

## Module 12 – Cultural Awareness in the Classroom

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## I. The cultural challenges of teaching English

This module is designed to give you an insight into how culture impacts on English language teaching, both in English speaking countries and in places where English is a second or foreign language.

When we teach a class of students brought up in a different culture from ours, we have two main aims:

- To teach them the English language
- To make them aware of the differences between the culture of the English-speaking countries and the culture of their native country.

Culture includes traditions, customs, assumptions, expectations and common points of reference.

However, during the process of this, we may have to deal with a variety of false assumptions that are easily made, and less easily overcome.

For example, in many non-English speaking cultures, students are brought up with more passive behaviours when interacting with adults. A student may be less willing to ask a teacher for extra help or to admit that they don't understand. This can lead to assumptions that non-English speaking students are less intelligent than their native English speaking peers.

At the same time, non-English speaking students can quickly absorb cultural biases against English speakers who come from a more driven and ambitious educational community than they maybe accustomed to. The teacher's attitude may be perceived as aggressive by some students, who will then be even less willing to participate or ask questions.

We should try to overcome preconceived notions about different cultures and also help our students to overcome biases against our culture. In that way we will create a learning environment where everyone is valued for their unique heritage.

## II. A theory of culture

### 1. Hofstede's five dimensions of culture

There are many academic studies on international culture. To help us understand the different elements that make up the mixing pot of culture, we are going to look at the work of **Geert Hofstede**.

Hofstede's ideas were first based on a large research project into national cultural differences across a multinational corporation, and later expanded to cover students and other professions and to cover more than 70 countries.

From the initial results and later additions, Hofstede developed a model that identifies five **'dimensions of culture'**.

#### 1) Power Distance

- In the EFL classroom the teacher is likely to be seen as a powerful person.
- In those countries where there is a large 'power distance', it is natural for students to be deferential towards the teacher and unwilling to joke with them.
- Students from cultures where the power distance is large may not participate much or make decisions.
- Your students will recognise that their teacher comes from another culture and make allowances when you laugh and joke with them but be aware that their normal expectation of a teacher is someone they respect, defer to and obey.
- Power Distance scores are high for Latin, Asian and African countries and smaller for Germanic countries.

#### 2) Individualism

- There is always one person who will volunteer answers, come up with new ideas and comments or points of view.
- This person is unlikely to come from a culture where individualism is low. If you are teaching in a more collectively orientated culture, you can be less reliant on the individual who will always answer your questions or volunteer a viewpoint.
- In more collective cultures it is not normal to deliberately be different or to try to stand out from the crowd. This can be very frustrating if you ask students for an opinion or to debate.
- Individualism prevails in developed countries and Western countries, while collectivism is more common in less developed and Eastern countries. Japan is somewhere in the middle.

### 3) Masculinity

- So called 'masculine' cultures value competitiveness, assertiveness, ambition, and the accumulation of wealth and material possessions, whereas 'feminine' cultures place more value on relationships and quality of life.
- In a more masculine society women may be expected to be quiet and more deferential to men. This becomes evident in the classroom.
- Masculinity is high in Japan, in some European countries like Germany, Austria and Switzerland and moderately high in Anglo countries. In contrast, masculinity is low in Nordic countries and in the Netherlands and moderately low in some Latin and Asian countries like France, Spain and Thailand.

### 4) Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)

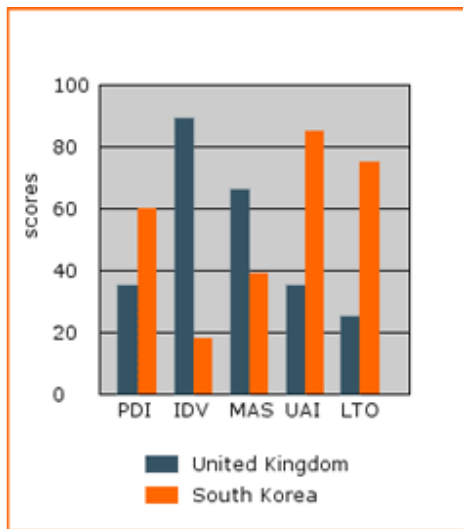
- The Uncertainty Avoidance Index indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel comfortable in unknown or surprising situations.
- The opposite type, uncertainty accepting cultures, are more tolerant of opinions different from what they are used to; they try to have as few rules as possible. They tend to be more contemplative, rarely expressing their emotions.
- Uncertainty avoiders are going to like planned and structured activities and will seek rules for the language you teach them. They may also be more intolerant of the views and cultures different from theirs.
- Uncertainty avoidance scores are higher in Latin countries, in Japan and in German speaking countries. They are lower in Anglo, Nordic and Chinese culture countries.

