

The cultural iceberg

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Abstract

Many university students consider the possibility of participating in an international mobility program or working in a multicultural context, where English is used as the lingua franca. The goal of this project is to raise their awareness of cultural difference and help them understand and respect other cultures by developing their intercultural communicative competence. Students learn basic concepts related to the study of cultures, read and watch material especially selected for that purpose and discuss it in class. In small groups, they research and explore different aspects of a culture they would like to know more about and find a cultural informant. They interview this informant and finally, they share their work through a presentation and a blog which include the interview on video. They also reflect on the abilities acquired inside and outside the classroom.

Keywords: intercultural skills and awareness; mobility.

Resumen

Muchos estudiantes universitarios consideran la posibilidad de participar en un programa de movilidad internacional o trabajar en un entorno multicultural, donde el inglés es utilizado como lengua franca. El objetivo de este proyecto es estimular su toma de conciencia acerca de las diferencias culturales y ayudarlos a comprender y respetar otras culturas por medio del desarrollo de competencias interculturales. Los estudiantes aprenden conceptos básicos relacionados con el estudio de culturas, leen y miran material específicamente seleccionado para este fin y lo analizan en clase. En grupos, investigan y exploran distintos aspectos de una cultura que les gustaría conocer mejor y encuentran un informante cultural. Entrevistan a este informante y finalmente comparten su trabajo mediante una presentación y un blog que incluyen el video de la entrevista. Además, reflexionan sobre las habilidades adquiridas dentro y fuera del aula.

Palabras clave: conciencia y habilidades interculturales; movilidad.

Preview

Level: Higher Education

Language competence: B2 (Common European Framework of Reference)

Age of students: Young adults (18–24)

Type of project: ESP

Theme: Cultures

Estimated time: 5–6 weeks

Summary

This project is designed as part of an ESP course targeted at university students from different degree courses who are considering the possibility, in the short or medium term, of participating in an international mobility program or working in a multicultural context, where English is used as the *lingua franca*.

In order to raise awareness and develop both intercultural and linguistic competence, students learn basic concepts related to the study of cultures, read and watch material especially selected for that purpose and discuss it in class. Then, working in small groups, they choose a culture they would like to know more about and find someone who can act as a cultural informant. After exploring different aspects of this culture online, they write out questions and interview this informant. Finally, they share their work with the class through a technology-enhanced presentation and a blog which include the interview on video. They also reflect on the abilities acquired inside and outside the classroom.

From Theory to Practice

Over the last years, the importance of creating awareness among students about our multicultural world has become a key issue for many teachers of foreign languages. Developing the intercultural dimension in the language teaching practice is an essential approach for teachers who wish to show students that, throughout their lives, they will live, work, study, and interact with people from many cultures. To do this, teachers must recognise that the aims of such an approach are to equip learners with the necessary intercultural skills; to prepare them for interaction with people of other cultures; to enable them to understand and accept people from other cultures as individuals with other distinctive perspectives, values and behaviours; and to help them to see that such interaction is an enriching experience. Therefore, the language teacher has to develop skills, attitudes and awareness of the values as well as knowledge of a particular culture or country based on an understanding of human rights and respect for others. Teachers do not need to be experts on the country; their task is to help learners ask relevant questions, and to interpret answers; teachers need to assess the students' ability to make

the strange familiar and the familiar strange (*savoir être*), to step outside their taken for granted perspectives, and to act on the basis of new perspectives (*savoir s'engager*) (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002).

Cosmopolitan relationships require mutual respect for the otherness of the interlocutor and, in order to negotiate their language differences, interlocutors are known to treat the locus of their interactions as a contact zone beyond their respective cultures. The contact zone is not a neutral site since there are power differences. However, we should remember that power is negotiable and calls for creative and strategic negotiation strategies (Canagarajah, 2013).

