EXPLORING CULTURE

Consider these questions:
- What do you think about when you hear the word *culture*?
- What experiences have you had interacting with people from other cultures?
- Have you spent time living in another culture? What do you remember about your experience?

Many English language teachers have experienced cross-cultural interaction. We may have traveled, lived, worked, or come from overseas. Perhaps we have studied about other languages and cultures. Although we have had these experiences, we may not always remember the extent to which culture plays an important role in our lives and in the lives of our students. In

this chapter we hope to raise awareness of what culture is, the unexpected effects culture has on our lives, and the way we communicate with people from cultures different from our own.

The English language classroom is a place where different cultures interact. Students are learning a new language and learning about a new culture. When students arrive in language classrooms, they bring with them their own cultural background and experiences, which may differ from those of their teachers and classmates. Often students don't realize the importance culture plays in language teaching and learning. As teachers we not only have the responsibility to acquaint students with their new target culture and language, but we also have an obligation to be aware of the impact culture has on our students' daily lives.

TIPS FOR EXPLORING CULTURE

The six tips in this chapter offer specific suggestions about how teachers can encourage language learners to build an awareness of culture—their own as well as that of others. With each tip, we provide a summary of the research related to the tip and offer practical ideas for what teachers can do in the classroom. Some of the activities include photocopiable handouts. These are located in Appendix A on pages 192–194.

■ TIPS

1. Have students articulate their own definition of culture.
2. Raise culture to a conscious level.
3. Point out the hidden aspects of culture.
4. Show how cultures may value the same thing differently.
5. Help students understand how culture works.
6. Build awareness about stress caused by cultural adjustment.

In this chapter we introduce the concept of culture and its many facets. We raise issues related to culture and introduce basic concepts to help students avoid cross-cultural and intercultural misunderstandings. The activities heighten student awareness of culture, present situations to help avoid miscommunication, highlight varied aspects of culture, and provide alternative ideas on how to present culture. Our goal is to equip you with research-based knowledge about culture and to suggest classroom practices that will allow you to serve as a facilitator and in turn help students in their cultural development.

1 Have students articulate their own definition of culture.

Students will have different ways of explaining what culture means to them. To discuss culture in a meaningful way as a group, it is helpful to have students describe what they think culture is.

Ann, one of the authors, teaches an advanced English as a second language (ESL) speaking and listening class. Donkor, a student from Togo, told Ann that it was his grandmother's stories that allowed him to understand his African culture. As an international student in the United States, he turned to television and listened to music on the radio to try to learn about and understand American culture. He said, "I learned about my culture from the oral tradition of my grandmother and now that I am here in the United States, the media contributes to my understanding of American culture." Ultimately, he thought that his personal definition of culture applied to him and him alone. But Donkor's situation is not unique. Our students often share more cultural commonalities than they think with their classmates.

What the research says

Culture is a far-reaching dynamic concept and an elaborate, ever-changing phenomenon. There are many ways to look at it. The sister disciplines of anthropology, sociology, psychology, linguistics, and communication have each contributed significantly to our understanding of culture, intercultural communication, and cross-cultural awareness. Each discipline has brought its own perspective to the way that we think about culture. While anthropologists view culture from the perspective of the study of human beings, sociologists view culture from the standpoint of the study of social relationships between people and groups. Psychologists consider culture from the perspective of the mind and behavior, whereas linguists consider it from the standpoint of human language. Communication specialists look at culture from the perspective of interactions or the exchange of information.

In 1952, two anthropologists surveyed the work of existing researchers in some 300 studies in an attempt to come up with a unified definition of culture. They failed in their attempt. Through their investigation, however, they did uncover three general characteristics of culture: its historical dimension, its interdependency of components, and its complex nature (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952).

In 1999 the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project issued standards for foreign language teaching in the United States. This project based its definition of culture on three interrelated components: products, practices, and perspectives—which can also be described as artifacts, actions, and meanings (Moran 2001, p. 23). Other researchers define culture as a set of basic ideas, practices, and experiences that a group of people share. DeCapua and Wintergerst (2004, p. 11) describe culture as shared beliefs, norms, and attitudes that guide a group of people's behavior and help explain their world.

Communication scholar Stella Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 10) defines culture as "a complex frame of reference that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, symbols, and meanings that are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community." Just like Peterson (2004), Ting-Toomey compares culture to an iceberg. In this analogy, the deeper layers of culture consisting of traditions, beliefs, and values are hidden from our view below the surface. The uppermost layers of culture consist of fashion, trends, and pop music, as well as verbal and nonverbal cues which can be easily observed.

