

The Critical Eye : Refining Observational Skills for Culture Study

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Abstract

This paper was presented at three international conferences in Tokyo, Seoul, and New York in 1998 and 1999. It introduces three sequential classroom activities for exploring basic concepts of cultural awareness learning at the beginning of a course in Cultural Awareness or Language and Culture. The activities can also form part of a pre-departure orientation program for overseas study. They are intended to help students with lower language proficiency gain an awareness of the influence of perception on cultural assumptions and interpretations, to improve their linguistic skills in objective description and categorization of information, and to distinguish between facts and opinions (including stereotyping).

The first activity is intended to stimulate awareness of individual perception. Participants brainstorm lists of defining features of members of a group of related objects (semantic feature analysis). Next, they compare/contrast their lists with representative samples of the real objects, in the process discovering how their categories fail to account for anomalies. Focusing attention on assumptions vs objective reality, this activity provides a lead-in to the second activity.

The subsequent activity is intended to introduce the concepts of objective description and symbolism. Students attempt to describe as accurately as possible each member of a set of *cultural artefacts* (in this case, monetary currencies) and find evidence of cultural symbols and the values they represent.

Next, students observe three imaginary cultures, sourced from a short, almost dialogue-free animated movie (*The Rainbow War*). They are divided into three groups, each of which takes descriptive notes of one culture in terms of cultural categories: art, warfare, city design, tools & artefacts. Following this, participants discuss possible interpretations of the patterns of behaviour and cultural objects noted. In the final step, individuals are asked to choose the culture which they

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most naturally empathize with and discuss their reactions to the other cultures. Thus, this activity acts as a dramatic introduction to the D-I-E (Describe - Interpret - Evaluate) anthropological/cultural analysis technique.

By using the examination of common cultural objects and video as means to introduce experiential learning techniques common in simulations such as *The Albatross*, this paper argues such indirect exposure is less intimidating at initial stages of culture and language learning than the use of simulation.

Theoretical Ground : Principles of Cultural Awareness

As a high school teacher in Canada during the 1970s, I was part of a provincial Task Force on Racism whose goal was to design educational materials for use in the public school system. The intention was to reduce racial problems experienced by minority groups in British Columbian schools through exposure to relevant classroom activities. Initially, the task force materials failed : instead of reducing racial tensions, these increased. This occurred because the approach was too insensitive, looking at local racism directly instead of by analogy. Students, and their parents, often became angry - saying that they were not themselves racist or that their prejudices were reasonable because the local minority groups acted poorly in some way. In effect, the racism issue could not be addressed easily by talking about local examples because this approach was too emotional. So gradually educational materials were developed that looked at racism in other regions of the world. Because they did not relate so directly to the local situation, students were able to discuss the materials without emotional overreactions.

Racism as an issue occurs when two or more cultures interact. This problem is of course the negative side of intercultural contact. At the start of a new millennium characterized by transparent national boundaries and the emergence of global culture, it is imperative that students gain awareness, skill, and experience for intercultural communication. Since there can be little communication (or the wrong kind) if contact primarily produces conflict, designers of educational materials and programs can learn a valuable lesson from the Canadian experience just noted. It is that materials development needs to be sensitive and gradual, moving from the abstract to the specific, the indirect to the direct.

Underlying the study of culture, for its own sake or in tandem with language study, there are several important principles of cultural understanding. Without prior and sufficient learning of these principles, most people will be unable to

appreciate or understand other cultures as well as they should. Thus, it is imperative that teachers prepare their students through appropriate awareness activities. Even culturally or linguistically “naïve” students can be introduced to the following principles, given suitable classroom methodologies :

- Because of culture, humans have different values and perceptions of the world.
- Humans are usually bound and bounded by their culture.
- Humans often respond to cultural and ethnic differences in harmful ways.
- There is much diversity within each cultural group.
- Despite differences, there are also many cultural universals or parallels.
- Gaining cultural awareness and sensitivity is a learning process.
- The first step in the cultural learning process is objective observation.

Goals and Teaching Principles

The goals for learning are naturally dependent on the type of course of study. However, for the activities described in this paper, there are four basic goals :

1. to improve linguistic skills in description and categorization
2. to improve the ability to distinguish fact and opinion
3. to gain an awareness of the interconnection of culture and perception
4. to introduce the notions of cultural diversity and universality

Once students are familiarized with these goals, and have begun to work with relevant teaching materials, they will be on the road to cultural awareness. Yet, as the goals indicate, it is necessary to sharpen one’s observational skills if one is truly able to understand and be objective.

