

Enhancing Cultural Aspects in the EFL Classroom

Safiro Rivera Mena
Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica
sapphiresaf26@gmail.com

Cristina Melissa Vargas Barboza
Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica
mel0590@hotmail.com

Resumen

La enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera es un proceso en el cual varios componentes toman lugar por esto se han utilizado diferentes métodos de enseñanza para facilitar un óptimo aprendizaje. La implementación de esos métodos varía dependiendo del enfoque que la clase tenga. En la mayoría de las aulas donde se enseña inglés como lengua extranjera, los aspectos lingüísticos son más enfatizados, dejando de lado los aspectos culturales que ayudan a los estudiantes a tener un mejor entendimiento de la forma en que el nativo-hablante se comunica e interactúa. Por esta razón, los profesores son responsables de incorporar la cultura meta en la clase y así brindar apoyo a los estudiantes para reconocer por qué las personas en esa cultura hablan y se comportan de cierta manera. Una de las formas para integrar cultura en la clase, es diseñando actividades y materiales utilizando como base los conocimientos culturales expuestos por Moran (2001) que incluyen las prácticas, los productos, las personas, y comunidades que se encuentran en la cultura meta (págs. 48-98). Tomando en cuenta lo anterior, el propósito de este estudio cualitativo fue identificar la manera en que los instructores enseñan cultura en la clase de inglés para diseñar una unidad didáctica fundamentada en los principios establecidos por Moran que sirviera como un medio para unir los aspectos lingüísticos y culturales del idioma inglés. La investigación se llevó a cabo en el nivel IV del centro de idiomas CI-UNA, donde información concerniente a la manera en la cual se abarcan elementos culturales en la clase fue recolectada. Luego de llevar a cabo el análisis de datos se concluyó que ciertos aspectos culturales son estudiados de una manera implícita y el texto utilizado contiene algunos elementos pero no los suficientes para que el estudiante comprenda la cultura meta a mayor escala.

Palabras clave: enseñanza, idioma meta, cultura, conocimientos culturales, unidad didáctica

Abstract

Teaching English as a foreign language is a process that comprises a variety of components. Through history, different teaching methods have been approached so as to enable students with optimal learning. The implementation of such methods vary depending on the main focus of the program that controls the course or class. In most EFL classrooms, great emphasis is given to linguistic aspects of the target language, leaving aside cultural elements. For learners to truly internalize the way native speakers of English communicate and interact, teachers have the responsibility to bring culture into the classroom. Incorporating culture in the lesson helps learners understand why people speak and behave the way they do. For this

reason, educators need to be conscious of the importance of integrating culture and language. One of the ways teacher can approach cultural matters is by basing the design of teaching activities on the cultural knowings stated by Moran (2001), including practices, products, persons, and communities involved in the target culture (pp. 48-98). The purpose of this study was to identify how instructors address cultural aspects in the class so that a didactic unit based on Moran's cultural knowings, where cultural and linguistic elements can be integrated, was designed. The investigation was carried out by following a qualitative approach in which a specific phenomenon was addressed. The research setting was CI-UNA language program, level IV. Additionally, valuable information on cultural aspects was collected through the administration of questionnaires. After the data analysis, it was drawn that some cultural aspects are covered implicitly and the book used does contain some cultural elements, but not the necessary for the learners to grasp what the target culture comprises. Finally, it was concluded that the activities and materials suggested allow learners to reinforce both cultural and linguistic features.

Keywords: teaching, target language, culture, knowings, didactic unit

1. Introduction

In ancient times, people used to learn foreign languages so as to have the opportunity to read different pieces of writing in specific languages. By doing so, people kept in contact with target cultures. Nowadays, people learn new languages to communicate ideas and insights in different circumstances and places, which also serves as a means to avoid cross cultural misunderstandings (Thanasoulas, 2001, p.3). In the case of foreign language classrooms, educators are to consider some possibilities to help learners engage themselves in the cultural experience.