### 5) Long-Term Orientation (LTO)

- In the classroom environment those with a stronger long-term orientation may seem 'serious' or formal. They may struggle with the concept of learning by playing games.
- The more long-term orientated students will be very concerned about losing 'face'. Expect them to be reticent about speaking out for fear of making a mistake. You may also find that they excel in writing but feel less comfortable about speaking.
- A long term orientation is mostly found in East Asian countries, in particular China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea.

## 2. Comparing two cultures

It compares UK and South Korean cultures across the 5 dimensions. The teacher in this class is British and the students are Korean.



### Power Distance

The UK teacher is happy for students to treat him or her informally and to treat the students as equals. Korean students expect the teacher to be formal and will seek to treat him or her with respect and deference, rather than as an equal.

### Individualism

The British teacher comes from a highly individualistic culture where doing your own thing and finding yourself (for example by travelling to Korea to teach), is applauded.

Entrepreneurs are highly valued and differences are celebrated. This is fairly alien to Korean students. They tend to seek the right way to do things rather than wishing to be different. As a rule, they do not want to be different and do not admire those who are.

### Masculinity

The UK teacher is from a culture that encourages competition. The Korean students prefer to collaborate and nurture.

### Uncertainty Avoidance

The teacher is likely to enjoy new challenges and changes. The students prefer traditional ways.

### Long Term Orientation

Again the teacher and the students are poles apart in their values.

### III. How to avoid making cultural mistakes

Every EFL teacher who has ever taught overseas has made a cultural faux-pas at some time. Such faux-pas may concern the following aspects among others:

- Use of inappropriate body language
- Bringing up topics that are taboo
- Dressing in an inappropriate way
- Failing to greet a person or bid them farewell in the right way

#### 1. Anecdotes of cultural faux-pas

Here you can see three student stories with explanations of what caused the embarrassment or misunderstanding. These examples demonstrate how important it is to be aware of the differences between the culture of your students and your own culture.

##### Story 1

“I was teaching in Indonesia, and I found it very difficult to pronounce their names. Sometimes I just touched them individually on the arm or back either with my right or my left hand when I wanted them to speak. Imagine my horror when gradually week by week the students stopped coming because of this!”

Explanation: It is inappropriate for anyone in Indonesia to touch another person with their left hand.

##### Story 2

“I was teaching irregular verbs to my students in Saudi Arabia during one lesson, and to help get the concepts across we were playing bingo with the verbs! To spice up the activity I asked all the students to put a very small sum of money into a kitty – but many of my students refused point blank!”

Explanation : Gambling is prohibited in Saudi Arabia.

##### Story 3

“In an English lesson with my Japanese students, there was a short discussion about the treatment of animals. One of the students commented that bull fighting was cruel. Another mentioned that circuses were guilty of animal cruelty and that zoos could be too. I asked them what they thought about Japanese tuna fishing, and one student mentioned that it was damaging the dolphin population. The class then settled down to a new activity.”

The next day I was summoned into the director's office to be told that one of the students had complained that her teacher did not like Japanese students. She had moved classes and I couldn't understand why!"

Explanation : The student had taken a criticism of Japan very personally! He thought that by mentioning tuna fishing the teacher encouraged criticism of their country.

## **2. Examples of cultural differences**

Let's take a look at some important cultural differences to be aware of and potential cultural pitfalls you could fall foul of in your first teaching position.

### **Shaking hands**

There are different traditions of greeting people in different countries. For example, in Russia men usually shake hands when they see each other for the first time during the day (whereas women never shake hands). You may see your male students shake hands with each other, however the teacher (male or female) is not expected to shake hands with students.

### **How are you**

If you ask a Russian 'How are you?' they may take the question too literally and launch into a lengthy account of their latest achievements or family problems. They are unlikely to ask 'How are you?' in return because it is not a traditional greeting in their culture. A good idea is to explain the English custom of asking 'How are you?' to your students from the start. Tell them what the usual responses to the question are.

