



Intercultural Language Activities

By John Corbett

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Intercultural Language Activities, as its name suggests, has practical teaching ideas and activities for developing intercultural language competence. The book serves as a bridge between the learner's own culture and that of others. This works well, as an awareness of one's own culture and how this influences behaviour and communication is necessary before we can understand another culture. The aim is to develop intercultural and communicative competence in learners via reflection and sharing. The starting point is to reflect on one's cultural values and become aware of those of others. Self-analysis, i.e., discussing just how our values lead us to behave in specific contexts, can help further the learning.

Corbett uses the term "intercultural communicative competence," which is defined with reference to the Common European Framework of competence as "a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes." He also refers to it in reference to Byram's "five aspects of intercultural communicative competence: knowing the self and the other; knowing how to relate and interpret meaning; developing critical awareness; knowing how to discover cultural information; and knowing how to relativise oneself and value the attitudes and beliefs of others". The activities in the book deal with each of the above aspects.

Intercultural communicative competence has become more and more important in the language classroom, as we do not only teach the language but also the culture that functions with it. As there are more non-native speakers of English than there are native speakers of English, students should become effective intercultural communicators and have knowledge about each other's cultures. That means the ability to behave appropriately and in a flexible way when communicating with speakers from other

cultures is paramount and this can be defined as intercultural competence - one of the aims of the foreign language classroom.

It seems that the teacher's or facilitator's task is to help students understand themselves and the world around them. Thus, the students should develop intercultural and communicative competence by functioning as mediators between different cultures and having the ability to reflect on their own cultural values as well as those of others. When this is managed successfully, students become bicultural or multicultural, i.e., successful communicators across another culture or cultures. However, the teacher or facilitator using the activities in the book should also be competent at intercultural mediation.

The book is a great source for cultural exploration but as it is meant to be used in conjunction with other course materials, it does not offer much language work or concrete examples of the use of words or phrases to go with the activities. Presumably this is because its focus is on intercultural exploration. However, there are a few phrases for polite offers and acceptances/refusals as well as reference to the TIME corpus for exploring informal language, proverbs and sayings and the British National Corpus for food idioms. The users should expect to need some preparation work, e.g., in case of adapting the material and bringing realia for some of the activities.

Corbett points out "the challenges of intercultural learning and teaching". This is true—things can go wrong in the classroom, and so users of the book should know how to facilitate the activities, foresee things that may possibly go wrong, doing this transparently so that they will sensitize students to the many differences we have, and know which language point to focus on in the activities as well as which phrase is good for which situation, if students are being assisted to learn about an English-speaking culture as well, etc.

Intercultural Language Activities is intended to supplement the main syllabus and is mainly aimed at mature teenagers and adults. A CD-ROM with photocopiable extracts in pdf format comes with the book. This makes it easy to project or print the discussion topics, observation schedules, or texts in class. As with any such material, adaption

makes sense. Corbett suggests adapting the activities in response to the interest and level of the students.

Intercultural Language Activities has fourteen chapters with sub-sections. The activities in each can be used in any order, depending on the topic being discussed in class. The book's activities help explore the intercultural dimension by sharing stories, reflecting on critical incidents, acting out role plays, discussing questions, etc.

The tasks are meant for in class or after class use, some activities can be set for homework and later discussion in class as well as used in internet exchanges. Topics range from setting up an online community to issues in domestic life, face to face communication, interpreting different phenomena such as advertisements, icons, food, etc.

The book also offers activities for controversial topics, such as religion and politics. It is essential for students to discuss these, as where else would they be exploring them in an open-minded way? Corbett points out that religion can be a sensitive topic for students and teachers should be cautious here. However, an awareness of a person's religion can help explain his or her values and behavior, so it is important to embed it in the learning process. Users of the book can adapt the activities by reflecting on their own and students' experiences and use of intercultural skills once the task is underway.

The first chapter looks at online community and explains how to start and set one up, so students can share their ideas with students from other countries. This is useful in monolingual groups but can also be used in mixed nationality groups to ensure a broader coverage, learn about cultures not represented in the classroom and learn about online intercultural communication. Again, it is possible to adapt these topics to classroom work and discussions if the internet is not available.

I found the second chapter on mediations useful, e.g., levels of formality (formal and informal), conflict styles, etc. In case of formal and informal language use, learners can explore situations and discover when one or the other is used in other cultures. Students can relate to most activities easily and share their experiences and learn to mediate in intercultural conflict situations.

The topics are explored through critical incidents, role plays and discussions. It would be best to adapt the content of each to the learners' background and experience. The activity on conflict resolution is useful for teaching the language of argumentation and reflecting on behavior in conflict situations. It also lists some good phrases used in different conflict styles. Here again the teacher should act as a guide and point out how directness can be misinterpreted, for example. The chapter also sheds light on job interviews and how the interviewee can be misinterpreted by giving an answer that is not the answer anticipated by the question, etc.

I would like to point out the activities in chapter four, which focus on ethnographic work. Here students observe different public places and how they function {e.g. visiting a café, observing behavior in public transport}. This is suitable for lower levels, too, and can give students a real sense of accomplishment as well as raise interest in cultural exploration.

Chapter five has activities for face-to-face communication issues. Depending on the country, students should know how maintaining or not maintaining eye contact is perceived, what they should do to have good rapport with others, etc. This can help work on presentation skills and non-verbal communication. It also explores informal language by having students first reflect on their own language, learn about informal expressions and when these are used in other cultures by sharing, and making use of the British National Corpus and Corpus of Contemporary American English online.

Chapter six prepares students for interviewing, asking questions and understanding someone's interests from the answers they give. Activities explore assumptions through critical incidents and give practice through a role play, this is again adaptable. The interviewing activity comes with pictures of two people from different cultures to help prepare for an online interview . There is also a suggested activity for more advanced learners in which they are asked to read a poem and guess what the everyday things described are like. Students explore how the thinking and wording can make a difference.

Another good discussion topic is the definition of childhood and legal ages, treated in chapter eight. Students can learn and share a lot here, for example comparing legal

ages in their culture with those in the cultures of other students and the reasons for and values behind these. An inserted box presents this data for the UK. Chapter nine focuses on role models. Activities ask learners to talk about their role models, people they admire and why, etc. The follow-up activity asks learners to debate on which person should receive the one and only available parachute and be saved if they were all in a plane about to crash. This debate can get heated and, depending on the person they most admire, some students may appear insensitive or too direct for some other students, giving the teacher excellent material for debriefing the learning.

I would also like to point out the list at the end of the book which offers further reading and resources for teaching language from an intercultural aspect as well as some that give the theory behind the activities in the book.

Intercultural Language Activities should definitely have a place in teacher training courses and foreign language classrooms. It should also be of interest to trainers and language teaching professionals interested in incorporating cultural exploration and intercultural learning in their teaching or coaching, an excellent resource for professionals looking for activities to develop intercultural awareness, more sophisticated cultural activities could be designed. The book should alert intercultural trainers to the fact that students learn about intercultural activities early and do not necessarily come to intercultural training sessions as clean sheets. Standard intercultural activities have become commonplace in secondary education suggesting that more sophisticated approaches need to be developed by interculturalists themselves.