



Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 20

3-27-1981

Culture Shock: Helping Our Students Adjust

Neil J. Anderson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Anderson, Neil J. (1981) "Culture Shock: Helping Our Students Adjust," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol7/iss1/20>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

CULTURE SHOCK: HELPING OUR STUDENTS ADJUST

Neil J. Anderson
Brigham Young University

A businessman from Japan arrived here at BYU a year ago to study English as a second language. Having studied English in Japan for seven years he felt that it would be an easy adjustment. The first few months of his experience were exciting. The United States was a beautiful, friendly country. He enjoyed being with Americans and other foreign students.

There were periods of adjustment but during his ninth month here this student, who appeared to have adjusted, went into the critical stage of culture shock. He suddenly disliked American food and his roommate didn't allow him to play his guitar, which for this student was important. He stopped attending classes at the ELC and completely withdrew from social activities.

This student's experience is not atypical. Many foreign students experience a similar period of adjustment. Understanding culture and culture shock with its symptoms will help us assist students like this businessman adjust to their educational experience here in the United States.

Philip Bock offered a helpful definition of culture: when he said that "culture, in its broadest sense, is what makes you a stranger when you are away from home. It includes all those beliefs and expectations about how people should speak and act which have become a kind of second nature to you as a result of social learning." (Bock, 1970).

Everett Kleinjans further defines culture as "a set of ways of communicating which can be learned somewhat as a language is learned" (Kleinjans, 1975).

Culture and language are inseparable, especially when the language is learned in its host environment. Language is a part of the total behavior of man and his behavior, in turn, influences his language. Effective language teaching is characterized by an awareness that language is itself an integral part of the behavior system of a people, and at the same time a means for the expression and summing up of this system or culture (Herscovici, 1976).

Before a teacher can create the proper atmosphere for language instruction he/she must be aware of the process of acculturation. In 1954, a cultural anthropologist, Kalervo Oberg, introduced the concept of culture shock (Oberg, 1954). He defined culture shock as "a mental

illness" that when suffered "the victim usually does not know he is afflicted" (Oberg, 1954).

Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all one's familiar cues. These cues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves. It is caused in part from the inability to communicate.

When we as teachers in the multicultural classroom understand culture shock, we will be better prepared to help our students adjust. Helping them to realize that a period of adjustment is a challenge but that as they become more familiar with the language and customs their cultural conflict will pass.

Oberg identified four phases of culture shock. Phase I is characterized by excitement and fascination toward the new culture. Many have referred to this phase as the "honeymoon" stage (Oberg, 1955; Intercultural Communication, 1976). You are pleased with the politeness of your hosts, living conditions, the language is so "real," it is exciting. Many people in this phase see others from their own culture in a different stage of culture shock and wonder why they are having such a difficult time adjusting when they seem to have adjusted in only a few days. This stage may last anywhere from a few days to a few weeks, sometimes longer.

When the honeymoon is over the critical phase of culture shock begins. The second phase is characterized by rejection of the language, the food, the people, everything dealing with the host culture. It is in this stage that Oberg refers to the concept of "mental illness." This stage is also characterized by complaints about the host culture and blaming everything on them. This phase can last up to six months. If it lasts longer the person usually returns home.

As you gradually begin to adjust to the language and customs you move into the third phase. It is easier to understand the host culture although you may never fully accept it. This third phase is referred to as the adjustment phase.

The fourth phase is often referred to as "biculturalism." You feel completely comfortable in both the host culture and your own.

It is interesting to note that almost anyone who goes abroad will pass through the four phases of culture shock in one form or another. Some have a longer period of adjustment than others. You may pass through these phases, although it may be less severe, everytime you encounter a new cultural experience. You do not become immune to culture shock.

Working at the English Language Center has given me an interest in the study of culture shock and its effects on students. We know very little about the effects of culture shock. The literature is largely descriptive and anecdotal (Warner, 1976).