Such cultural experience “consists of any encounter between learners and another way of life, be it first hand through direct involvement with people of the other culture or indirectly through learning materials in the language classroom” (Moran, 2001, p. 8). There is a vast number of resources which instructors can take advantage of in order to make students become aware of the cultural practices, products, persons, and communities involved in the target culture. Therefore, the researchers of this study decided to find out what it is that instructors teaching level IV at the CI-UNA language program do when integrating both linguistic and cultural aspects of the language itself.

1.1. Target Population

The target population that researchers selected as a data source for the design of a unit in which cultural instruction is comprised is composed of learners from level four at CI-UNA, Universidad Nacional, Brunca extension. At that time, there were two different groups taken the course CIUNA 4. Nonetheless, investigators decided to collect the information necessary to carry out the needs analysis just from one of the groups. The sample population is the students from group 1. The specific members of this group enrolled the course because of a variety of reasons, which go from the necessity of English for job applications and current jobs to personal satisfaction. The course is controlled by the syllabus created by the founders

of the project, which is based on the Common European Framework for Languages. It is important to stress that the age of the participants range from about 17 to 25 years old. In regard to the linguistic level of students, it is noticeable that they are capable of communicating and interacting in English; nevertheless, some improvement in areas like grammar, pronunciation, and speaking is required. Finally, all learners take part in the development of a comfortable and pleasant environment to learn the linguistic and cultural features of the target language.

1.2. Research Questions

- a. What theoretical principles can serve as a means to aid instructors when teaching cultural aspects to learners from level IV at the CI-UNA language program in Pérez Zeledón?
- b. How do EFL teachers in charge of level IV at the CI-UNA language program in Pérez Zeledón teach culture?
- c. How do learners from level IV at the CI-UNA language program in Pérez Zeledón perceive the way cultural matters are addressed in the classroom?
- d. What didactic resources are suggested to assist teachers at the moment of teaching cultural aspects to students from level IV at the CI-UNA language program in Pérez Zeledón?

2. Literature Review

In order to provide readers with a better understanding of what culture is and how it can be taught in the foreign English classroom, researchers of this study provided pertinent aspects related to the latter.

2.1. Defining Culture

Scholars have not been able to agree on a definition for the word *culture*. Cullen & Kazuyoshi (2000) suggested that this concept entails different perspectives:

It consists of all the institutions, all the behavior, in fact all the man-made aspects of a very large group of non-homogeneous people. All that we can do is provide some pathways to enter into learning more about the culture. (p. 23)

In its broad sense, culture is everything people do and think, but people usually bound this word to the customs and traditions of a particular group. Regarding the teaching of foreign languages and cultures, this conception has evolved during the last years. Simon (2014) stressed the inclusion of culture in the curriculum. This author elaborated on the fact that “popular culture was progressively included in cultural education and pupils/students were encouraged to reflect on their own culture. Later on, cultural education would grow into

intercultural foreign language education” (p. 978). This trend evokes a response from teachers who need to create the conditions for intercultural communication to take place. Culture should thereby be an inclusive concept when dealing with issues concerning the teaching of foreign languages and cultures to facilitate students’ communicative performance in intercultural contexts.

2.2. Cultural Knowings

In the teaching-learning process, there has been a growing concern on the importance of integrating both language and culture in the teaching of a foreign language. Regarding this, Patrick Moran stated that for students to understand linguistic aspects of the language is quite necessary to allow learners go through the cultural experience. However, some educators are not well-informed on how to incorporate the target culture to the linguistic objective of the class in a more direct way. To do so, Moran proposed the Cultural Knowings Framework which serves as a basis for the proper integration of language and culture in the classroom. Such framework is composed of four learning interactions that are part of the cultural experience; those learning interactions are: knowing about, knowing how, knowing why, and knowing oneself.

