

# **Cultural, Multicultural, Cross-cultural, Intercultural: A Moderator's Proposal**

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## **Abstract**

This article is an attempt to cover some of the issues of terminology, philosophy and politics at the point where language teaching and culture meet and sometimes collide. It is intended for English teachers who have not had much contact with the field of intercultural communication, except perhaps what they have seen in recent EFL course books. Nevertheless, many of these teachers have had some personal experience of functioning in more than one culture, for example as an EFL teacher in a foreign country, or of dealing with students from cultures other than theirs. This is the case in almost every EFL classroom nowadays: even French native speakers teaching English in French schools have students of foreign origin or of mixed background.

## **Background**

This article was inspired by promotional material that was sent out before the 2002 TESOL-France Colloquium, which posed some provocative questions around the conference topic, itself presented as a question : A Cross-Cultural Approach to the Teaching and Learning of English ?

I was asked to be moderator of the opening roundtable discussion since some of the colloquium organizers knew I was interested in intercultural communication and had been teaching it for several years. The roundtable included four of the distinguished colloquium speakers, and showed how different their perspectives and areas of interest were on this question. Members of the Paris audience asked questions and made comments, broadening the topic even further in a spirited and very subjective debate about choosing the appropriate variety of English, accent and culture to teach in different environments.

While preparing for the round table I had vowed to remember that the discussion was not about my personal opinions. As it turned out it most definitely was not, since it rapidly developed a life of its own, over which I felt I had very little control. This article might be considered as my turn, my way of entering the debate, which is why I've called it "A Moderator's Proposal". (Since my title is a play on words and a cultural reference, you might say it is a paradoxical choice for an article which is not at all ironic, and in which I hope to be inclusive.)

I am writing as an American who has lived in France for more than twenty years and is now a dual national. I studied French at school and in college, and now teach English at a French "grande école". For the past ten years, the theme of some of my classes has been "Intercultural

Communication”, part of a content-based approach to language teaching. In addition, my doctoral research in linguistics deals with the intercultural aspect of foreign accents and communication.

### Terminology: cross- or inter-?

In French the only possible adjective for this field is “interculturel”, whereas in English we have both “intercultural” and “cross-cultural”. Many English speakers favor “cross-cultural”, some almost avoiding “intercultural” as if it were a case of vocabulary interference with French. Others use the terms interchangeably.

I have entitled my class “Intercultural Communication”, because like many people involved in this field, I distinguish between these two terms. In our usage, “cross-cultural” applies to something which covers more than one culture. For example “a cross-cultural study of education in Western Europe” would be a comparison of chosen aspects of education in various countries or regions, but would consider each country or region separately and would not suggest any interaction between the various educational systems.

On the other hand, the term “intercultural” implies interaction. From an intercultural perspective, it would be possible to study the experiences of students or teachers who move from one educational system to another, or to examine the interactions of students from different countries enrolled in a specific class or program. “Culture shock” and “cultural adaptation” are thus intercultural notions.

### “An intercultural approach to language teaching”

I would like to propose that taking an intercultural approach to language teaching does not mean “teaching culture”, be it from an anecdotal point of view (Beefeaters, double-decker buses, cream teas) or from a political and current events point of view (crime, gun control, the death penalty).

An intercultural approach also goes beyond lists of “Dos and Don'ts” and does not purport to give students tricks or recipes they can apply whenever they communicate with people from a given culture. Far from the “cultural imperialism” mentioned in one of the provocative questions from the 2002 colloquium literature, an intercultural approach should enable learners of English to treat other speakers of English, “native” or “non-native”, with curiosity and respect.

### Definition of culture

The word “culture” has many definitions, so it seems important to rule out those that are not pertinent in the context of intercultural communication.

For example, Latin scholars might emphasize the agricultural roots of the term, which are still apparent in French (e.g. “la culture du maïs”); in English we still speak of a culture of cells in a Petri dish. Nevertheless the definition of culture that is uppermost in many people’s minds is that of “high culture”, as in “the man ain’t got no culture”. Likewise we speak of someone as “cultured” or “cultivated”, or of the “cultural” events scheduled in a certain town on a given weekend. None of these definitions apply in the field of intercultural research, which defines culture from a more anthropological perspective.

