

## Developing Intercultural Awareness in the Foreign Language Class

### Aiming at intercultural competence

Learning transforms who we are and what we can do. If our identity is transformed by everything we learn, this is particularly evident in foreign language learning, which involves **an encounter between self and other**:

Every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. They are, in other words, engaged in identity construction and negotiation.

(Norton 1997: 410)

Rather than disguising our learners' multiple identities behind the mask of an ideal native speaker, the overall aim of foreign language education, in Michael Byram's words (1997), should be the development of an **'intercultural speaker'**.

The 'intercultural' learner is one who is linguistically adept (although not 'native speaker' proficient) who has skills which enable him or her to identify cultural norms and values that are often implicit in the language and behaviour of the groups he or she meets, and who can articulate and negotiate a position with respect to those norms and values.

(Corbett 2007: 41)

It is on the basis of this conception that the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* advocates an **'intercultural approach'**:

In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote the favourable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture.

(Council of Europe 2001:1)

The *Prediseño Curricular de Lenguas Extranjeras* of the City of Buenos Aires (1999: 13) also highlights the importance of intercultural awareness:

*El contacto con la lengua extranjera hace trizas la ilusión de que existe un punto de vista único. La arbitrariedad del signo lingüístico se vuelve tangible, la constatación de una adecuación ilusoria entre la palabra y la cosa, inevitable. El extrañamiento que produce el contraste y la distancia con lo propio deja al descubierto, en la lengua extranjera, al otro y su alteridad, al otro y sus modos diferentes de constitución de sentidos.*

**How can learners profit from the enriching experience of coming into contact with otherness by reflecting on their own values and identity and on the construction of their self-image?**

### Representational materials in intermedial dialogue

What McRae (1991: 3) calls **'representational' materials** can help us achieve this aim. These materials include canonical literary works, but also texts produced and distributed unconventionally, as well as any kind of multimodal texts (verbal, auditory and/or visual) which involve the imagination of the receiver: comics and graphic novels, advertisements, graffiti, song lyrics, films, video clips, blogs, v-logs, hyperfiction .... Such texts are rich in **cultural content, often metaphorically expressed**. To make sense of the text, readers need to adapt their knowledge of the world to the new knowledge and values expressed in it. English, as an international language, can open doors into a wide range of cultures that express themselves in English as their mother tongue, as a second language or as a lingua franca. A whole world of multicultural texts is at our disposal.

We can contribute to intercultural awareness by **putting representational texts from different cultures in contact**, making sure texts which may be representative of students' identities are part of the selection, perhaps in the students' mother tongue. The varieties of English used in texts from different contexts can encourage reflection on the role of English as an international language and develop awareness of the cultural and linguistic diversity of 'world Englishes' (Ferradas 2010).

Personal response and reflection based on comparison can be encouraged by means of **'textual intervention activities'** (Pope 1998) that invite students to adapt the text, change it and extend it creatively. The silences in the text (information and opinion gaps) are left for readers to fill in with their own reading.

### **Some suggestions for textual intervention:**

- Write a missing scene or dialogue
- Change the point of view
- Imagine a character's thoughts
- Dramatise what is told, narrate what is communicated through dialogue
- Illustrate
- Try the "what if...?" question
- Change the ending

### **Constructing identity**

In the words of Claire Kramsch, the central concern of foreign language acquisition is addressing "the problem of wanting to express one world view through the language normally used to express another society's world views" (Kramsch, 1993: 20).

If the variety of representational texts in intertextual (or rather, intermedial) dialogue includes texts from the students' own culture, discussing the way such texts relate to those from other cultures can help students find the language necessary to talk about themselves in English. In terms of intercultural competence, looking at themselves from outside may help them identify their own prejudices when relating to others.

### **Our proposal**

- aim at multimodal communication,
- let multicultural, intermedial texts come into dialogue to reflect on self as well as on otherness,
- focus on values,
- encourage the production of identity texts through textual intervention.

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