It is also important to help students realise that a culture is like an iceberg, that it hides more than it reveals and that it does not only hide things from strangers, but also from its own participants (Dignen & Chamberlain, 2009). We need to understand this fact in order to look at our own culture from a critical standpoint, to question all those things that are taken for granted, and to be able to understand other cultures and embrace differences and similarities. Learning about other cultures will help us to learn about our own and to develop the skills to be democratic citizens in an intercultural world.

Materials and Technology

- Computer with Internet access and speakers
- Projector (to show the presentations and videos to the whole class)
- Updated list of foreign exchange students and professors at the university with their email addresses
- Presentation software (PowerPoint or similar)
- Communication software (Skype or similar)
- Recording software or digital camera (to record the interview)
- Blogging platform (Blogger, Wordpress or similar)
- Clips from the following movies can be used as additional material: Crash (2004), Outsourced (2006), Spanglish (2004), Freedom writers (2007), The best exotic Marigold Hotel (2012)
- The Peace Corps Cross-cultural Workbook: Fundamentals of Culture
- [The danger of a single story](#)
- [Reading material about relativity of time](#)
- [Reading material about difficulties in translations](#)

Preparation

1. Gain access to the technology needed for this project, including projector and software. Test the software on your computer to familiarise yourself with the tools and ensure that everything is working, including speakers and sound.

2. Make a list of the available computers in order to inform students whether they can use the classroom computer for their presentation.
3. Identify local resources, such as exchange students or professors at the university, and make a list of these resources available to the students. Each group of students will have the option to select a person from this list or to work with any other person they know who can act as a cultural informant.
4. Plan your grouping arrangements. This lesson will work best with four or five students to a group, with each group composed of both foreign and local students and students coming from different fields of study.
5. Prepare to talk with students about some strategies to interview their informant and elaborate questions in order to obtain relevant information.

Instructional Plan

Project Timeline

	Session 1	Session 2
Week 1	What is culture? Values and behaviors	The danger of a single story: Challenging our own stereotypes
Week 2	The Fundamentals of Culture: Individualism and collectivism The concept of time Homework: Reading online article	The Fundamentals of Culture: Individual and social ethics Internal and external control Homework: reading online article
Week 3	Project work: The Cultural Iceberg Instructions and group assignment Homework: Preparation for interview	Interviewing a cultural informant in class Groups' first meeting
Weeks 4 and 5	Film-watching and reading on related topics Time for students to work in groups under teacher's supervision	
Week 6	Group presentations Conclusions, evaluation and feedback	

Table 1. Project timeline.

Objectives

Linguistic Objectives

Students will:

- describe facts and behaviours and ask their cultural informant about

them

- give their personal opinion on controversial issues, agree and disagree politely
- negotiate linguistic differences through actual interactions in English
- develop their intercultural communicative competence in English

Intercultural Objectives

Students will:

- develop negotiation skills and respect for diversity by being part of an heterogeneous group and interacting with their cultural informant
- gain awareness of other people's behaviours, values and beliefs as well as their own
- challenge naturalised perspectives and gain conscious awareness of stereotyping

Citizenship Objectives

Students will:

- act on their learning outside the classroom reaching the local and global community
- uphold the rights of others as well as their own, based on a deep understanding of otherness

Week 1 (2 sessions)

Session 1.

1. Download the definition of culture by Peace Corps and explain in class the concept of culture (The Iceberg Model, p. 10-11) and the different aspects of culture: values and behaviours (p.13), universal, cultural and personal dimensions of culture (p.15-16).
2. Encourage students to give examples of different behaviours to illustrate these three dimensions.

Language focus

- Describing people's behaviours using the gerund in subject position: respecting older people, eating with chopsticks, etc.

Session 2.

1. Students watch Chimamanda Adichie's talk on [The danger of a single story](#) where this Nigerian novelist explains how our cultures are composed of many overlapping stories and how she was able to find her

authentic cultural voice. She warns that if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding.

2. After that, make a list on the board of different groups the students may belong to, such as men, women, young people, students born in this city, students from out of town, engineering students, humanities students, etc. and encourage them to examine and challenge their own stereotypes and other single stories in their lives.