Cross-cultural communication trainer Robert Kohls (1996, p. 23) offers the following comprehensive definition:

> Culture = an integrated system of learned behavior patterns that are characteristic of the members of any given society. Culture refers to the total way of life of particular groups of people. It includes everything that a group of people thinks, says, does and makes—its systems of attitudes and feelings. Culture is learned and transmitted from generation to generation.

Within the context of the classroom, Kramsch (1993, p. 1) states that "Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one." In other words, culture is an integral part of language learning and affects all aspects of learning.

Damen (1987) cautions that when learning about a new culture, we have to consciously observe and be aware of events, behaviors, or situations without making judgments. We have to seek out information and ask questions. As we do this, we bring our own cultural patterns and those of others to a conscious level of awareness. This awareness can pave the way to our understanding of the
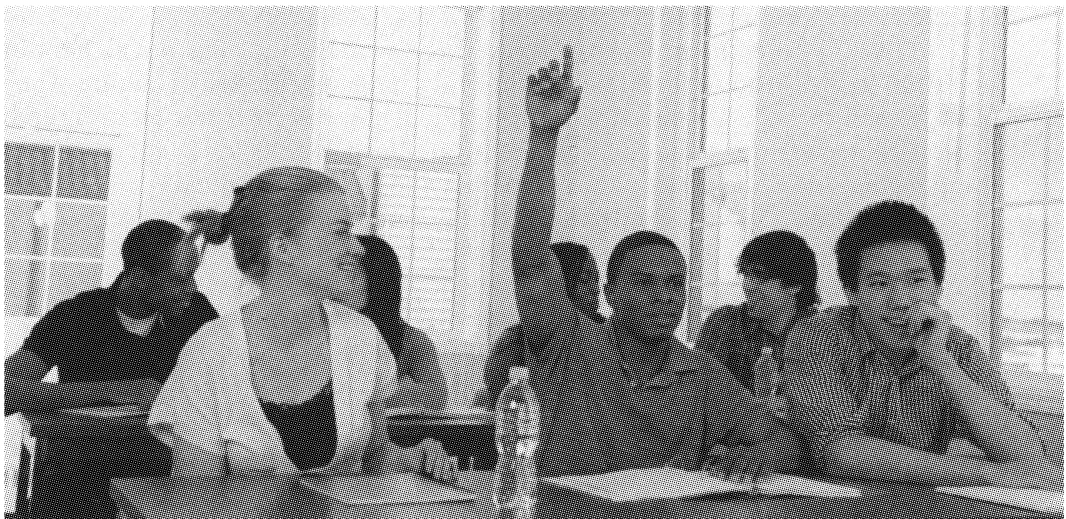
unfamiliar. As you can see, there is no firm agreement on a definition of culture. However, students can begin to understand culture as they explore and discuss its different aspects.

What the teacher can do

Teachers can help students by talking about how we have come to define culture and how it relates to our own lives. Ann, one of the authors, is originally from Germany. She often reminds her students that, as a nonnative speaker of English, she has had to adapt to her new American culture from her German culture, but she identifies with both. She points out that she does not exist in one culture at the expense of the other but that she exists fully in both cultures and enjoys the advantages of being not only bilingual but also bicultural.

Teachers can further help students develop their own understanding of what culture means by using classroom activities that encourage students to articulate their own ideas. Activity 1.1 asks students to work together to create their own definitions of culture. Discussing the concept of culture at the beginning of a course can be beneficial to students as it equips them to better comprehend what a significant role culture plays in their daily lives.

Activity 1.1	*What is culture?*
Level	Intermediate – Advanced
Handout	None
Tip	Have students articulate their own definition of culture.

Steps:

1. Write the following on the board: "Culture is _____."
2. Form small groups. Have students talk about how to fill in the blank. One student should take notes about the group's ideas.
3. Have groups share some of their ideas with the class. You may want to write them on the board.
4. Ask the same groups to work together again. This time they need to fill in the blank for "Culture is _____." but with only one idea as a group.
5. Ask each group to tell the class their sentence. Write the sentences on the board.
6. Ask the class to notice the similarities or differences in the sentences. Ask: "What made this exercise challenging?"
7. Continue the exploration of culture by having students create an analogy. Write on the board: "Culture is like a/an _____."
8. Ask students to work individually to write their ideas for completing the sentence.

