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## THE CULTURAL MOSAIC: CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

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**Margaret Kersten and Marilyn Weir**

Centre For Applied Language Studies

Carleton University, Ottawa

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a teaching approach which uses students' diverse cultural background as a primary resource to help them develop language skills and to raise their cultural awareness.

### HOW THE APPROACH WAS DEVELOPED

Carleton University offers an English Language program to foreign students intending to enter an academic program where English would be the medium of study. Many of these students have a basic knowledge of English but require substantial short term improvement in order to equip them both to live and study in the English language. There are also some students who wish to obtain a very high level of language proficiency because they are required to function professionally in English in their own country. A substantial proportion of Carleton ESL students are "no speaks" people who have been exposed to two or more years of language instruction in their own country but have seldom been encouraged to use the language. They have some knowledge of the language but little or no ability to speak it. The practical problem was how to get them to develop communication skills and fluency in a limited time.

Observation revealed that even the most passive students would engage in heated conversation when the topic was one that was both relevant and important to them and about which they felt they had something important to contribute. They would then use whatever command of the language they had to express their views and to convey and receive information. In doing so, they drew to the fullest extent possible on their

total knowledge of the language including "dormant" English - the language that is at the back of their minds but that has not yet been fully internalized or comfortable to use.

Analysis of the nature the topics that seemed to draw them out to the greatest extent and most encouraged them to use their command of English seemed that even the quietest students took pleasure from explaining what was different in their countries and why it was different. Equally, if the topic was important enough to them, they would be curious about it, and want to find out about it in the context of other countries represented by their classmates. They were fascinated by the similarities and stimulated by the differences.

These observations led to the realization that the students were in fact the most precious information resource. They possessed a wealth of knowledge and expertise waiting to be tapped. That knowledge became a natural choice when looking for authentic materials and led the field of cultural studies as one that could provide some useful criteria for selecting topics that would be relevant and interesting to the students.

### RESEARCH

Recent research has described language learning as having three main elements. The first being that of awareness (i.e. knowledge of the structures of the language), the second, experience (i.e. practice of the language) and the third, culture (i.e. the knowledge of the culture to which the language refers) [Byram, 1989]. The relationship between these three elements

appears to be a significant factor in language learning.

More and more, language teachers have realized that it is not enough to provide only the first two elements in language teaching, i.e. to teach structures and to provide opportunities for practice. Such an approach disregards the basic function of the language itself, that of social interaction.

*“Language and culture are two different aspects of social life, but are interdependent to the extent that neither can be understood without reference to the other, because neither has much meaning outside the context of the other. Language reflects culture and develops with it; culture interacts with language and is reflected by it” [Jan W. Walls].*

So if we want to help students achieve communicative competence, culture must play a role in the language learning process.

Language teachers usually try to provide some cultural background of the target language. For example, an EFL/ESL teacher will illustrate or explain concepts using pictures or graphics which reflect the target culture. This approach helps but it leaves the students with the task of translating cultural differences as well as linguistic ones. Sometimes the teacher will provide a “cultural translation.” Though a valid exercise, it does not really provide deep insight into the culture of the target language, nor does it lend itself to developing communication or social skills.

Two questions arose from this: How can a teacher help the students with the “cultural translation” issue in language learning? And how can a teacher teach language in a way that finds an appropriate role for culture at the same time?

## **RELATIONSHIP TO TRADITIONAL ESL APPROACHES**

This approach builds on the foundation of traditional and accepted approaches to language teaching.

First, there was the language-centered approach as described, for example, by Hutchison and Waters (Hutchison & Waters, 1978). It explored the nature of the language and developed language instructional materials and activities around different language fea-

tures such as grammar, register and styles. It focused on the structural elements of language learning. Then came the skill-centered approach which focused on experience or practice in developing particular language skills, such as listening, speaking, or writing and reading but it does not necessarily focus or develop the language itself. More recently, there has been a move toward the student-centered approach which has, as its foundation, a learner’s needs, motivations and learning styles, and which has gained acceptance.

