

Teaching Culturally Appropriate Classroom Behavior Through the Use of Video-Taped Mini-Dramas

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Those who work with foreign students who come to the United States to study at the university level know that these students face tremendous difficulties. They have left their homes, families, and friends to pursue their academic areas of interest. Yet, before they can begin this endeavor, they must often spend several months learning the English language. To help them toward this end, many U.S. colleges and universities have established language institutes. In these institutes, ESL teachers work with these students to refine their grammar, pronunciation, writing skills, reading speed, and listening comprehension ability in English, all of which will be needed if these students are to succeed in their academic fields. In the process, the faculty, staff, and auxiliary services of the university usually try to help them adjust to life in the U.S. through orientation programs and counseling. However, in trying to meet the needs of foreign students as they prepare to undertake their academic studies, one area has often been neglected, that is, behavior appropriate to the U.S. classroom.

ESL teachers generally assume that if students do not already know how to act in a U.S. classroom when they arrive, they will learn how to behave simply through their experiences in the language institute. After all, to point out bluntly to adult students that their behavior is inappropriate seems in itself impolite. Moreover, appropriate behavior appears to be something so obvious that it does not need to be talked about. But what actually happens in a language institute?

Inside the Language Institute

Within the confines of a classroom, an atmosphere of closeness and camaraderie often develops between faculty and students. ESL teachers often know their students quite well. Students and teachers may work together in small groups for weeks or months. Teachers often come to accept and even enjoy the personal idiosyncrasies of students. If José comes to class late every day, it is not a source of irritation. If Kyoko wants to make up a test she missed, that is all right. If Mohammed wants to argue about his grade, that is to be expected. However, students who become used to these behaviors as acceptable in the environment of a language institute are often surprised to discover that in the larger world of the university their behavior is misinterpreted as aggressive or impolite. The misunderstandings that come about as a result of this inappropriate classroom behavior can sometimes negatively affect foreign students' relationships with academic professors and consequently negatively affect their academic success.

Outside the Language Institute

Students who have graduated from the University of Alabama's English Language Institute (ELI) and have gone on into their academic fields have often commented that their non-ELI, academic professors seem strict and do not understand their special difficulties. Academic faculty members, on the other hand, have often commented that

the foreign students in their classes do not seem to understand the proper relationship between teachers and students, are not prompt, ask for special treatment, are sometimes aggressive, and often want to negotiate set policies. From both sides, these are generalizations. Yet, they point out that many foreign students have not come to understand what is expected of them in terms of personal behavior in a student-teacher relationship in U.S. higher education.

Cultural Orientation through Video Taped Mini-Dramas

Having seen the need to provide students with this kind of cultural orientation, Frances Rudolph (Director of the ELI) and I made a series of video-taped mini-dramas depicting conflicts or misunderstandings between academic professors and foreign students. Among these are scenes in which a student interrupts a lecture by arriving late for class, a student requests extra time to finish an exam because she cannot read as quickly as the American students in the class, a student attempts to negotiate a grade, and a student tries to convince a teacher to make an exception in course policy for him.

Students at the ELI and professors from a variety of regular academic fields were invited to be the actors in these mini-dramas. The technical assistance of the educational media department of our university was also enlisted. Scripts were not written for these scenes. Instead, an improvisational technique was used. Students and professors were each given a situational objective written on a piece of paper. The student did not know what the professor had on his paper. Likewise, the professor did not know what the student had on his paper. Therefore, the actors went into their scenes knowing only that they had particular tasks to perform. They could perform them in any way that they felt appropriate and natural. The following is an example of the situational

objectives given to the student and the professor for one scene:

Student's Information:

The teacher in your course has a strict policy regarding make-up exams. The policy is this: if you must be absent on the day of an exam, you must present your excuse prior to the day the exam is to be given. The teacher will then either accept or reject the excuse depending on its validity. If the excuse is acceptable, the teacher will then set a date for you to make up the exam. You know that this is the teacher's policy. However, you had to be absent on the exam day for what you consider to be a valid reason and were unable to tell the teacher prior to the exam day. You want to take that exam because it is a determining factor in the grade you will receive for the course. Go talk to the teacher. Your objective is to get the teacher to give you special consideration.

