



ICOPROMO

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



<h2>Journey to the unconscious¹</h2>	Sense-making Making meaning and self-positioning
<p>Rationale</p> <p>Intercultural contact can be an unsettling experience. When individuals go to a different community or culture they are likely to suffer a certain degree of culture shock. This can be an invigorating but also an extremely unsettling experience.</p> <p>Learning Outcome</p> <p>Participants are expected to explore the process of culture shock both from a theoretical standpoint and also from the perspective of a student who reports how he suffered and dealt with culture shock.</p> <p>Competences:</p> <p>Awareness of the need for sense making, the need to cope with new information, ambiguity and uncertainty. In particular, sense making becomes paramount when a person feels disoriented due to phenomena such as culture shock.</p> <p>Awareness of the self and others, chiefly when it comes to dealing with culture shock and reverse culture-shock and with stereotypes and generalisations.</p>	
<p>Time</p> <p>40 – 50 minutes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- 5 minutes for introducing the activity.- 10-15 for reading the texts in ‘Worksheet A’ and ‘Worksheet B’ and for pair work.- 10 minutes for reading the extract and image in the ‘Worksheet for All’ and for group discussion.- 10 minutes for reading the student’s	<p>Participants</p> <p>Up to 26</p> <p>Note:</p> <p>This activity can be conducted both in a monocultural and in a multicultural context.</p>

¹ The author of this activity is greatly indebted to her former student Francisco Luis Gámez for his consent to the use of this material. His personal experience, related in his project on culture-shock, forms the basis of this activity.

general views on his experience abroad and for the second group discussion.

- 10 minutes for the whole group discussion and for the teacher's feedback

Materials required

Worksheets A and B
Worksheet for All
Blackboard or flipchart

Procedure

1. Introduce the activity.
2. Give half the participants a copy of 'Worksheet A' and half of them a copy of 'Worksheet B'.
3. Ask participants to form pairs. Each of the members of the pair should have a different worksheet.
4. Participants deal with 'Worksheet A' and 'Worksheet B' by matching the theoretical aspects of culture shock (first column of their own worksheet) with the example of culture shock reported by the Spanish student (second column of their peers' worksheet).
5. Have a brief whole group discussion if necessary.
6. Distribute the 'Worksheet for All'.
7. Learners read the first text and the image and, in groups of four, discuss the different ways of coping with culture shock.
8. Learners read the retrospective view of the Spanish student (now a qualified language teacher) on culture shock and discuss the implications for teaching/learning.
9. End the activity with a whole group discussion on the process of culture shock. Summarise the main results on the blackboard.

Guidelines

These are the suggested answer to the matching part of the activity:

- ✓ A – 6
- ✓ B – 5
- ✓ C – 4
- ✓ D – 2
- ✓ E – 1
- ✓ F – 3

As to the sequence of the phenomena observed within culture-shock, the order of the five elements according to Oberg (1960) are:

- a) *Incubation period*
- b) *Crisis or culture shock period*
- c) *Period during which the foreign culture is beginning to be understood*
- d) *Period of acceptance of the foreign culture*
- e) *Contrary culture shock*

In the literature, *language shock* does not enter this paradigm and appears as a related although independent factor. However, it could be related to the crisis period (b).

References

Brislin, R. W. & P. Pedersen. 1976. *Cross-cultural Orientation Programs*. New York: Gardner Press, Inc.

Méndez García, M.C. 2002. Culture shock and acculturation in foreign language learning. In Bueno, A., G. Luque, F. Molina, A. M^a Ortega and M^a L. Pérez (ed.) *Studies in Applied Linguistics and English Teaching*. Jaén: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Jaén.

Oberg, K. 1960. Cultural shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology*, 7, pp. 177-182.

Seelye, H. N. 1993. *Teaching Culture: Strategies for Intercultural Communication*. Lincolnwood (Illinois USA): National Textbook Company Publishing Group.

Further Readings:

Marx, E. 1999. *Breaking Through Culture Shock; What you need to succeed in international business*. London: Nicholas Brealey.

Furnham, A. & Bochner, S. 1986. *Culture shock: Psychological reactions to unfamiliar environments*. London: Methuen.

Web Sites:

<http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~culture/Bochner.htm>

<http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~culture/sussman.htm>



Worksheet A:

JOURNEY TO THE UNCONSCIOUS

In 1958, the anthropologist Oberg (quoted by Brislin and Pedersen, 1976:13-14) used the term *culture shock* to refer to the confusion, distress and bewilderment individuals undergo in another community or country. According to Oberg, this phenomenon is due to the fact that the foreigner does not know “when to do what and how”. In similar terms, Brislin and Pedersen (1976:13) define *culture shock* as “the anxiety that happens when a person loses all the familiar clues to reality on which each of us depend.”

