

Techniques and Activities for Teaching Culture

There is a great variety of techniques and activities developed for integrating culture into language teaching. Different scholars group them according to different principles (if any).

Stern (1992: 223-232) writes about *techniques* of culture teaching and presents them in eight groups according to, what he calls, different *approaches*. The latter include:

- ✓ creating an authentic classroom environment (techniques include, for example, displays and exhibitions of realia);
- ✓ providing cultural information (for example, cultural aside, culture capsule and culture cluster);
- ✓ cultural problem solving (for example, culture assimilator);
- ✓ behavioural and affective aspects (for example drama and mini-drama);
- ✓ cognitive approaches (for example student research);
- ✓ the role of literature and humanities (for example, literary readings and watching films);
- ✓ real-life exposure to the target culture (for example, visits to the class by native speakers, pen-pals and visits to other countries);
- ✓ making use of cultural community resources (for example, when a foreign language learning takes place in the target-language community, the everyday environment can be used as a resource).

Hughes' (1994: 167-168) list of *techniques* for teaching cultural awareness includes eight "vehicles" which he considers the most practical. Chastain (1988: 308-315) entitles the chapter where he describes methods of teaching culture *Modes of presenting culture*, using the terms *approach* and *technique* interchangeably. He makes a distinction between the in-class and out-of-class situations.

The following list of techniques and activities is compiled from various sources (given in brackets) and are mostly meant to be used in class.

Creating an authentic environment. Although listed under techniques by Chastain (1988: 313) and Stern (1992: 224), this might rather be called a setting for more memorable learning. Displays, posters, bulletin boards, maps and realia can create a visual and tangible presence of the other

culture, especially in the situation where language and culture are taught far away from the target country. Students can also make *culture wallcharts*. Hughes (1994: 168) calls this technique the *culture island*.

The cultural aside (Stern 1992: 224, Chastain 1988: 309, Henrichsen 1998) is an item of cultural information offered by the teacher when it arises in the text. It is often an unplanned, brief culture comment. (Nostrand (1974: 298) calls the technique an *incidental comment*). Its advantage is that it helps to create a cultural content for language items as well as helps learners to make mental associations similar to those that native speakers make. The disadvantage is that the cultural information presented to students is likely to be disordered and incomplete.

The slice-of-life technique (first suggested by Taylor in 1972; also referred to by Chastain 1988: 309-10, Stern 1992: 224) is a technique when the teacher chooses a small segment of life from the other culture and usually presents it to learners at the beginning of the class. This short input could be, for example, a song related to the topic or a recording of a news item. The advantage of the technique is that it both catches learners' attention and arouses their interest. It does not take up much of a valuable class time. As Chastain puts it: "the point is made with a minimum of comment and maximum of dispatch" (Chastain 1988:310).

The culture assimilator (Chastain 1988: 310, Stern 1992: 223, 226, Seelye 1993: 162-174, Henrichsen 1998, Tomalin and Stempleski 1993: 89) is a brief description of a critical incident of cross-cultural interaction that may be misinterpreted by students. Cultural assimilators were originally designed for preparing Peace Corp volunteers for life in a foreign environment (Stern 1992: 223). After reading the description of the incident, students are presented with four possible explanations, from which they are asked to select the correct one. Finally, students are given feedback why one explanation is right and the others wrong in the certain cultural context. Culture assimilators have several advantages over presenting cultural information through books. According to Seelye (1993: 163) they are fun to read and they involve the learner with a cross-cultural problem. He also claims that they have been more effective in controlled

experiments. Chastain (1988: 310) sees the main advantage of this type of activity as helping to create an insight into and tolerance of cultural diversity. On the other hand, it takes much time to prepare and requires “a high degree of familiarity with the culture”.

The culture capsule (first suggested by Taylor and Sorensen 1961; also referred to by Chastain 1988: 310, Stern 1992: 224-25, Seelye 1993: 174-177, Henrichsen 1998) is a brief description of one aspect of the other culture followed by a discussion of the contrasts between the learner’s and other cultures. Differently from the culture assimilator, where learners read the description, in this technique the teacher presents the information orally. It is also possible that students prepare a culture capsule at home and present it during class time. The oral presentation is often combined with realia and visuals, as well as with a set of questions to stimulate discussion. One capsule should not take up more than 10 minutes. The main advantage of using a culture capsule is its “compactness and practical manageable quality” (Stern 1992: 240). Another advantage is that learners become involved in the discussion and can consider the basic characteristics of their own culture (Chastain 1988:310).

