

# Language Learning Activities to Enhance Intercultural Awareness

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## ABSTRACT

The inexorable link between language and culture has long been acknowledged and has risen in prominence in language pedagogy. The emerging role of English as a lingua franca necessitates a reconsideration of the relationship between languages and cultures in intercultural communication. The traditional target language – target culture relationship should evolve into a dynamic awareness of plural cultures and skills to successfully negotiate and understand them. Therefore, it is important that language teaching materials present cross-cultural elements from around the world to incorporate the knowledge and skills to be able to communicate in diverse global contexts through English. The present study is an attempt to highlight the role of English as a lingua franca and the importance of Intercultural Communicative Competence and to offer some sample language activities to enhance intercultural awareness.

**KEYWORDS:** Intercultural awareness, intercultural communicative competence, English as a lingua franca

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The English language has an extraordinary status that entitles it to be called a global lingua franca. Only about one out of every four users of English in the world is a native speaker of the language (Crystal 2003). Since it is being spoken by many more non-natives than native speakers, and many more interactions in English are taking place among non-native speakers, English has become the foreign language that millions of people from different languages and cultures have chosen to communicate with each other. Thus, the new role of English has gone beyond the traditional “native” English speaking countries and now requires a more intercultural approach to language teaching.

The limitations of traditional grammar-based approaches to foreign and second language teaching have long been recognized. Even a communicative approach, which broadens its scope from a focus on grammatical accuracy to contextual appropriateness, might fall short without an intercultural aspect. The contemporary models of communicative competence reveal that learning a language means a lot more than simply studying the language, it also includes the vital component of intercultural knowledge and awareness (Council of Europe 2001). The cultural background of the participants with different native languages communicating across diverse cultural boundaries is a reality, rather than an exception, in an interconnected world. Therefore, teaching English as a foreign language should encompass necessary knowledge and skills for communicating with people from diverse cultures, and language teaching materials should not be limited to those exemplifying native English speaking cultures alone (Alptekin 2002; Cortazzi & Jin 1999). Therefore, language teachers face the challenge of promoting the acquisition of intercultural competence in their learners. The need for the development of learners’ intercultural skills and knowledge necessities a revision in foreign language teaching.

Based on these assumptions, this study gives a brief review of the terms culture, intercultural communicative competence, intercultural awareness and suggests some sample activities for teachers to enhance intercultural awareness.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1 Definition of Culture

There is no single specific definition of the term culture. The social sciences define culture as values, beliefs, and behaviors that a group of people share. Anthropologists like Geerts (1973) and Douglas (1970) define culture as a system of symbols, and language is only one of the symbolic systems in this network. Loveday states that “[culture] involves the implicit norms and conventions of a society, its methods of ‘going about doing things’, its historically transmitted but also adaptive and creative ethos, its symbols and organization of experience” (1981:34). According to Hammers (1985:53), culture is a system of concepts, values, behaviors, an approach to life, developed throughout its history by a certain people. Pu (2002) divides the concept into three levels, namely high culture, deep culture and popular culture (cited in Muir 2007). High culture refers to politics, philosophy, education, literature, art, etc. Deep culture includes a sense of value, mode of thinking, code of conduct, religious beliefs, etc. Popular culture is a pattern of customs, ceremony and propriety of social contact,

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ways of life, family patterns, etc. To be precise, culture is the context in which linguistic interaction takes place and it has the power to shape the meaning of what is said. Therefore, any method of language teaching and learning is inevitably cultural (Valdes 1990).

## 2.2 Intercultural Communicative Competence

In the area of foreign language teaching, the ultimate goal is to support students' abilities to be communicatively competent learners. Intercultural communicative competence is linked to communicative competence and builds on it. An intercultural approach emphasizes the social function of language; for example, students are required to be active analysts of both their own and target culture in a wide range of situations. They are also required to interpret the similarities and differences between their home and target culture (Byram 1997; Corbett 2003; Guilherme 2002; Sercu et al. 2005).

With social and technological transformations, the world has become smaller. Today, more than any time in history, people of diverse cultural backgrounds are in contact, which gives rise to intercultural communicative competence. Meyer (1991:137) defines intercultural competence as the "the ability of a person to behave adequately and in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures". Alred and Byram (2002) propose that it "...is the ability to change one's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors so as to be open and flexible to other cultures". An intercultural approach trains learners' views different cultures with informed understanding together with their native cultures. The ultimate goal of an intercultural approach to language teaching is not 'native speaker competence', but rather an 'intercultural communicative competence' (Guilherme 2002). That is, in the area of language teaching, the long-standing objective is target language development; however, an intercultural approach supports the emphasis of an equally important aim: an intercultural understanding and interpretation. Kramsch (1993:257) describes that an intercultural perspective is a third place, transcending both home and target culture.