Milton Bennett, an American interculturalist and the founder (with his wife Janet) of the Intercultural Communication Institute in Portland, Oregon, gave this definition in a seminar I attended: “the learned and shared values, beliefs and behaviors of a group of interacting people”. Some of the words in this definition bear emphasizing.

## Groups and culture

It is crucial to remember that culture is learned, not something “in one’s blood”. Children adopted as infants will have the culture of their adoptive parents and their society, although we can’t totally discount the impact of their very first experiences, even those in the womb (for example, the sound of their birth mother’s voice!). And of course an Asian child adopted by non-Asian parents in Europe, to take one example, will have to “explain” and deal with the difference between his true culture (say, German or French) and the culture that outsiders may expect him to have, based on his appearance.

Thus culture is learned through interaction, and shared by the people interacting. In this definition there is the suggestion of an ongoing process, of culture as a group creation rather than a solidified object. Definitions that compare culture to an iceberg or to an onion are somewhat misleading, despite their obvious pedagogical appeal.

With this intercultural definition, it becomes clear that all human beings “have culture”, no matter what their level of formal education. Primatologists have even discovered that groups of chimpanzees share rudimentary culture, developing and then teaching each other specific methods of gathering food and grooming in different geographical areas. This differs from the purely instinctive behavior shown by other animals.

Students will easily concur that a person can be fully a member of his culture even if he or she is illiterate. Likewise to have “French culture” you don’t need to be an expert in French literature, art, music or architecture; you may have only the vaguest notions of any of these things.

Bennett uses the term “big C Culture” for the above aspects of culture, and “little c culture” for aspects of behavior that are learned more implicitly. Edward T. Hall, in his seminal work *The Silent Language*, says that culture is “out of awareness”, which is precisely why we tend not to realize that we “have”, or belong to, a culture. We have picked up certain beliefs and behaviors through every succeeding moment of our existence, and not

necessarily because our parents or other people have explicitly told us “Do this” or “Don’t do that”.

## Do’s and Don’ts

Interculturalists are often wary of lists of “Dos and Don’ts” devised for people who are planning to travel or work in foreign cultures. Many English-teaching course books written in the last few years contain lists like this, often in the form of a quiz, which can actually be a lot of fun for students to talk about. Most of the trivia they include is funny, fascinating or surprising, for example the warning about which way to hold your hand in Britain when you order “two beers”, to avoid insulting the bartender with a vulgar gesture. Or the fact that you shouldn’t show the sole of your shoe in an Arab country. Or that French students shouldn’t necessarily rush to kiss their English-speaking hosts on both cheeks at the airport.

I think this can be an enjoyable speaking activity for a group of students, but it is a bit like learning what the traffic signs mean in a foreign country: vital but superficial. Unfortunately it also fosters the idea that foreigners have all sorts of odd, amusing customs that we can learn about. Students tend to forget that they, too, have habits that might seem odd and amusing to an outside observer.

## Major areas of difference

Due to the fact that people are unaware of having learned their cultural behavior, they tend to assume that their group’s way of thinking or acting is human nature. Hence their shock or anger when other people behave in ways they interpret as illogical, unreasonable, or impolite. Before jumping to this conclusion, and placing the conflict or misunderstanding on an interpersonal level, it is often helpful to look at the situation from an intercultural point of view.

Most people are not aware of how much their culture shapes their attitudes towards time, space, and interpersonal communication, to name three major areas of difference.

Concerning time: How do people conceptualize it, and what importance is given to the past, the present, and the future? (Cultures do not necessarily see these as existing along a timeline.) What is the organization of the year, and the day? What does it mean to be “on time” in different situations?

If you ask any group of students whether they feel it is important to be “on time”, you will get a range of answers corresponding to different psychological or personal profiles. From an intercultural perspective, however, this question is meaningless. The discussion changes radically if you ask students what time they would expect to arrive in order to be “on time” for a 10 o’clock meeting at work, for a class, dinner at a friend’s house and so forth. In my opinion we should not be teaching Germans and Americans that “the French are never on

time”, for example, but rather exploring what it means to be “on time” in different situations in France, and when “lateness” (by German or American standards) should not be perceived as insulting but merely as culturally-linked behavior.

