CULTURAL AWARENESS

Raising cultural awareness

One of the aims of European trade unionists is to break down national trade union barriers and create an awareness of a European trade union culture. Language syllabuses should be designed to make learners function more effectively in the target language, but must not be seen as aiming at mere linguistic competence. They should also include raising awareness of the cultural assumptions underlying language forms, and recognition of the misunderstandings that can arise in international encounters. The language tutor's own cultural background also needs to be considered in conjunction with those of the members of the learning group.

The materials selected for use on the course may be based on a particular cultural tradition, and tutors should strive to achieve a balance as far as possible, so that the representation of one culture is not predominant.

Culture bumps

Culture bumps are occasions when something goes wrong for one or more of the participants in an international encounter. Here are some examples:

➢ Signalling an end to a visit

An English native speaker is receiving a visit in her workplace from an Italian. After some time, she begins to use some of the polite expressions by which many English people show that they wish to draw an end to a visit, leaving the onus on the visitor to take the initiative in actually terminating it:

for example: 'Well, if that's all?' with a rising intonation;

or: 'I hope that's been of some help to you. Now, ...' then tailing off.

If the visitor does not pick up these linguistic clues, or is unsure how to respond appropriately, both interlocutors may end up feeling discomfited or irritated, with a vague feeling of something not quite right. The fact that the language used was clear and easy to understand actually clouds the issue for them both.
Interrupting

In an informal international discussion, some Germans and Scandinavians find it off-putting when they are interrupted in mid-speech by French and Spanish participants. Conversely, the latter find it disconcerting to receive no visible response to what they are saying, whether in the form of verbal or body language encouragement or disagreement.

These are both examples of mismatches of cultural expectations in conversation management. In the first example the Italian visitor is unaware that the English speaker is using a protocol expression for bringing a conversation to a close. In the second example the expectations of different nationalities differ in terms of turn-taking, that is, one group thinks it is polite and effective to let the other person have their say, even in an informal discussion, and does not see a strong need to encourage or contribute until the other `turn' is finished. Only then will they be ready to give a full and considered response. The other group feels uneasy without the more interactive conversational dynamics that operate in their own cultures.

Culture bumps are not limited to linguistic utterances. They may involve:

- body-language
- stress and intonation
- codes of dress
- attitudes to status, age, gender
- tangibles, such as gifts (for example, what do you take when invited to dinner in a Swiss/French/Norwegian household?)
- attitudes to humour
- attitudes to appropriate levels of formality and informality in different situations
- different perceptions about appropriate meal-times, punctuality.
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**To some extent, misunderstandings** are inevitable when learners are exposed to new situations in a target language at which they are less than proficient. What is insidious about culture bumps, however, is that when they are not recognised as such, a series of these occurring with a particular nationality can lead the learners who have never been sensitised to their existence to resolve their unease in one of two ways:

- by blaming the individual: for example the behaviour may be misinterpreted as "Mario's aggressive and pushy" or "Ulla is cold and unresponsive"
- by falling back on stereotypes, or generalising in such a negative way as to reduce the likely success of further encounters with that particular nationality. For example, this may be misinterpreted as "They all like to jump into a discussion first, don't they?" or "They never say what they really think to your face."

**The role of the tutor**

**It would be unrealistic of the language tutor** to attempt to contribute to world harmony by pretending that a willingness to take into account different cultural norms will solve all clashes in the learning environment and beyond. Unfortunately there are difficult or socially unskilled individuals. Even stereotypes have grains of truth embedded in them, emerging as they do from contexts of relative values and behaviour observed from different perspectives.

What the tutor can hope to achieve with students is a reduction in the number of misunderstandings, and an increased willingness to modify behaviour for the sake of a successful outcome to an encounter. It is also important that wherever possible the tutor benefits from cultural awareness training, or at the very least, reads one or two of the widening range of resource books on the topic which also include activities for learners.

**Activities with single-nationality groups**

**The experienced tutor can provide** information in the form of cultural briefings. This can be helpful, especially on short courses with groups who have little experience of the target- language culture. However, care should be taken to avoid pre-empting learning by discovery by over-teaching, through providing a variety of learning opportunities.