The culture cluster (first suggested by Meade and Morain in 1973; also referred to by Chastain 1988: 310, Stern 1992: 225, Seelye 1993: 177-185, Henrichsen 1998) is a combination of conceptually related culture capsules. Two or more capsules which belong together can form a cluster. A cluster should be concluded by some sort of activity, foreexample a dramatisation and a role-play. Parts of a culture cluster can be presented in succeeding lessons. In the final lesson an activity is carried out where the set of capsules is integrated into a single sequence. Meade and Morrain (cited in Chastain 1988: 310) give an example of a French country wedding, which is divided into 4 capsules: (1) the civil ceremony, (2) the religious ceremony, (3) the wedding banquet, (4) acting out a country wedding. Teachers can develop culture clusters themselves. To start with they should think of “a slice of target life” (Seelye 1993: 178) and then work backwards to identify three or four components it contains. The advantage of a culture cluster according to Stern (1992:226) is that besides introducing different aspects of culture it “lends itself well to behavioural training.” Henrichsen also claims that culture capsules and clusters are good methods for giving students knowledge and some intellectual awareness of several cultural

aspects, but he warns that they generally do not cause much emotional empathy.

The audio-motor unit (Chastain 1988: 311, Stern 1992: 226, 241, Henrichsen 1998) is considered to be an extension of the *Total Physical Response* method. It was first developed to provide practical listening comprehension and to enliven the learning situation with humour. The teacher gives students a set of commands to which students respond by acting them out. The commands are arranged in an order that will cause students to learn a new cultural experience by performing it. Audio-motor units give knowledge and practice with correct behaviour but according to Henrichsen, they do not necessarily promote understanding or empathy.

The micrologue (Chastain 1988: 312) is a technique where culture is made the focus of language learning. The teacher chooses a cultural passage that can be read out in class. Students listen, answer the questions, give an oral summary and, finally, write the material as a dictation. According to Chastain, the advantage of this technique is that the teacher does not need to have any special cultural expertise and it takes only a small amount of time.

The cultoon (Chastain 1988: 312, Henrichsen 1998) is a technique which is like a visual culture assimilator. The teacher gives students a cartoon strip (usually four pictures) where some misunderstanding occurs. The situations are also described verbally by the teacher or by students who read the accompanying written descriptions. Students may be asked if they think the reactions of the characters in the cultoons seem appropriate or not and try to arrive at the correct interpretation. Cultoons generally promote understanding of cultural facts and some understanding, but they do not usually give real understanding of emotions involved in cultural misunderstandings.

The self-awareness technique (Chastain 1988: 311) serves as an aim to raise students' consciousness of basic beliefs that govern their values, attitudes and actions. Teachers may use sensitivity exercises, self-assessment questionnaires, problem-solving and checklists of value orientations. Chastain claims that the way people use the second language to express themselves reflects the way they organise reality and teachers can explore the language and culture connections that occur

in class.

The quiz (Cullen 2000) can be used to test materials that the teacher has previously taught, but it is also useful in learning new information. Cullen stresses that it is not important whether students get the right answer or not but, by predicting, they will become more interested in finding it out. The right answers can be given by the teacher, through reading, listening, or a video, after which extra information can be provided. Quizzes are a high-interest activity that keeps students involved.

The drama (dramatisation) (Stern 1992: 227, 241, Fleming 1998) has been widely used in teaching culture and is considered useful for clarifying cross-cultural misunderstandings. Byram and Fleming (1998: 143) claim that when drama is taught properly it is “an ideal context for exploration of cultural values, both one’s own and other people’s.” Drama involves learners in a role-play and simulation as well as encourages them to position themselves in the role of a member of the other culture. Dramatisation makes cultural differences vivid and memorable as drama mirrors reality. According to Fleming (1998: 152), one important ingredient for successful drama is the tension. Therefore, he suggests that for dramatisation such situations should be chosen where the tension derives from the different interpretations of the situation. On the other hand, drama takes quite a lot of time to prepare and requires great willingness from the students to participate.

The minidrama/miniskit (Chastain 1988: 310-311, Stern 1992: 227-228, Henrichsen 1998, Seelye 1993: 70-73) was first developed by social scientists for cross-cultural education. Minidrama is a series of skits or scenes (usually from three to five) of everyday life that illustrate culturally significant behaviour. Often the scenes contain examples of miscommunication. The skit is read, viewed on a video or acted out. Each skit is followed by a discussion. Seelye (1993: 71) stresses that the teacher has to “establish a non-judgemental atmosphere” during the discussion. It is also important for the teacher to use the “right” questions. Open-ended questions should rather be used than *yes/no* questions. For example the question *What are your impressions of the scene?* should be preferred to the question *Is there conflict in this scene?* Teachers can lead the discussion further using “neutral probes” like *I see,*

Very interesting, and *Go on*. The main aim of a minidrama is to present a problem-situation as well as to promote knowledge and understanding. Mini-dramas work best if they deal with highly emotional issues.