However, students cannot learn things easily that appear in overwhelmingly challenging forms. It is a rule of thumb for most lessons, especially those in a foreign language, that most of the content should already be unknown - even if it is looked at from a new point of view. The rule can be called *Known + One*, meaning that only one new concept should be introduced at a time. The bottom line is that a gradual increase of challenge, complexity, vocabulary, and so on is better than a bombardment of difficult concepts.

The three learning activities described here are designed to fit the teaching principles in the box below. It is felt that by following these principles, the teacher can keep students focused on the learning goals, rather than struggling just to make sense of the content.

Teaching Principles

- keep it simple and concrete
- avoid excessive language demands
- avoid directly personal content (keep it non-threatening)
- make it interesting & enjoyable
- provide data for student discovery (support investigation, don't preach)

Sequence of Learning Activities

To prepare students for the examination of other cultures, it is important for them to first understand the interactive nature of perception. Specifically, they need to realize that perception is affected by the interface of background experience and observation. One's understanding of observed phenomena is interpreted partly by the application of one's earlier experiences with these or similar phenomena.

For example, many people may be repelled at the things considered food in another culture. Perhaps Japanese people would be horrified to learn that my students in Zimbabwe, when asked to name something they thought must be the worst food in the world, universally said *crabs*. On the other hand, my Japanese students are appalled at the idea of eating *grubs* or *worms*, which many Zimbabweans would find perfectly acceptable food. Lack of experience with these forms of food or perhaps exposure only through film may have influenced their emotional reactions.

Activity 1: *The Cups*

Since students seldom are aware that perception can be misleading, it is useful to begin a look at other cultures with a simple and concrete perceptual exercise. *The Cups*, described in detail in Appendix 1, is an example. In this exercise, we start with the examination of a concept that at first glance appears obvious: the description of drinking containers. Students are asked: *What is a cup? What is a glass? What is a mug? How can we describe them accurately?*

When these questions are posed, students are challenged to identify the distinguishing features of what seems at first glance very simple. By creating a list of descriptive features, students are attempting to *define* a concept. Yet as they list the features and share their ideas with each other, they discover that there are differences of opinion, as well as ideas that they have not themselves thought of. They note a

much greater variation in description than they initially expect: some cups have handles while others do not, glasses usually but not always hold cold liquids, mugs are more similar to cups than glasses, and so on. In their attempts to define each concept, they are basically stating their perception of each item.

However, in the second stage of the activity, they physically examine a group of such containers and are asked to categorize each as a cup, glass, or mug. Inevitably, some containers are perceived differently by different students. In addition, some containers defy precise categorization; for instance, they may have multiple uses that overlap categorical functions.

By looking at concrete objects, seemingly unrelated to cultural issues, students can be introduced to several key principles of culture study. Specifically, they can learn:

1. Categories and rules are arbitrary, flexible, and often vague.
2. Faced with something unknown, people tend to “pigeonhole:” they try to fit the unknown into commonly known categories.
3. Perceptions differ, due to the influence of a variety of factors including cultural background, personality, and personal experience.
4. People tend to react to uncertainty in emotional ways (e.g., frustration).

In the feedback discussions, students often argue about individual containers. They can easily understand that if such a simple problem as categorizing drinking containers is difficult, it is reasonable to expect cross-cultural experiences to be much more complex. Thus, this activity can act as a good illustration of the interrelationship of observation and experience on perception. In addition, since it looks at concrete objects rather than cultures, there is no danger of serious emotional reactions.

Activity 2: *Currencies*

In order to evaluate cultural experiences, it is first necessary to develop skills in objectivity. That is to say, accurate description and categorization of observed objects and behaviours need to precede interpretation. Such description is not as easy as one may imagine. For example, someone you describe as “tall” may not be considered tall by another person: it is at least partly a subjective adjective. On the other hand, if you say someone is “180 cm. tall” you are being objective.

In the activity *Currencies* (Appendix 2), students are given paper money from another country. They are first asked to make notes only describing precisely what

they see on the bills. In the reporting stage that follows, the teacher points out times when their descriptions become interpretations. When they say something like “There is a woman wearing some kind of robe with a fur collar,” they are being objective. However, if they say “We think she is a queen,” they begin to interpret their observations.