Our approach builds on these approaches while paying considerably more attention to cultural awareness. Some elements of cultural information will always find their way into the classroom implicitly, hidden in a text or in a visual image which portrays a particular way of life (hidden curriculum), but they may not contribute to a better understanding of the culture of the target language. Actually, such hidden cultural content may in fact play a perverse role by creating or reinforcing stereotypes.

If culture were used overtly and explicitly as a teaching medium, this should raise cultural awareness and promote real understanding and accelerate the language learning process. Thus, we determined to use information about peoples and cultures - “the constant puzzle of how far we are all the same and how far we are all different” (Leech)-as the medium for language training.

The approach is student-centered in that it recognizes students as primary sources of information. It treats language learning as an overall learning process. It stresses the importance of both process and product, and it advocates the use of themes for developing teaching materials.

## **CULTURE**

If culture is an important element in language learning, what is meant by culture?

Culture has been described as information, attitudes and values: Ned Seelye took it one step further when he said that it includes everything we learn to do, “it embraces all aspects of man’s life” (Seelye, 1982). If it is assumed that teaching the target language means teaching its culture, what then is Canadian culture?

Canada has a history of cultural and racial diversity, and “multiculturalism” is a Canadian creation. It is a land of immigrants who maintain and cultivate their cultural roots. This complexity of Canadian life must seem to be

the most curious puzzle to students who come from a more homogenous cultural experience (T. O'Brien).

“The Melting Pot is American. Immigrants there dissolve in bubbling assimilation; they become Americans. Canada has its MOSAIC. The country doesn't assimilate and never aspired to. The pieces of the Canadian Mosaic are beautiful, as in Cape Breton towns where people converse in Gaelic still, or the spanking clean Hutterite villages of Alberta, or the Portugese neighborhoods of Toronto where black-eyed babies wear tiny gold rings in their ears. But the parts don't merge as a coherent whole” (June Callwood, 1981 : 27)

In more than one way our ESL classes - with their students from diverse cultural backgrounds - are a microcosm of what Canadian culture is all about. The students learn about, and develop respect for the diverse cultural backgrounds of their classmates. This equips them well for fitting into the Canadian Mosaic.

Canada's ethnic minorities exist as separate groups, but also as part of a large community of people who live and work together, all of whom call themselves Canadians. In order to communicate they use one of two official languages - English or French. They are a collection of people who chose to come to Canada for professional or personal development. They bring with them their cultural baggage which they are proud of and eager to cultivate but they are also prepared to share it with others if the opportunity is given.

## CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

The cultural studies literature suggested that two factors are critical to the successful use of cultural themes in teaching English as a Second Language. First, choose appropriate topics. Second, develop appropriate activities.

By paying attention to these two factors, we firstly achieved the expected benefits of consistently high and sustained levels of student involvement and, consequently, enriched learning. We also discovered that students acquired a mutual understanding and increased respect for the different ways that similar events and common activities are handled in different cultures. In part, this came simply from the transfer of information and in part, from the collaboration required by the activities.

## Choosing Appropriate Topics

The choice of topics should be appropriate not only from the perspective of student interest but also from the perspective of cultural neutrality and respect. Based largely on the work of Michael Byram (Byram, 1989) the following criteria for selecting and dealing with topics in the classroom were developed. The topics should:

- . bring out norms and values of a society
- . deal with relationships (social, generational, family, etc.)
- . be explicit enough to bring out concrete information (avoid abstraction and generalizations that may reflect stereotypes and biases)
- . deal with matters about which students would have personal knowledge
- . be broad enough so that students can have their contribution
- . be relevant/interesting to the students

According to H. Ned Seelye “culture is seen to include everything people learn to do .....it embraces all aspects of a man's life” (Seelye, 1982). Culture has also been described as information about attitudes and values. Many topics or themes meet these criteria. To date thematic units have been developed around such cultural topics as love and marriage, celebrations, education, children's games, fairy tales and stories, and health.

## Developing Appropriate Activities

Choosing the right topic is half the battle but presenting it appropriately is equally important. That was where the adaptation of the jigsaw technique played an important role. It offered unquestionable benefits:

- . it simulates the real world where information is gathered in order to complete a task
- . it encourages and depends on student input
- . it is flexible enough to allow participation of individual with very different levels of English
- . it attaches equal importance to both process and product

In a jigsaw, a complete picture gets broken into pieces that are fragments of a whole. They are not meaningful units which can exist independently. Separately, they present little use or value. The idea of jigsaw, then, is to put the pieces together again - to reconstruct the original picture.

Our adaptation of the jigsaw technique is different in one important respect. It is reversed. There is no original picture to break into small pieces; instead, there is a classroom full of international students. Each student with his or her cultural background and experience constitutes an independent whole. Each one is different and, especially at the beginning, may be a bit anxious about it. Our goal is not to reconstruct an existing picture but to create a new one which would show all the shades and colours of the differences but which would also emphasize the sameness in us all. This "reverse" jigsaw technique offers the possibility of creating a new picture every time; a possibility of discovering, "how much we are different and how much we are all the same".

## MATERIALS

These materials were developed out of a need to create a language learning environment where the emphasis is one of communicative competence and where a better understanding of things not familiar would promote tolerance and respect for others.

The example that follows was developed using the theme "love and marriage". It was initially designed for students in the intensive language program at the beginner to intermediate level. It was designed to cover three sessions of three hours each. Depending on both the number of students and their level of involvement more time may be needed. It was found, for example, that more advanced students wanted more time because their greater competence allowed them to contribute and process more information.

### *Step One: Preparing Questions*

First, a set of question cards (Fig 1) with questions that relate to situations familiar to all of us were used to both introduce the theme and initiate discussion.

### *Step Two: Classroom activities*

#### **Activity 1 : interviewing**

The set of question cards would be given to a group of approximately four to six students together with the first Worksheet (Fig. 2).

The format of the Worksheet is that of a chart. It is intended to be used as a recording device for the student. It is designed so that there is a limited space to record each student's response to the questions which forces the students to focus on the main ideas or key

words to be used in this note-taking exercise. It is also generic enough that it can be easily transferred to other cultural themes.

After each student has had an opportunity to discuss the questions, and has completed the first chart, the second Worksheet (Fig. ) is given out. Again in the form of a chart, the students are asked to gather and exchange information from the other members of the group.

At this point each student has information from five students. In other words, if each student stands for one segment of information then, after completing this activity, each student has the knowledge of the five segments of the whole. They still do not have the whole picture. In order to complete the picture, or "jigsaw" they must gather information from the rest of the class.

#### **Activity 2 : Sharing information**

This is done by giving each student within each group a number, i.e. # 1, #2, #3, etc. The students are then asked to change groups. All the students who were given the number 1 form one group, all the students who were given the number 2 form another group and so on until each student finds himself in a new group with new students, each representing a segment of the class.

At this point students exchange information. They report on what they had learned in their original groups and again fill out the chart with this "second hand" information. Even if there are a few representatives of the same country, the information may differ slightly and this is also a valid point for conversation or discussion. When this task has been completed, each student has first or second hand information from every other student in the class. The "pieces of our jigsaw" have been put together: The students have accomplished the task of giving and retrieving information from their classmates and by doing so they can see more. The picture they put together gives them a broader view and has more dimensions.

#### **Activity 3 : Reporting**

The students should now have similar information. Each student returns to his or her original group both to check and analyze the information collected. Here the third Worksheet (Fig 4) is given to the students to be completed. They are asked once again to discuss, exchange and report their findings but also to check for similarities, i.e. to find that common link or thread that binds us.

After completion of this task, each group reports to the whole class what similarities they observed, for example marriage is an important event in every culture, each culture has special customs and rituals related to marriage, or that there is usually an engagement period (more or less formal), or that the family of either side is usually involved in the preparations. Another observation is that in big urban areas the ritual seems to be similar across the world, but more traditional weddings will be observed in small towns and villages.

The above described activity is simple in its design, and the questions/topics are taken from "every day life", these are the conversation topics which sometimes can be overheard in the "real world" on social occasions. That is why, after the first person's response the students tend to forget that they are in the classroom. They listen, ask questions, ask for clarification and explanation-nothing is taken for granted so the conversation goes on and on, reinforcing Dewey's (1897) statement that "Language is a logical instrument, but it is fundamentally and primarily a social instrument."