Experiencing some degree of anxiety is normal when any person plunges into a new culture. The problem is that some individuals suffer culture shock to a very large extent, experience serious difficulties in other cultures and become victims of this phenomenon. If this is related to language acquisition, the process of learning or acquiring the foreign language can be either facilitated by a slight culture shock or, on the contrary, greatly hindered by a strong feeling of unease. Despite these phenomena, Brislin and Pedersen (1976:15) are very positive in their views of *culture shock*: “the greatest impact of culture shock is in learning about and confronting one’s own culture. [...] By comparing the familiar and unfamiliar, sojourners learn something about their own identity.”

Seelye (1993:58-59) believes that awareness of this phenomenon does not usually prevent the individual from suffering it. Moreover, experiencing culture shock in one foreign community does not preclude people from going through a second period of culture shock in another.

In this activity, you are going to reflect on the theoretical aspects of culture shock that have been documented and supported by research. They are explained in the first column. These theoretical aspects will be illustrated by the experience a Spanish student of English reported having in England, which appear in the second column. Please note that these quotes are authentic and have not been adapted to Standard English.

- Work in pairs in order to match your theoretical aspects (first column) with the students’ account (second column) of your peers’ worksheet.
- After doing the matching, try and put the different phenomena in the sequence in which they happen.

Then discuss whether you have had a similar experience to the one reported by the Spanish student.

**CULTURE SHOCK:
SOME THEORETICAL
ASPECTS**

A

'Period during which the foreign culture is beginning to be understood. The previous anxiety leads to a gradual calm as the degree of understanding and acceptance of the non-native cultural system increases' (Oberg, quoted in Brislin and Pederson, 1976: 13-14).

B

'Period of acceptance of the foreign culture, which is the progressive result of the acquisition of a balanced image of this alien culture, a real understanding of its positive and negative aspects' (Oberg, quoted in Méndez García, M. C. 2002: 207)

**STUDENT'S DIARY:
EXPERIENCING CULTURE SHOCK**

1

I remember that when I came back [to Spain] I felt strange again: the weather was too hot, the people talked too loud, the people jumped the queue... I was glad to be at home again but my friends said that I had changed.

In a sense, I originally rejected many aspects of British culture, but the direct contact with it made me abandon certain ideas of my Spanish culture.

Unconsciously I assumed some British habits, for example, when I returned to Spain I used the words 'gracias' and 'por favor' ('thanks' and 'please') on the same occasions and with the same degree of frequency as British people used them, which is definitely excessive for Spanish speakers. Some people thought that I was joking or maybe being ironic but I was not.

I remember that the 'disproportionate' use of 'please' annoyed me during the first weeks of my stay in England but, in the end, I got used to it and 'imported' it to my Spanish everyday language.

2

All these changes and difficulties provoke psychological and also physical fatigue and tiredness. This is due to the great effort you have to do in order to understand and to be understood.

I remember that I was always tired and I slept much more than I usually sleep in Spain. I thought that the reason was the combination of the cold weather outside and the heat inside the buildings due to the central heating.

The difference in weather and in the organisation of time in your native and in the other country become elements that also have a great influence on your emotional and bodily state. [...]

In the residence dining-room I saw the groups of English friends who sat together, eating and speaking. They seemed closed groups in which I could not enter, and at that stage, I didn't know if I wanted to.

I sat alone at a table. Sometimes with another Chinese student who had no friends. He spoke no English and was shyer than the British. Previously, I had thought that I was closer to the English than to the Chinese, but then I simply was a foreigner.

The sense of loneliness was growing bigger, till one day I was at my table with the unknown and

inexpressive Chinese boy, when I heard “El pescado está asqueroso, está crudo”, which means something like ‘this fish is awful, it is raw’. Only hearing those Spanish words made me feel happy; I looked for the speaker of those words: at the next table there were several Spanish people, I took my tray and went to that table. [...]

From that day, I joined those Spanish people and I did not separate from them. Many of them had spent several months there and they said that they could not get intimate friends with any English person. Even one of them was studying English since he was 14 and said that, even when he spoke ‘perfect’ English, all his real friends were Spanish, Greek or French but never English native speaker. I was accepted as part of that group without any effort and I was renamed as Paco Jaén, which was like being at home again (twice).

