

INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS -VARIATIONS ON THE THEME

Name of author: Liisa LÖFMAN

Email address: liisa.lofman@opeko.fi

Institution and country: National Centre for Professional Development in Education, Finland

Target audience

- Pre-service teachers
 - Primary teachers
 - Secondary teachers_
- In-service teachers
 - Primary teachers
 - Secondary teachers

Itinerary

- Exploring awareness and skills needed in successful intercultural encounters

Abstract

The function of these didactic materials is to focus the teachers' and students' interest in the interplay between the various factors of intercultural communication situations. The materials consist of a text dealing with intercultural encounters, background material, and two worksheets. The text is written in a form of a story telling about a Finnish student travelling from the North to participate in a conference further south. On the way, she meets interesting fellow passengers. The story focuses on situations where the communication between the participants to the discussion may create obvious or not so obvious misunderstandings. The background material helps the teacher to explain these situations to the students. There are two worksheets. The function of them is to make the teachers and students to concentrate on the following questions:

How do we succeed in intercultural communication situations?

How do we benefit from knowing basic facts of intercultural communication?

How do I design further activities?

How do we choose the information we give the students?

Rationale

The material focuses on the different contexts in which different people meet and communicate – with different results. On the basis of the text and background material the class can discuss the

communication situations and thus increase their awareness of the reasons behind various ways of communication. A further idea – and a very important one – is to give the students the opportunity to use their imagination and create problematic intercultural communication situations of their own. Discussion in the class will show different ways of becoming a competent intercultural communicator.

Social and personal dimension

- having confidence in one's professional ability to develop educational approaches in which taking account of linguistic and cultural diversity is a reality

Professional dimension

- finding and communicating purposes in the pursuit of a new linguistic and cultural education;
- creating, experimenting with and evaluating educational projects ultimately aimed at developing plurilingual and pluricultural skills

STORY OF INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS - Variations on the Theme

INTRODUCTION TO THE PLOT

The star of the play, Johanna Hallamaa, 24 years old, lives in the City of Tampere, Finland. A few weeks ago she graduated from the University of Tampere. After five years of intensive studying, she is a competent and qualified teacher of English and Swedish. Next autumn she will begin her teaching career in a small town called Ikaalinen, some 50 kilometres from Tampere. But now she has a free summer in front of her – she is totally free from the beginning of June until the middle of August.

Johanna has decided to travel first to Sweden and from there to Hamburg in Germany. From there she might continue to Barcelona in Spain. The reason for choosing these two locations is really a secret – she has two boyfriends, Hans in Hamburg and Antonio in Barcelona. They had all met in a Northern Dimension seminar in the Finnish Lapland the year ago. Eventually, she would have to go to London to a SIETAR conference – if nothing interferes with the plan...

This is a story about Johanna's adventures in the big wide world. The play begins.

Situation 1. Reflexions about Identity

Johanna is sitting in a comfortable lounge chair on the Silja Serenade, one of the ferries cruising between Finland and Sweden. She has got some currency, passport, and her tickets. She is looking around her, satisfied with the good beginning of the journey. Because it is summertime, the ferry is crowded with passengers, mostly Finns and Swedes but also many other nationalities are being presented. Johanna has studied aspects of European integration and attempts towards a common European identity. How could

all these different people and nations share the same identity, she wonders. And what is my own identity, am I Finnish, Scandinavian, European – a global citizen? She is feeling very philosophical.

Situation 2 – Are Stereotypes true?

“You are Swedish, aren’t you?” asks a voice by Johanna’s ear. “Why don’t you come and have first a drink with me at the bar, and then some dancing, and then...” Johanna looks up and sees an unknown man looking appreciatively at her. “No thank you”, says Johanna politely although she would have liked to use stronger words. Johanna is tall and blond, with blue eyes – the true stereotype of a Swedish girl. And she is travelling alone – is it an invitation to for just anybody to approach her? Johanna realises – once again - that she is now leaving her own country with its customs and values behind her and entering a foreign world. But already now, on the ferry to Sweden, to the neighbouring country!