Clearly if you are doing business with people from another culture, you might want to find out what time they really expect you to arrive at the meeting, in order to avoid offense on all sides.

Concerning space: How is it divided up and shared? What are the notions of territoriality, of public and private space? How do individuals define their personal space or “bubble”, what E.T. Hall called “proxemics”? In any culture the distance we stand from another person varies depending on our relationship to them and the place where we find ourselves, but these norms vary from culture to culture. Things become complicated when people from different cultures interact.

People naturally (I almost said “instinctively”, but in fact that would be incorrect) try to establish the speaking distance that they were brought up to feel comfortable with. That means that in an intercultural situation one person might want to stand closer than the other, and will move in, whereupon the other person will pull back. The first person might perceive the other as cold or “standoffish” (note the term), whereas the second person will probably think his interlocutor is pushy or “in his face”.

Concerning body language: What is communicated through posture, movement, gestures and facial expressions, eye contact? Many of my students seem to think that only people from certain cultures “use” body language, for example the Italians. Students usually don't realize that their own bodies are communicating information at any given moment, even if they are not aware of it.

Interpreting people's body language is an important skill and can even be a defense mechanism. Once again, however, difficulties may arise when we “decode” the body language of people from other cultures as if they were members of our own culture.

Concerning conversation : What is the pattern of turn-taking, in other words how much overlap is there between speakers? What rituals are expected? What topics are avoided? How much information is transmitted explicitly, and how much is suggested indirectly?

In France the skill of social discourse is so prized that when there is a sudden lapse in the exchange, followed by a silence, some people say “un ange passe”, that is “an angel passes/ is passing”. Raymonde Carroll might say they are acknowledging that they have collectively dropped the ball, since she describes conversation in France as a sort of group endeavor. Her book comparing French and American (US) culture is called “Evidences invisibles”, translated as “Cultural Misunderstandings”. I can't suggest a more faithful English translation myself, but the French title is a lovely description of culture: something obvious and yet invisible, obvious to those who share it and often invisible to those “outside”.

These are only a few of the questions that might be asked about each of these topics. I don't think it's necessary for the instructor to be able to give precise answers to all of these questions for a given culture or situation. The simple fact of making students aware of these areas of difference is enough to suggest other interpretations than those that would be the most obvious in one's own culture. For example, if Midwestern Americans in France are taken aback by what they perceive as an unsmiling, in-your-face debating style and frequent interruptions, should they necessarily interpret it as they would in their own home town?

It will also be useful for students to realize that even if the teacher is a member of the "target culture", his or her reaction is not necessarily the only possible or even the most likely one for that culture.

### Culture of individuals

Just as most human beings speak more than one language, many of us "share" more than one culture with different groups of people we interact with. When applied to a society, the term "multicultural" can suggest a "mixed salad" and does not necessarily mean that each individual belongs to many different cultures. On the other hand "multicultural" and "bicultural", when applied to an individual, suggest mixing or multiplicity, the ability to function in at least two different groups.

This can happen in many ways, and may even apply to most people in border regions where two groups interact frequently. It can be the case of immigrants or anyone who lives with members of another culture and assimilates aspects of their behavior. Other individuals become bicultural through interaction with a mother and father from different cultures, or with grandparents, stepparents, or caregivers. Yet another group, sometimes called "third culture kids", has lived briefly in many different cultures, usually due to their parents' professions, often military, diplomatic or business-related.

Many people believe in the dubious notion of a "perfect bilingual" with a native command of two languages and no influence of one language on the other. Few people would expect this lack of influence in the case of two co-existing cultures. Bicultural individuals have necessarily lost the innocent and dangerous belief that there is only one way of doing things or of looking at a problem. They sometimes feel they have the best of both worlds, and sometimes that they are not truly at home in either culture. Frequently they move back and forth on a continuum between these two feelings.

As a young man in one of my classes said, "Here I'm Chinese, but when I go back to Taiwan I'm the Frenchy." This comment emphasizes how the perception of personal culture is constantly changing, subject to people's image of themselves, influenced by the feedback they receive from others. This is part of the construct of identity, which also includes other characteristics such as age, sex, and profession.

