and culture is clearly manifested in the other two dimensions: the semantic and the pragmatic. The semantic dimension of culture refers to the cultural knowledge embodied in the lexis of language: the connotative meanings of words, proverbs, idioms, etc. Cultural knowledge is stored in cultural schemas, that is, in mental structures shared by the population of a given community and created from common experiences since early childhood. These cultural schemas allow speakers to identify and understand objects and events as cultural products and to capture cultural connotations. For example, the association between the terms *lucky* and *grapes* in Peninsular Spanish can only be understood within the cultural context of the New Year's Eve celebrations in Spain.

Finally, the pragmatic dimension of culture refers to the paralinguistic skills that, in addition to the mastery of the language code and register in different situations, make successful communication possible. It includes the ability:

(1) To use the appropriate exponents of the various communicative functions across cultures. This includes, for example, the familiarity with the different linguistic realizations of speech acts across languages.
(2) To conform to norms of politeness of a given language particularly when they differ across cultures.

(3) To conform to the conventions governing interpersonal interaction in the foreign language: for example, how to make appropriate choices in conversation topics, know how to open and close a conversation, how to use turn-taking, how to change the subject, etc.

(4) And finally, to develop awareness of some other culturally determined aspects of non-verbal communication such as facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, etc., which have a powerful influence on interpersonal relations, and thus can be determining in promoting or hindering communication.

Learners should be cognisant of these cultural phenomena, which may lead to miscommunication and erroneous assumptions.

Over to you 2.2

What is the most prominent cultural dimension portrayed in your favourite EFL textbook: the aesthetic, sociological, semantic or the pragmatic? How do you know?

2.3. Getting to grips with culture in the English classroom: Principles, techniques and materials

If you carried out the above reflection activity *(Over to you 2.2)*, you will have probably realised that textbooks do not provide a comprehensive panorama of the four dimensions of culture. This is coincident with some research studies which prove that:

(1) Most cultural distinctive occurrences in EFL textbooks are sociological in nature, in detriment to the other dimensions of culture (Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2015).

(2) The pragmatic dimension of culture in textbooks is limited to the presence of decontextualised speech act linguistic formulae (Diepenbroek & Derwing, 2013).

This lack of cultural perspectives in EFL textbooks can create a barrier for students who are seeking to develop their cultural awareness. In practical terms, these shortcomings imply that teachers should be able to complement textbooks with techniques, materials and resources which promote their students' exposure to the foreign culture. But how? In the following pages you will find some recommendations to boost learners' cultural awareness in the classroom.

2.3.1. *What culture should be taught?*

In a globalised world where English is mainly used as a lingua franca (see sections 1.3 and 1.4 in Chapter 1), it sometimes becomes hard to choose which culture to teach as background to English. Traditionally, the representations of the culture of the UK or the USA have been favoured in the EFL classroom in detriment of other English-speaking cultures. Nowadays, however, there is a general tendency to promote a fairer inclusion of local and international perspectives of culture in recent EFL materials. Thus, instead of explicitly exposing students to the cultural values of one specific English-speaking culture and/or nation, the English language becomes a tool with which students may better understand culture in general. Accordingly, many EFL textbooks now revolve around universal topics that facilitate English-language learning with a global perspective, i.e. schools, cities, transport, superstitions, crimes, keeping fit, etc. In this new globalised context, understanding the learners' own cultures is paramount to foster cultural sensitivity. Learners should have the opportunity to use English to reflect about their own culture or on their own experiences. That is why for example, in the case of the EFL textbooks specifically targeted at Spanish learners, it is frequent to find textual and visual references to famous local VIPs nowadays (e.g. Penélope Cruz, Pau Gasol, Rafael Nadal, etc.).

2.3.2. *Where?*

Cultural awareness can be developed through independent experience, outside the classroom. For example, reading literary texts and all types of fictional materials in English, whether adapted or authentic, can be a good introduction about the values and norms of the language culture (see subsections 3.1.3 and 3.4.1 from Chapter 3 and section 4.1 from Chapter 4). Another interesting option are cultural exchanges among students of different backgrounds. Through these exchanges, students progressively move from holding a rather ethnocentric view of other cultures (if this is the case) at an initial level, to developing more ethno-relative perspectives which exhibit higher awareness and sensitivity towards those cultures (intermediate and mature levels). As learners observe, experience and reflect on cultural differences, their critical inquiry into and appreciation of these differences become more subtle over time.