Language focus

- Using adjectives to describe people's appearance and personality: friendly, unfriendly, conservative, hard-working, lazy, attractive, ugly, etc.
- Expressing personal opinions: In my opinion..., I think / guess / find..., To me, ..., I've always thought..., etc.
- Supporting opinions with generally known information: They say that..., ...are considered / known to be..., etc.

Week 2 (2 sessions)

Session 1.

1. Explain in class two of the four Fundamentals of Culture (Peace Corps Cross-cultural Workbook, p. 29-30): individualism and collectivism (p.31-32) and the concept of time (p. 104-105). We suggest starting with these two concepts since they seem to be easier for most students to grasp and identify.
2. Discuss the different behaviours described in the book.
3. Encourage students to work in small groups and do the exercises on page 32 (characteristics and behaviours of individualist and collectivist cultures) and page 105 (characteristics and behaviours of monochronic and polychronic cultures).
4. Homework: Assign students to read an [online article about how attitudes about punctuality vary from country to country](#) to discuss it the following class.

Language focus

- Describing facts and behaviours using the simple present (active and passive voice): People adhere to traditions, Time is money, Marriages are arranged, Schedules are considered sacred, etc.
- Agreeing or disagreeing with a statement: I agree that..., I totally disagree with this, That may be true, but..., Well, but on the other hand,...

Session 2.

1. Discuss the assigned reading and share ideas and opinions.
2. Explain in class the remaining two Fundamentals of Culture (Peace Corps Cross-cultural Workbook, p. 29-30): individual and social ethics (p. 67-68-69-71-72), and the locus of control: internal and external (p.144-145-147).
3. Discuss the different behaviours described in the book which illustrate each concept, give students some time to answer the Score yourself exercises on pages 71, 72 and 147 individually and then, compare their answers with their partners.
4. Homework: Assign students to read an [online article on how language reflects the values in a particular culture and why we should try to go beyond the literal meaning of words](#) to discuss it the following class.

Language focus

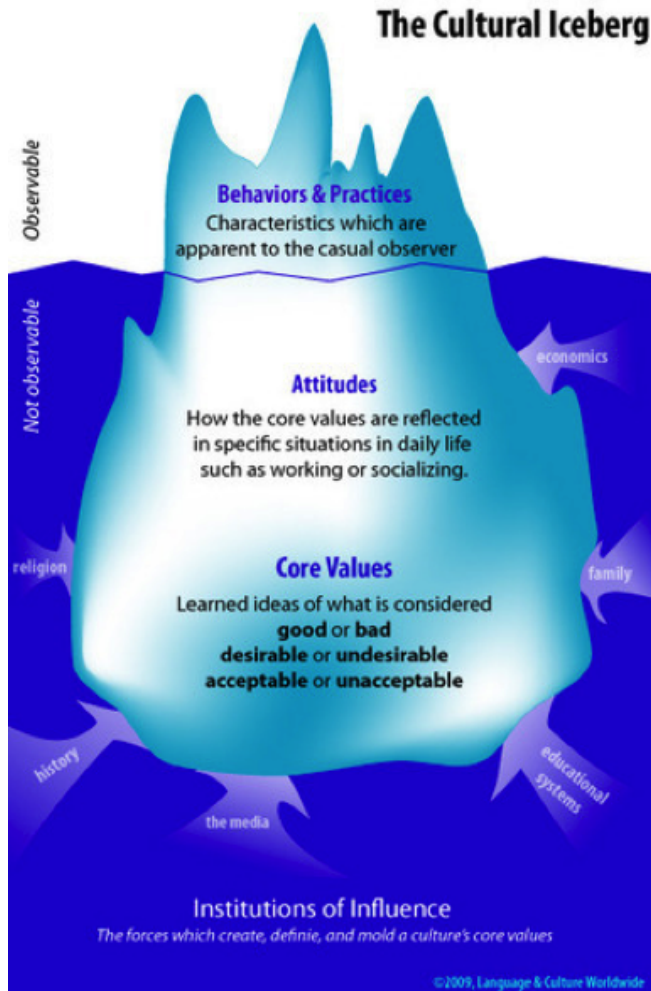
- Describing hypothetical behaviour: I would always tell the truth, I would never lie to protect a friend, etc.
- Describing facts and behaviours using simple present and zero or first conditionals: Some things are beyond my reach, If I try hard enough, I'll succeed, etc.
- Agreeing or disagreeing with a statement: I agree that..., I totally disagree with this, That may be true, but..., Well, but on the other hand,...

