

# Acculturating Learners to English Classrooms

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Participants in this poster session learned why and how to help learners acculturate to English language classrooms. The presenter, who designed this workshop for Japanese students in a one year Business English course, presented the rationale for this activity and a sample acculturation curriculum. The curriculum includes lessons in defining culture, teaching, and learning; academic and study skills; and reinforcing those skills. Participants asked questions and raised concerns.

このセッションで、何故如何にして生徒が英語の授業に慣れるかを習得します。元々このプレゼンテーションは、一年間のビジネス英語コース用に作られたものでカリキュラムを主に説明しています。

**W**hile teaching at a Tokyo university, I used learner training to create a safe environment for my students. When I began at the University of Washington, I abandoned learner training rationalizing there was no time as terms are 11 weeks. I quickly realized the folly of my decision as those activities made my lessons more successful and pleasant for everyone. In a year-long Business English course for Japanese students I had the same students for 22 weeks, so I convinced my colleagues learner training would be useful, especially for the students' internships at the end. This poster session evolved from sixteen hours of learner training done the first week. I called it learner acculturation because the activities are designed to encourage students to contemplate how education is culturally bound. The goal was not training them, but acculturating them to a new environment. Learner acculturation is a comprehensive, ongoing series of activities to help students become skilled, autonomous, confident, and motivated language learners. It is intensive during orientation and integrated throughout language study.

## Culture, Education, and Teaching

First let us consider three concepts: culture, education, and teaching. Language is one way that culture is transmitted and reinforced. Geertz (1983) states "there is no such thing as human nature independent of culture" (p. 49). Culture is "a shared way of making sense of experience, based on a shared history" (Jacobson, 1996, p.15) and "a shared system of meaning, ideas, and thoughts" (Rosenzweig, 1994, p. 2). We cannot separate language from culture.

Because we cannot separate language from culture, it is necessary to “acculturate” students to paralinguistic elements of language and culture while teaching the language. It is not enough to “train” students to behave in accordance with our standards. We must “acculturate” – that is to tell them what is appropriate in given situations and why – students so that they build fluency in the language and the culture simultaneously, especially when the learners will be interacting with native speakers as my students had to do. “Cultures possess their own internal logic and coherence for their members and . . . their own validity” (Paige, 1993, p. 3). The Optimal Distance Model attributes learners’ difficulties in building fluency to inefficient synchronization of acculturation and language development (Brown, 1980, p. 162). Acculturation is an important factor in learners’ ability to building communicative competence. Successful learners identify with the target linguistic-cultural group and incorporate subtle aspects of the group’s behavior (Lambert, 1972, p. 290). By acculturating students to the English language and English (in my case North American) culture, students learn to use English with native speakers situationally appropriately to communicate their messages verbally and non-verbally.

Culture permeates everything, including education. Education is a “social-cultural process” (Cheng, 1998, p. 3). However, that socio-cultural process has different goals in different cultures. According to Chang (2004)

In the collectivist cultures of East Asia, education is viewed . . . as a means of socialization. . . . In contrast, cultures, where individualism dominates, such as in many Western nations . . . education [is] a means of empowering children (p. 14).

Moreover, “in mainstream Western culture, knowledge and skills form the main content of education. . . . The social or moral dimension is the primary aim of Chinese and Japanese education” (Chang, 2004, p. 18). In the West “the ultimate aim of education is to develop fully the potential capacity of individuals. In East Asia, the ultimate aim of education is to cultivate a person so that he or she can and will contribute to the society” (Chang, 2004, p. 26). Learning another language means learning to understand how native speakers express ideas, or how to understand the culture. Simultaneously, learning another language means learning what learning and teaching are in another culture. The language teacher has the opportunity to utilize “learners’ cultural background” and hers while creating an opportunity to communicate something real (Chang, 2004, p. 189).

Culture impacts teaching, the question is how teachers can utilize learners’ culture because “a sound student-teacher relationship depends on the awareness and collusion of learners in the process at all stages” (McDevitt, 2004, p. 6). It is important that

Neither our ideologies nor our methodologies [are] force-fed to . . . students. . . . The teacher and the learner need to explore . . . the exciting possibilities at the cultural interface where . . . the roles of teacher and learner become blurred, and a new relationship can be formed (McDevitt, 2004, p. 8).

Teachers arriving in a new country “with strict preconceptions about how students learn, and what they need, are setting themselves up for disappointment” (McDevitt, 2004, p. 3). Furthermore,

ESL teachers operating within ...apparently familiar contexts may find that the ...similarities conceal a minefield of issues which, unless addressed, can greatly hamper the teaching and learning process in their classroom (McDevitt, 2004, p. 3).

When the teacher views “the end product of all education [is] an independent learner” (McDevitt, 2004, p. 3) and the students believe the teacher is “expected to pass on what s/he knows” (McDevitt, 2004, p. 4) cross-cultural conflict occurs. Thus, teachers who consider and incorporate their students’ culture into their lessons will be more successful than those who do not.

