Strategies to Support Students with Cultural Misunderstandings: An Intercultural Approach
by Lucas Rezende Almeida

Introduction
This paper was inspired by my experience as an English language learner and professor in the United States. Before coming to the United States, in August 2015, I taught Portuguese as a second language for five years in my home country of Brazil, and researched intercultural approaches for two years. This past semester, I have been working as an exchange professor of Portuguese and studying English as a second language (ESL) at SUNY New Paltz. When I was learning all these approaches in my home country, I never could figure out how they figured in the learning process. But when I came to the United States and was the only Brazilian student in an ESL class with an American teacher and all Japanese or Chinese classmates, I could feel how difficult it is to learn a second language when you are “alone” in a class and, more important, you have completely different methods of learning.

Method
My research is based on an ethnographic study of ESL classes for students at the Haggerty English Language Program (HELP) at SUNY New Paltz, an intensive English program designed to prepare students for academic classes at the undergraduate or graduate level. Within HELP, I was both a student and an observer. In both capacities, I created notes about my class and, together with some readings about cultural misunderstandings, I developed strategies in order to help teachers create a friendly cultural atmosphere.

Research 1: Multi-Active, Active, and Passive Learners
Lewis (2006) creates three different kinds of categorizations to show how cultures are different and how an intercultural approach is important to help the education and business environment create a friendly atmosphere. In this perspective, Lewis divided society into three categories: multi-active, active, and passive people.
- Multi-active people do a lot of things simultaneously, are sometimes impatient, have close personal and professional relationships, and seek favors. Brazilians are an example of multi-active people.
- Active people are more directive, prefer to focus their attention on one thing at a time and have hierarchical relationships in their professional environment. The United States is an example of a society that is active.
- Passive people prefer to think and reflect first, are very patient, and live in a strict and hierarchical society. The Japanese are an example of this.

Research 2: Six Dimensions
Hofstede (2001) created a set of six categories, or dimensions, to show how cultures are different using a scale from 0 to 100. His research compares cultures by graphics, which makes an easy way to visualize the differences between cultures. In this paper, we will
explain two of the six dimensions.

The first dimension Hofstede (2001) created is Power Distance. The goals of the dimension are to try to understand how a society deals with the inequalities of power—the relationship between those who have it and those who don’t. Brazil, for example, is a country in which hierarchy should be respected and people accept the inequalities between them. In the United States, however, the idea of respecting the differences is much less than in Brazil, which creates an atmosphere in which the students can show their different perspectives without creating much conflict.

The second dimension is Individualism. This dimension means the degree of interdependence that members of society maintain between each other and how they interpret this connection. This conception is directly related to the way they see “I” (the individual) and “we” (the collective). In individualist societies, as America is, people focus on their own goals or on the goals of their family. In collectivist societies, such as Brazil, they believe that they belong to a group and thus need to take care of each other.

Hofstede’s (2001) other dimensions are Indulgence, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term Orientation, and Masculinity versus Femininity. In all of these other dimensions, you can see from his explanations how Asian, Brazilians, and Americans are classified.

Results and Conclusion

To summarize my research and experiences as a learner in the ESL classroom, I would like to share activities that foster all skill sets. The focus of these strategies is to prepare students not just to develop their intercultural knowledge but also to improve their communication with students from other parts of the world.

Reading and Writing Strategy. Write a comment about what is different between your culture and another one. Exchange your comment with another student who has a different background from yours. Comment on the point of view of the other student.

Listening and Speaking Strategy. Bring the activity from the Reading and Writing class to Listening and Speaking. Make a presentation to show your opinion to the class. Discuss the different behaviors between cultures in a friendly debate. Make a list in the class with some suggestions on how to create a better social environment in the class in order to minimize misunderstandings between cultures.

As a final point, this research shows the importance of including in the curriculum activities to help students overcome their fears and frustrations when they come to a new culture and be open to learning the second language. As this paper shows, Brazilians, Japanese, and Americans have different perspectives about how to live and because of this, professors need to support these students using activities to foster cross-cultural understanding.
References
[http://www.newpaltz.edu/esl/missionstatement.html](http://www.newpaltz.edu/esl/missionstatement.html)

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