## Objections: We are all the same... We are all different

There are many grounds on which people can object to intercultural research and analysis, and two of the primary ones are apparent opposites: the argument that we are all basically the same, or that we are all ultimately different.

### All the same: humanity transcendent

For philosophical or spiritual reasons, some people reject the differentiation implied by intercultural analysis, and prefer to emphasize those aspects that are common to all human beings and the ways in which we are all one.

On a spiritual plane, this argument is impossible to counter, so I won't even try. It seems clear that in some circumstances we can achieve a form of compassion or empathy for other human beings despite the barriers of language or culture. This is especially true when we manage to rise above the level of day-to-day experience, or when we are faced with extreme circumstances that remind us of our common mortality. Few people seem able to sustain this level of connectedness as they go about the tasks of daily life. Those who do may not need intercultural sensitivity training as much as the rest of us.

I can also hypothesize that certain areas of human endeavor, because they transcend language, make communication possible even where languages and cultures differ: music and dance come to mind, whether they involve acceptance of one overriding musical code (eg. people of many cultures in an orchestra playing a Mozart symphony) or the fusion of several traditions to create a new form. Likewise some physical activities or sports may create a framework of rules and behavior in which other differences, including cultural ones, are less important. This same argument can be made for certain professions. I've heard it said that engineers from different countries understand each other through a shared code of engineering values and behavior. But to echo a statement many teachers have probably heard from students learning Business English, the hard part is when the engineers take a break for lunch or dinner.

### We are all different

A second objection to intercultural generalizations comes from those who maintain that we are all different, since each human being is unique. Once again, this argument is true and impossible to refute. In many Western countries the assertion of each person's individuality and "self" is a key cultural value.

Related to this fundamental notion is the fact that, due to all the variation in any group of human beings, there will be many exceptions to any generalization. At the national level, for example, it might seem ludicrous to generalize about a country like the United States, given the important regional, racial and ethnic variation, in addition to socio-economic,

political and religious differences, on top of such variables as education, profession, age and sex.

In fact this is also true for countries that appear to be more homogeneous. The French are quick to differentiate between people in various regions, and those in a specific region can also see differences between inhabitants of two nearby towns. The more people know about a given area, the more they can see these differences.

Milton Bennett speaks of different “levels of analysis”. In my opinion it can be useful for students to visualize these levels, from comparing individuals, say individual French people, to generalizing about people in Nice compared to those in Marseille, or people in the French Mediterranean region compared to those in Alsace or in Brittany. It is possible to generalize at any of these levels, or to continue “upwards” and compare France to other European countries, Western Europe to Eastern Europe, Northwestern Europe to Southwestern Europe, Europe to North America, or even Western countries to Asian countries.

The intercultural approach hypothesizes that there are useful generalizations to be made at any of these levels, as long as people are aware of the great appeal and the great danger of stereotyping.

## Stereotypes

One of the most frequent criticisms made about intercultural awareness training or about any discussion of “cultural differences”, is that they encourage the propagation of stereotypes concerning people from other cultures. Since stereotypes are by definition oversimplified and by nature judgmental and often derogatory, this would certainly not encourage effective intercultural communication.

There are those who maintain that if enough people in a culture share a stereotype about another group, then this stereotype must have a “kernel of truth”. This is said to be especially true when people from different cultures share a common stereotype about a certain cultural group. Yet on the other hand we are all familiar with the idea that a lie, if repeated often enough, will ultimately gain credence with some of the people who hear it. I think it is important to underline that stereotypes say something not only about the people being judged, but also about those doing the judging and their vision of themselves.

Personal or idiosyncratic stereotypes are easy to form through personal contacts, but relatively easy to counter on the basis of logic. Shared stereotypes can be harder, insofar as they play into the “us vs. them” mentality. They can provide a fairly harmless outlet for the frustrations of the “out” group, for example in the case of host-culture bashing on the part of foreigners living there, but can also provide dangerous scapegoats for large, angry groups of people.