#### **Activity 4 : Reading**

The next activity in the Love and Marriage unit focuses on developing students' reading skills. Here again, the forms is on the students' background knowledge of classical love stories and the framework is once again that of a jigsaw.

The class is divided into two groups. There are two readings - "badly damaged manuscripts" of Romeo and Juliet and Tristan and Isolda. Students in each group are given copies of one of the manuscripts. They read the stories, trying to reconstruct the missing elements. (Fig.5/ Fig.6).

Then, working in pairs, they complete a chart (main characters, other characters, place of action, time of action, first event, second event, third event, fourth event, and ending). In order to be able to complete the chart (Fig.7) they have to use their background knowledge of the story and they also have to infer information - both tasks are well recognized reading strategies. Once the pairs have completed the chart, they can compare their answers with other pairs within the same group, making any necessary changes or additions. When students are satisfied with the answers, each finds a person who has the other story and exchanges information (orally) by telling their story and by listening to the other person's story and completing the chart. Having done this, the students return to

their original groups and check the information by comparing their notes.

The final task in this activity is a group creation of a love story which takes place in 1991. The students are given a chart. The entries in the chart have been designed to help them make up their own story. In the process of discussing the place of action, characters, events, etc. the students fill out the chart. When they have finally agreed on their story, a spokesperson for each group tells the story to the whole class. As their homework assignment, the students write the story, using the notes. This activity is fully learner centered. The teacher plays the role of an initiator and facilitator but even these functions are very limited - the responsibility for doing and completing the tasks remains with the students.

#### **Activity 5 : listening**

The fifth activity in this unit is a listening jigsaw. The class is divided into three groups. Each student within each group is given a number (Student # 1, Student # 2, Student # 3, etc). Each group gets a different tape. Each tape is a talk about marriage and wedding traditions in one of the three countries: China, Germany and Greece. The groups listen to their respective tapes and the students complete a chart by taking notes (Fig. 8). In order to fill in the blanks they have to listen for key words, which is a very useful listening strategy. Then, within their original groups they compare their notes, making sure that they picked up enough information to fill in all the blanks for their group's assigned country.

Finally, all students form new groups of three (one from each of the country groups) and by sharing and exchanging information complete the blanks for the other two countries.

A written follow up in the form of an essay on different wedding traditions reinforces the spoken language.

#### **Activity 6 : crossword puzzle**

The final activity in this unit is a jigsaw crossword puzzle. There is one crossword puzzle grid and three sets of clue cards. The students break into groups of three with each student holding a different set of clues in his hands. The students read their clues out loud and try to guess the right word. They are allowed to talk for as long as it takes but they are not allowed to show their clue cards to one another. (Fig9/ Fig. 10)

## CONCLUSIONS

These materials were developed and tested in a Canadian context with young adults and also at workshops with Canadian teachers.

The activities are very demanding on the students and, by the same token, they are a very powerful language exercise. Their cross-cultural character seems to be methodologically justified and thematically appropriate because cultural diversity is such an important characteristic of the Canadian cultural landscape; a characteristic so prominent and visible that it often comes as a shock to visitors and newcomers.

Our language students were both reassured and motivated when they were able to draw upon their own cultural experiences in a constructive way. They were encouraged to draw on their "dormant language" when they felt passionate about a topic, and had a genuine desire to communicate. They enjoyed the process and

the completion of the final task. In doing so they developed a mutual understanding and cooperation that is essential to Canadian way of living.

Any topic can be done in a similar way because the activities are generic in their design. The list of topics can range from such trivia like "telephones" to much more complex issues such as "social strata".

As discussed above, language and culture are inseparable. When this is recognized and culture is made an integral part of our approach to language instruction, the language training, and cultural needs of students are more fully met. This approach can be especially useful in any environment where students come from different cultural backgrounds. However, it does not necessarily need to be used as a crosscultural activity. It is flexible enough to be easily adapted for any audience in ESL or EFL classes as it created an opportunity to use the language.

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DATING AND MARRIAGE

A young man meets a young woman at a family gathering. He wants to meet her again.