In order to better look at the effects of culture shock, a culture shock questionnaire was prepared and administered to seventy-four

students in the English Language Center during January of 1981. The subjects ranged from a few weeks to one year in length of time here in the United States. There were eight language backgrounds represented: Finnish, French, Indonesian, Japanese, Kpelle, Spanish, Swedish and Serbo Croatian.

The questionnaire consisted of thirty-eight items dealing with six cultural areas: (1) language, (2) interpersonal relationships, (3) societal attitudes, (4) systems and processes, (5) sexuality, and (6) climate. The students rated on a five-point Likert scale (one being very hard and five being very easy) the difficulty of adjustment of the thirty-eight items. The items and cultural areas were obtained from Intercultural Communicating a resource book on intercultural communication. There were two open-ended items on the survey soliciting information from the students as to what they felt was the most difficult adjustment for them. Language use and pronunciation were listed most frequently as their most difficult adjustment. Also solicited was information as to advice that they would give to someone from their country who was preparing to come to the U.S. to study. No one piece of advice was repeated significantly. Not eating too much, studying hard, and not imposing your culture were a few of the items given. (See appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire.)

Results

The thirty-eight items were combined into six major areas and a t-test of independent means was calculated comparing the results by language group and by the length of time the students had been in the United States.

Table 1 shows the six areas as the students rated them with respect to difficulty of adjustment. (Language being the most difficult and systems and procedures being the least difficult.)

Table 1

Difficulty of Adjustment
in Cultural Areas

-
-
1. Language
 2. Sexuality
 3. Societal Attitudes
 4. Climate
 5. Interpersonal Relations
 6. Systems and Procedures
-

The two major language backgrounds represented were Japanese and Spanish. A t-test of independent means was calculated to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in adjustment of Japanese versus Spanish speaking students. Table 2 gives the results of the t-test.

Table 2
Results of t-test of independent means
Japanese vs. Spanish speaking
student responses

Area	t-value	level of significance
1. Language	2.753	.01 level
2. Sexuality	2.359	.05 level
3. Societal Attitudes	.099	not significant
4. Climate	.966	not significant
5. Interpersonal Relations	.363	not significant
6. Systems and Procedures	-.920	not significant

The areas of language and sexuality were statistically more difficult for the Japanese students to adjust to than the Spanish speaking students.

A second t-test was calculated to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between two groups divided by the amount of time spent here in the U.S. The subjects were placed into group 1 if they had been here three months or less and group 2 if they had been here four months or more. There were exactly fifty-three students that fell in each group. Table 3 shows the results of this t-test.

Table 3
Results of t-test of independent means
Length of Time in the United States

Area	t-value	level of significance
1. Language	.9391	not significant
2. Sexuality	.1859	not significant
3. Societal Attitudes	.6979	not significant
4. Climate	5.0821	.001 level
5. Interpersonal Relations	1.1943	.10 level
6. Systems and Procedures	.3434	not significant

The results of this particular survey suggest that the climate and interpersonal relations were areas more difficult to adjust to for the students who had been here three months or less.

Conclusion

Knowing where our students are in their cultural adjustment will help us to assist them in passing from one phase to another. Our goal as teachers should not be to eliminate culture shock for it can be beneficial to be culturally shaken up. Nor should it be our goal to get our students to phase four of biculturalism. Some foreign students get to a phase four then do not want to return to their own countries because they want to stay here in the U.S. Thus they defeat their purpose of learning English.

As teachers in a multicultural and multilanguage classroom we should be aware of the stages and symptoms of culture shock. Helping our students realize they will pass through these phases will help them in their adjusting situations. Students can learn things they can do to help themselves and their classmates pass through the phases.

Developing a cultural awareness in the minds of students and teachers is important. Ina Corinne Brown has stated what our purpose should be:

It does not matter how culturally diverse we are so long as we agree on certain basic values, one of which must be respect for one another's cultural differences. Our problem is how to live together, not how to become alike (Brown, 1963).