According to Moran, knowing about refers to “all activities that consist of gathering and demonstrating acquisition of cultural information –facts, data, or knowledge about products, practices, and perspectives of the culture” (2001, p. 15). Furthermore, knowing how is related to the cultural practices and behaviors performed by people from the target culture. Knowing why takes into account the perspectives and understanding of the beliefs, values, etc. from the culture under study. When it comes to knowing oneself, Moran established that it “concerns the individual learners –their values, opinions, feelings, questions, reactions” (2001, p. 17), etc. that are part of the cultural experience. These four learning interactions can be of great help to teach culture directly because it facilitates the analysis of differences and similarities between students’ target and mother culture; and it benefits students’ engagement in the language classroom.

3. Main Body

The most relevant aspects pertinent to the instruments used to gather information from the participants of the study and the data analysis are presented as follows.

3.1. Procedures and Data Analysis

Every time teachers want to incorporate, change, or eliminate something from the existent curriculum, they need to carry out a needs analysis. This analysis will be beneficial for the learning process because it takes into account not only what the teacher thinks students have to learn but also what learners want to learn. In order to gather the information necessary to carry out this research, investigators made use of two questionnaires, one directed to students in level IV at CIUNA and one directed to the instructors who have taught that course, so as

to make decisions on what contents, activities, and didactic resources could be added to the class to incorporate culture instruction.

After analyzing the data collected, it was noticeable that most of the students know little about some of the features found in the American culture. Their responses show that they do not have much information about aspects like holidays and celebrations, education, business, currency, social issues, customs and traditions, history of the United States, etc. (See Table 1) Furthermore, most of them agree on the fact that they have not received enough instruction regarding those aspects in class.

Table 1
Students' Opinion on the Knowledge They Have About the American Culture

	A lot	Partly	Nothing
American Food	57%	43%	0%
Business	14%	57%	29%
Clothing	29%	71%	0%
Customs and Traditions	28%	43%	29%
Crafts	0%	29%	71%
Currency	29%	43%	29%
Education	28%	29%	43%
History of the United States	0%	57%	43%
Holidays and Celebrations	14%	86%	0%
Housing	14%	86%	0%
Literature	14%	14%	72%
Media and Entertainment	57%	43%	0%
Non-verbal Cues	14%	86%	0%
Occupations	43%	57%	0%
Seasons	43%	57%	0%
Social Issues	0%	71%	29%
Transportation	57%	43%	0%

Note. Responses gathered from the questionnaire administered to students in level IV.

On the other hand, all the teachers who were part of the study said that they mainly teach culture indirectly which explains students' perception on the amount of time devoted to learn about the target culture. Moreover, all the teachers' responses show that the book does include cultural aspects but it does in such a way that it could be unnoticeable for someone who is not immerse in the teaching world and that was not trained to identify those aspects.

Also, educators established that they need to implement other resources to teach culture in the classroom because what is portrayed in the book is not enough for students to have a clear understanding of the target culture.

When asked about the didactic resources they would like to use to learn about culture, most learners said videos. Also, they would like to have real life readings, and presentations as part of the teaching instruction. In the same way, most teachers agreed on that they use such resources during the lesson, especially videos (See Table 2); however, it was not clear if they use those resources for the specific purpose of teaching culture.

Material	Participants' Response
Flashcards	20%
Games	40%
Songs	60%
Readings	20%
Videos	100%

Note. Data collected from the questionnaire administered to teachers.

Additionally, teachers believe that what students need to learn about the target culture relates to how they have to behave on specific situations which constitutes the learning interaction 'knowing how' leaving aside the other cultural knowings (knowing about, knowing why, and knowing oneself) necessary to have a holistic understanding of the target culture. Finally, it is important to stress that both linguistic and cultural contents need to be backed up by specific linguistic and cultural goals to ensure optimal learning to happen.

4. Conclusions

After analyzing the data gathered through the instruments chosen, the researchers could draw the next conclusions.

