Culture bump and beyond

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Rare is the ESL teacher who has not heard or told a variation of the story about the student who comes to his office, bringing a friend to translate. The message this enterprising student wishes to convey is something to the effect, “Please teacher you must to move me to high level.” The story elicits groans of recognition and prompts listening ESL practitioners to roll their eyes heavenward. Other such stories universally recognized by members of the TESL profession pertain to the student who inevitably comes late, interrupting the class while entering; the student who promises daily to bring her paper “tomorrow”; the shy student who refuses to participate despite the teacher’s best efforts; and, of course, the student who talks incessantly during the class. In each of these cases, the individual who suffers the most is the teacher.

On the other side of the coin, there is the Asian student who sits in shock as his teacher bounces into the room and announces familiarly, “Hi, my name is Karen! I’m your teacher and I’m sure we’re going to have a great time together!”; or the Arab who is bewildered by his teacher’s angry outburst when he politely tries to explain why he was late to class — again — before taking his seat; or, of course, the Latin who is genuinely puzzled that his next door neighbor doesn’t even let him into her apartment when he drops by, giving the excuse that she has to study, when only last week she had told him to come by “anytime.” When Hong sits with his Asian friends and relates the story of his extraordinary teacher, they smile and nod and tell about their equally outrageous teachers (or some that are even worse!). Arab eyes roll when Hassan tells his tale to his friends, and groans of recognition greet Joaquin’s story to his friends.

All across North America, little culturally homogeneous groups gather and recount their encounters with “them,” nod in agreement that “they” are weird, cold, aggressive, pushy, too shy, not friendly, too friendly, clannish, rude — and go on their way with a leery eye on “them.” Thus are the seeds of cultural stereotypes sown.

What has happened in each of these cases is a culture bump followed by a mirroring process (discussed on p. 176). A culture bump occurs when an individual from one culture finds himself or herself in a different, strange, or uncomfortable situation when interacting with persons of a different culture. This phenomenon results from a difference in the way people from one culture behave in a particular situation from people in another culture. Since the purpose of this article is to inform teachers, most of the focus will be on the teacher rather than on the student, with explication of what happens to the student in the process.

Certain situations (e.g., arriving late to class) exist in all cultures, and each culture develops particular responses that are labeled “polite” for these situations; for example, North American culture teaches university students who are late for class to enter quietly without knocking and sit down, while Chinese culture teaches university students to knock, offer an explanation, and wait for the teacher’s permission to enter. A culture bump occurs when an individual has expectations of one behavior and gets something completely different. The unexpected behavior can be negative (as in the examples at the beginning of this article) or neutral (as when an individual has become accustomed to a behavior) or positive (as when a North American is pleasantly surprised by being kissed on the cheek when greeted by a Latin American). Unlike culture shock, which extends over an extended period of time, culture bumps are instantaneous, usually over within minutes or even seconds, though the effect may be long-lasting, and can occur any time one is in contact with members of a different culture. One does not have to leave one’s own culture in order to experience a culture bump. Certainly the ideal is gradually to eliminate the negative culture bumps, leaving the neutral and positive ones.

Indeed, culture bumps provide a gold mine for the international educator. They lead teacher and student alike to an awareness of self as a cultural being and provide an opportunity for skill development in extrapolating one cultural influence on everyday life, expressing feelings effectively in a cross-cultural situation, and observing behavior. The entire process is language in action, leading to general improvement in communication in the target language.

In order to illustrate how a culture bump is analyzed, let us take the example of the teacher who has a culture bump with a student who talks incessantly in class. This bump, taken from the teacher’s point of view, can be processed in the following steps:

1. Pinpoint some time when I have felt “different” or noticed something different when I was with someone from another culture.

   I notice Joséfa talking in class at the same time that I am talking.

2. Define the situation.

   A university classroom in which I am lecturing.

3. List the behaviors of the other person.

   Joséfa leaned over to Maria and spoke in a whisper for 30 seconds.
4. List my own behavior.
   I looked at Joséfina, faltered in speaking, looked at my notes, looked back at her. I said, “Joséfina, do you have a question?”

5. List my feelings in the situation.
   I felt angry, uncertain (that I was doing a good job), humiliated (that she did this in front of the other students), disrespected.

6. List the behaviors I expect from people in my own culture in that same situation.
   I expect students not to talk when I am talking.