REFERENCES

- Bock, Philip K.
1970 Culture Shock: A Reader in Modern Cultural Anthropology.
New York: A. A. Knoph Company.
- Brown, Ina Corinne
1963 Understanding Other Cultures. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey:
Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Calhoun, Theodore Warner
1977 "Culture Shock and its effects on American Teachers in
overseas schools: An exploratory Study." Ph.D. dissertation,
University of Massachusetts.
- Foster, George M.
1962 Traditional Cultures: and the Impact of Technological Change.
New York: Harper and Row Publishers.
- Hall, Edward T.
1959 The Silent Language. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publishing.
- Herscovici Nurit
1976 "Analysis of Culture Shock in a class of English for Speakers
of Other Languages." M.A. thesis, Hunter College, The City
University of New York.
- Intercultural Communicating
1976 Language and Intercultural Research Center. Provo, Utah:
Brigham Young University.
- Oberg, Kalervo
1954 Culture Shock and the Problem of Adjustment to New Cultural
Environments. Speech given 3 August 1954. Reprinted in
Practical Anthropology 7 (July-August 1960), 177-82.
- Saville-Troike, Muriel
1976 Foundations for Teaching English as a Second Language.
Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.: 45-64.
- Seelye, Ned A.
1976 Teaching Culture. Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company.
- Steele, Mark A.
1976 "Cultural Adjustment of ESL Students with the Wasatch Front."
M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University.

Appendix A

	VERY HARD	HARD	AVERAGE	EASY	VERY EASY
1. Learning what people like to talk about	1	2	3	4	5
2. Knowing how to act toward police	1	2	3	4	5
3. Learning what is offensive to people	1	2	3	4	5
4. Understanding American art	1	2	3	4	5
5. Understanding American men	1	2	3	4	5
6. Understanding American women	1	2	3	4	5
7. Knowing how to recognize approval or disapproval	1	2	3	4	5
8. Understanding when people talk fast	1	2	3	4	5
9. Understanding jokes	1	2	3	4	5
10. Learning how close to stand when talking to another person.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Understanding how people in the U.S. feel about other nations or cultures	1	2	3	4	5
12. Understanding attitudes about money and success	1	2	3	4	5
13. Adjusting to the cold weather here	1	2	3	4	5
14. Understanding American adults	1	2	3	4	5
15. Understanding American students	1	2	3	4	5
16. Understanding American religions	1	2	3	4	5
17. Understanding the pronunciation of Americans	1	2	3	4	5
18. Learning how to ask for a date	1	2	3	4	5
19. Knowing what to do on a date	1	2	3	4	5
20. Knowing how much things should cost	1	2	3	4	5
21. Learning how to greet people	1	2	3	4	5
22. Learning how to use banks	1	2	3	4	5
23. Ordering food at a restaurant	1	2	3	4	5
24. Understanding American shopping plazas	1	2	3	4	5
25. Understanding old American women	1	2	3	4	5
26. Understanding the American family	1	2	3	4	5

	VERY HARD	HARD	AVERAGE	EASY	VERY EASY
27. Understanding American movies	1	2	3	4	5
28. Registering at the ELC	1	2	3	4	5
29. Adjusting to American clothing	1	2	3	4	5
30. Understanding the educational system	1	2	3	4	5
31. Understanding American names	1	2	3	4	5
32. Competition in the schools	1	2	3	4	5
33. Getting help when sick or in an emergency	1	2	3	4	5
34. Getting others to understand my English	1	2	3	4	5
35. Adjusting to American friends	1	2	3	4	5
36. Adjusting to American faces	1	2	3	4	5
37. Understanding American history	1	2	3	4	5
38. Understanding American fathers	1	2	3	4	5
39. What one thing did you have the most difficulty adjusting to?					
40. What would you tell someone from your own culture or country to help them prepare to come to this culture?					