Of course, learners can also become familiarised with cultural content in the classroom. Subsection 2.3.5 will present some activities which can be carried out in the class to achieve a certain degree of cultural awareness to interact in the foreign language. In today's culturally and ethnically diverse classrooms, secondary students themselves can also be used as cultural resources. Learners can be invited to the classroom as expert sources and share authentic insights into their home and cultural life. Students from virtual exchanges can help as well, in order to boost cultural awareness (see section 2.7).

2.3.3. How?

Twenty-first century FL teachers are no longer expected to limit their teaching practice to the transmission of detailed information about the culture being studied to learners. As a matter of fact, research shows that only purely conceptual teaching and learning of cultural content may be ineffective because it may have little impact on students' understanding. Since cultural learning is transformative, that is, it implies a change in perspective, its promotion demands the students' participation in meaningful interactions with others to get engaged in cultural inquiry, observation, critical reflection and evaluation regarding their own and other cultures. In this context, the teacher assumes the role of facilitator as he/she guides the learning process in which learners explore, discover, analyse, and evaluate meaningful information through texts, audio, video, and media (Byram et al., 2002). To illustrate this process, here is an example of a possible teaching practice to introduce students to the topic of Bollywood, the Indian cinema industry:

EXAMPLE 2.1

Individually, answer the following questions:

– Do you know what Bollywood is? Google the term and read what comes up. What is the origin of the term Bollywood?

Now talk together:

– Have you ever seen a Bollywood film? If so, do you remember the title of the film? Can you tell your partner about the plot? Did you like it? Why?
– Explain what your partner said to the rest of the class.

Finally, watch the following video and answer the following questions:

– In what way are Bollywood films different from Hollywood's? And from the films produced in your country?

In the previous example, students are asked to look for information about Bollywood by themselves, to share their own experiences and ideas about the Indian cinema industry and relate them to their actual knowledge and experiences about cinema in their own culture. This explicit cultural comparison in pairs or group work on input provided by the teacher (the video) forces the learners to revisit prior conceptions, if any.

2.3.4. Materials and sources

Culture can be introduced in the EFL classroom through authentic multimodal materials. Advertisements, films, music, festivals, literary texts, pictures, stories, radio podcasts, (digital) news, etc. are just some examples of materials that allow learners not only to improve their language skills, but also reflect about values, attitudes and beliefs. Watching films, news broadcasts or TV shows can also provide them with ample information about non-verbal behaviour, such as the use of personal space, eye contact or gestures. Of course, as explained before, in order for the exposure to be meaningful, there must be some reflection and discussion on the authentic material in order to push students towards a deeper understanding of the cultural content addressed.

Over to you 2.3

As explained above in subsection 2.3.3, cultural awareness does not take place by simply being exposed to authentic materials. For example, playing a song in English in the classroom does not necessarily promote cultural content learning. How would you exploit a song in the class to develop cultural awareness? Choose a song and think about the activities you would do with it. Here is an example of a song you could choose to reflect upon the feelings of alienation when living in a country different to one's own: An English man in New York, *by Sting.*

2.3.5. Activities

There is plenty of literature on good classroom practices for fostering cultural awareness in EFL (Canková & Gill, 2002; Johnson & Rinvolucri, 2017; *inter alia*). Here are some activity types you can use in the classroom.

– Celebrating cultural festivals (e.g. *World Food Day; New Year's celebration around the world; San Patrick's Day around the world; The Chinese New Year,* etc.). For example, the outcome of a World Food Festival could be a food market at school where learners present a general description of a given country's culinary habits, different recipes of typical dishes, a visual glossary with typical food and drink related vocabulary, etc.
– Cultural Islands. From the first day of class teachers can prepare a cultural island, that is, a poster, a picture, a map, and *realia* of many kinds which reflect a particular cultural content and stick it on the classroom wall. Objects (e.g. mug), typical food (e.g, fish and chips, full English breakfast), monuments

(e.g. Stonehenge) etc. will help attract students' attention and develop a cultural mental image that they will make questions and comments about.

