

A Look at Intercultural Communication in the Adult ESL Classroom:
Using English to Empower not Overpower

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Introduction

A helpful tool. A representation of culture. A strategic weapon. The English language can be labeled as a multitude of things, especially when one analyzes its place in the world. While some native speakers of English see it as the best and only language necessary in their lives, others see it as an imposing threat to the livelihood of other languages. Despite personal opinions of the language, there is no denying its rising presence in every corner of our world. From popular movies, music, and video games, the language is transcending multiple cultures and its popularity will only continue to grow. This is why a discussion is necessary in order to actively look at the English language and determine how we can work with it to promote the growth of culture rather than take culture away.

As mentioned in the article “The Hegemony of English and Strategies for Linguistic Pluralism,” written by Yukio Tsuda, English is the most prevalently used language in the world today and, because of this, non-English speakers are at a disadvantage (446). This is true in most countries in the world, but even more so in the United States. Although there is not a national language of the United States, those who enter the country experience much more prejudice towards the use of any language other than English (“Official”). On top of this, an attempt to speak the English language with any imperfections (accent, misuse of words, etc.) will still result in continued prejudice.

In recent years, the focus on immigration between the Mexican and American border has prompted more discussion on the use of the English language by new immigrants. As mentioned by author Wayne A. Santoro, the push for English-only

laws has been occurring for over a century now, and targeted due to an influx of a new particular ethnic group. Because of the current pattern in immigration, the focus, lately, has been against Spanish speaking Americans (Santoro 888). This blatant attack on a culture that deviates from the “normal” American life is something that is not alright, but which is nevertheless occurring. An approach that seeks to bridge cultures, and which promotes exploration and acceptance of other cultures, is severely lacking in the United States.

It because of this need that I feel the need to write this paper and explore different techniques for accomplishing these goals. I am a white, United States born, female. I am also a lover all languages and a very empathetic second language learner. I did not think much about the importance of the English language growing up. It was not until age 19 (one year into college) that I began to study and observe the value of the language, especially in my home country. As a student in the TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) program at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly), I learned the cultural, economic, and personal gains a student can benefit from by learning English when living in the United States.

To do even more research with the influence of English, and its relation to non-native speakers, I spent time as a teacher’s assistant in an ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom in Paso Robles, California. Although I recognize that we must continue to work in the paradigm of English being the expected language in the United States (even if it is not mandated by law) my goal in teaching ESL is for it to be an introduction to multiple cultures. Each student brings an individual

perspective, due to their culture, and that is something I want to recognize, not brush over and tell them that the English/American culture is better. The purpose of this paper, then, is to show my own personal experience as an ESL teacher's assistant in the hopes of promoting positive navigation between multiple cultures and meaningful learning for both the students and the teacher. I hope for it to be an example of the new, and deepened self and cultural understanding that can occur through research and experience. Ultimately, my goal is for this to be thought-provoking, and to begin a dialogue on the importance of cultural preservation and infusion.

In this paper, I attempt to accomplish intercultural exploration and promotion by retelling my experience in the classroom. First I give a personal background in order to explain my culture, why I notice the cultural aspects that I do, and why I react to them the way I do. Next, I share some of the main areas of my observation and the cultural factors, differences, and similarities I noted. These include age, gender, monochronic and polychronic time orientations, and high context and low context cultures. Finally, I look at the culture that my students and I created in our classroom and how it was fostered through different cultural practices from the students and myself.

My Own Ethnocentric View

"My culture is by which I give order to world" is a quote from Raymonde Carroll that I feel holds truth for every human, no matter what culture they belong to (Carroll 3). It is also the reason I feel the need to provide a personal history in this

paper. I believe that there is no way for me to write this paper without acknowledging that all of my actions, thoughts, beliefs, and values are entrenched in my own culture and an ethnocentric way of life. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama define ethnocentrism as “a tendency to think that our culture is superior to other cultures.” This definition, and practice, was a difficult one for me to identify with, as my whole goal for teaching ESL was to promote cultural acceptance. It was not until further self reflection that I began to realize that being superior does not equate to being the “one and only.” It can simply mean that your culture is the best one for you to live by. Fully recognizing this made me a better and more respectful human and, more specifically, teacher.

I identify as a white female, born and raised in the United States. I consider myself ethnically Portuguese, Russian, and Irish. I was raised Russian Orthodox, though I consider myself spiritual more than religious. Growing up, I lived in the predominantly white community of Pleasant Hill, California for the majority of my life (14 years). According to the United States Census Bureau, Pleasant Hill’s population in 2010 was 74.9% white. The second largest ethnic group in the town is Asian at 13.6% (“Profile”). As one would assume, according to the “similarity principle” which suggests that individuals are attracted to those they perceive to be similar to themselves, I grew up with predominantly white friends (Martin, Nakayama, 398)

In Pleasant Hill, I lived with my mother, father, and younger brother. At home, we all spoke English. Despite our personal monolingualism, both of my mother’s parents spoke multiple languages. My grandfather spoke English, Spanish,

and French and my grandmother spoke English, Russian, and Spanish. Both taught Spanish for several years at the high school level, yet neither taught their children the language. Growing up around family members that were multilingual made me very comfortable with the idea of speaking various languages, and even envious of those who could. In particular, I was always encouraged to study Spanish in school and was very impressed by native Spanish speakers. It was not until college that it dawned on me that speaking two languages (especially Spanish) was not considered admirable by all Americans.

