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Chapter 6

Exploring Culture Through Interviews

In this chapter, the ethnographic theme is further developed by focusing on the key tool of the interview. Topics addressed are:

- *The interview as a speech genre.*
- *Interviewing strategies.*
- *The presentation of the self in interviews.*
- *Interviews as interaction.*
- *Using interviews to collect cultural information.*
- *Preparing learners to be interviewers.*

The Interview as a Speech Genre

In this chapter we shall consider how interviews can be treated from an intercultural perspective. In particular, the focus will be on how to conduct interviews as part of small and large-scale ethnographic research, and how to analyse the data collected from interviews. Interviews might seem a very specific topic to be allocated a full chapter in this book; however, they are important for an intercultural approach to ELT for two reasons. First of all, interviews seem at first glance to be a speech genre that exists mainly to exchange information – an interviewer asks a question, and the interviewee responds. In communicative language textbooks, interviews are often used in listening passages as examples of information gaps being bridged. However, as we shall see, the content and form of questions and responses in interviews also incidentally give *cultural* information, about the participants' social and geographical identities, and about their values, assumptions and attitudes. This aspect of interviews is often neglected. Commenting on the use of interviews in anthropological research, Roberts *et al.* (2001: 142–3) observe:

> The conclusions drawn from data collected in interviews are not unproblematic facts. The questions are asked in particular ways and construct and constrain the answers. A different question would produce a different response and so different data. So any interview

> data is jointly produced and is as much a product of the interviewers' social world as it is of the informants'.

Despite these misgivings, however, interviews are still a major way in which learners, particularly in an ELT situation, can conduct practical ethnographic research – for example, they can make contact with English speakers and ask them about aspects of the target culture. What must be remembered and anticipated is that the responses they elicit might not be entirely straightforward, and both the questions and the answers will probably require careful analysis to shed light on the 'joint production' of social reality. This chapter gives some guidance in how to analyse interviews from a cultural perspective, by using examples from linguistic and social research, as well as data collected by L2 learners.

Chapter 3 argued that conversations and interviews are different types of speech genre. Casual conversation has been problematic in ELT because its cultural function is not primarily to exchange information, but to establish or maintain social identity by sharing experiences and negotiating or affirming the values and norms of the group. An understanding of the cultural function of conversation can lend purpose to the familiar characteristics of conversation – turn-taking, holding the floor, second-storying, and so on – and help teachers and students prepare for the difficulties inherent in this speech genre. At first glance, interviews should be a much easier genre to cope with in a classroom with a focus on information exchange. In interviews, at least superficially, content is primary: they are ostensibly a genre in which an information gap is bridged. A brief excerpt from a tape script from an ESP course book *Business Venture 1* (Barnard & Cady, 1992: 86) illustrates a typical exchange of information:

A: Could you tell me something about IKEA?
B: Yes, we're a big international furniture company. We have 89 stores in 21 countries.
A: How do you operate?
B: Well, first we do market research; that's very important. We ask people what they want and, using this information, we design a new piece of furniture.
A: And what's the next stage?
B: After that, we ask the suppliers to manufacture the furniture. Then, they pack it, and send it to our stores.
A: And then the customers buy it.
B: Yes. They visit our stores and see the furniture. They decide what they want and buy it.

The interview is evidently constructed in part to demonstrate the use of

sequencers (*first, after that, then*), and partly to offer a simple model of interview structure. 'A' asks a question, or probes with a statement, and 'B' either gives a minimal response ('Yes'), or sometimes elaborates with further information ('We have 89 stores . . . '), and sometimes offers an evaluation ('that's very important'). Over the course of the interview, 'A' learns new information about the company. However, in 'real' interviews, even information exchange of this kind occurs within cultural 'frames' that vary from speaker to speaker. These 'frames' contextualise the speech event, allowing the speaker to assess the significance of the information exchanged, and to understand implicit meanings which underlie the explicit questions asked. Successful communication in interviews depends on the sharing of cultural frames of reference.

The uses of interviews, moreover, are varied. The example above is contextualised briefly in the course book as an exchange between a journalist and an IKEA manager – the type of journalistic end-product of the interview is not made clear, but we can imagine that it would be some kind of business feature or public relations exercise. The participants in the interview are on relatively equal terms professionally, and treat each other co-operatively, and with respect. Similar relationships would normally be found in interviews that are for research purposes – whether market research, sociolinguistic research or other types of research conducted by professionals upon strangers. Other types of interview are more complex and problematic. Some interviews, such as those on television 'chat shows', are as much about performance as about genuine information exchange, and they will be dealt with separately in Chapter 8. Many interviews, like those with personnel officers, social services or promotion panels, involve unequal relationships between applicants and 'gatekeepers' to resources or power. In such interviews, the questions asked are not as straightforward as the IKEA example, and the applicants' responses will determine whether or not they are granted access to employment, services or a promoted post. It has been shown that in gatekeeping interviews with ESL speakers, not knowing the 'cultural game' of anglophone interviewing style can put applicants at a severe disadvantage. Roberts *et al.* (1992: 47) give the example of a job interview in which an ethnic minority candidate ('B') was asked about his driving experience:

N: You obviously don't drive in the job you're doing. What sort of driving experience have you had?
B: In this country?
N: Um hum.
B: I've got um light goods vehicle driving licence and I've . . . I don't think done nothing wrong.

