Raising Self-Awareness and Developing Intercultural Competence by Activating Personal Filters

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Abstract: All individuals are fitted with filters which affect their experience of the world and which depend on various factors, including personal traits and cultural influences. Language is a reflection of the self, and of the culture and people it belongs to, thus when learning a new language each individual is approaching a different identity and culture with personal filters which act on the learning process. Learning involves approaching something new and inevitably leads to some change, which may occur without conscious awareness but is affected by the individual's attitude towards novelty and diversity.

This joint project involved learners of English (Parma University) and of Italian (University of Salzburg) as L2, and aimed at indirectly testing these filters. The objectives were to verify if their filters are subtly expressed in their way of seeing themselves, their own language and culture, and the 'other' language and culture, and also raise their awareness of them. This hopefully is a stepping stone towards discovering aspects of their personality, developing sensitivity to differences and recognizing factors to be exploited to become more efficient learners.

Key words: awareness, intercultural competence, personal filters

Abstrakt: Jedes Individuum nähert sich – beim Erwerben einer neuen Sprache – einer anderen Identität und Kultur mit persönlichen Wahrnehmungsfiltern.

Studierende des Englischen (L2) in Parma sowie des Italienischen (L2) in Salzburg nahmen an einem Projekt teil, dessen Ziel war es, die Auswirkungen der persönlichen Filter in der Selbstwahrnehmung, in der Wahrnehmung der eigenen Sprache und Kultur, sowie der fremden Sprache und Kultur bewusst zu machen.

Schlüsselwörter: Wahrnehmung, interkulturelle Kompetenz, persönliche Wahrnehmungsfilter

Abstrakt: Každý jednotlivec je vybaven tzv. filtry, které ovlivňují jeho vnímání světa, závisejí na jeho zkušenostech, povahových rysech a kulturních vlivech. Jazyk je odrazem našeho "já", kultury a lidí, kterým patří. Při studiu nového jazyka tedy každý jednotlivec přistupuje k odlišné identitě a kultuře s osobními filtry, které působí na studijní proces. Studium zahrnuje přiblížení se něčemu novému a nevyhnutelně vede k určité změně, která může nastat nevědomky, ale je ovlivněna postojem jednotlivce k novému a různorodému.

Společný projekt univerzit v Parmě a v Salzburgu nepřímo testoval filtry studentů angličtiny a italštiny jako druhého jazyka. Záměrem bylo ověřit, zda jsou filtry studentů skrytě vyjádřeny ve způsobu, jakým vidí sebe, svůj vlastní jazyk a kulturu a ten "druhý" jazyk a kulturu, a také zvýšit jejich povědomí o nich. Doufejme, že to je první krok k odhalení stránek jejich osobnosti, rozvoji vnímavosti k rozdílům a rozpoznání faktorů, které lze využít k tomu, aby se jejich studium zefektivnilo.

The present paper describes the development of a joint project which was first presented at the conference on 'Multilingualism – A Challenge for Science and Education: Research, Development and Practice', held in Salzburg (Austria) on 6–7 November 2009[1]. In carrying out the activities outlined, principles from Neuro-Linguistic Programming and the theory of Multiple Intelligences were applied to learning a foreign language and culture with the aim of raising both the teacher's and the learners' awareness of their personal filters, reflecting on the way these filters affect each individual's perception of their 'self', of their own language and culture, and of the 'other' language and culture, and ultimately developing sensitivity to differences as a gateway to intercultural competence. At the same time learners discovered new aspects of their identity and personality, and were able to recognize what learning approach benefits them as a step to becoming more effective and more self-sufficient in the learning process.

1   Personal filters in action

Learning involves comprehension of unfamiliar input from the external world and its transformation into familiar, internal and potentially usable intake (Willing, 1989). Each individual has a specific way of learning – this is a reflection of their way of experiencing things. The fact that things are perceived in different ways and that different details are focused on affects a person's ideas and thoughts, including their opinion of oneself as an individual and as a representative of their own language, people, and culture, but also their opinions and feelings towards what is new and what they (decide to) learn. Each individual is fitted with a set of filters which influence their perceptions and consequently their conceptions of the world (Utley, 2004): these filters delimit what stimuli a person will pay attention to and the way s/he may (choose to) interpret them. However, learning, or more broadly, approaching something new inevitably involves some kind of change: that which was not part of the person is assimilated and integrated with other resources, and becomes part of the 'self' (Willing, 1989). Much of the learning process in the full sense of the term takes place without conscious awareness (Willing, 1989), and the change an individual undergoes is often unconscious, yet it is affected by, and at the same time acts on, their attitude towards novelty and diversity.