7. Reflect on the underlying value in my culture that prompts that behavior expectation.
   In American concepts of time, the idea of monochronic time is dominant. In other words, only one thing at a time can be done comfortably. Taking turns is important in all situations, from people talking to stopping at four-way stop signs, and is associated with polite behavior.
   (If one wants to teach the concept of culture bump in class, step number eight would be to take this new-found cultural insight and apply it in designing role plays or lectures for teaching others about their cultures.)

The teacher now has the base for asking two critical questions. The first is asked of Joséfina: “Why did you talk while I was talking?” Upon receiving the answer, “I hadn’t understood what you said and I didn’t want to be impolite and interrupt you, so I asked my friend,” the teacher reflects: “How do students in my culture handle that situation in a polite way?” The teacher then teaches the answer to Joséfina, reassuring her that she knows that Joséfina was attempting to be polite and showing Joséfina how to express her intention of politeness in this culture. Both parties are now in a position to begin to comprehend the other’s behavior. In many cases, this mere comprehension will be sufficient to defuse the incident and clear the way for better understanding in the future. The key to the interaction is that the teacher approaches the student rationally certain (even if not emotionally certain) that the student’s reaction was cultural and not personal, thereby giving the student the benefit of the doubt.

The teacher has now moved beyond the culturally biased judgmental stage (example: Joséfina is rude) to the “comprehension of other” stage (example: She did that because she is monochronic and because she was trying to be polite to me) and to the “self-comprehension” stage (example: I reacted because I am monochronic and am oriented to different behavior). By moving through these three stages, the teacher is able to comprehend the situation as it becomes depersonalized and is placed within a cultural context.

Normally when people from differing cultures interact and some type of conflict results, they do not have the vocabulary to express that conflict in an objective way. In fact, the conflict would probably not be mentioned out loud. If a teacher were to describe the situation, it would be a personal evaluation of the student’s behavior, as in “He’s always talking out loud in class and driving me nuts.” The words used to characterize the other person in such situations are frequently pejorative. Once the teacher perceives these encounters as culture bumps, however, he can distinguish and categorize his experience in a new way. Whereas before, the incident could only be categorized as a personal conflict, it is now removed from that level and eased into a cultural level. Not only is the objective view more rational, but this cultural level is safer emotionally, and at best it even invites further exploration. This depersonalization of an incident allows, even encourages, an individual to seek more and more interaction with members of the other culture. Rather than moving through their midst with a leery eye, he begins to move among them with an eager eye — looking for culture bumps.

Paradoxically, by first depersonalizing the situation, the individuals can approach one another on a truly personal level, much more intimate than typically (if ever) occurs in a short time span for people in cross-cultural situations. In our example, the teacher, rather than having an unconscious assumption that Latin Americans talk during class, now has a conscious assumption that Latins are polite, and that most of them are not aware of the appropriate way to express that politeness in an American classroom.

Depersonalization makes possible the expression of emotions in such a way that neither participant is damaged; rather, both experience an increase of trust and willingness to communicate. The individual begins by revealing his reactions, making it evident that he is aware that he, himself, is responsible for his feelings. Rather than saying, “Your rudeness made me feel angry” or “You hurt me,” he simply states, “I feel angry, frustrated, and hurt.” This acknowledges his feelings without placing blame for those feelings on the other, and allows both to take a major step forward in the communication process. The controlled sequence ensures not only that emotions are expressed but that the incident is accurately defined. That is to say, the individual must describe his and the other’s actions as observable behavior. His own interpretation and evaluations have no place in processing the culture bump. This ability to separate observable behavior from personal interpretation and then to label it accurately, as exemplified in step number three, is fundamental to being able to depersonalize the incident and express emotions.

Once a teacher has learned to analyze his role in the culture bump process, he is ready to use culture bump with the students as a way of
teaching cultural awareness and language simultaneously. The teacher is the obvious “knower” of the target language and through experience and/or should have garnered numerous instances of discrepancies between the target culture and the cultures of the students. He may elicit further examples through discussion sessions in which students are queried about what bothers them in the behavior of people in the target culture. Armed with this information, he explains the culture bump process to the students, making sure that they understand the reason for what may seem to them a purposeless game that consumes valuable time which should be devoted to more obvious language learning exercises.