[...] The Spanish group was not only formed by Spanish people but by Spanish speakers. There were several French people who could speak a bit of Spanish. All of us were rather different. I am sure that I would not have been friends with many of them if I had met them in Spain, but the unique fact that we had in common was the same national identity in a hostile environment, and this is why we joined each other.

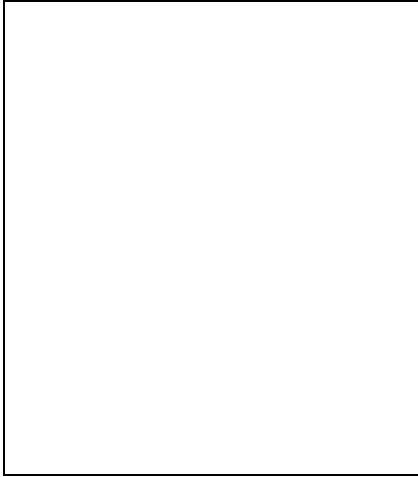
The tables in the dinning-room were completely segregated. No English-speaker was with non native English speakers. Even there was a group formed by American people who had no relation with British people. With a fast look you could find the Spanish group, the Chinese one, the American, the Russian, and so on and so forth; each community isolated at its table.

Culture shock was making me feel lonely and my identity was fading. So, when I entered this group where I could speak again easily, I could be understood, I could joke and laugh, I felt at home, and these people became my support. I can say that I was between the phase of anxiety and rejection in the culture shock evolution. Joining this group calmed my anxiety and heightened my rejection to some extent.

[...]

Before I went to England I had not a clear ethnic or national identity, or at least, I was not aware of it. But at this point I started to build it up. [...]

I was happy to be part of this group, but I now realise that this group also increased my distancing myself from the English world, since, on the one hand, we confirmed our Spanish beliefs and thoughts, and, on the other hand, this group was the nucleus, in some way, of my refusal of English people. Each day, when we met to have our meals, we talked about what we had done. Almost everyday one of us spoke about a problem with an English person; so even when each one of us had only had few problems of understanding and interaction with them, we made the problems of



our friends our own problems. And, in the end, in our mind, we felt as if we had had hundreds of clashes with English people.
As we felt rejected by English people, we refused to be like them and we stressed our Spanish identity each time more and more openly.
In order to underline our Spanish identity we auto stereotyped ourselves. For example, I remember that I started listening to Flamenco music, which is something that I had never done before going in England. This fact did not help us integrate, since we stressed our differences in opposition to English people. We were building, unconsciously, a barrier between us and 'the others'

C

'Incubation period, which takes place when foreigners first come into contact with the non-native culture. The reaction to this new situation is absolutely positive: the sojourner feels euphoric in the alien setting, everything in it is considered to be alluring, interesting, fascinating since it is the surprise element that is now playing its role. By definition, this is but a very short stage because the novelty will soon wear off' (Brislin and Pedersen, 1976: 13-14)

3

You go back somehow to childhood stage where you cannot do anything by yourself easily, you always need some help, and you cannot speak, all your ideas are reduced to fragmented messages that people cannot understand very well. [...] The fact is that I was not aware of it and, step-by-step, I reduced my use of English, till I closed my mouth. Whenever it was possible I avoided speaking English. I want to remark here that on the one hand I felt each time more insecure to speak English because people did not understand me very well, but on the other hand; on many occasions many English people were not receptive at all, and did not make any effort to understand you. [...]



Worksheet B:

JOURNEY TO THE UNCONSCIOUS

In 1958, the anthropologist Oberg (quoted by Brislin and Pedersen, 1976:13-14) used the term *culture shock* to refer to the confusion, distress and bewilderment individuals undergo in another community or country. According to Oberg, this phenomenon is due to the fact that the foreigner does not know “when to do what and how”. In similar terms, Brislin and Pedersen (1976:13) define *culture shock* as “the anxiety that happens when a person loses all the familiar clues to reality on which each of us depend.”