When I chose to attend Cal Poly, the thought of teaching ESL never crossed my mind. I came in with the notion that I would be a sportscaster, but quickly realized that there was no reason for that except that it sounded “cool.” Soon after, I determined that I wanted to help others but was not sure how to do so. I decided to use my powers of communication and love of people for good, and enrolled in the TESL program. My life was changed from there. I thought I could travel the world and teach English and all would be well! But then I was assigned to sit in on an adult ESL classroom and observe and I saw a whole new world. I saw a place where cultures united, where students wanted to learn, and where lives were being changed. I was hooked.

My goal in the future is to either get my credential to teach ESL at a particular grade level or to get my Masters in TESL and teach at the community college level. Both are fantastic options and allow me to help those who want help. This is why this experience is so important to me. It is a true representation of all that I learned at Cal Poly. I get to melt together my love of Communication Studies and ESL into

one report that can help inform others of my experience of embracing other cultures.

The Classroom I Worked In

For the past month and a half (from April 3rd, 2014 to May 14th, 2014), I spent about six hours a week (27 hours total) in an ESL classroom at Cuesta Community College in Paso Robles. The class was held on Mondays and Wednesdays from 7:00 p.m. to 9:45 p.m. in order to accommodate students that had work during the day. My role in the class was to act as a Teacher's Assistant. This generally included managing small groups, helping answer student's questions, and other small activities in the class.

The teacher I assisted was a white female who was in her seventies. She was married and retired, and only taught one class. She had experience teaching ESL to middle school students for 40 plus years, and very clearly enjoyed teaching. She loved having me to help participate in the classroom, and wanted to ensure that I met all my requirements and goals I had while working in the class. With that said, she also enjoyed having control over her class and would not give over much control without me asking for some wiggle room.

As of 2013, there were 1,346,333 English learners in the California public school system ("Facts"). In other words, 21.6 percent of the total enrollment of the California public schools. Though a majority of these ESL students were enrolled in elementary grades (72 percent in kindergarten through sixth grade), 28 percent of the students were in classes in seventh through twelfth grade, and in undergraduate classes ("Facts"). From the over one million ESL students in California, 84.67

percent speak Spanish. There is no other language that comes remotely close in usage by the students. The second most commonly used language is Vietnamese at 2.3 percent (“Facts”). In my personal experience, the demographics of the class I worked with closely resembled the statistics collected by the California Department of Education.

In my class, I worked with students in undergraduate courses that the students decided to take on their own. They were enrolled in an ESL level two class, which they were placed into either because of a completion of an ESL level one class or a high enough score on a placement test. The class was made up of 12 adults, seven men and five women. All of the students were older than me, ranging in age from 24 to 50. Through conversations I had with my students (See Appendix 1). I found them to all be of Latin decent. Most of them were from Mexico originally, though one was from Guatemala, and one was from Peru. By the end of my time with the class, one of the male students dropped the class, which is unfortunately a common occurrence in the ESL program at Cuesta Community College despite efforts to combat it.

Important Cultural Learning Moments

During my experience working in the ESL classroom, I noticed and experienced several cultural differences amongst my students and I, and individually between all of my students. Although not all of my students were originally from the same home country (all of them were from Latin America) they often shared broad cultural experiences or values. In particular, I found that in

relation to age, gender, and dealings with time, most of students tended to follow a cultural pattern different than my own. When I began to speak with them individually, however, I noticed that subcultures and individual values were still prevalent in their value systems. Perhaps the most valuable cultural learning moment I noticed was the classroom culture we created together as an infusion of multiple cultures, to create a brand new one. As I go through this section of the paper, I transition from most blatant cultural differences (starting with age) to more in-depth differences that took more time, effort, and observation to notice all of the nuances.

Age

Age was an immediate factor to acknowledge and deal with during my teaching experience. The bottom line was: I was at minimum three years younger than some of my students, and looked at minimum eight years younger than them. On top of this, I am a 22 year old who partakes in a culture where we are more “youth-centric” than elderly focused (Martinez-Carter). In the United States we are encouraged to learn our age very early on and be able to recite it to who ever will listen. Americans are often proud of their age until their mid-twenties and then we tend to stray away from age identification until we are in our seventies (Martin, Nakayama 190). In the United States, age can be seen as a limiting identification, rather than an encouraging one.

In comparison, I was working with students who subscribed to Latin American culture, which classifies respecting and caring for elders as extremely

important (Martinez-Carter). In Latin American cultures there is great emphasis on family and on the usefulness of elders. Often, multiple generations will live together under one roof and all have a role in the inner workings of the home (Martinez-Carter). The elderly continue to be a crucial and vital member of the family until their last day, where-as in United States culture they can be seen as the “weakest link.” As mentioned by Jared Diamond, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, “The elderly’s usefulness in a society plays a big part in determining their fate” (Qtd. in Lin). This explains why some cultures might hold the wisdom of their elders in higher regards as compared with the attitudes in place the highly industrialized west.

