

Culture

Inspiration for this lesson came from ESL Special Collection found at: <http://www.literacynet.org/esl/ta5.html>. Within that website, there is *Building Bridges: A Peace Corps Guide to Cross-Cultural Understanding* <http://www.peacecorps.gov/wvs/bridges/lesson2/index.html>. This lesson is an adaptation of materials provided there.

1. Find a partner or a small team of three or four classmates to work on this lesson.

A. Read the following statement.

**Everyone has a culture. Culture shapes how you see the world.
Culture shapes you. Culture also shapes how you see others.**

B. Talk about the statement with your partner/team. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Delete or cross out the statements that are not true.

I agree with the statement.

I disagree with the statement.

My partner/team agrees with it.

My partner/team disagrees with it.

C. Explain to your partner/team why you agree or disagree with the statement. Finish one of these sentences:

We agree with the statement because

We disagree with the statement because

2. Now read the following information about culture.

When learning about culture, keep in mind that culture is just one of many different influences on people's behavior. People can differ from each other in many other ways; e.g., age, gender, personality, level of education, ability, and many other personal features that make each individual a unique human being.

Some people generalize and make statements like:

"She's an American, so that explains why . . ."

"He's from New York, so that explains why . . ."

"He's a Canadian, so that explains why . . ."

However, we need to be careful when we over-generalize. Culture is complicated, just as people are complicated.

It is true that cultural groups have certain characteristics in common. These characteristics are interesting to talk about. But, at the same time, we have to remember that within each culture there are always important differences.

Our cultural beliefs, values, and behaviors are so ingrained, so natural to us, that we are often unaware of our own culture. We may act every day in perfect harmony with our own culture, but how can you explain it to a person from another country? Where do you begin? Can you describe what is generally true about the people who live in your country?

3. Complete the following statements. Compare your responses with the responses of your partner/team.

My native country is _____.
name of country

1. Many people in _____ eat _____
your country name(s) of food
_____ for breakfast.

2. Many people eat breakfast at _____ at _____.
time place

3. After breakfast children go to _____.
place

4. After breakfast adults go to _____.
Place

(Notice how the word “many” is used in sentences 1 and 2 above. When you say “people” in English, you are speaking about all the people. When you say “many people” or “some people” you are limiting the number of people that you are talking about. When speaking about a general topic like culture, use the words “many” or “some” to prevent overgeneralization.)

4. With your partner/team, decide which of the four statements above was the most difficult for you to complete? Why? Write your answer here.

The most difficult one for all of us to complete was #___ because _____.

How can you change the sentence to make it easier to complete? Rewrite the sentence here:

_____.

5. Continue reading about culture.

So, you can see that it may be easy or difficult to describe different features of a culture. However, it is very common in casual conversation to make generalizations about people and cultures. It is natural to talk

- Did the American use the words “some” or “many” or “most” in his or her responses?

- What did you and your partner/team learn from your opinions and the opinions of the American? Write two things that you learned here:

8. Read some more about culture.

When comparing regions of the United States, you may hear people say, “People from the South are much more polite than people from the Northeast.” It is certainly possible to find examples to show that there may be some truth to that statement. However, people from the Northeast might disagree. They might point out that people from the Northeast are just as polite *in their own way* as people in the South. So, within one country, there are cultural differences.

When people do not know a culture well, they may find it easy to observe cultural differences. They may notice many things that natives of the country do not see. Some of the things they notice may be surprising.

One visitor from Asia was asked by a small group of Americans what surprised him about the United States. Without hesitation he answered, “All the small, dead animals on the roads!” The Americans laughed. They knew that what he had noticed was true, but they did not pay attention to it the same way that the Asian man did. Isn’t that interesting?

A visitor from Eastern Europe was asked what surprised him about the United States, and he said, “Americans don’t have any bars on the windows of their houses and they don’t have any walls around them.” He was right, of course. While many Americans worry about crime and some about terrorism, few Americans have considered building a wall around their houses or putting iron bars on their windows. Some feel that it would spoil their view; others think it would be “unfriendly.” The man from Eastern Europe thought that Americans were very peculiar. How interesting different cultures are!

9. With the information in Part 4 in mind, discuss the following questions with your partner/team. If you have different answers, talk about why your answers are different. Try to find three answers that are the same:

List three things that you think are unique, different, or interesting about people from the United States.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

List three reasons why you believe that people are that way.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

10. Now discuss the following questions with your partner/team. Try to reach a consensus in your answers. Imagine that you and your partner/team are extraterrestrials— peaceful, intelligent creatures from another planet. You have been given the mission of spending a week researching life on earth. Write down 5 observations that you extraterrestrials might make about everyday life in the town/city where you (the student) are living now.

