I Do:
Teaching the Culture of American Weddings and Marriage
Using Multiple Intelligences in ESL

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Abstract

Culture is a vital component of language, and teaching English as a second language requires instructors to create as many opportunities for communication as possible. Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligence theory, therefore, lends itself to incorporation in the ESL classroom. The ESL lesson “I Do: American Weddings and Marriage” uses principles from Gardner’s theory to explore the topics of weddings and marriage for the purposes of understanding American culture and generating effective and accurate language. It incorporates activities that address all eight of Gardner’s established intelligences and provides students with the opportunity to demonstrate language proficiency using their various intelligences.
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Introduction

Teaching English as a second language in an intensive program at the university level presents many instructional challenges. In pursuing a goal of communicative fluency, diversity is key as a uniform approach to instruction is rarely effective (Bae, 2004, p. 14). Language is furthermore a product of culture and must be approached as such (Boroditsky, 2010). English language teachers, therefore, often explore a variety of topics employing many teaching strategies that combine aspects of both language and culture. This multi-faceted approach readily lends itself to incorporation of Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligence theory. Consequently, the ESL lesson “I Do: American Weddings and Marriage” was developed using principles from Gardner’s theory to explore the topics of weddings and marriage for the purposes of understanding American culture and generating language.

Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences

Howard Gardner first presented his theory of multiple intelligences in the book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983) by cataloguing intelligences into seven different categories (Lupton, 2006). In addition to the previously touted scholastic intelligences which were linguistic and logical-mathematical, Gardner introduced spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal intelligences (Armstrong, 2012). Gardner later added naturalistic intelligence to the list of multiple intelligences in 1999 (Smith, 2002, 2008). Several other intelligences have been proposed as additional intelligences, and Gardner himself has considered adding an existential intelligence, however, to date, these proposed intelligences have
failed to satisfy the criteria to qualify as a unique intelligence (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider, Gardner, 2011, p. 7-8). The theory of multiple intelligences is a departure from the traditional idea of intelligence based on IQ testing and provides for a wider range of individual potential, especially in terms of education (Armstrong, 2012). According to Armstrong (2012), Gardner believes that all individuals who show “gifts” across the spectrum of intelligences and “enrich the world in which we live” should receive equal attention and focus in the classroom and in society at large.

As a doctoral student, Gardner became interested in how and why children became artistic creators. His research with young learners at Harvard and older victims of brain disease at a veterans’ hospital allowed him to observe “unusual configurations of strengths and difficulties” and redefine intelligence (Gardner, 2011). According to Gardner, intelligence is defined as “the capacity to solve problems or to fashion products that are valued in one or more cultural setting,” and he established eight specific criteria, or signs, of an intelligence (Smith, 2002, 2008). In order to qualify as a unique intelligence, the following criteria must be met: the quality should be evident in exceptional populations (e.g. prodigies, autistic savants, stroke victims); it should demonstrate a core, information-processing system; it should have distinct neural representation and be potentially isolated by brain damage; it should have a distinctive developmental history; it should be based in evolutionary history and have evolutionary plausibility; it should be distinguishable with experimental psychological tasks; it should be supported with psychometric findings; and it should be subject to symbol systems used in formal or informal education (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider, Gardner, 2011, p. 5-6; Smith, 2002, 2008). In addition to satisfying these criteria, an “intelligence” must also include “the ability to resolve genuine problems or difficulties within certain cultural settings” (Smith, 2002, 2008).
There are currently eight intelligences that satisfy these requirements for identification as intelligence. Though as recently as October 2011, in an address in Madrid, Spain, Gardner stated that,

…sooner or later there might be an existential intelligence – the intelligence that leads human beings to pose big ‘existential questions’ and a pedagogical intelligence, the intelligence that enables human beings to convey knowledge and skills to other human beings who have varying degrees of knowledge. (Gardner, 2011)

Gardner’s eight established intelligences are linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal. These intelligences are defined as follows: linguistic intelligence describes an ability to analyze information and create products using written or spoken language; logical-mathematical intelligence refers to an ability to calculate, solve abstract problems and develop equations and proofs; spatial intelligence is an ability to identify and manipulate objects in space; musical intelligence represents the skills to produce, remember and construct meaning from different patterns of sounds; naturalist intelligence expresses the unique ability to identify and distinguish between different elements of the natural world (e.g. plants, animals, and weather formations); bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is defined as the ability to use one’s own body to solve problems or create something; interpersonal intelligence describes an ability to recognize and understand the moods, desires, motivations and intentions of other people; and intrapersonal intelligence is the unique ability to recognize and understand the moods, desires, motivations and intentions of the individual him/herself (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider, Gardner, 2011, p. 6-7).
According to studies cited in the work of Davis, Christodoulou, Seider and Gardner (2011), approaches in the classroom that consider multiple intelligences “have been credited with better performance and retention of knowledge as compared to a traditional approach … and with understanding content in more complex ways” (p. 28). An understanding of multiple intelligences and classrooms that take them into consideration with regard to lessons “can allow students to safely explore and learn in many ways, … help students understand and appreciate their strengths, and identify real-world activities that will stimulate more learning” (Guignon, 2010, 2011). From a language learning perspective, multiple intelligences allow multiple approaches to a topic, thereby creating an increasing number of opportunities for communication and language production and use both inside and outside of the classroom.