Week 3 (2 sessions)

Session 1.

1. Discuss the [assigned reading](#) and share ideas and opinions.
2. Give instructions to students about the project work called *The cultural iceberg*.

PROJECT WORK: The Cultural Iceberg

Figure 1. [The cultural iceberg.](#)

First, choose a culture you'd like to know more about and imagine you have to work or study in this culture for some time. Be sure to have someone who can act as a cultural informant, that is, a native person or someone who has lived in this culture for at least six months.

Then, do some research on this culture, taking into consideration both those aspects or features that are visible—language, food, appearance—and those which are invisible, like values, attitudes, styles of communication and beliefs.

Finally, prepare a group presentation of 20 to 30 minutes to share with the

class. This final work should include a personal interview to your cultural informant (in person, on video or by Skype or similar software) and any other element that you consider appropriate and attractive to communicate your ideas more effectively.

As a record of your learning process and also as a self-assessment activity, each group will create a blog where you will write about your day-by-day work, the reasons why you were interested in this specific culture, how you contacted the cultural informant, the difficulties you met along the way, your previous knowledge and your prejudices, if any, and how this experience helped you to raise awareness, develop intercultural skills and change your perspective. After your presentation is ready and with the consent of all the parties involved, you may upload your video and share any other material you consider relevant and effective to develop not only knowledge about this particular culture, but also respect for diversity and a sense of solidarity with others.

Deadline: _____

3. Assign students to heterogeneous groups, give them time to start organizing their work and ask questions. Set a reasonable deadline, at least a couple of weeks ahead, and agree on the dates their presentations will take place.
4. Taking into consideration the new concepts learnt in class, discuss what kind of questions to ask when interviewing a cultural informant in order to find out about the different aspects of his/her culture. At this stage, these questions should reflect that students have developed their intercultural skills and awareness so as to avoid the stereotyping which usually accompanies perceiving the interlocutor through a single story.
5. Homework: Write at least three questions you might ask your cultural informant (individual work).

Language focus

- Asking questions about habits, routines, values and beliefs (Wh-/ Yes-no questions using several verb tenses): What holidays and celebrations are traditional in your community?, How often do you get together with your family?, Are women allowed to...?, Does your choice of sexual partner / your religion / your physical appearance affect your interpersonal relationships?, etc.

Session 2.

1. Invite a foreign person (for example, an exchange student or teacher) to come to class so that students can interview him/her and rehearse the kind of questions they may ask in their project work. They may use the questions they prepared as homework.
2. Until the deadline and while their work is in progress, students will be given some class time to get together in groups and the teacher will have the opportunity to supervise their work and, if necessary, provide some help. The remaining time of the class may be devoted to other tasks, like watching fragments of films (see the list of suggested films under Materials) or reading articles on these topics.

Language focus

- Asking questions about habits, routines, values and beliefs (Wh-/ Yes-no questions using several verb tenses): What holidays and celebrations are traditional in your community?, How often do you get together with your family?, Are women allowed to...?, Does your choice of sexual partner / your religion / your physical appearance affect your interpersonal relationships?
- Expressing likes and dislikes: One of my favourite scenes was..., What I liked the most / the least was..., ...made me laugh / cry / think about...

Weeks 4 and 5

1. Students work in groups under the teacher's supervision to prepare their presentations.

Week 6 (2 sessions)

1. Students make their group presentations. After the presentation, the audience will have some minutes to ask questions.
2. At the end of each presentation, encourage students to reflect on the linguistic and cultural experience gained inside and outside the classroom, become aware of the strategies they adopted in these cosmopolitan encounters and write about them on their blog.