Professor's Information:

A student was absent on the day of a major exam. It's your policy that no make-up exams be given unless the student notifies you in advance and has a good reason for being absent on the day of the exam. You have an appointment to get to in 20 minutes

With this information, the actors created the following scene on video tape without rehearsal:

Place: A classroom

Time: The end of the day's lecture

Students are leaving the room. The professor is at the lectern, gathering up his notes. One student lingers in the room and finally approaches the professor.

Professor: Yes, you missed a test, didn't you?

Student: Yes, excuse me, sir. But, you know, I couldn't make it because when I tried to put on my contact lenses, I lost one. And you know, I couldn't find the contact lenses because I didn't have the contact lenses. Then, I lost thirty minutes. And I couldn't come before. But I ask you to do the test again.

Professor: Did you find the contact?

Student: Well, yes. I find it at the end. But, you know, it was very hard because if you don't have the contact lenses, you can't see.

Professor: Where did all this happen?

Student: Well, at room. In my room in the apartment. And my roommate wasn't there. He was already to the school and I...

Professor: But this was an 11:00 class. How could you be up putting in your contacts for the first time at 10:30?

Student: Well, you know, I studied the whole night to be prepared for the test and I was just a little sleepy.

Professor: I'm sorry. You know the policy in this class. There is to be no make up unless you tell me in advance that you'll have to be away. Your swimming team might be a reasonable excuse for that. Fritzing around with your contact glasses is not an excuse.

Student: Well, you know, without contact lenses I can't see. I can't come. I can't

phone because I can't see the phone book and everything.

Professor: I function perfectly well without my glasses all day.

Student: Well, I can't put glasses, you know, because I have a problem with the eyes. I have contact lenses. And, you know, you should try with contact lenses. It's very hard. And I thought maybe I should call him, but how can I read the phone book if I can't see?

Professor: I'm sorry. I can't give a make up for that reason.

Student: No way! You know, I studied the whole night to do my exam and...

Professor: It's my experience that students who study all night fail anyway.

Student: Oh really?

Professor: Yes.

Student: Well, in the past time I didn't fail. You know, it was very good. You have to understand me, you know. I have really a big problem.

Professor: Well, the best I can do is look on the final exam which will be comprehensive and see whether you show some knowledge of this material, but I shall not give you a make up.

Student: Well, you know, I...

Professor: I'm sorry. I have an appointment. I have to leave, and that's the end of the matter.

Student: Whhhhhh... (Student sighs.)

Professor picks up his papers and leaves the room.

Using the Taped Scenes

These scenes can be used in advanced level ESL classes as discussion starters. Each scene is introduced with pre-questions designed to focus the students' attention on the particular behavior with which the scene is concerned. The students then view the scene as many times as they feel necessary. Afterwards, the students are asked to summarize the action. Then, the students are guided through a discussion in which the teacher tries to help students discover principles of behavior that would most benefit them in dealing with professors in similar situations.

For example, pre-questions used with the above scene are: What does "course policy" mean? What can happen if you don't follow course policy? Following the viewing of the scene, the teacher can direct the discussion by asking the students: What happened in this scene? What did the student want? What was the professor's reaction? How do we know that the student was telling the truth? Why do you think the professor has this policy? How do you think the professor felt? Did the conversation benefit the student? What would a student do in this situation in your country? Would the professor react in the same way as this American professor did? What do you think is the best way to approach an American professor under these circumstances?

When asked to summarize what they have learned from this discussion, many students reply that they realize it is very important to be sure they understand the course policy from the beginning. Moreover, students say that when a professor says "No" he means it and to try to argue with the professor only makes the situation worse. Finally, students say that they believe that it is still important to let the professor know how they feel in such a situation, though in a respectful manner.

Students who view and discuss these mini-dramas come away with an increased awareness of their own behavior toward their teachers in classroom situations. They become sensitive to the fact that behavior that is appropriate in their own countries may not be appropriate in the U.S. and may even cause conflict. Hopefully, they have also shaped some guidelines for developing professional relationships with faculty members. As a result, they will be better prepared to succeed in their academic studies in the university.

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About the Author

Ruth Todd-Chattin received her master's degree in TEFL from the University of Texas in 1979. She has taught ESL as an English Teaching Fellow in Honduras and as an instructor at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama and The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. She previously published an article in the October 1983 issue of the TESL Reporter.