As Roberts *et al*. observe, the applicant here puts himself at a disadvantage by giving what appears to be a defensive and only tangentially relevant answer to 'N's question. 'N' is indirectly offering the applicant an opportunity to present his skills and experience, according to the cultural conventions of anglophone job interviews. However, 'B', who comes from a culture where interviews are more closely akin to tests where weaknesses are probed, interprets the question as an attempt to find fault, and answers in the light of his own cultural assumptions. In his own terms, he is being relevant, but both 'N' and 'B' have different assumptions about the cultural function of the question, and therefore different expectations about the kind of information that is to be exchanged.

This example is a vivid illustration that even 'straight' information exchange is culturally conditioned, not least by the participants' presuppositions about what kind of information is important, and why it is being exchanged. This chapter considers the way that culture impacts upon interview situations, examines the way that meaning is constructed interactively by participants in interviews, and suggests ways in which interviews can be exploited more fully from an intercultural perspective in the ELT classroom.

Interview Techniques

Interviewing is only one way of gaining cultural information. Ethnographers currently tend to avoid formal interviews, preferring covert observation, or 'focused conversation'. Roberts *et al.* (2001: 141) comment in their description of the Thames Valley University ethnography programme that:

> One of the most difficult aspects of the methods element of the course is to help students unlearn their preconceptions about the interview as a research method. They have to replace their image of the white coat and the clipboard with something that is much closer to a focused conversation. This does not mean that ethnographic interviews are unstructured, unprepared encounters.

A structured guide to interview technique is given in Spradley (1979). Key points to consider include:

- Try, if possible, to interview the respondent more than once, over time.
- Decide in advance which general themes or topics you wish to cover in the first interview.
- Listen to the interviewee's responses to establish further topics to follow up later, in more focused interviews.

- Decide in advance how you will record the responses (notes taken during or immediately after the interview, audio or video-recordings?). This will depend in part on the location of the research and the relationship with the respondents.
- Avoid 'leading questions' of the kind, 'How do you show that you are proud to be Scottish?' This assumes that the respondent *is* proud to be Scottish.
- Elicit information with as little evaluation as possible. Back-channelling, or repeating what the respondent has just said, often encourages the respondent to elaborate. Alternatively, probe the interviewee's responses by asking questions like, 'What do you mean by –?'.
- Encourage interviewees to elaborate on topics. Do not be in a hurry to hasten them on to new topics by asking a new direct question after they have given a brief response to an earlier question.

Ethnographic interviewing in a foreign language is not as difficult as might be supposed. Roberts *et al.* introduced their students to ethnographic interviewing first by practising in their mother tongue, and then by role-playing in the target language. They found that their students' anxieties were ill-founded (2001: 145):

> Interestingly, the fears about their own competence in interviewing in the foreign language are quickly laid to rest. They find that ethnographic interviewing requires relatively little productive competence because the whole point is to give the informant control of the interview and because questions so often use the informants' own language.

After the data has been recorded, the interviews should be transcribed, in whole or part. Different conventions are used in published interviews to mark hesitations, pauses, overlaps, non-verbal features such as laughs and gestures, and characteristics such as volume, intonation and whispering. How interviews are transcribed depends in large part on what the research identifies as important. If two interviewees are talking, and one interrupts or overlaps with the other, this should be shown, particularly if the learner is interested in why they are interrupting and overlapping. If an interviewee changes his or her voice quality to dramatise certain incidents in the interview, this should be coded in order to be shown systematically. The interviews transcribed below illustrate some of the differences in the conventions governing the presentation of speech in writing

Finally, the transcribed data has to be analysed. As noted above, this is not a transparent process, and it involves the learner reflecting on the usefulness of his or her questions, and the assumptions underlying both the questions and the answers. The following sections suggest, first of all, different ways in which interview data can be analysed, according to a range of cultural perspectives to do with topics such as class, gender, and subcultural group membership. Finally, more practical, 'classroom' examples of data collection and analysis are presented.

The Presentation of the Self in Interviews

People respond to interviews in different ways. This fact itself has been the subject of discussion in sociolinguistics for over three decades, since Bernstein (Bernstein, 1971) investigated the speech styles of children in interviews, and controversially correlated those styles to their working-class and middle-class status, that is, their 'social formations'. In brief, Bernstein argued that working-class children grew up in a social environment in which individuals fitted into a fairly rigid and uncontested hierarchy. In traditional working-class communities, in other words, people knew their place within the social structure. Working-class communities were stable and promoted solidarity and well-defined social roles. Middle-class children, in contrast, grew up in an environment in which there was more scope for negotiation – social roles (e.g. of males and females) were less 'fixed', and the community itself was less well-defined. The contrasting social formations led to a disposition to use language in different ways: working-class speakers use language to affirm their identity as part of a collective; while middle-class speakers use language to affirm their identity as a negotiating individual. As Montgomery (1986) puts it:

> The contrast between the two social formations could be summed up in terms of the relative bias of each toward the collectivity or the individual. The first raises the 'we' over the 'I'; the second raises the 'I' over the 'we'. In doing so, each formation – with its characteristic role systems – develops a distinctive orientation towards communication. (Montgomery, 1986; reprinted in Montgomery & Reid-Thomas, 1994: 60)

Bernstein's view of the relationship between language use and social class was hotly criticised in the 1970s – some of the findings were, for example, interpreted as suggesting that working-class speakers were unable to form arguments, and that they were linguistically 'deprived'. Their use of a 'restricted code' that favoured collective narrative over individual argument was sometimes contrasted unfavourably with middle-class speakers' mastery of an 'elaborated code'. Such arguments demonstrate the dangers of over-generalising from limited data. As Montgomery observes, most sociolinguists today would not consider 'orientations towards communication' as completely determining the way working-class or middle-class speakers use language – they are simply 'orienta-

tions'. Any speaker can move along a continuum between individual-oriented and community-oriented speech styles, depending on personal inclination, speech situation, and the relationship between participants. However, in given speech genres, such as interviews, general patterns of preference can be correlated with social classes, or 'formations'. In other words, working-class and middle-class speakers tended to view interviews in systematically different ways, and construct a relationship with the interviewers in accordance with these varying perceptions.

The realisation of communicative orientations can frequently be observed in interviews, particularly those favoured by sociolinguists, which probe for personal information as a way of putting the interviewee at ease. Macaulay (1991) elicited the following data when interviewing middle-class and working-class speakers from Ayr in Scotland. The transcripts are organised in lines, each of which is a phrase that contains a single verb. Both speakers are reminiscing about their past, but they present themselves in quite different ways. Extract A shows a middle-class speaker presenting himself in terms of likes and dislikes. He constructs an argument to justify his preferences, and explicitly draws attention to the status of one of his statements as a 'generalisation'. At one point he even appeals to the written mode ('put normal in inverted commas'), which serves to underline the fact that his presentation of himself takes the form of an argument – a negotiating position.

Extract A
well I quite like this environment
I like the people here
and I like the countryside
and I like the attitudes of people
because I found
one – one problem with say Germany or Oxford was
that there was a certain amount of [.] unreality in Oxford
in that the academics were really a bit isolated from the
rest of the community
and many of them felt
that this was the whole point of living
to solve their own particular research problems
and nothing else was really all that important
and they tend
to live in this sort of ivory tower atmosphere
although obviously with a generalization like that you know
there were many exceptions
and there were many sort of – sort of normal people
put normal in inverted commas

In contrast, the working-class speaker below presents herself not as someone who negotiates, but as someone who narrates. In other words, she reveals herself through stories rather than argumentation. As Macaulay points out (Macaulay 1991, 1995/6), this style of self-presentation is no less sophisticated than the middle-class style, requiring as it does a command of pacing, suspense, and a control of dramatised direct speech, used at moments of crisis. The spelling of the working-class transcript represents some features of a working-class Ayrshire accent and dialect (e.g. 'oot', *out;* 'telt', *told*) and these also, obviously, indicate the social and geographical origins of the speaker. The middle-class speaker above would also have an Ayrshire accent, but his dialect is closer to that of written standard English, and so it is more difficult to represent in writing. (For a further discussion of non-standard varieties in the intercultural classroom, see Corbett, 2000.)

Extract B [talking about her mother]
she watched you like a hawk
so I goes oot this night
it was my first husband
I'd made arrangements
to meet him – away at Tam's Brig
away from the Prestwick Road to the Tam's Brig
and somebody had telt her
they had seen me
so we'd made arrangements
we'd meet at Tam's Brig
he would go his road
and I would go mine
and then naebody would see us
walking hame
however whoever spouted on me
had telt her
where I was and aw the rest of it
so she –
I come to Tam's Brig this night
and I'm just coming ower Tam's Brig
and I stopped dead
Bertie says to me
"What's up with you?"
I says
"Oh don't luck the noo
there's my mother"
he says

"It is nut"
I says
"It is"
"Well come on
and we'll face her"
I says
"You may
but I won't"
says I
"You'd better stop there
and I'll go on"
he stopped
as I telt him
and I went on
well she hammered me fae the Tam's Brig tae the
Prestwick Road
and everybody watching me
and I was eighteen

The content of the anecdote here is directly concerned with social roles in working-class communities in the speaker's youth – by courting without her parents' permission, the speaker had violated the norms of the community, and her mother makes a public example of her. Both she and her boyfriend seem aware of the social conventions they have violated and although the man appears willing to 'face' the mother and negotiate, the speaker is not, and accepts her public punishment without resisting. The speaker seems to be saying that, as a young woman, she accepted the roles and constraints of traditional working-class communities more readily than she would now. The working-class speaker here presents herself not through explicit argument, but by way of a narrative that dramatises key social issues, but does so implicitly, in a way that the interviewer is supposed to understand and appreciate. As a means of self-presentation, the narrative is no less sophisticated than the argument of the middle-class speaker, though in educational contexts it may well be less valued.

