

Teaching English as a foreign or second Language

Chapters Summary

By
Assist.lect. Batool A.M. Al-shawi

Chapter 7 Summary

Culture and the Language Teacher

What Is a Reasonable Working Definition of Culture?

Although there are many ways to define culture, here **it refers to the common values and beliefs of a people and the behaviors that reflect them**. At the risk of overgeneralizing, it is possible to talk about **common beliefs and values** and about how **they can differ from culture to culture**, as well as **the behaviors associated with them**. To illustrate how values and beliefs can vary, let's look at the way people make use of time in two different cultures: mainstream North America and Saudi Arabia. Time, for the average American, is very important. Time is something to be on, spent, gained, kept, filled, killed, saved, used, Wasted, lost, and planned. In contrast, Arabs see time as "flowing from the past to the present to the future, and they flow with it. Social events and appointments do not always have fixed beginnings or endings. If a time for an appointment has been set, under many circumstances, it is acceptable to be late, especially if the person is engaged in a conversation.

What Cultural Adjustment Process Do Most Expatriates Experience?

Culture shock: Most of us have mixed emotions about moving to another country. This is true for those of us who have relocated to teach EFL, or in the case of non-native speakers of English, to study and live in English-speaking countries. We discover that we have to think about, even prepare for, the simplest daily activities, such as paying bills, buying food, doing laundry, taking a bus, and using a telephone. These activities soon weigh on us, resulting in **culture shock**. Some of us exhibit **symptoms of culture shock**. We may **become depressed** or **nervous** and **may complain about** the **food**, the **weather**, **housing**, and the host **people's behavior**. We might become **physically ill**, **make irrational comments**, **have fits of anger over minor incidents**, or **become very homesick**, spending endless hours writing to friends and family. **Some of us react to culture shock by withdrawing**. We stay home, sleep, and generally avoid contact with people in the host culture.

Adjustment: Although some of us seek refuge in the expatriate community to Escape culture shock, others of us continue to endure, despite the Discomfort. Instead of withdrawing, we **reach out into the larger Community**, **making friends** and **working out problems as they arise**. We **reflect on and learn from our experiences**, and as we do this, we Start to realize that we are adjusting. Such adjustments are **typified by an understanding that cultural Behaviors and**

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values are simply different. We still have cultural Stress and problems to contend with, but we **become more empathetic, understanding that people in the host culture have been Raised in a culture different from our own.** Likewise, we "**develop a Greater ability to tolerate and cope with the external cultural patterns.... We acquire alternative ways of behaving, feeling, and Responding to others.**"

Results of adjustment: As we adjust, **self-confidence increases**, and As we interact freely, a **new self-image emerges**, a **new identity as a Participant in the host culture.**

What Are the Benefits of Adjusting to Another Culture?

Although adjusting to another culture can be an arduous experience, there are benefits that make the effort worthwhile. The benefits of successful cultural adjustment include:

1. A fuller sense of security
2. The possibility of greater success in the workplace
3. The possibility of establishing meaningful relationships With people from the culture
4. The possibility of gaining fluency in the language of the Host country
5. A deeper understanding of one's own culture
6. A deeper understanding of oneself

What Cultural Concepts Can EFL/ESL Teachers Teach Students?

Teachers can teach concepts that not only can bring about appreciation for people and culture, but also can be useful for students when placed in cross-cultural communication situations. There are four of these concepts, and activities that aim at teaching these concepts to EFL students. The four concepts are:

1. Cross-cultural communication includes adapting behavior

A part of learning to communicate with people from other cultures is knowing how to adapt one's behaviors, including nonverbal and discourse behaviors.

A. Nonverbal Behaviors across Cultures

Nonverbal behavior includes kinesics (facial expressions, gaze and eye management, gestures, touch, and posture and movement) and proxemics (the use of space, such as the distance people sit or stand from each other). To introduce kinesic differences, I often begin by teaching students that people in

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different cultures walk differently. I Also give lessons on how people shake hands differently in different cultures. For example, I show students that some Germans use a firm grip, pump the arm, and maintain strong eye contact while stepping closer during the handshake. Some Japanese use a weak grip, no arm pump, and no eye contact. I have students practice these different culturally adapted handshakes, and we talk about why it is important to be able to change the way we shake hands. Another area of kinesic behavior that varies from culture to culture is touch. For example, American males touch each other more often and on more body parts than do Japanese males. However, when compared to Arabs, Latin Americans, and Southern Europeans, these same Americans do not touch much at all. 16 Since touch is a very personal behavior, it is well worth making students aware that differences in touching behavior exist. For example, most Thais do not like to be touched on the head by people they do not know very well, and some mothers will become annoyed if someone touches. Their children's heads. As such, an American might get into trouble if she or he playfully rubs a child's head.

B. Socio-cultural Behaviors across Cultures

In addition to nonverbal aspects of culture, **EFL students can benefit from exposure to socio-cultural behaviors that follow the rules of speaking. These include the appropriate ways people interact in social settings, such as how to greet, make promises, approve, disapprove, show regret, apologize, request, complain, give gifts, compliment, invite, refuse an invitation, offer, and thank. The ways people in different cultures do these things are often quite different, although there is some similarity across some cultures.** To illustrate how these behaviors can be different across cultures, let's look at gift giving. In many countries, a person visiting a friend on a special occasion will take a gift. In America, the hostess will open the gift and thank the person. However, in China and Thailand the receiver of a gift will quite often set it aside, not open ing it in front of the guest. When I asked a number of Thais why they wait to open the gift, they all responded that they are afraid that they might hurt the guest's feelings if they don't like the gift and this is obvious to the guest. When I asked those with Chinese cultural background why they wait, I consistently got the response that opening the gift would make the guest feel that the host is more inter- ested in the gift than in the friend or friendship.