According to Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), individuals perceive the world and therefore learn through their senses; this sensory information is translated into thought processes and transformed into meanings, beliefs and expectations, which in turn affect the emotions and behaviour of the person, and language is used to conceptualize and communicate experiences as they are mentally coded through internal processes and strategies (Satrajit, 2010). The way this is done varies from individual to individual, and this different perception, and consequently the attention to dif-

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[1] http://www.uni-salzburg.at/index.php?id=30455 [07.04.2015].

ferent details, act as filters on what is taken in (Baker/Rinvolucri, 2005). The input received from the environment is therefore interpreted and in some way 'distorted' also on the basis of what is already present in one's mind. Sensory acuity is one of the pillars of NLP, and includes channels which are visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and kinaesthetic (i.e. outer and inner movement, thus motion and emotion).

The theory of multiple intelligences (MIs) developed by Howard in 1983[2] also focuses on individual ways of making sense of the world and its stimuli, and consequently reacting to them. The notion of one single intelligence has been replaced by the concept of several relatively mutually independent intelligences existing in each individual, with different ones being used simultaneously most of the time. However, in each person some intelligences tend to be more dominant than others and may also develop, be trained and strengthened over time (Mariani/Pozzo, 2002). The different intelligences refer to different abilities (Nicolini, 1995; Puchta/Rinvolucri, 2005; Volterrani, 2007), i.e. very briefly:

- Linguistic intelligence: ability to use words, both written and oral.
- Logical/Mathematical intelligence: ability to discover patterns and connections, solve problems, analyse situations linearly, plan, prioritize and organize.
- Musical/Rhythmic intelligence: ability to detect sound patterns, reproduce sounds, recognize intonation.
- Visual/Spatial intelligence: ability to relate to space, and create and understand images (including mental images).
- Bodily/kinaesthetic intelligence: ability to coordinate and use one's body.
- Interpersonal intelligence: ability to relate to and understand other people.
- Intrapersonal intelligence: ability to look into oneself and understand one's feelings, learn from mistakes, exercise self-control.
- Naturalistic intelligence: ability to be instinctively in relationship with nature.
- Existential/Spiritual intelligence: ability to reflect on ultimate issues.

Of the intelligences above, the first five have their own codes: the alphabet, words, punctuation, ideograms, numbers, mathematical symbols, musical scores, phonetic symbols, diagrams, charts, graphs, pictures, shapes, sign language, miming, gestures, etc., whilst the final four need the systems adopted by the others to express themselves (Puchta/Rinvolucri, 2005). Moreover, the linguistic, bodily/ kinaesthetic and interpersonal intelligences relate to interactive skills, whilst the visual/spatial, intrapersonal and existential/spiritual intelligences relate to introspective skills; finally, the logical/mathematical, musical/rhythmic and naturalistic intelligences refer to analytical skills (Volterrani, 2007).

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[2] Cf. also Gardner's official website http://multipleintelligencesoasis.org/ [13.04.2015].

2 Identity, language learning and intercultural competence

As teachers of a foreign language we were interested in how all this is linked to both teaching and learning another language (L2/Ln), and to approaching the culture (C2/Cn) which is expressed by it. The connection between language, culture and identity has long been known. Migration and mobility have proven that multiculturalism is now an established fact of life, so much so that the EU Commission designated 2008 as the year of Intercultural Dialogue. Although the changes they bring about are undoubtedly enriching for society, they also pose challenges related to integration. It is clearly the responsibility of educators to ensure that the young people of today in multicultural Europe are prepared to meet these challenges (Banzato/Dalziel, 2008; Verdooren, 2014), as a lack of skill which prevents from interacting according to the norms of an Ln community can be costly and even result in lost opportunities for professional, academic, economic advancement, or social relationships. The Bologna Agreement in 1999[3] stressed the role of universities and institutions involved in higher education in preparing internationally minded, interculturally trained, multilingual graduates able to operate in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic contexts. This declaration is a commitment of each country to reform its higher education to reach convergence at a European level to face issues of transnational education, increase competitiveness of the European higher education system, enhance mobility of citizens as students and workers, promote the employability of students, and cover lifelong learning experiences. This is further reflected in the Bologna Process 2020[4], which also emphasizes the importance of student-centred learning in a changing labour market where mobility and globalization are key issues as they contribute to personal development, increase both cooperation and competition, and foster respect for diversity and a capacity to deal with other cultures[5].