These examples illustrate the fact that even in interview situations, the exchange of information is influenced – though not completely determined – by cultural factors like class and ethnicity. Gender, too, may play a part in the way that information is selected and communicated. Certainly in one real-life case study of a classic ELT situation – buying tickets at a railway station – researchers discovered that women asked more questions than men, especially when the ticket-seller was male (Brouwer *et al.*, 1979,

cited in Montgomery & Reid-Thomas, 1994: 32). This difference in gender behaviour can be interpreted in various ways but it does at least suggest once more that information exchange is culturally shaped.

The educational implications of this insight are considerable. In native-speaker education it has long been argued that in oral assessments, working-class speakers can be disadvantaged because their speech-styles do not conform to the middle-class expectations of the education system. In the USA, in particular, there are long-standing debates about the assessment of sociolinguistic competence of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) speakers (e.g. Rickford, 1987). In ELT, of course, the situation is different but analogous: as we have observed, there are some gatekeeping encounters (e.g. oral examinations, and job interviews) in which speakers from different cultural backgrounds might be disadvantaged, though one would hope that in the former, the training of ELT examiners would encourage them to compensate for varying speech styles. From an intercultural perspective, it is necessary for learners (and their assessors) to be aware that even in apparently 'objective' situations of information transfer – typically in interview situations – background and communicative orientation will predispose individuals to select and structure information in systematically different ways. The remainder of this chapter looks at the construction of meaning during the process of interviews, and considers ways of raising awareness of cultural differences in information-exchange.

Interviews as Interaction

The interviews found in ELT coursebooks often share a problem with simulated conversations: a stiltedness that becomes even more apparent if learners are asked to read dialogues aloud. Erickson (1996: 292) pinpoints the source of this recurring inauthenticity in the absence of 'the on-line mutual influence that we experience in naturally occurring conversation, the dynamic ebb and flow of listening and speaking relations' and 'the fluidity of social identification that can occur as real people converse face to face'. There may be other good reasons for reading dialogues aloud, of course, but they do not offer learners the opportunity to cope with real-life interaction, which, as Erickson observes, demands a degree of spontaneity and the ability to cope with the unexpected. One simple strategy for leading learners from the controlled ritual of a textbook dialogue to the relative unpredictability of spontaneous speech is to devise a role-play based on the dialogue. One such role-play was devised by Sheila Cogill and Denise Gubbay for ESL learners in industrial contexts (cited in Roberts *et al*. 1992: 267). It begins with the telephone dialogue:

Teacher: Westwide plumbing.
Student: I need a plumber. My tap is leaking.
Teacher: Name please.
Student: [supplies]
Teacher: Address?
Student: [supplies]
Teacher: OK. I'll come this afternoon.
Student: What time?
Teacher: Between twelve and five. I can't be exact.
Student: That's alright. Thanks.

Once students have practised this, the teacher begins to give unpredicted and largely unwanted responses, such as:

(wrong number): 'No plumber here. This is a private house.'
(plumber ill): 'We're not taking orders. Mr Jones is ill.'
(plumber busy): 'We can't do anything for a week.'
(request for direction): 'Where can I find you?'

Within the familiar framework of the known dialogue, then, a 'controlled element of unpredictability' is introduced. The learner does not need to process the whole situation in order to deal with the unfamiliar elements, and can focus on producing something more akin to the 'dynamic ebb and flow' of an authentic exchange of information, where he or she has to negotiate a successful conclusion to the interaction.

However, as Erickson observes, spontaneity and dealing with unpredictability is only part of what makes spoken interactions 'authentic'. There is a cultural element, namely the 'fluidity of social identification' that can occur as speakers interact. Again this fluidity of identification is as pertinent to interviews as it is to casual conversation. Erickson (1996: 292–3) gives the fictional example of an interview between a supervisor and a new employee, a young, female Puerto Rican of African ancestry, who happens also to be a college graduate in business, a former track star, a lesbian, a mother of small children, and an active member of the local Protestant church. Her identity is multifaceted, as are all our identities, and in the interaction with her supervisor, she may choose to select one topic in preference to another. Thus, as Erickson (1996: 293) sums up:

> Different badges for attributes of identity could be made more salient at one moment in the encounter than at other moments. Thus, which attributes of identity would be emphasized as central to the conduct of interaction might vary for a given individual, not from one social situation to the next but within a given situation.