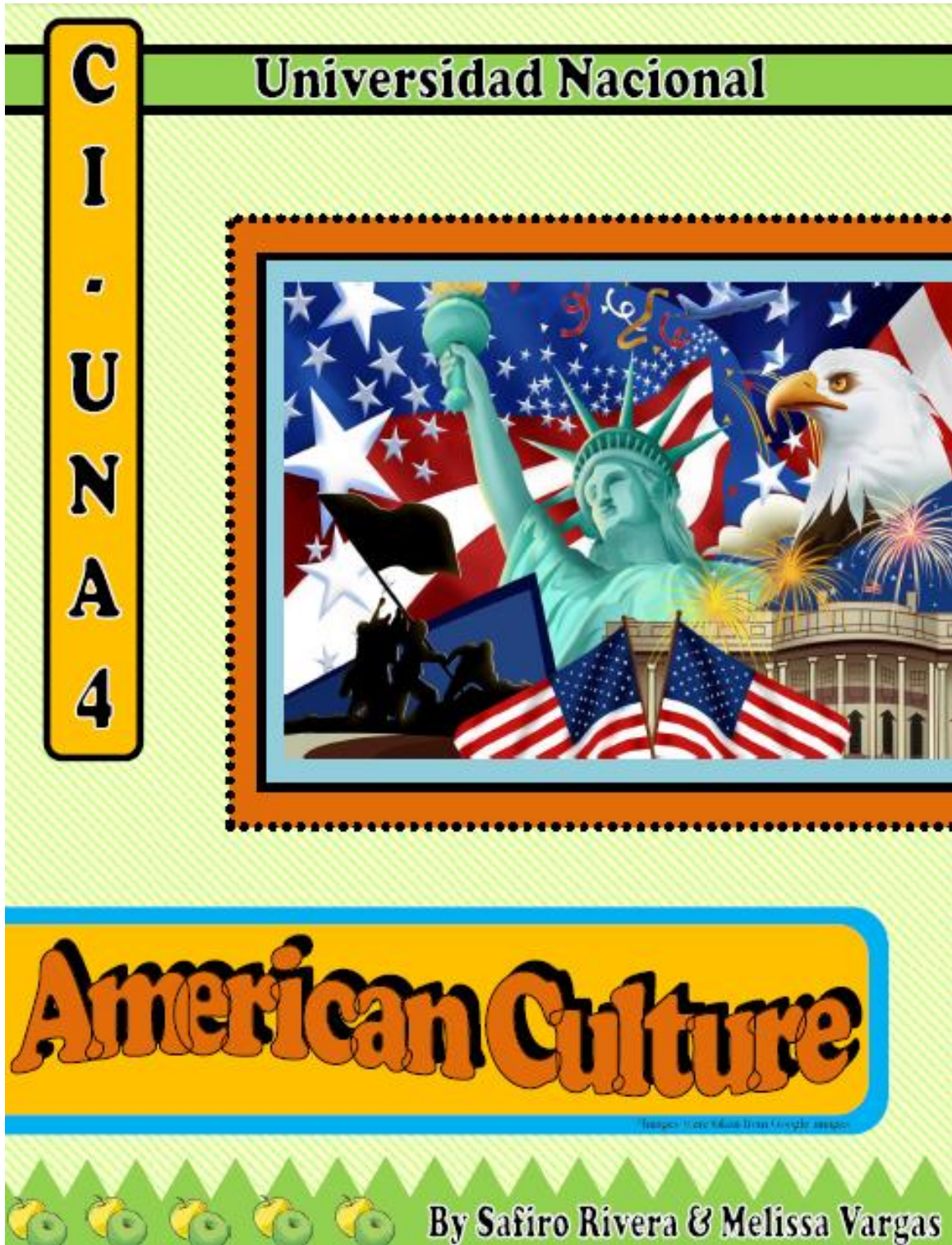
Researchers of this study concluded that learners enrolled in level IV are aware of some cultural aspects pertinent to the American culture; however, this is not mainly because of academic instruction. Moreover, learners stated that they feel like they are not learning cultural aspects from the target culture during the development of the class because teachers address such aspects indirectly. It is also important to mention that the book used at this level refers to some aspects of the target culture; nevertheless, most of the times it does it indirectly as well. Also, instructors in charge of teaching this level indicated that the book does contain some cultural matters, but the information presented is not enough for the learner to grasp what the target culture encompasses. Therefore, teachers need to look for extra materials and resources to address culture in a more explicit way. Additionally,