It is therefore obvious that language courses cannot afford to simply teach language, but are also required to favour the development of intercultural competence and mutual respect and sensitivity as essential factors in facilitating mobility and integration of people as regards studies, work and tourism[6]. Teaching culture needs to be an essential part of the courses too and learners need to attain Ln socio-cultural competence as "the purpose of teaching culture together with other language skills is to increase learners' interactional as well as linguistic competences" (Hinkel, 2001:445). One of the first points to be considered is how culture is defined. Perhaps one of the most complete definitions is the one provided by the British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (1871: 1), who defined culture as "that complex whole which includes

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[3] http://www.magna-charta.org/resources/files/BOLOGNA_DECLARATION.pdf [29.03.2015].

[4] http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/leuven_ louvain-la-neuve_communiqu\%C3\%A9_april_2009.pdf [29.03.2015].

[5] Cf. also Antor, 2007.

[6] Cf. also Mchitarjan, 2014.

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knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society". What emerges clearly is that it is complex, as it involves products (e.g. literature), ideas (e.g. values), norms and behaviours (e.g. celebrations, gestures) (Grove, 2004), it is acquired, thus shared, and it identifies an individual as a member of a given society, which means it provides identity through factors which guarantee uniqueness through differences, as culture represents at the same time difference and elimination of difference because by being part of a group a relative homogeneity is established, perpetuated and enforced (Appiah, 2005). Each language embodies the unique cultural wisdom of the people who speak it (UNESCO, 2003), thus language and culture together provide security to the individual. When one or more individuals recognize common elements of their 'selves' within a group, they perceive (their) *identity* and a sense of belonging, and cultural identity is specifically experienced when meeting another culture (Müller/Gelbrich, 2014).

Interculture can be considered as an orientation in the way of thinking and acting "based on the unity out of the diversity" (Yousefi, 2006: 64). This means that, on the one hand, an individual retains the otherness of his/her culture, and on the other, s/he accepts the otherness of the culture s/he approaches. Intercultural communication can only take place when neither of the cultures coming into contact has primacy. Indeed, hermeneutics of any intercultural communication requires that when two people interact, they are simultaneously aware of themselves and of each other. It is thus obvious that individuals need to acquire intercultural competence and this cannot be done simply by accumulating language skills or knowledge about another culture. What is needed is reflection about language and culture, as well as social knowledge and skills (Allemand-Ghionda, 2007). Intercultural competence therefore cannot be assumed to be one single competence, rather it is the intersection of many competences.

However, in this framework of multilingualism and interculture which seems to blur the boundaries of individuality, have we lost sight of the needs of the individual and of the community s/he belongs to? How can they be met and overcome to encourage intercultural communication, which is now a priority for societies and nations? And how can we meet the need of lifelong learners? These were the questions which gave rise to our project.

3   Personal filters, self-awareness and intercultural awareness

Our main interest as teachers is the centrality of the learner and their active participation in all the stages of the lesson, from planning to feedback. What we need to consider is the complexity of the learner as an individual, i.e. the distinction between the 'self' and the 'person', the former referring to what each individual perceives of themselves, the latter to what the others perceive of the individual (Pavlenko/Lantolf, 2000). In other words, the self refers to the personal sphere, whereas the person

refs to the social domain. Both the learner and the teacher are representatives of each one's language and culture, being linguistic and cultural elements indissolubly connected. This also means that discovering oneself does not only open up a personal perspective, but also helps to define the role(s) one plays in society (Lüdi, 2007). As individuals we perceive other people through their appearance, character and way of presenting themselves and interacting in society, and through our filters we reconstruct their identity as a product of both language and culture, assuming language to be both the repository of culture as well as the tool by which culture is dynamically and unceasingly created (Hall, 2002).

