

Understanding Asian ESL Students: Translating School Cultures

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Asian ESL students in American public secondary schools are often misunderstood and their instructors assess them utilizing American school cultural norms. However, the students' behavior can be better comprehended by taking into account their home country's school culture. Education in any country is governed by culture so observation made of the students' school life reveals their culture.

Asian ESL students are a diverse population group, yet people of Asian cultures seem to lie along similar ends of the cultural spectrum. Buckley (2000) suggests a framework whereby cultural variables are presented and each national group is defined in terms of where they lie along the continuum. Within Buckley's framework, Asians tend to fall in the similar vicinity of each other.

The reason for observing Asians as a whole is to include a bigger number of students who might be misunderstood at an American school. The purpose of this paper is to be inclusive rather than exclusive of some Asian cultures that might not fit exactly in the framework presented here. It must be noted that in order to have specific examples, one group of Asian cultures must be studied. Far East Asian cultures have similarities within the Asian group, so some factors mentioned in this paper may be more representative of the Far East Asian learners. This is not an attempt to stereotype all Asians as "being Asian."

The stereotypes of Asian ESL students by teachers (CATESOL state wide conference 2004) are: quiet; unwilling to participate; too polite; sit in the back seats; and never ask questions during class. The first step to understanding this population is to decipher these characteristics in a cultural context. For example, they are not all quiet people but were taught to respect the instructor by listening and not speaking in class unless given the permission to do so. If they are planning to enter university in the U.S.; however, they need to learn American school culture to

become successful. American school culture calls for students to state their opinions and get involved in discussions during class time.

An instructor cannot assume that telling the students to speak up in class is feasible in directing them to get more involved in class discussions. What is said is taken at face value and not fully grasped by the students. The instructor needs to do the following: understand what cultural aspect makes the students act in a certain way; emphasize and let the students know their actions are understood; gently lead them into realization that their action needs adjusting; and give them many opportunities to practice the new way.

Here are some common Asian group norms and how they often play out in American contexts:

*Collectivism:* In some Asian schools, students practice forms of cooperation and orderliness. This can be seen in all-school practice to enter and exit school auditoriums and silence seen by the teacher as a response. Therefore, in America, Asian students often become nervous at no directions or patterns, needing explanations often.

*In-Group and Out-Group:* In Japan and South Korea, elaborate hierarchical language registers exist. Adding to the fact that students remain in the same classroom throughout the day, unlike in America, gives students the chance to form cliques and to establish classroom hierarchies. Students have the urge to make a clique before they are tossed out into an out-group. So in an American school, Asian students may seem cliquish or even bullying within their own cultural groups.

*Respect for Elders:* In Asia, it is considered rude to show any kind of doubt for elders. Age equals respect. Since grade levels create a system of authority, those who show disrespect for the older students will receive harsh treatments by them. In American schools, they tend to agree

with the older population or do not show any disagreement with their opinions. Class discussion can turn into a pleasing session of the older students.

*Absolute Authority:* In some Asian cultures, students stand up together when the teacher enters the classroom. They all wait for the cue and bow as they greet the teacher. They sit down to start a lesson when given permission by the teacher. Students have a difficult time asking questions in the classroom for fear that they may insult the teacher. They may wait until after class for Q&A. The American teacher needs to pay attention to the cues of the silent students. They may be quiet but are active listeners, wanting comments and feedback. If no reaction comes from the teacher, the students will lose confidence.

*Clear Gender Differences:* In their home countries, there are gender-based attendance sheets for every class and students are directed to form queues by gender since preschool. This may result in giggles and childish display by some Asian students when working in a co-ed group in an American school.

*Visual and Aesthetic Orientation:* Asian schools stress the importance of appearance. Note-taking strategies are taught from early on and students compete to make their notebooks appealing. In an American school, they may seem obsessed with receiving handouts and given directions on how to take notes. Finally, they are intolerant of unorganized classmates.

*Driven by Test Scores:* In Asia, parents believe that there is a path that one needs to follow in order to succeed in life. The path starts with getting good marks in kindergarten. The American teacher may need to accept this fact and be empathetic to the parents' concern.

*Animism:* Asian students are taught that there are spirits dwelling in objects. From an early age, they are told to handle objects with respect. They are often stunned by American classmates and teachers sitting on desks and also not recycling as often as they do.

*Superstition:* Some numbers and colors are taboo to mention. Commonly, odd numbers are not liked. Writing in red ink is reserved only for the teacher for corrections. Historically, red ink indicated an ultimatum, so using a red pen to write on a poster board for a project will make some Asian students uncomfortable.

When Asian students' home culture is regarded in light of a school setting, many mysterious actions and attitudes can be understood. Then the teacher can be empathetic to the students and tailor their guidance accordingly. This is a start in assisting Asian students acclimate to the American school system.

### Reference

Buckley, L.C. (2000). A framework for understanding cross-cultural issues in the English as a second language classroom. *The CATESOL Journal*, 21(1),53-72.