– Culture capsules. Essentially, a culture capsule is a brief description –a paragraph or so– of a given cultural construct. It can be about an object or a cultural event –e.g. Christmas Eve customs and celebrations–, followed by, or incorporated with contrasting information from the students' local culture. Culture capsules are usually presented orally, supported by several illustrative photos and relevant *realia*.

– Observation activities. These activities are intended to make cultural concepts and attitudes explicit through the observation and analysis of cultural artifacts of all kinds.

Did you know? 2.1

The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters through Visual Media, easily accessible through the Internet, offers picture cards to help young students observe and analyse images representing people from different cultural backgrounds.

Older students can look for an image of their choice and reflect on the content it reflects guided by a sequence of questions proposed by *The Autobiography.*

– Culture assimilators and cultoons. Culture assimilators consist of a brief description of situations which generate points of surprise or misunderstandings among people from different cultures. The description is usually followed by a list of four possible responses to the incident which explain the meaning of the behavior, action, or words of the participants in the interaction. Students read the description in the assimilator and then choose which of the four options they feel is the correct interpretation of the interaction. Once all students have made their individual choices, the teacher leads a discussion about why particular options are correct or incorrect in interpretation. As for cultoons, they are like visual culture assimilators. Students are given a series of (usually) four pictures depicting points of surprise or possible cultural misunderstandings and they are asked if they think the reactions of the characters in the cultoons seem appropriate or not. Both the cultoons and culture assimilators increase tolerance of ambiguous situations and help them cope with the impact of culture shock.

Over to you 2.4

Imagine you are expected to teach the meaning of different non-verbal gestures across cultures in the EFL classroom. How would you do it? Choose one of the activity types proposed above and develop it according to your students' needs.

2.4. From cultural awareness towards intercultural communication

The previous activities promote cultural awareness mainly through contrast, but do not necessarily teach students how to perform effectively and appropriately in a communication setting which involves people from different cultures. For this goal to be achieved, speakers need to be both interculturally and communicatively competent, as is also acknowledged by the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001, 2020) (the CEFR):

> In any communicative situation, general competences (e.g. knowledge of the world, socio-cultural competence, intercultural competence, professional experience if any: CEFR Section 5.1) are always combined with communicative language competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences: Section 5.2), and strategies (some general, some communicative language strategies) in order to complete a task (CEFR, 2001, Chapter 7) (CEFR, 2020, pp. 31–32).

Intercultural competence is characterised in the academia as a blend of cognitive, affective and behavioral dimensions composed of a series of parameters, including awareness of self and culture, tolerance, empathy, curiosity, etc. (Witte & Harden, 2011). As for communicative competence, it is defined in foreign language teaching and learning as the ability to use the language adequately and successfully in communication with others (Canale & Swain, 1980, Celce Murcia, 2007). The combination of these competences as suggested by the CEFR is conceptualised by Michael Byram, one the most influential scholars in the field, in the notion of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). ICC refers to the ability that allows speakers "to actively communicate with those from another culture, experience and discover other culture(s) because of an inherent curiosity, and form new attitudes that mediate between one's own and the others' cultures" (Byram et al., 2001, p. 5).

One of the differences between communicative competence and ICC is that the latter does not take the figure of the native speaker as a model. In a lingua franca context, the native speaker is not a useful reference point since most communicative exchanges in intercultural settings take place among non-native speakers. ICC revolves around the figure of the intercultural speaker (IS), which is an idealised notion with specific characteristics. The intercultural speaker:

(1) Is plurilingual.
(2) Is knowledgeable about his/her local culture and other cultures, their similarities and their differences.
(3) Is constantly engaged in "border experiences" (Kramsch, 1993), which promote self-reflection and the progressive relativisation of the values,

categories, beliefs and attitudes internalised during childhood and adolescence in his/her own culture.

The outcome of this relativisation or "de-centering" effort generates an intermediate culture which is referred to metaphorically by scholars as the third space, third place or third culture (Kramsch, 1993). The third space is more than simply the fusion of two or more cultures. Rather it is a place where judgement of others' actions and beliefs is withheld, and new cultural meanings are established or created and then shared among participants.

