

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND TEACHING CULTURALLY DIVERSE LEARNERS



OVERVIEW

*Home has really less to do with a piece of soil than, you could say,
with a piece of soul.*

—Pico Iyer (2013)

For most immigrants, “home” is a more complex and ever-changing phenomenon than just a place of residence or settlement; home is also an inner sense of belonging to one culture while learning to live and settle in another. Granted, immigrant experiences can be very different; they can involve both happy and unhappy memories. Nevertheless, the English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) student may not yet fully understand the process of adapting to a new home and navigating between or even among cultures. English language teachers simultaneously validate deep feelings their students have about their origins and introduce these students to a new language and culture.

Intercultural work is often referred to as work that involves crossing borders, bridges, or territories, three common “journey” metaphors that imply a transformation of some kind. We inherently possess diverse cultural orientations to the world, which cause us to interpret events differently. Exploring intercultural differences, even the slightest of differences, such as the way someone looks or doesn’t look you in the eye, can evoke different emotional and physical responses. English language teachers shift and enter different mindsets and worldviews when they teach students with different cultural backgrounds, values, and life experiences. However, with curiosity, knowledge, and experience, educators learn to accommodate differences and adapt their lessons accordingly. For example, you might decide to have gender-based groupings because some members of the class may feel uncomfortable conversing in mixed company. The fact is that interacting with students is a two-way street; though ESOL learners must acquire English language skills along with intercultural communicative competence (ICC) to become successful participants in their new world, English-speaking students and teachers must also acquire such competence.

Our responsibility as English language teachers, then, is to facilitate these entrances or crossings and learn from them in ways that bring meaning to our work. In the end, we want to feel confident that our students can become well-adapted citizens, having a voice and actively engaging in community and civic society.

This chapter introduces the concept of culture, cultural identity and embedded behaviors, stereotyping cultural behaviors, and the challenges ESOL learners have in acculturating to their new environment.

THINKING ABOUT THE TOPIC

Understanding who our students are, their cultural backgrounds, and their countries of origin can help us as English language teachers apply appropriate methodology and choose classroom activities that can help our students acculturate to their new surroundings. Following are some questions you can ask yourself to get you started:

- How do I go about understanding cultural behaviors that go beyond cooking food, dancing, or celebrating festivals?
- How can I avoid making overgeneralizations and stereotyping my students' behaviors?
- What is intercultural competence and what models have been developed?
- What can I do in the classroom to facilitate the acculturation process?
- Is culturally authentic behavior really a practical goal? What are the barriers?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

What Is Culture?

We all know that culture influences our behavior. Whether we are shopping for groceries or visiting a doctor or celebrating a birthday, the way we physically move or enter into a conversation is for the most part determined by the culture in which we were raised and live. Although layered and rather complex, we can say that culture is a way of life of a people, consisting of what Spitzberg and Chagnon (2009) refer to as “enduring, yet evolving intergenerational” (p. 6) behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, values, rituals/customs, language, and knowledge that are passed on through various forms of communication. It also includes clusters of expected rules and meanings associated with specific social and professional activities and morally acceptable behavior that take place in education, workplace, medical, and family contexts. *Enduring* and *evolving* are key words here. Cultural traditions and rituals are passed on from generation to generation, yet, whether deliberate or accidental, they change with the times. Think about *cultural hybridization*, which refers to the blending or fusion of cultural elements, such as forms of behavior, music, food, and language from different cultures that are constantly changing in a globalized world.

It should be emphasized that culture is never static. It is dynamic and forms the basis of self-identity and community. Particular styles and values might be central to a cultural

group's beliefs; however, individuals may change their cultural identities as they learn about others' attitudes, values, and traditions. In a similar vein, a person might choose to abandon some of the cultural beliefs that were important elements of their upbringing. A variety of experiences or circumstances can influence an individual's cultural beliefs. For example, they might find themselves in a peer group that practices different traditions or have the experience of moving (or fleeing involuntarily) from one country to another. In short, culture informs the way people understand themselves and others. As author Jen told Haupt (2013) in an interview, "We are made by culture, but we make culture too."

We are all human beings possessing similar behaviors. Some obvious examples are that if we are hungry, we gravitate toward food because we cannot survive without it, and if we are sleepy, we all go to bed. Nevertheless, as individuals, we may eat different foods and require different amounts of sleep to function productively in our lives. At the individual level, we are all unique in some way; that is, we have different personalities, although our nature, or way of behaving, may be similar to a parent or relative as revealed in the comment, "She is so much like her grandmother." Our personality can be both inherited and learned through, for example, personal experiences. Laroche and Yang (2014) point out that culture lies somewhere between what we consider universal and what we consider individual; it is culture that "makes us more similar to one group of people than other groups of people" (p. 9). In other words, if culture is a collective phenomenon and learned in one's social environment, "it is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 6). One of the challenges we face when confronted with cultural differences is to decide in the moment if a behavior is universal, individual, or cultural.

We can also look at culture from different vantage points and perspectives, ranging from corporate culture to high culture and from local culture to global culture. Global culture reveals a world becoming more culturally diffused and standardized, especially through technology and mass media. The global village is indeed alive and well as aspects of culture, such as celebrity watching and Facebook postings, become more commonplace on an international scale. However, it is important to realize that local cultures are still very vibrant, well defined, and well established. Cultural behaviors also include unconscious aspects that are not freely chosen or easily modified—ways of being in the world that entail deep affective commitments that people do not readily relinquish. For this reason, ESOL learners tend to remain faithful to their culture of origin as they grapple with understanding and applying their knowledge of the cultural practices and behaviors characteristic of their new home.

Culture and Identity

Cultural identity is closely related to the dynamic nature of culture. If we view identity as being multiple, flexible, and dynamic, then we can understand that it is entirely possible to operate across cultural boundaries. Cultural identity comprises a variety of features, such as gender, ethnicity, national origin, level of education, family dynamics, social class, sexual orientation, values, beliefs, and language use, all of which distinguish one cultural group

from another and influence how one interprets or lives in a culture (Nieto, 2010). All these attributes play a role in how people lead their lives and behave in social situations. People also create their multiple identities in different ways. For example, a married Iranian doctor who is a woman with children may identify herself first and foremost as an Iranian woman while a person with the same background may primarily identify herself as a doctor, with various combinations thereof.

How people from different cultural groups interact and share experiences with each other influences culture and identity as well. For example, young people, especially those of many diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, living in urban United States communities may assume different identities as they relate to, for example, a blend of Hispanic, African American hip hop, working class, and gay culture. If they have Caribbean heritage, they may speak patois, a vernacular form of English spoken in the region, along with the English they learned at school. The concept of intersectionality recognizes that no one person has a singular identity; we are all influenced by the history, politics, power, and ideology that dictate oppression or privilege in a society. As a theory, intersectionality is used to analyze how social and cultural categories overlap and intertwine. As for communication,

Intersectionality suggests that for dialogue between cultural groups to take place, and perhaps be successful, such groups need to recognize how their identities have historical legacies, power differentials, and political consequences that could aid or impede relations between them. Paying attention to privilege and oppression associated with intersectional identities makes the work of creating intercultural dialogue more demanding but potentially more fulfilling to the parties involved. (Yep, 2015, p. 1)

Being aware of intersectionality with your ESOL learners can help you to understand their behavior and their physical and emotional well-being from a more holistic point of view. Creating opportunities for intercultural dialogue and relationship building is the key to fostering understanding.

In addition to the notion of intersectionality, the “third space” or “third place” has been applied to helping us understand cultural combinations, especially when it comes to communication and language use. The term recognizes the fact that one’s cultural orientation is complex, deeply ingrained, and multifaceted. According to cultural critic Bhabha (2011), the third space is an in-between place in which creative forms of cultural identity are produced. Cultural difference is built into the very condition of communication because of the necessity to interpret, not just to send and receive messages. Bhabha (2011) goes on to say that the intervention of a third space also challenges our perception of viewing culture as fixed and unifying. For example, signs and symbols (e.g., pictures, gestures, and objects that carry a particular meaning by individuals who are immersed in a particular culture) can very easily be appropriated, copied, and read in new and different ways by others not from that culture.

Kramsch (2009) explains that according to Bhabha, we cannot be conscious of our interpretive strategies at the same moment that we activate them because such discourses

(ways of organizing meaning that take into account the links between language and culture) are historically embedded in our minds and expressed unconsciously. As a result, when we are interacting with someone from another culture, there is a discontinuity in the traditionally continuous time of a person's discourse practices. For example, an ESOL learner living in the United States might not have the same subconscious discourse related to American history as a Native American would. Understanding someone from another culture requires an effort of translation (language and culture) from one perspective to the other and finding some sort of commonality or harmony after initial discomfort and frustration. To acquire that understanding, learners need to consciously occupy a position where they see themselves both from the inside and from the outside, what Kramsch (2009) calls a third place of symbolic competence that focuses on the process of meaning-making. The third place develops its own unique culture as ESOL learners engage critically in coming to an understanding of English-speaking culture and their ongoing role in it. Sounds a bit complicated, eh? Fortunately, we have language to help us in this process.

Language and Cultural Identity

Language is our vehicle of expression and interaction. Through communication, we preserve and convey our cultural identity. People identify themselves and get identified through the language they use when they talk about their work, family, cultural background, affiliations, attitudes, and values. Words also take on different meanings based on the social status and power relationships between speakers (Think of the CEO of a company in conversation with the janitor of the office building). These meanings, in turn, are deeply connected to the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts in which a conversation takes place. For example, when young people use slang with their friends in the street or argue intelligently with their professors in university, they display different identities and signal different group memberships. Multiethnic and multilingual ESOL learners are especially conscious about grappling with intersecting identities as they continue to be attentive to racial, linguistic, and cultural factors in and out of school where the majority culture is normalized and affirmed (Núñez, 2014). In other words, these students must think about the implications of their culture, language, and race or ethnic group in an unfamiliar culture, whereas for students who are right at home in the culture, such thoughts might rarely cross their minds, if at all (Harklau, 2007).

In short, even when we talk about our own culture, we need to realize that there are numerous subgroups in our society that may be different from one another *and* from the majority. Clearly, we all belong to multiple cultural circles that may define us in variable, even contradictory ways.

Culturally Embedded Behaviors

We learn our native or first language and culturally embedded behaviors through a socialization process that begins at a young age by, to put it simply, observing and copying the behavior of adults around us and through informal and formal education channels. Enculturation is a process by which people acquire acceptable norms, values, and behaviors

appropriate to the culture in which they are living. Parents, relatives, teachers, and peers all influence and shape the learning process, deliberately, such as in a school setting, or inadvertently, such as on the playground. Successful enculturation results in individuals having competence in the language, values, and rituals of a particular culture.

Much of our enculturation into social and culturally determined routines and practices happens unconsciously. We may exert our individuality by rebelling against conformity, but we are still part of that cultural milieu. The thing is, once those initial behaviors and worldviews are fairly well established, which is around puberty, it becomes increasingly difficult to see things any other way. As a result, exposure to another language and culture provides our ESOL learners with several coping challenges but also the opportunity to see (and feel) the world with new eyes.

Unless we find ourselves in a cultural context different from the one in which we were raised, it is difficult to understand our own behaviors. (A fish in water is commonly used to illustrate this challenge; a fish is not aware that it lives in water until it jumps out.) However, the behavior of someone who experienced a different kind of socialization can be unsettling if it goes against actions we believe are appropriate to a particular social context. For example, the simple act of paying the exact price for clothing as listed on the tag may seem universal until a shopper decides to bargain, which is perfectly acceptable behavior in many countries. For another example, if you were raised in a culture that makes arguments in a deductive, linear style of logic (If A is true, and B is true, then C must be true), you may never be aware of that deductive, linear approach to argumentation unless you are immersed in a culture (or have ESOL learners who organize their persuasive essays according to a different sense of logic) in which one uses a different approach, such as an extended, circular narrative (Baldwin, Means Coleman, Gonzalez, & Shenoy-Packer, 2014).

Examples of Cultural Practices

Why do people think and act differently? Our ways of thinking and communicating have philosophical and historical roots that become deeply embedded in our psyches. Western or Eurocentric culture refers to a heritage of social norms, ethical values, traditional customs, belief systems, political systems, and specific artifacts and technologies that have some origin or association with Europe. Although regional diversity and cultural fluidity must be taken into account, Western or Eurocentric culture also applies to countries such as the United States, Canada, South America, Australia, and New Zealand. Eastern culture refers to the countries and cultures east of Europe, such as China, Japan, and Korea, as well as the African part of the Greater Middle East (except for Israel). Simply put, Western culture is steeped in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy as well as Christianity, and Eastern traditions are based on Confucian ideals and values that offer a set of pragmatic rules for daily life. Such rules include respect and reverence for parents and maintaining a hierarchical social order. The division between East and West is a product of European cultural history.

There are overt expressions of cultural traditions, such as those revealed in different types of food, holidays, and clothing. Observable features are commonly referred to as the “5 Fs”: food, fashion, festivals, folklore, and flags. Overt expressions can also be seen in