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## Bringing Workplace Culture Into the ESL Classroom

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**V**an Tran worked for a large electronics firm for two years. One day her boss announced an opening for an assistant manager. Van was certain that her boss would choose her for the position because her production quotas were always the highest in the department, and she often helped him with scheduling. She waited patiently to be offered the job. One week later another worker in the department got the promotion. Van felt very hurt that she wasn't offered the job. She began to think about quitting.

Van acted in an appropriate manner for a Vietnamese worker. Had she understood more about U.S. business practices, however, she would have known that American supervisors presume workers will apply for jobs they are interested in, and she might have stood a better chance of getting the promotion.

Van's confusion and disappointment are mirrored daily across the United States as immigrant workers struggle to understand the workplace culture around them. This lack of understanding often leads to decreased productivity and bad feelings at work. Clearly, the more ESL students know about the culture of the U.S. workplace, as well as the multicultural workforce they are or will become a part of, the more successful their adaptation to living and working in the United States will be. ESL teachers can play an important role in this process by bringing workplace culture into the ESL classroom. This article will first outline American workplace behavioral patterns that constitute potential problem areas for foreign-born workers. Techniques used to incorporate cultural learning into the language classroom will then be discussed.

### **BUSINESS CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS**

#### **Feedback**

American business culture relies heavily on verbal feedback, particularly for clarifying and confirming instructions and summarizing

agreements. Interrupting the flow of conversation to clarify and confirm instructions is allowed and even encouraged. In an American business situation, this type of feedback provides reassurance that good communication is taking place. However, problems arise because this need for verbal reassurance is not shared by many peoples around the world. Frequent questions and interruptions are considered rude, or at best, unnecessary in many Asian cultures and in some Latin American and Middle Eastern cultures as well. In these cultures, reluctance to ask questions stems from the notion of saving face which requires that all parties in an interaction be spared embarrassment. Workers from other cultures, therefore, will often refrain from asking questions or confirming instructions in order to avoid the embarrassment of appearing ignorant. They also may worry that questions will be construed as an insult—implying the speaker's ideas were not clearly expressed.

### Initiative

Taking initiative by presenting new ideas, solving problems, and making independent decisions has always been a valuable worker attribute in the United States and is becoming increasingly important in light of the recent push toward participative management in many American businesses. However, these behaviors are often perceived as offensive, aggressive, and disrespectful in many foreign cultures. In some Asian and Latin American cultures, making suggestions implies that workers are more knowledgeable than their superiors. Acting on a problem independently without going to superiors for advice and leadership, is gravely impolite.

This respect for authority, coupled with strong mores toward modesty, also makes it difficult for workers to perform well in interviews and performance reviews where workers are expected to freely discuss strengths and accomplishments. This is especially problematic for many Asian workers who feel that calling attention to oneself, particularly one's achievements, is rude and unprofessional. As we have seen in the case of Van Tran, this kind of modesty in the workplace can lead to serious frustrations.

Similarly, foreign workers are often reluctant to speak up in staff meetings because they fear appearing boastful and disrespectful. In Turkish cultures, where collective opinion generally dominates, workers will refrain from giving personal opinions until they have conferred with a leader. In many Asian cultures as well group consensus rather than independent thinking is the norm. Unfortunately, American managers misinterpret silence in a meeting as a lack of self-confidence or drive, and consequently these workers are frequently passed over when opportunities for raises and promotions arise.

### Nonverbal Communication

Birdwhistell (1970) asserts that nonverbal communication makes up roughly 65% of our social interactions. Therefore, teachers can provide students a great service by teaching about gestures, facial expressions, and other body movements characteristic of American working culture. Eye contact plays a significant role in American culture, and the absence of it is generally interpreted as shiftiness, dishonesty, or shyness, and in some cases, as a nonverbal snub. However, direct eye contact in many foreign cultures is avoided to show deference and respect to teachers, supervisors, elders, and so forth. To further complicate matters, many Latin American and Arab peoples consider the American practice of periodically shifting the gaze away from the speaker to be rude and disrespectful, while their culturally appropriate steady gaze is considered overly aggressive here.