Our starting point was that each person's language is part of their identity, and their way of speaking reflects and expresses who they are (Lowes/Target, 1998). Each individual has values, expectations, attitudes, but also a personal way of presenting and representing themselves, as well as personal grids to evaluate matters. At the same time each individual is also a representative of the cultural background they belong to (Bolten, 2011). The limits of the individual are determined by personal filters through which they perceive and experience the world. When experiencing something new, the individual passes through an ongoing process of assimilation and accommodation (Hu, 2007). However, due to their personal characteristics, each individual reacts to and assimilates new inputs in a different way. We can assume that the individual learner is changing even when this new input is a specific input of Ln, and the evolution deriving from these assimilation processes also continuously influences the learner's multilingual system (Jessner, 2006).

We agree with Huber-Kriegler et al. (2003:9), according to whom "you should first look in the mirror at your own culture, and out of the window at other cultures you are interested in or want to interact with", and wanted to verify if and how personal filters affect the learners' perceptions of their own self, their own language and culture, and the 'other' language and culture. We chose to do so by adopting the NLP principles of sensory acuity and Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences. Our objectives were twofold: to develop the learners' sensitivity as to their own personal learning preferences and filters, and to identify how these might shape their opinions concerning, on the one hand, their own language and culture, and on the other hand, other languages and cultures.

3.1   Exploring Identity, Language and Culture in Class

The following in-class activity contains practical ideas for developing intercultural awareness and cross-cultural understanding. It was carried out during a 90-minute class with five monolingual groups (three in Austria, two in Italy) at B1+/B2 level of knowledge of the foreign language, with 92 adult learners who were either Austrians learning Italian as a foreign language (Dante Alighieri school of Italian; University of Salzburg) or Italians learning English (Parma University Language Centre). Classes

focused on general language (i.e. not for specific purposes); group sizes ranged from 6 to 24 participants, and the learners' age ranged between 21 and 56 years.

The activity was presented as a speaking task in which learners would learn something about themselves and about each other; indirectly it aimed at stimulating intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences by getting them to reflect on their opinions and comparing them with others, as well as gaining insights into their own culture and the foreign culture they were learning. The activity was divided into three stages, each with a separate handout for the students with 12 stem sentences to be completed by working individually. These sentences consisted in metaphors which had been deliberately chosen to reflect principles from NLP, the theory of MIs and components of culture.

In the first stage, learners completed the metaphors in Table 1 (If I were…, I'd be…) thinking about themselves (self-perception); they were then asked to choose the 5 metaphors which they identified most with, make a note of the reasons and then explain their choice to each other working in pairs. Our underlying assumption was that this first-stage choice would reflect their personal filters and emerge in the following stages. In the second stage the learners went through exactly the same steps but completed the same metaphors by replacing the stem sentence with "If Italians/Austrians were…, they'd be…" to reflect their perception of their own language and culture. Finally in the third stage, the students went through the same procedure this time thinking about the language/culture they were learning (i.e. If the British/Italians were …, they'd be …)[7].

The papers with the learners' choices and reasons were collected for research purposes and analysed in order to verify if there were patterns, similarities or differences across the three stages. This was carried out by putting the choices into a single table (Table 2).

We noticed that very similar, and often the same metaphors appeared to have been chosen and we realized that personal filters seemed to shape the students' opinions on the notions of self, native language and culture, and foreign language and culture, ultimately confirming stereotypes (if not prejudices at times). In the following class, the papers were returned, and the learners were asked to verify if they recognized any similarities or differences within their own choices across the three stages. This led to a class discussion on how these filters may be relevant to learning and shed light on their own learning preferences, how they may affect their approach to something new and how they may be counterbalanced when being aware of them[8].

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[7] A detailed lesson plan is available in Scott-Monkhouse, A. R., Rigamonti, E. (2010). Me in Metaphors. Discovering and Uncovering Myself through NLP and Multiple Intelligences. *Humanising Language Teaching*, 12(4). Available on http://www.hltmag.co.uk/aug10/sart07.htm [03.04.2015].

