

¿Se come igual en todo el mundo? Teaching Intercultural Competence through Food

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Abstract

The present teaching activity was designed for a beginner level Spanish class to develop intercultural competence in the classroom. This activity aims to develop learners' overall knowledge and foster their skills of interpreting and relating in regard to food, food habits, and cultural implications surrounding food from different cultures. We piloted this activity in 3 online courses through Zoom. The activity begins with a class discussion to identify the students' native cultural norms and to explore what they know about other cultures prior to explicit instruction. Then, students are shown a video about the food culture in a different country to build their knowledge base. Finally, after watching the video, the students do both a personal reflection letter and a group reflection discussion which allows students to relate and the newly-learned information to their own culture and develop their intercultural competence. These reflections are compared to the initial discussion to assess the learners' progress in developing their intercultural competence.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, L2/FL Spanish, Food, Culture

Level: 100-level/beginner level Spanish (equivalent to CEFR level A2 and ACTFL novice high to intermediate low)

Suggested Time: 25-35 minutes

Materials: Zoom or other video conferencing application, instructional video, email, or messaging system, PowerPoint

Target Grammatical Structures: Comparative and superlative

Goal: to have students understand cultural differences related to food

1 Introduction

Language classrooms, while having a strong communicative focus, are beginning to incorporate intercultural competence as a course goal. Intercultural competence refers to the “abilities needed to perform ‘effectively’ and ‘appropriately’ when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself” (Fantini, 2009). The present teaching activity aims to expand intercultural competence in an existing lesson on different food cultures from different countries and aims to develop the students’ skills of knowledge and skills of interpreting and relating, which are competencies identified in Byram’s Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (1997; 2009). Skills of knowledge refer to the learners’ familiarity with facts and information, while skills of interpreting and relating are the ability to identify symbols and events from other cultures and relate their interpretations to the learners’ own culture and experience. The present activity is based on exploring different foods and food cultures and includes routines and beliefs surrounding food. It was piloted in three online classes through Zoom, each lasting an hour. The activity begins with students identifying their own food habits and preferences. Next, students watch a video explaining another country’s habits and preferences. Following the video, students compare their own cultural practices to the cultural practices presented in the video. Finally, to help further develop intercultural competence, the last component is a reflection letter. Reflecting on their intercultural experiences as well as their L1 identity allows students to evaluate and frame different cultures in relation to each other (McConachy, 2018).

There are three major goals for this teaching activity: 1. Explore foods from other countries; 2. Identify different food schedules; and 3. Reflect upon and explain differences in typical foods, schedules, and customs. The first two goals are focused on developing the

knowledge (*savoir*) component of Byram's model, while the last goal is focused on developing the skill of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), and also serves as individual reflection.

2 Context

This activity was created for an accelerated introductory Spanish course which covers the program of two full semesters of first year Spanish in one, and is thought for learners who had some previous experience in Spanish. Students enrolled in the course ranged from novice-high to intermediate-low proficiency levels, if we follow the ACTFL scale, or level A2 of the CEFR. The piloted classes were taught in a hybrid format, meaning they contained both synchronous and asynchronous lessons, with a communicative focus where students were expected to participate and talk during synchronous instruction (Mitchell, 2002). This activity is based on chapter seven of the textbook *¡Anda! Curso Elemental* (2017), titled *¡A comer!* 'Time to eat!' which deals with food vocabulary and food-related topics. This lesson was designed for an online format but could be easily adapted to an in-person activity. This chapter includes a short excerpt about different food habits in various Spanish-speaking countries compared to the United States, but offered students little opportunity for reflection and interaction.

Many first-year Spanish courses include a section on food; however, we noticed a lack of intercultural content in the food chapter from the book we use in our own course, *¡Anda! Curso elemental*. To introduce intercultural topics, we wanted to draw students' attention to not only different foods commonly eaten in other countries, but also different norms and beliefs surrounding food from other cultures. This activity specifically focuses on the differences between Spain and the United States but could be adapted to include other cultures.

