

# Finding Heterogeneity in Cultural Homogeneity

**A** typical complication in teaching for intercultural competence in English as a foreign language (EFL) is the lack of heterogeneity, or diversity, in each class. Universities and schools in many parts of the world are dominated by just one ethnic group. For example, in many of my classes, the students all use the same first language. Therefore, diversity of language use, which is often an indicator of cultural heterogeneity (Guilherme and Dietz 2015), is of minimal use in raising cultural awareness. In addition, I have taught classes where all the students were of the same age and ethnic group, and they all spoke related dialects of the same language. In other classes, only one or two students were not from the local majority ethnic or faith group. I have also come across students who have said their struggle is that they had never spoken to, or intended to speak to, anyone of another ethnicity or faith. The idea of needing to relate to people outside their culture seemed irrelevant to them.

Both Byram and Fleming (1998) in the United Kingdom and Jandt (2016) in the United States have written extensively about the necessary connection between teaching and learning English and developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC). There are various pragmatic reasons to start from the students' own culture(s). Ali and Walker (2014) suggest that materials writers use the "home culture" or students' culture(s) context at lower levels of language learning, transitioning to target-language culture at higher levels.

Bennett (2004, 74) explains that English learners "who have received largely monocultural socialization normally have access only to their own *cultural worldview*, so they are unable to experience the difference between their own perception and that of

people who are culturally different." However, there is a lack of teaching materials addressing this inability.

I have designed awareness-raising class activities to give students, in classes that appear to be culturally homogenous, chances to experience differences in perception. These activities serve as a preliminary step in helping students experience and appreciate different cultural behaviors. Following a brief overview of the theoretical framework, the activities are presented below.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Standard textbooks often suggest using cultural differences in the immediate context as a starting point in learning ICC (Liu, Volcic, and Gallois 2019). However,

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as de Goei (2014), Reimann (2010), and Chlopek (2008) have noted, there may not be much cultural diversity in EFL classes. Without conscious exposure to cultural differences, students in culturally homogenous classes may deny such differences exist (Bennett 2004). This will hinder their ability to interact appropriately with people of different cultures, English-speaking or otherwise.

Some suggestions of ways to help students learn about cultural differences, such as those put forward by Corbett (2010), assume that students are already aware of and interested in these differences. However, in homogenous classes, many students may be almost oblivious to differences in behavior that are related to culture. The following activities help such students become aware of differences in behavior and perception that exist in their own classroom.

### ACTIVITIES

Below are five groups of activities I have used when teaching culturally homogenous classes in Indonesia in order to promote awareness of cultural differences. Suggestions are included on how to integrate these activities into any language class to arouse students' curiosity about culture. A curiosity about cultural differences within an apparently culturally homogenous class can help students start to negotiate foreign cultures.

An example of each activity includes comments on how and why to use them.

Alternative suggestions are provided for most activities, starting with the ones that I have found most useful. It is possible and even likely that not all of the activities will be appropriate where you teach. I see these activities as a buffet from which you can pick and choose what is appropriate for your students.

#### Group 1. Focusing on the Everyday

In many Indonesian educational contexts, much emphasis is on Culture with a capital C: the dances, foods, and songs of various areas and ethnic groups. This is particularly apparent in school subjects dealing with culture. Such a focus flows over into EFL classes. For example, students tend to ask only about what people in various countries eat, rather than also being interested in discovering where, how, and with whom people eat. They mention what people from other cultures wear, rather than why they wear those types of clothes.

This preoccupation with cultural knowledge as facts has been noted in several other Asian cultures (Tian 2016; Nguyen 2007). Although facts about another culture can be fascinating, knowing them does not directly help a student interact with the people of that culture, one of the stated aims of intercultural competence. This is why culture with a small *c*—the more intangible aspects of culture, including values, beliefs, and practices around language use, communication, and daily life—should rather be the focus. What is needed is the

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analysis and then much practice of everyday language and behaviors (Chlopek 2008).

