

Final Reflective Report

Bethany Anderson

Azusa Pacific University

Learning Outcome #1: Demonstrate the knowledge necessary for intercultural competence such as knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in another culture including knowledge of worldviews, beliefs, values, and norms of behavior.

During this course, I have gained a deeper awareness of my own cultural values and norms as a Caucasian Midwestern American. These include **limited touching and more personal space, direct eye contact, and low tolerance for silence in conversations** (Jackson, 2014). I also realized that our culture has an **expectation of quiet compliance** in situations where waiting is required, which became clear to me as I contrasted cultural norms from the Middle East (as observed in interactions with my Iraqi students).

I began to understand that many individuals from Middle Eastern countries tend to “push” for what they need and want because that is the behavior that is expected and respected in their culture. If you don't make your voice heard, you will never get what you want! Consequently, this is not being rude, it is just doing what any self-respecting person does when they need something. We interpret this as being rude because in our culture, you are expected to mildly state your wish and then patiently and quietly wait your turn—an utterly ridiculous thing to do if you want something to happen in the Middle East!” (from my response to the Week 1 forum post: “How have you not been a blessing in other cultures?”)

Another value I identified in my own culture was **an emphasis on productivity over relationships**.

When I was teaching in the Chicago suburbs for World Relief, I would sometimes go visit my students in their homes and they would set aside anything they had been

planning to do and just spend time in conversation with me, serving me food and treating me like the most important thing on their agenda. Over time, I have realized that true hospitality does not come naturally to me in my cultural framework. What does come naturally to me is to selfishly want to dictate my own schedule and get things done that I think are important. Setting aside time to put others first and serve them in my home, making them feel comfortable and welcome shows humility, compassion and love. I feel that this is a lost art form in US culture, and we could learn so much from other cultures that still emphasize the importance of hospitality (from my response to the Week 1 forum post: “What has God taught you through foreigners?”).

I also gained a greater awareness of the way **my Scandinavian Midwestern farming roots have influenced my own identity and values.**

Growing up in a family descended from immigrant farmers, hard work carries a strong sense of pride, and describing someone as “hardworking” is a high form of praise—among *the highest*, in fact. On the one hand, I am truly grateful for this cultural heritage. The Bible holds up diligence as a virtue (“A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.” Proverbs 10:4, ESV). We are instructed in scripture to provide for our families: “but if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8, ESV).

However, where does providing for your family stop and love of money begin? Is hard work simply for the sake of working hard really a virtue God commends? Scripture instructs, “keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have” (Hebrews 13:5, ESV). Even beyond this caution, God chose to create a day specifically

for *rest*, (Genesis 2:2-3) and commanded his people to honor the day designated for this purpose (Exodus 34:21), thereby emphasizing the importance of rest, both for our own good and as part of our worship and obedience to God.

Hard work can be motivated by different desires, and while a strong work ethic can spring from pure and noble goals, in our culture we are perhaps more likely to find at its root sins of **greed**, **covetousness**, and **discontent**. Many of us (and people we know) work hard because we find our value and **identity in our job** or career rather than in Christ. Others may be **hiding from responsibilities** and/or problems in their life, perhaps at home. Some may love the acclaim and respect that comes with working hard, which essentially boils down to **pride**. Another motivator is often not wanting to say no and “let people down,” i.e., **fear of man**. Even if we are innocent of these sinful motives, hard work and busyness can keep us from work that God wants us to do by filling up our time with the good and leaving no time for our true priorities. This might mean having no time to devote to training our children, hospitality, developing our talents, meeting needs in our community or sharing with others about Christ. (from my response to the Week 3 forum post: “The good and bad”).

Through my observation and interview for the ethnographic project, I have learned about different elements of Liberian culture including the value of respect for elders and the avoidance of eye contact along with an emphasis on listening before speaking as a demonstration of this respect. I observed different nonverbal behaviors such as staring, hugging, and low time-consciousness. I learned about the significance of Liberia’s historical link with the US through the settlement of freed slaves and subsequent creation of the *Americo-Liberian* ethnic/cultural group which held a high status and position of power until the native tribes overthrew the

Americo-Liberian government. I also learned about traditional men's and women's roles (men do not typically cook, wash dishes or care for children), and the supportive and tight-knit community Liberians maintain with family and friends, helping each other with children and spending considerable amounts of time in each other's homes. I gained a deeper understanding of the role that the civil war has played in the identity of Liberian refugees due to a lack of education for the younger generation and the deep trauma many have experienced.