Ultimately, all of the research shows that there are simply different habits in cultures that lead to the behaviors of those who partake in them. As seen in a study done on Americans and their relations to their elders, Americans tend to show respect in different ways than other cultures (Sung 226). For Americans, acquiescent and linguistic forms of respect were very popular towards elders (Sung 226). While some might see not inviting your family to live with you as disrespectful, in America it is acceptable. It might even be preferred to be independent as long as you can in the United States when you are older, something that is unimaginable to other cultures of the world. (Portacolone 803).

Understanding where I was coming from and where my students were coming from made me pay special attention to my interactions with them. For example, I never wanted to interrupt them when they were working because in my culture that would seem rude due to the importance of being an individual. At the

same time, I wanted to help them when I saw them struggling, but did not want to threaten their ego or waste their time as a younger and potentially less wise person giving them suggestions.

As I mentioned previously, the teacher I worked with was in her seventies and was older than all of the students in the classroom. Her age played a surprisingly interesting role in the interactions she had with the students. First off, when it came to them specifically asking me for help, I noticed that it was often the younger students that asked. The oldest students tended to never raise their hand for me, but only for the actual teacher. Her age may have been the reason other students chose to ask her questions over me. Although I'm sure comfort in their relationship played a role, the Latin American cultural notion of elders being wiser could have effected their decision making process also.

The second main way in which I saw her age effect their interactions, was in the way the students helped her do certain physical activities. Every class I saw students jump to their feet to make sure that their teacher would not have to lift anything heavy, or do any extra physical exertion. It eventually was just assumed that the students would bring her book bag into the room, and none of them looked remotely upset about this. Though all of the students assumed the responsibility of helping the teacher, it appeared that the men were much more responsive to her needs. This showed me that much more was occurring than values with age, and it involved gender roles.

Gender

Gender is, and may always be, an important factor in every culture. American culture and Latin American cultures are no different. As a blonde, blue-eyed, white female in a predominantly Latin American class I immediately felt how my gender affected how others interacted with me. Most (if not all) Latin American cultures contain a bit of the concept of machismo, which contributes to their actions and value systems. As defined in the article *Machismo and Mexican American Men: An Empirical Understanding Using a Gay Sample*, machismo is a “socially constructed, learned, and reinforced set of behaviors comprising the content of male gender roles in Latino society” (Estrada 358). Often, this idea is related to a notion of being assertive and emotionally responsive (Estrada 358). This concept affects the way that Latin American men work and how they interact with friends, family, and, most importantly, women.

During my first night in the classroom, I witnessed some actions borne out of the cultural concept of machismo. Because it was my first night in the classroom, the head teacher requested that I just observe the class before fully “jumping in” as an assistant. I agreed, and randomly chose a seat amongst the students. Because it was my first time in the classroom, I did not know that I was sitting amongst three men in their twenties. All of them continuously smiled at me, and talked to each other about me in Spanish. They were not aware at that point that I too spoke (some) Spanish. The next few minutes consisted of them talking about being “blind in love” and other things surrounding love. One of the students also “accidentally” threw his

pen on my back. When I turned around and handed him the pen he was giggling and smiling.

None of these actions made me overwhelmingly uncomfortable. It was very obvious that they were attempting to flirt with me, and I shrugged it off without a worry. What was interesting to me, however, was their fascination with me. Being white, blonde, and blue-eyed made their flirtation even stronger but also silenced them at the same time. They would flirt with me amongst each other, but if I attempted to speak to them in English or Spanish they would be very reluctant to speak. It was a very interesting interaction that seemed to be the product of their machismo culture and their insecurity with the American culture.

When referencing men that are a part of Latin American Culture, Hall states: “descendants of the Spanish Conquistadors are sensitive to the slightest suggestion of criticism”(Hall 156). Building upon this notion, the thought of criticism could have been another reason that the young male students did not want to speak to me, especially in English. The concept of machismo is to be as masculine and as strong as one can be, and putting yourself in vulnerable position is threatening the very livelihood of this. On top of this desire to avoid criticism, is the “added burden of ‘machismo’” as Hall notes, causes Spanish males to want to avoid confrontation altogether (Hall 156). This continues to clarify the situation with my male students, for they wanted avoid embarrassment at all costs, even if it meant to remain silent at certain times.

As time went on, different male students began to become more forward with me. One student, who also spoke the best English in the class, asked me if I

liked Spanish music. When I said I sometimes listen to it, he immediately offered to make me a CD. I did not want to offend him so I said yes. When I listened to the CD I was taken aback by the fact that they were *all* love songs. For example, one song contained the lines, “yo quiero ser tu amor para siempre” or in English, “I want to be your love always” (Fernando). From then on, I noticed how that student would always come over to speak with me and constantly compliment me on my Spanish speaking abilities.