9. Form new groups of 3-4. Have students discuss the analogies that they wrote. Students should try to explain why they chose their particular image.
10. Ask volunteer students to share their analogies with the class.

Teaching notes:

- It is helpful to point out to students that you are not talking about culture in the sense of music, art, literature, and history.
- If students can't think of an analogy for step 7, suggest creative responses such as a melting pot, salad bowl, mosaic, tapestry, pizza, spider web, or clouds.

2 Raise culture to a conscious level.

Often students are not conscious of how culture affects their daily lives. When students make mistakes in language, they are usually corrected and then they try to improve. But errors in appropriate cultural behavior can often pass without comment, and students then miss a chance to increase their cultural knowledge.

When Raul, an Argentine student in the United States, wanted to answer a question in class, he simply called out the answer and did not wait for the ESL teacher to call on him. Although he understood it was important in an American classroom to show his knowledge of the subject, Raul did not know that just calling out answers violated acceptable classroom behavior norms. The teacher explained to Raul and others in the class that in many classrooms in the United States it is expected that students first raise their hands to show they would like to speak and then wait for the teacher to acknowledge them. By bringing these characteristics of culture to a conscious level, we can start students on the road to intercultural awareness.

What the research says

Atkinson (1999) conducted a survey of the academic literature and concluded that culture had not been adequately addressed by the TESOL profession in the fifteen-year period leading up to his study. In his opinion, "Except for language, learning, and teaching, there is perhaps no more important concept in the field of TESOL than *culture.* Implicitly or explicitly, ESL teachers face it in everything they do" (p. 625).

There are many characteristics of culture, and different academic disciplines view culture through different lenses. From the perspective of the pragmatic **ethnographer**—who deals with the systematic recording of human cultures—Damen (1987, pp. 88-89) sets forth six significant, observable characteristics of culture and their individual interpretations as shown in the following chart. To bring learning about culture to a conscious level, she proposes that teachers and students assume the role of an ethnographer and explore, describe, and understand the new culture by engaging in ethnographic inquiry.

CHARACTERISTIC	INTERPRETATION
Culture is learned.	Culture can be taught.
Cultures and cultural patterns change.	It is vital to adapt to a culture rather than merely learn facts about culture.
Culture is a universal fact of human life.	No human group exists without culture. Cultural patterns are closely aligned to human needs.
Culture offers a set of blueprints for living and values and beliefs to support this way of life.	Values and beliefs are linked through strong networks of relationships. Values and beliefs support the way in which we live.
Language and culture are closely related and interactive.	Culture is conveyed through language. Cultural patterns are manifested in language.
Culture functions as a filter between its possessor and the environment.	Intercultural communicators need to be able to go beyond their own filters.

What the teacher can do

Teachers can introduce Damen's six characteristics of culture and use them as a springboard for discussion. This discussion can help raise culture to a conscious level. Teachers can also share their own stories about experiencing new cultures.

Teachers can use Activity 1.2, which encourages students to play the role of cultural explorer—or ethnographer—to investigate and discuss cultural differences. This activity gives students the opportunity to engage with a native speaker and make direct contact with an expert on the culture they are investigating.

Activity 1.2	*Exploring culture*
Level	Beginning – Advanced
Handout	None
Tip	Raise culture to a conscious level.

Steps:

1. Tell students that they are going to assume the role of an ethnographer— a person who explores human culture.

2. Have students choose a cultural or ethnic group they would like to know more about and form small research groups. As part of their exploration, they need to work with a native informant of the target culture. If it isn't possible for students to find native informants, use the alternative suggestion at the end of this activity.
3. Have students choose a topic of interest to explore within the selected culture. You can brainstorm possible topics with the class and write them on the board. Examples are raising children, the place of the elderly, the role of women in society, government, holidays, etc.
4. Have students prepare 5 to 10 open-ended questions to ask the informant about the topic. For example: "Did you attend school? What memories do you have about school? Did your race/ethnicity play a role in your school life?"
5. Have students meet with the informant. Students should ask the interview questions and take notes.
6. Have student groups prepare an oral report using the following format:
    a. Name and location of target group
    b. Major ideas and findings from the interview
    c. Student experiences in interviewing the informant
    d. Student feelings about assuming the role of ethnographer
7. Have student groups present their oral reports to the entire class.