### **A Chinese greeting**

When Chinese people meet each other, they often say, "Have you had your meal yet?" which is more of a friendly greeting than of a question of concern, but foreigners, not familiar with such a form of greeting, tend to find it rather awkward. Another common form of address if you meet someone in the street is asking 'Where are you going?' instead of 'hello'. If your students ask you these questions you need to be aware that they are attempting to greet you rather than being nosy or impolite.

### **Manners**

Sniffing, spitting, blowing your nose are acceptable in some cultures and very inappropriate in others.

### **Entering and leaving the classroom**

Certain rituals may be involved and greetings are necessary in many cultures.

### **"Yes"**

"Yes" may mean, "I hear you" more than "I agree".

### **Length of pleasantries**

Length of pleasantries and greetings before getting down to business may vary.

### **Level of tolerance**

Level of tolerance for being around someone speaking a foreign (not understood) language may also vary.

### **Celebrations**

Not all cultures and religious groups celebrate birthdays e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses. Even though Christmas has by and large become a secular holiday, not everybody in the world celebrates it. In some countries, such as Russia, it has a solemn religious meaning.

## **3. Taboos, gestures, and giving praise**

Getting together with your students to discuss a topic is a great way to encourage conversation skills, but be careful to choose a suitable subject. Remember that each culture has certain taboos.

Unless you really know your class, you should avoid discussing any contentious subjects. The discussion about who should stay at home and look after the housework is a non starter in many countries, as is the discussion about the merits of cohabiting before marriage.

Some other likely taboo subjects might include:

- Sex, drugs and alcohol
- Any criticism of a country which appears in the international press, e.g. human rights issues in China
- Wars and political unrest
- Some aspects of history
- Homosexuality in some cultures
- Religion
- Challenging cultural norms
- The value of honesty
- Attitudes toward children
- Attitudes toward animals

Gestures and body language are thought by some to convey more meaning than the actual words spoken. Naturally just as languages differ so do body languages.

In many cultures certain things may be inappropriate or disrespectful.



Here are a few examples:

- Touching the head, shoulders or back of an older person.
- The thumbs up gesture is considered obscene in many countries.
- For a man to make any comment about a woman's appearance can be considered inappropriate.
- Pointing with one's index finger is considered impolite, especially when pointing at people.
- Politeness measured in terms of gallantry or etiquette is important e.g., standing up for a woman who approaches a table, giving a seat on the train/bus to an older person.

Whereas giving praise can show natural warmth in some cultures, the following example shows a different perception of praise:

A British professor once saw a Chinese wearing a pretty dress, so she said to her, "You look very beautiful today". To her surprise, the student blushed and said timidly, "No, no. This is an ordinary dress".

On another occasion, she commended a student's spoken English, "Your English is quite fluent". The student was quick to respond, "No, no. My English is quite poor". Their responses confused and piqued the British professor, who might be thinking that the students just rudely questioned her judgement. In reality, they were responding according to their cultural values.

Explanation: Where Westerners say "Thank you very much", the Chinese feel they must disagree with the compliment as it reflects their perception of modesty as a principal value. This doesn't mean that we should avoid complimenting our students but we should not respond emotionally to their expression of modesty or try to convince them that they are underestimating themselves.

Another example is Arab countries, where it is not a good idea to praise an object someone owns because it will make them feel obliged to give it to you as a present.

#### **4. Appearance and dress**

Teachers should dress appropriately at all times. Depending where you are this will vary considerably.

In most schools, in most parts of the world, teachers are expected to dress smartly. If you want to play it safe, avoid the scruffy jeans and vest top. Be very careful about wearing modest clothing if you are teaching in a hot climate. Ask the school about the dress code beforehand so you can take appropriate clothes from home.

If you have visible body piercings do not be surprised if you are asked to remove them. In many countries it is considered inappropriate for a teacher to have any piercings!

If you have green hair styled in a Mohican, do not be surprised if you don't get the job you are after. As a tip, if a prospective employer asks for a photo, do yourself a favour and send one of your more conservative ones. If you don't look the part, you won't get the part!

## **5. Six top tips**

Here are some ideas for how to avoid cultural howlers in the classroom:

- Thoroughly research the culture of the country you will be teaching in
- See if you can find out if there are any taboo subjects
- Speak to other teachers about any mistakes they made
- Ensure you understand the dress code and rules of the school you will be teaching in
- If in doubt, play it safe!
- Build a good rapport with your class. If they like their teacher they are more likely to forgive you any cultural faux-pas

## IV. Monolingual vs multilingual

### 1. Teaching a monolingual class

If you are going abroad then it is most likely that you will be teaching a monolingual class. The advantage of this is that you will be able to read up on the typical differences in culture as well as pronunciation and grammar problems that your students may have trouble with on account of their first language.

