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## **Engaging ELLs in Culture Activities in the Classroom**

by Ann C. Wintergerst

*Globalization* is a buzzword in our field today. It is obvious that technology is closing the distance gap with other parts of the world, but it is just as obvious that our students' main exposure to globalization is experienced in the language classroom through their varied cultural encounters. With this in mind, teachers are challenged to explore how culture can become an integral part of their ELL classes.

Second language research reminds us that the term *culture* is a rather general concept, comprising a multifaceted system of interacting elements. Culture pervades all aspects of human society and is infused into every area of life, influencing people's thinking, talking, and behaving. Kohls (2001) sees culture as "the sum of the way of life of any group of people" (p.26), while Ting-Toomey (1999) sees it 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" (p. 10). DeCapua and Wintergerst (2004; in press) see it as "the framework through which we understand and interpret the world around us" (p. 9).

Research supports that culture is a necessary component in the language classroom. Wintergerst and McVeigh (2011, p. 3) remind us that "culture is a far-reaching dynamic concept and an elaborate, ever-changing phenomenon" that affects how our students perceive the world around them and how they unravel the world. Since culture is also connected to language, to nonverbal communication, and to personal identity, among other activities, how can we help our students build an awareness of culture and its meaning in their lives? Involving our ELLs in engaging and challenging culture activities is one answer.

### **Three Research-Based Culture Activities**

The first activity that helps students better understand the concept of culture involves the formulation of their own definition of culture. Have your students work alone to complete the following sentence, written on the board:

Culture is \_\_\_\_\_.

When finished, break the class into small groups of 3 to 4 students to discuss their answers. Have each group share their ideas with the class; as they do, you might write their ideas on the board for students to copy and to remember them. Ask the class if there are any similarities or differences in the ideas listed. If so, what are they? Then have each group fill in the blank again, with only one agreed-upon answer for each group. Ask what they have learned from the activity.

If they can't think of anything, share with them how the different researchers cited above have defined culture.

The second activity follows up on the first. This time, students are asked to complete another sentence written on the board:

Culture is like a/an \_\_\_\_\_.

Tell your students that this fill-in-the-blank is an analogy that points to a resemblance in some ways between two things otherwise unlike. Break the students into groups of 3 to 4 to discuss the analogies they have written. Ask for volunteers to share their analogies and have them explain why they came up with their particular images. If they can't do this, offer some creative suggestions: melting pot, salad bowl, mosaic, pizza, tapestry, spider web, or clouds, and discuss these.

The third activity is to make your students aware of the hidden aspects of culture by pointing out the distinction between big "C" culture, or objective culture, and little "c" culture, or subjective culture. Peterson (2004) refers to big "C" culture as emphasizing classic or grand themes, while little "c" culture emphasizes minor or everyday common themes. He clarifies this distinction by using the iceberg image. Imagine the tip of an iceberg, which is visible, as referring to things that people have created, such as a culture's literature, classical music, architecture, historical figures, and geography, as the little "c" culture; then imagine the bottom of an iceberg, which is invisible, as referring to core values, attitudes or beliefs, society's norms, legal foundations, assumptions, history, and cognitive processes as the big "C" culture.

Make a chart on the board with the big "C" culture and little "c" culture categories and some representative examples. Have your students brainstorm other ideas to add to the chart. Big "C" culture examples will probably not be difficult; if they can't think of any examples for little "c" culture, however, offer some suggestion: gestures and posture, use of physical space, food and cooking, clothing and style, and popular music. Referring to the image of the iceberg, discuss with the class which aspects of their own culture are easily visible to those from another culture and which aspects seem hidden or more difficult to see.

### Conclusion

Research-based activities allow teachers and students to discover their own cultural background, to understand how culture influences their behavior, and to gain insights into the role that culture plays in their daily lives. ELLs are actively involved in these three culture activities, which have been adapted from those found in *Tips for Teaching Culture* (Wintergerst & McVeigh, 2011). Students work on these activities with their fellow classmates, who are often from other cultures, learning how others see them and how they see others. Involving ELLs in engaging and challenging culture activities is indeed one answer to how we can help our students build an awareness of culture and its meaning and impact in their lives.

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*Ann C. Wintergerst is professor of TESOL in the Department of Languages and Literatures at St. John's University. She has co-authored three culture books and various articles and has given conference presentations on different aspects of culture. <[winterga@stjohns.edu](mailto:winterga@stjohns.edu)>*