Situation 3 – Prejudices

Johanna is standing on the platform at the railway station in Stockholm. The train seems to be so very far away, she is feeling exhausted after having carried her suitcase and bags from the ferry bus. “May we help you with your bags?” asks a polite voice. Johanna sees a most foreign looking young couple wearing funny bright coloured clothes. As an instantaneous reaction, Johanna seizes her bags tightly under her arm and is convinced that she will be robbed... People looking like that cannot be decent people! And they are not even white!

Situation 4 – My values aren’t necessarily your values

The train from Stockholm to Copenhagen is packed. Johanna finds a seat in a carriage from where cheerful talk and loud laughter is heard to the platform. There seems to be a large family travelling all together, small children, a little older children, parents, cousins, grandparents, maybe an aunt and an uncle too. Everybody looks happy to be together. A very old lady is being treated with extra courtesy. Johanna, the only child of her parents and the product of the silent Finnish culture enjoys watching them. She is soon taken in the lively conversation although she does not really understand the language they are talking. Portuguese it must be, Johanna thinks and tries to find use for the few Portuguese words she knows. Soon she makes friends with two young ladies, a bit older than herself.

Situation 5 – What time is it?

The family on the train has come from Uppsala, where they had been staying with relatives. They come originally from Brazil. They are going to stay in Hamburg with other relatives for a while and invite Johanna to visit them.

Now Johanna is sitting in a café in Hamburg waiting for her two friends to arrive – they have agreed to meet at 2 pm. Where are they? Did they not really mean to meet her? Johanna had thought they were her friends – had she hurt them somehow? Johanna sits at her table and is becoming impatient. Now, time being already 3.30 pm, she hears laughter and a big group of girls storm in. Johanna’s friends had found some of their older friends and spent some time with them. Now they are all happily here and everything seems to be OK.

Situation 6 – Don’t come too near me!

The new friends are crowding at Johanna's table. They are talking to each other and to her and at the same time touching her arm or shoulder. Johanna starts feeling uncomfortable although the atmosphere is very warm and friendly. She tries to move her chair slightly away from her neighbours.

Situation 7 – What am I telling you?

“Oh no! I don't believe this – this is not happening to me!” Johanna is attending a party in Hamburg. The International Summer Camp Association is celebrating its 10th anniversary. Johanna is invited, and so is Hans. Johanna is wearing her new summer outfit and she is feeling very cool. She is talking to Hans and enjoying every minute of it. Then she realises that somebody is watching her ... Antonio! Johanna makes a desperate attempt to adjust her smile – is it too late? She draws quickly a bit away from Hans. Has Antonio understood?

Situation 8 – Losing face?

Johanna is sitting on a train again. She has decided to travel all the way to London now without stopping anywhere. Travelling by train, she thinks, is a great way of seeing European scenery. It's going to be a long journey with lots of beautiful and historical places to see – and, needless to say, many interesting fellow passengers to meet. Johanna needs new things to think about after the catastrophe last night. Although she had tried to explain to Antonio that Hans was only a passing acquaintance, she had felt that Antonio didn't believe a word she was saying – she had been transformed from a nice innocent Nordic girl into a fatal temptress...

“Excuse me, is this seat taken?” asks a voice behind Johanna. A young man with a big rucksack is standing beside her. “Oh no, do sit down”, says Johanna. They start talking and the journey goes quickly. The young man says his name is Mirek, short for Miroslaw, and he comes from Poznan, Poland. They start talking about the countries in Europe in the 20th century. “And your country, Finland, was occupied by the Russians. Was it very difficult?” asks the young man. “No, we were never occupied by them!” flashes Johanna, indignant. Mirek is blushing – of course, he should have known.

Situation 9 – Pluriculturalism and Interculturalism

After the awkward moment, both Johanna and Mirek continue the conversation and enjoy each other's company. Johanna is almost a teacher, Mirek is a nurse. The train moves forward and they find lots and lots of interesting topics and they talk and talk – sympathy of the souls seems to be the name of the game. Different backgrounds don't matter. Mirek tells Johanna about his hometown, and Johanna tells Mirek about the Finnish summer when the sun never sets.