Nonverbal behavior used to indicate agreement and disagreement varies considerably from culture to culture. One gesture given to wide interpretation around the world is the affirmative nodding gesture. While it signifies agreement and understanding in the United States, in Mexico and many Asian cultures, nodding and even saying yes does not necessarily mean that the listener agrees or understands. Nodding is used to indicate, rather, that the listener is paying attention and wants to make the interaction smooth and positive. In the United States a smile or a small laugh is usually interpreted as agreement, while in some cultures the same behavior is used as a screen to conceal embarrassment, anger, shyness, or confusion. As mentioned earlier, silence in the American workplace is often interpreted as lack of self-confidence. However, in some African cultures, where it is rude to verbally disagree, silence is used to express confusion or disagreement.

Spatial distance is another area of nonverbal behavior with diverse norms around the world. Immigrant workers need to be aware of the spatial distance required at the workplace. A "business zone" of approximately 4 to 13 feet has been identified in the United States for interpersonal spatial distance in the workplace. This varies, of course, depending on whether one is speaking to a supervisor or coworker or to someone of the same or different sex—the rule being to allow more physical distance where there is more social distance. Violators of this zone will set off protective mechanisms and/or negative responses. Workers from some Arab and Latin American cultures, where spatial distance is much smaller, might, for example, be thought of as overly aggressive by their American coworkers.

### Interpersonal

ESL students are often shocked by the level of informality in many American companies. The friendly, family-like atmosphere, which

many companies foster to create a favorable, cooperative working environment can be confusing to people from cultures that have a more rigid class society and where formality pervades customs and daily routines. Many American supervisors, for example, prefer to be addressed by their first name in order to break down social barriers and to inspire an egalitarian team spirit in their workforce. This practice is bewildering to many Asian workers who find this level of informality with superiors disconcerting. The "open door" policy, common in American businesses, is based on the premise that operations run smoothly and efficiently when supervisors maintain open channels of communication with their staff. Staff members are encouraged to come to their supervisors at any time to discuss problems, ask questions, or raise new ideas. This is an alien concept to many foreign workers who usually do not initiate dialog with supervisors, particularly to offer suggestions or air grievances.

American employers have noted that foreign workers, even those with high-level language skills, often lack the social skills necessary to function well in business. An Asian worker, for example, might offend an American coworker by asking inappropriate questions about salary, unwittingly rebuff another coworker's friendly compliment by stubbornly denying the compliment, and frustrate a third by responding to conversational overtures by simply nodding and smiling. Foreign-born workers clearly need training in appropriate conversational topics, initiating conversation, taking turns, and keeping conversations going at work.

### Social

Gift-giving practices differ greatly from one country to another in terms of types of gifts and appropriate occasions for giving. Anyone who has spent time in a foreign country knows how confusing and embarrassing social interactions can be without cultural information in this area. Foreign workers need explicit information about gift-giving practices in the workplace in order to fit in comfortably. In some cultures, for example, it is acceptable to offer gifts to supervisors and managers in return for favors, a practice frowned upon in the United States. Baby and bridal showers and birthdays, which are often celebrated at work in the United States, might not be part of the work domain in some immigrant cultures. Potluck parties at work, common here, also might be considered strange by many foreign workers.

### Teaching Techniques

Clearly, immigrants benefit when cultural information about working in the United States is explicitly taught along with the language needed to function well in the workplace. In presenting cultural information to our students, we enable them to make decisions about

their behavior in a variety of situations. Ultimately they must decide which behaviors to adopt. Our job is to provide them with the information needed to understand the surrounding culture so that they can make informed choices. A number of techniques can be employed to bring cultural training into the classroom. Below are some possibilities.