To introduce intercultural competence to this lesson, we adopted Byram's Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (1997; 2009) because it recognizes learners as

intercultural speakers who co-construct meaning through their interactions, but removes the idea of a native speaker as a model for L2 speakers. The model is broken down into two parts. In the first part of the model Byram identifies three linguistic competencies that are included under the idea intercultural competence: (a) linguistic competence, the ability to effectively use a language to produce written and oral discourse; (b) sociolinguistic competence, the ability to understand meanings intended by the interlocutor; and (c) discourse competence, the ability to negotiate strategies to produce and interpret written and oral communication (Jackson, 2019). The second part of the model is based on five knowledges (or *savoirs*, as labeled in the ICC model), which refer to both knowledge and skills. The five *savoirs* are knowledge (*savoir*), intercultural attitudes (*savoir être*), interpreting/relating skills (*savoir comprendre*), discovery/interaction skills (*savoir apprendre/savoir faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*). The present activity aims to target the skills of knowledge (*savoir*), which, to reiterate, is the learner's familiarity with facts and information; and the skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), i.e., the ability to identify symbols and events from other cultures and subsequently relate the interpretations to one's own culture and experience.

This activity starts by having students describe food and food culture in their own culture/country. The next step is focused on developing the students' basic knowledge about other countries by watching and discussing a class a video that describes the food culture in Spain. After focusing solely on the video about Spain, the focus is then shifted to comparing the two cultures. It is important to aid students in identifying cross-cultural differences because as Schmidt (1995) describes in his Noticing Hypothesis, students must first become aware of differences before they are able to interact and develop connections with the new information. Once differences have been identified, students are given the chance to create personal connections between the cultures through a short writing activity. Finally, the activity ends with

a class discussion where students share their personal connections and thoughts from the writing activity.

3 Curriculum, Tasks, and Materials

Language learners experience a dynamic interaction between their preexisting L1 knowledge and assumptions and their developing L2 knowledge (McConachy & Spencer Oatey, 2020). Learners must reformulate what they know in one language to include another language system. This includes recontextualizing how to realize speech acts such as an apology or request, or how to mitigate a breakdown in communication. Learners must also learn how to speak appropriately in different contexts and how to mark social distance. Once speakers begin to notice the differences and create connections between their different systems, they will ultimately encounter more differences and develop their intercultural competence. As learners develop their intercultural competence, they can then become aware of potential misunderstandings or breakdowns in conversation due to cultural differences (McConachy and Spencer Oatey, 2020). However, L2 speakers are confronted not just with a new language system, but also a new culture which includes other aspects beyond language. For example, L2 speakers encounter different music, holidays, clothing, religious beliefs/systems, social structures, etc. All of these experiences expose the learner to cultural differences, essential in developing intercultural competence.

Taking the above into consideration, the goal of this activity is to help beginners familiarize themselves with cultural features and cross-cultural differences related to food, in order to have them develop intercultural competence. In regard to vocabulary/lexicon, this extends farther than simple translations of food terms with which the students are already familiar. Although it is important to introduce students to different ingredients and dishes found in other countries, it is also important to discuss routines and cultural implications. For example,

Americans may find eating dinner at nine at night or eating their biggest meal in the middle of the day uncustomary, so it is good to expose students to different routines. Another point we want to focus on, going beyond vocabulary, is cultural implications. For example, it may surprise Americans that, in other countries, dinner or lunch could take multiple hours instead of 30 to 60 minutes. Although this difference is about meal duration, it could reflect a larger societal difference in other areas such as the expected hours worked each week and how much time should be spent with family and friends. In addition, typical meals can be a reflection of health consciousness, for example meal portions and cooking techniques (frying, grilling, baking, etc.). As shown, topics relating to food are a significant component of culture, and language learners should be aware of the variety that exists beyond their L1, especially if they plan to visit different cultures.

