

Cross-Cultural Awareness: Good Manners, Taboos, and Foot-in-Mouth Disease

Good Intentions, Disastrous Mistakes

In his "Cultural Pitfalls of a Foreign Educational Advisor," appearing in Volume IX of *Practical Anthropology*, 1962, D. Adams relates the following story:

Once upon a time there was a great flood, and involved in the flood were two creatures, a monkey and a fish. Now the monkey, being agile and experienced, was lucky enough to scramble up a tree and escape the raging waters. As he looked down from his safe perch, he saw the poor fish struggling against the swift current. With the very best of intentions, he reached down and lifted the fish from the water. The result was inevitable.

According to the *Travel Industry Yearbook*, approximately 25 million U.S. travelers will go abroad this year and spend more than 19 billion dollars in foreign countries. Among these millions, more than 27,000 will be students enrolled in the more than 650 college-sponsored, study-abroad programs. Thousands more will be men and women assuming managerial assignments and employment positions with huge transnational corporations operating in foreign countries.

It seems logical to assume that young men and women in the process of becoming educated are well-informed and aware of the subtle yet very important difference among cultures. A logical assumption, perhaps, but a recent survey by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of

Teaching found that one out of every four college seniors said he or she had almost nothing in common with people in developing countries and knew very little about their cultures.

If not students, then surely men and women employed by multi-national corporations know enough about other cultures to survive in them. Many do, but according to the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, one third of all personnel transferred abroad return prematurely, usually because they cannot adjust to the host country and its culture.

It seems safe to assume that all 25 million of us who will visit in foreign countries for a fortnight or a lifetime may act much like the monkey of the story, and with the very best intentions make equally disastrous mistakes that lead to inevitable results, namely, cross-cultural communication blunders and unhappy maladjustments to cultures other than our own.

Linguistic and Cultural Codes

Cross-cultural communication blunders (verbal and non-verbal) and maladjustments to foreign cultures occur because we often do not understand enough of both the linguistic and cultural codes of the foreign countries in which we travel, study, live, and work. We think nothing of hopping into a jet plane, flying for 24 hours at incredible speed only to land in a country about whose political, cultural, and geographical parameters we know nothing, very little, or much worse, a country known only to us by stereotypes. Lacking the necessary understanding, we have great difficulty putting ourselves into the

shoes of our international hosts, and what we perceive from our cultural point of view as the very best of our intentions and most laudable behaviors may be—and all too often are—perceived by the host country nationals as incredible insults.

Roger E. Axtell, a former Vice-President of The Parker Pen Company (with offices in 154 countries; a company that depends on the world outside the U.S.A. for 60% of its revenues) tells the following “monumental goof” committed by a young, culturally ignorant salesman from New Jersey who apparently knew nothing about hand gestures and body language in Brazil.

The scene was his company’s offices in Rio, and it had gone like a Sunday preacher’s favorite sermon. As he looked around the table, he knew he had clinched the sale. Triumphant, he raised his hand to his Latin customers and flashed the classic American okay sign—thumb and forefinger forming a circle, other fingers pointing up.

The sunny Brazilian atmosphere suddenly felt like a deep freeze. Stony silence. Icy stares. Plus embarrassed smirks from his colleagues.

Calling for a break, they took him outside the conference room and explained. Our hero had just treated everyone to a gesture with roughly the same meaning in Brazil as the notorious third-finger sign conveys so vividly in the U.S.A.

Marching to the Beat of a Different Cultural Drummer

Putting one’s self into the other person’s shoes depends upon the ability to communicate with people who are products of a different culture; moreover, the ability to communicate across cultures is only as good as the ability to understand, decipher, and appropriately use linguistic and cultural codes.

Understanding, deciphering, and appropriately using linguistic and cultural codes is extremely difficult, primarily because learning languages and cultures is a complex process of developing the capacity to see as others see, to feel as others feel, to talk as others talk, and to walk in shoes

that march to the beat of a different cultural drummer.

The value of being able to march to the beat of a different cultural drummer is delineated by Clyde Kluckhohn in his *Mirror For Man* in which he compares culture to a map: “Culture is like a map. Just as a map isn’t the territory but an abstract representation of a particular area, so also culture is an abstract description of trends toward uniformity in words, deeds, and artifacts of a human group. If a map is accurate and you can read it, you won’t get lost; if you know a culture, you will know your way around the life of a society.”

Creating An Experience of Culture for Our Students

In the spirit of the Kluckhohn comparison of cultures to maps, the job of educators involved in teaching for international and cultural awareness is straightforward enough: We must make certain that the cultural maps—to which we expose our students—are accurate and up-to-date, and we must help our students ‘read’ such maps. In short, we must create for students an **experience of culture** so that they will know their way around the life of cultures other than their own.

But, how do we go about exposing students to accurate cultural maps? How do we teach for international and cross-cultural awareness so that students will be able to ‘read’ a culture accurately? How do we help students achieve successful cross-cultural communication?