[8] The development of the activity and ensuing class discussion related to 'learner training' is described in detail in Rigamonti Permanschlager, E., Scott-Monkhouse, A. R. (2010). Myself, my language and my

Tab. 1: *Handout 1 given to the students. The references to MIs and NLP principles printed in italics on the right were not present on the learners' copies. All sentences stimulate intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences.*
Handouts 2 and 3 had different stem sentences, i.e. "If Italians/Austrians were…, they'd be…" (h. 2) and "If the British/Italians were…, they'd be…" (h. 3) to reflect their native language and culture, and the language and culture they were learning, respectively.

If **I** were…,	**I**'d be…
a work of art (painting, sculpture, photograph, etc.)	*visual*
a piece of music or song	*musical / auditory*
a literary work (novel, poem, etc.) or movie	*linguistic*
an invention or tool	*kinaesthetic*
a scent/smell	*olfactory*
a food or drink	*gustatory*
a pastime (game, hobby, sport, etc.)	*kinaesthetic*
an animal	*visual / kinaesthetic*
a natural element (weather condition, landscape, flower, etc.)	*naturalistic*
an item of clothing	*visual / kinaesthetic*
a moment in time (season, part of day, hour, etc.)	*intrapersonal*
a proverb or way of saying/idiomatic expression	*linguistic*

Tab. 2: *The answers provided by Annamaria, an Italian student learning English*

If I were…, I'd be…	If Italians were…, they'd be…	If the British were…, they'd be …
Music soundtrack of the movie *Piano lessons*	**Smell** garden	**Song** Beatles
Invention microscope	**Literary work** *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri	**Literary work** plays by Shakespeare
Work of art painting	**Work of art** painting by Caravaggio	**Food** apple pie
Clothes scarf	**Sport** soccer	**Sport** rugby
Natural element tree	**Natural element** seaside landscape	**Natural element** hills

3.2 Raising Intercultural Awareness in Class

Having raised the students awareness of their personal filters, we decided to enter the field of culture by deliberately activating these filters, and chose to explore two distinct domains, one which is perceived as being more related to the person (i.e. a typical house) and one which is more linked to a professional situation (i.e. a business lunch), with the aim of discovering, understanding and possibly overcoming

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culture. Who am I? Identity, Language and Culture through NLP and Multiple Intelligences. In Newby, D., Rückl, M., & Hinger, B. (2010). (Eds.) *Mehrsprachigkeit: Herausforderung für Wissenschaft und Unterricht.* Wien: Praesens Vorlag, 243–260.

negative perceptions and stereotypes, and also helping learners acknowledge the similarities and cope with the differences between their own and the other culture by establishing a positive intercultural atmosphere through discussion.

3.2.1 A Typical House

We chose the house as the first domain as it represents one of most personal associations of any individual. This activity was carried out as an individual written activity followed by class discussion, and visual material (e.g. drawings and pictures) was allowed. The description was guided by using questions which were meant to activate the learners' personal filters, as shown in Table 3[9], and develop observation, interpretation and critical thinking skills.

Tab. 3: *Questions to guide the students' description.*
The references to MIs and NLP principles on the right were not available to the learners. All questions stimulate verbal/linguistic intelligence.

What can you see? What does it look like?	*visual*
What can you hear?	*auditory*
What can you smell?	*olfactory*
What do you/other people do?	*kinaesthetic/interpersonal*
How do you feel? How does it feel?	*kinaesthetic/intrapersonal*

In the first stage learners were asked to answer the questions individually thinking about a typical house in their own country (i.e. in Italy/Austria), then identify the two features which each believed was the most characteristic and explain their choices to each other working in pairs. In the following stage they answered the same questions about what they felt was a typical house in the country whose language they were learning (i.e. in England/Italy) and once again chose the two descriptions which they felt were more relevant and explain their choice to each other. A class feedback was then conducted to verify which answers were the most frequent and draw up a description for both houses which took these elements into consideration (Table 4). Inevitably the description of the houses included some reference to their occupants.