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**CULTURE SHOCK:
SOME THEORETICAL ASPECTS**

D

For Oberg the '*Crisis or culture shock period*, mainly [consists] in the negative reaction towards the foreign community when sojourners realise everyday life activities entail an indefinite number of difficulties inexistent in the native culture, where everything was familiar and automatically carried out. Now the exciting novelty turns into a marked feeling of uneasiness due to the fact that foreign culture patterns are not understood and are branded as "unreasonable". Hence, the personal unease is just attributed to the incomprehensibility of the alien culture and a feeling of hostility grows against it. Needless to mention, this is a lasting period which, in the long run, will give way to a much more enriching one. (Méndez García, 2002: 206)

E

According to Oberg, there is a '*Contrary culture shock*, taking place when the individual finally returns to his/her original community and has to re-adjust to the old environment [...] Brislin and Pedersen (1976:16) call this final stage *re-entry*

**STUDENT'S DIARY:
EXPERIENCING CULTURE SHOCK**

4

I think that my honeymoon was rather brief or nonexistent because I was very shocked from the moment I took a taxi to go to my residence. I felt scared looking at the cars going along the road on the lane opposite to the one I was used to. I thought we were going to smash into another car. Moreover, I could not understand a single word the Geordie taxi driver was saying. [...]

When I got my key, I went to the lift. When I stepped in, there were six young British people in the lift, I said hello as you are supposed to do in Spain when you came into close contact with someone, known or unknown. None of them answered and they seemed embarrassed [...]. Finally, I got to my room on the seventh floor. It was empty, the grey walls were completely naked and all I had was inside my suitcase.

The sense of displacement increased during the first days but, as I could see new things, I was like a tourist discovering the visited city and I did not feel really bad.

Conversation with English people was very difficult: on the one hand, my Spanish accent seemed very difficult for them, on the other, their Geordie accent had nothing to do with the English accent I had heard from the tapes of my English-lessons' listening activities.

They seemed really reluctant to meet people and I felt very insecure to speak English since they did not seem to understand me [...] The problem is that I perceived that they not only were unable to understand me, but also felt rather annoyed by my bad pronunciation.

5

The fact is that we met many English people there whom we considered our friends, but we thought that they were the exception to the rule. I felt rather comfortable and I could cope with the difficulties of everyday communication. I felt that I could understand

crisis and state that it is clearly linked with both the Peace Corps going back to the USA and foreign students returning home. This return seems to be particularly difficult, since it is an unexpected shock and the individual realizes that it is not only him/herself that has changed but his/her own culture. For some people this is especially painful owing to the personal expectancies, habitually distorted by an unreal favourable feeling caused by the period of absence (Méndez García, 2002: 207)

F

Apart from these phenomena, adult learners of foreign languages in the target community run the risk of being the victims of *language shock* (Schumann, 1986:379-392). Actually, adults are afraid of looking comical; children love wearing disguises and the success in acquiring foreign languages lies in their lack of inhibitions. From this fact it can be inferred that the adult's degree of command of the target language depends on the childlike features s/he still exhibits. Furthermore, adults express their reservations about whether their words in the foreign code express their ideas, whereas children do not. Finally, adults experience certain narcissistic gratification when speaking in their own language, gratification they cannot feel if a code which is not completely mastered by them has to be used. (Méndez García, 2002: 213-214)

how things worked in that place and I was 'in my element'. When I had to come back to Spain, I was a bit sad because right when I was beginning to be comfortable, I had to leave. I would have liked to make better use of my time over there.

6

After three months, I came back to Spain to spend the Easter holidays with my family. When I went back to England, I experienced some kind of adjustment. As I knew that I was going to be back to Spain in a month or so, I decided to improve my English once for all. Even when I was not separated from my 'Spanish' group I had a more independent attitude and I interacted many times and more easily with English people. I think that I had overcome the anxiety but I continued having certain prejudices.

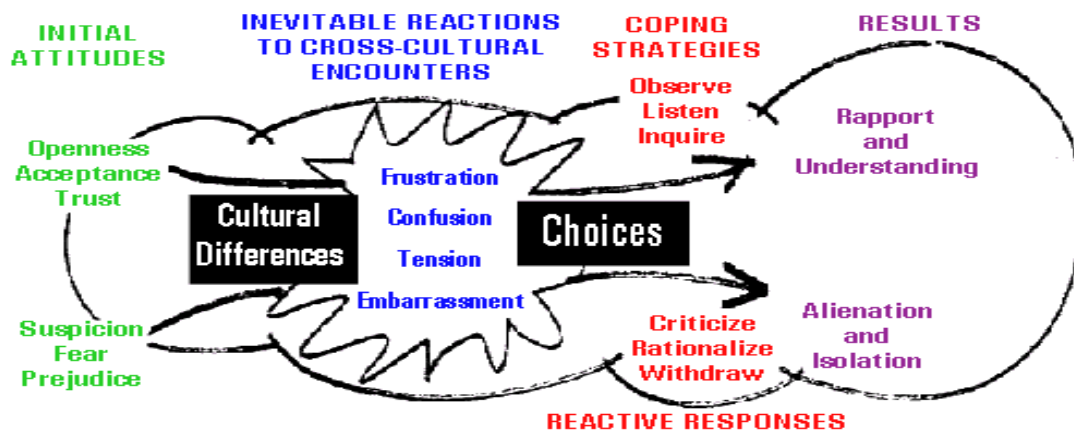


Worksheet for All:

JOURNEY TO THE UNCONSCIOUS

Read the following extract and analyse the image:

Researchers have proposed different models in connection with the processes undergone by individuals in their adjustment to a foreign culture. Rhinesmith (Brislin and Pedersen, 1976:16-17) distinguish three main categories which can also be detected in the Spanish student's observations discussed during the previous activity: (1) *flight* (avoiding the interaction with the people from the host culture, rejection of the native speakers of the target language because they are held responsible for the feeling of distress, and finally the search for protection among the fellow countrymen in the alien culture), (2) *fight* (hostile response toward the foreign community) and (3) *adaptation* (no rejection of the new environment due to a flexible and tolerant attitude). (Méndez García, 2002: 208)



“Cultural Adjustment” 2001. Online image. [Understanding Culture Stress](#). Downloaded: 6th May 2005

. < home.snu.edu/~hculbert.fs/shocks.htm

In groups of four discuss the relationship between the Spanish student's account, the above figure, and Oberg's theory of culture shock dealt with previously:

- What do you think was the Spanish student's response to the culture shock experienced?
- How may the culture shock experience be explained using both the text and the figure above?
- If you suffered culture shock during your stay abroad, how did you react to it?

Now read about the Spanish student's impressions of the whole experience as seen in retrospect three years later:

Three years ago, I spent four months in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in northern England. I was in the second year of my university degree programme and I thought that the best way of improving my second language was to immerse myself in British society and British everyday life, to get into direct contact with native speakers of English. However, after four months my English was not any better. In addition, I had not established a single close friendship with a native speaker of English and I had reinforced certain prejudices against English people. Obviously, something had gone wrong.

In this paper I want to analyse the reasons for this failure. For a very long time I could not explain in a rational way what had happened, but after reading some articles about study periods abroad, about culture shock and identity in an intercultural context, I discovered several key aspects about my experience. Previously I had thought that my experience was unique, but after reading some of the relevant literature, I realised that my experience fits perfectly into Oberg's definition of culture shock, which is quite a well-documented phenomenon. Before my stay abroad, I had never heard about it, but I obviously suffered from it.

I was very interested in analysing the impressions I gained from this experience because, to some extent, they changed my view of the world. My new perspective was more open, to some extent, but at the same time it also showed several misconceptions and some chauvinism. As I am a student of English language and literature, this wrong and negative perception produced a significant clash between my field of studies and my feelings.

Reflecting on my study period abroad in order to write this essay has been fairly difficult, since I had to break with the mental schemes I had built up in order to understand what had gone wrong in my interaction with British people. It is the first time I am writing a paper about a personal experience. I had expected this to be easy, since I only had to write about something I knew very well, but it turned out to be a torturing *journey to the unconscious*. Many times I had to stop writing because I had a splitting headache trying to understand my experience and attempting to change the perspective of the problems and putting myself on the other side; on the side of the 'rival'.

Writing this dissertation, I have realized that several ideas (prejudices) that I had held to be true for a very long time were completely wrong. Even if some people were unpleasant, many others were rather friendly. Not all the English were 'stiff, unpleasant and proud'. Only some of them fit this definition. I had over-generalized my experience with some concrete people and had transferred these feelings onto the whole nation. I thought ill about the English.

As those harmful beliefs were strongly linked with my emotions and feelings, it has been very difficult for me to eliminate them. But doing this 'therapeutic' piece of work, I have broken down some of them. I am being sincere when I say this. I think that the way of removing prejudices is to rationalize them. This way you realise how ridiculous they are.

This is the experience as related by many students who travel abroad. Finally, discuss the following questions in groups.

- In the case of this student in particular (now a qualified language teacher), working on 'culture shock' seemed to be beneficial. Do you think it was beneficial only for himself? For his (future) students? For both?
- Do you think this 'journey to the unconscious' may influence the way in which he teaches English and presents the concept of 'otherness' to his language students? If so, in which way?