The train finally arrives at a railway station in London. What a lot of people, Johanna thinks, and so many colours of skin. Mirek takes his leave and gives his email address (a very complicated one) to Johanna and asks her to email him and keep him posted about the course of her life.

Situation 10 Multiculturalism

The SIETAR conference has begun. Johanna looks at the people there and is fascinated. It would be tempting to expand the international experience – Johanna has often been thinking of moving to another country, maybe to Germany or to Spain. But now, Mirek looked really cool! And he was such a good company. And he had said that he would like to live abroad too. Would they perhaps live in Finland, in Poland, in some other country? Johanna's imagination runs wild ... To live abroad, to work abroad, to raise a family abroad ... How many children would they have? Would they look like their father or mother?

Johanna decides to send an urgent email to Mirek's address. But the information society has turned its back to her – Mirek's email address has gone missing in the course of many changes of trains and opening and shutting of bags.

EPILOGUE

It so happened that Johanna met a charming young Chinese architect, Bo, at the SIETAR Conference. Bo came from Beijing. Johanna and Bo decided to live together. They established a Finnish-Chinese company specialising in pluri- and intercultural training programmes worldwide.

BACKGROUND MATERIALS

IDENTITY

General Information

One's own identity is something that is vitally important both for a person and for a country. It specifies who you are, and what your country is, and differentiates you with your characteristic qualities from somebody else. It is often said that a good sense of identity unifies a nation – so it is no big wonder that European Identity is a much-discussed item.

Identity can be understood as the by-product of experiences in different cultures.

STEREOTYPES

General Information

Stereotypes are generalisations of others and of us. They are deep-rooted part of one's own culture and they live long! Stereotypes originate from your own culture and they influence your behaviour very much indeed. You see and understand things in a certain way because you are a product of your own culture – somebody from a different culture would perhaps be unable to understand the same phenomenon in the way you do.

Stereotypes can be positive or negative. They function as a shortcut of thinking, causing you to react quickly, without thinking, to a stimulus.

PREJUDICES

General Information

Prejudices are negative stereotypes about certain people or groups. They have existed for many generations and become stronger by generation. They are emotional and they express deeply negative feeling about people or groups different from us.

People with prejudices often want to put forward values they believe to be correct (“to stand up for the one true religion”) To defend one's own ego, people blame difficulties on other people.

People often hide the fact that they are prejudiced:

Tokens convince others that you are not prejudiced; such is one woman or one black member on a committee! Or you can be friendly and positive towards people different from you, if they remain conveniently at an arm's length. Prejudices often lead to racism.

VALUES

General Information

Values are the basic building block of a culture. Each culture can be distinguished by its system of values. Values shape the behaviours of people. Values can be defined as a set of standards by which the individual lives and forms his relationship with himself, his friends, relatives, environment, and, in fact, everything around him.

Values are culture specific. A list of values by K.S. Sitaram (born in India, professor of communication studies in the USA):

	Primary values	Secondary values
Aggressiveness	W	M
Authoritarianism	E M A	W
Brotherhood M		
Collective responsibility	E A M	
Color of skin E W		M
Cooperation M		A
Education	W	E A M
Efficiency	W	
Equality of women	W	E
Firstness	W	
Frankness	W	E A M
Gratefulness/loyalty	E A	M
Hierarchy	W E M A	
Hospitality	E A	
Human dignity	W	E A M
Individuality	W	
Inherited property	E	
Karma	E	
Masculinity	M E W A	
Modesty	E	A M
Money	W A	M
Motherhood	E	
Patriotism	M A E	W
Peace	E	
Preservation of environment	E	A
Punctuality	W	
Religion	W M A E	
Respect for elders	E A M	
Respects for youth	W	M A
Sacredness of farmland	E	A
Saviorism	W	M

W= Western cultures

E = Eastern cultures

A = African cultures

M= Muslim cultures

TIME

General Informaton

Also the concept of time is culture specific. Time can be seen as linear, circular, or it can berelated to events that happen or do not happen. The Hindu religion links time, space and Karma together. They believe that some individuals achieve their goals – self-realisation – here and now, while others may have to wait for several rebirths in this or other worlds.

