

Mix It Up: Culture, Creativity, and Fiction

by [Sarah C. Kassas](#)

Combining creative thinking and culture with language instruction is a great way to encourage students to take an active role in their learning process. Scholars recognize the importance of cultural awareness for language acquisition. According to Samovar, Porter, and Jain (1981), “culture and communication are inseparable . . . [they are] the foundation of communication.” Thanasoulas (2001) argues, “Language teaching is culture teaching and teachers do their students a great disservice in placing emphasis on the former, to the detriment of the latter.” This article presents three different activities for intermediate IEP and ESL classes. The purpose behind them is to incorporate culture and creativity in the classroom. They can easily be adapted to different levels.

Short Pixar Films

Pixar has many short films that you can use to help students develop critical thinking and oral or written response. What is great about many of the videos is that there isn’t any dialogue, which makes it easier for ESL students to focus and respond to the plot and themes. One of my favorites is “[For the Birds](#),” because it is about a bird that doesn’t fit in, something that our students can relate to. It is a good idea to come up with a variety of questions with objectives of summary, critical thinking, advice giving, and personal narrative. Questions that I asked my students in relation to “For the Birds” were:

1. Explain what happened in “For the Birds.” Do you think the little blue birds got what they deserved? Why?
2. Describe a time when you were being bullied. What happened? Who was doing the bullying? Why were you being bullied? What did you do?
3. Why are some people bullied? What do you think should happen to people who bully?
4. What kind of advice would you give to someone who is being bullied?
5. Describe a time where you helped to stand up for someone who was being bullied.

You can let students pick a question to respond to, or you can assign a question to them depending on the curriculum goals. If you want to assign a question, consider giving an option; students who have been bullied may not feel comfortable explaining their personal experience. This video prompted a lot of communication in my class because many students had read about bullying or had experienced it themselves. Other Pixar short films have themes like failure, determination, and ego. Many of the Pixar clips can be found on YouTube or you can purchase them on DVD.

Twists on Fairy Tales

Twists on fairy tales can generate critical thinking with the goal of class discussion and producing a research paper. Begin this activity by showing students a series of photographs of fairy tale princesses that ask the question, “What really happens in happily ever after?” Consider photographs taken by Dina Goldstein, an award winning Canadian photographer. See two examples of the photographs (Figures 1 and 2):



Figure 1. Rapunzel gets cancer. (Rapunzel – Fallen Princesses;
© Dina Goldstein, used with permission)



Figure 2. Red Riding Hood develops obesity. (Red – Fallen Princesses;
© Dina Goldstein, used with permission)

To prompt class discussion, you can ask your students:

1. Who is in the photograph?
2. Where is she?
3. What happened to her?
4. What is her problem?

The next stage of the fairy tale activity requires researching an issue that affects society and writing a research paper on it. It is a good idea to give your students a list of possible topics to help them get started.

The third stage of the fairy tale activity involves having students select and read a fairy tale from [*Grimm's Fairy Tales*](#) or [*Hans Christian Anderson's Fairy Tales*](#).

The last stage of the fairy tale activity involves having students incorporate the issue they researched into the fairy tale with a creative writing assignment. Students need to select a major or minor character, and decide how this character will deal with the problem and how the other characters in the story will react to him or her and his or her issue. For example:

1. If Cinderella suffers from credit card debt, how does she deal with her problem? How do others react to her problem?
2. If the prince from Snow White suffers from Alzheimer's disease, how does he feel? How does he behave? How do Snow White and others around him react?

I did this fairy tale activity in an ESL credit writing class that met three times a week over a 6-week period: one period was allocated to discussing photographs, 3 weeks to writing multiple drafts of the research paper, and 3 weeks to writing multiple drafts of the twist to the fairy tale. You can easily adapt this activity to lower levels or shorter time frames by reducing the research paper to a short paragraph, or by eliminating it and just using the photographs as an interesting class discussion.

TIME's The 100 Most Influential People Who Never Lived

This activity can help your students develop research, oral presentation, and listening skills using *TIME's* [*The 100 Most Influential People Who Never Lived*](#). This special publication of *TIME* magazine divides cultural icons into different categories: heroes and villains, archetypes, couples, outliers, everyday heroes, and tragic destinies, with a selection from literature, film, and television. Some of the characters are from a much earlier period and some are more recent. This publication is a useful reference because it already has information and photographs for students to look at, but you also can come up with a list of characters on your own. For this activity, I advise you to do the following:

1. Teach or remind students how to give an informative presentation.
2. Ask students to select and research a fictional person.
3. Ask students to create and practice a PowerPoint presentation.
4. Film students delivering their presentations.

Filming the students is a great way for them to review their presentations skills by watching their video independently or by discussing their performance with you in your office. You may want to encourage your students to dress up in character. Some of my students did, and it motivated them to get into character and encouraged their classmates to pay more attention to the presentations.

This activity was done in both an intermediate IEP class and an ESL credit class. I gave my students 3–5 minutes to present. A bonus is that classmates will learn additional culture by listening to presentations of their peers.

Conclusion

Although many ESL programs favor a standard curriculum, one or all of these activities can create the right mix to add a creative change to class.

Resources

- [About Pixar Short Films](#)
- [Dina Goldstein photographs](#)
- *TIME's* [The 100 Most Influential People Who Never Lived](#)

References

Samovar, L., Porter, R., & Jain, N. (1981). *Understanding intercultural communication*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Thanasoulas, D. (2001). The importance of teaching culture in the foreign language classroom. *Radical Pedagogy*, 3(3). Retrieved from http://www.radicalpedagogy.org/radicalpedagogy/The_Importance_of_Teaching_Culture_in_the_Foreign_Language_Classroom.html

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