You will soon learn whether your students are likely to be active and collaborative or quieter and more passive. Whatever you do, do not try to change your class. You are a teacher of the English language. It is not your job to educate your students on the merits of your culture or way of doing things, but it is likely that these will make great discussion topics. If you can find out about the national dishes, holidays, and customs of the country you are teaching in, you'll have some great material that every student knows something about. Many students enjoy teaching you about their culture.

Do bear in mind however that you may well have students in your class who are not nationals of the country you are teaching in or who have grown up in a different culture. This can require some delicate handling in some circumstances.

### 2. Teaching a multilingual class

The multilingual class is probably the preference of most teachers, given the choice. By multilingual we mean a mixture of nationalities. You are more likely to get this if you teach in your own country.

The main issue for the EFL teacher with a multilingual class is to ensure that everyone gets on and respects each other. This starts with the teacher doing just that and never showing a preference for any particular nationality. Each nationality will have its own pronunciation problems and in some cases, students will find it hard to understand each other. Do not tolerate any form of ridicule from other students when a student makes a mistake. Do not let your students make racist comments or at least signal your disapproval and move on.

The other issue is that there can be marked differences in your students' expectations and behaviour in the classroom. If you have a class comprised of, for example, outgoing Brazilians and Italians and a few quieter Taiwanese and Chinese, you need to bear this in mind when you allocate your students to groups. While the quieter students may be happy to listen, the more outgoing ones can become resentful as they feel they are doing all the work. So, occasionally it

is good to put the quieter ones into a group together and give them a chance to have their say. You may be very surprised by the output.

On other occasions get your students to enjoy their diversity. Savvy teachers can arrange group projects designed to encourage students to share and explore one another's cultures. As a task based discussion, get the class, in small groups, to imagine that they are going to open a 'fusion' restaurant featuring starters, main courses and desserts from all the countries represented in the group. Your class will be describing national dishes and will leave the lesson with a good appetite for dinner!

Decorations such as country maps, flags, and pictures of prominent leaders can bring a taste of each nation into the ESL classroom in a positive way.

## V. Understanding another culture

### 1. Bilingual and bicultural

While your ultimate goal of teaching English as a second or foreign language is to create bilingual students, an additional goal should be to create bicultural students. To do this, you should practise cultural sensitivity and encourage students to learn about new cultures.

As students learn to compare their native culture with the culture they are taught, they can gain an appreciation of both without minimising or denigrating either culture. Take a look at these activities that can help with this process.

#### **Polls**

Taking polls of students' assumptions and beliefs about English culture and discussing the results

#### **Excursions**

If you teach in an English speaking country, visiting museums, art exhibits, historical sites, etc

#### **Films**

Watching and discussing films which have become an important part of your culture and which illustrate some typical features of your culture

#### **Q&A**

Encouraging question and answer sessions about the new culture while comparing it to students' native cultures, such as discussing popular television shows, slang, or other lifestyle characteristics

#### **Guest speakers**

Inviting guest speakers who have successfully integrated into the new culture but who are still active. This will demonstrate how biculturalism can enrich your life.

### 2. Respect and adaptability

You are a representative of your culture and your students are representatives of theirs. We are all different and there is no sense in trying to decide which culture is better (even though humans are essentially conservative and will normally feel that their culture is 'right').

Be prepared to adapt the way you behave to be more acceptable to your students' expectations. Your students will expect you to be different but they will thank you for trying to fit in rather than glorifying in being a foreigner.

While you adapt yourself, teach your students about your own culture, to help them acclimatise to the English-speaking world. If your students are already in an English-speaking country, teaching them about the local culture is vital.

Given the close association of language with culture, it is no exaggeration to say that only when our students get fully acquainted with English culture can they be expected to have a satisfactory command of the English language.

When it comes to cultural awareness, it is likely that some of the greatest lessons learned in the TEFL classroom will be learned by you as the teacher. If you make mistakes, your best bet is to apologise and explain the cultural difference.

Remember that cultures are different from each other but that there is no correct or right culture. Don't therefore try to convert your class or question their norms; Respect and learn.

If you make a cultural blunder, pass on your experience to others so we can all learn from one another's mistakes.