

College of Education for Humanities

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Ch7 Culture

What Is a Reasonable Working Definition of Culture?

Culture can be defined as the shared values and beliefs of a group of people and the behaviors that express them. Although this definition may generalize, it helps explain how people from different cultures think and act differently.

For example, Americans tend to view time as very important and structured, while in many Arab cultures time is more flexible and social relationships are prioritized. Cultures also differ in their views on equality and status. Americans value equality and informal interaction, whereas cultures such as Thailand emphasize hierarchy, respect, and appropriate behavior based on social status. In addition, approaches to conflict vary: Americans often prefer direct confrontation, while many Asian cultures avoid it to maintain harmony. These cultural differences are often rooted in religious and philosophical traditions, such as Islam and Buddhism.

What Cultural Adjustment Process Do Most Expatriates Experience?

Most expatriates experience a cultural adjustment process that begins with excitement about living in a new country. As daily life begins, simple tasks such as shopping, transportation, and communication become challenging, leading to culture shock. Common reactions include stress, homesickness, frustration, and withdrawal, often into expatriate communities for comfort and familiarity.

Over time, many expatriates begin to adjust by engaging more with the host culture, learning from their experiences, and developing new ways of coping. Daily activities become easier, cultural differences are better understood, and empathy increases. As adjustment continues, confidence grows and expatriates often develop a new identity as participants in the host culture, sometimes feeling sadness when it is time to leave.

What Cultural Concepts Can EFL/ESL Teachers Teach Students?

EFL/ESL teachers can teach important cultural concepts that help students communicate more effectively in cross-cultural situations. These concepts promote cultural awareness, respect, and practical communication skills. Four key ideas are that cross-cultural communication requires adapting behavior, involves problem solving, is best understood by getting to know individuals, and is deepened by understanding one's own culture.

One essential concept is that cross-cultural communication includes adapting behavior, especially nonverbal behavior. Nonverbal communication involves body movements, facial expressions, eye contact, touch, posture, and the use of personal space, all of which vary across cultures. For example, people from different cultures walk, shake hands, and greet others in distinct ways. A handshake may be firm and direct in some cultures, while in others it may be gentle with little eye contact. Touching behaviors also differ, with some cultures being high-contact and others preferring minimal physical contact.

The use of space, or proxemics, is another important area of difference. Cultures vary in how closely people stand or sit during interactions, and misunderstandings can occur when these expectations clash. Teachers can help students become aware of these differences through role plays, classroom demonstrations, videos, and discussions. By learning to recognize and adapt to nonverbal cultural differences, students are better prepared to communicate respectfully and effectively in real-life cross-cultural situations.

Socio-cultural Behaviors across Cultures

In addition to nonverbal communication, EFL/ESL students benefit from learning socio-cultural rules of speaking, such as how to greet, apologize, compliment, request, complain, invite, refuse, and give gifts appropriately. These behaviors vary across cultures and can easily lead to misunderstanding. For example, while Americans usually open gifts

immediately and express thanks, people in China and Thailand often wait to open gifts to avoid appearing greedy or risking the giver's feelings. Complimenting also differs: North Americans compliment frequently and accept compliments directly, while in Japanese and Chinese cultures compliments are often indirect and met with modest responses.

Teachers can raise students' awareness of these differences through readings, lectures, and role plays, but cultural knowledge alone is not enough. Successful cross-cultural communication also requires problem-solving skills. In real interactions, people from different cultures must decide which verbal and nonverbal rules to follow and how to avoid misinterpretation.

Teaching students how to analyze cultural problems helps them move beyond memorizing cultural facts. By practicing problem solving, students learn to assess situations, understand conflicting values, and choose appropriate behaviors. This can be done through real experiences in ESL settings or through case studies and imagined scenarios in EFL contexts. Activities such as analyzing cross-cultural conflicts—like misunderstandings in American dorm life—help students develop practical strategies for effective communication across cultures.