instructors tend to leave aside other important aspects of the target culture and focus only on how to behave or react in certain situations. The researchers consider that teaching culture in a more holistic way is possible if teachers set both linguistic and cultural objectives when planning the lesson. To do so, Moran's cultural knowings are of great help at the moment of integrating linguistic and cultural activities. Taking as a reference Moran's cultural knowings, the researches of this study designed a unit so as to enable teachers to address some cultural aspects more directly.

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Annex 1





Map of the Unit!



*Images were taken from Google images

A: Are you a party animal? 5-6	Linguistic Goal	Cultural Goal	Knowings
	To review the use of infinitives when talking about parties.	To recognize a number of products, persons, and behaviors that might be present in American parties.	Knowing About Knowing How Knowing Why Knowing Oneself

B: Shopping In America 7-8	Linguistic Goal	Cultural Goal	Knowings
	To have students use the target language to describe objects and events.	To have students express their perspectives related to the products and practices involved in shopping in Costa Rica and in The United States.	Knowing About Knowing How Knowing Why Knowing Oneself

C: School Life 9-10	Linguistic Goal	Cultural Goal	Knowings
	To have students become familiar with vocabulary related to education.	To have students perceive the practices, products, and persons involved in the education system of the USA.	Knowing About Knowing How Knowing Oneself

D: American People 11-12	Linguistic Goal	Cultural Goal	Knowings
	To use the simple past and the present perfect correctly when talking about people's life.	To have students get familiar with information about people who contributed to shaping the American history and that have a great influence in the target culture.	Knowing About Knowing How

A: Are you a party animal?



Definition: A party animal is someone who likes going to parties a lot and goes to as many as possible.
Example: *She was a real party animal at college. I don't remember her ever staying in in the evening.*
Taken from <http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/>

1 Get in groups of three people and arrange the puzzles the teacher will provide you with as fast as possible. Write down the products you recognize on the spaces below.




2 In pairs, read the article below and answer the questions below. Share your insights with the class.

How to survive at a party...

Has this ever happened to you? You arrive at a party or wedding reception where you don't know anybody. Everybody there seems to know each other. What can you do? Here are five simple tips.

- Don't stand in the corner. You need to be positive. Find somebody you think you would like to meet and go and introduce yourself.
- Try to ask impersonal questions like "I love your bag. Where did you get it?" that will help to start a conversation
- Try not to dominate the conversation. When you are nervous, it's very easy to talk about yourself all the time. Nobody wants to listen to your life story when they've only just met you.
- Smile, smile, smile. Use your body language to give a positive friendly impression. That way, people will want to talk to you.
- If you want to escape from a really boring person, say that you are going to the bar to get another drink or that you need to go to the restroom. Don't come back!

Taken from American English File 2B

**Images were taken from Google images*

Can you remember the tips?

Have you ever tried one of the tips?

What do they tell you about American people?

When do we use infinitives?

5



B: Shopping in America



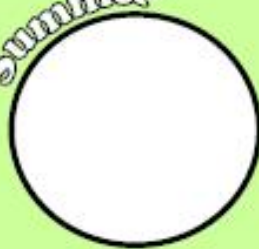
1

Spot & Shoot. Look at the pictures in the presentation and throw the ball to the picture that matches the name on each slide.

2

Look at the PowerPoint presentation and write down some examples of clothing that people in the United States use on each season.

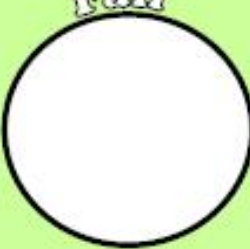
Summer



Spring



Fall



Winter



3

Look at the pictures your teacher will show and comment on the questions below with a partner.



4

Watch the excerpt of the TV series *Friends* and create a poster where behaviors related to competitiveness and materialism are exposed.