After writing and sharing their descriptions, they are asked to make cultural interpretations with the questions: *What do you think each image symbolizes? What are the culture’s values?* The teacher can model some interpretations using the Japanese thousand yen note:

The twin cranes have their heads raised towards the sky or heaven. Perhaps this suggests the spiritual strength of the nation. The choice of these cranes is important, since these birds mate for life. This may show a value or respect for loyalty and love of the family...

Through the examination of the currencies of other nations, students can get insights into their cultural thinking, heroes, and values. In addition, they can learn that cultures share universal values but may rank them differently in importance. This exercise also illustrates the value of using one’s eyes carefully: simple things like money can reveal much about culture. The implication of this is that cultural experiences need to be observed and participated in with “eyes wide open.” Even the sharing of interpretations about the currencies shows the value of testing hypotheses. In particular, this activity should show the students that accurate observation needs to precede judgement.

Activity 3: *The Rainbow War*

In the first two activities, students are introduced to cultural concepts through analyses of cultural artefacts. In addition to the avoidance of emotion-laden content, these activities reduce excessive language demands for students whose oral communication skills in English may be limited. The self-discovery methodology and group-oriented nature of the activity designs also tend to interest students: they enjoy sharing and comparing their ideas and opinions.

Having prepared students for more direct examination of cultures by exposing them to notions of perception, objective description, and applied interpretation, they may now be ready to study cultures as individual units. However, there is still the danger of misinterpretation due to preconceived ideas and stereotyping. Stu-

dents may have stereotypes of other cultures due to individual experiences and, more often, from the influence of movies and other mass media. These preconceived ideas (such as that “all Americans are talkative”) may interfere with their ability to describe and interpret behaviours accurately and fairly.

In many Culture Awareness courses, teachers attempt to avoid the above problem by using materials about cultures that are not well-known or are far away in distance. For instance, it is common to study isolated indigenous or tribal cultures such as the Bushmen of South Africa. However, it is my contention that before students look at real cultures they should study completely imaginary ones. Video clips from SF movies or TV programs such as the *Star Trek* series can provide suitable content for such an approach.

The Canadian animated film *The Rainbow War* is clearly ideal for this purpose, since it is an anthropological narrative about three cultures coming into contact for the first time. Moreover, it is almost free of any dialogue, so there is little difficulty in understanding even by students of low English proficiency.

As the detailed description of the classroom procedures in Appendix 3 explains, students follow a three-step process to examine each culture. This process parallels a technique common to anthropological field work called D-I-E (*Describe - Interpret - Evaluate*). In the descriptive stage, they must make notes of what they objectively observe. In the interpretation stage, they try to explain observed behaviours and objects, as well as attempt to check their hypotheses in discussion with others. In the final evaluation stage, they make personal judgements and explain their reactions to what they have observed and interpreted. These three stages may be clarified with questions :

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|----------------|--|
| Description | <i>What do you see and hear? What are people wearing? What are they doing?</i> |
| Interpretation | <i>What do these actions and objects tell you about cultural thinking? Why are people doing these things? What do the clothes and other cultural objects show about the values of the society?</i> |
| Evaluation | <i>How do these behaviours make you feel? Would you be comfortable doing them yourself? What do you like or dislike? Why?</i> |

As they watch the film, students must observe carefully one of the cultures portrayed in the film. Afterwards, they describe it as precisely as possible, making notes on the behaviours, types of tools, building designs, costumes, and so on. Next they attempt to interpret the symbols and values shown by these objects. Finally,

they compare the three cultures and discuss which they would prefer to live in most.

Three examples of real student responses to these stages of the lesson are shown below. (Appendix 3 includes a summary of some of the cultural interpretations possible from this film study.)

Description: *They use red paint to fight. They use a house paint brush.*

Interpretation: *The yellow army fights best. They look better-trained. Maybe they are more aggressive.*

Evaluation: *I want to live on the blue world. It's peaceful. They have the best fashions.*

One of the central reasons for using a film such as *The Rainbow War* for culture study is that it is ideal for showing students how to make culturally sensitive judgements. In the feedback sessions, the teacher may ask students to imagine what they would say if they were one of the characters. For example, in one scene, the king of the blue nation offers the queen of the yellow nation various objects as gifts. She refuses to accept them and makes threatening gestures. This scene could easily be scripted and role played by the students. As they carry out such acting, they effectively "step into the shoes" of another culture, the most effective way to learn to appreciate any other culture.