Such a 'fluidity of social identification' explains the responses of members of 'spectacular' youth subcultures (i.e. goths, punks, rockers and hippies), when interviewed by social scientists investigating subcultural affiliations (Widdiecombe and Wooffitt, 1995). The researchers hoped that their interviews with subculture members would cast light on their need for group affiliation; while, in fact, in the interviews, respondents typically avoided categorising themselves and instead stressed their 'ordinariness' and individuality. One interview with two 'goths' (R1 and R2) makes this point clearly (Widdiecombe and Wooffitt, 1995: 106–7; presentation adapted):

I: right, so as a said I'm doing stuff on style and appearance can you tell me something about yourselves the- the way you look
R1: w-wu-wh't d'you mean like . . . what do you mean . . . about ourselves's a bit general huhh
I: well . . . how would you describe what you're wearing
R1: ehm . . . what I feel . . . be(hh)st in hhuh . . . what I feel is sort'f myself . . .
I: what about you
R2: uhm . . .
[Alarm goes off in backround]
R2: I just find it really offensive when people . . .
I: sorry
R2: I just find it really offensive when people try to label . . . what you look like and so . . .
I: yeah
R2: then go away and write a magazine article and say oh they're gothic . . . or they're hippy or something

Here, as the researchers comment, the interviewer seeks what seems to be unproblematic information about the visual style adopted by two 'goths', that is, members of a subculture that typically dresses in funereal black, uses deathly pale make-up, and listens to rock bands that dwell on morbid themes. Both interviewees resist the interviewer's categorisation of them, however, the first by seeking clarification of the question and then, in her response, emphasising personal choice rather than affiliation with other goths. The second respondent 'forcibly protests about the kind of self-identification which the interviewer's first turn was designed to achieve' (Widdiecombe & Wooffitt, 1995: 107). Information, here, is not exchanged in the straightforward way that the interviewer originally intended: the respondents choose to downplay visually explicit markers of their group affiliation, and protest against the easy assumptions of a 'straight' mainstream interviewer.

Widdiecombe and Wooffitt argue (1995: 75n) that they did not look like 'prototypical market researchers', and did not look 'out of place in the festivals we attended' and so their informal interviews should be regarded as equivalent to conversations. However, this is in fact a difficult claim to justify. As we saw in Chapter 3, participants in casual conversation are typically engaged in an implicit negotiation of values to construct a shared identity – if those negotiations break down, the group can also fragment. By contrast, in Widdiecombe and Wooffitt's interviews, an outsider (no matter how inoffensive) is asking for information about the group affiliations of individuals – the purpose is different and so the speech genre is different from that of everyday conversation. In their interviews, the youths are implicitly being asked to explain or justify their dress style, which is assumed to be a badge of their subcultural membership. The first respondent's request for clarification can be interpreted as a strategy to make the interviewer 'come clean' about the intent of the question; the second respondent's complaint can be interpreted as a rejection of the assumptions that might lead the interviewer to categorise them as one thing or another. It is important to note that the interview progresses on the basis of one participant's interpretation of the intent *behind* the utterances of the other participants. The second respondent assumes that the social researcher is a journalist, hoping to write a stereotypical magazine piece on teen styles, and her complaint can be read partly as a protest about being misunderstood, and partly about being exploited.

The downplaying of what may seem to be obvious badges of social identity was a common (but not universal) feature of Widdiecombe and Wooffitt's interviews exploring subcultural identities, and this fact is a cautionary warning to anyone conducting ethnographic projects on the topic of identity. The way that identity is constructed is not straightforward, and the question-answer structure of interviews may not be the best way to elicit it. Even when the respondents are being co-operative, the answers to the questions may not be direct, although they are sometimes surprisingly systematic. When Widdiecombe and Wooffit asked various subcultural members, 'Is being a punk / hippy / rocker important to you', they received very similar answers, although none of them directly addressed the benefits of subcultural affiliation (1995: 168–76; presentation adapted):

I: is being a punk very important to you?
R: yeah, very indeed
I couldn't imagine myself being straight at all . . .
like dressing neatly in tidy nice clothes an' having
my hair down and all that hh
. . .

I: is it very important to you . . . being a hippy?
R: er . . . I dunno, y'know, I – well I wouldn't like to be anything else – put it that way – I wouldn't like to be 'orrible trendy smelly yellow shirts an' things like that . . .
. . .
I: is being a rocker very important to you?
R: er . . . ahha aye . . . it's jus the way I am er . . . couldn't imagine life . . . of er . . . of say I lived wi' . . . I dunno . . . bu' . . . I remember the Royal Family you know having a go at these people as er you know an' er going about wearing suits an' everything . . . going to all these functions and do's an' that er . . . driving about in a Ferrari . . . I jus couldn't see it . . . I mean . . .
I: mmhm
R: it's easier being being the way I am . . . it's jus . . . jus comes natural ken?

Here, instead of saying something like 'it's important / not important to me because . . .' the respondents construct their answers in terms of what Widdiecombe and Wooffitt call 'a rejection of alternatives'. Those who are rejected are those who conform (are 'straight'), are fashionable ('trendy'), or, in the third case, are business people ('suits') or the epitomes of the establishment ('the Royal Family'). Respondents 'address and affirm the importance of membership of a subcultural group without actually referring, say, to the lifestyle, beliefs or activities associated with that subculture' (ibid.: 174). In short, when asked about their identities, respondents tend to construct themselves by referring to what they are not – what is sometimes called in cultural studies, the 'Other'. By describing and rejecting the Other (here, 'straight' middle-class or even aristocratic people), the respondents are indirectly describing themselves.

