Cultural Skills

Introduction to Cross-Cultural Skills

This section is designed to promote the use of cross-cultural topics as an integral part of the ESL/ESOL Content Standards. Its purpose is to strengthen the understanding and appreciation of cultural similarities and differences.

Culture may be defined as a people's way of life. It consists of all the ideas, objects, and ways of doing things created by a specific group. Culture encompasses language, beliefs, customs, traditions, arts, and technology. It is made up of learned ways of behaving, feeling, and thinking. All cultures have similarities, which result from basic needs shared by all people, and all cultures differ in the ways these basic needs are met. When we integrate cultural discussions with language learning, we give learners the opportunity to share "how things are done" or "what is valued" in other cultures.

In general, people do not realize how greatly culture influences their behavior until they are introduced to other ways of doing things.   Only then can they see that they have been acting in a learned cultural way. When people meet persons of another culture, even small differences in behavior may make them feel uncomfortable. The difficulty that people go through when they leave their own culture and enter another has even been labeled "culture shock." Therefore, it is extremely important that cross-cultural topics be integrated into instruction.

Discussions about cross-cultural topics can:
- increase learners' understanding of American culture as well as their own
- facilitate learners' adjustment to their new lives in this country
- enhance learners' awareness and understanding of other cultures in their community
- motivate and enhance language learning
- provide a basis for "real" conversational practice outside of the classroom

Teachers may select and adapt topics and strategies for integrating culture that are appropriate for the needs and backgrounds of their learners. Discussions may take place in small groups, with partners, and/or among the class as a whole. Learners should be encouraged to give information about their own cultures and compare that to what they know about life in the United States.

Teachers may facilitate and/or participate directly in these discussions by presenting different American points of view. It is hoped that these topics will lead to other topics of concern and interest for more discussion, and that they will increase an awareness and understanding not only of the American culture but also of all the cultures represented in one's classroom

Sample Teaching Strategies for Integrating Cultural Skills
- Compare and contrast (in discussion or writing)
- Problem-posing
- Critical incidents (discussing examples from learner's lives of cultural appropriateness in authentic situations)
- Role-plays/Skits
- Advice lines/Columns
- Projects such as learner-generated materials, hosting special events, exhibits, celebrations
- Identifying cultural "gains" and "losses" from one's own country and in the USA.
- Guest speakers
- Add more….

Cross-Cultural Skills by Topic Area

Basic Communication
- Names and titles (i.e., first/last; meaning attached to names)
- Greetings and introductions (i.e., register and titles)
- Personal questions (i.e., appropriate questions and responses)
- Paralinguistic (i.e., gestures, touching, proximity, tone, etc.)
- Life Events/Rituals (e.g., birth, rites of passage, marriage, death, etc.)
- Beliefs/Superstitions
- Core values
  * Time
  * Family (roles & responsibilities, M-F, parent-child, elders)
  * Sexuality
  * Privacy (individual – group)
  * Independence/dependence
  * Dress codes (determining appropriateness for different contexts)

Consumer Economics includes general shopping, clothing, food and housing
- Types of stores (e.g., discount, department, thrift, etc.)
- Budgeting/Saving (e.g., signs such as "clearance/reduced" and numeracy skills "30% Off")
- Norms (e.g., opening packages, trying things on)
- Returns and exchanges
- Reading labels and unit prices
- Food – making offers and refusing
- Food – preparing, cooking, sharing
- Money management – budgeting, tips on saving, and "pros & cons of credit"
- Banking services and options
- Tipping
- Housing -- types of housing
- Housing -- owning/renting – rights and responsibilities
- Housing rules and norms (e.g., leases, co-habitation, noise levels, maintenance, etc.)
- Housing alternatives – "assisted living", retirement communities, nursing homes

Community Resources and Services includes transportation
- Local services available (e.g., postal, banking, emergency, child care, social services, libraries, parks and recreation, etc.)
- Types of services (e.g., emergency, private and public, and social)
- Eligibility for and access to services
- Schedules and fees for services and activities
- Public transportation (e.g., fares, schedules)
- Map reading and giving/following directions
- Driving (e.g., licenses, insurance, regulations)
- Pedestrian safety
- Car ownership (e.g., rights & responsibilities, expenses, etc.)
- Leisure options including holidays, celebrations, sports, etc.
- Traditions – religious, cultural, ethnic, language groups

Health/Medical
- Basic care (private vs. public)
- Insurance and other options
- Preventive health care (e.g., diet, exercise, smoking, etc)
- Medicine (e.g., reading labels, understanding prescriptions)
- Emergencies
- Concerns and programs for physically and mentally challenged

Employment (see Workplace Skills)
- Job seeking
- On the job
- Getting ahead
- Values in the workplace (e.g., reliability, initiative, teamwork, etc.)

Government and Law includes safety
- Driving rules and regulations
- Taxes
- Legal system (e.g., legal aide, public defender, felony vs. misdemeanor, etc.)
- Laws -- family relations (e.g., domestic violence, disciplining children)
- Regulations – smoking, loitering, public drinking, etc.
- Safety -- precautions in the home, traveling alone or at night
- Citizenship (rights & responsibilities, naturalization, and voting)
- Civic participation (volunteerism, community-based organizations and local decision-making)

Education
- Role of parents in education
- Active vs. passive participation
- Testing, report cards (e.g., local, state and national standards)