



**CULTURE IN OUR CLASSROOMS:
TEACHING LANGUAGE THROUGH CULTURAL CONTENT BY
GILL JOHNSON AND MARIO RINVOLUNCRI –
BOOK REVIEW**

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In this study, I would like to write the review of the book, entitled '**Culture In Our Classrooms: Teaching Language Through Cultural Content**'. The authors of this book are Gill Johnson and Mario Rinvoluceri. It was edited by Mike Burghall and designed by Christine Cox. It was printed by Halstan & Co. Ltd. and it was published by Delta Publishing Company in Surrey in England in 2010. The international standard book number of this book is 978-1-905085-21-7.

This book has 104 pages. On page 3, the authors of this book introduce themselves to the readers of this book and the title of this page is 'From the Authors'. Foreword is on page 6. It is written by Barri Tomalin from the International House in London.

The topics of this book are listed in the contents part of this book and they are between the pages of 4 and 5. This book has 4 parts and they are A, B and C. Part A starts on page 7 and finishes on page 18. The topic titles of Part A are as follows: 1. Culture In Our Classrooms 2. Culture and Current Thinking 3. Culture and Society 4. Culture and the Individual 5. Culture and Values 6. Culture and Behaviour 7. Culture Within Culture 8. Cultural Capital 9. Cultural Codes 10. Culture and Language 11. Culture and Language Teaching 12. Cultural Competence 13. Culture and the Classroom 14. Culture and Context

In Part A, Johnson and Rinvoluceri (2010: 7) state that;

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“As we shall see, culture is everywhere. It is in the writing of these pages and, inevitably, in what takes place in our classrooms, affecting all aspects of our teaching and our students’ learning. It is:

- ***here** (where we are) and **there** (where we aren’t);*
- ***up** (what we might aspire to) and **down** (what we might despise);*
- ***high** (what we revere) and **low** (what we nevertheless enjoy);*
- ***in** (where we belong) and **out** (where we don’t).*

There is widely differing, even conflicting, views within historical and current thought on the Notion of culture and in this brief account, it will be for each of us to decide what fits with our own way of thinking. The word ‘culture’ itself comes from the Italian cultura, stemming from colere, which means ‘to cultivate’. Its etymology would support the notion; therefore, that culture is a shifting, changing, moving thing, which grows through a society as it progresses.”

In the same part of this book, it has also been stated by Johnson and Rinvolucrici (2010:15) that;

“In the teaching of modern languages, it has long been usual to include elements of culture and ‘civilisation’ as part of language courses in secondary schools, so, for example, a student in the UK studying French ‘Advanced’ level (for examination at the age of 18) would be expected to keep up with current events in France and know about French media, as well as education, legal, political, social and healthcare systems.

All this is praiseworthy, although it could be argued that what we learn about beliefs and behaviours from all this may be rather limited. More and more modern language materials are ‘authentic’ that is, taken verbatim from radio, TV and newspapers. This gives us more of an ‘authentic’, that is, taken verbatim from radio, TV and newspapers. This gives us more of an insight into national character via real language. However, again, this is limited. It depends what kind of authentic material, or how much of it, we expose our students to, as well how we decide to use it. (The latter is often limited by very tight curriculum restraints under which teachers have to operate.)

Our point here is that learning lots of field-specific lexis and statistics won’t help our students get into the mindset of the average French person. If anything, here is a danger of reinforcing stereotypes. There is a gap, if you like, between the information given about life/institutions and how things actually work at an anthropological, human level. For example, a secondary-level student of English in Germany or France may have learned about the class system in Britain and that the government has devised a method of defining class via our professions.”

Part B starts on page 19 and finishes on page 86. There are four topics in Part B and their titles are as follows: **1.** Activating cultural awareness **2.** Words, metaphors and stories **3.** Frames for studying culture **4.** Spotlight on the UK.

In Part B, it has been mentioned by Johnson and Rinvoluceri (2010: 19) that;

“Our students, and ourselves their teachers, belong to a classroom group, an environment which offers huge possibilities for raising awareness of these subterranean forces, as we address ‘cultural content’ while still accomplishing our roles as language teachers.

A more precise look at language, the cultural aspects of its words and discourse, provides further areas of communication, contact and even surprise.

Cultural issues can be the basis of whole courses-or the subject of individual lessons. And the frames that allow us to approach culture can range from the analysis of concepts and constructs, codes and conventions, diagrams and debates, surveys and statistics-to role-plays and simple (and not so simple!) reactions and responses to a single open-ended question.

Even focusing on an English-speaking country like the UK, the subject of the cultural content of many a language curriculum or the target of many student exchanges can be a touchstone for discussion and dialogue-creating more language and more awareness.”

In Chapter One, the following warm-up classroom activity has been suggested by Johnson and Rinvoluceri (2010: 21):

Cultural Categorisations

A warm-up to thinking about culture.