Using what he knows of disparate cultures, or taking the example supplied by a student, the teacher devises a situation that is sure to result in conflict, and assigns the selected students to role-play the situation. Clearly, the controlled culture bump must be based on observable behavior, but it must also include the expression of reactions of the participants and of other members of the class. Here is an example taken from a heterogeneous class studying English. Two women students, one South American and one Asian, are told to assume that after being in the same class for several weeks, they happen to meet socially at a party. They are simply told to greet each other. Typically, the South American is effusive and rushes over to kiss her classmate on the cheek. The Asian’s inclination is merely to stand where she is, smile, and say “Hello,” and possibly “How are you?” The result is predictable. Led to express their reactions openly and objectively, through the steps described in the culture bump analysis, the South American feels rejected, disliked, cold-shouldered, while the Asian feels set upon, her space violated, the victim of aggressive behavior. The instructor then opens the discussion to the whole class in a search for the meaning of the incident. The teacher plays the role of moderator, attempting to lead the discussion in the right direction, but may have to provide further explanation if class discussion does not achieve the desired conclusion. The question that arises, naturally enough, is “What should be done to avoid the negative results?” If all goes well, this should lead to an acceptance of one another’s cultural bias, and a willingness to try to meet somewhere in between. Humans being what they are, results are not always what one plans, but the percentages are very good.

If there are no representatives of the target culture in the class, the teacher would also explain what the behavior of someone from that culture would probably be, given the same situation. At other times, the teacher will take part in the role play in order to demonstrate target culture behavior.

The linguistic advantage to the controlled culture bump process is clearly to be seen in the requisite exchange of ideas that students are anxious to communicate.

Another way of processing culture bumps is through ethnic group dramatizations, which lead to the same sort of discussions that the one-on-one role play produces. After dividing the class into cultural groups, the teacher assigns situations, or scenes, for each group to work out and present for the class. After each group reaches a consensus on what “typical” behavior of their culture would be in the circumstances and presents its version of the scene, the entire group discusses similarities and differences, and learns from the teacher what the target culture presentation would probably be like, if it differs from all the others. An example is a classroom in the native culture. The set-up is to have one student enact the teacher, the others enact the students, and one student assigned to arrive late. The scene is not too different from one group to another before the arrival of the teacher, with the students chatting among themselves, but differences occur upon the arrival of the teacher. To use the Asians as an example, all conversation ceases and the students all rise and remain standing until the teacher reaches the lectern and indicates that they may be seated. Complete silence is maintained as the teacher calls the roll, except for responses as names are called. The tardy student arrives at the door and knocks, waiting for permission to enter. The teacher nods and the student comes in and respectfully tells the teacher why he is late and asks to be excused. The teacher tells him to avoid such tardiness in future and allows him to sit. As he calls on each student, the student stands to recite and sits again when the teacher’s nod gives permission. All is based on a rote form of learning. A student who is not prepared and cannot give a correct answer is reproved, and meets with disfavor from the other students, as well as from the teacher. The students do not leave until the teacher exits.

After the group concludes its performance, other students ask questions about what they have seen, eventually getting to the values that underlie the behavior. After all the presentations are completed, the class discusses the differences without making value judgments. When all the groups have played their scenes – possibly only one per class period – a further discussion ensues, including a comparison with the target culture, resulting in an understanding of what would be expected of the student in the target culture and how misinterpretation could occur if a student used his own classroom behavior in the target culture classroom. In other words, the students conceive the likelihood and nature of culture bumps.

Other examples of situations for dramatic presentation are arriving at someone’s home for a dinner party; a group of friends together at dinner in a restaurant; a group reacting to someone mistreating an
animal, or to a robbery; a husband and wife and their children deciding to move or stay where they are (to note differences in involvement of various members of the family); businessmen gathering for a meeting; women at a social event for women only; students who feel their professor has graded their tests unfairly and want something done about it; a family at the dinner table; a political rally.

Role plays can be videotaped or tape-recorded and, once the cultural analysis has been made, can be used for teaching language. Using an adaptation of the Community Learning method, the teacher makes a script of the role play, which is used to teach vocabulary and idioms in context, grammar, and pronunciation. In this way the learning of the target language is placed within the total context of the students’ personal experiences as well as the all-pervasive cultural influences. One could hardly find a method for teaching language more communicatively.