The following everyday culture activities can serve as pre-teaching for the topic or language function they are related to, especially for higher-level classes. Alternatively, the activities can be used at the end of a unit of work to extend cultural understanding.

### **Activity: Good Morning**

**Context:** Lesson about greetings or the beginning of a new class

**Time needed:** About 30 minutes

**Pre-teach/review:** Simple past, reported speech

**Procedure:** Give instructions and ask questions:

- Think about whom you first talked to this morning.
- Who was it? What did you say? Why?
- In groups of three, discuss your answers.
- *[After small-group discussion]* Are your answers similar or different? In what ways? What have you learned about yourself or your culture from answering and discussing these questions?

These questions are almost guaranteed to produce a variety of answers. One class put forward that an older sibling might start the day by telling a younger sibling to get up and do the morning prayers, but not vice versa. We then discussed this example when the cultural values of hierarchy and egalitarianism were introduced. This variety helps the class start discovering some heterogeneity in their homogeneity.

Personality traits and lifestyle may account for some of the answers, but useful cultural information may well be lurking there.

Students living away from home say different things to their roommates than they would say to their parents or brothers and sisters when they are at home. Note that this activity also provides an opportunity to teach the use of titles, names, and terms of address in English.

**Alternatives:** Any daily speech routine can be analyzed for greetings and leave-takings, factual questions, chitchat, and gossip. Teachers can tweak this activity to have students ask about other daily habits, such as eating, studying, getting dressed, going to school (and going back home), and shopping.

### **Activity: Combing Your Hair**

**Context:** Contrasting use of simple present and present continuous; utilizing behaviors that are unfamiliar to students, mentioned in a dialog or a reading in a textbook

**Time needed:** 30 minutes

**Pre-teach/review:** Simple present for habitual actions and present continuous for present activities; with advanced classes, teachers might introduce *rarely* and other adverbs of frequency

**Procedure:** Ask questions and elicit answers.

#### **Step 1**

Teacher: What am I doing? (*mimes combing hair; elicits answers*)

Students: (*One by one the teacher asks students to mime an activity for the class to guess.*)

Teacher: (*asks students*) What is s/he doing? (*elicits answers*)

Teacher: (*mimes*) I comb my hair every day. Do you often comb your hair? (*elicits answers*)

Teacher: (*asks other students*) Does s/he often comb her/his hair? (*elicits answers*)

Teacher: (*mimes*) I'm combing my hair now. In fact, I comb my hair often/every day. (*asks students to mime and make two sentences like this about themselves*)

### Step 2

Give instructions to students: "Find a partner. In pairs, one of you mime an activity. The other will guess what the activity is and then ask how often your partner does the activity. Switch roles and repeat. Later, you will tell the class about your partner, with the first sentence using *now* and the second sentence using *often*, *every day*, *rarely*, or other words to describe how often someone does something."

### Step 3

Tell students to write a paragraph about their habit of combing hair. Then have them work in pairs, reading each other's paragraph and discussing what they wrote. Finally, bring students together for a class discussion, comparing habits and thoughts.

Some students tend to describe who and why; others describe when or where. Still others focus on taboos and beliefs. Combing hair in public may or may not be appropriate in the context where you teach; some students might not feel comfortable discussing it. (Depending on their degree of discomfort, you may want to choose a different behavior to discuss.) Using the information students provide about taboos and beliefs in particular, you can create another step for this activity by asking additional questions for discussion.

### Step 4

Elicit answers to the following questions:

- Do you assume anything about someone who combs his or her hair in public?
- What do you assume?
- Do you think everyone in the world believes that?

With this activity, you are trying to lead your students to an "aha" moment, where they realize that behaviors they think are normal are not necessarily normal for everyone, and vice versa for behaviors they think are strange.

**Alternatives:** Other activities include brushing your teeth, eating while walking, feeding a toddler, wearing headphones, studying in the library, and feeding a cat. You can also be more specific about frequency, introducing or using terms such as *twice a day*, *once a week*, and so on.

