

OVERCOMING CULTURE SHOCK AT THE EFL LESSONS

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Abstract: *The article focuses on the phenomenon of “culture shock” at educational institutions. The author of the article tries to identify the factors contributing to culture shock in order to find some pedagogical strategies to cope with this phenomenon, and therefore, facilitate the acclimatization in the host country.*

Key words: *adjustment, intercultural education, intercultural communication, culture shock, frustration, social environment*

To teach a foreign language is extremely difficult without an acknowledgement of the cultural context in which the language is used. Culture has been a component of our understanding of communicative competence, a term coined by linguist Dell Hymes. “...*This competence, moreover, is integral with attitudes, values, and motivations concerning language, its features and uses, and integral with competence for, and attitudes toward, the interrelation of language with the other code of communicative conduct*” (Hymes 1985: 269). Hymes puts the emphasis on the importance of sociocultural knowledge.

The process of globalization when the world becomes more interconnected and is called “global village” affects English language teachers who teach English as a foreign language, who have different linguistic courses and develop students’ reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. Over the last decade and a half, numerous researchers have described the impact of globalization on language education and teaching, modes of communication, corporatization of curriculum, and access to resources (see, for example, Block & Cameron, 2002; Canagarajah, 2011; Hawkins & Norton, 2009; Kramsch, 2014). As Kramsch (2009: 190) argues in relation to foreign language teaching, this has fundamental implications: “*the goals of traditional language teaching have been found wanting in this new era of globalization. Its main tenets (monolingual native speakers, homogeneous national cultures, pure standard national languages, instrumental goals of education, and functional criteria of success) have all*

become problematic in a world that is increasingly multilingual and multicultural”.

Nowadays, any nation is rather open to the perception of someone else’s cultural experience and at the same time we are ready to share our own culture to other nations. But any interaction of a person with a new (but at the same time “alien”) culture is accompanied by a peculiar process of entering into this culture that can be more or less painful for someone always having certain consequences. In spite of getting new knowledge, experience, spiritual enrichment, the person can receive misunderstanding or even rejection of a new culture that may lead to various problems and stress. According to Peter S. Adler, a professor from University of Hawaii, whose field of research is cross-cultural communication, a sojourner (an exchange student in the host country for the period of time/ a semester/ a year) might have some disturbance of his mental health that is called “culture shock” or “cultural fatigue”(Peter S. Adler,1975: 286).

Culture shock has traditionally been thought of as a form of anxiety which results from the misunderstanding of commonly perceived and understood signs and symbols of social interaction. Kalervo Oberg, a Canadian anthropologist and researcher, describes the phenomenon of “culture shock” as he has experienced it many times and talks about it as of illness or disease. Kalervo Oberg, who initially conceptualized the term “culture shock” in the mid-1950s, defines “culture shock” as “the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (Oberg 1960). According to Oberg, a person is not born with a culture but only with the capacity to understand it and use it. As we grow up in a determined cultural environment and we learn to interact socially in this environment, this culture becomes our way of life; it becomes a safe, automatic and familiar way to get what we want.

When people abandon their home, family, country, i.e. their social environment (where they feel comfortable and safe) and move to a new cultural environment (in the case of university students who decide to spend a period of time abroad), they will *have to adjust* to the new environment and the new culture. It should not be assumed that the target culture is ruled by the same patterns the culture of origin is, as each culture (not only each country) perceives the world around it in different ways and develops different mechanisms and strategies to interpret it. For all this, those people

transplanted abroad will be exposed to stimuli, which, at some point or another, they will not know how to interpret in a coherent way as they will try to apply interpretation patterns that they found useful in their culture of origin but which are not always useful in the target culture. Oberg also described culture shock as “the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (Oberg,1960:142). Most people ignore the importance of the symbols, cues and signals they use in their daily life such as language, gestures, norms and customs. This importance is only recognized when a person lives in a different environment with different people. He or she feels confused and anxious in simple situations that seemed obvious in his or her country; because those signs of his or her social communication and connections acquired throughout his or her life have changed in this new environment. In such situation, frustration and anxiety increase, and serious problems emerge no matter how the person is. Culture shock is not abnormal, but a common phenomenon in one way or another, the sojourner is affected by when he or she comes to a new environment.

Oberg (1954) described the process of adaptation to a new cultural environment as a U-shape continuum where the following stages are usually present:



For several years Erasmus+ Programme has been the cornerstone of student mobility to a lot of prestigious European universities. Many students from Balti “Alecu Russo” State University have benefitted to study abroad, to gain linguistic, professional and communicative skills, to enhance their experience and future careers.