The mirroring process, in which the individual checks out his experience of the other person with members of his own culture, assumes a new, more positive role. Rather than being the breeding ground for cultural stereotypes, the classroom becomes the laboratory for testing the validity of a culture bump; that is, Was my reaction a cultural one or a personal one? If members of one’s own culture all agree with the individual’s reaction, there is a good chance the reaction was cultural. This process works for the teachers, too; thus those “war stories” told in the teacher’s lounge assume new shapes—they now hold the possibility of reflection and new personal and professional growth. In fact, those “outrageous” behaviors that everyone experiences become candidates for serious cultural analysis.

I have emphasized the teacher in this article because I believe very strongly that the culture bump should first be rigorously applied to the teacher’s experiences before it is applied to those of the students. Without a visceral as well as rational knowledge of it, there exists the risk of the culture bump being used as a club over the head of the student or as a subtle method of having students give up their “bad” behavior and learn how to “do it right.” The teacher’s own involvement in the culture bump process, both in the formal, controlled role plays and in the unstructured cross-culture experiences both in and out of the classroom, is quite likely to result in an almost embarrassing realization of himself as a cultural being. It seems that almost always the insight one has of oneself as a cultural being is accompanied by a feeling of embarrassment or of being “found out.” The teacher can watch for this both in himself and in his students and point it out as a very good sign, leading to a new, more profoundly based appreciation, not only of cultural differences, but of one’s own cultural characteristic that has been uncovered.

In implementing this method there are several concerns that the facilitator should take into consideration:

1. Being sensitive to how different cultures learn, both in methods and in time needed to integrate new learning, and to the processing of what may be very personal, emotional experiences for the individual student.
2. In a class with students from varied cultural backgrounds, an awareness of how they respond to high-student-involvement learning methods, such as the culture bump. This can mean the difference between success and failure. Generally speaking, Western cultures will readily adapt to self-analysis and role play. Since these methodologies are familiar ones to them, the teacher will need only to explain what he expects of them and spend a minimum of time giving feedback and motivating them. Experience has revealed that students from Asia take a longer time than Western students to participate fully, but once they do begin the process their involvement is profound and they produce extremely effective results. Middle Easterners tend to require a longer period of time than the other two to become truly involved.
3. How the culture bumps are initiated. Because the method frequently relies on the student choosing an incident that stands out in his memory, it has the potential for psychological harm. Great care must be taken that the teacher, as facilitator, never belittles or rejects the student’s choice nor permits other students to do so. If a student chooses it, it is valid—even if it causes misgivings.
4. Stereotyping. The teacher must make it abundantly clear that all Asian classrooms are not exactly the same, that all businessmen of a certain culture do not behave in just the same way when gathering for a meeting, and all Americans do not ask their children whether they would prefer to move across town or stay where they are. The best antidote to stereotyping may be found in the difficulties each ethnic group encounters in agreeing on their own ethnic behavior.

After all the tocsins are sounded, the culture bump remains an effective and pleasurable method for teaching both culture and language.

Questions for consideration

1. Have you ever experienced a culture bump? Describe it, and its consequences.
2. How does the culture bump help one to understand one’s own culture?
3. How can the culture bump be used to reduce prejudice? Is it usable between subcultures of the same main culture?
4. Is the culture bump more suitable for use with children or adults? Why?
5. What are the dangers of the culture bump in the classroom if discussion is not properly guided?

18 The culture test
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As the teaching of culture has become an accepted part of the foreign language course, teachers are realizing how broad and deep this subject matter really is.

Culture in the broad sense has two major components: anthropological or sociological culture: the attitudes, customs, activities of a people, their ways of thinking, their values, and of reference. Since language is a direct manifestation of culture, a society cannot be totally understood or appreciated unless a knowledge of its language. The other component is the history of civilization. Traditionally representing the "culture" in foreign language teaching, it includes geography, history, governments in the sciences, the social sciences, and the arts.

The first component forms the framework for the first: it represents the "essence" of a people and as such must be appreciated by the student to understand the new target culture.

As language teachers strive to introduce their students to their culture so as to free these young people from the straitjacket of monoculturalism, some specialists are beginning to warn of the perils of total immersion into the great tradition of a second high culture. Mead writes:

When students saturate themselves deeply and meaningfully with culture and language, and that in a high culture with whose modes they engage in sophisticated discourse, they tend to become locked into a we-they position, in which one language and culture tends to stand higher, than the other.... There is no doubt that learning a language in a releasing activity and is much more difficult than learning two languages. But we need to go further and consider how to avoid from the various traps that lie in the intense immersion in a foreign culture, whether it be the trap of romanticism, of finding a common excessive guilt over past imperialism and western chauvinism.