### Incorporating Learner Acculturation

EFL/ESL students are products of language teaching systems with different philosophies and methods than their teachers. Learner acculturation helps teachers create a safe learning environment, helping students think about differences between their past language learning experiences and their current ones. Students consider how and why teachers’ methods differ, how affective environments impact motivation, how they learn English best, and how they can use English in the future. Teachers who use communicative language learning techniques to teach students unaccustomed to such techniques operate under a different set of assumptions and expectations, which can lead to conflict and demotivation. Teachers impact students’ motivation because “the teacher directs course contents and pace” (Falout & Maruyama, 2004, p. 8) and ...the teacher creates the learning environment. A “teacher can sway the attitude of group members as well as modify a student’s ...self confidence”

(Falout & Maruyama, 2004, p. 9). Through learner acculturation, students learn how to maximize their learning potential and how to succeed under different teaching and learning methods.

Students and teachers naturally assume that “teaching” and “learning” in an English language classroom will reflect their past experiences. Thus “a careful examination of what it means to learn a language in a particular context is necessary before applying a model in a different context” (Yashima, 2002, p. 62). Teachers using communicative approaches must help students understand the more they communicate, the more practice they get expressing themselves in English, and the more they learn (Yashima, 2002, p. 55). One learner acculturation goal is to help students process top-down, rather than bottom-up. “With bottom-up processing, students start with the component parts: words, grammar, [etc.]. Top-down processing is the opposite. “Students start from their background knowledge” (Helgeson, M., Brown, S., & Smith, D., 1997, p. x). With top-down processing, students acquire skills necessary to become life-long language learners. Students

“can ...think of learning English as similar to learning to play a sport. If [they] think ... too much, it doesn’t work.... [They will be] too aware of [themselves].... Should [they] stop studying grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary? [No.] Adults ...can learn both subconsciously and consciously. Research shows that being able to learn both ways is important for success. [They] need to be childlike enough to relax with the language and not be too worried about the details.

But at the right times, [they] also need to examine [their] language with [a] zoom lens, then use the detail to improve [their] language” (Brown, 2002, p. 12).

### A Learner Acculturation Curriculum

The objectives are to help students understand . . .

- the meaning of culture
- how teaching and learning connect to culture
- what teaching is in their culture versus another culture
- what learning is in their culture versus another culture
- the academic and study skills needed to succeed in English classrooms (and universities)
- how to apply the skills appropriately

#### Lesson 1: What is Culture?

This lesson is from Meares (1997) *Cultivate Curiosity About Other Cultures*. It helps students notice how culture permeates their daily lives and begin to articulate how it does so. The experiential nature of this lesson helps it stick in students’ minds.

*Objectives: The students will be able to*

1. recognize and identify types of greetings from different cultures.

2. experience different types of greetings.
3. list examples of culture.
4. begin to develop a concept of culture.

*Materials Needed:*

1. Video of movie clips showing different greetings (hugging, shaking hands, bowing, kissing, curtsying, and exchanging business cards)
2. 3+ small pieces of paper per student
3. Cultural Iceberg illustration (see the Internet)
4. Tape to attach poster and papers

*Vocabulary:*

- culture = [n] the way of life of a group of people, their customs and beliefs
- custom = [n] a way of behaving or a belief which has been established for a long time
- belief = [n] the feeling of certainty that something exists or is true
- value = [n, v] the importance or worth of something for someone
- invisible = [adj] unable to be seen, not visible
- visible = [adj] able to be seen
- iceberg = [n] a very large mass of ice that floats in the sea

*Lesson Procedure: Step 1. Comparing Greetings from Various Cultures*

a. Have students watch the video and contemplate the differences and similarities among the scenes. Lead a discussion using the following questions. The students may need help in answering. Intended answers are provided.

T: *What are the people in the video doing?* (S: “Greeting people.”)

*How do you greet people? How do you greet your friends?* (Intended Answer [IA]= waving, saying hello.)

*Why don't you kiss when you greet people in your culture?* (IA: “We weren’t taught that way.”)

*Why do people act differently when they greet each other?* (IA: they are taught differently by their parents, different cultures)

b. Pair students with the same gender for this activity. Ask the students to practice some unfamiliar greetings. Sequence them from less to more threatening, for example start with handshakes. Proceed to curtsying, hugging, or kissing on the cheek. Lead a follow-up discussion.

T: *Stand up and find a partner. (Girls should work with girls, and boys with boys.)* When everyone has found a partner, continue... *Now we are going to try some greetings. First let's greet our partners by bowing. Let's shake hands. Let's curtsy. How about hugging your partner?..(Students need not do this if they feel uncomfortable.) You can sit down.* When students are seated ask the following.

*How did you feel when you greeted your partner in a new way?* If students remain silent, observe that they laughed and ask why.

*Was it strange for you? Why do you think you felt this way? Why don't you greet people in all these ways?* (IA = in our culture we weren't taught to greet people that way.)

