

For Etp **Their Culture Tells me about Our Culture and about Me**

Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, UK

‘ The women of the harem pitied us European women heartily, that we had to go about travelling and appearing in the streets without being properly taken care of--- that is being watched. They think us strangely neglected in being left so free, and boast of how closely they are watched, as a token of the value in which they are held.

(Harriet Martineau , Eastern Life)

This article suggests that teenagers can become more aware of their own home culture through their encounters with the funny ways of foreigners, just as Martineau is powerfully invited to look at her own ‘freedom’, as a Western woman, through the eyes of her harem sisters. Their very different attitude sets off and silhouettes her own beliefs about her freedom. This article offers you practical exercises that help in the process of using the peculiarities of THEM to throw light on US, sometimes to show up parallels and sometimes to highlight differences.

Teenagers today, around the world, encounter THEM when they travel to other countries, but also when they look around their own classrooms and see the faces and hear the voices of the immigrants. In Bangkok classes the immigrant faces, voices and presences will be from Burma, Cambodia and other poorer countries round Thailand, in Durban they will be from war-torn places like Rwanda, Burundi and Congo, while in Madrid they are from Rumania and Morocco and many other places. Dealing with cultural difference is part of any teacher’s normal day-to-day work in a big, melting pot cities.

The aim of the classroom activities that follow is to help students to think about cultural differences in an insightful way, rather than in a primitive, natural and sometimes upset or angry way.

Activity 1 What is my natural Focus of Attention? (intermediate and up)

- place two handbags or two satchels where everybody can see them clearly. Wait till everybody has really noticed them.
 - Tell the students to work on their own and to write 6-8 sentences about the objects. Go round yourself helping with language.
 - Group the students in fours to read their sentences to each other.
 - Ask if anybody only had sentences that focused on the SAMENESS of the bags. Find a student whose main focus was on sameness, and dictate these sentences to the class, modifying the language where the student has things wrong.
 - Find a student whose sentences mostly contrast the DIFFERENCES between the two bags. Dictate these to the whole class.
 - Ask the students what they tend to focus on when they meet a person from elsewhere, are they more struck by differences or by sameness? Lead a whole class discussion.
- (this exercise comes from NLP metaprogram thinking)

Activity 2 What does Foreign territorial Behaviour tell me about Ours? (upper intermediate and up)

- ask the students to read these short newspaper items:

Hedge Case Couple must sell home

A couple who cut down a laurel boundary hedge in Groombridge, East Sussex, will have to sell their £600,000 house to pay the costs of a three year legal battle. They were landed with a £350,000 bill yesterday after losing their case in the Court of Appeal.

Jailed for a hedge

Malcolm and Marlene Girling were jailed for 14 days last August when they disobeyed a court order. This forbade them interfering with a dividing hedge. The dispute began when they cut down a 15 foot hedge shared with their neighbours in Witton, near Norwich.

Two year dispute over hedge ends in death

A pensioner is dead and his neighbour is being questioned by police in what appears to be the latest case of 'hedge rage'.

After a heated exchange the neighbour shot the pensioner dead.

The hedge in dispute is one foot high and divides the lawn in front of the two semi-detached houses, each owned by one of the men.

- Give any help needed with language or cultural understanding.
- Ask each student to write a three sentence reaction to the stories. These sentences are private.
- Now tell the class a story from your experience or from your reading of a territorial quarrel between neighbours or between people who have to share the same environment.
- Group the students in sixes to tell their own stories of territorial friction between people.
- Round off with a sameness/difference discussion between the target culture and the home culture, or between the target culture and the various home cultures present in your class.

Activity 3 Racists are.....or so someone said intermediate up

- Dictate these sentences and tell the class that they are the opinions of 15-16 year-old UK school students about racism.

I think it's just that some people do not want to share their country with other

People.

I don't think the school is racist but some of the kids are.

I get really cross when I see these people getting money from the government and working 'on the side'. There are poor people who were born here who should get help before we start with anybody else.

The asylum seekers at my school have language support workers who sit with them in class. It must cost a fortune. Why can't they learn English some where else first?

I think unemployment and competition for jobs makes everything worse.

I think racists are ignorant.

I get really angry when the lesson gets held up because asylum seekers can't understand the teacher.

I've seen a boy at our school get bullied because he was an Arab. They were calling him Bin Laden's boy and hitting him. I watched it and I didn't do anything. I was scared.

It must be awful to have people being horrible to you because of the colour of your skin

- Pair the students. Ask each person to think of someone they know who might agree with three or four of the sentences above.
Student A in each pair reads out the sentences as the person chosen and explains each sentence further, in role
Student B then does the same, working in role as a person of their choice.
- Invite feedback from the whole class as to how it felt to be presenting some one else's opinions
(I learnt this activity from Gill Johnson)

Activity 4 Things I like in a Foreign Culture intermediate and up

- Explain that you are going to dictate a paragraph spoken by an Indian doctor who has spent 10 years in UK. He left India partly because he was disgusted at the back-handers offered by drugs companies to doctors to get them to prescribe their products.
Here are his words to dictate:

'I feel British when I am restrained in my emotions. I am no longer emotionally

expressive and loud as I was in India. I have become far more diplomatic in the way I express my feelings.

In India, as a doctor, I was supposed to know everything. I had to be a god. Here in the UK, it is acceptable to say 'I don't know'. I can be human.'

- Tell the students some positive aspects that you really like in the culture of the language they are studying, or of another culture you like. What you tell them is really important since they know you as their teacher. (For them, the Indian doctor is an abstraction)
- Ask them to bring to mind a foreign culture they know, from songs, from film, from meeting people. Ask them to write half a page of things they really love about this culture.
- Bring the students together in fours to read each other's half pages and to comment.

Culture as part of my expression of myself

It is hard to define what is culturally governed in a person and what is purely individual and idiosyncratic. In all four of the above activities the students bring to the discussion their own personal beliefs as well as the values of the family, class, region and country they belong to. Each student is female or male in their own powerful way and yet they have learnt their gender role within the context of a family and societal culture.

It only becomes easy to analytically separate what is personal and what is learnt from the tribe when an individual's personal opinions and beliefs clash with those of their community. If the person mainly conforms to societal values, they think of these as being simply theirs, as being an integral part of self. If Chiemi has never been outside Japan then perceiving a stark difference between INSIDE (home etc) and OUTSIDE (rather dangerous) will feel to her to be simply part of herself. She is not aware of the distinction as being a cultural one, that other people from distant places may not subscribe to.

As a foreign language teacher I want my students to learn more about their mother tongue through the mirror of the target language and I want them to use the target culture in the same way, learning more about their home culture through experiencing strange, 'over there' ways of perceiving the world that belong to the target culture. In the process of doing this they become much more self-aware and much more able to distinguish between their individual 'I' and the big 'we' of their home culture. I feel that in this way they become more fully themselves, and all this through the medium of the ever-less foreign language.