How does he go about it?

A young woman meets a young man at the corner store. She wants to meet him again.

What does she do? (What are the acceptable social standards?)

A young man falls in love and wants to get married. What does his and his fiancée's family expect him to do?

A young couple get engaged. How long is the engagement period? What do they/their respective families do during that period?

A young couple get married. Where do they live?

Fig. 1

### CROSS CULTURAL ACTIVITY

**READ ALL THE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST.**

1. Place the set of the cards in the centre of the table.
2. Player # 1: turn the top card, read the card to the other players and respond to the topic.
3. Players # 2, # 3 and # 4 take it in turns to talk about the same topic.
4. While listening to each player, take notes by filling in the chart.
5. Repeat the procedure with Player # 2, then Player # 3 and then Player # 4 turning the top card then reading the card, etc.

#### NATIONALITY

Topic	Player #1	Player #2	Player #3	Player #4
# 1				
# 2				
# 3				
# 4				
# 5				

**Fig. 2**



Players with the same number get together and, while exchanging information, fill in the chart.

## NATIONALITY

TOPIC					
A young man meets a young woman at a family gathering. He wants to meet her again. How does he go about it?					
A young woman meets a young man at the corner shop. She wants to meet him again. What does she do?					
A young man falls in love and wants to get married. What does he do in terms of family relations?					
A young couple get engaged. How long is the engagement period?					
A young couple get married. Where do they live?					

Fig. 3

- 7. Go back to your original groups.
- 8. Take turns to report to your group.
- 9. While listening to the other players, fill out the chart.

TOPIC	SIMILARITIES
# 1	
# 2	
# 3	
# 4	
# 5	

Fig. 4

LOVE (1)

This ancient manuscript was found damaged and torn. Some pieces are missing. Work with your partner to complete this famous love story. Fill in the chart.

- . Read the story
- . Work with your partners to complete the chart (column # 1 or # 2)
- . Find someone who has read the other story and exchange information; complete the chart (column # 1 or # 2)
- . Return to your group and check your information
- . Together create a story of your own. Use the chart as a guide. Make notes in column # 3
- . Use your notes to help you write your story