### Activity: Clothes and Makeup

**Context:** Lesson about clothes and makeup

**Time needed:** 30 minutes

**Pre-teach/review:** Vocabulary related to what people wear

**Procedure:** Show a picture of a person and ask questions:

- What is s/he wearing?
- Why do you think s/he is dressed in those clothes?
- Where do you think s/he is (going)?

I used to ignore or skip over the pictures that students found offensive (in my context, for example, these include pictures of people at the beach and women wearing sleeveless tops), but now I realize these pictures can be a gold mine of cultural information.

Ask the following questions:

- When was the last time you put on makeup?
- What was the occasion? What makeup did you put on? What color was it?
- Why did you put on makeup?

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- How would you have felt if you had not put on makeup at that time?
- Did anyone comment on your makeup? What did they say?

This activity should lead to a fruitful discussion, by both male and female students, of positive and negative stereotypes about people who wear certain kinds of makeup—or about when fancy dress is worn, what sportswear is used for, etc. In one class, it led to a discussion of what wearing bright red lipstick and heavy eye makeup connotes. The activity is a useful way to start to address the topics of cultural assumptions and stereotypes.

**Alternatives:** Other topics to discuss include formal dress, national dress, sportswear, beachwear, hiking boots, hats, scarfs, flip-flops, glasses, headsets, gloves, perfume, belts, masks, prayer shawls, and jewelry.

### Group 2. Amplifying Diversity within a Class

Small cultural differences that exist even in classes that are culturally quite homogenous can be amplified and then exploited with the aim of helping students notice and analyze them. In general EFL lessons, these activities could supplement, for example, the topic of “personalities.”

**Activity:** Left or Right

**Context:** Warm-up activity with movement

**Time needed:** 5 minutes

**Pre-teach/review:** This activity can be used to review recently learned vocabulary.

**Procedure:** Ask students to stand up and to head to the left or right side of the

classroom as you (or a student) call out various contrasting situations. It is best to use abstract concepts that force the students to think.

**Instruction:** Go to the left for the first situation, or go to the right for the second, according to your preference.

1. *Study alone* versus *study with friends*
2. *Couch potato* versus *fitness fanatic*
3. *Photos of scenery* versus *photos of people*
4. *Bookworm* versus *party animal*
5. *Eating at home* versus *eating out*
6. *Last year* versus *next year*
7. *Find a job in your hometown* versus *find a job in another place*
8. *Sweet* versus *sour*

Teacher: Now you give me some ideas. What did you find out about yourself that you didn't know before?

Students soon work out that they might want to be in the middle, in that they can decide on neither or both of the choices. In its own way, this is progress in understanding cultural differences. I know the students are starting to understand the activity when they suggest contrasts that they are aware of, and I use insights from this activity in lessons about cultural values. (It is important also that students do not see these choices as “labels,” but as evidence that people sharing the same general culture can have many differences in the lifestyles they prefer.)

**Alternative:** This activity can be adapted to serve as a review of almost any vocabulary.

**Activity: Grandpa and Grandma**

**Context:** Teaching “Where are you from?” and “Who do you look like?”

**Time needed:** 20 minutes

**Pre-teach/review:** Various personal characteristics, personalities, inheritable traits

**Procedure:** Have students ask and answer these questions in pairs or small groups:

- What ethnicity are you?
- What ethnicity is your father?
- What ethnicity is your mother?
- What are the ethnicities of your father’s parents?
- What are the ethnicities of your mother’s parents?

**Follow-up questions:**

- What is something you inherited from each of your parents and grandparents?
- What is something you have learned from each of them?

When students acknowledge that they have a parent, grandparent, or great-grandparent not from the majority ethnic group, the class starts to look and feel a little less homogenous. A class discussion, with as much information as students are comfortable sharing, can lead to discoveries about similarities and differences in family backgrounds that students never realized existed among their members of the class.