The most blatant example of machismo culture was during the last class session. To celebrate the end of the quarter our class threw a party with food and music the students picked out. I have always known what an important part music and dancing is in Latin American culture, but it was so much fun to experience it with my students. Once we ate a bit of food some of the male students then wanted to dance and insisted that I dance with them. Of course I was curious and wanted to try new things, but once I started to dance I immediately was out of my culture’s comfort zone. My students were holding me close, holding my hands, and grinding on me to the music. I was shocked! On one hand I was excited to see them be so happy to share their culture with me and enjoy themselves. On the other hand, I felt as if I was crossing multiple lines as a teacher. Being a product of the American culture, I have been told that being even remotely sexual with your students is dishonorable. To remedy the situation I danced until the end of the song but then declined dancing with any other students for the rest of the night.

I felt much less gender-based actions from the women in the class during my teaching experience. Most of the women treated me as more of an equal than a

teacher, which did not bother me. They often asked me for more help than the men and tended to want me check all of their work. In certain situations, because they were older than me, I often felt a nurturing vibe from the women when they would explain to me new concepts about their culture. For example, when they would tell me about their children or about their home country they exuded a sense of pride and accomplishment and always wanted to tell me as much as our language barriers would permit (Appendix 1). Overall, it was interesting to note the different practices between two genders that partake in similar cultures. Sometimes it was the gender-based actions that caused someone to talk to me, but many times the actions were rooted in habits of people orientation that is found in all Latin American cultures to a certain extent.

Monochronic Versus Polychronic Habits

It did not occur to me until some reflection after some of the first class sessions, that the scheduling of the ESL class was very entrenched in American culture scheduling habits and monochronic thinking. To me, the class was set up normally! But then I began to notice some habits the students had that did not conform well to the head teacher's wishes. Whether it was them being "late" to the class or talking during the lesson, the teacher began to become irritated by these occurrences. She understood them to be rude, when in reality these were practices that are common amongst members of a polychronic society.

Simply put, monochronic time orientation refers to doing one thing at a time, while polychronic refers to doing multiple things at once (Goonetilleke 177). These

concepts were observed and labeled by Edward T. Hall, an anthropologist. When observing several cultures he began to notice the different time orientations each preferred to organize time (Hall 17). Monochronic cultures, like the United States, focus on schedules, segmentation, and promptness (Hall 17). Americans, and other monochronic cultures, have created the notion that time is a precious commodity and we must “spend” it and “use” it without being wasteful. People from this culture become personally offended and hurt when their time is wasted, especially at the hand of others. For example, in the context of the classroom I worked in, the head teacher always wrote a schedule of the night on the board. She would write each activity out in order to segment them from one another and show the order in which she wanted them to be completed. If they did not get completed on a particular night, and as a result of an external force, she became visibly upset.

It was not just the way the teacher set up her class that worked in a monochronic fashion, it was the way Cuesta College set up the scheduling. The class would be held twice a week, and lasted from January to May. The teacher did not see her way to run the class as harmful because she felt the need to plan her time according to the schedule given to her by Cuesta. As Edward Hall states, “there are social and other pressures that keep most Americans within the monochronic time frame,” something that is clearly true in this situation (Hall 17). It is clear that the American school system follows the monochronic time orientation and those who do not follow this logic will ultimately suffer as a result. This can be seen as a combination of the individualistic culture (people focus on themselves rather than on others) of the United States and the idea that time is a commodity.

On the other side of the spectrum are cultures that follow the polychronic time orientation. Hall describes polychronic cultures as “characterized by several things happening at once.” Importance is put on paying attention and being involved with people, more so than following along with schedules (Hall 17). This is also due in part to the notion of a collectivistic culture, which puts emphasis on the greater good of the group, rather than the individual. Latin American cultures are a great example of cultures that subscribe to collectivistic agenda and orient towards polychronic time, where they do not see time as a precious and valuable commodity. In polychronic societies, time is viewed as something that can be worked around and does not hold importance over people. Essentially being opposites when it comes to organizing time can clearly lead to issues in a teaching environment, amongst members of the American culture and Latin American cultures. And it did.

Not often did I criticize my head teacher and her teaching techniques, but when it came to understanding time orientation, I could not help but take note. One of the biggest complaints the teacher had about her students was their constant tardiness. She would always complain about it with me, and say how she has told them time and time again but nothing has worked! Then, when the students would come in 15 minutes “late” (late is a notion created and defined by individual cultures, ethnocentrically) she would chastise the students in front of the other students. This then would make the students obviously embarrassed.

This action was a problem for multiple reasons. Most obviously, the teacher should have understood that the students were not doing it because they were being rude but because their culture does not place much value on promptness. (Also,

there was often a lot of traffic that contributed to tardiness. It caused me, a monochronic American, to be late sometimes!) She also should not have reprimanded the students so blatantly for doing something that they did not even see as wrong. This affects them because they feel the punishment is unjust, but also because coming from a collectivistic culture where there is emphasis on involvement with peers they are being embarrassed in front of all of their peers.

