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REVIEW OF *INTERCULTURAL LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES [WITH CD-ROM]*

Intercultural Language Activities [with CD-ROM]

John Corbett

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Cambridge University Press
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Probably one of the most significant developments in foreign language education over the past two decades has been the growing recognition of the importance of culture in foreign language learning. This has led to a shift in the aim of foreign language learning from achieving *native speaker* proficiency in learners to achieving the competence of an *intercultural speaker*. Online technologies have undoubtedly contributed to this development as they have facilitated the integration of authentic intercultural communicative activities into the classroom, and this has moved attention gradually away from the textbook with its often idealised representations of the foreign cultures and towards contact with real speakers of other languages in distant locations.

The importance of culture in foreign language education has been recognised since the 1990's thanks to the landmark publications of authors such as Byram (1997) and Kramsch (1993), but it has only been in the new millennium that the aim of developing learners' intercultural competence has begun to be cited in standards for foreign language learning such as the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) and the *National Standards for Foreign Language Education* (American Council of the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1996) in the United States of America. More recently, support for educators wishing to integrate intercultural learning into their teaching has emerged in the form of evaluation tools such as the *European Language Portfolio* (Council of Europe, 2002) and in the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (Council of Europe, 2005). However, there still continues to be a dearth of high-quality resources for educators looking for ways to translate the often lofty aims of intercultural learning into practical classroom activities. This book, *Intercultural Language Activities* by John Corbett, goes some way to dealing with this deficiency by providing approximately 100 activities which deal with the different aspects of intercultural learning.

Corbett is a well-known academic at the University of Glasgow whose previous publication, *An Intercultural Approach to English Language Teaching* (2003), provided an excellent overview of how foreign language education could borrow from neighbouring disciplines such as Ethnography, Media Studies, Cultural Studies and Conversation Analysis to more effectively develop intercultural communicative competence in foreign language learners. The present volume is, in a sense, the logical sequel to this book as we find in its pages practical activities which are inspired by or located in these previously mentioned disciplines.

Corbett begins the volume by outlining what he understands by the term intercultural learning. He

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identifies the aims of intercultural language learning as the development of the learners' ability to explore different cultures and to mediate in situations of cultural misunderstanding. He also highlights the need for learners to hone their skills of observing, describing and evaluating different cultures as well as their own and to develop personal qualities such as empathy and open-mindedness. He then goes on to explore Michael Byram's description of the skills, knowledge and attitudes that make up intercultural communicative competence (1997) and outlines how the activities in this book deal with these different areas.

The book is structured into 14 different sections which can loosely be divided into two parts. The opening 7 sections focus on the development of learners' intercultural skills such as mediating in contexts of intercultural communication breakdown, analysing body language and interviewing. Following that, the second half of the book focuses on getting learners to study and compare perspectives on different intercultural issues such as sports, food, politics and religion. The book concludes with a rather short section on further reading and resources. It also includes a CD ROM which contains printable PDF documents of all the worksheets and photos printed in the book itself. This is a very useful added-extra for busy teachers who do not have time for cutting and pasting photocopies from the book itself. It is also a particularly valuable resource for users of interactive whiteboards.

Overall, I found the book to be a very positive and constructive contribution to this area. I also found it refreshingly original for three main reasons.

First, I was happy to see that, unlike many other publications in this area, the author did not try to sidestep the thorny issues of politics and religion. Gray (2002) claims that in an attempt not to insult possible buyers in different cultures, textbook authors have often diligently avoided many possibly controversial topics in their products and have created a bland version of the target culture which can appeal to all. The author explains that the acronym PARSNIP is used by many publishers to outline the topics which authors should not bring up in their materials—politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms and pork. Gray suggests that this has resulted in the target culture being stripped of many of its important characteristics. The alternative world presented in EFL textbooks, according to the author, is "cosmopolitan" and "aspirational," and content is based on a fantasy world of spending money on luxury goods, going on international trips and discussing pop stars. Corbett's volume goes some way to counteracting this trend by attempting to provide lively activities which involve students in "risky" tasks such as setting up their own political parties, taking part in parliamentary debates or analysing the gestures and body language used by a politician. Similarly, the activities on religion encourage learners to observe and describe religious ceremonies or compare key features of different religions. The key here is not to bring learners to express or build opinions on what political party or religion is better than the other, rather learners are being trained in the intercultural skills of observation and comparison.

A second strong point of this volume is the manner in which it presents intercultural learning as something pro-active, skill-based and fun for students. Until recently, on the rare occasions that cultural information did appear in EFL resource books and textbooks, it was presented as a dry, factual aspect of language learning which came in the form of anecdotes or "facts" about the target culture. Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan and Street (2001) summarise the traditional approach to culture learning in the following way:

> …information about political structures, regional or economic policy or the history of changing national boundaries might be useful background knowledge, but it is essentially book-based information, usually presented as facts in an unproblematic way and abstracted from the everydayness of people's ordinary lives. (Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan, & Street, 2001, p. 42)

Corbett moves away from this approach and encourages foreign language educators and students to look at culture learning as a combination of skills and attitudes which will enable learners to understand and mediate between different cultural perspectives. He does this by offering tasks which involve

interviewing, role playing, ethnographic observations and the semiotic analysis of advertisements. Throughout the book the reader gets the impression that the tasks and accompanying worksheets are encouraging learners to look at everyday objects and activities in a different, more scientific way. Learners are not being asked to judge their home culture or the target culture, but they are required to identify and describe the language and behaviour of daily life in a society and the significance that these words and behaviour have for members of that culture. Some activities include, for example, getting learners to spend time in a café or a hair salon doing ethnographic fieldwork, using the supplied observation sheets to become more aware of the language and behaviour typical of these contexts. Other activities require learners to carry out interviews where one member of the class role-plays a member of a subculture. Before carrying out the interviews, the class is provided with training in the skills of ethnographic interviewing. It goes without saying that many of the activities in this publication are best suited to second language contexts where the learners are actually living or studying in the target culture. This is particularly the case when students are asked to observe aspects of the society around them. For example, I speak from experience when I say that it is easier to motivate students to spend time observing behaviour in a foreign café than in the local café next to their homes. However, there is undoubtedly an educational value in getting learners to observe aspects of their own culture through an ethnographic lens, and the skills that they will develop by doing this will no doubt be of use to learners when they do spend time in a different culture than their own.

A final area worthy of praise in this publication is its approach to supporting educators wishing to start online intercultural exchanges with international partner classes. Educators are being told constantly that online exchange offers a host of opportunities for developing intercultural competence, but until recently it has been hard to find concrete guidelines as how to go about preparing learners for online interaction and to exploit the exchange for language and culture learning in the classroom. The first chapter of this book not only provides some original tasks to stimulate discussion and collaboration with a partner class, but the author also provides plenty of suggestions as to how learners should prepare their messages in the classroom and how teachers can support their classes to make the most linguistically out of this activity. I have complained elsewhere (O'Dowd, 2007) that far too often online exchange is portrayed as an activity which is best left for learners to carry out independently outside the classroom. This first chapter does much to offer an alternative approach that integrates intercultural exchange into everyday classroom activity.

To conclude, this resource book is a very welcome addition to the growing body of work on intercultural learning and how it can be integrated in the classroom. This publication is, in my opinion, one of the first to successfully translate the aims of intercultural language learning into a set of learning activities which is both effective and clear. Although the title of the book may suggest a more universal audience, the language materials and examples in the book make it best suited to teachers involved in EFL or ESL educational contexts. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the activities could be adapted to other foreign language teaching contexts with a little imagination on behalf of the teacher.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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