As we can see, intercultural communicative competence is a complex combination of knowledge and skills. In order to clarify the concept of intercultural competence, different formulations are given. Byram (1997:34) suggests five *savoirs* of the knowledge and skills needed to mediate between cultures for intercultural competence. These are specified as follows:

1. Knowledge of self and other; of how interaction occurs; of the relationship of the individual to society.
2. Knowing how to interpret and relate information.
3. Knowing how to engage with the political consequences of education; being critically aware of cultural behaviours.
4. Knowing how to discover cultural information.
5. Knowing how to be: how to relativise oneself and value the attitudes and beliefs of the other.

Sercu et al. (2005:3) propose its components under three main headings, namely knowledge, skills/behavior and attitudes/traits.

Knowledge	Skills/behavior	Attitudes/traits
<b>culture specific and culture general knowledge</b> <b>Knowledge of self and other</b> <b>Knowledge of interaction: individual and societal</b> <b>Insight regarding the ways in which culture affects language and communication</b>	Ability to interpret and relate Ability to discover and/or interact Ability to acquire new knowledge and to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction Metacognitive strategies to direct one's own learning	Attitude to relativize self and value others Positive disposition towards learning General disposition characterized by a critical engagement with the foreign culture under consideration and one's own

The above given traits of intercultural communicative competence make it clear that in foreign language education, foreign language teachers need certain knowledge, strategies, skills, attitudes and competencies in order to implement an intercultural course (Corbett 2003; Sercu et al. 2005). Nevertheless, Stern (1992:207) identifies some problems with the curricular aims of an intercultural approach and how to implement it in the area of language teaching and learning.

**a)** The vastness of the culture concept, **b)** the problem of goal determination and lack of accessible information, **c)** questions of syllabus design and the difficulty of according an inappropriate place to culture in a predominantly language-oriented approach, **d)** questions of teaching procedures and the difficulty of handling substantive subject-matter in a mainly skill-oriented programme.

However, from the various cultural studies, a consensus has emerged about the curricular aims of an intercultural approach and how to implement intercultural activities to raise cultural awareness as well as to develop communicative skills. The best way to achieve this is to use communicative tasks to provide materials for raising intercultural awareness by reflecting on culturally specific patterns of behavior.

### 2.3 Intercultural Awareness

The inevitable integration of a cultural dimension into language teaching has formed the concept of *cultural awareness*, which suggests that language learners need to understand communicating in a foreign or second language is a cultural process and that the participants have their own culturally-based communicative behavior. Despite its valuable contribution, cultural awareness might have shortcomings due to a national view of language and culture. The plurality of world 'Englishes' and English as a lingua franca have made it difficult to adhere to a single variety of English in foreign and second language teaching and this gives rise to *intercultural awareness*, which is more applicable to intercultural communication in an expanding circle of English as lingua franca contexts.

Intercultural awareness is offered "... as a characterization of the types of skills and knowledge which need to be employed alongside linguistic resources to communicate successfully in the emergent sociocultural settings of English used as a lingua franca" (Baker 2009:69). Given the complexity and plurality of cultural contexts and participants in intercultural communication today, we need to reconsider 'third places' (Kramsch 1993), which are neither part of users' L1 or a target language. In this 'expanding circle' (Kachru 2005), in which English is used in international contexts as a contact language by people from diverse cultures and languages, more fluid notions of language and culture need to be adopted (Canagarajah 2007; Pennycook 2007; Baker 2009).

### 2.4 Developing Activities for Intercultural Awareness

There is a need to develop an awareness of the role culturally based forms, practices and frames of understanding can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to communicate flexibly in a context specific manner. In ELF contexts, such awareness and skills may be as important as more conventional linguistic knowledge of grammar and lexis for successful communication. Teachers can add this dimension to the materials they produce.

Teachers should go beyond subject boundaries, that is to say, they should hold a cross-curricular approach. Thus the language class can adopt a broader perspective, which could help learners observe the cultural other, observe themselves and what they take for granted. Language activities can serve much more than just simply enhancing language skills. They can promote tolerance for others and self-reflection and seeing ourselves as others see us.