Another conflict that arose from the differences between monochronic and polychronic time was issues of the students speaking up in class. Often the students would talk to each other during lessons. This upset the teacher because in her monochronic mindset, she only had two hours and 45 minutes to teach her students the English language and she wanted to use every second. She could not understand why the students would come to a learning environment just to socialize. From the point of view of the students, they were coming to a learning environment where those present were also their friends, not simply students. For some of the students, this was the only time that they would see this select group of people so they wanted to pay their respects to their peers. As mentioned earlier in Hall, in their polychronic mindset, it was more important to catch up with their friends than abide by a schedule that valued time and tasks over human connection. This issue tended to be resolved much more pleasantly than the "late" issue, and would be remedied with the conversations being tended to at the class break.

Ultimately time orientation, was an interesting cultural aspect that was very prevalent in the class I worked in, though, it did not always get addressed. Instead of asking "why?" are the students "late" the teacher continued to look at time as a

commodity and view it as being wasted. The students always wanted to emphasize human interaction and while this helped for certain lessons, it tended to put a strain on some scheduled activities. In the end, time orientation appeared to be contextual information that the teacher did not seem to have, something that would continue to play a role in the classroom past time orientation.

High-context Versus Low-context

When one thinks about how many different factors make up our understanding of the world, why we value what we do, or why we react the way we do, it becomes overwhelming. It becomes even more overwhelming when you begin to realize that that is just *your* culture and that everyone else on this planet contains *their own* culture made up of another seemingly infinite amount of influences.

During my teaching experience, I would continually have moments where I was struck with this realization while observing my students interact with me and with one another. On top of this, I would begin to realize that I could not even begin to understand all of the influences that were creating and underlying their cultures, yet at times they expected me to.

Hall identifies the concepts of high-context cultures and low-context cultures in his book *Beyond Culture*. In this, he notes that the concept of high and low-context cultures develop from the “degree to which one is aware of the selective screen that one places between himself and the outside world”(Hall 86). To understand this, we must recognize that every person possesses a “selective screen,” or a figurative lens that helps them translate what they are viewing into the context of their own

personal culture. For some people, their selective screen is something they are very dependent on, while others use it sparingly. A high-context culture pays more attention to the selective screen, whereas low-context cultures do the opposite (to varying degrees). Communication in high-context cultures is efficient and streamlined due, to the amount of information the communicators have “preprogramed” in their minds (Hall 101). This preprogrammed knowledge can vary from specific rituals for certain holidays, to knowledge on when and where to smile in a certain culture. On the other hand, low-context communication contains the majority of the information in the message being sent (Hall 101). This would mean asking for something or stating something and providing all of the necessary information for someone to understand you without relying on any shared knowledge with the other person.

In the United States, we rank near the low-context side of the spectrum. For example, in written communication, Americans provide immense detail compared to high-context cultures that provide little detail. Americans aim to make information as explicit as they can while high-context cultures assume that the reader already contains particular background information to make sense of the written work (“High”). An example of a high- context culture is many of the countries in Latin America. These countries put emphasis on tradition and rituals and often tend to be fairly homogenous (“High”).

Understanding these differences in communication tactics was crucial while working with my students. Not only was I coming from a low-context culture, I was working with students who were part of high-context cultures *and* spoke a different

language than I did. I was attempting to understand their subtle and “preprogramed” cultural practices while understanding their language. Plus, I was seeing how culturally different they all were at the same time, and had to consciously edit myself to work with each individual.

Prior to becoming a teacher’s assistant, I took a class at Cal Poly on the Chicano and Chicana (Mexican-American) culture. I was given a great amount of detail on the culture, and after a several weeks of studying the topic I became more knowledgeable of the more subtle values and practices of the culture. This ended up helping me immensely when it came to working with my students. Although they were not all Mexican-American, I understood facts about Latin American culture that led me to be able to partially work within their high-context practices.

A great example of this came during the last class with my students. As mentioned before, we had decided to throw a small party to celebrate their completion of the course. From previous knowledge, I had known that parties were very important in Latin American culture. This was a result of multiple cultural factors, including their polychronic time orientation and emphasis on connecting with friends and families. Plus, each student was bringing in some food for the party. I also had previous knowledge that food has a very significant role in Latin American culture, as an extension of the want to share and be with a community.

Knowing all of this, I went to the party bringing food and excited to be a part of even more cultural immersion. Right away, I was amazed by the amount of food just the 13 of us brought in. We had tamales, flan, three cakes, chips, fruit salad, pizza and more! Each person brought something and was so proud of what they

brought. In one case, a man forgot to bring something so he left the class momentarily to go to the store and buy ice cream for each of us. It was clear that bringing an item to a party was a subtle cultural rule that each student followed in order to show their involvement with their fellow friends.

On top of this, I saw that it was not only necessary to bring food but also to eat the food that others brought. I thought I understood this prior to the party, but it was only at a surface level. I did not understand the high-context cultural rule that even if you are full, you must continue to eat or you will offend others. I saw this first hand when I declined a second sandwich from a student and she was visibly upset. I then made sure to not only eat a second sandwich, but also comment on how good the sandwich was to ensure she knew I was eating it.

