

## I can use English interculturally

*Peter Anderson applies Joint Construction to Hall's dimension of time.*



**Peter Anderson** runs Anderson House in Bergamo, Italy, and teaches English to children, adults and companies. He is the treasurer of SIETAR Italia and a Cambridge examiner. He helps his students to use English in an interculturally appropriate way.

### The silent language

Edward Hall (1959) emphasises the importance in intercultural communication of nonverbal signals, of proxemics (how space affects communication), of chronemics (how time affects communication) and finally of 'context' (how, in some cultures, talk is allusive because listeners are expected to infer meanings from shared knowledge and

from the communicative situation, while in other cultures talk is very explicit and does not require a high degree of contextualising).

### Joint construction

Patrick Boylan—an American interculturalist based in Rome—suggested I try combining the following eliciting technique with Hall's cultural dimensions to promote change in students' approaches. The technique is 'Joint construction' and is something I tried with my Italian learners of English. The task was to write four short compositions that varied culturally according to Hall's dimensions of time, context and, to a lesser extent, space. In this article I present two compositions.

*The aim of the task is to promote real change in the students' cultural mindset by getting mentally 'into' the cultural dimensions*

The joint construction technique was developed at the University of Sydney; it is a collaborative writing activity in which the students and their teacher construct a text together. The teacher takes the lead, proposing a text type, asking leading questions, confirming responses and offering explanations about the purpose and form of the text produced and the writing conventions to observe in order to convey a given

cultural value. Phrase by phrase and sentence by sentence, as suggested by the students through the artful prompts of the teacher, the class constructs a culturally authentic text on the board. During the process the teacher thinks aloud about the reasoning behind the students' suggestions; this enables the students to become aware of the effect of their words on a person of the target culture. Even an apparently 'tiny' difference, such as the use of Miss instead of Ms in composing a low-context letter to an American woman recipient, can cause the teacher to grimace and exclaim 'It's none of your business if I'm married or not!', thus alerting students to their cultural faux pas. Texts can be letters, reports, even poems.

### Task: A letter to an American and Mexican family

The task was to write two letters applying Hall's dimension of time—monochronic and polychronic time. Monochronic time means doing one thing at a time and is typical of Americans and Northern Europeans. In polychronic cultures, human interaction is valued over time and things do get done but in their own time. It is typical of Latin cultures, the Arab world, etc.. Students can be asked to research the differences or a diagram can be given in class, as in Figure 1.

Factor	Polychronic action	Monochronic action
Actions	Do many things at once	Do one thing at a time
Focus	Notice things happening all around	Concentrate on the job at hand
Attention to time	Think about what will be achieved	Think about when things must be achieved
Priority	Put relationships first	Put the job first
Timeliness	Base promptness on relationship factors	Emphasise promptness as a positive value in itself

Figure 1

The two letters can be written in parallel or in sequence. I decided to write the first letter to a Mexican family (polychronic) and the other to an American family (monochronic). The instructions given said: 'The two families you don't know will be staying with you for a week and you will need to look after them'.

Here are the results from several classes—see Figures 2 and 3). I live in Italy, therefore I'm writing as an Italian, in an Italian context. You apply it to your contexts. I have written comments in the column on the left next to the letters to explain the choice of sentences in the letters.

The aim of the task is to promote real change in the students' cultural mindset by getting mentally 'into' the cultural dimensions and using that newly acquired awareness to write the texts. That is, learning by doing, the constructivist approach.

p.anderson@andersonhouse.it

### References

- Dreyfus, S., L. McNaught and S. Humphrey. 2011. Understanding Joint Construction in the tertiary context. [http://www.academia.edu/622732/Understanding\\_Joint\\_Construction\\_in\\_the\\_tertiary\\_context](http://www.academia.edu/622732/Understanding_Joint_Construction_in_the_tertiary_context) (accessed 26.10.2012)
- Hall, E. T. 1990. *The Silent Language*. New York: Anchor Books.

**Polychronic:** Write a letter to a Mexican family (polychronic) you don't know who will be staying with you for a week in your home. Propose your plans for them: you will look after them for the whole week.

Formality with the 'usted' vs. 'tu' in mind	Dear Mr Gonzales,
Time and promptness less important	Thank you for the email you sent me two weeks ago. I apologise for the delay in replying but I was very busy at work.
On an impromptu basis, not organised	When you arrive we will decide what to do day by day as we do not know what your tastes are. There are always many cultural activities going on that you can choose from or see a little of all of them, if you like.
Real Latin warmth! Relationship is more important than time	Both my wife and I are taking that week off work so as to be able to look after you and spend as much time as possible with you to get to know you well. You must consider us as your family and our house is yours!
Polychronic time!	If you wish to stay on for an extra few days, please feel free to do so: we would be delighted to have you stay on.
Promptness based on relationships. Many things at a time	Let us know when your plane arrives and we will pick you up at the airport. We will stop on the way to taste a lovely 'gelato' an ice cream from the local shop run by our friend. He makes a great homemade ice cream!
Stressing importance of family	My wife, my children and I are really looking forward to getting to know you. Warmest regards, Mario Rossi

Figure 2

**Monochronic:** Write to an **American family (monochronic)** you don't know who will be staying with you for a week in your home. Propose your plans for them: you will look after them for the whole week.

Anglosaxon informality —on first name terms from the beginning	Dear Bob,
Promptness in replying. Job first and organising one thing at a time	Thank you for your email which I have just received. We have already prepared a detailed program for the week which I attach for your comments.
Program and timing important in themselves	We have arranged fixed times for everything so that you will get the most out of your week here with us.
Privacy important in Anglosaxon culture	We understand you want to spend some time on your own, so we have left a couple of empty slots in the program.
Monochronic! First, finish trip and get settled, then switch to enjoy country	I will pick you up at the airport on Sunday at 4pm. We'll take you straight home so you can unpack and relax a moment. Then at 5pm we'll take you to a famous 'gelateria' nearby for some real Italian ice cream.
Warning about punctuality of public transport	I'm afraid public transport in this country is not always punctual and efficient so be prepared. Please come with a spirit of adventure! Whenever we can we will use our car.
Proxemics: Distance from people. In Italy people stand closer than in the US	I'm afraid our house is not as large as many American houses: we hope you don't mind!
Informal closure	Looking forward to meeting you on Sunday afternoon. Best regards, Mario

Figure 3



Reading this online?

You can choose the way you receive IATEFL Voices in the Members Area  
Just log in at [www.iatefl.org](http://www.iatefl.org) to change your settings