ESL Lesson Plan
I Do: American Weddings and Marriage

This lesson sequence focuses on various aspects of American weddings and marriage relationships and their connections to language. It is designed to be used in a university level, intensive English language program course. The students enrolled are advanced and functioning at a TOEFL level of 500 to 550 on the paper-based exam. They may be undergraduate or graduate students and are intent on pursuing a degree program in different disciplines at the university level in English and come from various cultures and academic backgrounds. This is a lesson sequence in the final language course they will take before beginning an academic program of study. The lesson sequence may be tailored for one to six weeks in an intensive, integrated skills course.
Standards

The following standards apply to all of the activities presented here (Teachers of English to Speakers of Others Languages, Inc. (TESOL), 2006).

**Technology Standard.** Language learners effectively use and critically evaluate technology-based tools as aids in the development of their language learning competence as part of formal instruction and for further learning.

**Social, Intercultural and Instructional Standard.** English language learners communicate for social, intercultural and instructional purposes within the school setting.

**Language Standard.** English language learners communicate information, ideas, and concepts necessary for academic success in the area of language arts.

Essential Understanding, Objectives, Materials

The essential understanding for this lesson sequence is that human relationships and their associated ceremonies reflect the culture of the time and place in which they exist. Objectives for this lesson are as follows. Students will: use content specific vocabulary to share ideas and communicate with each other and native speakers, use technology to effectively present findings and ideas, work in small groups, classify images, identify customs, and use comparison-contrast structure.

The materials required for this lesson include, images from American weddings, video clips from “Meet the Parents,” “My Big Fat Greek Wedding,” and “Father of the Bride,” text to “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin, statistics for worldwide marriage and divorce trends, and copies of several bridal magazines.
Lesson Activities

The order of the following activities may vary depending on the nature/student composition of the class.

Show and Tell. Students will be given the prompt “marriage” and asked to bring images to class that depict that topic from their own cultural perspective. The instructor will also provide images illustrating specific customs in American weddings/marriages. The class will brainstorm to create a list of marriage customs and traditions based on the images and classify these appropriately. (Highlighted intelligences are spatial and naturalistic.)

Meet the Parents Role Play. After viewing selected scenes from the movie, “Meet the Parents” students will role-play various situations and interactions between engaged couples and their future in-laws. (Highlighted intelligences are bodily-kinesthetic and interpersonal.)

Movie Night. Students will screen “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” and “Father of the Bride.” Following the movies, the grammar and writing lesson will focus on comparison-contrast structure and vocabulary. Students will then complete a journal writing assignment comparing various aspects of the movies with their own experiences and culture. (Highlighted intelligences are musical, spatial, intrapersonal and linguistic.)

Marriage and Divorce. Students will analyze statistics from around the world for trends in the rates of marriage and divorce. They will create a three to five minute presentation using the technology of their choice to present their findings. (Highlighted intelligences are logical/mathematical and linguistic.)

The Story of an Hour. Students will read the short story, “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin focusing on the literary elements of the story. They will write a journal entry
responding to the ideas of marriage presented in the story that include lines of communication, expectations and the ideal partner. (Highlighted intelligences are linguistic and intrapersonal.)

**Modern Bride.** The instructor will provide several copies of bridal magazines for students to analyze. Students will brainstorm evident wedding customs, and then interview a native speaker about his/her wedding. (Highlighted intelligences are spatial and interpersonal.)

**Journaling.** Students will keep journals in the form of individual blogs throughout the sequence of lessons responding to brief prompts. Prompts may include, but are not limited to, the following: describing wedding and marriage customs in students’ native cultures, describing familial and marriage relationships in students’ native cultures and in relation to American culture, discussing attitudes regarding marriage and divorce in different cultures, reflecting on expectations for an ideal partner, discussing dating and/or courtship in different cultures, reflecting on the customs and traditions discovered in interviewing Americans about their weddings. Additional journal prompts may be included based on class discussions and interest. (Highlighted intelligences are intrapersonal and linguistic.)

**Assessment**

After completing the lessons on marriage relationships and weddings in American culture, students will plan an American wedding in an integrated final group project. Students will present their wedding in a video presentation using the technology of their choice. The presentation may take the form of a video diary, a documentary or other creative production so long as it shows evidence of understanding of American customs and traditions with regard to weddings and marriage. They will also submit written vows, a budget, the musical selection for the ceremony and reception, a floor-plan layout of the ceremony and reception, and images of
the wardrobe selections for the bridal party. Individually, students will reflect on the project and their understanding of American marriage and weddings. The rubric for evaluation of the integrated final project can be found in Appendix 1.

Lesson Development and Connection to Theory

The ESL lesson plan “I Do: American Weddings and Marriage” was developed around Gardner’s multiple intelligence theory by creating activities and assessments that correspond with the eight established intelligences. Language itself is largely a product of its culture (Boroditsky, 2010). Additionally, Bae (2004), states that diversity is essential for effective instruction with second-language learners (p. 14). Therefore, when it comes to teaching ESL, the more teaching strategies and approaches to a singular topic, the better the opportunity for students to produce and use language authentically. The topic of American weddings and marriage was chosen for its universality. While students may not be familiar with American wedding and marriage customs, they certainly have their own cultural understanding of the subject, and therefore, prior knowledge from which to draw. The topic of American weddings and marriage further lends itself to cultural comparisons and an exploration of the culture essential to language acquisition.

After selecting the topic of American weddings and marriage, Gardner’s multiple intelligence theory guided the formation of the lesson plan as activities and assessments were designed to highlight each of the established eight intelligences. Employing the different intelligences provides students with the opportunity to draw on their inherent strengths, or intelligences, while working with language.
The lesson “I Do: American Weddings and Marriage” is designed for an English language class, so linguistic intelligence is highlighted throughout the entire sequence of activities and assessments, as the overarching goal is production and use of language in both written and spoken forms. Students with linguistic intelligence have an ability to analyze information and create products using written or spoken language (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider, Gardner, 2011, p. 6-7). The linguistic intelligence is specifically targeted in the written component following the Movie Night activity where students compare various aspects of their wedding customs with those in the movies, in reading and responding to “The Story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin, in the oral presentation of marriage and divorce rate trends, and in the ongoing journaling throughout the activities.

Incorporating activities to highlight the other intelligences along with linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence was targeted in the statistical analysis of marriage and divorce rates. Students with logical-mathematical intelligence have an ability to calculate, solve abstract problems and develop equations and proofs (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider, Gardner, 2011, p. 6-7). The opportunity to work with numbers related to the subject of weddings and marriage might be effective in drawing students with this particular intelligence into the lesson. Spatial intelligence is targeted in the Show and Tell activity where students bring in images depicting marriage, in the Modern Bride activity where students brainstorm and analyze American wedding customs based on magazine images, as well as in the Movie Night and Meet the Parents activity where they screen selected video clips and movies. Students with spatial intelligence have the ability to identify and manipulate objects in space (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider, Gardner, 2011, p. 6-7).
Like linguistic intelligence, musical intelligence is highlighted throughout language activities since constructing meaning from patterns of sound is foundational to spoken language. Students with musical intelligence possess the skills to produce, remember and construct meaning from different patterns of sounds (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider, Gardner, 2011, p. 6-7). This musical intelligence is specifically targeted in the Meet the Parents and Movie Night activities where auditory expressions of language and culture are highlighted. The naturalist intelligence is highlighted in the Show and Tell activity where customs are distinguished and classified. Students with naturalist intelligence have the unique ability to identify and distinguish between different elements of the natural world (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider, Gardner, 2011, p. 6-7). Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is targeted in the Meet the Parents activity where students role-play interactions between an engaged couple and various family members and in-laws. Students with bodily-kinesthetic intelligence have the ability to use their own bodies to solve problems or create something (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider, Gardner, 2011, p. 6-7).

The interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences are again employed throughout the lesson as language is both personal and interactive. Language classrooms rarely involve entirely independent work because the very nature of language is communication and therefore use of the language with other people is essential. The pair and group work featured throughout the activities highlight interpersonal intelligence, and this is further specifically targeted in the part of the Modern Bride activity where students interview native speakers about their weddings, and in the Meet the Parents role-playing activity. Students with interpersonal intelligence have a special ability to recognize and understand the moods, desires, motivations and intentions of other people, and students with intrapersonal intelligence possess the ability to recognize and understand their own moods, desires, motivations and intentions (Davis, Christodoulou, Seider,
Gardner, 2011, p. 6-7). Intrapersonal intelligence is targeted in the ongoing journaling activities as well as in the written responses to the Movie Night, The Story of an Hour activities where students reflect on their own ideas and experiences related to wedding and marriage customs.