The interviews discussed immediately above are significant from several perspectives. First, they again demonstrate what is meant by speech progressing through interaction, even in interview situations, when the focus might be expected to be on the 'objective' information exchange. In other words, the oppositional position of some subcultural styles is communicated not by the explicit statement of a position, but implicitly, by strategies such as seeking clarification, rejecting the inferred basis for the question, and rejecting alternatives rather than supporting preferences. As the ethnic minority interviewee also discovered during the job interview referred to earlier, much successful question-and-answering activity in another language depends on co-operation and in having a cultural frame in common which will allow participants to infer the implicit purpose behind what is often indirect questioning. Secondly, the final example

shows the kind of difficulties that a researcher – even a professional researcher – can run into when trying to describe an interesting cultural phenomenon. Interviewing members of 'spectacular' youth subcultures, in order to glean information about group affiliation and perceived benefits, can be difficult since the interviewer will likely be treated as an 'outsider', and his or her motives may be questioned. Moreover, the inferences that inform the interviewer's line of questioning might be denied by the interviewees in a series of interactional strategies through which, if they answer the question at all, they answer it only indirectly.

Using Interviews to Collect Cultural Data

It will be clear from the foregoing discussion that interviews can be approached from two perspectives in an intercultural English language course. Learners who have direct access to native speakers can be encouraged to interview them about some aspect of their lives. For more advanced learners, transcripts of interviews in textbooks such as Montgomery and Reid-Thomas (1994) might be used. In the analysis of the interview both the content and the interactive speech style are worth considering. In other words, as well as paying attention to what is said, learners should also pay attention to how it was said; for example:

(1) Setting

(a) Where did the interview take place?
(b) How comfortable would the interviewee feel there?
(c) How well did the participants know each other before the interview?
(d) What was the purpose of the interview? Did the interviewee know of its purpose beforehand?

(2) How were the interviewer's questions understood?

(a) What points, if any, needed clarification?
(b) Were any of the questions challenged?
(c) Were any of the questions rephrased?
(d) Did the interviewee give minimal or extensive responses?
(e) Were difficult questions responded to by hesitation, false starts, changes of direction?
(f) How explicitly did the interviewer articulate his/her questions? How far did s/he attempt to elicit information by *indirect* questioning?

(3) Presentation of the self/Relationship with interviewer

(a) Did the interviewee mainly argue, describe or tell stories, etc?
(b) Did s/he answer from an individual or a group perspective?

(c) Was the language relatively formal or informal?
(d) Did the interviewee interrupt the interviewer?
(e) (If videoed) How did posture, gesture, eye movement, etc, contribute to the interaction?

To give examples of possible commentaries on interviews, we shall now consider in detail two interviews between a couple of advanced L2 speakers (one from Turkey and the other from Brazil) and two respondents they met in Glasgow Gallery of Modern Art. The interviews were conducted by participants on a cultural studies course, organised by the British Council in Glasgow. These interviews illustrate the kind of project work that can be done with advanced non-native speakers who have access to native-speaker respondents, here in a particular institutional setting. The two L2 speakers, one Brazilian and one Turkish, decided to interview visitors to the then newly opened Glasgow Museum of Modern Art, to gather information about their opinions about Glasgow's status as a 'city of culture'. For several decades the city has been promoted as a destination for cultural tourism, and in 1990 it was officially designated as 'European City of Culture'. The transcripts of two extracts are given below. The interviewers are A and B; C is an older woman, self-confessedly 'working-class', and D and E are a younger couple, who profess themselves to be 'ordinary'.

In the Art Gallery (1)

A: And you think that this idea of city of culture . . . come . . . is a new . . . new one?

C: It's a new thing. And I don't feel it's for the ordinary working class people you know

B: [mumbles]

C: I don't think so, I think they're going over the top as far as ordinary peop – ordinary people can't get to these things, you know what I mean.

A: mmm

C: They're so expensive. Even the new eh concert hall, now it's been built I think maybe it might be two years, maybe three, maybe even four, I have never been near it

B: ohh

C: and as I say because of all the – they've built a lot of nice – people go there – but things are so expensive they're really not for the ordinary person if you can understand. I'm sorry to go on like this but I really feel that that's what it's about you know, they're dealing – they're they're definitely going above theirself and people just can't afford these kind of things. If they'd get down to a lower

level I feel that, em you know, it would be much better. But that's only my opinion. Thanks very much.

B: Thank you.

In the Art Gallery (2)

A: It's presented eh as a city of culture mainly and we we were wondering to eh what extent this idea is eh real and genuine and to what extent it is something constructed, created eh by the tourism industry maybe.

D: Yeah, the 1990 year of culture thing helped quite a lot

A: mmm

D: but I think a lot –

E: That was built upon.