Conclusion

It is one of the fundamental purposes of overseas travel to learn and come to appreciate other cultures. You learn much more by immersing yourself inside another culture than merely reading a book. But before you can immerse yourself you need to "get your feet wet," so to speak; otherwise, the cold water may shock you. So it is vital that you have a chance to experience a culture gradually and inside the safety net of the classroom. A classroom is not a foreign culture, yet is a microculture of its own. Its learning activities can mirror the experience of visiting a foreign culture, provided they do not create negative emotional reactions nor focus on stereotypical behaviours.

The activities described in this paper should be viewed as merely samples of appropriate teaching ideas. There are numerous films that would serve the goals and follow the teaching principles described here. Other cultural artefacts such as postage stamps would serve equally well for description and interpretation practice.

The most important aspect of real learning is that it is a journey of self-

discovery. Hence, teachers have an opportunity - in fact, an obligation - to create a learning environment where such a journey starts. But truthfully, designing a suitable educational program is only the first step ; the rest is up to the student.

Appendix 1

Drinking Containers

1. Put the following table on the board and ask students in small groups to think of ways to describe or define each : CUP GLASS MUG
(If your class is unlikely to know what a mug is, use only the other two categories.)
2. After several minutes, students list their ideas on the board under each category.
3. Now place 8~10 drinking containers on a table and ask students individually to try to match them to the correct term from the board. Then have them discuss their matches in groups.
4. After a few minutes, discuss with the class the problems they had in categorizing each object.
5. Finally, review the main point of the activity. Point out that the problem was primarily because some objects didn't match the features perceived to define each term. Cultures in many respects are like those objects - they often don't fit clear categories. Moreover, what we think something is (our *perceptions* of the object) don't always match reality. This may be because we have been taught to believe certain information (*preconditioning*) that is not always true. We may also, depending on our culture, have different ideas of what something we all observe actually is or means. For example, a member of one culture might call one object a "cup" while another calls it a "glass."

drinking containers - descriptions

CUP	GLASS	MUG
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Appendix 2

Currencies

1. Explain the meaning of the term cultural symbol (= a concrete object used to represent an abstract cultural value).
2. Use the national flag as an example. Tell the students to describe precisely what the flag looks like (from memory). Then challenge them to explain what each image in the flag represents. If they are unable to, explain them yourself with questions.
e.g., What does the Japanese flag look like?
There is a red circle in the middle on a white background.
What does the circle represent (mean)?
It is the rising sun. The nation is one ; unified like a circle.
Why is it red?
The sacred colour of Buddhism and the imperial colour.

Why is the background white?

The colour of snow and purity.

3. Give a currency bill from a foreign country to each pair of students and ask them to make notes to complete the chart :

CURRENCY	AMOUNT	DESCRIPTION	SYMBOLS

4. Have each pair report orally to the class about what their currency bill shows.
5. Point out that the symbols show some of the things that are highly valued by a society. For example, a society's heroes depicted on the currency may be musicians and artists, revolutionaries or politicians, depending on what is valued most. Buildings may be classical or modern, depending on which outlook is more significant culturally. In addition, for some countries it is possible to identify the order of importance of various symbols by the denomination : the largest bills may have the most important symbols (and their underlying values).

Appendix 3

The Rainbow War

1. Introduce the film : students will observe three imaginary cultures when they first make contact with each other. They are required to describe as accurately as possible one of the cultures. Afterwards, they analyse the descriptions and try to interpret the cultural meanings of what they have observed and described.
2. Divide the class into three groups and assign a different culture to each. Give each student a copy of the table for making notes.
3. Play the start of the film until the introductory dialogue is finished (the dialogue explains the attitude of each culture to its colour - which is also a summary of its most basic value system).
4. After stopping the tape, review orally with each group what they have observed so far. Try to get them to make accurate statements : *There was a Everything was coloured*
5. Play the film, stopping periodically for students to add notes and confer. You may wish to review different categories one by one : e.g., *In the next viewing, focus your notes on the weapons. Describe all the weapons that you see.* Student groups then confer, followed with a report to the class. Alternatively, you can play the film through once, having students followup with note-sharing in groups. Afterwards you play it again (or in a subsequent lesson) to complete notes and discuss as a whole class.
6. The key to the success of this activity is to complete the description stage fully before starting the interpretation stage. Students will probably have incomplete notes, so it is important to question them to draw out full descriptions. For example, they may say that their group used a "brush" as a weapon, so you need to ask them, *What kind of brush? How did they fight with it? Individually? In formation? Under orders?*
7. The interpretation stage is best done initially by student groups in discussion, followed by oral reports. You should then provide any missing conclusions by careful questioning

