Book Review: Tips for Teaching Culture

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Tips for Teaching Culture: Practical Approaches to Intercultural Communication
Ann C. Wintergerst and Joe McVeigh

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In a field where language and culture interact in myriad ways, Ann Wintergerst and Joe McVeigh’s *Tips for Teaching Culture* offers English language teachers a clear guide to understanding and interacting with culture in English for speakers of other languages classes here in North America or abroad. Written to help teachers consider not only what research says but also what they can do in the classroom, this book is well organized, clearly written, and provides many ways for ESL/EFL teachers to help their students build cross-cultural understanding and develop intercultural competence.

After the preface, this book has eight chapters, two appendices, a glossary, bibliography, and name and subject indexes. Each chapter starts with a photo and several reflection questions for readers to consider, followed by an introduction and a list of “tips” that are then expanded on, usually along with charts and visuals that help focus or elaborate upon the discussion within each chapter. A significant strength of the book is the way that class activities are spread throughout chapters to help teachers apply the issues and ideas introduced to classes they teach. Each activity has a specified level, connection to one of the tips in the book, and provides steps to follow with relevant teaching notes. In essence, these are lesson-plan outlines that teachers reading the book can adapt for their own contexts. The book is thus obviously written for busy teachers, who the authors recognize will want to apply the principles and techniques they discuss. One wonderful way they have made this possible is by including an “Overview of Tips and Activities” at the beginning of the book (pp. xi-xii) as a quick reference with the names and page numbers for each of the tips.

Chapter 1 addresses exploring culture in the classroom, expanding on six tips: having students discuss their definitions of culture, bringing culture to a conscious level, pointing out potentially hidden aspects of culture, showing how cultures may value the same things differently, helping students understand how culture works, and building awareness of the stress that may result during cultural adjustment. The authors briefly introduce each tip and then comment on “what the research says” and “what the teacher can do” to incorporate the tip into their classroom teaching (pp. 6-7). As a reader I
appreciate the charts, graphs, photos, and other visuals Wintergerst and McVeigh have incorporated into their easy-to-follow narrative. Each chapter ends with a summary conclusion, followed by a bulleted list of reminders.

Chapter 2 introduces eight tips on the language and culture connection, including exploring the concept of face, communication styles and registers, and differences between spoken and written language. Chapter 3 discusses seven tips related to cultural and nonverbal communication, including time, space, and gestures, while Chapter 4 puts forward six tips connecting culture and identity. Chapter 5’s five tips include recognizing stages of culture shock, countering its effects, and examining one’s own cultural style, and Chapter 6 introduces eight traditional ways to teach culture, such as using the arts, literature, role-plays, and holidays and festivals. Teachers will appreciate Chapter 7’s emphasis on culture and education, which expands on six tips, such as investigating how learner and teacher expectations may differ across cultures, as well as Chapter 8’s six teaching tips for exploring culture and social responsibility, which incorporate principles of multicultural education, create respect for diversity and difference, and manage controversial issues that may arise in class. Appendix A is a go-to resource, as it incorporates photocopiable handouts for use with many of the activities from the book. These include critical issues for discussion, tables and charts for students to complete, discussion questions for partners or small groups to consider, and a number of reflection and self-evaluation rubrics students can use. Appendix B lists different types of movies that teachers might use in class to introduce various aspects of intercultural communication.

If I sound excited about this book, it is because I am. I teach an Intercultural Communication for Teachers course in which I use several texts to introduce and expand upon key concepts in this area. I have used Tips for Teaching Culture successfully, and my undergraduate and graduate students all responded positively in evaluating it as a textbook. I believe this is largely because there are clear teaching applications on virtually every page, which helps readers apply the discussion of intercultural communication to their students and courses. For example, yet another way the authors reach out to readers is through occasional “Voices From the Classroom” vignettes by practicing teachers, most of whom are working in varied contexts here in the US, although a couple are from Japan and the West Indies.

At times I wondered about the potential oversimplification of such a complex reality as culture. Much of the research the book discusses is well established but also somewhat dated, with the most recent reference being 2008. These potential areas for improvement
The current edition is a marvelous resource for teachers who wish to move beyond stereotypes and think carefully about culture and its role in their ESL/EFL courses. I, therefore, highly recommend it. Teachers who add this resource to their library will find much food for thought as well as ready-to-use activities for their classes.

50 Ways to Teach Them Speaking: Tips for ESL/EFL Teachers
Janine Sepulveda

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Many ESL and EFL textbooks are brimming with lesson plans and teaching materials but contain very few practice exercises and activities. In 50 Ways to Teach Them Speaking: Tips for ESL/EFL Teachers, author Janine Sepulveda meets this need with 50 activities that can supplement class textbooks or stand alone and be used for any teaching context or language level. Each activity encourages students to put lessons into practice, and her communicative approach encourages all students to participate actively in their own learning. The book comes from the 50 Ways to Teach Them … series, which uses a holistic approach to practicing English that empowers students to communicate in a variety of ways that strengthens their proficiency.

This book contains eight icebreakers/warm-ups/games, 33 fluency and focused-practice activities, and nine tips for making activities more effective for students. Many activities, such as one teaching conversation patterns of initiation, response, and follow-up, seek to engage students in meaningful conversation with their classmates, while others have a strong focus on specific language areas such as stress, pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary, and grammatical structures.

The warm-ups and fluency-practice activities offer creative ways to get students communicating more comfortably and confidently. One, for instance, has students learn and sing a song to practice their pronunciation and intonation. The variety—from situational skills such as exploring the nuances of English, initiating conversations, and being understood over the phone to more discrete language skills such as minimal pairs, verb tenses, and adverbs—is impressive.

A unique feature of this book is that it also contains activities specifically designed to address the perceived intimidation that shy students feel when speaking in front of their peers. For example, one
Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted. Culture...is the foundation of communication. (Samovar, Porter, & Jain, 1981).

1. Definition: What is Culture?
2. Common Approaches to Teaching Culture.
5. Planning Teaching for Cultural Understanding: Goals.
6. Themes to use for Teaching Culture.
7. Strategies & Techniques for Teaching Culture.

Strategies Emphasizes that communication, culture and cultural differences should be studied in context. Contributions of the Critical approach. Recognizes that economic and political forces in culture and communication; asserts that all intercultural interactions are characterized by power.

The Social Scientific approach to identity. The self is performed; we create it by relating and comparing to others and then we act it out (one chooses what they show to others).

The Interpretive approach to identity. Joe McVeigh.