D: Yeah, I think it's been built upon a lot since then and -

E: It I think it started off as em just sort of being created to help tourism or whatever and now they've built upon that em -

D: Yeah, I think the people of Glasgow have taken to their heart quite a lot to actually build on it quite a lot –

E: It means they've done a lot with theatre and you know constructing the art gallery and things like that and they've taken pride in their city being a city of culture –

A: yeh

E: and so it's developed from there.

A: When the word culture comes into one's mind is it high culture which is meant here in Glasgow or popular culture in general?

D: I think it's popular culture.

E: Yeah.

A: Popular culture.

D: It's very much a culture of the people, you know, it's it's a culture that [clears throat] that everyone can take part in, it's not a sort of hierarchy culture.

A: Ordinary people.

D: Yeah, uh huh, definitely, I mean there's here –

E: There's not there's not a great deal of snobbery in it.

D: No, no.

E: Em, you know it's just your everyday person what they believe culture is.

D: Yeah, everyone takes part –

A: Yeh.

D: very much so.

Normally, in projects like this, the students will gather a number of

responses from different people – that is, pragmatic ethnography tends to yield a sample of diverse opinions. This kind of data collection is manifestly unsystematic and therefore unrepresentative, and learners must be cautioned against making easy over-generalisations based on such data. What ethnographic research seeks is the 'telling' example rather than the 'typical' example (cf. Mitchell, 1984: 239) – that is, while we cannot argue that the respondents in interviews like this represent the general population, the patterns of their responses do clarify certain illuminating principles.

The interviews can be exploited to show how the respondents construct their answers, and this tells us about the cultural frames of reference underlying their inferences and arguments. Despite the fact that the interviewees in the two extracts above have divergent opinions, they use almost identical strategies to justify them. To the invitation to comment on Glasgow as a city of culture, C chooses to complain that it is not for the 'ordinary' person: it is too expensive, and it is 'over their heads'. She backs this up with the observation that she has never been near the new concert hall. Her combination of personal evaluation, ('I think/feel'), general evaluation ('they're . . . going above theirself'), and anecdotal support shows the inadequacy of a polarised view of speech styles as *either* individual or community-oriented in the terms discussed earlier in this chapter. The respondent, who aligns herself with the working-class, is articulate in negotiating what she acknowledges is 'only her opinion', and draws upon elements of both Bernstein's 'restricted code' (in the narrative element) and 'elaborated' code (in the argumentative element) to do so.

The couple in the second extract are more individually-oriented in their argument: there are many generalisations, often hedged with 'I think . . . '. Even here though, as in the other interview, the 'I thinks' are balanced by the community-oriented discourse marker 'you know', the function of which is to raise 'common ground' between interviewer and respondent, that is, it appeals to shared community norms. It is often the place where the interviewer will back-channel with a nod or a supportive 'mmm' to show assent. There are no anecdotes to support the claims made, though E gives several examples chronicling the development of the artistic programme of the city, in defence of the repeated statement that its cultural reputation has been 'built upon'. What links the two divergent opinions is the common construction of the 'ordinary' person's perspective. Although consistently referred to in the third person (A: 'People just can't afford . . . '; E: 'It's just your everyday person, what they believe culture is.'), the 'ordinary/everyday person' is the position from which each of the respondents chooses to discuss Glasgow's cultural aspirations. The cultural construction of 'ordinariness' may vary according to age and

social class, but it is clearly seen by all three respondents here as a powerful rhetorical position from which to advance one's opinions

This finding is not particularly original: when researching youth subcultures, Widdiecombe and Wooffit were surprised to find that members of youth subcultures, easily identifiable from their 'spectacular' modes of dress, make-up and hairstyle, clearly regarded themselves as representatives of 'ordinariness'. This is evident in an interview with a punk (Widdiecombe and Wooffit, 1995: 124; presentation adapted):

R: ah mean I know ah'm a punk know
but I jus(t) . . . I just feel as though
I'm the same as everyone else . . . I mean I dress
diff'rently (h) but there again everyone
dresses differently to everyone else
so like

I: yeah

R: when people look at me as if I'm an alien,
it sometimes . . . it gets me really annoyed because . . .
you know, I'm just the same as everybody else

It is clear that, whatever their opinions, fashions or lifestyles, people wish to be considered 'ordinary'. The interesting thing to note in the 'art gallery' interviews is how 'ordinary people' are assumed to behave, and what values they are supposed to have. In the first of the interviews, the ordinary person is presupposed to have limited access to city centre venues, limited funds, and a common-sense understanding of art objects. The woman's criticism of the gallery is based on the argument that the city council is not making art accessible – economically or intellectually – to the ordinary person thus conceived. The young couple constructs the 'ordinary' person as interested in culture, as taking a pride in the city and as being without pretension. Their 'ordinary person' is an active participant in cultural events, who has even hi-jacked the city council's agenda, which is seen as based on expanding tourism, by encouraging a more democratic participation in cultural events. Not unnaturally, their 'ordinary person' is much more positive about the new art gallery. The responses of C, D and E in these interviews can be seen as telling us much more about their cultural values than about their opinion of the art gallery itself – the responses can be seen as part of an ongoing cultural negotiation about what it is to be 'ordinary' and what values and behaviour represent ordinary people.