If the tutor provides the cultural briefing about the target language culture in the learner's mother tongue, then this can sometimes be seen as foreigners offering stereotypical or over-generalised information about native speakers of the target language. They prove far less offensive when offered by native speakers in the target language (for example, the kind of 'Useful Tips' article found in in-flight magazines designed to be of practical help to the inexperienced visitor to that country). This principle can be extended to more advanced language
learning situations where cultural briefings can describe acceptable
behaviour in a range of given situations, from basic survival to more
complex social or professional contexts.

The tutor can also elicit learners' own observations of the cultural norms
of the target language through a stimulus in the form of a text, video or
audio tape, a clip from a film, photographs and visuals, followed by
discussion with a cultural focus. The learners can share experiences of
previous interactions with the target group and discuss assumptions,
prejudices and stereotypes.

The tutor can alert learners to the impact that cultural assumptions have
on language forms. Discussion of the implications (for example in
Spanish, German, Italian, French) of the native speaker inviting you to
use the familiar second person singular can illustrate that it is much
more than a shift in grammatical usage. It shows a wish to draw closer
socially, and to open the discussion to subjects that are not
approachable in a formal relationship.

**Learners can discuss the implications** for formal and informal use,
and attitude in certain language forms. For example, what is the
difference in English between 'I wonder if you would help me with x'
and 'I was wondering if you would help me with x?'

Both are polite, fairly formal tentative; but the second, in its distancing
use of a past tense not related to past time is the more tentative. As
such, it deserves a sympathetic response, even in the case of refusal or
rejection.

The tutor can help learners to build up a list of language routines or
protocols which can cause confusion between the two nationalities. A
'protocol' (for example, a greeting, a compliment, congratulation) is a
language routine, the use of which is dictated more by cultural
convention than by the intentions of the speaker. Here are some
examples:

➢ Apologising when you bump into someone. (in order of ascending
seriousness): 'Oops', 'Excuse me', 'Sorry', 'I'm so sorry', 'Oh dear,
did I hurt you?'

➢ Asking people to move aside in a lift or on a bus or train: 'Excuse
me'.

**Conversation management:**

- to begin a conversation
- to end a conversation; drawing it to a close
- showing attentiveness during another's "long turn" (for example
  'Yes'; 'I see'; 'uh-huh'; 'really?' etc)
- showing agreement or disagreement
- showing partial agreement
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- encouraging further talk
- signalling you wish to interrupt
- hesitation devices to play for time (for example 'Er', `Let's see')

Such protocols are clearly significant in everyday life. Ignoring them or misusing them can make even an advanced foreign speaker seem ill-mannered. Whilst native speakers will make some allowances for foreigners, the point is that they may not realise it is absence of knowledge that causes an apparent act of rudeness.

Activities with multi-national groups

Many of the activities listed for single-nationality groups can be used. However, there is a clear advantage operating in trans-national situations. Learners can benefit from the process of working within international groups, and the culture bumps they will experience with each other during the course can be used to sensitise them to the underlying dynamics of cultural assumptions at work in such groups. The insights gained are clearly transferable to any target language situation.

As well as using text, films, and visual stimuli as outlined above, effective use can be made of videoing some group interactions of, for example, formal and informal meetings; social interactions, long and short turn discussions in large or small groups. The tutor can then choose examples from the video to illustrate possible hidden cultural bumps operating. For example:

- Sirkka is looking desperate to join in, but Hans and Antonio are excluding her. Is this a culture or gender issue?
- Pedro appears to have finished speaking, then looks disappointed when someone else takes over. Is this due to lack of awareness of hesitation devices, or a deliberate interruption by someone else?

A better method is to allow the learners to pinpoint where they felt uncomfortable, either by using a videoed transaction, or recounting an experience, either in or beyond the classroom, past or present. Brief but regular discussion of this kind will enable the learners to become much more skilled at identifying whether it was their linguistic confusion that caused the problem, or if cultural expectations were operating. Naturally, the tutor's discretion will be exercised where it is problems with personalities rather than culture clashes which are causing a problem.

On a positive note, many trade unionists are likely to be aware of the broad psychological aspects of conversational transactions, such as agreeing or disagreeing and of the importance of arriving at a conclusion which is acceptable to both parties.
CULTURAL AWARENESS

All Levels

Activity 1

Aims

- To share an appreciation of different patterns of behaviour
- To know what is appropriate to say/do in other countries

Have you ever felt that you have “committed a social gaffe” or “put your foot in it” or “made a faux pas” when visiting another country or dealing with people of a different nationality to your own?