Critical incidents/Problem solving (Chastain 1988: 311, Henrichsen 1998, Stern 1992: 226) are sometimes identified with *culture assimilators* but, according to Henrichsen there are a couple of differences between the two methods. Critical incidents are descriptions of incidents or situations which demand that a participant makes some kind of decision. Most of the situations could happen to any individual and they do not require intercultural interaction as culture assimilators do. Students usually read the incident independently and make individual decisions. Then they are put into small groups to discuss their findings. Next, a classroom discussion follows where students try to give reasons behind the decisions. Finally, students are given the opportunity to see how their decision and reasoning compare and contrast with the decisions and reasoning of native members of the target culture. As individual critical incidents do not require much time, Henrichsen suggests the teacher presents more than one critical incident at a time. Teachers can find critical incidents or problems from advice columns in newspapers or magazines together with information about what native speakers would do and why. When solving critical incidents students will get emotionally involved in the cultural issue. Discussions about what native English speakers would do also promote intellectual understanding of the issues and give learners basic knowledge about the target culture.

Student research (Stern 1992: 229, Seelye 1993: 149-159, Cullen 2000) is considered one of the most powerful tools that can be used with more advanced students because it combines their interests with the classroom activities. For a start, the teacher might ask learners to search in the Internet or library and find information on any aspect of the target culture that interests them. In the following class, learners explain to their group what they have found out and answer any questions about it. This can lead to poster-sessions or longer projects. For some learners, it can lead to a long-term interest in the target-culture, for example writing a course paper. Research techniques enable learners to find out things for themselves and “approach the new society with an open mind” (Stern 1992: 229). Seelye adds that research skills are the ones that stay with a student after he or she leaves school. Also, he claims that

they are easy to develop as there are “so many founts of knowledge subject to rational inquiry.” His ‘founts’ include books, newspapers, magazines, other printed materials, films, recordings, pictures, other people, and personal experience.

The WebQuest (Brabbs 2002: 39-41) is an inquiry-oriented activity in which most or all of the information used by learners is drawn from the Internet. According to March (1998), WebQuests were designed to use learners’ time well, to focus on using information rather than looking for it, and to support learners’ thinking at the levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. The strategy was developed in 1995 by Bernie Dodge from San Diego State University to help teachers integrate the power of the World Wide Web with student learning. A traditional WebQuest consists of the following parts: *the introduction, task, process/steps, resources, evaluation/assessment, and conclusion or reflection*. The *introduction* introduces students to the task and captures their attention. The *task* is a description of what learners are to accomplish by the end of the WebQuest. *The process* part includes several *steps* through which students locate, synthesise and analyse information to complete the task. The steps support student learning and may use questions and suggest research strategies. *Resources* may be both web-based and print- based but the majority of resources are usually found on the Internet. Each WebQuest has an *assessment* tool that sets the criteria for achievement of the outcomes. These tools are known as rubrics. *Conclusion/reflection* of the WebQuest provides an opportunity for students to apply the knowledge they have gained from the task to a new situation. Brabbs (ibid.: 41) lists nine advantages of using the WebQuests. The most important could be that it saves the teachers’ time and that it helps learners to find material from the huge range of topics.

The CultureQuest is another web-based activity. It was created at the Center for School Development of the School of Education at The City College of the City University of New York. The CultureQuest involves students in inquiry-based classroom projects, the aim of which is to explore other peoples and cultures. It seeks to promote better understanding and appreciation of other cultures, strengthen inquiry, research and literacy skills and provide

students with technology skills. The result of a completed Culture Quest is a website. The authors claim that the basic values of the Culture Quest are: learner-centred, constructivist, project-based and authentic.

The given list of methods and techniques does not pretend to be exhaustive. Which method or technique to use depends on many factors. Teachers might find it worthwhile to consider Brown's checklist for culturally appropriate techniques. Brown (2000: 202) suggests that when choosing an appropriate technique the teacher should consider the following:

1. Does the technique recognise the value and belief systems that are presumed to be part of the culture(s) of students?
2. Does the technique refrain from any demeaning stereotypes of any culture, including the culture(s) of students?
3. Does the technique refrain from any possible devaluing of student's native languages(s)?
4. Does the technique recognise varying willingness of students to participate openly due to factors of collectivism/individualism and power distance?
5. If the technique requires students to go beyond the comfort zone of uncertainty avoidance in their culture(s), does it do so emphatically and tactfully?
6. Is the technique sensitive to the perceived roles of males and females in the culture(s) of students?
7. Does the technique sufficiently connect specific language features (e.g., grammatical categories, lexicon, discourse) to cultural ways of thinking feeling and acting?
8. Does the technique in some ways draw on the potentially rich background experiences of students, including their experiences in other cultures?

To sum up, a great variety of techniques, ranging from short activities to more time-consuming student research and internet-based activities, allow teachers to bring some element of culture into almost every language class. Using them effectively requires that teachers set clear aims as well as consider what to teach to who and when. If teachers constantly monitor their classes and adjust to what they do, there is a really good chance that the methods and techniques they use will be the best (Harmer 2001: 97).