

My understanding of intercultural learning

M.Byram (2005) proposes including citizenship and human rights education as part of intercultural dimension of language teaching/learning. I am convinced that including them in language education is essential.

I agree with Helen Keller that “The highest result of education is tolerance”, language learning is just one aspect of education , educational goals are primary (as M.Byram stresses), language is just a tool for holistic development of personality. I appreciate the description of empathy by Kvale “I wish to understand the meaning of your experience your way, walk in your shoes, feel what you feel, and explain it in the way you do. Would you be my teacher and help me doing so? (Kvale, 1997:73).

I find that it is important to deal with individuals and their experiences and to be aware that in the process of socialization we are influenced by different microcultures – that of the family, peers, place of birth, school, profession, corporate culture, age (generation), gender and so on.

S.Sierens (2000) points out 7 criteria for designing intercultural learning materials:

1. Recognisable (addressing all pupils` experience)
2. Accessible (suited for pupils` language level, competence)
3. Reflecting diversity (showing many-sided image of diversity in society)
4. Showing interaction (individuals interacting with each other)
5. Antiracist-unprejudiced
6. Multiperspectivist (from various points of view, people experiencing realities in various ways)
7. Activating and innovating (didactic approach- cooperation, pupils-active, critical analysis)

Diversity in the society of Latvia (modified from *Changing Perspectives : Cultural values, Diversity and Equality in Ireland and the Wider World: A Resource for Civic, Social and Political Education*, Dublin: CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit, the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism, 2002, p.48-55 and from the drama activities presented in the courses 'Inter-Connect: promoting intercultural understanding in ELT through drama' in Slapanice, Czech Republic, July, 2005)

Notes for teachers

Aim: Students reflect critically on diversity and values in the society of Latvia.

Class time: 90 minutes (45+45)

Methodology:

1. the teacher asks students to stand in a line in the hall and walking along the line asks each student to take out a role/identity card. The role cards contain information on the person that the student has to identify with.
2. The teacher lets students read the information from the role cards and then explains that she is going to read several statements and the students should make a large step if they can do what is mentioned in the statement easily, a small step, if they can do it with difficulty and stay without moving, if they cannot do it at all.
3. The teacher reads statements and the students make steps.
4. The teacher stops reading and approaches some students and asks to tell about their roles (who are they according to the role card) how do they feel about their situation in life, how do they react to the fact that others have got further, what actions they felt they were not able to do.
5. One student whose role card says that he is a wheelchair user sits in a "hot seat". The teacher tells him beforehand some information and now he first of all says some words about himself: that he is 16 years old, from a poor family and that a year ago he suffered in a car accident and now he has to use a wheelchair, that his girlfriend has left him.
6. Students ask him questions that they feel like asking (such as how he can move around Riga, attend school, go shopping, go to Jurmala, to the doctor, cinema, café, concert, visit his friends regularly) and he answers.
7. Students work in groups and perform a still image showing his life after 5 years.
8. Discussion: what are the reasons for getting further in the society of Latvia, what does it show about the values in the society.

Follow-up: at home students are asked to explore several buildings and public transport in Riga (or other place) and investigate how accessible they are for wheelchair users (do they have elevators for wheelchair users, special entrances...) find out how much does a special elevator for lifting up to the entrance of the house cost, what services and help do social services provide for wheelchair users. Students present their findings in the next class.