Almost all students who have ever been “a lucky one” and have had their experience of studying abroad agreed that before starting their mobility they needed to learn how to live and adjust to a new culture. 87 % of respondents were astonished by the new culture; they discovered things that were alike between the host country and their origin country.

Later on in some weeks or even one month of being in the new culture the majority of respondents (80%) felt another stage of culture shock – anxiety or distress stage. Some students developed a hostile attitude towards the new culture; the others said that even minor issues became major problems and cultural differences became irritating.

Later on the emotional and psychological balance of the students abroad again reigns in their life. As they explained, from the moment as they started learning a language of the host country, they became more objective and rational as they understood the culture better and its people. About 92% of respondents felt comfortable in the new environment. Some of them agreed that at that stage they were able to deal with some obstacles without asking for help; it looked like a recovery from frustration. The students started learning how to make an acceptable adaptation to the new life.

When the students gained both self-confidence and the ability to live and function in the new culture, the last stage of culture shock appeared. *“Although full assimilation is difficult if not impossible, one will acculturate and may undergo substantial personal change through cultural adaptation and development of a bicultural identity”*(Winkelman, 1994: 122).

In order to encourage students to consider the meaning of culture shock at the EFL lessons within the course of “Intercultural communication”, we suggest starting with Q&A “icebreaker”:

- *Have you ever been in a situation where you felt you had to "do as the Romans do"?*
- *What is the best/most important thing your culture/country has adopted from another culture?*
- *What does it mean to be polite in your culture?*
- *What is considered rude in your culture?*
- *What has surprised you when you've met people from other countries?*
- *When you move to a new country, what aspects of culture are the most difficult to get used to? Why?*
- *Have you ever felt confused by the actions of someone from another culture? etc.*

The next step might be watching the video clip called “Culture shock for Amazon Chief ’s Son” found on the BBC’s official site or on Youtube⁶. The BBC film clip is about a man called Nilson Tue HuniKui, who moved from the jungles of the Amazon to New York. The clip features Nilson speaking about adjusting to the new way of life and his dreams related to this. He speaks in his native language, but there are subtitles in English that the students can focus on.

Before-watching activity might be the following:

You are going to watch a BBC film clip called ‘Culture Shock for Amazon Chief’s Son’ about a man called Nilson, who moved from the Amazon rainforest to New York.

a. What might Nilson find difficult about adapting to New York after living in the Amazon?

b. Compare your ideas with a partner. Do you have the same or different ideas? If you agree with your partner’s ideas, write down any that are missing from your list. If you disagree with your partner’s ideas, tell them why.

After watching the clip paying attention to the new vocabulary, the teacher divides the students into the small groups of 2 or 4 and asks them to discuss what “culture shock” means to them. Later on the teacher shows them the Macmillan English Dictionary definition: “Culture shock” (noun) /'kʌlʃə ʃɒk/ - the nervous or confused feeling that people sometimes get when they arrive in a place that has a very different culture from their own. E.g. *He had never left his village before so arriving in the capital, Manila, was a big culture shock.*

To make after-watching activities more useful and attractive to students, we suggest the following procedure:

- a) *Making predictions about adapting to a new culture.* The teacher asks students to work in pairs and make predictions about what Nilson might have experienced while getting used to the new culture. If any of the students have travelled much before can ask them about their own experiences.
- b) *Group/ pair discussion.* If you were Nilson, how would you feel, living in New York? Can you think of any more differences between New York and the Amazon that you would have to get used to? Do you

⁶<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFxKs-K70B8>

think there would be any similarities? Look at the pictures below for some ideas.



- c) *Creative activity*. You are the BBC reporter and want to ask Nilson some questions. Make a list of questions beginning with *What, Where, Why, How* etc.

The abstract presented above is only the first step of series of lessons dedicated to culture shock in the EFL classroom with the university students. The next lessons are focused on the ways of reducing feelings of depression, anxiety and helplessness being abroad. The new culture (German, Spanish, British, French) should be studied in as many aspects as possible prior to the actual physical acculturation process. We strongly believe that before entering a new cultural environment, it is very important for students to prepare as much beforehand as possible. Detailed preparation at the course of “Intercultural communication” or the course of “Civilization” can improve the students’ ability to adjust to new surroundings and make them become more self-confident. According to Ferraro, being familiar with a new culture may be considered as another solution in reducing the negative impact of culture shock on an individual. Through the familiarity with the new culture, people can imagine many possible obstacles they will encounter and at least psychologically, become better mentally prepared for the acculturation process.

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