Discuss the following examples of behaviour which have surprised, amused or insulted people:

- An Englishman invited to have a sauna with his new Finnish colleagues caused great amusement when he arrived wearing his swimming trunks
- An American upset his French host when he asked him how much he earned and how old was his wife
- A Dutch trade union rep was very insulted when the Scottish manager from the company shook her hand while his other hand was in his pocket
- The Italian delegate thought her Bulgarian colleague had agreed to prepare the report when she nodded her head
- The Irish trade unionist in the train happily accepted the sandwich which his Spanish fellow-traveller offered
- The English teacher felt she had performed very badly when she asked the German students what they thought of the course and they had nothing to say
- The Finnish group were surprised in the pub when they looked at the English locals and they became very aggressive
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- The Belgian delegate thought the English delegates were very cold and unfriendly when no one shook his hand
- The Englishman was horrified when his new German colleague hugged and kissed him
- When the British exchange-student asked the American girl in the class for a rubber she was most surprised!

Giving advice to visitors

Are there any special things that other nationalities need to be aware of when visiting your country or meeting your colleagues?

Prepare a cultural briefing sheet for visitors to your country. Use the following topics to help you

1. Use of language (Special ways of greeting people formal/informal? Use of “please” and “thank you”)
2. Non-verbal communication (the role of handshaking, kissing, hugging, gestures and silence)
3. Socialising (Inviting/paying for drinks and meals. Topics of conversation to avoid-religion/politics/family/salaries?).
### Activity 2

**True or false checklist**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TRUE</th>
<th>FALSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In England people always shake hands when they meet for the first time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you shop in England you should always address the shopkeeper as “sir” or “madam”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you greet someone in England it is good to ask after their health</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is considered impolite in England if you do not say “sorry” when you bump into somebody</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you are talking about your parents in English it is best to talk about “mummy” and “daddy”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you are waiting for a bus in England you should always try to find the end of the queue</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In England it is polite to ask a person’s age or salary as a way of getting to know them</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When a waiter puts a knife and fork or a plate on the table you should say “thank you”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you want to attract the barman in the pub you should snap your fingers and say “barman” in a loud voice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cultural awareness - National images

Write down the first two or three things that come to mind when you think of the following countries then compare and discuss your choice with a colleague. (Add other countries according to the composition of the group).

AUSTRIA  
BELGIUM  
FRANCE  
GERMANY  
HUNGARY  
ITALY  
SPAIN  
THE NETHERLANDS  
UNITED KINGDOM

Stereotypes?
- What are the characteristics of a “typical” inhabitant of these countries?
- In pairs/groups discuss and agree a short list (two/three characteristics) for each country with which you are familiar.
- What do you think are the characteristics of a “typical” inhabitant of your own country?
- Compare your opinion with that of your colleagues
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### Some suggestions from colleagues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Sights and Traditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>AUSTRIA</strong></td>
<td>Skiing, Mozart, Vienna, Frontiers, Culture ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BELGIUM</strong></td>
<td>Chocolates, Beer, Brussels, Tintin, Languages...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FRANCE</strong></td>
<td>Wine, Fashion, Food, Paris, Romance...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GERMANY</strong></td>
<td>Beer, Motorway, Sausages, Berlin...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HUNGARY</strong></td>
<td>Budapest, Puskas, Wine, History, Goulash...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ITALY</strong></td>
<td>Music, Pasta, Shoes, Art, Rome...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SPAIN</strong></td>
<td>Bullfighting, Paella, Sunshine, Picasso, Football...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THE NETHERLANDS</strong></td>
<td>Tulips, Amsterdam, Van Gogh, Diamonds, Drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UNITED KINGDOM</strong></td>
<td>BBC, Beatles, Shakespeare, Hooligans, Royal family...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Methodological Principles – cultural awareness**
The Speakometer

Indicate below how much you think:

- you speak
- Your partner/best friend speaks
- Your boss speaks

Indicate below how much you think different nationalities speak:

- Americans
- British
- Your own nationality
- Others you are familiar with