**Alternative:** Ask students about people of other ethnic groups who have married into their extended family.

**Activity: Family Tree**

**Context:** In listening/speaking classes, there is often a pair activity in which students practice using kinship terms, with students asking questions about family members and then drawing each other’s family tree.

**Time needed:** 10 minutes

**Pre-teach/review:** Kinship terms, family tree

**Procedure:** Give the following instructions: “Draw your family tree, including all your cousins. Mark with one color relatives you are allowed to marry. Then, in pairs, swap family trees and ask each other about any differences you notice.”

I draw my family tree, too, and students where I teach are usually surprised that in my culture, no one in my family tree is a potential spouse! In other contexts, students might have the opposite reaction. This can lead to a discussion about local traditions, religious norms, taboos, and genetics.

**Activity: Traditions**

**Context:** Holidays, celebrations, life-cycle events

**Time needed:** 20 to 30 minutes

**Pre-teach/review:** Vocabulary related to the traditions and events to be described—for example, related to a wedding: *bride, groom, marriage attendants, officiate, ceremony, vows*

**Procedure:** Elicit answers to the following questions:

- What is a wedding ceremony like in your family? Who is invited?
- Where are weddings held? What do you wear?
- Do any members of your extended family have different wedding practices?

- What do you know about weddings in other traditions?

Students' understanding of the traditions they have grown up with can be used to find interesting similarities and differences in beliefs and practices.

### Activity: What Languages Do You Speak?

**Context:** This question is used for various reasons from early lessons in many EFL classes.

**Time needed:** 10 minutes

**Pre-teach/review:** Use of simple past and present perfect

**Procedure:** Elicit answers to the following questions:

- What language did you learn first, as a baby? Who did you learn it from? Did you learn any particular dialect?
- What language did you learn after that? From whom? How old were you?
- What other languages have you learned? From whom? At what age?

Students' life stories provide experiences of different cities and towns, rural and urban settings, and living as part of the majority or a minority culture. In my context, acquiring Indonesian as the first language tends to be more of an urban phenomenon, and acquiring an ethnic language first is more of a rural phenomenon. Also, if students grow up as part of a minority, they often learn the language(s) of their parents and grandparents first, and then the language of the major ethnic group around them. This variety of language-acquisition experience also highlights differences between students.

**Alternatives:** If the students all use a national language, for example, this activity can be shifted to ask about dialects. Students can move around and/or get into groups, depending on the dialect they use or know. In each group, they can discuss how much they

use their dialect and form a line according to how much they use it—from using that dialect *most of the time*, to *only at home*, to *only with certain relatives*, down to *can understand the dialect but not speak it*. Or they can form a line from *very comfortable using the dialect* to *not comfortable using the dialect*.

### Group 3. Exploiting Students' Cultural Ideals

The two aspects above, of focusing on the everyday and looking for cultural differences, can be carried forward together with the following activities, which provide a segue to beliefs and worldview. I find I need to do a few activities like those that follow before introducing the topic of cultural values (see the Group 4 activities).

#### Activity: Heroes

**Context:** Reading passages in EFL textbooks at the intermediate level and above often include fables and condensed folktales.

**Time needed:** 15 minutes for each part

**Pre-teach/review:** Connotative meanings

**Procedure:** Elicit answers to the following questions:

#### Part 1

- Do you know both positive and negative words for large people, tall people, short people, clever people, uneducated people, and so on in the languages you speak?
- Are these words the same for both men and women?
- What about the words you know in English?

#### Part 2

- What are the characteristics of the ideal man or ideal woman, or the heroes, of folktales in your culture?

Have students discuss answers with someone from a different hometown, ethnicity, or faith,

or someone who speaks a different dialect. Then ask the following:

- Are your ideas the same or different? Which details are similar, and which are different?
- Are there any details that one person mentioned, but the other person didn't? What are those details?

### Activity: Ideal Home

**Context:** Diagrams and floor plans of rooms are often provided in EFL textbooks as part of lessons about descriptions and using prepositions.

