

# Culture Awareness and the development of the pluricultural competence

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**Abstract/Résumé** (100 to 150 words; 100 à 150 mots):

Five activities are presented here to stimulate the development of pluriculturalism in teacher trainees. The first one tries to uncover the definition(s) of culture we bear in mind in order to incorporate an updated, anthropologically-sound definition for language teaching. The second one keeps reflecting on the idea of culture, now about one of its main assumed features, that culture can be transmitted; the analysis of that transmission in the family can help us understand it more deeply. The third one deals with identity and stereotypes, trying to see how easy it is to invoke stereotypes and how deeply they can determine our interpretation of other people's lives. The fourth one invites us to make an "examination of identity" to see the presence of cultures in our lives and to compare it with our fellow mates. Finally, the fifth one proposes an analytical activity to consider whether certain teaching practices promote pluriculturalism and rich socialization (and in which degrees) or not.

## **Rationale / Cadre théorique**

The concept of «pluriculturalism» is one of the most important educational innovations present in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Language learning can help the individual understand her/himself better thanks to the contact with other people. That connection can promote pluriculturalism, the development of a rich conception of identity. In this set of activities we assume that a reflective and critical approach to culture can help in the construction of a rich and sound pluricultural identity.

## **Personal and social dimensions / dimension individuelle et sociale**

- To observe the linguistic and cultural diversity of contexts and individuals;
- To recognise the linguistic and cultural complexity of individual and collective identities;
- To recognise linguistic and cultural diversity as a positive characteristic of groups and societies
- To enhance each individual's language and culture by considering language and culture as a means of human development (aimed at social inclusion and as preparation for exercising their citizenship);

## **Professional dimensions / dimension professionnelle**

- To be aware of the need for a new linguistic and cultural education capable of promoting plurilingualism and pluriculturalism;
- To know and defend the reasons for an education favourable to the development of a plurilingual and pluricultural competence;
- To observe, analyse and make use of – in didactic terms – the diversity that exists in one's teaching environment (individual and collective repertoires).




## The definition of culture

Timing / durée: 60 minutes


Material required / matériel nécessaire: paper and pins


Grouping / mode de groupement:

Grouping / mode de groupement:


 (individual/individuel) /  (pair work/par paire) /  (group work/travail de groupe)

Description of the activities / description des activités

 Prepare a poster with your own definition of culture. Don't look it up in any book. Hung each poster on the walls so that everybody can read and compare them. Look for similarities and differences.

 In pairs, first, and, then, in small groups (4-6 people), build a "shared" folk definition of culture.

 Finally, try to write a large group definition.

 With that group definition in mind, check if these statements are included in your definition:

1. culture is a way of life
2. culture comprises traditions and customs
3. culture is the behaviour of a group
4. culture comprises the main features of a society
5. culture is the knowledge one must learn to belong to a society

Notes for teachers:

“Culture” is a fashionable term nowadays. However, many old-fashioned definitions of culture still coexist with other more updated ones. An anthropologically-sound definition of culture describes it as a shared system of meanings and symbols human beings use to interpret reality and behave accordingly.

The statements mentioned (1. culture is a way of life; 2. culture comprises traditions and customs; 3. culture is the behaviour of a group; 4. culture comprises the main features of a society; 5. culture is the knowledge one must learn to belong to a society) above are based on two metaphors: “culture is an object” and “culture is an enclosure”. On the one hand, we should remember cultures are not objects (they are sets of ideas and symbols) which can be transmitted untouched but dynamic systems in constant change (even those ones which seem to be unchanged for centuries, such as religious cultures); on the other hand, cultures are not enclosures; in fact, most of us participate just partially of a wide number of different cultures: we are not exclusively national beings, religious beings or ethnic beings. We have multiple identities and we belong to multiple groups with different degrees of identification.

This multiple-identity perspective is the basis of pluriculturalism. Depending on the situations, we adopt and use a “cultural face” to interact with other human beings. Awareness of this fact can help us understand ourselves and others as well as the different communicative situations we may get involved.

## The 'transmission' of culture

Timing / durée: 60 minutes

Material required / matériel nécessaire : pencil and paper

Grouping / mode de groupement:

 (individual/individuel) /  (pair work/par paire)

Description of the activities / description des activités



Think of the differences and similarities among your grand-parents, your parents and you about

- a. religion;
- b. politics;
- c. sex;
- d. the family and generational relationships;
- e. civic compromise;
- f. ...



Then, write a short text to summarize those differences and similarities and share it with your partner.

Notes for teachers:

How can we explain these similarities and differences among members of a family if "culture is transmitted"? The culture of a group is managed (created, maintained and modified) through communication, which is a process of interpretation, open to negotiation of meanings. That is, culture is not transmitted as such, but created and re-created in people's minds.