The present activity is comprised of five sub-activities, described below, which altogether are supposed to last around 25 minutes. The five sub-activities discussed in the sections below are: class discussion (3.1), pre-video questions (3.2), video (3.3), personal reflection letter (3.4), and reflective discussion (3.5). When developing the activity, we followed Ellis' (2009) task cycle because it focuses on meaning. This activity is more concerned with discussing the information presented and its meaning, rather than practicing verb conjugations, an activity that is less focused on meaning and more on usage. It includes three phases, the pre-task phase, the task phase, and the post-task phase. The first three sub-activities are part of the pre-task phase, meant to engage previous knowledge of the topic and introduce new information. The fourth sub-activity, the personal reflection letter, is the task phase where students write a letter, thus relating the new information to their previous knowledge. Finally, the last sub-activity, the reflective discussion, is the post-task phase where students have an opportunity to reflect on the task and identify any problems they had. Prior to the present synchronous activity, students are

expected to review vocabulary during asynchronous preparation the day before. They were also provided with a related reading about food in the Spanish-speaking world. As mentioned, this activity was piloted in three online classes through Zoom.

3.1 Class discussion

Sub-activity one is a short class discussion lasting approximately 3 minutes. This is a part of the pre-task phase. The main goal is to have students recognize their L1 cultural norms. We ask the students questions such as *¿qué comes para el desayuno?* ‘What do you eat for breakfast?’, *¿por cuánto tiempo comes?* ‘How long does your meal last?’, and *¿cuándo comes el desayuno?* ‘when do you eat breakfast?’. We also ask the same questions about *almuerzo* ‘lunch’, *cena* ‘dinner’, and *merienda* ‘snack’. This allows students to recall previous vocabulary and to self-identify their own cultural habits.

3.2 Pre-video Questions

Sub-activity two, which is also a part of the pre-task phase, consists of pre-video questions. This part should take around 3 minutes. The questions about the video include *¿Qué sabes de la cultura española?* ‘What do you know about Spanish culture?’, *¿Qué sabes de la comida española?* ‘What do you know about Spanish food?’, *¿Qué sabes de la rutina española?* ‘What do you know about the Spanish routine?’ Students’ responses to these questions serve as an evaluation of their previous knowledge about the target culture. This gives instructors an idea of what students know, so that they, and students, can evaluate progress at the end of the task.

3.3 Video

Sub-activity three consists of showing a four-minute video.¹ This is the last part of the pre-task phase. The video is an educational material created by Pearson, the publisher of *¡Anda! Curso elemental*. The material comes from an earlier chapter of the textbook and was chosen so that the

¹ found at: https://media.pearsoncmg.com/alt/pegasus/ml_shared_assets/club_cultura/videos/spain_2_es_cc.html.

students had the ability to comprehend the language used in video. The video follows a Spaniard who goes through his day in Madrid, explaining what he eats and at what times. We also see him going to different locations across the city. The video is completely in Spanish, with Spanish subtitles. This video was created for instruction, and thus is not authentic (i.e., created by native speakers for native speakers), but it discusses the topics at an appropriate level for first-year students of Spanish. Liddicoat & Scarino (2013) advocate for the use of course-created material to adjust to learners' levels. While natural authentic material is ideal for a language course, authentic speech can be difficult for beginners to understand due to the high speed, pronunciation style and the use of forms with which they may not be familiar. For this reason, course-created material has the advantage of more appropriately meeting the students' language skills without creating unnecessary confusion.

3.4 Personal reflection letter

Sub-activity four is the during-task phase, which consists of writing a letter. It should take approximately 10 minutes. In our pilot, we found this to be enough time to let students internalize the information and make connections. The task is to write a letter for an incoming international student from Spain about what to expect in the United States regarding food. This part of the task directly follows the video; allowing students to have a chance to create their own personal connections before discussing with others. The prompt for the letter is:

Tienes una amiga que vive en España. Tu amiga, Sandra, viene para estudiar en los Estados Unidos en IU. Ella no conoce los EE. UU. muy bien y necesita tu ayuda. Escribe una carta a Sandra que describe el horario y las comidas típicas de los Estados Unidos. ¿Qué sería nuevo/diferente para ella? (Incluye dos comparaciones de igualdad y dos de desigualdad entre los dos países)

