

Tip #6 – Be open to learning a new culture

The iceberg concept of culture tells us that the vast majority of culture, like an iceberg, is hidden below the surface. You have to know the under-the-surface cultural implications if you want to be a fluent communicator in the target language.

Language reflects culture

When you are learning a new language, you are exposed to new cultural, social and literary references. Our lives are rooted in culture and we use language to describe our common experiences. We describe what we see, the customs we observe, the food we eat, ideas we have or are exposed to, to name a few. There are bound to be words and concepts in a target language that we are not familiar with because we do not have those same customs and traditions, the same reference points. There might not be words for certain objects or feelings, so in order to learn those words we need to first learn the concepts they refer to.

Language shapes culture

Language definitely reflects culture but it also shapes it – it gives meaning to experiences (values, beliefs and behaviors). Words we use carry with them hidden, non-verbal references and connotations. We use the language to name the objects and those names carry meaning. Eventually saying the name brings up, unconsciously, all the cultural and social connotations of that word. Common values are reflected in a way members of a group use language – what they choose to say or not to say and how they say it.

Language is a symbol of cultural reality/identity

Language is a system of signs that have cultural values. This is visible not only amongst various nationalities but also amongst other groups who develop various manners of speaking - teenagers, people using professional jargon, etc. Those not proficient in those systems remain outsiders.

The theory of linguistic relativity claims that different people speak differently because they think differently and they think differently because their language offers them different ways of expressing the world around them. In other words, the structure of the language can influence how we think and behave.

Teacher's Responsibility

The ultimate goal is to teach students to use the language in a new culture.

To do that the teachers need to be knowledgeable in cultural differences, be able to explain them as such (with no judgement), teach students how to use them, what they imply and what connotations they bring. This is education not conversion! You are just making your students aware of social conventions

- to prevent them from doing culturally inappropriate things
- to prevent them from being misunderstood.
- to help them recognize formal and informal social conventions

Growth mindsets in learning and teaching a new culture

If you are teaching your native language you need to make every effort to get to know your students and explain your culture to them not as a superior but rather as different from their own. You are your students' cultural guide.

If you are teaching language that is not your native language you need to make sure you understand the culture that comes with it in a non-judgmental way and be able to explain it to your students.

If you are a student, you have to be open to new concepts and new meanings behind non-verbal and verbal communication and be willing to consciously operate within different systems of verbal and non-verbal clues in order to reach a higher level of language proficiency.

SHOW EFFORT

It takes EFFORT to get to know the culture, especially if you have not lived in the target language country. As a teacher, you can always do research, check with a native speaker, etc. But do make an effort to understand before you teach. Do not judge. Do your research, compare and explain. Think of yourself as a cultural translator.

Implications of eye contact, attitudes towards time and relationships with teachers differ greatly between cultures. Some students might not feel comfortable addressing a teacher by his/her first name or disagreeing with them. When asked what are they interested in learning, students may question your expertise as a teacher because they believe as a teacher you should know. Those situations, if left unexplained, can cause great misunderstandings.

ACCEPT CHALLENGE

It is a CHALLENGE to teach something you don't quite understand. Some values might be very different. Many language schools employ native speakers for that very reason. Native speakers might not be trained language teachers but they bring invaluable cultural component to language learning. Every student needs to be exposed to both.

ADMIT YOU TOO ARE LEARNING

When you are learning an unfamiliar culture, as a student or as a teacher, you need to be open to making mistakes and admitting that you yourself are on a learning journey. Keep an open mind. Many language teachers have not lived in a country where target language is spoken. They learned the culture from books and maybe occasional contact with native speakers. There is nothing wrong with modeling growth mindset and admitting you are learning with your students.