(mainly of behaviour): e.g., *What did the blue leader do when he first met the yellow queen?* (He tried to trade.) *What did he offer in trade?* (Beads, female garments, etc.) *Why do you think he offered them?* (He didn't want to fight. He valued wealth and beauty more than power.) *Why do you think the yellow leader refused?* (She didn't respect the offerings. She preferred power.)

8. Finally, you discuss and explain the message in the plot: although there were many differences in culture, they eventually learned that working together and respecting one another was more effective than fighting. Moreover, they found out that they shared certain values (symbolized by the colour green and its bridging of the three cultures).

Rationale : Using an animated, allegorical film has the advantage of avoiding talking about real countries (wherein students already may have some preconceived notions). At the same time, the simplicity of plot and language makes the moral lesson(s) very accessible. It makes an easy introduction to the principles of cultural awareness. Following such a film (numerous others would also be suitable), the teacher might proceed to viewing excerpts from films about real cultures that are likely to be unknown to the students and atypical culturally (e.g., the Bushmen in *The Gods Must Be Crazy* or the Amish in *Witness*). Only after these non-threatening sources of data have been studied are the students likely to be ready to examine more personally relevant cultural analyses.

Other Teaching Ideas :

1. Listening Dictation : students have to listen and write down the three mottos or explanations of attitudes to the colours (at the beginning of the film).
2. Role Play : students write down what they think the main characters are saying to each other during the various scenes.
3. Graphic Cultural Analysis : students prepare a Venn diagram to take notes about the three cultures
4. Narration & Description (oral/written) : Students recount the plot aloud or in written paragraphs. Students use the tabled notes as descriptive outlines and then write descriptive paragraphs.
5. Evaluation Stage : Students go beyond the description - interpretation stage, and discuss their own impressions of the three cultures: e.g.,
Which society do you like the best? Why?
Rank all the values represented by the three cultures in order (from most to least important) according to your own feelings. Discuss your ranking with two partners.
What real countries do you think are most like each of the three imaginary ones in the film? Why?

Cultural Interpretations :

Blue Values beauty & tradition (personal and environment aesthetic; the arts)
 politeness (refined manners)
 trade & ownership
 open (excitement at seeing yellow flyer; city design indefensible)
 status (Motto : Anyone who was anyone loved blue.)

- innovation & creativity (invention of a flying machine)
 - adaptability & change (attempts to offer different trade goods, adaptation of a flying machine)
 - unmilitaristic (ill-trained & equipped soldiers)
- Symbols

 - blue - muted, cool tone = sophistication
 - the sea = travel, trade, flexibility (fluid), change
 - bubble - transparency, fragile, circular = delicacy, beauty, changing, frivolity
- Red

 - Values

 - defense & isolationism (city designed like a submarine; military fashion)
 - trust (of the group; Motto: You could trust red.)
 - family & home (cultivation of flowers, protection of the leader's daughter)
 - technology (for weapons)
 - group strength (weapons blunt and handled by groups)
 - practicality (tools for perceived needs)
 - Symbols

 - red rose - beautiful but thorny = defensive
 - red heart - blood = defence; love of family
- Yellow

 - Values

 - power & control (dominant queen; use of prisoners)
 - dominance & aggression (invasion of red culture)
 - technology & innovation (sophisticated weaponry)
 - mass education (schools)
 - modernism (space-age clothing; angular city design)
 - mass production & efficiency (flying machine factory)
 - discipline & punishment (guards & whips; military style)
 - Symbols

 - lightning bolt- speed + power
 - yellow - colour of a beehive (controlled, efficient hierarchical society)

the rainbow war

colour -	description	symbols	values
city design			
fashion			
art			
weapons & war			
tools & artefacts			
behaviors & actions			