Finally, even more cultural learning took place at the end of the party. When it was finally acceptable to stop eating, and the party was wrapping up, students began to delegate who was taking the leftover food. Every single student came up to me and asked if I wanted whatever food they brought. In one instance I was asked if I wanted some food and soon realized that in her cultural context she was saying “take some of the food before I leave, please.” I felt bad politely declining food, but at a certain point it became necessary. I left with water, a case of soda, cookies, halves of two cakes, and fruit salad. It was so heartwarming to be included in their cultural practices, but it also took a great amount of effort to work within the high-context cultural frame that they expected me to abide by, although it was never explicitly said.

In order to make up absent knowledge that they all shared, I had to work overtime. I was constantly pulling from past knowledge (for example, knowing about the importance of food) and continuously being overly attentive to the actions and reactions of my students. It was essential to be observant to their interactions with one another and with me to double check whether or not I was following the correct social cues, and to make sure I was acting appropriately in their high-context culture. Overall, it was an experience that required a lot of effort and attention but set me up nicely to observe the cultural tendencies our class followed all together as a whole.

Our Own Culture

Although it was an interesting and unique experience to look at the differences and similarities of all the cultures that came together in the classroom, it was even more interesting to see how we used bits and pieces to make our own unique culture. Rather than taking on a dominant culture that was present in the class, each person and their actions and values contributed to a classroom culture that was independent of our ESL class. Different ages, genders, home countries, and languages all fed into the way our class functioned. On top of this, we did not choose to follow one certain time orientation or high-context or low-context way of communication, instead we incorporated both styles because it was the best way to represent everyone in our class.

One of the first instances I realized that we had created our culture was when I began to see the students turn to me to laugh when the teacher was making a joke.

Often the teacher would make jokes while teaching, and though they were all in English, the students would laugh because of the physicality of the jokes. Sometimes she would pretend to fall down or pull her hair out, and it was not only because of the actions, but also because of how outrageously the teacher was doing them. Soon I picked up that the students (as did I) thought the teacher was comical because she was so wacky. This then became the reason we laughed, and we all shared this. It was our way of incorporating the high-context communication practices in our classroom, like giving a glance and knowing that the person you were looking at already had “preprogramed” knowledge to decipher what it was you were communicating.

Another example of when we combined all of our cultures to create our own was when I taught a lesson to the class. One class meeting prior to my lesson I told the students, in Spanish, that I was going to teach them a lesson and that one of my professors was going to come observe me doing so. I also told them what the subject of the lesson would be, and that we were going to be doing normal activities like always. I made sure that I told them all of this in Spanish to take part in their collectivistic culture and show them that it mattered to me that they knew what was going on and understood fully what I was required to do. They responded wonderfully to this and on the day of the observation, a few of my students (even some more reserved students) came up to me and asked if I was excited for the lesson. They saw my collectivistic attempt and made sure to respond in the same manner.

Also on the day of the observation I noted that they all followed the monochronic time orientation and came in when class started because of their want to make sure they made me look good. It was as if they used a monochronic time orientation for polychronic reasons, to make sure I knew that I was appreciated and that they were helping me as a friend. During the lesson, most of the class made sure to participate in one way or another while my professor was observing me.

Depending on the activity they would shout out the answer when I requested it or worked in small groups to work on particular assignments. I organized activities in a more group-focused and less structured format due to the observations I noted earlier with their polychronic preferences, and it seemed to work well.

Yet another instance when I noted a moment of fused culture was when I accidentally told the students about the party we were having on the last day of class. As I mentioned previously, we had a party on the last day of class, something I thought all of the students knew for an extended period of time. After class one night I brought up the party to the students and they had no idea it was going to happen. I was so entrenched in a monochronic time orientation, focused entirely on scheduling, that I did not realize they wouldn't know. As a result I felt so bad that I broke the news that I requested they act shocked when the teacher told them the following week, and sure enough they did! When the teacher brought up the topic the following week they all acted surprised towards her, but followed the high-context culture and used their nonverbal gestures to indicated to me that they were doing me a favor.

Ultimately, I think I ended up with a unique relationship with my students, one that was an infusion of cultures and a fusion of the teacher and friend roles. It was clear that they liked me enough to incorporate me into their group and use high-context habits of communicating that they did not use with the actual teacher. At the same time, they made sure to respect me like a teacher during the observation process with my professor. In the end, it was a culture that I could never recreate with any other class and never truly will.

Conclusion

Through my own experience, I have seen how teaching English as a second language is so much more than simply teaching students grammar and vocabulary. It is an intense and constant cultural experience, where the learning of multiple subjects takes place. Ideally, the learning that occurs is done both on the part of the student and of the teacher; for with each new person comes multiple cultures that they are a part of. As a teacher it is important to recognize the multiple cultural influences inside and outside of the classroom that may affect the way the students in your classroom work in relation to the subject matter or the organization in the classroom.

