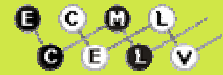




# ICOPROMO

Intercultural competence for professional mobility  
*Compétence interculturelle pour le développement  
de la mobilité professionnelle*



## A name, a self

### Awareness of the Self and the Other

#### Rationale

Language happens to be one of the most rooted elements of our identity and one which is easily identifiable by others. As many other aspects of our identity, we take it for granted and we only reflect upon it when we feel our linguistic identity is being threatened. This may be due to different reasons, like moving to a foreign country with a distinct vehicular language

#### Learning Outcome

Participants are expected to become aware of the relevance language has in the configuration of our identity. Likewise, they are invited to contemplate how unsettling moving to a foreign country with a different vehicular language can be in the individual perception of themselves.

#### Competences:

Awareness-raising of the link between language and identity.

#### Time

40-55 minutes:

- 5 minutes for introducing and reading the activity.
  - 15-20 minutes for reading the first text and answering and discussing the questions in groups.
  - 15-20 minutes for reading the second set of texts and answering and discussing the questions in groups.
- 5-10 minutes for the debriefing.

#### Participants

Up to 25

#### Materials required

Handout



## Procedure

1. Distribute the handouts and introduce the activity.
2. Individually, learners read the introduction and the first text.
3. In groups of four, learners answer the questions and discuss them.
4. Individually, learners read the following set of texts.
5. In groups of four, learners answer the questions and discuss them.
6. Put an end to the activity with a whole group discussion on “language and identity”. Encourage participants to illustrate their arguments with examples of their own experiences.

## References

- Bratchfeld, O. 1936. *Individual psychology in the learning of languages*. International Journal of Individual Psychology 2, 77-83.
- Hoffman, E. 1989. *Lost in Translation*. New York: Dutton.
- Stern, H.H. 1983. *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sweet, H. 1899. *The Practical Study of Languages: A Guide for Teachers and Learners*. London: Dent. Also published in the Series Language and Language Learning, edited by R. Mackin. London: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- Wierzbicka, A. 1997. The double life of a bilingual: a cross-cultural perspective. In M.H. Bond (ed) *Working at the Interface of Cultures. Eighteen lives in social science*. London: Routledge.



## Handout

### A NAME, A SELF

Language happens to be one of the most rooted elements of our identity and one that is easily identifiable by others. There are people who live in a monolingual environment and find it difficult to learn and master other languages; there are people who live in a bilingual society and are able to use two languages with a similar degree of proficiency; there are people who use one language at home and another one when they are not in the familiar surroundings, etc.

Learning a foreign language, either at home or abroad, implies re-interpreting the world. Sweet (1899/1964: 102) quoted by Stern (1983: 317) states that “The whole process of learning a language is one of forming associations. When we learn our own language we associate words and sentences with thoughts, ideas, actions, events”. When a foreign language is learnt, it is not only a new grammar or stock of vocabulary that is internalised; the whole individual, affection included, is implied”. As Bratchfeld (1936: 82) points out, “When I learn a language ... it is not my “linguistic talent”, nor my “intelligence”, nor my reasoning which does the learning: it is who *I* who am learning, i.e., the *entire person*”. Psychologically, adults learning a foreign language (in a foreign country) show emotional resistance, dread to appear comic, and experience the uncertainties “aroused” by the idiomatic use of the second language” (Stern, 1983: 322) What is more, the foreign and the native language are likely to remain different in the individual's mind: “Nevertheless, it is rare that a language learned in later life attains the inevitable, self-evident reality of the first language learned in childhood” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 163)

When one is learning a foreign language, one puts in considerable effort and time to come to terms with it. Sometimes, in these hard moments, the feeling of frustration is so great that one rejects the foreign language, clinging to the mother tongue for safety. The intercultural experience can be extremely unsettling if one's native language is no longer useful; for example, when moving to another country, and the individual has not managed to master the new language.