Learning Outcome #2: Demonstrate the attitudes necessary for intercultural competence such as curiosity, openness, and readiness to suspend judgment of cultures.

I feel that my attitudes toward cultural interactions have been developed to a greater extent through the coursework for this class. I was challenged to learn about a culture I was relatively unfamiliar with (Liberian refugees in the US) through the ethnographic project and feel that my curiosity and desire to learn more about other nationalities and cultural groups has grown as a result. I have grown in my ability to look at my own culture more critically; for example, in our emphasis on 'hard work' over relationships and the potential for this focus to lead to greed, discontent, pride and fear of man (Week 3, "Good and Bad" forum post). Through the course readings and my ethnographic observation, I have also grown in my ability to suspend judgement of cultures different from my own by "stop[ing] myself before making a . . . negative judgement and try[ing] to identify which specific nonverbal behavior is making me feel ____ (fill in the blank: uncomfortable, angry, etc.). If I can connect my reaction to the nonverbal behavior rather than the person, I will be avoiding the pitfall of a hasty judgement" (Week 5, "Too close for comfort" forum post).

Learning Outcome #3: Demonstrate the skills to effectively incorporate a cultural component in an ESL/EFL class that enables English language learners to acquire the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to develop intercultural competence.

Through the forum discussions, I explored practical ways to incorporate intercultural communication themes within the ESL classroom context. In a class comprised of diverse learners, the teacher can encourage an open attitude toward classmates from other cultures by providing opportunities for students to share with the class about their countries and regions of origin, frequently changing partner assignments for pair and group work, and encouraging students to learn each other's names. (Week 7, "Keeping your classroom a safe zone" forum post). Another method could be to help learners understand the concept of power differential and the role this can play in communication. To accomplish this, a teacher might highlight relationships that could represent a power differential (boss-employee, native English speaker-nonnative English speaker, parent-child, etc.) and what effect this has on word choice and nonverbal behavior (Week 4, PPT Overview forum post). Proxemics could be explored through a demonstration of differences in comfortable personal space, and similar activity could explore other differences in nonverbal behaviors across cultures such as gestures, smiling, etc. (Week 5, PPT Overview forum post). Another exercise to help learners explore the theme of identity would be to have students make a list under the headings of "How I want people to think about me" and, "How I see myself." Depending on the proficiency level of the class, this activity could be followed up with a writing assignment or by having students journal their insights. (Week 6, PPT Overview forum post). For students who have children growing up with multiple languages and cultural identities, it is also important to discuss how to "help their children navigate their

multicultural and multilingual identities and hopefully become a ‘constructive marginal’ [Jackson, p. 143]” (Week 6, “Implications for teaching” forum post).

Learning Outcome #4: Articulate a Biblical rationale (or a rationale based on a faith tradition or worldview of the students’ choosing) for learning and modeling intercultural sensitivity and competence.

I learned so much through the Smith (2009) readings about what a biblical and Christ-like motivation for intercultural competence looks like. Scripture gives us plenty of instruction on how to demonstrate cultural sensitivity: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18, ESV) is one applicable passage, coupled with “you shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself” (Leviticus 19: 34, ESV). Smith gave this passage a practical application for intercultural communication: “You want others to make life easier by learning your language? *Learn theirs*. You want others to understand you? *Work to understand them*. You want others to hear what you have to say? *Be attentive to them*” (Loc 907, Kindle version). The story of the Good Samaritan teaches us to put ourselves in a position of vulnerability with those who are culturally different from us, where we are willing to accept help and learn from them (Week 4, “A New Twist” forum post). From a biblical perspective, we need to ask ourselves how best to honor and serve in situations of intercultural interaction; “a lot has to do with whether our focus is inward or outward: are we traveling for the purpose of serving ourselves or for serving others? Are we seeking to take or to learn?” (Week 5, “A mindful traveler” forum post).

In chapter 6, Smith encourages us to demonstrate humility, show hospitality, and really listen during intercultural interactions. “One key insight I gained from this chapter was that ‘understanding cultural others too quickly can be a problem, especially when we ‘understand’

before we have really listened' (Loc 1441, Kindle edition). This concept ties in with the Matthew 7 reference about not judging and it highlights the way that what may be perceived as understanding can in reality be making a hasty judgement. Instead, Smith urges us to 'suspend . . . judgement for long enough to really find out what is going on' (Loc 1490, Kindle edition)" (Week 6, "Loving strangers" forum post).

References

Jackson, J. (2014). *Introducing language and intercultural communication*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Smith, D. (2009). *Learning from the stranger: Christian faith and cultural diversity*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans.