



Language and Culture

This document is formatted as a worksheet (or series of worksheets) to guide training sessions on language and culture. It would be most ideal to have a TESOL Specialist facilitating these training sessions and guiding discussion on the various topics. It is suggested that most tasks be completed in pairs or small groups, rather than individually, and that there be ample discussion time to apply these concepts to the local context.

Though there are many possible answers for many of the blanks, some possible answers for some of the questions are provided at the end of the document.

Overview

Language and culture have a complex and dynamic relationship. We will begin to address this relationship by looking at culture, language, and various aspects of their relationship.

First, let's check on your starting points. Provide a one-sentence definition for each:

Language:

Culture:

The Relationship Between Language and Culture:

As you work through these materials, feel free to return and revise your definitions!

■■■ Universal, Cultural and Personal Behavior

Some of the ways we think and act are due to our culture, but some are universal—the same the world over. Others are a matter of our personal tastes and preferences. Our behavior is a mixture of the three. Look at the following list and decide which category each behavior most likely stems from: 'U' for universal, 'P' for personal or 'C' for cultural. Some may have more than one!

1	Sleeping with a bedroom window open	
2	Running from a dangerous animal	
3	Respecting older people	
4	Liking spicy food	
5	Preferring playing football to reading a book	
6	Eating regularly	
7	Eating with knife, fork and spoon	
8	Being wary of strangers	
9	Calling a waiter with a hissing sound	
10	Regretting being the cause of an accident	
11	Feeling sad at the death of a family member	
12	Wearing white mourning robes for 30 days after the death of a family member	
13	Not liking to wear mourning clothes for 30 days after the death of a family member	
14	Saying thank you when someone holds the door for you	
15	Not saying thank you when someone gives you something	
16	Working to support your children	
17	Working to support your parents in old age	
18	Greeting each other with a kiss	
19	Saving for your retirement	
20	Queuing for a bus, a ticket . . . or anything	
21	Belching after a meal	
22	Smiling and talking to strangers	
23	Not smiling or talking to strangers	
24	Wearing shorts	
25	Wearing clothes to hide certain parts of the body	

Discuss:

- What can happen when a personal preference is different from a cultural norm?
- How can you minimize the risk of offending other people or being offended yourself, when you are in a new culture?
- When and why should we adapt our behavior?

Points to remember:

- Because of universal behavior, not everything about people in a new culture will be different: some of what you already know about human behavior will apply in the new culture.
- Because of personal behavior, not everything you learn about the new culture will apply in equal measure, or at all, to every individual who lives in it.

■ ■ ■ Concepts about Culture

Defining Culture

- According to Anthony Wallace (1961) culture is the organization of diversity; members of a culture have a “capacity for mutual prediction.”
- According to J. P. Lederach (1995) “Culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them” (p. 9).
- According to the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, “**culture** is defined as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group.”

Cultural dichotomies

Cultures have often been viewed as “either-or” dichotomies. Some well-known cultural dichotomies include the following. Below each, briefly describe what it means.

1. Individualistic vs. collectivist

2. Independent vs. interdependent

3. Shame culture vs. guilt culture

4. Time-oriented vs. event oriented

5. Prestige-achieved vs. prestige-ascribed

6. Object as goal vs. person as goal

7. Vulnerability as weakness vs. vulnerability as strength

8. Asian vs. western

Can you think of others?

Are these dichotomies legitimate, and are they helpful ways of viewing culture? In what ways might they be unhelpful?

What do you think might be some problems with these dichotomies?

Categorization

1. Write a sentence showing the relationship between “deficit theory” and “ethnocentrism”:

2. Write a sentence showing the difference between a “generalization” and a “stereotype”:

3. Write a sentence showing the connection between “pragmatics” and “generalizations”:

4. Teachers should be aware of their *generalizations* and *stereotypes*, and be willing to alter these beliefs, especially regarding **individual** students, but regarding people groups as well. Teachers should guard against a *deficit* model of cultural interpretation, stemming from *ethnocentrism*. How do these desired teacher perspectives apply to you, in your context?

Relationality

1. What is the concept of “face”? Write examples of “losing face” and “saving face.”

2. Compare how “face” is perceived and applied in two cultures, preferably your own and another that you interact with.

Choice in Culture

1. To what extent can a person choose culture?

3. Consider these culture-crossing terms:

- Multicultural
- Intercultural
- Cross-culture
- Multicultural/intercultural competence

Write a thought or question that you have about how these terms are alike or different, or how they are used.

■ ■ ■ Culture in Conversation

Conversation is much more than speaking! When we converse, we are not only sharing information, we are also establishing relationships and creating a relational identity, within a *cultural context*.

Conversation is considered to involve the following competencies (adapted from Brown & Lee, 2015).

Place these words in the correct blanks: **discourse, sociocultural, linguistic, strategic**.

1. _____ competence: the knowledge of words, structures, pronunciation, etc.
2. _____ competence: understanding social interpretations of speech, and ability to convey intended social meanings.
3. _____ competence: ability to begin and end conversations, negotiating turn-taking, demonstrating cohesion and coherence.
4. _____ competence: knowing strategies for solving communication problems; ability to re-phrase, ask for clarification, etc.

Consider these conversational problems. What area of competence is lacking?

1. Ari is impressed with his teacher's new cell phone, and blurts out, "How much did you pay for this?"
2. Maria and Leo are doing a classroom conversational activity. You (the teacher) notice that neither of them is speaking. Maria seems flustered, and suddenly says in the L1, "I can't do this!"
3. You have asked Hari to tell you about his job. You know he is an accountant. He says "I work . . . money." "I . . . people . . . how much spend . . ."
4. You greet your student Diah by saying "It's really hot today, isn't it." Diah just nods, and seems to wonder what she is supposed to say.

■ ■ ■ Intersections of Language and Culture

Socialization and Language Learning

Socialization into a culture is interwoven with language learning, in both first and additional languages. Language both expresses and embodies culture (Kramsch, 1998). What are some examples of socialization through first and/or second acquisition?

Cultural Adaptation

When we adapt to a new culture, we typically either *accommodate* or *assimilate* in various aspects of that culture. When we *accommodate* a new behavior, we accept it even if we don't adopt it. When we *assimilate* a new cultural value or behavior, we adopt this way of thinking or behaving.

1. Write an example of accommodation and an example of assimilation.

2. How could language affect each of these?

Nonverbal Communication

Is our nonverbal communication linked to our verbal communication? Share examples in support of or against this theory.

High and Low Contexts

These terms are sometimes linked to culture, language, and messages. In a *high context* language or culture, lot of cultural context is needed in order to understand the communication. In a *low context* language or culture, not as much cultural context is needed for communication because more of the information is encoded in the actual language itself. For example, Indonesian is a high context language and English is a low context language. An example of the contextual difference is that Indonesian does not have verb tenses. Interlocutors must understand the context in order to ascertain the time frame of the events being discussed. English, on the other hand, uses precise verb language to specify when actions occur (e.g. "I *went* to town"), and even when they occur relative to other actions (e.g. "I had already gone to town when he arrived at my house.").

Can you think of some other illustrations of high and low context languages or cultures?

Linguistic Relativity (LR)

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (see Kramsch, 1998) says that language influences how we “see” the world, and thus also influences our thought processes. In its weak form this is “linguistic relativity”; in its stronger form, it is “linguistic determinism.” LR can account for perceptions of time, status, community, individuality, gender, etc. For example, the Indonesian language uses the same word for “study” and “learn.” The theory of linguistic relativity might say, then, that Indonesians might be more inclined to see these two as the same, whereas an English speaker might argue that “studying” and “learning” are two very different things.

Write some examples of LR from your own experience.

Schema

Schema can be thought of as learners' prior experiences and background knowledge. It is used to talk about how learners interpret classroom events and content. How might this apply to cross-cultural language learning, as well as learning content through a new language?

Grice's Cooperative Principles of Conversation (see Kramsch, 1998)

Briefly explain each of the maxims in Grice's Cooperative principle.

1. Quantity: _____
2. Quality: _____
3. Relevance: _____
4. Manner: _____

How might the principles look different in different cultures?

The Meaning of Words

1. Define these terms:

Denotation: _____

Connotation: _____

2. Which is more associated with culture? Share some examples.

Code-Switching and Translanguaging

1. Define these terms:

Code-switching: _____

Translanguaging: _____

2. Share some examples of switching languages. Are these code-switching or translanguaging?

4. What factors make it positive or negative?

5. How do these relate to identity and culture?

Language Evolution

1. Define these terms:

Pidgin: _____

Creole: _____

Dialect: _____

2. What is a lingua franca? _____

3. How do these concepts connect with culture?

Language Change

1. What is the difference between these views of language:

Prescriptive: _____

Descriptive: _____

2. What do you understand by Kramersch's (1998) statement (p. 75) "The desire to halt the march of time and keep language pure of any cultural contamination is constantly thwarted by the co-construction of culture in every dialogic encounter."

3. Does language change as a result of cultural change, or does language change cause cultural change?

■ ■ ■ Teaching Across Cultures

1. Define the "hidden curriculum." How does this concept apply to cross-cultural teaching?

2. What are some different ways in which teaching and learning occurs in different contexts and cultures?

3. Do all forms of learning work equally well? Share your thoughts.

4. Should English be taught in the manner in which students are accustomed to learning, or in the manner in which research shows us students acquire language most effectively, if these two are not the same? What factors could guide us in answering this question?

■ ■ ■ Summary Reflection

In light of your learning about language and culture, what concrete steps would you like to take to make your teaching of English language learners more effective?

■ ■ ■ References

- Brown, H. D. & Lee, H. (2015). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. 4th Ed. White Plains, NY: Pearson.
- Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (n.d.) *What is culture?* Downloaded from: <http://carla.umn.edu/culture/definitions.html>
- Kramsch, C. (1998). *Language and culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lederach, J. P. (1995). *Preparing for peace: Conflict transformation across cultures*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Wallace A. F. (1961). *Culture and personality*. New York: Random House.



Language and Culture: Possible Responses for Some Questions

Cultural dichotomies

Cultures have often been viewed as “either-or” dichotomies. Some well-known cultural dichotomies include the following. Below each, briefly describe what it means.

Individualistic vs. collectivist: Individual rights and responsibilities vs. the rights and responsibilities of the group.

Independent vs. interdependent: Ability to make decisions according to what suits you, or what you want, rather than what is best for the community.

Shame culture vs. guilt culture: Avoiding doing something wrong or bad because it will cause shame for others (family, community) vs. avoiding it because you will feel guilt.

Time-oriented vs. event oriented: Valuing time (keeping things on time, sticking to a schedule) vs. valuing events (fully investing in one experience or event before moving on to the next; not using “time” as a prompt to move on to the next thing.)

Prestige-achieved vs. prestige-ascribed: Positions of authority are granted through merit, vs. being granted because of relationship or heritage.

Object as goal vs. person as goal: Pursuit of goals or achievements vs. pursuit of relationships.

Vulnerability as weakness vs. vulnerability as strength: Pressure to give the appearance of having no problems vs. willingness to discuss problems openly.

Asian vs. western: From cultures influenced by the East (China, Japan, Korea, India, etc.) vs. cultures originating from Europe, North America, etc.

Are these dichotomies legitimate, and are they helpful ways of viewing culture? In what ways might they be unhelpful? Though dichotomies can help us understand some general tendencies, culture and human behavior are much more complex than simple dichotomies. They are helpful in initial understanding of broad cultural differences, but should not be misapplied to individual people.

Categorization

1. Write a sentence showing the relationship between “deficit theory” and “ethnocentrism”:

Deficit theory means that we view other cultures as being deficient. Ethnocentrism, the view that our own culture is the best, can lead to thinking of other cultures as deficient.

2. Write a sentence showing the difference between a “generalization” and a “stereotype”:

Generalizations are sometimes helpful. For example, the generalizations that most Middle Easterners are Muslim and that Muslims don’t eat pork can be helpful if I am preparing a dinner for students from the Middle East, in that I can know not to serve pork. A stereotype is a generalization that is either over-applied or false, and which has a negative effect. For example, the stereotype that women are inferior drivers to men is false, and if this stereotype is expressed, it might have a negative effect on perceptions and relationships.

3. Write a sentence showing the connection between “pragmatics” and “generalizations”:

Pragmatics is the ability to use language in culturally and socially appropriate ways. Generalizations can help us to use language appropriately. For example, in the United States a generalization is that older women do not like to tell their age. So, pragmatic competence would be learning about the restrictions on asking about someone’s age, along with the appropriate language used to ask someone their age. Though the taboo on asking women their age is a generalization (i.e. some women don’t mind telling their age), pragmatic competence using English in the United States would dictate restricting this question to children and men.

Relationality

1. What is the concept of “face”? Write examples of “losing face” and “saving face.”

When Hae Min didn’t get into medical school, her parents lost face.

In some cultures students don’t ask questions in class so that their teachers can save face.

2. Compare how “face” is perceived and applied in two cultures, preferably your own and another that you interact with.

In American culture, saving face is largely individual. My family is not likely to lose face because of my mistakes. In Japan, a child who fails causes his parents to lose face.

Choice in Culture

Consider these culture-crossing terms:

Multicultural: People from different cultural groups present in one context.

Intercultural: People from different cultural groups not only present but also interacting, within a context.

Cross-culture: The bridging of two cultures within a context.

Multicultural/intercultural competence: The ability to navigate the presence and/or interaction of two or more cultural groups within a context.

■ ■ ■ Culture in Conversation

Conversation is much more than speaking! When we converse, we are not only sharing information, we are also establishing relationships and creating a relational identity, within a *cultural context*.

Conversation is considered to involve the following competencies (adapted from Brown & Lee, 2015).

Place these words in the correct blanks: **discourse, sociocultural, linguistic, strategic**.

1. Linguistic competence: the knowledge of words, structures, pronunciation, etc.
2. Sociocultural competence: understanding social interpretations of speech, and ability to convey intended social meanings.
3. Discourse competence: ability to begin and end conversations, negotiating turntaking, demonstrating cohesion and coherence.
4. Strategic competence: knowing strategies for solving communication problems; ability to re-phrase, ask for clarification, etc.

Consider these conversational problems. What area of competence is lacking?

1. Ari is impressed with his teacher's new cell phone, and blurts out, "How much did you pay for this?" **Sociocultural**
2. Maria and Leo are doing a classroom conversational activity. You (the teacher) notice that neither of them is speaking. Maria seems flustered, and suddenly says in the L1, "I can't do this!" **Strategic**
3. You have asked Hari to tell you about his job. You know he is an accountant. He says "I work . . . money." "I . . . people . . . how much spend . . ." **Linguistic**
4. You greet your student Diah by saying "It's really hot today, isn't it." Diah just nods, and seems to wonder what she is supposed to say. **Discourse**

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Socialization and Language Learning

Socialization into a culture is interwoven with language learning, in both first and additional languages. Language both expresses and embodies culture (Kramsch, 1998). What are some examples of socialization through first and/or second acquisition?

In American culture we say “thank you” or “thanks” for many different things. It is almost never inappropriate. In other cultures this is seen as being trivial, and possibly lessening the value of the concept of gratitude. Our use of “thank you” denotes a high cultural priority of *informal* politeness and friendliness.

Cultural Adaptation

When we adapt to a new culture, we typically either *accommodate* or *assimilate* in various aspects of that culture. When we *accommodate* a new behavior, we accept it even if we don't adopt it. When we *assimilate* a new cultural value or behavior, we adopt this way of thinking or behaving.

1. Write an example of accommodation and an example of assimilation.

Accommodation: I understand and can work with the notion of conveying messages through a third party, when I am living and working in Indonesia. However, I never become comfortable with conveying messages through a third party.

Assimilation: I learn to convey messages through a third party when I am in Indonesia. If I assimilate well, I may have a difficult time speaking directly (as opposed to through a third party) to someone about a problem.

2. How could language affect each of these?

Language is often involved in accommodation and assimilation. In the above example, I must learn the language that is culturally acceptable for using third party mediation.

Linguistic Relativity (LR)

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (see Kramsch, 1998) says that language influences how we “see” the world, and thus also influences our thought processes. In its weak form this is “linguistic relativity”; in its stronger form, it is “linguistic determinism.” LR can account for perceptions of time, status, community, individuality, gender, etc. For example, the Indonesian language uses the same word for “study” and “learn.” The theory of linguistic relativity might say, then, that Indonesians might be more inclined to see these two as the same, whereas an English speaker might argue that “studying” and “learning” are two very different things.

Schema

Schema is learners' prior experiences and background knowledge. It is used to talk about how learners interpret classroom events and content. How might this apply to cross-cultural language learning, as well as learning content through a new language?

Example: A learner coming from a culture where dogs are not kept as pets may have a hard time relating to stories about dogs. This learner may not answer 'inference' questions correctly after a reading, for example, if those require interpreting emotions such as love and affection for a dog.

Grice's Cooperative Principles of Conversation: (see Kramsch, 1998)

Briefly explain each of the maxims in Grice's Cooperative principle.

1. Quantity: Provide only the information required.
2. Quality: Provide only truthful information.
3. Relevance: Provide only relevant information.
4. Manner: Provide information in a manner that can be understood.

How might the principles look different in different cultures?

Different cultures have different ideas about what is required, truthful, relevant and clear.

The Meaning of Words

1. Define these terms:

Denotation: The dictionary meaning of a word. Ex: rose = flower

Connotation: The additional meanings and symbols that a word has. Ex: rose = love

2. Which is more associated with culture? Share some examples. Connotation

Code-Switching and Translanguaging

1. Define these terms:

Code-switching: Switching languages during communication—may be perceived as negative if done because of deficits in either language

Translanguaging: Switching languages during communication—perceived as positive, flexible language use for specific sociocultural and communicative purposes.

Language Evolution

1. Define these terms:

Pidgin: A mix of two languages for basic communication purposes

Creole: A pidgin which has become a first language for a group of speakers

Dialect: A variety of a developed language

2. What is a lingua franca? A language used for communication by groups of people for whom it is not a native language.

Language Change

1. What is the difference between these views of language:

Prescriptive: The rules of language are determined by experts.

Descriptive: The rules of language are determined by how the speakers of the language use it; the rules vary according to the group of speakers, and are always subject to change.

■ ■ ■ Teaching Across Cultures

1. Define the “hidden curriculum.” How does this concept apply to cross-cultural teaching?

What students learn that is not actively taught—for example, “students should be quiet in school.”

2. What are some different ways in which teaching and learning occurs in different contexts and cultures?

- Rote repetition
- Class discussion
- Small group and pair work
- Teacher lectures
- Teacher modeling
- (many more)