2. Cross-cultural communication involves problem solving.

Interacting with people from other cultures can be complex. Simply informing students that there can be differences in culturally based nonverbal and socio-

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cultural behaviors (and the values associated with them) is not enough. If our goal is to teach students how to interact in English in a variety of contexts with other non-native speakers of English, as well as with native speakers, then, in addition to informing students about culturally defined behaviors, we can introduce them to the value of problem solving. It is through **problem solving** that our **students can go beyond simply collecting interesting knowledge about cultures. They can have a way to assess a situation and identify behaviors that they predict will be appropriate to use within this situation.**

3. To understand a culture, get to know individuals

It is possible to generalize about the cultural values and behaviors of a large group of people. Such generalizations can be useful, for example, to gain a general idea of the differences (and similarities) between people from different cultural backgrounds. However, there is a danger in categorizing a group of people into one single set of values and behaviors since this can lead to stereotyping. Not all British, for example, are reserved. Not all Japanese are indirect. Not all Americans are competitive. As such, in addition to making generalizations, students must be taught the importance of getting to know one person at a time, treating each as a distinct and unique individual. This includes how each individual behaves in different social situations, as well as the values each has. With this in mind, the question is, **how can we teach students this concept? One way is to discuss it with them as a whole class; for some students, especially those who already like to personalize their experiences, this can make a difference in the way they perceive learning about people from different cultural backgrounds. Another way to focus on the individual is to draw the students' attention to the differences among individuals in their own culture and have them relate this knowledge to other cultures.** One reason to do this activity is that it meets criteria for promoting communication among students. It decreases the centrality of the teacher, provides students with chances to negotiate meaning, and allows them to decide for themselves what they want to say and how they want to say it.

4. To understand another culture, study your own.

A fourth concept worth teaching is that much can be gained from studying one's own cultural behaviors and values. Since acquiring the rules of one's own culture is a fairly unconscious process, students are most likely not aware of many aspects of their own culture. Even everyday behaviors-such as how change is given at a store, or how people greet each other and bid farewell, complain, apologize, compliment each other, and enter and leave a classroom-are usually not apparent to most EFL students. By providing students with opportunities to

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consider how people interact in their own culture, as well as their own individual values and ways of behaving, they can gain the insight useful to them when encountering people from other cultures. I base this assumption on the idea that by knowing one's own values and behaviors, it is easier to recognize those of others, as well as make necessary changes in behavior when needed. In short, contrasts help. To teach students about their own cultures, the teacher can design questions that provide students with chances to explain their own culture to the teacher and classmates.

What Problems Do Some EFL/ESL Teachers Have related to Culture and Language Teaching and Learning?

Problems some EFL/ESL teachers face include the following:

a. The 'I can't seem to adjust problem

Problem: EFL teachers (and ESL students and non-native EFL teachers studying abroad) go through a process of cultural adjustment that includes experiencing the loss of the familiar. Things taken for granted at home suddenly require close attention. Taking a bus, buying soap, doing laundry, paying bills, or looking up a telephone number can all require far more effort than was expected. For some, these everyday problems create an emphatic emotional disruption, and it feels like cultural adjustment will never take place.

Solutions: But there are things we can do in a new culture to make the adjustment process easier:

- a. Give yourself time. Cultural adjustment takes time. Adjustment is a gradual process. It will not happen overnight.
- b. Identify, accept, and treat symptoms of culture shock. To identify the symptoms, it is necessary to step back and reflect on personal feelings and behavior. Recognizing the symptoms of culture shock can in itself be therapeutic. But it is also important to accept the symptoms
- c. Talk with others who have successfully adjusted. Learn as much as possible about the host culture. It lets others know that our uneasiness, lack of confidence, and everyday problems in getting around and doing simple things is temporary. It is also possible to learn about what others have done to adjust.
- d. Get involved with people in the host culture. it helps to learn as much as possible about the host culture. While some want to know about geography, others are interested in history, art, education, politics, psychology, and religion. I personally like to read translated short stories

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and novels since they give me a window, as reinvented as it is, into understanding much about the host culture

- e. Study the language of the host culture. when we learn the language of the host culture, it is possible to gain an even deeper understanding of the culture and its people, making adjustment not only possible but, at least to me, interesting and even fun.

b. The "learning the language of the host country problem

Problem: The problem of learning the language of the host country is specific to both ESL students and EFL teachers living abroad who want to learn the language of the host country. When we venture out into the country, we meet people who jump at the chance to use English with a native speaker, and we oblige. As it turns out, opportunities to use the language of the host culture become limited. However, some of us are determined, and based on our experience with learning second languages, we agree that learning the language requires a great amount of effort.

Suggestions for learning the language of the host country include:

- A. Continue studying the language. Studying a language is an ongoing process, and it requires consistent discipline and interest and a willingness to concentrate on studying. Basically, if our goal is to become very fluent and literate in the language, we have to be willing to devote years to this endeavor.
- B. Take on the responsibility for your own learning. We have to take responsibility for our own learning, which includes creating a plan to learn the language that might include attending classes and collecting and studying language texts. Perhaps more important is our need to have a plan designed to make use of all the resources available to us, including people in the community.
- C. Create an implement a learning plan. Having a plan is a start. Implementing it is another matter. Going into the community to find people to use the language with is not always easy. However, it can be done.
- D. Build relationships with people in the community based on appropriate use of the language. as it relates to learning the language of the host country, it is important to build relationships with people in the community. Through interaction with them it becomes possible to make progress in the language, because language and culture are inextricably linked.