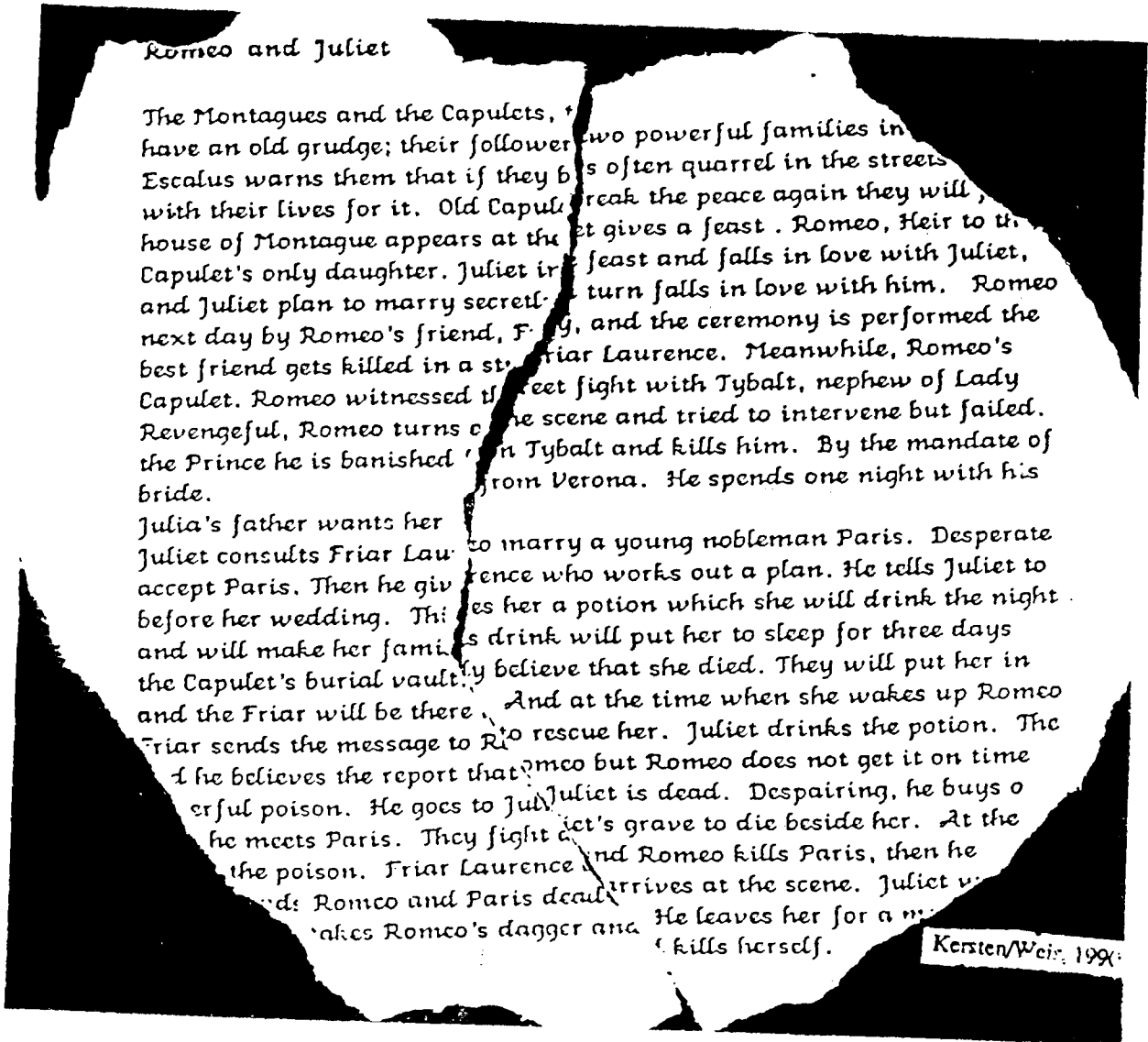


Fig. 5

LOVE (2)

This ancient manuscript was found damaged and torn. Some pieces are missing. Work with your partner to complete this famous love story. Fill in the chart.

- . Read the story
- . Work with your partners to complete the chart (column # 1 or # 2)
- . Find someone who has read the other story and exchange information; complete the chart (column # 1 or # 2)
- . Return to your group and check your information
- . Together create a story of your own. Use the chart as a guide. Make notes in column # 3
- . Use your notes to help you write your story

