

# Multiperspectivity

tasks that encourage learners to appreciate other points of view

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## **Multiperspectivity:** tasks that encourage learners to appreciate other points of view

*In this article, Andy Sampson discusses the use of information gap tasks, jigsaw reading and listening activities, written diary entries and interviews as ways of developing learners' multiperspectivity – their awareness that the world can be seen from multiple points of view.*

Our world appears to be increasingly characterised by a lack of understanding and tolerance, as evidenced by wars that rage across the globe and the increasing polarisation of viewpoints on various political, social and cultural issues. The silos and echo chambers of social media mean that today, more than ever, people can largely live within their own worldview, without needing to consider the perspectives of others. "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it", Aristotle claimed, yet the willingness to even hear other perspectives often seems lacking in today's world.

The concept of **multiperspectivity**, "the ability to decentre from one's own perspective and to take other people's perspectives into consideration in addition to one's own" (Huber & Reynolds, 2014, p. 20) is at the heart of what Michael Byram (1997) termed Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Byram's model outlines the qualities of competent intercultural agents, namely the ability to know, value, interpret, relate to, discover and interact with people, places and artefacts that are distinct from one's own; in other words, the ability to appreciate and value *otherness*. This model underpins the Council of Europe's (2018) Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC).

As language teachers we are ideally placed to develop our learners' multiperspectivity — that is, their appreciation that there are other ways of understanding the world, which they may or may not agree with, but which nonetheless coexist alongside their own. After all, the very enterprise of language learning is an attempt to understand and communicate with people who are culturally distinct from us. So, how can we develop multiperspectivity in the language classroom? The aim of this article is to suggest a few practical ideas for tasks that teachers at primary and secondary levels can employ in order to encourage learners to consider and understand other perspectives on the world. The tasks practise a range of language skills and can be adapted to fit any thematic content.

- **Information gap tasks** are communicative speaking activities in which students in pairs (A and B) receive information on a topic – usually in the form of a teacher-generated grid – but with gaps to complete. For example, the grid might contain information about traditions, foods and animals in different countries around the world. Student A has the information that student B needs to complete his or her gaps, and vice-versa. Without looking at each other's papers, students must ask each other questions in order to complete their missing information. Information gap tasks reinforce the idea that our own understanding of a subject is incomplete, and it is only through dialogue that we can build up a full awareness of the issue at hand. These tasks, which can be done by students even at very low levels, effectively encourage communication, interaction and negotiation of meaning. Information gap tasks can also be student-generated – for example, students complete a blank grid with information about themselves, e.g. their favourite food, hobby etc., and then mingle, asking questions to other students, in order to complete the spaces about their classmates and build up a full picture of their classmates and their different preferences.

- **Jigsaw reading or jigsaw listening** tasks require student A to read or listen to a text that provides one version of an event, and student B to read or listen to a different version of the same event. A and B then speak to each other to find similarities and differences between the two versions. For example, student A could read a short text about the "discovery" of the Americas, written from the viewpoint of a fifteenth-century European explorer, while student B reads about the same event, but written from the viewpoint of an indigenous American of that time. By comparing accounts, students build up a more complete version of events that takes into account both perspectives, and better appreciate the crucial role of perspective in the telling of history.

- **Diaries written from multiple perspectives** are a creative writing activity. The teacher describes to students an invented situation that has occurred involving multiple protagonists – for example, some serious incident, such as a theft at the school involving several students, teachers and parents – and then assigns a protagonist to each student, who must imagine him or herself as that protagonist and write a diary entry describing the event from that perspective. Students then share their diary entries, to build up a complete understanding of the multiple perspectives. As a follow-up, students could dramatise the incident, with students playing their different roles.

- **Interviews based on photos** practise speaking, creative thinking and question formation. The teacher shows students two or three photographs of children their own age, but from different walks of life, such as a child photographed at home in a Brazilian favela, or in a classroom in Palestine. Students must imagine they are going to interview the person in the photograph, and write a few questions to ask the person about their life. Then, teachers can choose some of the students to imagine they are the person in the photograph, and try to answer the other students' questions from that perspective. As in the dramatisation of the diary entries, above, this activity encourages learners to consider how it would be to walk in a pair of very different shoes.

My own experience of using these activities with YLs and teenagers is that they engage learners, encourage creativity, and perhaps most importantly, develop an awareness of multiple perspectives which, even if they do not align with our own, need to be acknowledged and respected. This may, albeit in a small way, help contribute to the development of young people who are open-minded, tolerant, culturally competent, and understanding of the key importance of multiperspectivity and otherness in our world.

### References

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