Incorporating culture into the MFL classroom

Rationale

Through the study of a Modern foreign languages GCSE, students should *"develop their ability and ambition to communicate with native speakers in speech and writing. The study of a modern foreign language at GCSE should also broaden students' horizons and encourage them to step beyond familiar cultural boundaries and develop new ways of seeing the world."*[i]

Indeed, a requirement of the Modern foreign languages GCSE 2017 is for students to "*develop awareness and understanding of the culture and identity of the countries and communities where the language is spoken.*"[ii] It is therefore important that students are exposed to materials relating to Italian-speaking countries throughout the GCSE course to develop their cultural awareness.

Languages are part of the cultural richness of our society and the world in which we live and work. Learning languages contributes to mutual understanding, a sense of global citizenship and personal fulfilment. Students learn to appreciate different countries, cultures, communities and people.

By making comparisons, students gain insight into their own culture and society. The ability to understand and communicate in another language is a lifelong skill for education, employment and leisure in this country and throughout the world. Learning to express thoughts and ideas in another language is about learning new ways of thinking, recognising that there are different ways of seeing and interpreting the world, and developing a truly international outlook.

Learning about the culture of the target language community is also strongly linked to motivation to learn the language[iii], and it is motivating to focus on cross-cultural similarities as well as differences[iv]. In motivational terms, experience of the TL country and its culture can take place as effectively through contact with authentic media and other resources in the classroom, as through direct contact.[v]

In addition, apart from the language itself, its grammar and vocabulary, cultural knowledge and intercultural understanding represent the 'new' content that students learn at GCSE, which is one reason, perhaps, that they find culture intrinsically interesting.

Please refer to our website to view a video about incorporating culture into the MFL classroom.
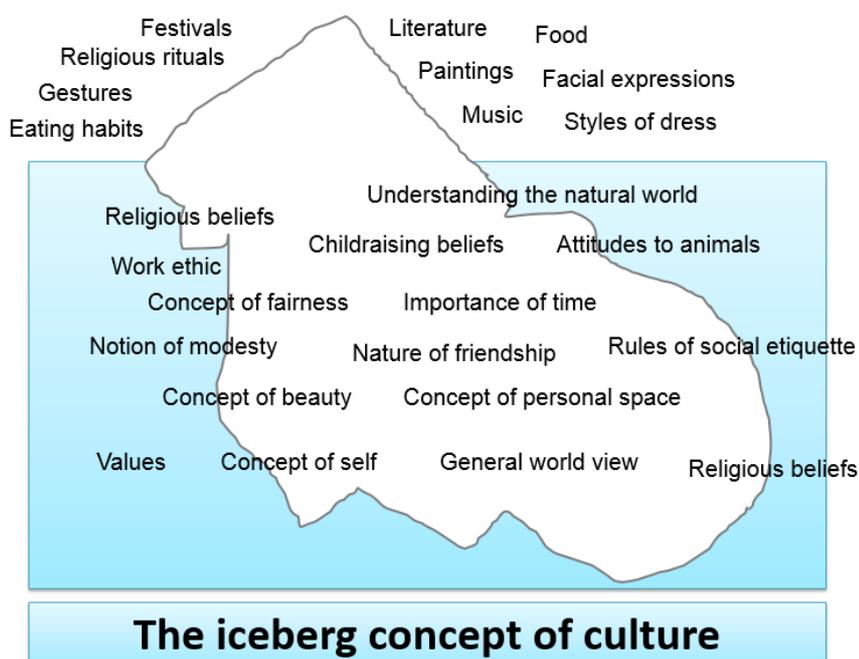
Strategies

All themes and topics in the Edexcel MFL GCSE specifications must be studied in the context of both the students' home country and that of countries and communities where Italian is spoken. For listening and reading assessments, the majority of contexts will be based on the culture and countries where the assessed language is spoken. Students may also refer to the culture of the assessed language country/countries or communities within the speaking and writing papers.

To help you to encourage greater cultural awareness in your students, here are some general strategies for incorporating culture into the classroom:

- Build (have students build) classroom displays showing information on the target-language countries – posters, pictures, maps, signs, and realia of many kinds help students develop a mental image of countries where Italian is spoken

- Inform students when special days relevant to the target-language countries are happening, and how they are celebrated

- Focus on festivals and other cultural events, comparing where possible with similar themed festivals in the UK (e.g. Day of the Dead / Halloween)

- Encourage students to do research projects on aspects of culture (foods and meals, sports, musical events, film, school systems, customs)

- Keep a box of foreign language books, newspapers, magazines that students can access and contribute to

- Exploit the wealth of online material to bring current affairs into the classroom, e.g. use TL news headlines relevant to particular topics

- Draw out the cultural aspects of any literary text, story, poem

- Use sayings, proverbs, idioms to highlight different ways of seeing the world

- Exploit visual media (paintings, sculpture, architecture, graffiti, advertising)

- Include explicit discussions of cultural differences (social habits, values, lifestyles)

- Access authentic sources of online listening material to get a variety of different perspectives and hear other voices

- Make use of songs, including information on the singer or band as well as analysis of the lyrics

- Use authentic texts as often as possible as source material for teaching and learning

Practice

Although there is surface and deeper culture, the two are related. One is often the underlying rationale for the other. Exposing learners to the things they can perceive, the surface culture, in a practical, real and sensitive way paves the way for a better understanding of the belief systems that underpin them.

Festivals
Religious rituals
Gestures
Eating habits

Literature
Paintings
Music

Food
Facial expressions
Styles of dress

Religious beliefs

Understanding the natural world

Work ethic

Childraising beliefs

Attitudes to animals

Concept of fairness

Importance of time

Notion of modesty

Nature of friendship

Rules of social etiquette

Concept of beauty

Concept of personal space

Values

Concept of self

General world view

Religious beliefs

The iceberg concept of culture

Exploring culture through the foreign language develops both *intercultural competence,* or a person's ability to relate to and communicate with people who speak a different language and live in a different cultural context, as well as *intercultural understanding*, a person's knowledge and understanding of a different cultural context, and their willingness to engage with people who live in that context.

Here is one example of a starter activity designed to get students to think about specific values, opinions and customs and whether they are individual, cultural or universal. This is just one sample set of statements, provided here in English for ease of reference, but the task would obviously be done in Italian.

Individual, cultural or universal?

1 I think that snakes are bad.

2 I prefer playing football to reading books.

3 You have to give a tip in a restaurant.

4 Eating and drinking regularly.

5 I love jeans.

6 Running away from dangerous animals.

7 Old people are very wise.

8 Celebrating a wedding.

9 Spicy food is delicious.

10 Thirteen is an unlucky number.

Further ideas for students to explore and explain in Italian:

1 The concept of lucky and unlucky numbers in different countries.

2 The colours of everyday objects (post-boxes, taxis, public buses, uniforms)

3 Attitudes to school and education

4 Food and drink preferences

5 Globalisation – where things come from

With thanks to Rachel Hawkes

[i] *Modern foreign languages GCSE subject content* (DfE, 2014)
www.gov.uk/government/publications
Reference: DFE-00348-2014

[ii] *Modern foreign languages GCSE subject content* (DfE, 2014)
www.gov.uk/government/publications
Reference: DFE-00348-2014

[iii] Gardner, R. and Lambert, W. (1959) Motivational Variables in Second-Language Acquisition. *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, 13/4, pp. 266–272.

[iv] Dornyei, Z. (1994) Motivation and Motivating in the Foreign Language Classroom. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78/3, pp. 273–284.

[v] Dornyei, Z. (1998) Motivation in second and foreign language learning. *Language Teaching*, 31, pp. 117–135.