

Role-play: intercultural encounters

© Huber-Kriegler, Lázár & Strange (2003). *Mirrors and windows: An intercultural communication textbook*, pp. 85–88.¹

The following role-play is an excellent way to raise your students' awareness of the importance of differences in non-verbal communication. It may even help students to experience culture shock for a few minutes. Therefore, it is probably best used with a monolingual/monocultural group who has little or no experience of meeting people from other cultures.

Preparation

Role -cards, colour ribbons, copies of the set of questions for discussion

Procedure

1. Explain that students will arrive from three different countries according to their roles to participate at a reception (or a party for first-year undergraduates, a business meeting or a ball depending on your students' interests and age).
2. All they have to do is get to know one another a little by talking briefly to as many people as possible.
3. Students without role cards should be asked to observe the players closely so they can even eavesdrop on some of the conversations. (You can prepare role-cards for the observers, too.)
4. Distribute role-cards and matching ribbons and let students stand up, walk around and get to know one other. (The red, blue and white ribbons worn as ties or necklaces help students identify who is from which country during and after the game.)
5. After about eight to twelve minutes of partying (less if you have a small number of students), they should be asked to sit down in groups of four or five, preferably so that there are people from Blueland, Whiteland and Redland in each group as well as one or two observers.
6. Distribute the set of questions (see below) for the discussion and let them answer the questions and discuss the issues in their groups.
7. Bring the whole class together and elicit some of their answers and final conclusions so you can evaluate the experience of cultural encounters together. This is probably a good time to ask your students if they have ever had intercultural misunderstandings with people from other cultures or tell them about your own similar experiences. You could also ask them whether they have ever been excluded from anywhere and how that felt. Another, perhaps more difficult, issue that can be discussed here is whether your students avoid or exclude any group of people on any basis.

¹ A variation on a role-play game from Holló, D. and Lázár, I. (2000b), "The Neglected Element: Teaching Culture in the EFL Classroom", *NovELTy*, Vol. 7, No.1, pp. 76–84.



Comments

Your students might not be used to role-play. Even if some students feel incapable of acting according to the roles allocated to them, the follow-up discussion might be entertaining and informative. In fact, this could provide another interesting issue for discussion: why is it so strange and difficult for us to avoid eye contact or pull earlobes when we talk to people? This can then lead to an awareness raising discussion on the different meanings of the same behaviour in different cultures.

This role-play also helps to recognise and observe features of other cultures. By playing set roles in unfamiliar social and cultural situations, students have a chance to experience different behaviours and recognise different values behind them. This is especially useful because as long as students are never exposed to foreign social customs and cultural values, they will not know how to react in intercultural settings. They may easily fabricate judgmental opinions about other people simply because they have never seen anything different from their own culture's norms and standards.

Variations

(a) Depending on your students' age and interest as well as your teaching focus, you may want to change the character description on each role-card. You could also list conversation topics there ("Try talking about the weather/shopping/sports") or you could also leave it up to the students what they want to talk about at a party or reception. They could then compare and evaluate the conversation starters they used for effectiveness and appropriateness afterwards.

Steps 6 and 7 can be done together as a whole class activity if you think that the whole discussion should be controlled or if the group is too small to split up.

(b) You can also start the debriefing session by asking the students to sit according to their assigned groups and not to talk to each other directly for the time being (the point is they should not exchange their role -cards or give away the instructions they got).

Then Redlanders describe Bluelanders and list the adjectives on the board. Bluelanders are not allowed to react at this stage. (This is also to make them realise how difficult it is to be exposed to prejudices and not be able to correct them.) You then ask the Whitelanders to describe the Redlanders and so on. Afterwards you can ask them to guess what the cause of the difficulties/differences could be and ask them to try and formulate the rules the other group had. Only after this should they present their original role-cards to the other group and discuss what effects the differences in rules had. (It might also be worthwhile to ask whether forming a distinct group united by specific behaviours had emotional benefits for the individuals.)



Sample role-cards

You come from **Redland**. You like to meet foreigners, but you really dislike being touched by strangers. In your country you rarely look into each other's eyes, and you always avoid eye contact when you first meet someone. You eat with a spoon.

You are from **Blueland**. In your country, people gently, but consistently touch each other's arms when they talk. You eat with your hands. You like to meet foreigners, but you avoid people from Whiteland.

You come from **Whiteland**. You love to meet people and express your enthusiasm with a lot of gestures. When you meet someone, you touch your earlobes and bow a little to say "hello" politely. You eat with chopsticks.

Follow-up questions

- What did we learn about the three different cultures?
- What is the role of physical contact?
- What caused (or could have caused) conflicts?
- How did participants avoid/solve conflicts?
- Are there any similarities between your culture and any of these three cultures?
- What are some of the differences?
- Which culture did you find the strangest of all?
- What else would you like to learn about these cultures?
- How did you feel while you were participating in the game?
- What did you notice when you were observing the role-play?