Monochronic (straight forward, one thing at a time) and polychronic (more complicated, many things happening at the same time) are two types of understanding time. These two concepts are often used to describe people too.

Monochronic people

- Do one thing at a time
- Concentrate on the job
- Take time commitments seriously
- Are low-context and need information
- Are committed to the job
- Adhere to the plans
- Are concerned about not disturbing others
- Show great respect for private property
- Emphasise promptness
- Are accustomed to short-term relationships

Polychronic people

- Do many things simultaneously
- Are highly distractible and subject to interruptions
- Consider time commitments to be achieved, if possible
- Are high context and well-informed
- Are committed to people and relationships
- Change plans easily and often
- Are concerned with those who are closely related
- Are not concerned with privacy
- Borrow and lend things easily
- Have tendency for lifetime relationships

SPACE

General Information

The visible boundary of every living thing is surrounded by a series of invisible boundaries, from the individual's personal space to his "territory". Personal space can be characterised as an invisible bubble around each person. "Territory" means that these places or things are mine, don't come near!

People react unconsciously to differences in distances between people. Again, distances are very culture-bound. Distance is perceived by all the senses!

Edward T. Hall distinguishes four distance zones:

- Intimate distance
- Personal distance
- Social distance
- Public distance

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

General Information

Nonverbal communication can tell people things about you that you maybe would not like them to know.

Paralanguage means variations in the way you speak, such as stress or speed. The use of paralanguage tells about your attitude towards the person you are with. Without saying anything specific you can show that you like or do not like a person.

Body language is very revealing. Your gestures and postures can indicate the way you are feeling and what you are thinking about the person with whom you are talking. Equally revealing is the way you dress!

With **eye language** you can send signs showing threats or propositions

With your **space language** you can indicate formal, informal, or intimate distances. Space language is seen in the way you furnish your rooms (a giant desk in an office; a big teacher's desk between the teacher and the students).

The most expressive part of nonverbal communication is the **touch language**. In different cultures the answer to the following question is different: Who can touch whom where and in what circumstances? And with what result!

FACE

General Information

A **positive face** means that you are considered to be a good and worthy person. To **lose face** means that during a conversation, for example, you say or do something that causes embarrassment and the others change their positive opinion of you into a negative one. A **negative face**, as a result of losing face, is a situation to be avoided in intercultural communication. If the conversation is to be continued, all the conversationalists try to contribute to the success of the talk and to do their best to keep each other's faces. If a loss of the face happens, it makes the continuation of the conversation very difficult – the saving of the face of everyone is the task of the people who want the conversation to go on and results to be reached.

PLURICULTURALITY, INTERCULTURALITY

General Information

Identity is the by-product of experiences in different cultures. Thus, multiple identifications create our unique personality, which is more than static "identity". **Pluriculturalism** implies an approach to the self and the other as complex, rich beings that act and react from the perspective of those multiple identifications (The Kit).

Interculturality is the link between language and culture. Being intercultural is a way of participating in communication in which interlocutors

- Are aware of the relevance of culture in communication
- Participate actively in communication
- React critically to communication. (The Kit)

Multiculturalism

General Information

Multiculturalism refers to contexts where cultures are in contact, not restricted to nations, religions or ethnic groups. (The Kit)

CLASSIC WRITERS ON INTERCULTURAL THEMES:

Dean Barnlund
Janet and Milton Bennett
Richard Brislin
Donald Carbaugh

W.B. Gudykunst
Stella Ting-Toomey
Edward T. Hall
Geert Hofstede

F.R. Kluckhorn
Robert Kohls
Margaret Pusch

K.S. Sitaram
F. Trompenaars

Worksheet 1

Timing: 2 x 90'

How do we succeed in intercultural communication situations?

How do we benefit from knowing basic facts of intercultural communication?

How do I design further activities?



Read the story of Johanna's Adventures

What facts of intercultural communication did you find?

Did you think of more facts that could be added to the story?

Discuss your answers in class



After reading the story

Write your own story with different characters and with different intercultural communication situations

Worksheet 2

Timing 90'

How do we choose the information we give the students?



Reading the background material

What kind of information would you give to your students?
In which form would you give it to them?

Discuss your answers in class