

REFLECTING ON HIDDEN CULTURAL RULES - PART ONE

This week’s Teacher’s Corner encourages students to think critically about the unspoken rules and expectations of different cultures. Because English is a lingua franca—a common language used by speakers with different native languages—the ability to successfully navigate different cultural expectations is becoming more and more valuable.

As noted by K. David Harrison in his book *The Last Speakers*, “languages abound in ‘cultural knowledge,’ which is neither genetic nor explicitly learned, but comes to us in an information package—rich and hierarchical in its structure” (p. 58). Every language has its own cultural “information package,” including English. However, because English is studied and spoken by so many different types of people from various backgrounds, there is not one set of unspoken rules or expectations for all English speakers. Rather, as teachers of English, we must prepare our students to be aware of differences and be ready to work through any potential miscommunications that may occur.

ACTIVITY: GENERATING A LIST OF BEHAVIORS AND PLANNING A SKIT

Time: 60 minutes

Goals:

- To help students reflect on what defines culture and to understand that different cultural groups have rules and expectations that may not always be communicated directly.
- To listen, speak, read, and write about culture in English.

Materials: Culture Group Descriptions (Appendix A), Example Scenario (Appendix B), poster/chart paper, different color markers, student notebooks, pencils

Preparation:

1. Decide how you will divide your class into groups. There should ideally be a minimum of four groups with 3 to 6 students in each one. If you have a small or large class, adjust groups accordingly.
2. Prepare copies of the Culture Group Descriptions and cut them into fourths for distribution. Note that each group of students will be assigned a single culture description (1, 2, 3, or 4). If your class

is divided into more than four groups, you can assign the same description to multiple groups, but each group will need its own copy.

3. Figure out how you will share the Example Scenario with students, such as by projecting it or making copies.

Procedure:

1. Begin by asking students what they think *culture* means. They can discuss this in small groups or as a whole class.
2. Create a Culture Thinking Map on chart/poster paper by writing *culture* in a circle in the middle. As students share their ideas with the class, draw lines coming out of the circle to record students' responses.
3. Explain to students, "Every cultural group has visible or spoken elements that are easy to see and understand. These are things like common celebrations, foods, clothing, and music. Additionally, we can also observe common ways of interacting such as greetings and goodbyes. However, every culture also has rules and expectations that are not discussed, directly taught, or easy for other people to see."
4. Tell students that they are going to participate in an activity to examine some of the parts of culture that are not as easy to see.
5. Have students get into groups according to the plan you prepared before starting the activity.
6. Continue by explaining that each group will be assigned one description of a fictional culture. Working together, the groups should discuss the description and write down a list of behaviors they believe that members of their assigned cultural group would show in a conversation or interaction.
7. Model this portion of the activity by choosing one or two of the characteristics from a Culture Group Description. Talk to students about what behaviors a person might show during a conversation or interaction as a result of each characteristic. Record responses in a chart as shown below.

Characteristic of Culture	Corresponding Behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Low level of gestures</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Does not talk with hands or explain things using movements</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Direct eye contact is a sign of respect</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Looks people in the eyes during conversation</i>

8. Have students create the same chart in their notebooks. Working together, each group should discuss the characteristics from the assigned description. Students should write down a list of behaviors they believe that members of their assigned cultural group would show in a conversation or interaction.
9. Once groups have had adequate time to prepare a list of behaviors, tell students that they will now be given an example scenario. Say, “Using this scenario and the list of behaviors you wrote, your group will create a skit. The skit must be about the example scenario and the actors must demonstrate as many of the behaviors as possible. You will perform this skit for the rest of the class. Based on your skit, your classmates will try to determine some of the characteristics of your culture, so keep this in mind as you are working.”
10. Display or distribute the example scenario, review it with students, and answer any questions they may have.
11. As groups work on writing their skits, move around the room to ensure students understand the assignment. Note that not every student from a group must act in the skit, but all group members should help to write it.
12. Students should write down a script or at least an outline of their skit in their notebooks in order to continue during the next class.
13. Provide time for students to practice their skits. If needed, review each group’s culture description, list of behaviors, and skit to offer suggestions.
14. After the activity is complete, collect all materials for use during upcoming classes.

In the next activity in this month’s Teacher’s Corner, students will perform and observe skits and work with classmates to describe each culture group.

Reference:

Harrison, K. D. (2010). *The Last Speakers: The Quest to Save the World’s Most Endangered Languages*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society.