

ANECDOTES FOR CROSS-CULTURAL INSIGHTS

by **Judy E. Winn-Bell Olsen**

Item: Janet Hafner of Palomar College tells of an incident in her beginning ESL class for Vietnamese students. One night she wore a favorite piece of jewelry, a large pendant in the shape of an owl. The students, normally warm and relaxed, froze. Finally one of them was able to tell her that, in Asian culture, the owl is the portent of death. An owl perched in a tree outside a house means that someone there will die soon.

Comment: What an interesting insight Janet's "mistake" reveals. Consider the number of educational materials with the "wise old owl" theme, and the commonness of the owl motif in American gifts and decorative accessories. Janet's anecdote could be the beginning of an interesting and relevant discussion for intermediate and advanced classes with Asian students, and help us avoid an upsetting symbol for shell-shocked Indochinese refugees.

Item: Pat Anesi of Alemany CCC and Jerrilou Johnson of Oxford U. Press tell of Arab and Latin students who have hissed for a waiter's attention and have nearly been thrown out of the restaurant for doing so.

Comment: These students' "mistakes" give us another insight into a bit of American cultural behavior which should be discussed, perhaps practiced, in ESL classes which have students of these backgrounds. How many of us would think to talk with our students about polite ways of getting others' attention in this country—unless we knew about this mistake?

Item: Elena Garate of USC tells of, and has shown on videotape, the Latin American who was insulted by a well-meaning North American who, when asking about the height of one of the Latin's children, used a gesture that is reserved for animals in many parts of Latin America (arm outstretched, palm down).

Comment: Another "mistake" reveals another aspect of culture that we might

wish to cover in class. How would we know unless someone had made that mistake? Would someone from that culture think to tell us about gestural differences? Only if they had been made overtly aware of those differences—probably through someone's mistakes.

The anecdotes above may make you think of others—mistakes made because what was appropriate in one culture was not in another. We may discover them inadvertently in class as Janet did, or from a student's anecdote about his own experience here, as Pat did, or from our own experience with someone of another culture, as in Elena's example.

A collection of these anecdotes would make a useful body of knowledge for us teachers to have; 1) for our own interest and heightened sensitivity; and 2) for indications of direct point of inter-cultural conflict—a very practical place to begin in "Teaching culture" in the classroom.

Won't you help with this collection? You have probably shared stories like Janet's, Pat's, and Elena's around the teacher's room coffee table. Perhaps your students have anecdotes to tell. You could make a real contribution to other teachers by sharing these anecdotes. Bob Lindberg in the Adult Education Field Services Section of the California State Dept. of Education has offered to distribute the collection to all contributors.

Please send your anecdotes to me (don't forget to include your name, affiliation, and mailing address). Put them down on paper **now** while the inspiration is fresh, and send to:

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Or, if you prefer, send a cassette tape of your anecdote and I'll type it out myself. Maybe it's time to revive an oral tradition!