Teaching notes:

- It can be helpful for students if you are able to locate the informants.
- *Alternative:* If you are teaching beginning level students, use the following version of the activity. Choose the culture/ethnic group. Ask the class to pick one or two topics and have the class create the list of questions. Invite an informant to class. Assign each student a question to ask. Write the informant's answers on the board. Then review and discuss the information together with the class.

3 Point out the hidden aspects of culture.

Many aspects of culture are hidden below the surface and therefore not visible or observable. A teacher can play an important role by bringing these hidden features to the surface. Abdullah, from Saudi Arabia, is in Ann's advanced ESL listening/speaking class. When asked to speak about the way his culture influences him, Abdulla talked about how his religion, his education, and his family's business influenced him. As he spoke, it did not occur to him to mention the underlying values of his culture, namely honesty, integrity, and esteem.

While some aspects of culture are clearly observable, many of the key aspects of a culture are less easily seen. In this section we explore some of the hidden aspects of culture. These aspects are often somewhat neglected precisely because they are less visible.

What the research says

One distinction that can help our students understand the concept of culture is the distinction between **big *C* culture** and **little *c* culture**. Peterson (2004, p. 25) categorizes big *C* culture as "classic or grand themes" and little *c* culture as "minor or common themes." He further organizes these two types of culture as visible culture—imagine the tip of an iceberg—and invisible culture—imagine the bottom of an iceberg.

Big *C* culture is often described as objective or highbrow culture, or as the institutions that people have created. Big *C visible* culture includes a culture's literature, classical music, architecture, historical figures, and geography, whereas big *C invisible* culture includes core values, attitudes or beliefs, society's norms, legal foundations, assumptions, history, and cognitive processes, according to Peterson.

Little *c* culture, on the other hand, is often described as subjective culture, as people's everyday thinking and behavior, or as the common traditions, practices, and customs of people. Little *c invisible* culture, according to Peterson, includes popular issues, opinions, viewpoints, preferences or tastes, and certain knowledge such as trivia and facts, whereas little *c visible* culture includes gestures, body posture, use of space, clothing styles, food, hobbies, music, and artwork.

Understanding our own culture and that of others will help us achieve intercultural competence, or the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and cultural awareness we need to interact successfully with someone from another culture.
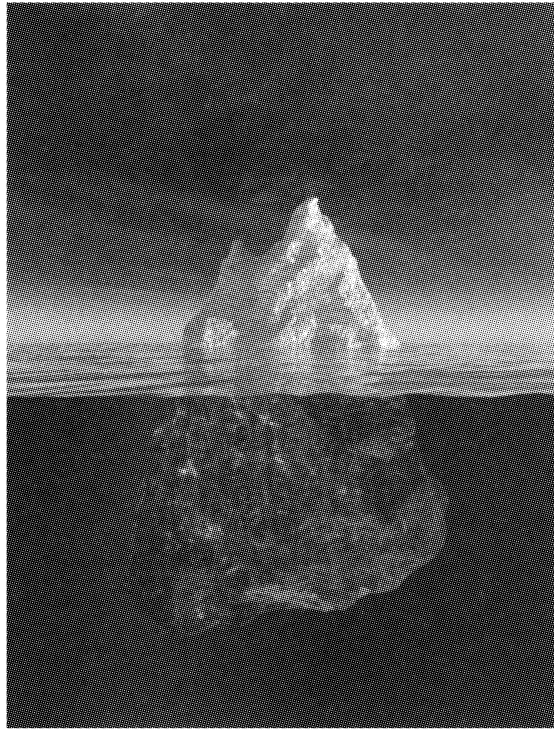
To help her students better understand visible and invisible culture, Ann, one of the authors, talks about her trips during semester breaks. She has visited various parts of the world. For example, when she traveled to Australia and New Zealand, she immediately recognized visible concepts of culture in the geography and in the architecture of the large cities. Invisible or hidden aspects of the cultures that Ann learned about were how people lived. In Australia, she observed the living conditions of the Aborigines and noted their difficulty in becoming integrated with mainstream society. In New Zealand, Ann learned about the complex culture of the Maori derived from their Pacific Island heritage where singing and dancing are integral and vital parts of Maori life. Ann's discovery of both sides of culture reflects our students' experiences. Only after learning about the core values and norms of a culture can our students understand the invisible part of their new culture.