Easier to say than do, one might say. Admittedly, developing an intercultural awareness might be difficult for non-native teachers of English. Nonetheless, this might be a process of discovery for both parties. Activities which not only practice language but also create interest and stimulation for research and discovery into cultures might be a pleasant and satisfying experience for the teacher and the learners. Below are sample language lesson plans with activities to foster intercultural awareness (see appendices).

## 3. Conclusion

The emerging role of English as a lingua franca has led to the notion of intercultural communicative competence, which in turn resulted in a new dimension in language learning. For the majority of the learners learning a foreign language, their own culture is so much given that they barely recognize it. In that respect, the process of learning another language involves a process of acculturation. Distant places and peoples are becoming more and more reachable each day. Learners of English as a lingua franca are likely to gain an understanding of other cultural identities and be culturally literate to interpret the messages they will confront. As Alptekin states (2002), in today's multicultural environment communication occurs not only between native and non-native participants but also, because of English's lingua franca status, between non-native and non-native participants with different cultural backgrounds as well. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to use pedagogic models which promote intercultural insights and knowledge.

However, teaching a foreign language differs from teaching a second language in that teaching takes place in a classroom setting where students speak a language other than the target one. Thus, students have reduced chances to use the target language in limited classroom discourse. Byram offers a model for language and culture teaching, which apart from language learning, language awareness and culture learning components, also comprises a cultural experience component (cited in Sercu et al. 2005:110). Students can experience the relationship between their home culture and target cultures through school trips, exchange projects, etc. However, these opportunities are rare and occasional. Therefore, new communication technologies such as e-mail, and the Internet are promoted as a means of overcoming the distance between home and target cultures, enabling students to experience interactions with native speakers. The more students have chances to experience intercultural interactions, the less likely they are to face misunderstandings across cultures. Students may perceive a situation, or associate different meanings with it based on his/her home culture which may result in communication breakdown. Thus, they should learn the potential meanings of a situation or behavior in the

target cultures with the help of contextual clues. This necessitates that foreign language teachers bring authentic materials such as films, newspapers, documentaries, visual aids, etc., for classroom use. They should also design real life activities to make foreign societies close and familiar to students. These activities are particularly effective because they move students into the area of intercultural learning. On the other hand, it is crucial for teachers to develop their own intercultural awareness and enrich their sensitivity to other cultures and avoid cultural prejudices.

In the following appendices, three sample intercultural activities are presented to help students reflect on their own language and culture, as well as that of others.

### Appendix A

#### Classroom manners

**Level:** intermediate

**Target audience:** young adults

#### Aims:

- ✓ avoiding misunderstandings in the target culture,
- ✓ using critical skills to discover the motive for the depicted behavior,
- ✓ making students aware of correct forms of behavior on problematic occasions in the target culture

**Skill areas:** reading and speaking

**Duration:** 30 min.

**Materials:** handouts

#### Before reading



- 1- Have you ever been late for class?
- 2- What was the reason? How did you come in?
- 3- What was your teacher's reaction?

**Now read the first section of the text below. Discuss with your partner what the Professor's behavior might mean?**

Emre's test in his history class took longer than the hour which was scheduled for the class, so he arrived at his math class about ten minutes late and discovered that the door to the classroom was closed. Emre knocked lightly on the door and waited for the teacher, Professor Smith, to open it. When she did, he quietly explained that he was sorry that he was late and told her that his history class took longer than he had expected. Professor Smith hardly seemed to be listening to what he was saying and actually started talking to the class again before Emre was completely finished. He noticed that she hardly looked at him as he took his seat. He felt that she was annoyed at him. A few minutes later, when the classroom became warm, Professor Smith opened the classroom door. About three minutes afterwards, Tom, an American student, came into the classroom and quietly took his seat. Emre noticed that the teacher smiled and nodded at Tom within a few minutes from the time that he came in.

**What did Professor Smith's behavior mean? Some possible explanations are given below. In groups of four read them and discuss the most probable explanation. Later, read the discussion to see if you have guessed correctly.**

- A. Professor Smith was annoyed at Emre because he was late and had not told her beforehand that he would be late. Americans expect explanations for lateness before the lateness occurs. Tom had given his explanation to Professor Smith beforehand, so it was not a problem.
- B. Professor Smith was annoyed at Emre because he tried to enter the class when the door was shut. For Americans, a closed door signals a desire for privacy which should not be interrupted. As Professor Smith opened the door before Tom arrived, there was no problem with his coming into the class, even though he was later than Emre.
- C. Professor Smith was annoyed at Emre because he interrupted her lecture by knocking at the door and trying to talk to her while the rest of the class was waiting. Once class has started, Americans expect that no one will interrupt except for an emergency. Tom did not interrupt when he entered late because he slipped quietly into his seat so that he did not annoy anyone.

