

Teaching Social Rules of Behavior

by Patricia Sullivan

In my career as an ESL teacher, I have often been called upon to teach short, intensive ESP classes to groups of students who have just arrived in the United States. Since the classes are an introduction to American life as well as language, we often deal with questions of social behavior.

As teachers, we know that teaching "correct behavior" is important, but in doing so we need to address a key question: What is the best way to teach these rules of social behavior? On field trips, situations where the students violate American social standards often arise, but I have found it difficult to "correct" this behavior without being embarrassed or appearing too critical. Through trial and error, I have come up with a technique that develops an awareness of new rules of behavior by beginning with the students' own cultural perspectives. The idea is that by becoming more aware of what they take for granted, students will be more sensitive to others and other cultural points of view.

Preparation

While the class is in session, over a period of at least several weeks, the teacher observes and makes notes of situations, actions, or phrases which have resulted in, or might result in, a cultural misunderstanding. These may include questions that the students bring to class about why a certain event occurs, as well as actual situations that the teacher observes. This preparation could take several weeks or longer, depending on how often the class meets, and how often the teacher can observe the students in "real-life" situations. The more the teacher is with the class on trips, in stores, in homes, or with native speakers outside the classroom, the more effective the teacher will be in gathering information.

The events or situations which have been collected are then written simply in short paragraphs so that the students can read them easily. The paragraphs depict an event, and are then followed by a few questions concerning the reasons for the described

behavior. The situation described can be changed slightly so that no particular student in the class recognizes him- or herself.

A situation I found common in my intensive classes was one in which my women students would pick up and kiss babies that they saw while we were out on field trips. The American mother usually seemed alarmed and offended seeing her baby being picked up by strangers. Using this situation, the paragraph for class work might look like this:

A woman sees a baby playing in a park. The baby's mother is on a bench nearby. The woman thinks of her own child, and goes to the baby. She talks to the baby, pinches her cheek, and picks her up. She does not talk to the baby's mother. How does the woman feel?
How does the baby's mother feel?

Before beginning the class activity, the teacher should have between one-third and one-half the number of situations as there are students in the class. The situations are then duplicated so that there are at least two or three copies of each situation.

Also before beginning the class activity, one copy of each situation is given to an American to fill out. More than one may be given out to get a wider range of responses. These are then kept by the teacher until after the class members have responded to their situations.

Class Activity

To begin the class activity, the situations are distributed to the students, with at least two students getting duplicate papers. The students first read and answer the questions on their papers individually. Then they find the student who has the same situation, and they compare answers. They reread and discuss the situation and the questions together, and can add to or

change their answers if they wish. If they disagree with each other's interpretations, they should discuss alternative answers that they can agree upon. The situation as written will probably be brief, and may leave out information which the students feel they need in order to answer the questions. If so, they can discuss the problem and add new information to the situation. The teacher should not interfere with the students, but let them come to some agreement by themselves as to what the situation means and what the people described are feeling. The students can assume that the event takes place in their own country if they wish. The important consideration is that they are interpreting the characters' feelings through their own cultural perspective.

After agreeing on some interpretations of behavior and feelings, the pairs (or small groups) demonstrate their situation for the

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whole class. The demonstrations are somewhat impromptu, though the students have had time to discuss ways to present the situations and the characters' feelings. Props can be used, if desired. The other members of the class who observe the demonstration may wish to add other interpretations of the behavior. Of course, the students always give answers and interpretations from their own points-of-view on the basis of their own cultures since that is what they are familiar with. Since all the situations have already occurred in "real life" (which was the reason for choosing them), the students are familiar with them, having experienced them personally. Therefore, they are meaningful to the students. In all classes in which I have used this activity, exciting and interesting conversations have evolved. In fact, since the students had per-

sonally taken part in such situations, and were possibly confused by them, it was hard to get the students to stop talking.

If the students are new to the United States, or to Western culture, they may have totally overlooked an American interpretation of their situations. In this case, the teacher (with other native speakers, if possible) can demonstrate the same situations, the teacher should use the comments previously gathered from other native speakers in order not to be biased. At this point, the students, who have already read, discussed, written-about, and demonstrated their situations may be quite surprised to see them acted out from a totally different perspective. Discussion follows easily about how we interpret actions through our own culture, and how we may often misinterpret other people's actions.

This technique of "getting at" cultural assumptions is not fool-proof, of course, and the intended outcome is not necessarily to change a person's behavior. Behavioral change is not as important in the long run as is the development of an awareness of different interpretations of behavior and a sensitivity to others.

This technique has several advantages:

1. Students discuss only situations that they or their classmates have already experienced.
2. Students give only their own opinions about the feelings that have occurred, and these comments come from their own cultural viewpoint. There are no right or wrong answers.
3. Students discuss their interpretations with another student before anyone else hears them. At least two people agree, which gives them more confidence in their interpretation.
4. Students are not "role-playing" in the sense of playing the role of another person; rather they are speaking about their own feelings.

Summary and Conclusion

The following is a summary of this technique for developing an awareness of other social rules:

1. The teacher writes short paragraphs about situations which have involved

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members of the class and which might have been misinterpreted by native speakers of English.

2. Situations are passed out to each student to fill out individually.
3. Students then discuss their answers in pairs or small groups and plan a demonstration for the class.
4. When students have finished their demonstrations, the teacher demonstrates the same situations from a different cultural perspective.

Obviously, the above technique requires much initiative on the part of the classroom teacher, and it takes a lot of time, both in preparation and in the activity itself. One of the crucial aspects is the selection of appropriate situations. They have to be described briefly and clearly and be meaningful to the students. The teacher must spend a considerable amount of time with the students in order to see them interact in situations which may possibly result in misinterpretation.

This activity has been used successfully with small ESL classes in an intensive setting, where all of the students were from the same country, and all arrived in the United States at the same time.

Though the technique described in this paper might be easier to use in an intensive class, I believe it could also be adapted to other types of ESL classes, and be an important factor in the development of communication. Becoming aware of one's own cultural assumptions goes hand-in-hand with becoming aware of a new cultural perspective. Both are crucial to becoming a competent communicator in a new language.