*What different kinds of greetings did you try?* (IA = bowing, shaking hands, curtsying, exchanging cards, hugging, kissing on the cheek, etc.)

*Step 2. What is culture*

Returning to why people behave differently, introduce the concept of culture. On the board, make a mind map with culture in the center. Pair the students and ask them to write examples of culture on the small papers. To model, add “Greetings” to the mind map.

T: *Culture is the way of life of a group people, including their customs and beliefs. Please write an example of culture on your papers. For example “greetings” are part of culture, so I'll write that on mine and add it to the map. You can write anything that would be different in another culture. Then add your papers to the mind map.*

Here students reveal their knowledge of culture. If they have difficulty, ask them what would be different in another country. Give them examples if necessary.

When they are ready, ask them to affix their papers to the map. Provide more examples if needed. Introduce culture-related vocabulary if needed.

T: *All these are part of culture. Some are things that you can see, like clothing or food, but others are invisible, like values or beliefs.*

*Step 3. Cultural Iceberg*

The Cultural Iceberg is a model of culture depicting culture as mostly underwater (invisible). Above water are visible aspects of culture (high culture, pop culture, homes, clothes, etc.). Underwater are less visible parts of culture (values, beliefs, etc.).

Briefly lecture on the different aspects of culture and the Cultural Iceberg, giving examples.

T: *Do you know the story of the Titanic? It was a big, new ship. It sank because it hit an iceberg. Icebergs are bigger underwater than above so the sailors didn't see it.*

*Culture is like an iceberg -- it's bigger under the surface. Some of it you can see, like food and clothing. However, many parts of culture are invisible, like ideas, beliefs, and values.*

**Lessons 2 and 3: Defining learning and teaching**

These lessons encourage students to define learning and teaching for themselves and their culture and appreciate how those words are defined by their culture. It also enables students to realize that the definition of appropriate classroom behavior is culturally bound while they broaden their definitions of teaching and learning.

Students will be able to

1. define what teachers and students do in their culture, including appropriate and inappropriate behavior
2. recognize how teaching and learning are connected to culture

3. recognize that teaching and learning are different in different cultures

Materials

1. pieces of paper
2. pictures or movie clips depicting classrooms in other cultures
3. writing implements

Procedure: Have students

1. in pairs draw pictures of classrooms of
  - a. the layout
  - b. what students and teachers do
2. describe their drawings in small groups, including
  - a. the layout
  - b. what students and teachers do
  - c. a typical lesson
3. describe their drawings to the teacher
  - a. Have each group offer one comment per area below
    - i. the layout
    - ii. what teachers and students do
    - iii. typical lessons
  - b. Have students in small groups, then to the teacher, describe what makes a good/bad teacher good/bad and what makes a good/bad student good/bad

4. show the video or pictures of classrooms and have students
  - a. identify differences
  - b. list differences in teacher and student behaviors
  - c. recognize how cultural norms define appropriate behavior in teachers and students
  - d. brainstorm what behaviors are needed for success in English language classrooms

**Lesson 4: Academic skills to help students succeed**

This lesson helps students gain the skills they will need to succeed academically, including with standardized tests.

- reading
  - predicting (looking at titles, headings, illustrations)
  - guessing vocabulary from context
  - making inferences
  - identifying main ideas, topics, and details
  - identifying organizational patterns
    - ⊙ listing
    - ⊙ sequencing
    - ⊙ comparison-contrast
    - ⊙ cause-effect

- ⊙ problem-solution
- reading faster
  - ⊙ reading phrases
  - ⊙ timed readings
- pronoun reference
- reacting to passages (critical thinking)
  - ⊙ giving opinions
  - ⊙ evaluating and analyzing
  - ⊙ synthesizing
- writing summaries
  - making margin notes
  - organizing outlines
  - referring to sources
  - including only main ideas
- participation
  - asking questions
  - contributing to discussions
  - volunteering answers
  - coming to class prepared
  - listening respectfully while others talk
  - speaking English only

### Lesson 5: Study skills to help students succeed

This lesson reinforces the academic skills while also giving them skills that will help them become more successful in other arenas like work.

- time management
  - figuring out how much time is available and how much is needed
  - setting priorities, including time to study
- setting goals
  - breaking larger goals into smaller, achievable goals
  - setting deadlines
  - reframing goals
  - setting measurements of success

### Lesson 6: Helping students practice and develop these skills

This final lesson reinforces the others and helps students feel more comfortable using the skills they have gained in other situations.

- create a safe classroom environment for students to try new behaviors
- praise students immediately for appropriate behavior
- tell students immediately when they behave

inappropriately, ask why their behavior was inappropriate, and what would be appropriate

- incorporate these skills and behaviors daily
- revisit and reinforce them frequently

### Conclusion

Through learner acculturation students learn to maximize their learning potential and their English fluency, linguistically and culturally. They also learn to adapt to different teaching and learning paradigms. Consciously assisting learners acculturate to English classrooms creates a foundation for successful academic experiences.

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