

Artifacts, Sociofacts, Mentifacts: A Sociocultural Framework

Levels

Intermediate +

Aims

Identify the three interrelated dimensions of culture and specific examples within each
Deepen understanding about the nature of language and culture and their inter-connectedness
Practice language appropriate to the tasks

Class Time

30 minutes-1 hour

Preparation Time

30 minutes

Resources

Handouts

This activity makes use of a basic sociological framework to enhance the teaching of language and culture in the classroom. The framework presents three interrelated aspects of culture—artifacts (things people make), sociofacts (how people come together and for what purpose), and mentifacts (what people think or believe). The three dimensions are interrelated: No matter what dimension one begins with, the other two are always present and available for exploration to help deepen one's understanding of language/culture. For example, if one considers any object or item, such as a sandwich (or a cross, a vacuum cleaner, a catcher's mitt . . .), one can consider first of all what a sandwich is (e.g., lunch, snack, bread and coldcuts), what people (who), when, and how use a sandwich (e.g., working people, students, for picnics, bite size for cocktails), and finally what the notion of sandwich represents or means (e.g., portable, inexpensive, quick, common fare). The framework encourages language-culture exploration that goes beyond merely considering a cultural item, but more importantly the significance and social uses related to the item.

Procedure

1. First ask students to identify cultural items, either of the target culture or their own.
2. As they generate a list, write the words on the board, grouping them in three columns (in terms of artifacts, sociofacts, and mentifacts without using these labels just yet). For example: *taco, pencil, typewriter, wedding, proverbs, myths, tools, beliefs, great books, values, party* might be listed as follows:

taco	wedding	beliefs
pencil	party	values
typewriter		
proverbs		
myths		
tools		
great books		

(Students typically list more artifact items than sociofacts or mentifacts.)

3. Ask students to consider what the items in each column have in common. Then add the headings—Artifacts, Sociofacts, Mentifacts—and explain the meaning of each.
 4. Have students pick any item from any column—or add new items—and discuss how any item in any one column has its counterparts in the other two. For example, if one chooses the item *wedding*, one can then discuss and list the various artifacts related to the social occasion of a wedding in one's own culture or the target culture and then discuss the significance or meaning of each.
 5. After discussing the relationship between artifacts, sociofacts, and mentifacts, have students compare and contrast these in their own culture and the target culture, as well as the language expressions connected with them. Take special note of where relationships among the three dimensions and the language expressions used for each do not correspond across cultures.
1. The language used may be either the target language or the students' native tongue(s), depending on their proficiency level and the main objective(s) of the lesson.
 2. You may follow this activity with an out-of-class assignment in which students choose either an artifact (e.g., sandwich), a sociofact (e.g., wedding), or a mentifact (e.g., some belief or value) and investigate with native speakers the various dimensions and the appropriate language expressions that accompany each.
 3. Once this framework is well understood, you can use it throughout the course as a reference point as well as to deepen and expand any cultural topic that may come up.

Caveats and Options

Appendix

4. Use the handouts in the Appendix to continue class discussion on culture (Handout 1), or to work further on language or culture (Handouts 2 and 3). Handout 2 can be used to work through a sample together, and Handout 3, which is blank, can be used by students to do their own analysis.

Handout 1: More About Culture

1. Culture is created by people.
2. It exists in time and space, that is, in an environment in which human beings act and react upon their space, the time dimension, their thoughts about things, themselves and others.
3. It has several components:
 - artifacts (that which is made, created, produced)
 - sociofacts (the ways in which people organize their society and relate to one another)
 - mentifacts (the ideas, beliefs, and values that people hold)

Together, these components of any culture account for any and all of the following:

manners	customs	beliefs
ceremonies	rituals	tools
laws (written and unwritten)	institutions	religious beliefs
myths and legends	knowledge	values
concept of self	social taboos	language
ideas and thought patterns	art and art objects	models
ideals	customs	food
accepted ways of behaving	holidays	books

4. The whole of culture is greater than the sum of its individual parts, and the parts are interrelated. We can say that a tool (artifact) involves the custom (sociofact) for the use of that tool, and that the custom involves the ideas or concepts behind it (mentifact).
5. Culture is learned. It is not genetically transmitted as are racial characteristics. We learn to speak, think, and act the way we do because of the people and the culture that surround us.