Furthermore, thanks to this activity we can observe some interesting cultural phenomena: 1) individuals enjoy many different cultural groupings; being part of a family and being part of a generational group (grandparents, parents and children) are two basic groupings which can explain these similarities and differences; 2) our participation in a cultural community is partial and normally linked to our distance to the "power nucleus": if power in a family is represented by parents (or grandparents) the family culture is more strongly determined by their actions than by the rest of the members; consequently, children belong to the family culture but in a more peripheral and partial way than parents and grandparents; 3) cultures are dynamic and it may happen (it does) that the actions and ways of thinking of children modify the family culture gradually through the on-going process of communication which maintains the family together.

# Identity and stereotypes


Timing / durée: 60 minutes

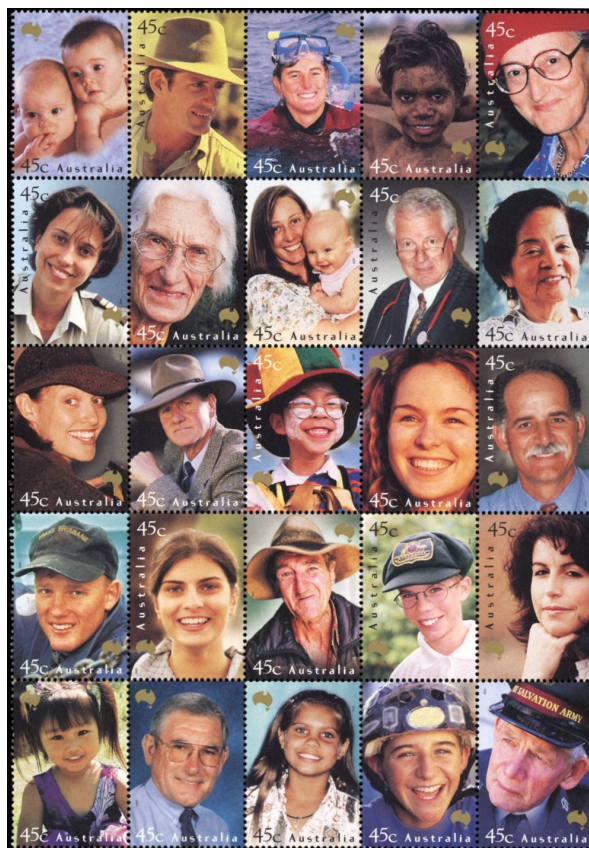
Material required / matériel nécessaire : Pictures of different people ; pencil and paper

Grouping / mode de groupement:

 (individual/individuel) /  (whole class/toute la classe)

Description of the activities / description des activités

 Who are these people? Fill in the following table making up the personality and the social life of three of these people. Describe them using just the graphic information you may receive from their image



	Picture 1	Picture 2	Picture 3
Name			
Place and date of birth			
Educational background			
Language(s)			
Hobbies			
Other details			



Adopt now one of those three identities and explore it. The whole group stands up and everyone introduces her/himself using that new identity. The activity can take place in a circle or walking along the classroom in pair conversation. At the end of it everybody must choose one of the “new identities” to get to know her/him better.

Notes for teachers:

The objective of this activity is to reflect on how easy it is to create a whole identity from an image just using our stereotypes. Stereotypes are not negative by themselves; they are shortcuts used in quick thinking with very limited information. However, social relations cannot be affected by stereotypes, particularly in educational contexts because stereotypes reduce identity to a small number of interpretative guidelines, keeping it away from the rich pluricultural perspective mentioned in the activities above. Awareness, reflection and criticism must be our constant objectives in relation to stereotypes.




In this sense, the group might like to come back to this activity after the teacher educator reflection on stereotypes in order to build new identities from a pluricultural perspective.

## Examination of identity


Timing / durée: 60 minutes


Material required / matériel nécessaire : paper and pencil ; a text by Amin Maalouf (2001 – see annex) ; the trainees' cards.


Grouping / mode de groupement:

 (individual/individuel) /  (pair work/par paire) /  (group work/travail de groupe)

Description of the activities / description des activités

 First, read pages 24 to 28 from Maalouf (2001 – see annex). There you can learn what the “examination of identity” is. Then, make your own “examination of identity” going through the multiple identifications which make up your identity.

 In pairs, share the results of your exam to study the coincidences and the divergences. Now, make a list of common identifications.

 Finally, the class will meet to compare them and write a list of common identifications.

### **A game**

Each of us will take out all the cards we may carry in our wallet (VISA, supermarkets, clubs, libraries,...). They represent a plastic signal of belonging. We can make a list of the groups they mark us as members of. Then, we can also write a list of those groups we belong to but we do not have cards to symbolize our belonging. Which differences are there among them? Which similarities?