In the United States it is particularly important to understand the outside factors that contribute to teaching English as a second language. First, a teacher should recognize that some see teaching English as a way to, in essence, overpower a student's first language and culture. This can be partially or fully avoided if one looks at ESL as a helpful tool that will better the life of the students in the United

States, but not as something that will replace the first language or culture. Second, an ESL teacher in the United States must recognize the hardships that come with speaking another language in the United States. Prejudice and inequality against non-English speakers make ESL a valuable tool to better the lives of multiple people.

Another important process to go through prior and while teaching ESL is to recognize your own person and your own cultures that you are part of. I gave the example of being a white, blonde, blue-eyed, female who is 22 but looks 18. I grew up in a predominantly white community, but always had an appreciation for multiple languages, especially Spanish. I know that I enjoy multiple cultures but I am also very ethnocentric in my behavior. Being culturally self-reflexive, gave me a better grasp of what I was comfortable with, of what I was willing to change, and of what I preferred from my culture versus others.

In my class of 11 Latin American students, I noticed a variety of cultural differences that impacted my teaching in various ways. For example, I had to deal with the fact that I was younger than every student I interacted with, with students who also subscribed to a culture where respect towards elders was key. I had to balance the want to help them with the need to not be intrusive or insulting. Also, being a female not accustomed to some of the nuances of machismo was a very interesting experience for me. I had to navigate being around men who were flirting with me while managing the fact that I was there to facilitate their learning.

Two other factors that came into play during my time with the class that had a large impact, but which were more subtle than age and gender were time orientations and high-context versus low context cultures. For time orientation, I

had to acknowledge that it was much more of a priority to me to make sure that I followed a schedule than it was to them. At times I noticed that it was hard for the head teacher to accept the students' polychronic time orientation, and it would negatively affect her teaching. On the other hand, I saw myself having to pay closer attention to the high-context culture of students to ensure that I was not negatively affecting our relationship. The most interesting time spent in the class was when I noticed that we combined so many aspects of our individual cultures to create one of our own. From monochronic to polychronic, individualistic to collective cultures, we united to create one that worked in the best interests of our group.

I learned not just about the role of the teacher in the ESL classroom or the place of ESL in the United States, but about the importance we put on communication as a whole. Communication, regardless of the form it takes, is something that we all strive for on a daily basis. It is something that drives all of us, and unites us for the basic reason that we want to understand and be understood. We make this goal a reality through languages, the way we position and present our body, through cultural practices and values, just to name a few. This is why ESL is important. In the classroom we explore various new forms of communication in a safe environment that allows a blending of cultures to be tested out. It gives people the power to communicate. Something we all deserve.

Ultimately, culture is not something you can define from country to country, or from group of people to group of people. It is something that you can be a part of, observe, and learn from, knowing that you will never see the exact customs performed from another group. It is likely that you may see similarities, potentially

very close similarities; but never a carbon copy of a culture, because there are so many layers that create it. In my personal case, I had 11 students with a variety of backgrounds and family lives that made each the person that she or he is when I met them. The teacher I worked with had a multitude of factors that made her the person she was. And all of these unique individuals came together to create an experience that was uniquely ours. This is why this paper cannot be used as a guide to intercultural communication in an ESL classroom. It is simply a telling of my experience, which I share in, and to show that being accepting and encouraging of multiple cultures can occur while primarily teaching only one.

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Appendix 1-Human Subject Protocol

Ashley Nelson
 Research Protocol
 4/29/14

Title: Intercultural Communication in an ESL Classroom

Researcher: Ashley Nelson, Communication Studies

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jnan Blau, Communication Studies Department

Statement of purpose:

The goal of this project is for the researcher to get a better understanding of the intercultural communication that occurs in the ESL classroom. This can involve looking at the topics of discussion, the interaction between the students, and the interaction amongst the students and the teacher. This new understanding of the interaction is hoped to better the researcher and other ESL teachers in being an effective and knowledgeable teacher.

Methods:

- **Subjects:** ESL 2 Class at Cuesta Community College at the Paso Robles campus. Twelve students total. Five female and seven male students. Age range is expected to be from 24-60 years of age. All students are of Latin American extent.
- **Experimenters:** Ashley Nelson
- **Materials and Procedures:**
 - Text book used by the teacher in class: Grammar in Context by Sandra N. Elbaum and Judi P. Pemán
 - Questions asked verbally, and not in any specific order:
 - Name?
 - Where are you from?
 - Do you have family?
 - Did you know anyone in the class prior to attending?
 - How much English do you speak outside of the class?
 - Location: Cuesta Community College, Paso Robles Campus
 - Procedures: The students will be informed of the Researcher coming in and observing the class. The researcher will not interact with the students much during the first class meeting she attends and then as time progresses she will supervise small groups and eventually teach a 20-minute lesson.
- **Informed Consent:**
 - A research project on *Intercultural Communication in the ESL Classroom* is being conducted by Ashley Nelson in the Department of Communication Studies at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. The purpose of the study is to look at the intercultural communication that occurs in an ESL classroom and how to teach English effectively. You are being

