

Ted Sabland

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## Plenary 1

c. C. C. C.  
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### Teaching culture and teaching language Mario Rinvoluceri (Pilgrims-OISE)

I am pretty sure that I have strong personal reasons for being very interested in matters cultural.

I say 'pretty sure' because the ideas I want to share with you have only come to the fore in my mind over the last 10-15 years. My father was a North Western Italian (Piedmont, Turin) while my mother hailed half from Aachen in Germany and half from Liverpool. One area of permanent discord between these two people was negotiation of anger. My father, conforming to his own choleric Italian cultural norms, would flare up in blazing anger over quite small things. My mother would not know what had hit her, would feel extremely upset, and would retire into her sulky shell like a snail. Half an hour later he would want to kiss and make up but she would have none of it. Amazingly, these two repeated this pattern over twenty five years; no cultural learning took place. They both, basing themselves on their own societal norms, found the other's behaviour intolerable. In their view, only the other needed to change their behaviour.

At this point in the talk I asked people to bring up a painful inter-cultural situation that they had experienced. I did not want to be left alone with my own!

I then modelled a positive cultural learning experience. Once, in Turkey, a male colleague and I went to pick up a thirty-five-year-old female colleague from her flat. I was sitting in the front of the car with Ahmet. As we sat waiting for her to come down, I moved to the back seat. Ahmet turned round and said: "Mario, why have you moved to the back?"

"Well, so that Bahar can sit in the front with you. She is a lady."

Long pause

"Mm, well, she might be a little bit embarrassed."

"How come?"

"In Turkey we tend to feel that the guest should have the best place. We also feel that an older person should have precedence over a younger person."

It didn't take me long to get back into that front seat. Thank you, Ahmet, for teaching me to behave adequately and for doing it with the gentleness and lightness of touch that is so central to Turkish culture.

At this point in the talk I asked people to talk to each other about a good cultural learning experience they have had.

Having, I hope, established the fact that cultural differences run deep and enshrine strong differences

in belief systems, and that cultural misunderstandings can seriously affect human relationships, I then went on to outline a thinking frame that helps to make sense of the jungle of cultural confusion.

I proposed these four basic attitudes to cultural difference:

**UNIVERSALIST:** In this frame of mind you notice the reality of the other culture being different from yours, but you maintain that such differences are superficial and that deeper investigation of the seeming differences will reveal basic sameness.

When I watched my wife giving birth to our daughter in Greece in the 1960's, I heard the other women in the ward screaming "Panagia," then "Boro!" (Holy Mary, I can't!) while Sophie tried to read a book between contractions, but I was sure that the biology and the feelings of the situation were such that there was 1% difference and 99% sameness. This is a clear example of the UNIVERSALIST state of mind.

**EVOLUTIONIST UPWARDS:** Within this mindset you look admiringly at the other culture, sigh and say "If only we could somehow manage to do things as well as they do them." In the area of generosity and hospitality I have this attitude towards people in the Arab World. I have been bowled over by the givingness, unstintingness and inter-personal warmth of my Arab students. I wish my own mixed Latin-English-German culture were less mean and bounded in the area of giving and hospitality. I feel ashamed of Northern European meanness. Arabs are better than us in this area.

**EVOLUTIONIST DOWNWARDS:** A good illustration of this attitude comes in the area of eating foreign food.

Italian Student in Edinburgh: "These Scots cook pasta to death - has nobody told them that pasta should be *al dente*?"

Chinese student: "Breakfast after breakfast and not a grain of rice. Don't they have steamers?"

Japanese student: "Heavy stuff - they never have fish."

It might be fair to say that many teenagers, on their first trip abroad look down on foreign food: "My Mum cooks better."

One of the biggest cultural transitions and adjustments most of us have to make is entering our in-law family. Aren't some of our both initial and later established reactions **EVOLUTIONIST DOWNWARDS?**

**RELATIVIST:** In this frame of mind you are able to behave one way in culture A and differently in culture B in a similar situation, and the change of

behaviour costs you nothing. An example: when I am paying for something in Italy I lay down the money on the surface between me and the recipient; when I am in UK, I put the money into the person's hand. I feel equally at ease in both situations.

A second example: in Germany I happily pay for my own drinks in a pub, while in UK I am happy to stand the people I'm with a round of drinks.

The above four positions carry no moral connotations – in anthropological thinking they are merely descriptive of four different attitudinal realities. A pacifist may have an EVOLUTIONIST DOWNWARDS attitude towards people who voluntarily join the SAS commandos. We are not judging either group, we are describing an attitude.

You may experience all four states of mind within half an hour, and we have all experienced each at different times. Nobody is purely one or the other.

If you wish to use this thinking framework, you

may want to pause and think of times when you personally have experienced each feelings/state of mind.

Culture is linked to language, and I find it hard to thinking of learning a language without also wanting to plunge myself into the culture to which it is vehicular. This is very clear if I am learning a Papua-New Guinean language, Sephardic Spanish or Maltese. It is less clear if I am learning an international language like Spanish or English, which are vehicular to many diverse cultures.

If you have cultural experiences or cultural thinking you would like to share, the SATEFL or SATEAL Newsletters may want to offer a home to what you write. The web'zine which I edit, HUMANISING LANGUAGE TEACHING, [www.hltmag.co.uk](http://www.hltmag.co.uk) would certainly welcome such contributions.

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## **Concurrent sessions I**

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### **Canadian Immersion Programmes: New ideas for bilingual learners, inclusion for all**

Ewan McIntosh (Musselburgh Grammar School, East Lothian)

The TESOL Scotland conference provided an initial platform for discoveries made during a nine-day LECT<sup>1</sup>-funded trip to examine bilingual policy and practice in New Brunswick, Canada.

The presentation set out to inspire teachers of English to use a project and experience-based learning approach fit for *all* mono- and bilingual pupils with basic levels of English, in a mainstream environment.

Systems in Scotland and New Brunswick are very similar, in terms of provision for the bilingual learner and incorporation of an inclusion policy. Mainstreaming takes a different meaning to the way it is used in Scotland: separate bilingual education is provided for all those wishing to undertake it, but this separate provision is open to all. This is therefore seen as mainstreamed bilingual education.

This grand project is aided by an official policy of bilingualism, since 1969, encouraging diversity, rather than the melting pot we see in Canada's neighbours, the USA. This culminates in two Education Departments: Anglophone and Francophone. Its aims are politically driven, ambitious and, above all, realistic: 40% of NB citizens are already bilingual, and

70% will be deemed bilingual in 2013.

The importance of offering varied and flexible systems was greatly underlined; immersion can take many forms. However, the importance of a suitable pedagogy was also stressed. The New Brunswick pedagogy of 'experiential' learning was introduced briefly. The most fundamental of learning principles – that we learn best when the language belongs to us and helps us survive – underpins the whole pedagogy of immersion education:

- Language is never learned for language's sake;
- The teacher is seen as the guide rather than the fount of knowledge;
- If a task does not contribute towards the completion of a 5–6 week class project, the task does not happen;
- The aim is to *do* things, not to *know* things (*savoir-faire*).

It was proposed that this project-based learning, incorporating as many subjects as possible in a communal project to create a final product, might be a possibility to make bilingual learners feel more responsible for their learning, and give them ownership of it.

These suggestions are not immediately applicable to a Scottish system, where bilingual pupils do not necessarily arrive at the beginning of a school year. But EAL/EFL teachers could use the flexibility of this more open-ended pedagogy to their advantage. Further findings at: [www.multilangs.co.uk](http://www.multilangs.co.uk)

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<sup>1</sup>League for the Exchange of Commonwealth Teachers