What the teacher can do

Teachers can point out the hidden aspects of culture to students by helping them understand that many parts of culture may not be initially evident and it takes time to fully realize and understand them. These invisible aspects of culture can be better understood if students connect their personal experiences to them. A case in point is Abdullah, from Saudi Arabia, who found that his view of culture expanded when he realized that the invisible aspects of culture are as much a part of his culture as are the visible aspects.

Teachers can use Activity 1.3 to help students build awareness of the aspects of culture that are normally less visible. In this activity students are asked to focus on the less obvious manifestations of culture as articulated in the idea of little *c* culture. Students can then use this new level of awareness as they try to navigate the culture of their new surroundings.

Activity 1.3	*Exploring the iceberg*
Level	Intermediate – Advanced
Handout	None
Tip	Point out the hidden aspects of culture.

Steps:

1. Draw an iceberg on the board like the one on page 9 or bring in a picture from a book or magazine.
2. Ask students what they know about icebergs.

3. Write the following chart on the board, including the empty spaces:

Big *C* culture	Little *c* culture
architecture	gestures and posture
literature	use of physical space
historical and political figures	food and cooking
classical music and composers	clothing and style
geography	popular music

4. Present and explain the concepts of big *C* culture and little *c* culture. Big *C* culture consists of large classical themes from the culture. Little *c* culture consists of smaller everyday types of culture. Point to the chart to show examples of big *C* culture and little *c* culture.
5. Ask students to brainstorm some new ideas to add to the chart. Discuss them and then add them to the chart.
6. Discuss the following concepts. Refer to the image of the iceberg during the discussion.
   a. Which aspects of a culture are easily visible to those from another culture?
   b. Which aspects seem hidden or more difficult to see?
   c. Which aspects do you think would be most challenging for an international visitor to understand?

Teaching notes:

- *Alternative:* If you are teaching lower-level students, use the following version of the activity. Draw the chart on the board without extra spaces. Show a picture of an iceberg or draw one on the board. Ask the class to say which items in the chart are at the top of the iceberg (visible) and which are at the bottom of the iceberg (invisible). Ask students to explain why. Label the iceberg. Then ask students to think about other big *C* or little *c* culture items they can add to the iceberg.

4 Show how cultures may value the same thing differently.

Many of us believe that the behavior of our own family provides the definition of normal behavior. Likewise, individuals assume that their own cultures' values are the norm and that other ways of doing things are strange or different. The underlying values of a culture have a particularly strong influence on behavior, yet these values are often not obvious or clear to someone experiencing a new culture for the first time.

When Makoto, a Japanese graduate student in business, was asked what he thought about the economic problems in Japan in his economics class, he responded that it wasn't his place to suggest causes and responsible parties because Japan had excellent economic advisors who formulate his country's policies. Paul, an American graduate student, insisted that the economic problems in Japan were the result of poor advice. He wondered why Makoto wouldn't go into more detail as the class discussed this issue. Paul and Makoto were unaware that their disagreement about this topic was compounded by their unspoken ideas about attitudes towards authority and of being critical of superiors. In Japan it is considered inappropriate to question authority or to speak against it, whereas in the United States it is considered part of a healthy discussion to voice one's opinion even if it is critical of authority.

What the research says

Beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes are fundamental elements of any culture. These elements influence and affect people's behavior. Each element is distinct and has its own meaning. Knowing the definition of each element helps us understand how these beliefs, values, norms and attitudes affect our daily lives.

Beliefs are convictions of the truth of something or the reality of some phenomena based on an examination of the evidence. In other words, beliefs are specific statements that people hold as true. The more convinced we are of a belief, the greater its intensity. Beliefs sometimes vary not only from culture to culture but also within a culture.

Examples
- the religious belief in the power of prayer
- the belief in alternative medicine, such as acupuncture or homeopathy, rather than surgery as a means to alleviate pain or cure disease
- the belief that humans can improve or change their lives by taking action

Values describe our feelings about the worth, usefulness, or importance of something. Our standards about what is right or wrong are steered by moral guidelines and bring emotional vigor to beliefs. Peterson (2004, p. 22) defines cultural values as "principles or qualities that a group of people will tend to see as good or right or worthwhile." In short, they are the standards by which people measure such things as goodness and beauty.