- D. Professor Smith was annoyed at Emre simply because he was a foreign student. She felt that the foreign students at the university were taking opportunities from the American students. She was not annoyed at Tom because he was an American.

**Discussion of the possible explanations**

- A. Although it is true that Americans are very time conscious and dislike lateness, they also realize that lateness will occur for unexpected reasons and that it is impossible to always know beforehand when you will be late.
- B. Some closed doors in the U.S. are signals of a desire for privacy. However, those closed doors are usually doors to private rooms - offices, bedrooms, bathrooms, etc. When doors to public rooms - classrooms, meeting halls, etc. - are closed, it is not necessarily a signal of a desire for privacy. It is more likely to be a sign that too much noise was coming in from the outside.
- C. This is the best answer. Teachers in the U.S. expect as little interruption as possible when they are conducting their classes. If an interruption does occur, Americans would expect that there was something very urgent about the interruption or that it would have relevance to everyone in the class. Emre's matter was a private one with relevance only for him so it was not appropriate. The proper way to handle the situation is to slip into class as quietly as possible not interrupting the teacher or the other students as Tom did.
- D. There are Americans who have prejudices against foreign students for one reason or another. However, such a prejudice is not a good thing to assume, particularly at the start and especially when there is no more proof than one incident. You should remember that all cross-cultural interactions are open to misunderstanding and you should allow much more time and evidence before making assumptions.

**After Reading**

**What might happen if an American student were in your country and late for class?**

**Appendix B**

**The Wedding and the Funeral**

**Level:** intermediate and above

**Target audience:** teenager and adult

**Aims:**

- ✓ becoming aware that even within the same culture there are unique traditions as well as shared ones,
- ✓ stimulating interest in other cultures,
- ✓ an awareness of different wedding and mourning traditions in different cultures

**Skill areas:** speaking, listening, vocabulary

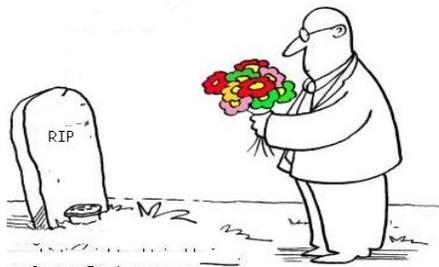
**Duration:** 100 min.

**Materials:** a copy of the movie "Four Weddings and a Funeral"

**Before viewing:**

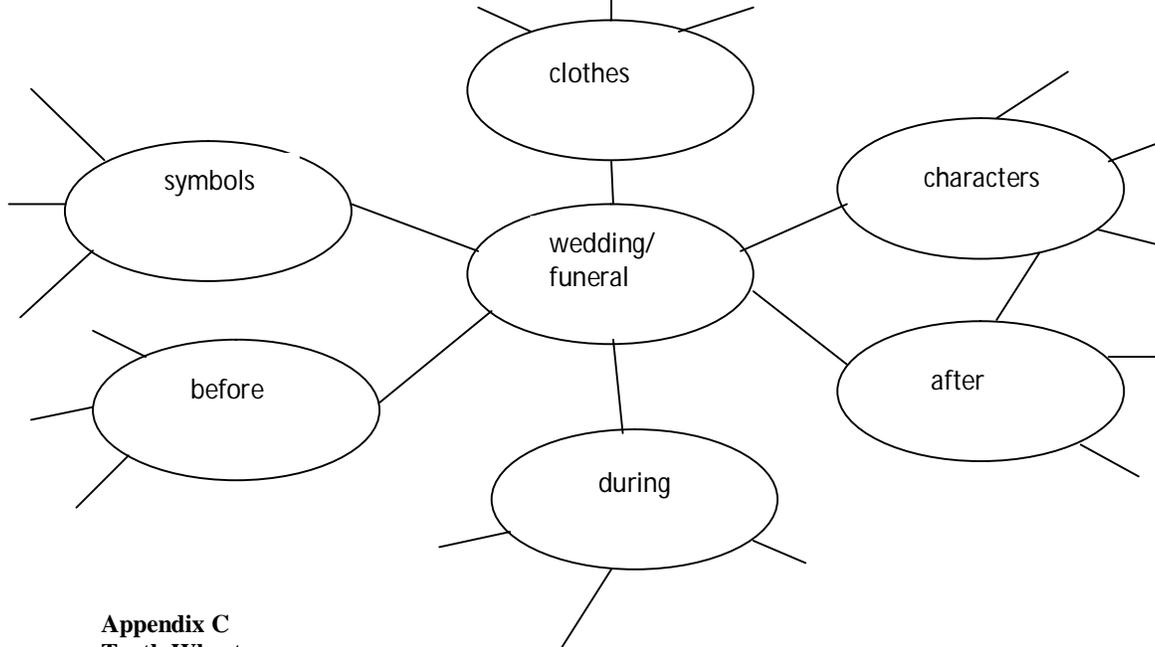


1. What are the wedding traditions in your hometown that are different from other regions in your country?



2. What do people do in case of the death of a relative in your hometown? How do they mourn?

Now watch the movie and complete the graph below.



