



Liselott Forsman

Liselott Forsman is a teacher of English currently involved in action research with 13–15-year-old students. She also teaches methodology at Åbo Akademi University in Vasa, Finland.

The basis for being able to respect the Other

Liselott Forsman develops the theme of *The Place of the Other* first set out by Hilda Torres Beltrán in issue 182

I read Hilda Torres Beltrán's article *The place of the Other* in the October–November 2004 *Issues* with interest, particularly the last section about working towards helping students 'accept that there are other ways of thinking and doing that are not necessarily better or worse than their own'. To this I would like to add some of my thoughts on how not even bringing in and exploring different ways of viewing the world necessarily leads to respectful attitudes towards the Other. So, then, what else can be done?

I am currently involved in a three-year teaching project with 13–15-year-old students where I try out different activities aimed at promoting EFL students' *awareness of diversity* (both between and within different groups to avoid stereotyping) and *respect for difference* precisely through the development of a more objective view of their own ways and values. In my work, the ability to decentre is seen as essential for the development of such intercultural competence. According to Byram (1997: 34), this ability can be defined as 'a willingness to suspend belief in one's own meanings and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging' (cf. Alred *et al.*, 2003). In other words, to attain a different perspective on and a more objective view of one's own taken-for-granted ways and values. Byram refers to among others Melde's suggestion that this ability is fundamental to understanding other cultures. Also Bredella (2003: 228) puts forward being able to reconstruct other people's frames of reference and seeing the world through their eyes as an indispensable feature of the intercultural experience.

However, inspired by Kramsch's (2001: 223) discussion of seeking 'a 'third place' from where to look at both C1 and C2' in order to have the necessary distance, I would like to suggest that the ability to decentre from one's own taken-for-granted point of view comes first, before trying to reconstruct other people's frames of reference, using their point of view, or looking at other cultures; *We* need to be able to look at ourselves first without necessarily taking a detour via another specific culture. There are several reasons for this. First of all, as Sen Gupta (2003: 160–162) states, it can be an uncomfortable process for some students to be

forced to challenge deeply held beliefs, or feeling that they are asked to evaluate their own taken-for-granted views in terms of right or wrong. Heusinkveld (1997: 489), citing a handbook for international studies, brings up the following: 'indeed, the greatest shock of an intercultural experience may not be in the encounter with a different culture but in the recognition of how our own culture has shaped us and what we do.'

According to Bredella (2003: 227) the insecurity such processes might bring is rarely mentioned. Kramsch (2001: 231) does point out that resistance towards exploration of oneself can often be found among teenage learners, an unwillingness to distance themselves from their native culture and familiar educational discourse. Also in my own experience, students can react with frustration and even become defensive of their own ways and habits. Such defensiveness often results in negative attitudes towards 'the Others' supposedly providing this new and threatening perspective, and this is why the use of some specific other cultural viewpoint actually can have the opposite effect to the one intended: students might resort to focusing on perceived 'strange ways' of the others, while retaining their own familiar and 'normal' perspective. Consequently, it is important for the teacher to reassure students that their traditions are there to be enjoyed, just as they should let others enjoy *their* way of life.

Some students might simply have prejudiced views of C2 from the beginning and then it is not easy to take the perspective of the Other. Ultimately, besides being more challenging both on a cognitive and an affective level, actually being able to use someone else's perspective, especially when it comes to values and not only conventions, requires that one is already more or less bicultural.

However, to be able to see ourselves we still need some distance. For the initial steps of this process I would like to suggest decentring activities where this 'other' perspective is a more neutral one. Here, I find what Stevens (2003: 187) speaks of as the 'Martian' school to be very useful, which aims at the making strange of the familiar. He points to Brecht's term '*Verfremdung*', entailing 'a potentially liberating, even celebratory, de-familiarisation'. By using an Alien perspective we have a neutral viewpoint that we can use to look at ourselves from, a both captivating and humorous approach that

the ability to decentre is seen as essential for the development of [...] intercultural competence