asked to take part in this study by *allowing Ashley Nelson to observe your ESL class and interact as a teaching assistant. This interaction would include being in the classroom, helping small groups, and presenting new and old information to the class. As a student you would continue learning and working as you normally do.* Your participation will take place during the remaining classes of your semester (today-May 19th, 2014). Please be aware that you are not required to participate in this research² and you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. There are no anticipated risks with this project. Your confidentiality will be protected *because I will not use your name in my report at all.*⁵ Potential benefits associated with the study include *learning English with my teaching help.* If you have questions regarding this study or would like to be informed of the results when the study is completed, please feel free to contact *Ashley Nelson* at 925-914-1159. If you have questions or concerns regarding the manner in which the study is conducted, you may contact Dr. Steve Davis, Chair of the Cal Poly Human Subjects Committee, at (805) 756-2754, sdavis@calpoly.edu, or Dr. Dean Wendt, Interim Dean of Research, at (805) 756-1508, dwendt@calpoly.edu.

Appendix 2- English Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT, “Intercultural Communication in an ESL Setting”

A research project on Intercultural Communication in the ESL Classroom is being conducted by Ashley Nelson, a student in the Department of Communication Studies at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, under the supervision of Dr. Jnan Blau. The purpose of the study is to look at the intercultural communication that occurs in an ESL classroom and how to teach English effectively.

You are being asked to take part in this study by allowing the researcher to observe your ESL class and interact as a teaching assistant. This interaction would include being in the classroom, helping small groups, and presenting new and old information to the class. As a student you would continue learning and working as you normally do. Your participation will take place during the remaining classes of your semester (today- May 19th, 2014). Please be aware that you are not required to participate in this research² and you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. You also do not have to answer any questions, related to this research that you chose not to answer.

There are no risks anticipated with your participation in this project. Your confidentiality will be protected because I will not use your name in reports of this research. Potential benefits associated with the study include improving methods of teaching English.

If you have questions regarding this study or would like to be informed of the results when the study is completed, please feel free to contact Ashley Nelson at 925-914-1159. If you have concerns regarding the manner in which the study is conducted, you may contact Dr. Steve Davis, Chair of the Cal Poly Human Subjects Committee, at (805) 756-2754, sdavis@calpoly.edu, or Dr. Dean Wendt, Interim Dean of Research, at (805) 756-1508, dwendt@calpoly.edu.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research project as described, please indicate your agreement by signing below. Please keep one copy of this form for your reference, and thank you for your participation in this research.

Signature of Volunteer Date

Signature of Researcher Date

Appendix 3- Spanish Consent From

Formulario de Consentimiento Informado

CONSENTIMIENTO INFORMADO PARA PARTICIPAR EN UN PROYECTO DE INVESTIGACIÓN, “Intercultural Communication in an ESL Setting” (Comunicación intercultural en un aula de inglés como segunda lengua [ESL, según sus siglas en inglés])

Un proyecto de investigación sobre la comunicación intercultural en el aula de inglés como segunda lengua (ESL) lo dirige Ashley Nelson, estudiante en el Departamento de Estudios de la Comunicación en Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, bajo la supervisión del Dr. Jnan Blau. El propósito de este estudio es observar la comunicación intercultural que ocurre en un salón de clase de inglés como segunda lengua y cómo enseñar inglés eficazmente.

A usted se le pide que participe en este estudio por medio de permitir que la investigadora observe su clase de ESL y que ella participe como asistente de enseñanza. Esta interacción incluiría estar en el salón de clase, ayudar a grupos pequeños y presentar información nueva y vieja a la clase. Como estudiante, usted seguiría aprendiendo y trabajando como lo hace normalmente. Su participación será durante las clases que quedan de su semestre (hoy hasta el 19 de mayo de 2014). Por favor, sepa que no se le requiere participar en este estudio² y que puede dejar de participar en cualquier momento sin sanción. Además, no tiene que contestar ninguna pregunta relacionada con este estudio que prefiera no contestar.

No se anticipan riesgos asociados con su participación en este estudio. Su confidencialidad será protegida porque no usaré su nombre en informes sobre este estudio. Los beneficios potenciales asociados con el estudio incluyen el mejoramiento de métodos de enseñar inglés.

Si tiene cualquier pregunta sobre este estudio o si le gustaría ser informado/a de los resultados cuando termine el estudio, no vacile en contactar a Ashley Nelson al 925-914-1159. Si tiene preguntas o inquietudes sobre la manera en que el estudio se lleva a cabo, puede contactar al Dr. Steve Davis, Jefe del Comité de Sujetos Humanos de Cal Poly, al 805-756-2754, sdavis@calpoly.edu, o al Dr. Dean Wendt, Decano Interino de Investigaciones, al 805-756-1508, dwendt@calpoly.edu.

Si usted acepta participar voluntariamente en este proyecto de investigación tal como se ha descrito, favor de indicar su acuerdo firmando abajo. Favor de guardar una copia de este formulario para referirse después; le agradecemos su participación en esta investigación.

Firma del/de la voluntario/a

Fecha

Firma de la investigadora

Fecha