The notion of the third space is a key term in the literature of ICC. It is viewed by many as the ultimate goal of ICC. In spite of the criticisms received for being too static for the globally connected world we live in (Baker, 2015, p. 30), the construct of third space is very helpful to clarify the dynamics of communication in an intercultural setting.

Over to you 2.5

As a speaker of English, do you remember being involved in an intercultural situation where you learnt to consider a perspective different from your own? What lesson did you learn?

2.5. Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence

In the last few decades various models of ICC have emerged (for a review, see Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Due to limitations of space, this section will focus on explaining the ICC model presented by Michael Byram in his seminal work *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence* (1997), recently revisited in 2020. This model was built upon the ideas presented in a paper (Byram & Zarate, 1994) that was written in relation to the Council of Europe's project to develop the CEFR in the 1990s. Byram's model of ICC is based on a view of language learning as a communicative, interactive and meaningful process and it has a clear pedagogical orientation. That is why it has been very influential in the teaching of foreign languages and teacher training in Europe.

Byram's model of ICC describes the factors involved in successful intercultural communication as a set of *savoirs* needed to develop ICC and perform appropriately in multicultural contexts. These *savoirs* are:

(1) Attitudes.
(2) Knowledge.

(3) Skills of discovery and interaction.
(4) Skills of interpreting and relating.

The interplay of these four factors leads to the fifth, critical cultural awareness, which aims at unveiling students' ideologies which drive some behavioural choices and may eventually lead to an intercultural conflict.

TABLE 2.1.   *Byram's model of ICC (1997, 2020)*

Component		Definition
Knowledge (*savoir*)		Knowing the system of cultural references of social groups (their products and practices) across cultures and knowing social and individual interactions.
Attitude (*Savoir-être*)		Having the affective capacity to overcome ethnocentrism, to "decentre".
Skills	Interpreting and relating (*Savoir comprendre*)	The ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, explain it and relate it to one's own.
	Discovering and interacting (*Savoir apprendre/faire*)	The ability to create an interpretative system of the meanings, beliefs and cultural practices that we get to know, coming from unknown cultures or not.
	Critical/cultural awareness (*Savoir s'engager*)	The ability to evaluate critically culturally based perspectives, practices and products on the basis of explicit criteria.

Unfortunately, ICC does not just "happen". It must be intentionally addressed and developed in the foreign language classroom. Thus, from the above it is possible to derive that English language teachers should aim at designing units or lessons that provide students with:

(1) The essential socio-cultural knowledge needed to participate adequately in intercultural communicative exchanges.
(2) Opportunities to practice the skills in analysis, interpretation, communication and interaction in relation to the products, practices and perspectives of their own and other cultures.
(3) Opportunities that enable learners to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values, and behaviours; and finally, to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience.

However, the above-mentioned aims are difficult to attain, time-consuming and logistically difficult for many teachers. Besides, many believe that the main aim of teaching ICC is the transmission of information about a foreign country, while, as shown above, the role of the language teacher is to develop skills, attitudes, and awareness of values just as much as to develop a knowledge of a particular culture. Finally, although some other teachers endorse intercultural teaching, they struggle when having to include ICC among their current classroom priorities (Sercu, 2005; Young & Sachdev, 2011).

2.6. The intercultural teacher of English as a Foreign Language

For all these reasons, we need foreign language teachers who are ready to act as intercultural mediators in the classroom and who are equipped with the necessary abilities to do it appropriately. These are the main requisites for the intercultural teacher of EFL:

TABLE 2.2. *The requisites of an intercultural teacher of EFL (partly based on Byram et al., 2002)*

Dimensions of ICC	Requisites for the intercultural teacher
Knowledge	– Should have a good knowledge about the socio-cultural practices of English-speaking countries. – Should also know his/her own culture well and possess some culture-general knowledge. – Should be able to select the appropriate topics to discuss with students, according to their profiles, age and existing perceptions of other cultures. – Should be able to select materials in English from different origins and showing different perspectives. – Should make sure that learners understand the context in which these materials were produced and their communicative purpose.
Skills	– Should be able to plan teaching activities which promote the skills of discovery, interaction and interpreting in the classroom, at the same time they promote the practice of the English language. – Should be able to bring EFL activities to the classroom to facilitate a critical comparative analysis (*relating*) of the target culture and the learners' own culture.

[…/…]