The interviews discussed so far have ranged from examples from sociolinguistic and ethnographic textbooks, to informal interviews eliciting personal opinions. In each case cultural content can be interpreted by (1) paying attention to the content of the interview, (2) observing to the way

the interaction develops between interviewee and interviewer, and (3) analysing in detail the speech styles and discourse strategies used by the respondents, as they describe, narrate and argue their case.

Preparing Learners to be Interviewers

Interviewing respondents is an obvious way of encouraging learners to use their language skills 'ethnographically', to gather information about aspects of the target culture. As the sample interviews above show, a range of interviews can yield cultural data but not always – or only – because the content of the interview gives information about the aspect of culture being investigated. The speech styles and inferencing strategies used by the respondent can also be analysed to suggest the kind of presuppositions which allow him or her to interpret the interaction.

As shown earlier in the chapter, previously recorded interviews (or transcripts of them) can be used to alert learners to community oriented and individually oriented speech styles (cf. also Montgomery & Reid-Thomas, 1994: 52–64). Role-plays can also be used to sensitise learners to the ways in which presuppositions govern the kinds of question asked in interviews, and how the questions are answered. For example, the teacher can set up situations in which people from different cultures are interviewing each other about their lives, or people with different cultural assumptions about interviews are assessed during a 'gatekeeping' interview. An extreme variation of the first example might be to set up a role-play in which an 'alien' from another planet interviews the class about life on the planet Earth. The role-card given to the learner playing the alien would give information about life on the alien's home planet; for instance, the alien might be a form of asexual vegetation, it might receive its education via implanted microchips, it might live to an advanced age, and so on. As the 'alien' asks questions about life on Earth, the class can be invited to speculate what these questions tell us about life in the alien's culture.

Many role-plays can be devised using interviews (cf. also Roberts *et al.* 1992: 352–63). The example suggested above focuses on the interviewer's cultural frame, and on the shared/different assumptions of interviewee and interviewer. If recorded, the different strategies of the interviewers and interviewees can be examined in class in more detail, and perhaps improved upon. However, it is important not to be prescriptive about cultural frames and the resulting speech styles. As Roberts *et al.* (1992: 128–46) demonstrate, communication breakdown, and unfair assessment during gatekeeping interviews, often arise because the interview frames of the anglophone interviewers predispose them towards asking indirect questions, the purpose of which is not easily perceived by non-native

speakers with different frames of expectation. Thus, if a job demands mobility, an interviewer might ask 'do you drive a car?', meaning 'have you currently got transport?'. A non-native speaker, expecting an orientation towards skills and tests, might answer, 'Yes, I passed my test first time' (1992: 130). The intercultural speaker should be aware of different cultural possibilities, even in information exchange, without necessarily privileging one mode above another. This should help learners to choose the speech style most suited to a given occasion, and, more pertinently, help them to request clarification and to adapt styles quickly if their hypotheses are proved incorrect.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on interviews, since this type of interaction is common in communicative textbooks, where it is usually treated as a means of exchanging information. Interviews are also an obvious way of collecting data for ethnographic projects. As we have seen, smooth interviews depend on the participants sharing cultural frames of reference, and the questions and responses to interviews can tell us as much about the assumptions and attitudes of the interviewers as they do about the interviewees. Interviews are therefore valuable ways of exploring both the target culture *and* the learners' home culture. As we have also seen, the assumptions and attitudes of participants are not always directly articulated, and so interviews need to be carefully analysed in order to see how they indirectly present themselves, their values and their beliefs.

Chapter 7

Developing Visual Literacy

This chapter turns from ethnography and begins to consider other ways of 'decoding' a culture. First of all, we consider the visual representations of cultural information, and how to 'read' them critically. Topics addressed include:

- *Defining 'visual literacy'.*
- *Using images in the ELT classroom.*
- *Understanding visual composition.*
- *Understanding the grammar and vocabulary of visual images.*
- *Combining visual and textual information.*
- *The 'iconography' of English in non-anglophone countries.*

From Ethnography to Semiotics

The preceding two chapters illustrated how a cultural approach to language teaching draws on disciplines other than mainstream linguistics. Ethnography offers invaluable strategies for systematic observation of a culture, supplemented by data-gathering techniques, such as the interviewing of respondents. Practical ethnography, on a limited scale, can be practised by curriculum planners, materials writers, teachers, and, above all, learners. Given the constraints of practical ethnography, it is valuable to train learners to consider the different ways that participants interact in interviews. A close study of interviews reveals that they are not simply occasions for the exchange of information: they also are ways of constructing and presenting identities.

This chapter turns from ethnography to consider another discipline relevant to the cultural approach: 'visual literacy' or semiotics. 'Semiotics', the study of signs, can be a difficult discipline to understand and master (cf. Barthes, 1977; Eco, 1976). Nevertheless, semiotics has much to offer the culturally-oriented language teacher who wishes his or her students to develop skills not only in *understanding* but in *interpreting*. Most students live in an ever-changing world of visual data, and by paying attention to and develop-