Regarding assessment, the final integrated project addresses all eight of the intelligences in different aspects of the project’s requirements. It is a group project, so interpersonal intelligence on some level is necessary for success. The linguistic and musical intelligences are largely important as accurate written and spoken language are essential, and they are specifically targeted in the written vows and musical selection pieces of the assignment. The wedding budget focuses on logical/mathematical intelligence. Creating a floor plan and deciding on/designing a wardrobe for both the ceremony and reception target the spatial and naturalistic intelligences. The presentation of the project in a video highlights the bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, and intrapersonal intelligence is targeted in the personal reflection each group member must complete.

Dr. Thomas Armstrong (2012) states that

One of the most remarkable features of the theory of multiple intelligences is how it provides eight different potential pathways to learning. … the theory of multiple intelligences suggests several … ways in which the material might be presented to facilitate effective learning. (Armstrong, 2012)

This is exactly the goal of “I Do: American Weddings and Marriage.” The lesson was developed with the goal of providing students as many approaches to the topic of American weddings and marriage as possible with the hope that cultural understanding and effective and accurate language production and usage would result.
Conclusion

In conclusion, Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences is readily applicable in the intensive English program setting. Culture is an inherent aspect of language and can be more deeply appreciated through analysis that focuses on the similarities and differences that exist between cultures. In the English language classroom, students by virtue of their varied backgrounds bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experience regarding customs and traditions in their native countries. This background can serve as an ideal starting point for a lesson designed to promote language production from several vantage points. While it is recognized that individual students may favor individual intelligences, the English language serves as the common denominator for addressing all forms of intelligence within the ESL classroom. Using the topic of marriage, students have numerous opportunities to explore the meaning of culture and develop their own linguistic abilities. The final project is specifically designed to allow students an opportunity to express their ideas in creative and unique ways that are in keeping with Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences and the multiple approaches his theory promotes.
References


### Appendix 1
#### American Marriage and Wedding Presentation Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names:</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>35-40 points</th>
<th>25-34 points</th>
<th>10-24 points</th>
<th>0-9 points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge/Content</strong></td>
<td>Shows a full understanding of American marriage and wedding customs. Vows, budget, music, floor plan, ceremony and wardrobe are well-planned and culturally appropriate.</td>
<td>Shows a good understanding of American marriage and wedding customs. Vows, budget, music, floor plan, ceremony and wardrobe are planned and generally culturally appropriate, but with lapses of clarity.</td>
<td>Shows a fair understanding of parts of the topic of American marriage and weddings. Vows, budget, music, floor plan, ceremony and wardrobe are planned, but without clarity or respect to cultural appropriateness.</td>
<td>Does not seem to understand the topic very well. Does not adequately provide vows, budget, music, floor plan, ceremony and/or wardrobe with respect to culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>Stays on topic all (100%) of the time. Consistently uses logical order of ideas and appropriate examples/explanation.</td>
<td>Stays on topic most (99-90%) of the time. Generally uses logical order of ideas and appropriate examples/explanation.</td>
<td>Stays on topic some (89%-75%) of the time. Uses logical order of ideas and appropriate examples/explanation at times, but not consistently.</td>
<td>It was hard to tell what the topic was. Fails to use logical order of ideas and appropriate examples/explanation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clarity/Mechanics</strong></td>
<td>Speaks clearly and distinctly all (100-95%) the time, and mispronounces no words. Clearly and effectively communicates ideas, uses correct spelling and grammar. Presentation runs smoothly.</td>
<td>Speaks clearly and distinctly all (100-95%) the time, but mispronounces one word. Effectively communicates ideas, uses correct spelling and grammar most of the time. Presentation generally runs smoothly.</td>
<td>Speaks clearly and distinctly most (94-85%) of the time. Mispronounces no more than one word. Some difficulty in communicating ideas, has obvious spelling or grammar mistakes. Presentation runs with difficulty.</td>
<td>Often mumbles or cannot be understood OR mispronounces more than one word. Has difficulty communicating ideas, has multiple spelling and grammar mistakes. Presentation runs with great difficulty or does not work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multimedia Elements</strong></td>
<td>Graphic, video and audio elements are used appropriately and effectively, show considerable work/creativity which make the presentation better, and convey intended meaning.</td>
<td>Graphic, video and audio elements are used, show work/creativity which make the presentation better, and convey intended meaning.</td>
<td>Graphic, video and audio elements are used and convey intended meaning.</td>
<td>Graphic, video and audio elements are used inappropriately and ineffectively, lack considerable work/creativity, and fail to convey intended meaning or detract from the presentation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total points:**

**Comments:**