

English Lite

Don't you dare laugh at my culture!

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Can we separate language from culture? My own opinion is that it is not possible, that in a very basic way language IS culture, and that as we teach English, we of necessity teach at least some aspects of culture. But even trying to define culture can be difficult, and most of us are aware that WHOSE culture you teach is a question about which EFL professionals have not yet reached consensus. The debate will no doubt go on for some time, but one thing I am sure of is that one culture and its stereotypes often seems very funny to another culture. As long as the humor remains friendly, and stereotypes are recognized for what they are, cultural comparisons can be both interesting and a valuable source of animated discussion in our classes. What we must be careful not to do, of course, is to accept unflattering stereotypes without analysis and scorn them as accurate examples of a culture that is certainly inferior to our own. Down that road lies bitterness and disaster.

I am reminded of a joke, told to me by a Mexican colleague a couple of years ago. It seems that four dogs were talking, one from Mexico, one from Cuba, one from Somalia and one from the United States. The Mexican dog observed, "*Pues*, I have a pretty good life. When I want food, I begin barking and my family puts food in my dish and gives it to me." The Cuban dog said, "That sounds good, but I don't understand---what is barking?" The Somali dog joined in, "Yes, you seem to have a fine life, but I'm puzzled---what is food?" And the dog from the U.S. added, "Your life is obviously comfortable, but please explain to me---what's a family?"

O.K., O.K., it's a pretty bad joke, but it is also a joke built on cultural and national stereotypes that are widely accepted. Cubans have no freedom of speech, Somalis are all starving, and nobody in the States knows what a family is anymore. (And, since a Mexican told the joke, things in Mexico are really much, much better than they are in the other benighted places.) I have used that dog story in tourism and business English classes, and discussed with Mexican students the fact that no matter what the stereotype of practically non-existent family life in the U.S. may be, there are indeed many families, my own among them, that are strong and close. Some students have observed that the stereotype of the almost-perfect Mexican family may have some flaws, and we have generally had lively discussions based on these cultural comparisons.

Years ago, one of the standard "images" of Mexico depicted in cartoons, carved in little onyx figurines for tourists--I have even seen a colorful ceramic teapot using the motif---was the figure of a Mexican *campesino*, asleep under his oversized *sombrero*, leaning against a *nopal* cactus. The image springs from a general stereotype of laziness, lack of ambition and even, I think, of a lack of intelligence---I mean, it's not too clever to fall asleep AGAINST a cactus, is

it? In a way, in the new post-NAFTA world, Mexico and Mexican business are still trying to shake off the *campesino-by-the-cactus* image.

Anyone who knows this country well, knows that the stereotype was never accurate, but WHY it existed in the first place can be a good discussion subject in a language class. Even if we can't definitively settle the question of WHOSE culture we present in our classes, we can approach the subject with openness and an awareness that cultural questions are invariably interesting to language learners.