Examples
- constitutionally guaranteed rights
- one's work ethic
- the importance of group membership

Norms are principles of appropriate behavior that are binding to the members of a culture. They guide and regulate proper and acceptable behavior in terms of what members should and should not do. Norms include **mores** or morally binding behavior that distinguishes right from wrong, as well as **taboos** or banned actions.

Examples
- showing respect by bowing to elders
- refraining from plagiarism when writing a college or university assignment
- not eating pork in a culture where it is prohibited

Attitudes are mental stances that we take in regard to a fact or a state of something. Attitudes are also feelings or emotions that we show toward something. Attitudes shape our cultural behavior.

Examples
- the German concept of *Gemuetlichkeit,* which characterizes a social gathering and reflects a feeling of comfortableness, contentment, and a *joie de vivre*.
- people's instant dislike of others who "look like foreigners"
- a positive identification with the target language that can increase motivation and enhance language proficiency

Attribution is how we interpret the behavior of others using our own cultural lens. Our beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes are used to impose our worldview or point of view when we attempt to explain what we "see."

Examples
- In some cultures it is unacceptable for a male and female to go out together in public unless they are accompanied by an elder or are married. In other cultures, it is acceptable for single males and females to spend time together in public.
- In some cultures people get a job or receive a promotion because they are the most qualified candidates. In other cultures, people may get a job or receive a promotion because they are related to the boss or their families have some kind of connection with the boss.

Ethnocentrism also influences our perspective on culture. Ethnocentrism refers to "our tendency to consider our own cultural practices as superior and consider other cultural practices as inferior" (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 14). In many instances, we are unaware of our own cultural prejudices and emotional, subjective tendencies and are inclined to view our cultural practices as better than those of others.

Examples
- Americans that regard themselves as better entrepreneurs than Latin Americans
- Religious groups that consider their particular religion superior to all others

Enculturation refers to the act of learning a primary culture and becoming socialized into it. This is a lifelong process. Learning about our new cultural patterns at home, in school, and at work affects our worldview and our new interpretation of the world.

Example
- A young immigrant who has lived most of his life in the United States calls himself an American and identifies with the American popular culture, yet his home life still includes beliefs and traditions from his native country.

Alternatively, **acculturation** is the learning of a supplementary culture. This is when we deliberately learn about a second culture, often because we are visiting or living in the new culture. In this case we adapt to a second culture without abandoning our native cultural identity.

Example
- A woman from the United States who lives and works abroad for a number of years continues to self-identify with her home country, even though she is fluent in the language of the new country and enjoys its culture and traditions.

Our cultural background influences our expectations at an unconscious level. We are frequently unaware that our judgments are being formed not, as we think, on the basis of objective facts but rather on the basis of attribution. To be cognizant of the elements of culture requires an awareness not only of our own culture but also the culture of others.

What the teacher can do

Teachers can help students see that beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes are part of every culture and that different cultures often value the same things, even though it is not always evident. By helping to make the invisible elements more accessible, teachers can help students understand why others view the world in a different way as well as encourage students to think about their own values. For example, if Makoto and Paul, mentioned at the beginning of this section, had realized the underlying cultural values from which the other was operating, they would have had a better chance of understanding each other.

Teachers can use Activity 1.4 to challenge students to think about their own cultural values and to compare them with others. The activity encourages students to make decisions about what matters most to them. The activity is also helpful to teachers in that they can learn more about their students' thoughts and beliefs.

Activity 1.4	*Cultural values clarification*
Level	Intermediate – Advanced
Handout	Page 192
Tip	Show how cultures may value the same thing differently.

Steps:

1. Make copies of the handout for Activity 1.4. Pass them out to the class.
2. Model how to use the chart. Draw a horizontal line on the board and number it 1 to 5 from left to right. To the left of number 1 write "It is important to have a job that you love." To the right of number 5 write "It is important to have a job that pays a good salary." Ask students to think about these statements and decide which they think is most important. Ask them to choose the number on the continuum that best represents their opinions.
3. Point out that there are seven separate items to think about. Explain the vocabulary if needed.

4. Give the class 5 minutes to complete the chart. Tell them to circle the answer that best represents their opinions, just as you did in the example.
5. Form pairs. Have students compare and discuss their answers. If students are from various cultural backgrounds, mix the pairs.
6. Draw the chart from the handout on the board. For each item, take a poll of how many students circled each number. Keep track of the totals on the board.
7. To finish the activity, have the class study the results of the poll. If any item has an unusually low or high total, ask students to talk about why they chose that answer.

