Overview:

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is a controversial linguistic theory that states that the way people think and perceive the world around them is heavily influenced by the language that they speak. The theory was first proposed by linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Whorf in 1929, but did not gain popularity until the 1950s. The hypothesis is based off of the concept of linguistic relativity, which assumes that languages have structural differences that affect cognition (i.e., an individual who speaks English may not be able to understand some of the ways in which someone who speaks Cantonese perceives the world). This is in contrast to linguistic universalism, which contends that all languages share the same innate structures and do not affect cognition.

There are two versions of the hypothesis. The strong version states that language determines how you perceive the world, while the weak version states that it only influences and merely represents one factor that shapes your worldview. The strong hypothesis has been discredited, but the weak version is more widely accepted.

This activity asks participants to consider the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and how language may shape their thoughts and perceptions. Before beginning this activity, the facilitator should familiarize themselves with the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (see the PowerPoint in the Links section of this tool). Participants will be shown a fictional example of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and then asked to discuss real examples related to how language may affect how they think/perceive.

Background:

This activity was adapted by Lindsey Macdonald, CILMAR, from an activity created by Rachel Anderson Droogsma, PhD, for Minnesota State University’s Mankato Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) Capstone Project in Spring 2008. This activity is no longer available online.

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Discuss the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis and how language may shape their thoughts and perceptions.
2. Identify the relationships between language, culture, and perception.
3. Reflect on how the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis might apply to their own uses of language.

Time:

1 hour and 10 minutes

Group Size:

Large group
Materials:

Pens/pencils, paper, computers/tablets/smartphones, access to the Internet, two videos on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in the movie Arrival (in Links), a projector to play videos, whiteboard or flip chart

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication:

- To articulate a complex understanding of cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication (e.g., demonstrates understanding of the degree to which people use physical contact while communicating in different cultures or use direct/indirect and explicit/implicit meanings).
- To skillfully negotiate a shared understanding based on these differences.

Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks:

- To demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles, economy, or beliefs & practices.

Other Skills:

Teamwork; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Activity Instructions:

1. The facilitator should begin by defining the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, in particular highlighting the strong and weak versions and contrasting it to linguistic universalism.

   Note: The facilitator may choose to help explain the hypothesis using the “How Language Shapes the Way We Think” TEDTalk by Lera Boroditsky

2. Next, the facilitator should show the video Arrival’s Linguistic Relativity and Time Perception are Awesome up until the 2:30 mark and then the full Science Behind Arrival: Can language determine the way we think? video.

3. After watching the videos, participants should discuss the following questions:

   - How is the movie Arrival using the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis? What do you think of their interpretation?
   - The primary question in the second video is “Can language determine the way we think?” What do you think? Are you convinced by the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis or are you skeptical? Why?
4. Participants should then be divided into groups, and each group should be assigned a different concept to which the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis can be applied. The facilitator can use the following examples or come up with their own: 1) color, 2) time, 3) space, 4) gender, 5) emotions. Each group should be provided with pens/pencils, paper, and a computer/tablet/smartphone.

5. Participants should then come up with examples of how language may affect people's perceptions of these concepts. They may choose to use examples from their own experiences (i.e., if a participant is multilingual, they may talk about the differences between the languages that they speak, or participants may note dialectical or cultural differences in language from different regions within the nation they are from) or they may search for examples online. Participants should keep a record of the examples that they discuss/find.

6. After participants have finished their group discussion, the facilitator should write each of the concepts on a whiteboard or flip chart. Participants should then share their examples and the facilitator will record them.

7. The facilitator should end the activity by debriefing with the following questions:
   - After completing this activity, what sorts of connections are you seeing between language, culture, and perception?
   - Do you notice any patterns in the examples provided by each group?
   - Are there any examples that seem particularly convincing? Why or why not?
   - Do you have any personal experiences related to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that you would like to share?
   - If you were either skeptical or accepting of the hypothesis after watching the two videos, has your opinion changed since working with your groups? If so, why?

Related Tools:

Tools to use in conjunction with this lesson:

- BaFa BaFa
- Culture Shock
- Direct-Indirect Communication
- Language Envelopes
- Language Learning Strategies Inventory
- Rafa Rafa
- Ritual