

Anthony Verardi
LING 2142 Fall 2019
Second Language Teaching
Dr. Dawn McCormick

Culture Comparison and Contrast

During one of our tutoring sessions, I surveyed my tutees about their experiences with culture in the United States and how it related to their home culture(s). The “survey” was framed as a lesson on small talk and presented to students as a way to prepare for conversations they might have to engage in with people from the US who want to know more about where they are from (see attached copy). The content and questions were designed to elicit their thoughts on four topics for consideration, namely:

- Do their personal identities differ in the L2 culture?
- What are the differences and similarities between the cultures that they have noticed?
- How is L2 school culture the same or different from the L1 school culture?
- Have they experienced any prejudice/stereotyping in their L2 culture?

I asked my tutees to produce brief notes about three general differences and similarities and two specific comparisons about their experience in an educational setting, as well as more substantive notes for the question about their identity in the L2 language and the nature of their experiences in the US so far. Tutees were also provided with my own observations from my time studying in Germany as both a model of some language to consider using and an example of my expectations,¹ then given ten minutes to work on their own (with my assistance for any vocabulary questions) writing notes before we reconvened for a group chat. While all three tutees (A-chan, Bogota, and Lala) participated in the initial discussion, only two returned completed worksheets (Lala was absent for the following session).

¹ It is worth considering that this method of modeling may have gone beyond providing a linguistic model and instead primed their responses, since a few of their comments mirrored the topics of my own notes. In a more normal classroom setting where contact time was less of a factor, I would ideally let their thoughts and opinions come up naturally over time in a way that connects to the material, instead of explicitly requiring them to think about culture in multiple ways on the spot. On the other hand, this can signal to learners that I am sincerely interested in their thoughts and foster a localized community of practice, as well as help them organize their thoughts.

During the initial note-writing period, Bogota asked about what “groups of students on campus, only men and only women,” were called, and after some clarification, it was determined that she was asking about Greek Life on campus. All three tutees were fascinated by the fraternity and sorority system, not having any similar structures in place in their home cultures (Japan and Colombia), and finding it interesting that students lived together without adult or family supervision (barring a Resident Assistant, who is traditionally also an undergraduate student). All three tutees noted that in their home cultures, it was more common for students to live at home for their undergraduate careers and commute to a local university, only traveling and living near campus to either 1) attend a very high-quality, specific program or 2) participate in graduate study. Tutees were surprised that this was not the norm in the United States as well, given that people in the US seem to value familial relationships. Bogota later included “fraternities/people living in dormitories” as the first difference between “school culture” in the US and Colombia.

In general, all tutees showed a propensity for noting surface-level similarities and differences between their home culture(s) and culture in the US, such as “portion sizes are larger” and “people don’t care how they dress in the US.” All three tutees mused that fashion was more relaxed in the United States, and that they perceived Americans as prioritizing comfort over appearance—especially for undergraduates; Lala even admitted to “dressing down” in the US in order to fit in, noting her attire that day consisted of a Pitt hoodie and leggings; they connected this with the broader perception of not caring about the negative opinions of others, which they admired about US culture. Further observations included that many people in the US own pets, use cars for transportation (as opposed to public transit), have similar shopping habits and fast food establishments, and that our system of government (Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches) was relatively similar to their own systems, idiosyncrasies of naming conventions aside. Both A-chan and Lala were intrigued by the fact that while the US does not have an established monarchy, like the Japanese Imperial Family, we seem to have

elevated celebrities and “influencers” to fill that niche in our society: people to look toward for inspiration and as models for behavior, but who don’t really do much.

They also found it interesting that university students were able to use their ID card (as a metonym for student status in general) for such purposes as accessing public transportation, arranging museum visits, and getting discounts at shopping malls. With specific regard to differences in education systems, A-chan and Lala differed from Bogota in how they viewed relationships in the US between students and the instructor: whereas they viewed students and instructors as being on more equal power levels here as compared to in Japan, Bogota was of the opinion that the relationship between instructor and student was similar to how it is in Colombia; in general, Bogota thought the US higher education system was not unlike the one in Colombia. She did, however, note that it was odd to her that students in the US study in the library, which in Colombia is a very quiet place only for looking at books.

The tutees’ inclinations toward making surface-level observations were not unexpected, given that none of them could say they had done any substantial amount of work in intercultural studies, comparative sociology, or anthropology before. All three tutees have also only been studying in the United States for a relatively short period of time (under six months), which may not be enough time to form more nuanced opinions about cultural similarities and differences. Similarly, this may be an explanatory factor behind why no tutee was able to provide a response to questions about whether they feel their identity changes between their L1 and their L2: they have not had enough time to cultivate that persona yet.