Teaching notes:
- If students are all from the same culture, see if there is any variation in the answers. If not, point that out and mention that if the class included various other cultures, answers could be different. If you are familiar with other cultures, you may want to offer ideas on how students from those cultures might have responded.

5 Help students understand how culture works.

In addition to beliefs, values, norms, and attitudes, culture is made up of a number of other key dimensions, such as identity, the hierarchy of society, and gender roles. Ann, one of the authors, does not usually have her position as a female university professor challenged, but there have been times when students from other cultures have needed to adapt and adjust their cultural views. Ekliel, from Afghanistan, was in Ann's advanced ESL writing class. Often he did not pay attention to the lesson, displayed arrogance when asked to participate in class, and answered Ann's questions in a disrespectful tone. At times when Ann was explaining something, Ekliel would question her explanation. It seemed to be his way of showing his unwillingness to accept having a female as his professor, a position traditionally held by males in Afghanistan. Ann decided to speak to Ekliel privately and talked about her academic achievements and the accepted role of women as professors in U.S. society. She also talked about her role as his teacher and her expectations of him as a student. Tensions were noticeably lessened after their conversation.

What the research says

Hofstede et al. (2002, p. 40) categorize five dimensions of a culture: identity, hierarchy, social gender role, truth value, and virtue. These researchers suggest that culture may be defined as the way a group of people teaches these perspectives and how they resolve any issues around them.

DIMENSION	CONTINUUM
Identity	Collectivism ←————————————————→ Individualism
Hierarchy	Large power distance ←————————→ Small power distance
Social gender role	Feminine ←————————————————————→ Masculine
Truth value	Strong uncertainty avoidance ←→ Weak uncertainty avoidance
Virtue	Long term orientation ←————————→ Short term orientation

The first dimension of culture—**identity**—can be described on a range from **collectivism** at one end to **individualism** at the other. According to Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 67), individualism stresses individual identity, focuses on individual rights, and emphasizes individual needs. Individualistic cultures encourage the *I* **identity** and individual goals. On the other end of the spectrum, collectivism stresses the *we* **identity** and focuses on group rights and group-oriented needs. Collectivistic cultures encourage dependence as a way to promote harmony and cooperation within the group.

The second dimension—**hierarchy**—can be described on a range from large **power distance** at one end to small **power distance** at the other. Power distance describes the degree of acceptance of the unequal distribution of power by the less powerful members of a culture (Hofstede and Bond, 1984). Ting-Toomey observes that in cultures with a small power distance, people are inclined to value an equal distribution of power, equal rights, and the idea that rewards or punishments should be granted based on how a task is executed (1999, p. 71). In cultures with a large power distance, on the other hand, people accept an unequal distribution of power. They seem to accept a chain of command regarding one's rights, unbalanced role relations, and the idea that rewards and punishments should be determined by factors such as age, rank, status, title, and seniority. Cultures with a small power distance tend to seek equality, whereas cultures with a large power distance have allowed inequalities of power and wealth to grow within their societies.

The third dimension of culture—**social gender role**—includes the question of roles for females and males. In traditional gender roles, men are expected to be forceful, tough, and materialistic, whereas women are expected to be humble, sensitive, and worried about the quality of daily life. When we look at this dimension, we are looking at the degree to which a society reinforces the traditional male and female roles regarding achievement, control, and power.

The fourth dimension—**truth value**—ranges from strong **uncertainty avoidance** at one end to weak **uncertainty avoidance** at the other. Uncertainty avoidance measures the degree to which members of a culture feel threatened by situations that are uncertain or unknown to them. It also describes their attempts to steer clear of such situations. For instance, a person from a strongly **collectivistic society** might feel threatened by being asked to act as the single representative of that culture. If uncertainty avoidance is strong, the individual feels a powerful threat and makes every effort to stay away from being put on the spot. Weak uncertainty avoidance cultures promote risk taking, whereas strong uncertainty avoidance cultures favor rules and laws, which make it very clear how people are expected to behave and thus help members avoid risks.

The fifth and final dimension of culture—**virtue**—ranges from **long-term orientation** to **short-term orientation**. This dimension refers to the time perspective and the attitude of perseverance of a society. Ting-Toomey (1999, p. 74) notes that cultures valuing long-term orientation stress social order, respect hierarchy, believe in collective face-saving, practice long-term planning, are centered on thrift, and focus on long-term outcomes. On the other end, cultures valuing short-term orientation emphasize personal survival, respect personal dignity, believe in individual face-saving, practice short-term planning, are centered on spending, and focus on short-term outcomes.