### Case Study

A case study, also called a *culture bump*, is a brief description of a situation in which a misunderstanding has occurred because of cultural differences. Case studies can be based on true incidents or can be created by the teacher to illustrate a point. Questions that follow help students to analyze the situation and to problem solve. McNulty (1985) illustrates how this is done.

*Situation:* Kayoko is an accountant in a small business. One day her boss says to her, "We're going to be audited sometime soon. Check the date."

Kayoko doesn't understand exactly what her boss said. She thinks maybe her boss means: "I will check the date and tell you when the auditors are coming."

Kayoko waits for her boss to tell her when the auditors are coming. The next week the auditors come. Kayoko is not prepared.

*Question:* Here is the beginning of the conversation that Kayoko and her boss had after the auditors came:

Boss: Didn't you check the date?

Kayoko: I'm sorry. I didn't understand you.

What do you think Kayoko's boss said next?

- a. Oh, that's okay. I didn't explain clearly.
- b. How can you be so stupid?
- c. You didn't understand? Why didn't you ask me?

A number of activities can be generated from this case study. Class discussions can center around analyzing the problem, discussing how the situation would be handled in various cultures, and suggesting how it could have been handled more effectively here. Students can discuss the situation in small groups and then go on to write another version of the same dialog.

### Role Play

Role play is another technique which helps students learn about cultural differences and problem solving. A situation is presented and discussed in pairs or small groups, and the solutions are role played. The following example (Hemphill, Pfaffenberger, & Hockman, 1989) illustrates:

*Job:* You are the supervisor of a shop in a factory.

*Situation:* You have a new worker named Liu. Liu works hard, but he doesn't speak much English. Liu listens when you explain things, but he doesn't ask questions, and he doesn't say anything. You are not sure if Liu understands. You want to know if he understands.

*Discuss:* What is the problem? Now, go talk to Liu about this situation.

Students then write a script illustrating how they would handle the situation in their own countries or in the United States. If possible, these role plays can be videotaped and then used to teach vocabulary, idioms, grammar and pronunciation. Following the role play, the class can discuss the situation and cultural differences around the world. These discussions introduce students to American culture and, at the same time, teach them about each other's cultures.

### Simulated Staff Meetings

Staff meetings, an integral part of American business operations, are an area in which many immigrant workers have little or no experience. Simulated staff meetings can be set up in the classroom giving students valuable training in initiating topics, asking questions, offering opinions, interrupting, holding turns, and summarizing. Meetings can be either controlled or spontaneous, depending on the class. To set up a controlled meeting, students are given the topic of discussion (such as a new company medical plan) along with specific questions and issues to be raised by participating students. A facilitator and secretary are selected in advance. Six to 10 students can be active participants, while other classmates act as observers who note the frequency and quality of each participant's interactions. Following the meetings, the class discusses the session, focusing on the level of participation, problems that arose, participants' feelings during the meeting, and further language needed. After the discussion, the observers and participants change roles, and another meeting is held. As students gain confidence, subsequent meetings can be organized with increasingly less control, until students are able to participate in spontaneous meetings. Students' participation and enthusiasm for

this activity is highest when the topics are related to their experiences (campus issues, interesting field trips, job search plans).

### Reading and Writing Activities

Students can use journals to improve their writing while they learn more about American working culture. The journals can be used to discuss problems that arise at work, ask questions about American culture, or make comparisons between the working culture of the students' countries and the United States. Often the teacher will have to begin by assigning topics, such as "Describe five things about working in the United States that are different from working in your country." Students often have a lot to say about this topic after they have been prodded.

Business magazines and newspapers offer articles that illuminate business culture in the U.S. These can be used for whole-class reading assignments or for research projects. My students enjoy "Ann Landers" and "The Question Man" (a daily public opinion column in the San Francisco *Chronicle*), because of the emphasis on etiquette and attitudes of American people. Studs Terkle's novel, *Working*, has a wealth of information about U.S. working culture for advanced students.