‘You have a friend that lives in Spain. Your friend, Sandra, is coming to study in the United States at IU. She is not very familiar with the U.S. and needs your help. Write a letter to Sandra that describes the schedule and typical foods of the United States. What would be new or different for her? (Include 2 equal and 2 unequal comparisons between the two countries)’

Students should send their letters via email to their instructors, who will evaluate each student individually. One example of a student’s response we received when we piloted the activity was “*Por último, a diferencia de España, me gusta cenar entre a las siete y a las ocho de la noche. Mi favorito es la pasta o el bistec auténticos [sic]. ¡Espero verte pronto!*” (Finally, different from Spain, I like to eat dinner at seven or eight at night. My favorite is pasta or authentic steak. I hope to see you soon!) In this response we can see intercultural competence growth as the student was able to relate new information from the video to their preexisting identity. The student was first able to identify the meal time difference between the two countries and offer a comparison from their own experience. This demonstrates the student building both their *savoir* (knowledge), shown by the acknowledgement of different habits, and *savoir comprendre* (skills of interpreting and relating), as evidenced by the comparison between Spain and the student’s own country/culture.

3.4 Reflective discussion

Sub-activity five is the post-task phase. This consists of both small group and open class discussion. First, students were given 6-8 minutes to answer questions from a handout (see Appendix) in small groups of 3-4 people. During our pilot studies, this was done through breakout rooms in Zoom. The handout is broken down according to the two *savoirs* that we have been targeting throughout the lesson. The first set of questions targets comprehension of the video, while the second set of questions targets comparisons. After the group work, the students returned to the main room for an in-plenum discussion of their answers and what they had

written in their letters. Ideally, the discussion should occur in Spanish; however, the main goal of this activity is to reflect on the content, so use of the target language is not absolutely essential. McConachy (2018, Chapter 6) states that student collaboration helps to foment discussion, and this gives students an opportunity to discuss areas they may have missed in their own letters. As McConachy suggests in his book, instructors can actively guide the students' discussion through follow-up questions and scaffolding (see Section 5). This could include helping guide students to think critically about the cultural implications that are represented through food. For example, during one of the discussions a student commented on how they saw a lot more seafood in the video than they see in their hometown. As a follow-up question to foster more critical thinking, we asked the class what factors contribute to this difference. The student then offered up an answer based on Spain's location near water, in contrast with their landlocked hometown. By asking this question, we were able to get the students to go beyond their initial knowledge to consider and compare the geographical locations and how access to different resources is reflected through food.

4 Assessment

Assessing intercultural competence is a difficult task because it involves many areas of knowledge, such as linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence. Deardorff (2017) advises using the following principles when considering how to develop an intercultural assessment: define, prioritize, align, identify evidence, and use. First and foremost, because it includes various competencies, it is important to identify and define what component of intercultural competence is going to be assessed, and then to prioritize the component being tested. After identifying the component being tested, it is important to consider both validity and reliability to ensure the correct component is prioritized (Cohen 2019). Validity is whether the

assessment measures what it was intended to measure, while reliability is the assessment's ability to consistently measure the target. As mentioned above, Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communication Competence model includes linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, as well the five different *savoirs* (i.e., knowledge, intercultural attitudes, interpreting/relating skills, discovery/interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness). With so many different components, it is necessary to pick one or a few areas to focus on in order to avoid confusion during the assessment. Deardorff also suggests creating your outcomes from the goals to ensure that the outcomes can be measured through intentional activities (2017, 124-6). To assess students' progress, it is important to use both explicit and implicit evidence for a more holistic picture. Lastly, Deardorff recommends that all the data collected should be meaningful and beneficial for the students' progress.

Based on the complexity involved in assessing intercultural competence mentioned above, for this activity we chose to focus on just two of the *savoirs* from Byram's model, namely knowledge and interpreting/relating skills. Since the class was done in an online format, the sessions were recorded, so as instructors, we were able to review and compare early class discussions from before the video, to the later discussion and reflective letter. From the pre-video discussion to the post-video discussion, we first looked for students who expressed more cultural knowledge about Spain, for example using new vocabulary, and/or offering more factual information about Spain. Secondly, we looked for students who related the new information to their own lives by making comparisons, and finally, for students who created larger connections between food and societal implications. Since the pre-video discussion was done spontaneously, we did not want to distract from the conversation by having students stop discussion to write down their thoughts, so that is why we compared the recordings. In an in-person environment we recommend keeping track of students' ideas on the board for later comparison.

