

diversophy® — Creating Cultural Awareness in the Language Classroom

It is an important aim of the foreign language classroom to develop intercultural and communicative competence in learners via practice, reflection and sharing. Language teaching should help students move beyond ethnocentrism, habits of viewing one's own culture as superior to others. In the successfully managed classroom, students become not just bilingual but culturally savvy and flexible. They are launched on the path to being successful communicators in another culture.

There is an unbreakable link between culture, language, and communication. This requires that learners should be taught not only the language functions, forms and stress patterns but also differing worldviews and how these shape our beliefs, how we make sense of our world, or how we praise or criticize (or do we at all?). We look at attitudes to family life, correct ways of apologizing and disagreeing. We learn how to interpret a message like, "Drop in any time."

Stereotypes, for example, "The British are so impolite" – they don't open doors, or "Italians talk too much," or, "USians are so materialistic," need to be tackled as they arise. Intercultural awareness and socio-cultural competence (e.g., when to shake hands and what to say in greeting, or how to refuse an offer or request, when and how to say "thank you") make learning the target language a holistic process that adds to the students' appreciation and understanding of others and their priorities.

Often we may have students who ask what they see as innocent, relationship-building questions, such as "Are you married?", "How old are you?" "Where do you live?" Depending on the respondent's background such questions can be viewed as intrusion on one's privacy and too personal or, perhaps, just fine. It is clear then, that students and teachers should know how to deal with these and many other intercultural situations. Language teachers inevitably will be learning from their pupils as well. It is just as important for me not to take offence, as may happen if my students say, "I want this handout," or "Give me the book," which I may perceive as downright rude. It is too easy to judge people negatively if we look at them only through our eyes. We are called to observe the cultural values that lie behind what people do and say, otherwise such differences easily lead to misunderstandings or conflicts.

In general, everyone wants to be liked and accepted, whatever their background and so would take steps to fit in. However, if there is a gap in cultural knowledge, not just in words, they may not always choose the appropriate strategies to do this. The language teacher needs to challenge the learner's belief that differences create problems.

When it comes to intercultural methodology in the EFL classroom, small-scale research is telling us that input on intercultural awareness needs to be increased. This means that the teacher or trainer must have appropriate pedagogy in hand, effective for developing intercultural skills and socio-cultural competence. Any use of language is related to cultural values,

contexts and other variables. Research in the area of EFL (Valdes, 1986) has suggested that a student's native culture acts as interference (e.g., tone of voice, the way requests are made, etc.) just as much as his or her native language does. Hence, any language course should help students create culturally appropriate dialogue.

diversophy® (wisdom about differences) is an award-winning tool that improves learners' cultural awareness. This learning game poses real life, cultural and language-related questions and situations for learners to experience, share, analyze, and respond to. It also creates a safe environment for participants to learn empathy and tolerance for each other's differences and those posed by the target language and culture under study. Students love it as it involves them actively in the subject matter and encourages them to test and practice their language skills as they engage with each other. They also learn so much more from these cards in group discussion discovering cultural issues they might otherwise not become aware of.

The power and the joy of learning through games derive from the presence of four elements of play that occur naturally in almost all cultures: striving to succeed, meeting unpredictable challenges, losing everyday frames of reference, and playing new roles.

The authors of the now over 50 different **diversophy®** instruments have built these dynamics into one of the simplest of game structure, partly a quiz, a set of cards containing questions, situations, risks and discourse as learners are thrust into a new cultural and linguistic environment, with little warning or predictability, but with challenges arriving from every direction.

diversophy® contains a generous collection of factoids, critical choices, risks, wisdom and reflective questions. It can be played by anywhere from three to eight people around a table taking turns, picking up a card and facing the challenge, as in life, to whatever has come their way.

diversophy® card categories are named to fit each learning challenge: **diversiSMARTS** cards test factual knowledge about a culture, **diversiCHOICE** ask us to pick a course of appropriate behavior in our new cultural setting, while **diversiRISK** cards subject us to surprise happenings in an unfamiliar context, some are positive surprises, and others are disappointing outcomes from our behavior or mere presence in alien surroundings. **diversiGUIDE** cards impart wisdom from the new culture and from those who have fathomed it well, while **diversiSHARE** cards ask us to compare the new culture's approaches to everyday human situations with what we were raised to believe or do. You can enjoy samples of each of the games at www.diversophy.com/traininggames.htm

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