

Generating Your Own Cross-Cultural Materials

by Trish Delamere

Nearly every contemporary ESL curriculum contains a cultural component and there is no lack of articles describing the importance of the foreign student's acculturation process as well as his linguistic progress. While we as teachers are grateful to curriculum writers for their planning foresight, we are nevertheless faced with a materials problem. There are so few materials that meet our immediate classroom needs. A few texts are beginning to appear which attempt to deal with cross-cultural awareness training, but mostly we are at the reviewing stage and still have little immediately at hand to help us meet the social and cultural needs of our entry and post-entry level foreign students. A further problem we face is that in keeping with the realistic trend toward a student-centered curriculum, we find that the necessary flexibility required of us as teachers to relate to the needs of different student groups cannot so easily be transferred to our materials.

The purpose of this article is to present three brief and simple techniques for creating cross-cultural materials. Each technique draws on material easily available to the ESL teacher and/or student generated materials.

Problem Solving and The Daily Newspaper

The first technique requires the use of the daily newspaper. Most cities have a newspaper column which responds to citizen needs. Problems are submitted to the newspaper and these along with their solutions are printed daily. These problems invariably deal with the rights and responsibilities of the American consumer versus the ever confusing red tape of the business and retail world. These situations present useful glimpses into American society for the foreign student, by means of a problem solving format. Indeed, the newly arrived

foreign student is very likely to be tempted by the 'get rich quick' advertisement or find himself in a situation where the furniture he ordered arrives broken.

These columns can be cut out of the newspaper and copied at minimal cost and preparation time to provide problem solving and discussion group activities which deal with specific survival skill needs of the students, whilst remaining within the American context.

A suggested presentation format, which covers a two hour period might be:

1. Students are arranged in groups of two or three, where each group should not contain more than one or two students of the same culture.
2. The teacher explains the concept of this community service to the groups.
3. Three or four consumer problems are separated in advance from their solutions and presented to the groups.
4. Each group is required to discuss the situation (in English) to ensure that every member clearly understands the problem. The teacher circulates during this time to aid with vocabulary and concept explanation.
5. The groups are then required to jot down their understanding of the basic problem. This is presented orally to the teacher as she moves around the class.
6. When the teacher is sure that each group has grasped the problem, each group is requested to suggest a likely solution. This is again in the form of small-group discussion. Some students may already have been faced with such problems in the U.S.A., while others will approach each problem from their own cultural bias. The teacher may wish to suggest alternate solutions.
7. When each group is comfortable with its solution, a whole-class discussion is held.

Each group's elected speaker presents the problem and the group solution to the whole class. I have found this stage to stimulate the most disagreement, hence it is here that the teacher as facilitator must guide the students through their debate while reminding them that an American solution might well be different.

8. At the close of the debate, the printed solutions are presented to each group. At this stage the students either find that their beliefs are confirmed or that the appropriate American behavior is unexpected. Group discussion should be allowed to continue until the students feel that their curiosity is satisfied.

Experiences with Americans

The second technique involves the creation of instructional materials based on encounters drawn from actual student experience with Americans. These are situations which the teacher considers to be crucial to an understanding of American social behavior, and are collected over a period of weeks of contact with foreign students.

The teacher may find that she can either simply collect these from her own experience

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or she may request that her students provide her with examples of confusing situations that they have found themselves in during their stay in the U.S.A.

Each situation comprises a short paragraph of not more than five or six lines, which describes an encounter between a student and an American with a brief description of the outcome. One typical situation might be the following: A foreign student is invited to dinner with a host

family and, unaware of the American concept of time, arrives an hour late to a burnt dinner and unhappy hostess. The student feels confused and upset and afraid of rejection by his new acquaintances.

There are many ways of utilizing such materials in a classroom setting. One way might be to present the situation on an overhead transparency to the entire class for whole-group discussion, stimulated by a series of questions such as:

- (i) What was the misunderstanding from each person's point of view (the host family and the student's point of view)?
- (ii) How could they solve this problem?

Another form of presentation, which is more controlled and requires more intensive individual as well as group work is as follows:

1. The students are asked to read the situations individually and to rate their agreement or disagreement with the actions of the student in the encounter on a scale from 1 through 5 (where 1 might represent total disagreement, 3 impartiality and 5 total agreement with the student's actions). They are also required to give a reason for their answer.
2. They are then requested to supply information concerning the action they would have taken given the same situation.
3. Students then form groups of two or three as before and discuss in English their individual ratings and come to a group consensus. At the end of stage three each group has *one* rating and *one* alternative action.

Through this discussion students are exposed to the concept of cultural diversity, since each individual will have presented his own values and system of beliefs. It is hoped that the students will become aware that there are no right or wrong answers, but rather *appropriate* behaviors within a given culture. This stage demands a longer time commitment since the students need to be able to feel comfortable with compromises in order to produce one group decision. Voting is not allowed as this avoids the need to discuss. The teacher should move around the groups as before.

4. The final step is a whole-class discussion, where group representatives present their findings. The teacher's role at this stage is to gauge whether these findings are acceptable in the American context, and to guide her students to a realization of the appropriate social behavior.

The Newspaper Advice Column

The third technique also requires the use of the newspaper and similarly deals with American values and social behavior. Ann Lander's syndicated advice column, which appears daily, can provide an easily accessible source of cultural material. This column provides a spring-board for discussion concerning comparative values, life-styles, and beliefs particularly in the area of contemporary social relations. Several controversial topics have proved successful, including family relations, surrogate mothers, women's liberation, abortion, and the generation gap.

The presentation of this material will depend upon the preference of the teacher and the level of linguistic and cultural proficiency of the student group. In my experience this technique works well with intermediate or advanced students whose linguistic skills allow them to cope with the controversial nature of the topics. As before, the column can be copied and distributed to students for individual or group work, or it may be presented on an overhead transparency for large-group discussion. In addition, either before or after the actual class presentation, skills exercises using this material, such as reading comprehension exercises, vocabulary work, and so on, may be worked up.

These suggestions provide ideas for simple teacher-made cultural materials that aid foreign students to become aware not only of their own cultural biases but also those of their peers and of their host society.