Examples:

1. **Most people live in small groups in houses or apartments.**
2. **Many women wear different clothes from one day to the next.**
3. **Some women wear the same shoes for several days in a row.**

Write your observations here:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

11. Now discuss the following with your partner. Try generalizing. You do not have to write your answers.

1. **What is important to people around the world?**
2. **Can you think of something that almost everyone thinks is good or bad?**
3. **Why do differences exist from country to country?**
4. **Do you think that these differences are a good thing or a bad thing?**
5. **How do people learn the rules of how to act and how to think?**
6. **If you could create a perfect world, would you have just one culture or permit many different cultures to exist? Why?**

12. Read the following information about making cultural generalizations.

The more people know about a culture, the more difficult they may find

It is to make generalizations about it. In particular cultures, people who live in the cities may be quite different from people who live in villages. Upper class people may live differently from middle class and lower class people. College graduates might have attitudes that are different from people with an elementary education. Regional differences exist in many countries, too. People from the south of a country may be different from people in the north, east, or west.

In addition, cultures change. If you look at an old movie, you may notice that people in the movie dress, talk, and behave differently from the way that people do today. Have you ever heard an older adult complain about the changes they see? You may have heard an older person say, “Young people today don’t have any manners.” Some people may think this statement is absolutely true because they are very unhappy with the changes that they see in modern life. Others may think that the statement is an overgeneralization. They might argue that most young people today have manners because they tend to act predictably around different people in different situations. However, most people would agree that young people’s manners today are, on the whole, quite different from the manners that young people used to display fifty to one hundred years ago.

(Grammar note: As mentioned before, in academic settings, when making a generalization, it is a good idea to say “some” “many” or “most” rather than taking the chance of making too strong a generalization. Notice in the paragraph above that the writer uses the phrase “on the whole” and the adverb “quite” to make the generalization softer. You can see that it is also possible to modify verbs so they are not so strong. Notice how the writer uses “may” and “might” and “tend to” in the paragraphs above so that the generalizations are expressed more carefully.)

13. Read the list of cultural features on the next page. Talk to your partner/team about the items on this list. Which ones are especially interesting to you? How do you think people in your native country feel about these features? How do you think Americans feel? (For practice, use “some,” “many,” “most,” “may,” and “might” as you speak. Some of you might want to try to use, “on the whole,” “speaking generally,” “tend to,” and “quite.”)

Features of Culture

1. Styles of clothes
2. Ways of greeting people
3. Beliefs about hospitality
4. Importance/Lack of importance of time
5. What paintings are famous
6. What values are important
7. What poems/books are famous
8. Beliefs about how to raise children (children and teens)
9. Attitudes about personal space/privacy
10. Beliefs about the responsibilities of children and teens to their family.
11. The life events that people celebrate
12. The holiday customs that people have
13. What music everyone knows
14. What styles of dancing are popular
15. Attitudes toward sick people
16. Beliefs about what is fair/unfair
17. Beliefs about friendship
18. Beliefs about physical punishment
19. What food is good and how it should taste
20. Where family members live
21. What facial expressions and hand gestures are used
22. Beliefs about what makes a person good or bad
23. Beliefs about work
24. Beliefs about religion
25. What is beautiful/ugly
26. What is polite/impolite behavior
27. Beliefs about males/females
28. Attitudes toward old age
29. The importance/lack of importance of family
30. Attitudes toward rich people, poor people

14. Write three features from the list that you and your partner believe are different in the United States from the way they are in your native country.

1.

2.

3.

15. Now look at the information below. Respond to each question.

Everyone Has a Culture—Is Everyone Different?

In a family, what is considered respectful and what is considered disrespectful? What manners are taught? (Think about the way young people should behave toward parents, and older people.)

People from my country:

What I have observed about Americans:

How often do people get together with their extended family (for example, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins)? What role do these relatives play in a person's life?

People from my country:

What I have observed about Americans:

Think about special occasions like going to a party, going to a religious place, attending a wedding. What do people wear and what do they do?

People from my country:

What I have observed about Americans:

Think about what makes people really angry. When/Why do they get angry? How do they express their anger?

People from my country:

What I have observed about Americans:

What obligations do parents have toward their children? (Think about obligations such as: food, clothing, medical care, a place to live, a college education, money, a job.) Do these obligations stop at a particular age? Do these obligations ever stop?

People from my country:

Who do people discriminate against? (Think about skin color, religion, educational level, physical disability, mental disability, gender, sickness, and poverty.) Do they discriminate against foreigners? How do they show this discrimination to those people?

People from my country:

What I have observed about Americans:

What I have observed about Americans:

16. Assignment (Journal: Culture)

Choose one of the following questions about your native country. Write your answer in a journal form and email it to your teacher. Be sure to put your name and date at the top and write "Journal 1: Culture" under your name.

1. How and why do people in your native country dress the way they do?
2. What are the foods that people in your native country eat, and how have they been taught to eat them?
3. How do polite people behave in your native country? How do you know they are being polite? What do they do? What do they say?
4. How do people in your native country feel about a college education? Do educated people act and speak differently from uneducated people? If so, how are they different?
5. How is your native culture (or American culture) changing? What changes have you seen in the last ten years? How do you feel about those changes?