The students compared the two houses and discussed advantages and disadvantages, likes and dislikes in pairs, and reflected on possible explanations for some of the differences. They then worked in groups to list some tips for a young, inexperienced foreign person travelling to their country as an au-pair or a live-in student, and prepare a leaflet of useful suggestions. The aim of the simulation was to raise the students' awareness of their way of approaching an intercultural situation which is often experienced by young people when going abroad on a summer course or

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[9] This activity is largely based on the lesson plan Scott-Monkhouse, A. R., Sañudo Hernandez, J. L. (2009). House and furniture: A speaking activity. *Humanising Language Teaching*, 11(3) available on http://www.hltmag.co.uk/jun09/less02.htm [05.04.2015].

Tab. 4: *A summary of some the most frequent answers given by Italian students learning English*

A typical house in…	Italy	Britain
What can you see? **What does it look like?**	plenty of light, very bright inside; a big kitchen, a tiled balcony	two floors; bay windows draped with heavy curtains (no blinds); a fireplace; wall-to-wall carpets
What can you hear?	TV and someone talking on the balcony	an old clock ticking; rain against the windows
What can you smell?	coffee	apple pie
What do you do? **What are people doing?**	invite friends for a meal, and drink some good wine	sit by the fireplace; drink tea; listen to music
How do you feel? **How does it feel?**	It's a little noisy but pleasant.	comfortably warm and calm

Erasmus project by thinking about similarities, differences and stereotypes (if not prejudices) in order to develop understanding and greater flexibility towards the other culture, and foster respect and empathy for what is different.

Finally, the learners engaged in a project in which they compared their descriptions of the 'foreign' house with authentic estate agents' websites / house magazines in order to highlight similarities and differences with their beliefs and expectations, and consequently become more sensitive to their own filters and to the reasons for the description they had initially provided.

3.2.2 A Business Lunch

We chose a business lunch as the second domain to be explored as it is one of most frequent situations encountered in professional settings and represents a time when relationships are built and consolidated with individuals and their respective cultures really coming into contact.

Once again, we wanted to create a positive atmosphere by using the students' imagination and providing multi-sensory stimuli. The students imagined they had been invited to a business lunch in their country and answered the same questions as in the lesson on the typical house (Table 3)[10]. Just like the previous one, this activity was first carried out as an individual written activity with the learners being guided in their description. They were then asked to choose the two answers which they felt represented them best, and in pairs explain their answers and choices to their partner. In the next stage the students carried out a similar task, this time imagining they were participating in a business lunch in the foreign country. At this point the students were asked to compare the two countries and discuss their answers with their partner.

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[10] The detailed lesson plan is available in Scott-Monkhouse, A. R., Rigamonti, E. (2012). A Business Lunch: an Intercultural Activity. *Humanising Language Teaching*, 14(1) on http://www.hltmag.co.uk/feb12/less03.htm [05.04.2015].

The next step was to think about what they would change in each situation to help a foreign guest feel more at ease in their country and in the case of them being foreign guests in the other country (e.g. an Italian at a business lunch in Austria, and an Austrian at a business lunch in Italy). They then ranked the differences in order of importance for a successful business lunch. The aim of these questions was to sensitize the students to their way of approaching a frequent professional intercultural situation, and to get them to think about differences and stereotypes in order to weaken them and create an understanding for the others' way of behaving, while looking for reasons for these differences[11].

Tab. 5: *A summary of some of the most frequent answers given by the Austrian students learning Italian*

A business lunch in…	Austria	Italy
What can you see? **What does it look like?**	very good restaurant with a friendly atmosphere; people checking the time before beginning	very good restaurant, high-quality elegant attire and accessories; groups sitting in separate rooms; people leaving the dining-room to smoke
What can you hear?	laptop humming on the table; people discussing business, in turns, one at the time	people talking about family, soccer, cars; ringtones and mobiles going off
What can you smell?	tobacco, orange juice	after shave lotion and coffee
What do you do? **What are people doing?**	I read the handouts carefully, conclude my business, leave the restaurant after the meal and go back to my office	I wait for the Italian executives to arrive
How do you feel? **How does it feel?**	I'm absorbed in my work	Frustrated: I wonder when we will actually start discussing business! At the end I feel exhausted

Finally, students were asked to imagine they were to organize a course on etiquette for executives from their own country and from the foreign country. The students worked in groups to pool ideas and compare opinions, and created a poster with suggestions and advice about how to behave and what to avoid doing.