Read the following extract from Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* (1989). It illustrates the way in which language and identity are linked. Ewa has just migrated with her family from Poland, their native country, to Canada. She describes her first moments in the new country and in the new school:

Mine – “Ewa”- is easy to change into its near equivalent in English, “Eva.” My sister’s name –“Alina”- poses more of a problem, but after a moment’s thought, Mr. Rosenberg and the teacher decide that “Elaine” is close enough. My sister and I hang our heads wordlessly under this careless baptism. [...] We make our way to a bench at the back of the room; nothing much has happened, except a small, seismic mental shift. [...] Our Polish names didn’t refer to us; they were as surely us as our eyes or hands. These new appellations, which we ourselves can’t yet pronounce, are not us. They are identification tags, disembodied signs pointing to objects that happen to be my sister and myself. We walk to our seats, into a roomful of unknown faces, with names that make us strangers to ourselves. (Hoffman, 1989: 105)

Consider the points raised by the text and answer these questions. Then, work in groups of four:

- a) Which language do you identify with? Why?
- b) If you speak more than one language, how and when did you learn the others? Was it a painful process? Justify your answers.
- c) Have you ever been in a situation in which you have considered your (linguistic) identity threatened? If so, how did you react?
- d) In which way can Ewa learn to come to terms with the new language without unsettling her identity?

Biographical writings such as by Hoffman (1989), a Polish immigrant in Canada, or Wierzbicka (1997), who considers herself a bilingual and bicultural Pole in Australia, reveal that one of the most difficult experiences in the acquisition of the foreign language is the need to re-think and re-interpret the world and oneself. They consider this to be not only a linguistic but a psychological process affecting not only the code one uses but also the way of structuring one's mind and, therefore, the whole self.

Read the following extracts:

No, I’m no patriot, nor was I ever allowed to be. And yet, the country of my childhood lives within me with a primacy that is a form of love. It lives within me despite my knowledge of our marginality, and its primitive, unpretty emotions. Is it blind and self-deceptive of me to hold on to its memory? I think it would be blind and self- deceptive not to. All it has given me is the world, but that is enough. It has fed me language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind. It has given me the colors and the furrows of reality, my first loves. (Hoffman, 1989: 74)

But mostly, the problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified. The words I learn now don’t stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. “River” in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. “River” in English is cold— a word without aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke. (Hoffman, 1989: 106)

Every day I learn new words, new expressions. I pick them up from school exercises, from conversations, from the books I take out of Vancouver's well-lit, cheerful public library. There are some turns of phrase to which I develop strange allergies. "You're welcome," for example, strikes me as a *gaucherie*, and I can hardly bring myself to say it— I suppose because it implies that there's something to be thanked for, which in Polish would be impolite. The very places where language is at its most conventional, where it should be most taken for granted, are the places where I feel the prick of artifice. (Hoffman, 1989: 106)

I had to learn to 'calm down', to become less 'sharp' and less 'blunt', less 'excitable', less 'extreme' in my judgements, more 'tactful' in their expression. I had to learn the use of Anglo understatement (instead of more hyperbolic and more emphatic Polish ways of speaking). I had to learn to avoid sounding 'dogmatic', 'argumentative', 'emotional'. (Wierzbicka, 1997: 119)

But these weren't just changes in the patterns of communication. There were also changes in my personality. I was becoming a different person, at least when I was speaking English. (Wierzbicka, 1997: 120)

Thus, I came to feel that by learning the Anglo ways I could enrich myself immeasurably, but I could also 'lose myself'. (Wierzbicka, 1997: 121)

Answer the following questions and discuss the main issues in groups of four. Exemplify your views by comparing your first with the foreign language/s you speak:

- e) In what way does the individual's original country and culture leave a mark on him/her?
- f) How does the first language relate to the perception of reality?
- g) How does the first language affect the way we think? How can learning a foreign language affect the way we think and the way we behave?
- h) What do you think about the relationship between language and identity?