

Intercultural Skills for the EFL Classroom

by Yoshi Joanna Grote and Jennifer Jordan

As we well know, the vast majority of interactions in English are between nonnative speakers. Unlike many other languages, English is not simply the language of one (two or three) nation(s); it is a tool for communicating in a variety of different contexts which expose the speaker to a plethora of cultural backgrounds. Therefore, in the EFL classroom, teaching language and native-English cultures alone is no longer enough. Neither is supplementing our teaching with culture-specific readings any longer fulfilling all our students' needs. While reading about specific cultural practices may have some interest value, much more is necessary to help students interact with the myriad of different cultures they will encounter in their English-speaking lives.

Equipping our students with the ability to function effectively on the global stage should be an aspect of the EFL teacher's responsibility. What this means is providing our students with the facility to adjust to different cultural settings without having to study the specifics of each culture individually. One means of doing this is to provide students with the opportunity to experience cultural contact first hand in a nonthreatening environment.

The EFL classroom is the perfect place for this kind of cultural training for several reasons. First, English is being used as a world lingua franca (Graddol, 2006). Students are more likely to encounter new cultures in English than in other languages. Second, students are already operating outside the constraints and norms of their home cultures in the EFL classroom, making it easier for them to actively participate in certain tasks. One way to encourage intercultural learning without sacrificing English language teaching time is to use warm-ups, cool-downs, or supplementary options when touching upon culturally-related content. In this article, we introduce a few of our shortest and most basic ideas that have been tried and tested in our classrooms and that have also received positive feedback from others who have adapted them to their own contexts.

Most of these activities are best used with very little pre-explanation, but some postactivity discussion will be required to clarify the point. For most exercises, this can be accomplished through a brief gathering of students' reflections and a guided analysis of those responses. Although we are presenting these in their shortest form, all of these tasks are well suited to facilitating an extended discussion of intercultural topics. For each activity, we have briefly detailed the materials, purpose, method, and any extension options.

Proxemics Activity

Materials: None.

Purpose: To demonstrate that the size of our comfortable personal space bubbles is culturally determined, and to allow students to experience how it feels to be placed in a situation outside of their personal comfort zones. This activity can be used in conjunction with any warm-up/discussion activity.

Method: Have students stand a comfortable distance apart and give them a topic to discuss (or free talk). Explain to students that they should stay relatively still while discussing, especially without moving their feet. After a short time, ask one student to take one step closer to the other and continue the discussion. Make sure they understand it is important to stay planted in this position; otherwise, their discomfort will make them step back, even unconsciously. Finally, ask both students to take a large step back and continue the discussion. Finish with a plenary discussion about how they felt about the different discussion spaces.

Extension: Do the above while asking students to imagine they are in different relationships to each other (friends, strangers, couple, teacher-student, etc.) and have them discuss how this affects their personal space bubbles.

Cultural Maps

Materials: Paper and pens.

Purpose: To illustrate how culture is more than just nationality, and to encourage students to think about the composition of their own cultures and give them short presentation practice.

Method: First, initiate a brainstorm of cultures on the board. Explain that culture has many definitions but can be seen as a group with a shared set of behaviors. Start with the obvious, such as nationality and language, and elicit all the main players like religion, sexuality, age, gender, socioeconomic background, education, race, ethnicity, and so on. After you have a healthy number of ideas, encourage students to come up with subcultures for each (e.g., nationality–region, language–dialect, etc.). Once your board is flooded with ideas, ask students to draw their own cultural maps. They should do this by drawing circles for all the cultures they feel some sense of belonging to; the stronger their sense of belonging to a particular culture, the bigger the circle. Once complete, ask students to present and explain their cultural maps to their classmates.

Zero Context Activity

Materials: Cultural artifact flashcards (In Japan, we use pictures of things like *tatami*, *sashimi*, *macha*, *dango*, *kotatsu*, *okonomiyaki*, *geta*, *manga*, *soba*, *natto*, etc.) Alternatively, in a mixed-culture class, students could bring in their own cultural artifacts.

Purpose: To help students think about how they could explain items from their culture to someone of another culture, and to encourage or practice circumlocution and descriptive language use.

Method: Call on a student to help you demonstrate a zero-context description (thorough and with no prior cultural knowledge required) of a cultural artifact. Initiate a question and answer session with the student. An easy first example can be sashimi. Ask the student to explain sashimi to you while you feedback the image he or she is creating in your mind.

S: It is sliced, raw fish.

T: I see a dead fish that you have cut up.

S: No, it has no skin.
T: I see a skinned, dead fish that you have chopped up.
S: It is very clean, it has no bones.
T: It is clean but it is staring at me with its dead eyes.
S: It doesn't have any eyes.
etc.

After you have demonstrated the exercise, put students in groups of three to four and place the flashcards in a stack upside-down between them. The first student takes the first card from the top of the pile and describes it to the group. The group tries to a) feedback the image the student is creating and/or b) guess what it is.

Interruption Gaps

Materials: None.

Purpose: To help students learn interruption skills and become more comfortable with interrupting and being interrupted. Our Japanese students who return from overseas often report having had difficulties in entering conversations abroad. This is because the Japanese turn-taking gap is quite large with speakers generally waiting for one interlocutor to finish speaking before taking their turn.

Method: Before you begin, you may need to preteach some interruption skills/language depending on how adept your students already are at this. Put students in threes and give two of them a topic to discuss. Tell them that whenever you clap your hands, the third person, who is not speaking, must make an effort to appropriately interrupt the speaker, by asking a question, interjecting a personal experience, or commenting on what's been said. You may also want to focus a little on the body language that directly precedes an interruption.

In conclusion, we have found these activities, some of which are based on tried and true intercultural training activities, have been very effective with our EFL students in terms of increasing their general intercultural awareness and motivations to communicate on a global scale. We hope you enjoy implementing them in your classroom and always welcome any feedback you might have.

Reference

Graddol, D. (2006). *English next. Why global English may mean the end of 'English as a Foreign Language,'* London, England: British Council.

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