**Time needed:** 20 minutes

**Pre-teach/review:** Describing, prepositions of place

**Procedure:** Give the following instructions: "Draw a floor plan of your ideal home. Do not show your drawing to other students. When you're done, sit back-to-back with another student. Describe your ideal home to your partner, who will draw it. Then switch roles. Compare your ideal homes. What is different? What is the same?"

Students then ask each other these questions:

- Why is \_\_\_\_\_ near the front door?
- Why is \_\_\_\_\_ far from the front door?
- Why is \_\_\_\_\_ near the back door?
- Which parts of the house do guests go into?
- What is on the walls? What is on the floor?

**Alternatives:** Students can describe the area outside their ideal house, or they can describe a school, market or shopping mall, or theater. If possible, and if students are comfortable with the idea, it may be helpful to hang students' drawings around the classroom so

they have time to look at them and discuss or reflect further on the heterogeneity that has been uncovered.

### Group 4. Focusing on Other Cultures

When students' awareness of cultural differences within the class is established, it is time to encourage students to become *other-centered*. Canagarajah (2007, 931) reminds us that

to accept deviations as the norm, one must display positive attitudes to variation and be open to unexpectedness. Participants have to be radically other-centered. They have to be imaginative and alert to make on-the-spot decisions in relation to the forms and conventions employed by the other. It is clear that communication in multilingual communities involves a different mind-set and practices from the mind-set and practices in monolingual communities.

The following activities help students put themselves into the shoes of people from other cultures. Students can then move beyond stories of their own and others' misunderstandings to real empathy.

### Activity: Ambiguous

**Context:** Finding the differences; EFL students are often asked to sit back-to-back in pairs and describe similar pictures to find the differences.

**Time needed:** 5 minutes to look at the picture, 15 minutes for the discussion

**Pre-teach/review:** Prepositions of place, use of *there is/are*

**Procedure:** Show students a picture that can be interpreted in more than one way. Genzel and Cummings (2010, 1) use the two faces/vase and old woman/young woman drawings, and I have used these to good effect. Some students can see only one drawing, others immediately see two, yet others see two after some time. Students



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get frustrated when they are told there are at least two drawings if they can only see one!

Ask students the following questions:

- What can you see in this picture?
- How many people are in the picture?
- If you can see one thing but your friend sees something different, what does that mean?
- Have you ever had an experience where what you thought was happening was different than what other people thought was happening?

This description exercise can be extended to teach about culture. The point is made that each person interprets the world using his or her own cultural worldview. People of various cultures are exposed to the same world but can interpret things quite differently. Students often tell stories about experiences of thinking someone was angry with them when in fact the other person was not. Intercultural competence means accepting that others have different perspectives and then seeking to understand their perspectives.

**Alternatives:** Brainstorm different uses of a tea towel, a coat hanger, a paper clip,

a plastic bag, a comb, a saucepan, or other items familiar to students (adapted from Klippel 1984).

### Activity: Culture Shock

**Context:** Tourism, customs, vacations, studying abroad, travel

**Time needed:** 20 minutes

**Pre-teach/review:** Narrative time markers such as *last year*, *when I was in high school*, *at first*, *as soon as*, *immediately*, *after that*, and *finally*

**Procedure:** I sometimes tell a story like the following to get this discussion started:

Sometimes when I am trying to take a photo of a beautiful sunset [or mountain, lake, or garden], my friends immediately get in front of the camera and ruin my photo. Any comments?

As a warm-up, ask students the following questions:

- Have you visited other parts of this country or another country?
- What was unusual or difficult for you? Was anything strange or annoying? Tell your story.

Part of Speech	Vocabulary for Comparing	Vocabulary for Contrasting
<i>Verbs</i>	compare, resemble	contrast, differ
<i>Nouns</i>	comparison, similarity	contrast, difference
<i>Adjectives</i>	similar, same	different, dissimilar
<i>Conjunctions</i>	as, like, in the same way	however, although, whereas

**Table 1. Vocabulary for comparing and contrasting**

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## Not all of these activities are appropriate in every context, and you might have to choose other examples or prompts.