5 Reflection as a means for learning

In Chapter 6 of *Developing Intercultural Perspectives of Language* (2018), McConachy speaks about the importance and role of the teacher in the development of intercultural competence. One of the principal strategies that McConachy identifies is scaffolding. Liddicoat & Scarino (2013) also advocate for scaffolding in the classroom and define it as a technique that has the instructor engage the student to describe a feature in more detail, consider the context, justify their stances, and consider alternative perspectives (Liddicoat & Scarino 2013). This technique prompts the student to produce a response rather than be given an answer from the instructor. Scaffolding is also beneficial because instructors can draw students' attention to missed information. Schmidt (1995) argues in his Noticing Hypothesis that it is imperative for students to become aware of these features and differences before they can internalize and interact with the information. "Thus, what shapes the learning process in the first instance is the learner's ability to notice features of the input and make it available for conscious reflection" (McConachy 2018, p.156). Reflection can occur in many ways, such as through role-play and discussion. The instructor can also help students to reformulate their ideas while introducing metapragmatic language. McConachy argues that metapragmatic development helps the students to identify, interpret, and relate new intercultural experiences in the future. In addition, McConachy and Spencer-Oatey (2020) explain the benefit of metapragmatic awareness as follows "...metapragmatic interpretation and gradual decentering from taken for granted assumptions about pragmatic norms and meanings to see the pragmatic system of each language as a valid meaning-making system in its own right" (McConachy & Spencer-Oatey, 2020, 409).

6 Conclusion and extensions

Instructors, even if they have not had any prior instruction in pragmatics, can still implement pragmatic ability into their lessons. We have provided here a detailed plan on how to implement a task related to food and eating customs in different cultures that allows students to understand the intercultural differences surrounding this topic. This activity follows Ellis' (2009) task cycle, where the pre-task phase consists of identifying student's own culture norms, their knowledge about Spain and watching a video. Then, a during-task sub-activity consisting of drafting a reflective letter to a friend from Spain, in which students discuss cultural differences. This activity closes with the post-task phase where students share what they wrote in their letters. This reflection and discussion allow students to develop intercultural awareness, based on Byram's (1997) intercultural model.

The present activity was created for a beginning level Spanish course to introduce food variety and different cultural implications surrounding food, but it could be adapted for higher-level courses. To adapt to a higher level, all discussion can be done in the target language or more cultures could be included and discussed to create a larger picture. We also suggest including other elements of Byram's (1997) model for students at higher levels of Spanish as they may have more knowledge to draw on. For example, instead of providing a video that describes a given culture's food and habits, students can be let free to find information about different cultures on their own, to stimulate discovery/interaction skills (*savoir apprendre/faire*). This activity could also be adapted for a study abroad context; however, instead of showing videos or having students find information on their own, students would discuss their own experiences in the L2/host culture. In a study abroad context, students will be surrounded by the target culture's food and habits, which provides a rich context for students to draw upon. They can more immediately discuss beliefs with host families or friends from the target culture.

Discussion and reflection in the study aboard context could help students to develop their intercultural competence. Regardless of level of or context, it is important for students to first notice differences, and then reflect and create connections to develop their intercultural competence.

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Appendix

Handout (Reflective Discussion)

<p><i>Savoir/Knowledge</i> (Familiarity with facts and information from another culture)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What time do people in Spain eat?• What are some common Spanish dishes?• What is a ‘caña’ (1:35)?• How did the presenter in the video order his food? (Think about the form of the verb.)
<p><i>Savoir comprendre/Skills of interpreting and relating</i> (ability to identify symbols and events from other cultures and relate the interpretations to your own culture)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you consider a meal?• What is important to you to have in a meal?• How do you think your idea of a meal might be different from those in Spain?• Why might people in Spain eat at different times than people in the United States? (How does it connect to their society as a whole?)