As a conclusion, consider this quotation by Claire Kramsch (1998: 82) about the native speaker:

“The cultural identity of multicultural individuals is not that of multiple native speakers, but, rather, it is made of a multiplicity of social roles or ‘subject positions’ which they occupy selectively, depending on the interactional context in which they find themselves at the time.”

So, if we all have multiple identities, we are all ‘multicultural’ inside, then. That is, we are pluricultural.

Note for teachers:

The examination of identity is a powerful awareness-raising activity which normally provokes surprising results. First, we are not normally aware of the number of groups/cultures we belong to (and how they determine our interpretations and behaviours); second, the identification of coincidences, divergences and common identifications can surprise us with differences among people who considered themselves “very similar” and similarities among people who regarded themselves “totally different”.

Finally, it is important to know that one of the lessons of the implementation of the game with the plastic cards was that it may not work in every nation/group, depending on the distribution of these items in that group. Perhaps an alternative might be to analyse the items in the trainees’ bags or wallets to see references to groups they belong to (pictures of the family or group of friends, a ticket to a cultural event, a mobile telephone,...).






## Developing the pluricultural competence: rich socialization


Timing / durée: 60 minutes

Material required / matériel nécessaire : paper and pencil

Grouping / mode de groupement:

 (individual/individuel) /  (pair work/par paire) /  (whole class/toute la classe)

Description of the activities / description des activités

 Read the following list of competences from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, point 2.1. Normally, language teaching was organised around the concept of communicative competence but what does the “general competences” add to our traditional view on learners’ competences applied to language learning? Share your opinion with your partner.

### 1. General competences

- a. Declarative knowledge (savoir)
  - i. Knowledge of the world
  - ii. Sociocultural knowledge
  - iii. Intercultural awareness
- b. Skills and know-how (savoir-faire)
  - i. Practical skills and know-how
    1. social skills
    2. living skills
    3. vocational and professional skills
    4. leisure skills
  - ii. Intercultural skills and know-how
    1. the ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other;
    2. cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures;
    3. the capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between one’s own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations;
    4. the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships.
- c. ‘Existential’ competence (savioire-etre)
  - i. attitudes
  - ii. motivations
  - iii. values
  - iv. beliefs
  - v. cognitive styles
  - vi. personality factors

- d. Ability to learn (savoir-apprendre)
  - i. Language and communication awareness
  - ii. General phonetic awareness and skills
  - iii. Study skills
  - iv. Heuristic skills
2. Communicative language competences
  - a. Linguistic competences
  - b. Sociolinguistic competences
  - c. Pragmatic competences.

The question is whether we can hope to help our students become pluricultural through language learning. Although there is not much research about it, Lantolf (1999: 45) seems to conclude that “although the evidence is not overwhelming, it does seem to be possible for some adults in certain circumstances to restructure, to some extent at least, their conceptual organization, whereas for others, as in the case of classroom learners, reorganization does not seem to be a likely alternative”.

Awareness of culture and rich socialization are two procedures to develop the pluricultural competence. Our proposal of “rich socialization” is related to being socialized in contact with diversity. It implies to make our students familiar with a number of different social contexts and the people living them. That contact is an element of socialization of our students but it can also help them become pluricultural.



Now which teaching procedures can favour rich socialization and which do not? Make a list and share it with your partner.



What about these ones: do they promote rich socialization or not? Why and how?

- Drama techniques
- Pen-pals and other varieties
- Lectures on culture
- Solving culture problems
- Literature activities
- Interviewing a native speaker
- Contact with people from other communities living around the learners
- Study visits to a foreign country
- Making an ethnographic research
- Watching a video



Share your opinion with your partner and then with the whole group.

Note for teachers:

The definition of concepts in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages invite us to consider language and culture teaching from a wider perspective in which the whole student is involved. One of the innovations implied by the Common European Framework is the development of pluriculturalism and plurilingualism. In this activity we invite teacher trainees to reflect on activities which can help develop pluriculturalism through the practice of rich socialization, that is, contact with diversity.

## **Assessment / évaluation**

These activities aim at two important aspects of change in the teacher trainees: at a rational level, a new awareness and conception of culture and identity is proposed to be considered in language teaching; at an emotional level, higher degrees of empathy and mutual understanding are expected after the activities. Both dimensions can be observed during the progress of the activities, or with the inclusion in the trainee portfolio of an evaluation essay in which they may consider the effects of these activities on them as individuals and as teachers-to-be. A conference between the teacher trainee and the trainer can also help measure the effects of the activities in the trainees.

## **Bibliography**

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## Annex

“Examination of Identity”: Amin Maalouf. 2001. *Identidades Asesinas* (pp. 24-28). Madrid: Alianza Editorial. Personal Translation.