Perception Programmed By Language

If we ask people in general how to overcome problems in cross-cultural communication, many, if not most men and women in our society, would express the wishful yet persistent belief that all one has to do is bring people together, and they will, more or less automatically, “get along.” If we ask educators about things cross-cultural and global, many, if not most of them in academe, would propose that we “educate for a

global perspective," that is, offer courses about other countries, about other cultures, about other ways of life. If we ask men and women who have lived, worked, or studied abroad, we find the thoughtful ones confirming what research such as that of J. Amir in "Contact Hypothesis in Ethnic Relations," published in Volume 71 of the *Psychological Bulletin* seems to show, namely, that by itself, cross-cultural contact is likely to create misunderstanding and disharmony. Furthermore, learning about something—gathering knowledge for the sake of gathering—is more or less an exercise in abstraction and a far cry from experiencing cultures—cultures that are expressions of different ways of perceiving and seeing the world; cultures that P. Cateora in *International Marketing* (1983) describes as "...the human-made part of human environment—the sum total of...knowledge, beliefs, art, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits...the distinctive way of life of a group of people, their complete design for living—a mosaic of human life."

Experiencing the "mosaic" of different cultures goes far beyond merely getting together or gathering **factual knowledge**. Experiencing a people's "design for living" requires a dynamic ability to interpret and put into a cultural context all the parts of a culture: its social institutions, its belief systems, its material culture, its graphic and plastic arts, its folklore, music, drama, and language.

A nation's material culture, its social institutions, its belief systems, its arts, and its language—great as these are—the greatest of these is its language. "Language is more than just a medium for expressing thought," states Edward T. Hall in *The Hidden Dimension*. "It is, in fact, a major element in the formation of thought...man's very perception of the world about him is programmed by the language he speaks . . ."

Language and Culture Determine Who We Are

If language is—as Hall contends—the program or determining element in how people see the world in which they live, and if culture is the sum total of everything produced by the mosaical

vision of a people, then **language and culture** determine the way people think, the way they communicate, the way they behave, and why they are the way they are. For each and every nation, language and culture are both the causes and the effects of who its people are. In short, for each nation, language and culture are the seminal structures of its individual and group identities.

Languages and Cultures as Top Priorities

In a time when it was possible to live in splendid isolation far away from the world's maddening problems, knowing languages and understanding cultures were nice. Today, when digital telecommunications have rendered the concept of distance meaningless, knowing languages and cultures are a necessity because any given event in the global mosaic of humanity is no longer something that happens to them "over there;" rather, all events have ramifications far beyond the parameters of where they occur in space and time. If "Spaceship Earth" is to avert disaster in an age where total annihilation is an ever-present possibility, it is incumbent upon all nations to actively participate in knowing languages and understanding cultures. Languages and cultures are, whether we like it or not, the top priorities of the electronically linked world of the 1980's and beyond.

Unfortunately, for us in the United States, knowing languages and cultures is not a top priority for most Americans: only one out of every twenty public high school students studies French, German, or Russian beyond the second year; the U.S. continues to be the only country in the world where one can graduate from college without having had one year of foreign language prior to and during the university years; our domestic airlines flying international routes routinely reject about 70% of flight attendant applicants because of insufficient foreign language skills; and a UNESCO education study of 30,000 students at all levels in nine countries places Americans next to last in their understanding of foreign cultures.

Although the study of languages and cultures is not yet a top priority, all of us in education, particularly those of us in foreign and second

languages, have a responsibility to become the catalysts to reverse the dismal trend of international ignorance on the part of the United States. Because we can determine the direction programs and curriculums take, we can no longer afford to ignore the very technologies that have shrunk the world into a "global village." How can the technologies of the modern learning laboratory be used effectively in teaching for international and cross-cultural awareness? This question needs to be asked, answered, and acted upon. The parallel learning environments of classroom and laboratory will have to intersect if education is to be the place to which people turn to acquire the understanding of cultures and the language communication skills needed to compete in the global marketplace of ideas and products.

Beginning with Volume 21, Issue 2, *The Journal of Educational Techniques and Technologies* will feature a column entitled "Cross-Cultural Awareness: Good Manners, Taboos, and Foot-in-Mouth Disease."

To all our national and international readers, I cordially extend the invitation to submit examples of what constitute good manners, taboos, and foot-in-mouth disease in your country for publication in *J.E.T.T.* Send your descriptions, stories, and anecdotes of good manners, taboos, or, perhaps, descriptions of a foreign visitor who has put his or her foot in the mouth by incorrectly using language to: Good Manners/Taboos/Foot-in-Mouth, *J.E.T.T.*, 304C Moore College Building, UGA Language Laboratories, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602, U.S.A. If your examples come from print or electronic media, please include a complete description of the source and request written permission to have it reprinted in *J.E.T.T.*

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