The follow-up stage, in which the students highlighted their own filters and reasons for a certain description, was carried out in different ways. One group compared their description with authentic material (e.g. websites, YouTube videoclips, etc.) with the aim of confirming or disproving their opinion during the class session itself. Another group compared their description with authentic material at home and the follow-up discussion took place in the following lesson where an excerpt of a film

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[11] An interesting analysis of the different national and cultural dimensions interplaying in negotiations and business lunches can be found in Gibson, R. (2008). *Intercultural Business Communication*. Berlin: Cornelsen, 77–82.

or a passage from a book was taken to confirm or disprove the stereotypes of the students' descriptions[12].

4   Conclusions

The whole project has revealed itself to be a process of guided discovery and self--development for both our learners and ourselves as teachers. From the teacher's perspective we have come to realize that what we transmit to our learners is not actually *the* language and *the* culture, but rather what we ourselves perceive through our own filters, acting as mediators both as teachers and as representatives of the language and culture we teach. As teachers we undergo a continuous change which leads to new perspectives on teaching and involves our attitude towards not only the learners, but also the language and culture we teach, as well as the way we convey them. At the same time this realization has helped us understand the complexity of the process our learners experience when approaching a new language. From the learners' perspective, by becoming aware of their filters they have developed higher level cognitive skills and discovered both their identity and centrality as active participants in the Ln learning process. They have realized that these filters need to be taken into account when approaching and formulating an opinion on something new, including a different language and culture. In an age in which migration and integration are key features, self-awareness is a way of reflecting on what and who we each are as individuals and as representatives of our language, people, and culture, and how this may affect our attitude towards other languages and cultures. Raising awareness of the differences and similarities existing between individuals in the class then became a starting point for reflecting on sensitivity to differences, appreciation and respect of diversity, openness to novelty as an enriching experience, acceptance, and flexibility. As Laugier (2009) pointed out, paradoxically it is by questioning personal identity and the individual representations of what is 'self' and what is 'other' that 'the others' and their cultures are actually recognized. This self-awareness can then develop into intercultural awareness, where the prefix 'inter-' presupposes the existence of a relationship and an exchange as the outcome of a process of becoming initially more aware of one's own culture and subsequently of different cultures through comparison and emphasis of both similarities and differences, the latter to be viewed and valued with deeper understanding (Carter, 2008). Intercultural competence needs to become a skill, next to the classic language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking), and can, indeed must be developed as such in class in order to meet the requirements of increasingly interconnecting world citizens.

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[12] For example the scene of the business lunch between Totò and Peppino de Filippo from the movie *Totò Peppino e i fuorilegge* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_-aDetybz6Y (23.03.2015)], or a passage from De Crescenzo, Luciano. *Così parlò Bellavista. Napoli, amore e libertà,* Milano: Mondadori, 1984, 136 to 137. For further developments see Appendix.

At the same time, valuing one's own and the other's culture is an educational practice in itself, indirectly leading us and our learners to acknowledge human rights and foster cultural democracy. We teachers are educators and have a responsibility in modelling the members of current and future societies through the development of a competence which also includes cross-curricular proficiency in adaptability. In other words, given the internationalization and subsequent interdependence of societies, we need to stimulate cultural intelligence and implement the "education for tolerance" recommended by UNESCO (1995:9) as a means to quvdevelop capacities for independent judgement, critical thinking and ethical reasoning [...], with a view to educating caring and responsible citizens open to other cultures, [...] respectful of [...] differences.

5   Appendix

One of the Italian classes in Austria had the opportunity to develop the topic in 3.2.2. during a workshop held at the Roman Philology Department of Salzburg University on 29 October 2012. The speaker, Ms Chiara Petrò, at the time was Head of Business Relations between Italy and German speaking areas in Europe for the Italian Trade Agency based in Milan. In her workshop "Italy as a trade country between the past and the future: new global challenges" (L'Italia dei commerci tra passato e futuro: nuove sfide globali) she highlighted the importance of intercultural awareness for executives in approaching otherness in order to cope positively with cultural differences occurring during 'critical incidents' (cf. Schumann, 2012), thereby promoting mutual business and cooperation. The students presented their activities related to *A Business Lunch* and in the ensuing discussion saw their results being reinforced. The workshop was indeed an excellent way to connect in-class activities with the real world outside.

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