

Strategies for developing cultural/intercultural awareness: class interview (Adapted from MLPSI, 2009)

A class interview in the modern language class

- gives students a real life context in which to practise their language skills
- capitalises on students' natural curiosity about other people and other cultures
- develops in students not only knowledge but the ability to think critically about the target culture as well as his/her own culture
- takes into account the social and emotional responses of students in dealing with culture

A class interview can potentially develop all strands of the modern language curriculum. It also integrates with Geography, CSPE, the oral language strands of the English/Irish curricula and potentially other areas depending on the special interest of the guest e.g. Music, Visual Arts etc.

The methodology of the class interview requires careful planning and preparation.

Step 1 - Clarify the focus of the interview

An interview will have a much greater chance of success if the teacher has clarified in his/her mind what the purpose/s of the interview will be. The purpose/s can include:

- To give students practice in using the target language
- To get a general overview of a country
- To focus on a particular region/town
- To compare two regions/towns/countries
- To compare and contrast the students' local area with a place in the target country
- To focus on a particular aspect of the target culture e.g. food, sport, school life, festivals, music

The detail of the questions to be pursued by the students with the interviewee should be worked out under the guidance of the teacher but the teacher must have a clear idea of the way in which the interview will contribute to the students' language skills, intercultural skills, knowledge and attitudes in relation to the target country.

Step 2 - Choosing and preparing interviewees

In choosing an interviewee a number of issues need to be considered:

- The ability of the person to use simple, clear language when speaking in the target language
- The ability of the person to take account of the interests, vocabulary and students limited attention span
- The willingness of the person to talk about his/her personal circumstances, family and experiences

- The degree of rapport between the teacher and the interviewee - if the teacher knows the interviewee well there should be no embarrassment about interrupting the session to keep it 'on track'

Talking to the interviewee before the interview is important in order to give guidelines regarding

- The level of the target language that students have attained - particular structures known etc.
- Students' prior knowledge about the target country
- The areas which you would like the guest to focus on
- The comparative aspect - the importance of looking at similarities as well as differences between Ireland and the target country
- The format of the interview - use of artefacts, map, the target language and English/Irish

Step 3 - Preparing for the visit

If the interview is to prove worthwhile the students will have to be well prepared. Preparation for the visit will involve

- Revising known language structures that can be used to access general information about the guest - name, place of origin, family, languages spoken etc.
- Teaching/revising structures that can be capitalised on to ask about different aspects e.g. Do you like.....(certain foods, hobbies, places etc.)
 - Which do you prefer.... or (foods, places, sports etc)
 - In ...is there a....(sports stadium, soccer team etc.)
- Researching the country/area/city with which the guest is associated. The interview can follow work done on a particular topic or be the stimulus for doing a project on a particular area or topic but some background work is advisable
- Getting students to focus on what they should ask the visitor. A rigid pre-determined set of questions (in English/Irish) can stifle spontaneity in an interview and should be avoided but students should be guided into establishing the areas about which they might ask questions. The class can be divided into groups and given responsibility for particular areas of questioning - country, local area, food, hobbies, festivals etc. Encourage students to note possible questions for the guest on a notice-board in the ML classroom: 'What questions do you have for our guest?'

Questions in the target language

These will be straight forward and limited according to students ability to use the target language. It is worthwhile getting students to practise asking the questions in advance to improve pronunciation and fluency and to ensure inclusion of all students in the class. Students can, individually or in groups, prepare a range of questions that they might ask the guest.

Questions in English/Irish

Students should be encouraged to examine the quality of their proposed questions in

English/Irish e.g. whether they are open or closed questions, whether they elicit a comparative approach etc. Encourage the students to ask questions that focus on reflecting about their own culture as well looking out at the target culture e.g. What did you find most surprising about Ireland/Dublin when you moved here? The importance of listening to the answers given and following up on them to elicit more information should be stressed. Using role-play to prepare for the interview is beneficial and usually improves the quality of the experience.

Step 4 - The interview

- Divide the interview into two parts if you wish students and the guest to use the target language as well as English/Irish - the first section can be conducted in the target language
- Make sure that there are maps to hand to show where the country and areas spoken about are located. If the focus is on a particular city a local map could be studied before hand and referred to during the interview. Each group could be supplied with a copy of the local map
- Display charts with typical questions and structures in the target language to encourage participation of all students
- Model some questions, if necessary, to keep the interview on track
- Encourage each group to ask the key questions that they have identified and to take brief notes of the answers (nominate a recorder in each group)
- Make good use of any artefacts, photographs etc

Step 5 - Follow-up

Discussion and other follow-up activities should help students to

- Recall and clarify what they have heard
- Think about the experiences, attitudes, views and opinions of the guest and reflect on the fact that such experiences, views and opinions do not represent those of everyone from the target country but are specific to the guest
- Relate what they have heard to their previous knowledge of the target country
- Identify locations mentioned during the interview
- Clarify and present their findings to others - eg. by writing an account (each group can focus on the section they asked questions about), making a chart, doing a mini-project, making a PowerPoint or Photo Story presentation etc. Schools using the ELP can record aspects of the interview in the ELP.