A good activity that helps to develop awareness of American workplace values uses typical employee evaluation forms. Students can complete these evaluation forms for a mock job and then role play a meeting between the employee and supervisor where the employee's progress is discussed. Teachers can also create their own evaluation forms for the classroom, have students fill them out, and later discuss progress and grades with each student.

### Nonverbal Communication Activities

Nonverbal communication can be incorporated into many of the above activities. Yet because of the central role gestures and other nonverbal cues play in communication, it is a good idea to focus some activities specifically on this area of communication. One simple and fun way is to have a class view a taped segment from a television show with the volume turned down. Students can then work in groups to interpret the video. Another enjoyable project is to have the students write their own dialogs for the scene before viewing it again with sound.

Total Physical Response activities can be used to prepare students to behave in a nonverbally appropriate manner for the workplace. Through oral commands the teacher directs students to act out situations that might come up at work. Suppose for example, students are preparing for a job interview. They work in pairs as the teacher gives the following commands:

Look into each other's eyes.  
Now look away.  
Look at your partner's eyes.  
Now look away.

*Interviewer:* Ask a question. Look into the interviewee's eyes.  
*Interviewee:* Smile at the interviewer. Look into the interviewer's eyes. Answer the question.  
*Interviewer:* Say *mm hm*, *I see*, and *uh hu*.  
And so forth...

Pictures of people from magazines, especially pictures of people at work, can also be used in class to teach nonverbal behavior. Students analyze a picture or group of pictures in a small group and then write a short description of the situation from their native culture perspectives, guided by teacher and student-generated questions (e.g., How does this person feel right now? How does the person's body language communicate that emotion?) Later, the students can change the description to reflect the cultural perspective of the U.S.

#### Miscellaneous Learning Activities

Teachers can capitalize on students' natural inclination to talk about themselves with comparison and contrast activities. Students are given a series of questions that they use to compare their culture with American culture. Possible questions are: How do people get job promotions? What do you do if you have an idea about changing something at work? What social activities do people engage in with their coworkers? When do people give gifts at work?

Another activity that draws attention to how much students know about the working culture is to ask them 10 questions about American culture to which they must answer with *yes*, *no*, or *I don't know*. The questions begin: *Is it true that...* These minichecks can be performed in 10 to 15 minutes and, therefore, can be incorporated into any class period.

#### Materials

There are a number of interesting and creative materials on the market for teaching about American culture. The following materials are helpful in teaching about workplace culture.

#### Textbooks

- Auerbach, E. R., & Wallerstein, N. (1987). *ESL for action*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley.
- Hemphill, D., Pfaffenberger, B., & Hockman, B. (1989). *The working culture: Cross cultural communication for new Americans (Book 1)*, and *Career development for new Americans (Book 2)*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Irving, K. J. (1986). *Communicating in context*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Levine, D. R., Baxter, J., & McNulty, P. (1987). *The culture puzzle*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-hall, Inc.
- McNulty, P. (1985). *38 case studies in cross cultural communication on the job*. Cupertino, CA: Bilingual Center, De Anza College.
- Prince, D. W., & Gage, J. L. (1986). *Your first job*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Robinson, C., & Rowekamp, J. (1985). *Speaking up at work*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Terkle, S. (1972). *Working*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- Zanger, V. Z. (1985). *Face to face: The cross-cultural workbook*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.

#### Video

- Center for Applied Linguistics. (1986). *Working in the United States I, II, III*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Penfield, J., Hansen, M. E., & Mildner, C. (1986). *When cultures meet face to face*. Highland Park, NJ: Penfield Associates.
- Romero, D. (1985). *On the job with Rolando*. San Francisco, CA: Mission Language and Vocational School.
- Romero, D. (1987). *Valuing diversity*. San Francisco, CA: Copeland Griggs Productions, Inc.

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*Editors' Note: Because all of the bibliographic citations within the text of this article are in the list of suggested teaching materials above, this article does not include a separate References section.*