Whenever the subject comes up in class discussions (which is often), I think it is important for the instructor to remind students of the limits of generalization and the importance of the words used. Stereotyping lumps all members of a group or culture together, whereas generalization allows room for variation. It encourages people to approach an individual with certain expectations, but to be willing to modify these expectations if the individual seems not to fit the expected "norm". In addition, stereotyping often uses words that are derogatory and emotionally charged, whereas the same information could be expressed in a more neutral, less aggressive way. Does this sound like proselytizing or political correctness?

### Holier and more sensitive than thou?

People who believe in encouraging intercultural awareness, myself included, sometimes take on an almost zealous air, preaching tolerance and ethnorelativity, warning against insensitivity and ethnocentrism, to the point that we must sometimes resemble members of a cult. Most of us have experienced life in another culture, and tend to assume that we can help others over some of the hurdles we have encountered.

Our insistence on the potential difficulties of intercultural communication makes some people want to protest. They feel we are accentuating the negative, whereas their intercultural experiences have been largely positive despite an absence of consciousness-raising. One of them challenged me: "Just because adapting to French culture was hard for you, why do you have to assume it's that way for everybody?"

And of course I can't assume that, although I may secretly think that some objectors need to spend a little more time in another culture before we talk. All I can say to other English teachers is that some students in my intercultural communication classes have been very grateful to learn that their "culture shock" or adaptation problems were not rare. Many of them were foreign students who had come to France to study, or young people from culturally-mixed backgrounds. Students like these may be more common in an ESL context than they are in an EFL context like France. Nevertheless in an increasingly multicultural France these students are often eager for recognition.

Some of your students will be very interested in these ideas already, and ready to share their experiences. Teachers should nevertheless be aware that culture and identity are extremely emotional topics, so that even students who are interested in the course material may prefer not to talk about their personal experiences. In classes where I have had a very open student who was willing to share his or her stories, the other students have been fascinated and touched. But I have also had students who were very reticent, and have refused to talk about themselves as representatives of a certain culture, or of a group such as "beurs" ("verlan" or backwards language slang for "arabe", people of Arab origin in France). At the beginning of the course, I always tell students that if ever I ask them an "intercultural question" they don't care to answer, they should feel free to say "I don't really want to talk about that" or "That's a bit personal".

Finally, in any class there will certainly be some students who have never given the matter any thought, who have never been abroad or who have spent only a few weeks as tourists or visitors. Some of them, in my experience, will tell you a year or two later that they appreciate the course more after having done an internship abroad or having had another intercultural experience.

## The language of intercultural awareness

As English teachers, even if we do not teach intercultural awareness per se, we are constantly dealing with our students' use of language and attempting to help them make it more appropriate to their situation and goals. Just as they need to know how to "moderate" their opinion as they increase in proficiency, and how to be polite in various situations, they can also learn to appreciate the extent to which many words and expressions are based on cultural norms.

No one would be surprised at the idea that "beautiful" and "delicious" can qualify very different objects, depending on the personality and culture of the speaker. The same is true for "logical", "dirty", "late", "hypocritical", "cold" and many other adjectives applied to people and their actions.

I am not suggesting that students and instructors should become paragons of political correctness, incapable of personal opinion, critical judgment and genuine sentiment. However I would like them to be aware of the implicit judgment behind many words, in English as in other languages, and the fact that the assumptions on which these judgments are based may not be shared by people from different cultural backgrounds. For example, sometimes people are shocked by behavior they feel shows a lack of "common sense". Clearly, something that makes sense to members of one culture may make no sense at all to members of another.

## Conclusion

I admit that it sometimes seems incredibly naïve to speak of acceptance, tolerance and empathy in a world that seems increasingly marked by a return to radical tribalism and various aggressive fundamentalisms which claim to have the moral and spiritual high road. I don't believe that people have to relinquish their moral code or consider that all morality is relative. I do believe that there is more than one path to knowledge and truth, and that people who feel they have found the one good way are frightening, no matter which way they have found.

It is my hope that intercultural sensitivity can further understanding, by allowing people to move past some of the "annoying" behavior and "exotic" customs of members of other

cultures. We human beings often fear and dislike the unknown. Training in intercultural awareness can make the unknown seem a little less surprising.

### **Biodata**

I think I would like the biodata to read like this:

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