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- What do you think would be the most confusing thing for a foreign tourist who came to your hometown? Why? Do you have a story you can tell about this?

I ask questions like these to show students how much they have learned about culture. The students are moving from focusing on the tangible, concrete parts of culture, objects, and behaviors to the intangible, abstract, and associated cultural values and beliefs.

### Activity: Movie Clips

**Context:** Compare and contrast

**Materials and time needed:** One or two movie clips of a few minutes each; 20 to 25 minutes for discussion

**Pre-teach/review:** Vocabulary for comparing and contrasting (see Table 1)

**Procedure:** Elicit answers to the following questions regarding a movie clip showing street crossings:

- What differences have you noticed between how pedestrian crossings and traffic lights are used in your culture and in the movie clip?
- Why do you think pedestrian crossings and traffic lights are used differently?
- How could this be confusing to a foreign visitor to your town?

**Alternatives:** Scenes other than street crossings may be appropriate in some situations, and still photographs can be used instead of movie clips. Students can also discuss uses of various objects found in the home and classroom, pieces of clothing,

gestures, and *false friend* words—those words that appear similar in two languages but have different meanings. Additional topics include different ideas about refreshments, ways of traveling, purposes of roads, education, and responsibilities of family members and other relatives.

### Group 5. Providing Alternative Cultural Experiences

Bennett (2004, 74) reminds us that the key issue when adapting culturally “is the ability to have an alternative cultural experience.” These experiences, as in the previous activities, could start from the students’ own culture(s) and then progress to foreign cultural practices.

### Activity: Class Party

**Context:** Food, eating, kitchens, dining rooms, restaurants, picnics

**Time needed:** One hour for the simulation, 20 minutes for the discussion

**Pre-teach/review:** “I feel \_\_\_\_\_” and “It feels \_\_\_\_\_,” and vocabulary such as *comfortable/uncomfortable*, *awkward/natural*, *formal/informal*, and *impolite/respectful*

**Procedure:** A fun and relatively easy topic to start with is food. This would not just be about trying foods from different places—local first, then from other regions, then foreign—but eating while sitting on the floor, sitting on a chair, sitting at a table, standing up, or walking around; eating using a bowl, a plate, a paper towel, a spoon, a fork, fingers, or chopsticks; having or not having water or another drink while eating; going on a picnic or eating with a formal table setting; drinking heavily sugared or sugarless tea or coffee, very hot drinks, or very cold drinks; and conversing or being silent while eating and drinking. EFL topics of

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food, holidays, and travel lend themselves to having a class party.

Ask students to form pairs and discuss one of the experiences that was new to them.

- How did it feel to eat \_\_\_\_\_ and/or drink \_\_\_\_\_?

Then initiate a class discussion with a question:

- How might a visitor from another culture feel when faced with your way of eating and drinking?

**Alternatives:** Simulations of classrooms, visiting the doctor, and attending a wedding or a baby shower in different cultures are other possibilities.

### CONCLUSION

As mentioned, not all of these activities are appropriate in every context, and you might have to choose other examples or prompts, depending on your students' needs and comfort levels. Be aware of topics and issues that are sensitive in your context, and recognize that situations in students' personal and family lives will affect how comfortable they are discussing certain topics and revealing information about themselves and their families. But when students recognize that some of their classmates are more (or less) willing to discuss certain topics than they are, that is part of developing students' awareness of differences among people and is a learning experience that can be exploited. No students, though, should be forced to talk about or reveal information they do not feel comfortable sharing.

Even the most homogenous EFL class will have some cultural variety. Creating and

using activities that unearth these cultural differences is a useful preliminary step that raises awareness and curiosity about these differences. This awareness can help students analyze cultural values and beliefs and improve understanding and effective communication skills for actually relating to people of other cultures. The activities suggested are just a sample of the ways this could be achieved in both general EFL classes and specialized ICC classes.

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