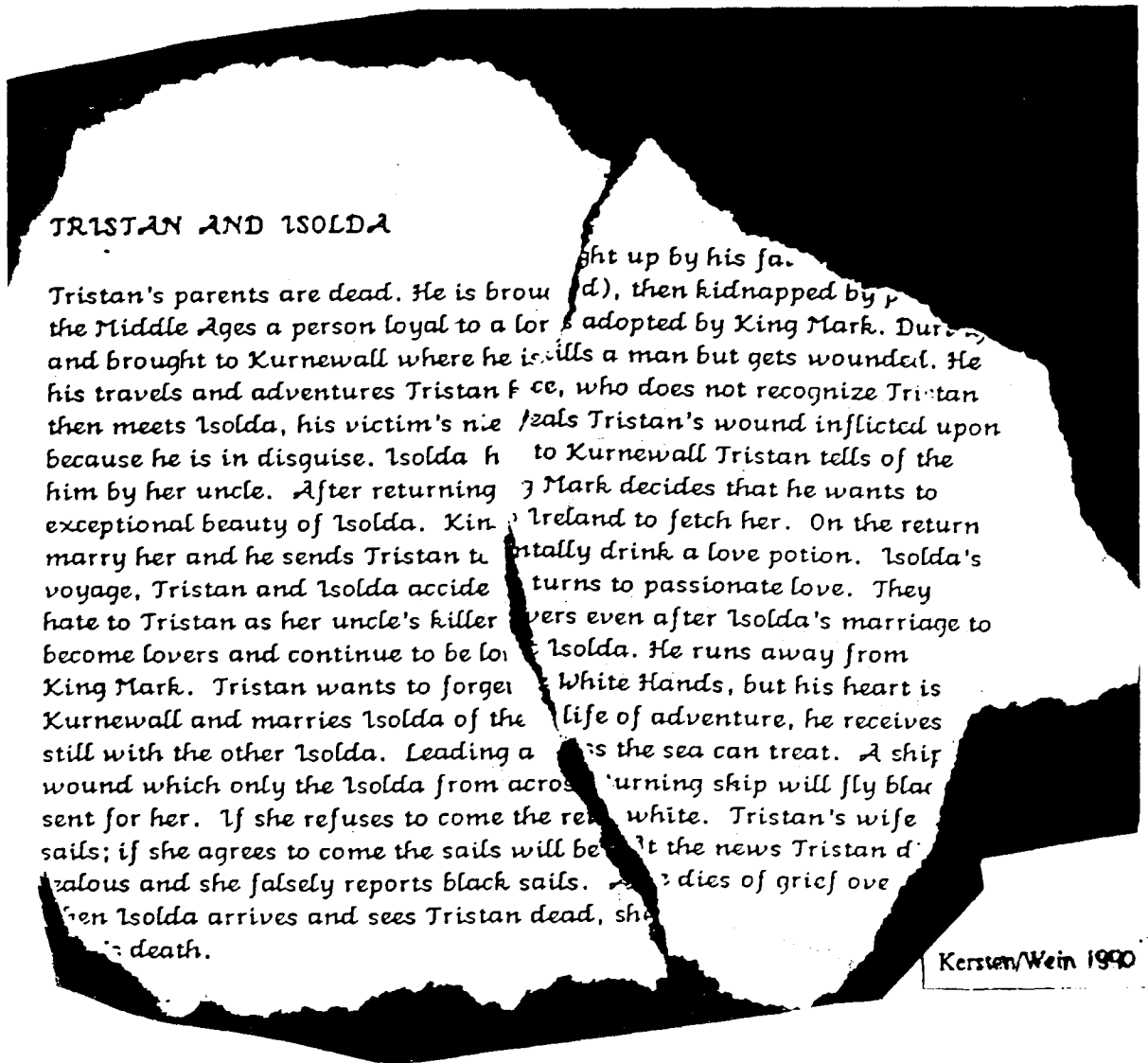


Fig. 6

## LOVE

	ROMEO AND JULIET #1	TRISTAN AND ISOLDA #2	#3
MAIN CHARACTERS			
OTHER CHARACTERS			
PLACE OF ACTION	1400	1200	1991
TIME OF ACTION			
1st EVENT			
2nd EVENT			
3rd EVENT			
4th EVENT			
ENDING			

Fig. 7

## LISTENING

## MARRIAGE AND WEDDINGS

1. Listen to the tape and make notes in the appropriate column
2. Compare your notes with the rest of the group
3. Complete the chart by getting information from the other groups (Student #1 to Group #1. Student #2 to Group #2...)

	CHINA	GERMANY	GREECE
MEETING THE PARTNER			
Period before the wedding			
Preparation for the wedding			
Family involvement			
Wedding celebration			