### Appendix C

#### Tooth Wheat

**Level:** intermediate

**Target audience:** young adults

**Aims:**

- ✓ becoming aware that there are unique traditions as well as shared ones across cultures of the world,
- ✓ stimulating interest in other cultures,
- ✓ an awareness of different baby and teething traditions in different cultures

**Skill areas:** reading and speaking, writing

**Duration:** 30 min.

**Materials:** handouts, video, the internet

**Before reading**

1. What are the important steps of a baby's development for the baby and its family (first step, first word, first tooth)?
2. Watch the video and discuss what is being celebrated. Note down special rituals and preparations about food and clothing (*students watch a short video of a "tooth wheat" celebration*).



#### Tooth Wheat

Babies generally sprout their first teeth when they are about 6 months old. The eruption of these teeth ("teething") is often a happy occasion to be celebrated in the family.

Most Turkish families prepare a special dish called "tooth wheat" and invite relatives and friends to celebrate the first tooth. The main ingredient of the meal is boiled wheat which is served with sweet ingredients. It is often the women who organize and take part in the activity, but male members of the family might be invited as well. The "tooth wheat" ritual is a celebration to bless and wish the baby good health and fortune.

One of the most entertaining moments of the celebration is to place various objects which symbolize different occupations and wait for the baby to reach out for one of them. Such items may be a banknote, a pair of scissors, a piece of bread, a book, a stethoscope, a mirror, a ruler, a calculator or even the holy book. It is believed that the object the baby picks up will be related to the occupation he or she will practice in the future. The parents of a baby taking a stethoscope will be happy to have a future doctor. A baby picking up the ruler will become an engineer. If the baby picks the holy book, it will have faith. The objects not only symbolize what occupation the

baby will have but also what kind of a person he or she will be in the future. However, most of the time the baby is so confused that it may end up picking up nothing.

**Discuss**

Have you ever attended a tooth wheat celebration? In what ways was it similar or different?

	 <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Web-quest Task</b></p>
<p><b>Introduction:</b> What do people around the world do when children lose their tooth? In this web-quest task you are going to find out different tooth fairy traditions around the world.</p>	
<p><b>Task:</b> In groups of three, prepare a poster showing what people do when children lose their teeth. Use visuals as well.</p>	
<p><b>Process:</b> First discuss what you did when your teeth fell out when you were a kid. Ask your parents what they used to do. Then, surf the net to discover different traditions when children lose their teeth. Search for the tooth fairy. What are different figures/ animals taking part in tooth and coin exchange in different countries? Find chants and rituals related to losing teeth. Make a comprehensive list of similarities and differences of children's tooth losing traditions across the world. Mark those you would like to adopt.</p>	
<p><b>Resources:</b> Below are links where you can find information to prepare your poster.  <a href="http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tooth_fairy">http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tooth_fairy</a>  <a href="http://www.netlaputa.ne.jp/~tokyo3/e/teeth_e.html">http://www.netlaputa.ne.jp/~tokyo3/e/teeth_e.html</a>  <a href="http://voices.yahoo.com/tooth-fairy-traditions-around-world-7503826.html?cat=70">http://voices.yahoo.com/tooth-fairy-traditions-around-world-7503826.html?cat=70</a>  <a href="http://www.annieandre.com/2013/01/tooth-traditions-around-the-world-tooth-fairy-mouse/">http://www.annieandre.com/2013/01/tooth-traditions-around-the-world-tooth-fairy-mouse/</a></p>	
<p><b>Evaluation:</b> Mark your work in terms of content, examples and visuals.                  (a) poor, (b) average, (c) good, (d) exemplary</p>	
<p><b>Conclusion:</b> You have created an intriguing and enlightening poster illustrating different tooth fairy traditions across the world. Well done.</p>	

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Main Research Interests are Content & Language Integrated Learning, Teaching English to Children, Intercultural Competence and Material Development.