works well for bringing up this topic also with teenagers. I wish to stress that I'm using the term 'neutral' here to describe the perspective of 'the Other' as opposed to using any other more familiar 'Other' that might obscure the view in case students carry certain prejudice, not to imply that the perspective of the students really could be objective. However, through the relativization of their own cultural practices, such activities can bring about the emergence of a 'third place' from which students then more easily can go on exploring boundaries between specific groups with a more objective stance, e.g. concerning phenomena that can cause misunderstandings or possible value clashes, thus being more open to authentic communication and work towards negotiating common ways and values when encountering difference. This also means that students get useful tools for lifelong learning, which is necessary since we only can include so much in our teaching.

To conclude, I will give a few concrete examples of reflective activities used in the project: the first steps in the direction of developing the ability to decentre were taken right in the beginning of our first term together with the help of an insightful cartoon drawing attention in a humorous way to the haphazard nature of the social convention of greeting someone by shaking hands and how we take it for granted. In the following reflective work, which included brainstorming around other more or less imaginative ways of greeting people, I pointed out that we are simply so used to our own ways that we seldom question them, but we still

tend to question other people's conventions. Why, if social conventions mainly and merely are conventions? This was directly followed by two other brainstorming activities on 'rules' that might have been construed or agreed upon differently in our society, to further emphasize the arbitrariness of our own ways. One of these concerned what kind of tools we could have developed for eating as an alternative to spoons, knives, and forks, the other how we could show our appreciation at a play instead of clapping our hands, i.e., we looked at conventions shared by everybody in the class and also by many other cultural groups. Consequently these activities were not experienced as threatening.

For those who are interested in finding out more (e.g. full references for research mentioned) I refer to Forsman (2004a, 2004b), where I have written more extensively on these matters from two slightly different angles. I can also be contacted via e-mail.

Email: liselott.forsman@abo.fi

References

- Forsman, L. (2004a). The Finland-Swedish EFL classroom – developing competences for the future. *Independence. The newsletter of the IATEFL Learner Independence Special Interest Group*, 35 (Summer 2004), 6–12.
- Forsman, L. (2004b). Promoting intercultural competence in a Finland-Swedish EFL classroom. In: Björklund, M., Gullberg, T. & Sjöholm, K. (Eds.), *Språk som kultur - brytningar i tid och rum, vol. 2/ Language as Culture - Tensions in Time and Space, Vol. 2*. Rapport från Pedagogiska fakulteten, Åbo Akademi, Nr 12 (pp. 87-101). Vasa, Finland: Pedagogiska fakulteten.

~~Teach as you would be taught~~

~~Bettina Ribes Gil reflects on how in her teaching she can draw on her own language-learning experiences~~

~~How many of you who speak other languages have ever reflected on your own learning experiences: motivation, success or failure, group empathy or how the teacher functioned? Has your teaching been influenced by how you learnt? It is said that teachers teach how they were taught, or should it be that they teach as they learnt? Below I focus on my recollection of acquiring several languages and highlight some elements that influenced my own EFL teaching.~~

~~English: my mother tongue, was absorbed from babyhood through the innate listening skill which enables children to produce their own language. At primary school repetition was the in method of the 1950s and I have stimulated very young learners to reproduce nursery rhymes, songs, rhythmical~~

~~patterns, etc. followed up by appropriate role play, which I enjoyed and so do they. I learnt the alphabet from letters fixed on the blackboard in various colours which has led to a form of synaesthesia: adjectives, Asia, Arthurs are red; pronouns, Poland and Peter are blue, and so on. The use of colour is a strategy that works well with students unfamiliar with the Roman alphabet. Animals are also common to all cultures and can easily be used in less privileged teaching situations, but beware of cultural variations if introducing metaphors – black cats have varied connotations in different countries!~~

~~French: introduced at four years old with numbers written on the blackboard with an animal pasted by each multiple of ten. I have adapted this~~



Bettina Ribes Gil

Bettina Ribes Gil is a retired international civil servant and a freelance TEFLA-certified teacher with experience in Switzerland and Spain. She is now concentrating on writing more than teaching.