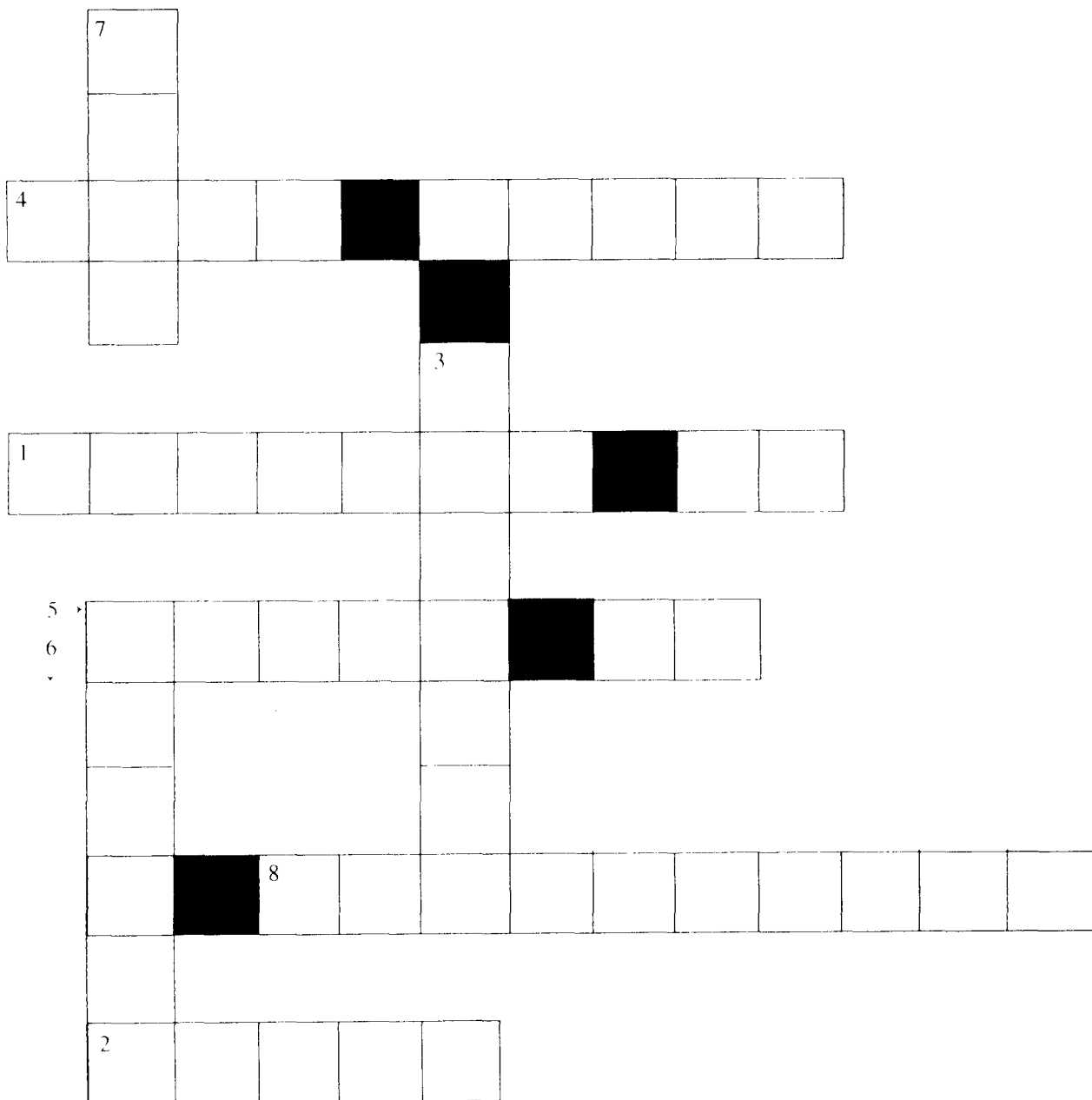
Fig. 8

**JIGAW CROSSWORD PUZZLE**

In order to solve this crossword puzzle, you will have to co-operate with your partners. Ask the members of your group for each definition or clue. For example:

“What’s the definition of the word for 2 across?” OR “What is 2 down?”

You may ask your partners for any help you want but you may not look at their definitions. You may co-operate verbally but not visually.



**Fig.9**

**GROUP A**

clues

1. Only one beat to the bar
2. gnir
3. After 50 years a couple celebrates their golden \_\_\_\_\_ anniversary
4. All male outing
5. dotso pu
6. Not a bath
7. What's the \_\_\_\_\_ today?
8. gentgemena

**GROUP B**

clues

1. neilosgs rab
2. The sound of a bell
3. A celebration
4. tags yarpt
5. He didn't sit down he \_\_\_\_\_ up
6. Lightrainfall
7. Sweet event
8. The waiting period before the wedding

**GROUP C**

clues

1. A place where "boy meets girl"
2. Often made of gold
3. edwindg
4. Male deer celebrates
5. Your date does not arrive. You have been \_\_\_\_\_ up
6. werohs
7. Soft Mediterranean fruit
8. A committment

**Fig. 10**