Just as others do an examination of conscience, sometimes I see myself doing what we might call an “examination of identity”. I do not try –it must have been guessed– to find an essential belonging where I could recognise myself, but rather I assume the opposite attitude: I search my memory to bring out as many components of my identity as possible, I put them together and make a list, not leaving any of them out.

I come from a family from the South of Arabia who settled down some centuries ago on the Lebanese mountains and who have spread since then, in successive migrations, throughout several corners of the planet, from Egypt to Brazil, from Cuba to Australia. My family is proud of having always been Arab and Christian, probably since the Second or Third Century, that is, much before Islam appeared and even before the West became Christian.

The fact of being Christian and of having as my mother tongue Arabic, which is the Holy Language of Islam, is one of the fundamental paradoxes which have forged my identity. Speaking Arabic weaves ties which join me to all those who use it daily in their prayers, to many people who, most of them, know it worse than I do; if someone who goes around Central Asia meets an old wise man at the door of a Timur madrasat, it is enough for them to speak in Arabic to feel in a friendly land and for him to talk good-heartedly, as he would never do speaking in Russian or in English.

The Arabic Language is common to him, to me and to more than one thousand million people. On the other hand, my belonging to Christianity – no matter if it is profoundly religiously or just sociologically – joins me significantly to all the Christians in the world, about two thousand millions. Many things separate me from each Christian, as from each Arab and each Muslim, but at the same time I have with all of them an undeniable relationship, in the first case religious and intellectual, in the second case linguistic and cultural.

Having said this, the fact of being at the same time Arab and Christian is a very specific condition, a minority one, and one not always easy to assume; it marks the person in a profound and lasting way; in my case, I cannot deny it has been decisive in most of the decisions I have had to make along my life, including the decision of writing this book.

Thus, when I contemplate these two elements of my identity separately, I feel close, by language or religion, to more than half the human kind; taken together, simultaneously, I see myself facing my specificity.

The same could be said about my other belongings: the fact of being French is shared with some sixty million people; being Lebanese, with between eight and ten million if I count the diaspora; but, the fact of being both things, French and Lebanese, with how many people is it shared? With a few thousands, I suppose.

Each one of my belongings links me to many people; and, however, the more belongings I consider, the more specific my identity is revealed.

Even if I prolong about my origins, I should specify that I was born within a Greek Catholic community, or Melkites, who acknowledge the authority of the Pope but keep faithful to some Byzantine rites. At first sight, that is not more than a detail, a curiosity, but, thinking it over, it turns out to be a decisive aspect of my identity: in a country such as Lebanon, where the strongest communities have always fought for their territory and their parcel of power, the members of a very minority community as mine have rarely gone up in arms and have been the first ones to exile. Personally, I always refused to get involved

in a war I thought absurd and suicidal; but that way of looking at things, that distant look, that refusal to take arms is related to my belonging to a marginal community.

Therefore I am a Melkite. However, if one day someone searched my name in the civil register – which in Lebanon, as it may be imagined, is organized in terms of religious confessions – they would not find me among the Melkites, but in the Protestant section. Why? It would be too long to explain. Suffice it to say that in our family there were two opposed religious traditions, and that during my childhood I witnessed that rivalry: I witnessed and, sometimes, suffered it: if they registered me at the French school, the Jesuit, it was because my mother, strongly Catholic, wanted to keep me from the Protestant influence which then dominated my father's family, in which it was traditional to send their children to American or English schools; and it is due to that conflict why I speak French, and that is why, during the war of Lebanon, I went to live to Paris and not to New York, Vancouver or London and why I started to write in French.

More details about my identity? I could tell you about my Turkish grandmother, her husband, a Maronite from Egypt, and about my other grandfather, dead well before I was born, about whom I have been told he was a poet, a freethinker, perhaps a Mason, and in any case violently anticlerical. I could go back up to a great-great-uncle of mine who was the first one to translate Molière into Arabic and who played it, in 1848, on the stage of an Ottoman theatre.

But I will not do it, as it is enough with this I have said, and I will ask a question: how many of my fellow men and women share with me this different elements which have shaped my identity and outlined, in general terms, my personal itinerary? Very few of them. Perhaps none. And it is on this I want to insist: thanks to each of my belongings, taken separately, I am joined by a certain relationship to many of my fellow people; thanks to those same criteria, but taken together, I have my own identity, which cannot be confused with any other.

Extrapolating from that, I can say that with every human being I have in common some belongings, but that there is nobody in the world who shares all of them with me, not even many of them; from the scores of criteria I could mention, it would be enough with a few of them to establish my specific identity clearly, which is different from any other person, even from my own son and my own father.