5

Look at your classmate miming one of the practices studied and try to guess it as soon as possible.



7

*Images were taken from Google images

Shopping in America



Evaluation: Read the statements below and draw a face that expresses how you feel about each assumption.

1. Most Americans are very competitive.
2. You think being competitive is a bad trait.
3. Most Americans are very materialistic.
4. You feel identified with some American practices.
5. You would like to go shopping to the United States.
6. Practices in your native culture are very similar to those of Americans.



You agree



You disagree



You don't care

Homework

Look for an article related to shopping and write a short reflection about it. What do you think? Which aspects you disagree with?

*Images were taken from Google images

C: School Life

1 Rally: Get in groups of three people and go around the building looking for hints that will lead you to some of the facilities in the institution. Collect five hints and solve the exercises contained on the back of each hint.



2 Pay close attention to the information that the teacher will provide you with by means of a PPT and take notes on the most relevant aspects related to education in the United States. Then, find a classmate to work with and answer the questions below.

*Images were taken from Google image

3 Listen to Melissa talking about her school days and choose whether the sentences below are true or false by circling T if they are true or F if they are false.



- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1. Melissa is a teenager in the photo. | T | F |
| 2. She used to write things on the wall. | T | F |
| 3. She didn't like any of the subjects at school. | T | F |
| 4. Her least favorite subject was PE. | T | F |
| 5. The PE teacher made her try to do difficult things. | T | F |
| 6. She used to break the rules about the school uniform. | T | F |
| 7. She wanted to be a doctor. | T | F |
| 8. Her parents wanted her to be a teacher. | T | F |



Taken from American English File 2B



School Life

4 Get in groups of three people and make up an oral story in which the most outstanding practices related to high schools or schools are portrayed. Include practices, persons, and products that are pertinent to American education. Use the vocabulary studied during the class and the pictures the teacher will provide you with.



5 Get in groups of three people and get ready to play. Place the board on a table and choose one token to represent you while traveling around the board. Pay attention to the instructions the teacher will give you.



Homework: Watch the movie *17 Again* and try to identify any other practices, products, and persons related to education. Write down whatever you recognize on the spaces provided. Be ready to share your insights with your classmates next class.



Images were taken from Google images

Evaluation: Read the sentences below and choose whether you agree or disagree with them by circling A if you agree or D if you disagree.



- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1. Students should wear uniforms when attending school. | A | D |
| 2. Homecoming dances are awesome. | A | D |
| 3. Students should not be taught foreign languages. | A | D |
| 4. Strict rules pertinent to makeup must be established in schools. | A | D |
| 5. There is nothing wrong with making out in the halls during recess time. | A | D |



D: American People




1 Who are they? Take the pictures of American people through history that the teacher will give you and match them with their corresponding name.

What do you know about the people in the pictures?



2 Pay attention to the biographies the teacher will present. In your notebook, take notes on how biographies are written.

When do you use simple past and when present perfect?

Feel free to share your ideas regarding the American characters

3 Listen to part of Martin Luther King Jr.'s biography and fill in the blanks with the missing words.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was the most important 1. _____ of the American civil rights movement. He helped unite a 2. _____ with his powerful speeches and use of non-violent protests. His 1963 "I Have a 3. _____" speech is one of the greatest in human history. King's efforts to end racial 4. _____ earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

King was born in 1929 in 5. _____. His father was a reverend and so King had a religious upbringing. He 6. _____ from college with a degree and a Ph.D. in religious studies. King went to India to visit Gandhi's family. He was inspired by Mohandas Gandhi's success with 7. _____ resistance and saw it as a "potent weapon" in America's struggle for 8. _____ rights.

Taken from famouspeoplelessons.com

4 Work in pairs. Use your computer to look for information related to the person the teacher will assign you and create a short presentation of his/her life.



Be prepared to present

5 Hot Seat! Help the person sitting in front of the class to guess the character that is projected on his/her back by giving physical descriptions or personal accomplishments.



11

*Images were taken from Google images