Language focus

- Expressing feelings: Before learning about this culture, I felt... / I imagined... / I thought..., I had the feeling that... , I used to believe that... but now, after the interview,..., etc.
- Using strategies of negotiation developed through actual interactions

(for instance, students omit reference to something that the cultural informant may say and that they may not understand), using safe talk (asking/talking about areas the students are familiar with), using expressions that demonstrate solidarity, using segmentation (shortening of utterances into clausal or phrasal segments which form the basic informational units); using interpersonal strategies (repair, rephrasing, clarification, gestures, topic change, etc.) (Canagarajah, 2013)

3. Evaluate both group work and individual work using the following rubric and provide feedback to students:

The cultural iceberg: Presentation rubric

Criteria	Notes	Score
a. Preparation: Evidence of preparation for the presentation (Adequate use of technological resources, knowledge of topic, fluency of speech, timing)		_____ / 10p
b. Visual aids and organisation: The presentation was clear, creative, it had a logical sequence (introduction, body and conclusions) and was easy to follow		_____ / 15p
c. Interview: Distinct image and sound Questions demonstrated understanding of the material and critical skills		_____ / 20p
d. Blog: Effective as a way to record and share the experience with the community and as a self-assessment activity for the group		_____ / 15p
e. Group work: Participation in all group activities, including planning, discussion, research and presentation		_____ / 15p
f. Language: Fluency, pronunciation, grammar Student was able to answer questions from audience		_____ / 15p
g. Delivery: Eye contact, use of voice, body language, pace of speech		_____ / 10p
Total Score		_____ / 100p

Table 2. Presentation rubric.

Note: Items **a**, **b**, **c** and **d** assess performance of the whole group (60/100p). Items **e**, **f** and **g** assess individual work (40/100p).

Related Websites

- [Free Applications for Collaborative Teaching and Learning Interactions and Activities](#)
- [Resources designed for Peace Corps Volunteers](#) and useful for students who want to look into their own culture and become more understanding of people of other cultures
- [Models for cross-cultural analysis](#)
- [A blog with articles about international business, education and travel, useful for reading with students](#)

Supporting Audios, Videos and Student Productions

We first piloted this lesson plan in 2013 as a final group work that allowed us to assess our students' intercultural competence after a three-month course called International Communication Skills. There were five groups then and they chose to do their research on the following communities or cultures: the Amish, the Japanese, the Mapuches, the African-Caribbean and the Indonesian. This also meant they had to go outside the classroom and find a suitable cultural informant who was willing to answer their questions. Their presentations showed not only their interest in other people's ways of life but also their respect for them. All the students said the experience had helped them to change their perspectives and avoid stereotyping. Unfortunately, at the time, we did not ask students to record their interviews with the cultural informant, so there is no evidence about them, except for some pictures we took during their presentations in class.

Last year, we made several adjustments and one of them was to require evidence on video of that interview. As an example of the lesson plan carried out by our students, we include here these supporting files which were part of the presentation made by a group of five students (four Argentine students and a French exchange student) who made a presentation on Ivory Coast (disclosed by permission).

- [PDF presentation](#)
- [Interview by Skype](#)

Conclusion

In foreign language teaching, it is essential to equip learners with the intercultural skills and competences that will enable them to understand and respect other cultures in an attempt to find their own identity and become involved with their community. For this purpose, it is necessary to create the conditions in which students can go beyond the classroom and develop intercultural skills by interacting with different interlocutors and negotiating their linguistic and cultural differences.

This project is a contribution to promote in our learners an interest in otherness and a respect for others, an understanding of complex and multiple identities, an ability to change their naturalised perspectives and avoid stereotyping and in this way develop as conscientious citizens who uphold the rights of others as well as their own.

Note

1. Cultures are dynamic and their limits are difficult to establish. Here the word *culture* is used in the singular for practical purposes only.

References

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