What the teacher can do

Teachers can encourage students to discover cultural dimensions by sharing concepts of culture along a continuum. Before doing this, be sure that students understand the idea of a continuum and how it works. One good illustration is that of color. Choose items in the classroom that are varying shades of blue and line them up from darkest to lightest. Alternatively, use the example of height. Line up students from shortest to tallest and place their names on a list.

Teachers can also help students gain an awareness of these various cultural dimensions by using concrete examples, as some of these ideas may be difficult to grasp in the abstract. An example is the idea of an individual versus a group.

Teachers can use Activity 1.5 to introduce students to the concept of the **critical incident**. A critical incident offers students a brief story or vignette in which some type of cultural miscommunication takes place. Students read and discuss the incident to try to understand why the miscommunication took place and how it could have been prevented. Critical incidents are used in activities throughout this book and provide a useful tool to help students share their opinions, values, and beliefs.

Activity 1.5	*Culture in action*
Level	Intermediate – Advanced
Handouts	Pages 193 – 194
Tip	Help students understand how culture works.

Steps:

1. Make copies of the two handouts for Activity 1.5.
2. Present and explain the concept of critical incidents to the class. Tell students that a critical incident is a cross-cultural problematic situation. The incidents are concerned with various dimensions of culture. Inform students that there are no right or wrong answers but that there are solutions.
3. Ask students to work in groups of 3-4. Pass out the handouts for Activity 1.5. Assign each group one critical incident. Have students read the critical incidents and questions and discuss what they think caused the conflict.
4. If a group finishes early, assign another critical incident.
5. As a class, discuss each critical incident, the solutions from each group, and the area of cultural conflict manifested. Page 189 outlines possible interpretations that you can share with the class if no one has suggested them.

Teaching notes:

- Each critical incident presents an area of conflict designed to stimulate discussion and to make students aware of and sensitive to cultural differences.
- *Alternative:* If necessary, simplify the vocabulary used in the critical incidents.

6   Build awareness about stress caused by cultural adjustment.

When students spend time in another culture, their adjustment to the new culture can cause feelings of stress. Becoming aware of possible intercultural stumbling blocks and overcoming them can help students become comfortable in a new culture.

Chia-Chang, a student from Taiwan, was used to eating a diet consisting mostly of noodles and vegetables. When he arrived to study in the United States, he found he didn't like the largely fast-food diet of American college students. Chia-Chang felt he could not eat most of the food and found himself hungry most days. This increased his stress level and began to affect his ability to concentrate in class and when studying. Finally, a fellow student mentioned a nearby neighborhood that had a number of Chinese restaurants and grocery stores. The ability to anchor himself in the familiar by buying and eating food he was accustomed to helped Chia-Chang reduce his stress so that he was able to function at a more productive level.

What the research says

Whether or not we are conscious of it, we are directly influenced by our cultural upbringing. We often presume that the needs, desires, and assumptions of others are the same as ours when in reality they are not. This can create problems when communicating with individuals from other cultures. To help avoid frustration and reduce misunderstanding, Barna (1988, p. 322) highlights potential stumbling blocks or obstacles that can hinder effective intercultural communication. We first need to acknowledge the existence of these stumbling blocks and then learn to avoid them. To do this may require a change in our mindset and the way that we view the world.

Common Stumbling Blocks

Assumption of similarity

When people from different cultures first meet and each person wears similar clothes, speaks the same language, and uses comparable rituals, we feel a sense of confidence rather than a sense of anxiety because no differences seem apparent. Only by assuming that subtle differences do in fact exist and that new rules for behavior are needed can our interpretation be adjusted so that we can really understand these differences.

Language difference

Components of language include vocabulary, grammar, idioms, slang, dialects, and many other features. The sociocultural aspects of language also include **cultural competence**, or knowing what to say, how to say it, when and where to say it, and why it is being said. We sometimes are under the impression that we understand what is being said when in fact we do not. Consequently, we can misinterpret the words of others. (Discussed in Chapter 2.)

Misinterpreting nonverbal communication

Gestures, postures, and other body movements, which are easily observable, are often misunderstood. Time and spatial relationships, which are more subtle and more difficult to grasp, are even more prone to misinterpretation. (Discussed in Chapter 3.)