Cultural Content

Students start thinking about the cultural similarities and differences between their home country and other lands

Procedure

- 1. Ask the students to work on their own and write down between five and seven ways in which their country is different from other countries (this can be other countries in general, or it can be specific other countries)*
- 2. Now ask them to write down between five and seven ways in which their country is similar to other countries.*
- 3. Finally, ask them to choose one region of their own country which is different from the national norm. They jot down five to seven ways in which it is different.*

4. *Group the students in sixes to explain their three lists to each other.*
5. *Bring the students back together and ask them to tell the class the single most interesting thing they have learnt during this session, letting their discoveries lead to a general discussion."*

In the same chapter of this book, Johnson and Rinvoluceri (2010: 22) share the following classroom activity on activating cultural awareness:

Who are you, teacher?

Let's find out a bit about you, shall we?

Cultural Content

Students are allowed to speculate about you, their teacher, and learn something about your cultural background

Preparation

Think of some areas (like the ones below) that you are happy to reveal about yourself. This is a good activity for when you have been with your group for no more than a day or two and if you are of a different nationality from your class.

Procedure

1. *Tell the students they are going to speculate about you?*
2. *Divide them into groups of three or four and give them some headings to help them make some notes. For example:*

- *my hobbies*
- *the newspapers I read*
- *what I earn*
- *my daily routine*
- *the car I drive*
- *my family life*
- *my house*
- *the food I like*
- *the drink I like*
- *my free time*
- *my attitude to money*
- *my attitude to politics*
- *my attitude to education*
- *how I'd be (I am) as a parent*

(Obviously, only give them headings for areas you'll be comfortable to talk about.)

3. Give them 10-15 minutes to write notes for themselves and then discuss their ideas within their groups. Try to get them to agree, as far as possible.

- **A monolingual group** This will be easier, as your students will often have the same preconceptions about you, viewed from their cultural standpoint.
- **A multilingual/multicultural group** There may be big differences.

4. The groups share their ideas with the whole class. At this point, they have to decide on what they think the truth is-about you. If protocol permits, leave the class, wait outside and give them 10-15 minutes to talk. If not, be as unobtrusive as possible. You can use this time to write some notes of your own, under the same headings.

5. When everyone is ready, the students call you back into the class and tell you what they think. You let them know how right/wrong they are. Ensure that you link what is true about you to general truths about your culture. For example:

- Actually, teachers are not very well paid in my country.
- Most people of my age would be buying/renting/sharing a house/flat.
- Outside big cities, very few people use public transport

This part of the lesson could be a short phrase or a detailed, deep discussion.

6. For homework, get the students to write a note to you, telling you what they learned about you and what (maybe) particularly surprised them.

Postscript

This activity is adapted from an idea given by Katie Plumb in St Petersburg."

Part C starts on page 89 and finishes on page 102. In this part of the book, some exercises are suggested. The name of the first exercise is 'I notice!' and it is suggested by Johnson and Rinvoluceri (2010: 90-91):

'I notice'

Purpose:

This exercise aims to give practice in avoiding 'second-guessing' the meaning of the actions seen. It is particularly relevant in observing a person from a different culture where our referential frame is likely to be wrong.

Procedure:

- Elect one of your colleagues to tell a story (any story will do).
- Divide the group in two-half will be the 'listeners-observers' (they are going to listen to the storyteller) and half will be the 'observers'. (they are going to observe the listeners).
- Get the listeners to sit in a horseshoe around the speaker you elected.

- *Allocate the observer group members a colleague to observe-and a position from which they can see they observe easily without intruding. Obviously, they will need clear sight lines to do this efficiently.*
- *The observers take notes on what they see, throughout the delivery of the story.*
- *At the end of the story, get observers and observes together in pairs. The observer will feed back to the observer, using language such as:*
 - *I notice you crossed your arms five times during the story.*
 - *I notice you made a lot of eye contact with the speaker.*
 - *It is important that the observers do not interpret the behaviour; they should simply report it. (It is worth noting that in animal observation studies, nothing is accepted as reliable data unless observed and agreed upon by two scientists.)*
- *Allow time for the observers to react if they wish, then repeat the exercise, role-reserved, with a new storyteller.*
- *Final feedback should centre on the feelings generated by this kind of work.”*

In conclusion, it can be said that this book reminds the readers the role of culture and the role of the cultural background in English language education. The classroom exercises which are suggested in this book can help students to increase their communicative competence. These exercises can also help students start to understand the target-culture norms and behaviours. Besides, they start to understand their own beliefs, traditions, customs and beliefs better than before they did. They will enjoy learning them while reading and attending many classroom activities in their own classes.

Readers of this book learn the definitions of culture and they become aware the connections between the beliefs and the behaviours while reading this book. This book is very useful for the teachers or instructors who try to understand the culture in their own classes. It is certain that this book has brought many benefits and advantages to the English language teaching world. Readers of this book will get the outcomes of using the classroom activities which are suggested in this book and they will have more joyful and happier classes.

References

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