

Ten Ways to Add Culture to your English Class

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When we speak of culture, many people think of sophistication, style, or high class. Of course, there is nothing wrong with adding class to your class, but this classy class of class is not the class classified here, but more the classic idea of culture. For our purposes, we will concentrate on a linguistic definition (Grosjean 1989: 157) which defines culture as "... the way of life of a people or society, including its rules of behavior; its economic, social, and political systems; its language, its religious beliefs; its laws. Culture is acquired, socially transmitted, and communicated by language." or learned through language instruction, we might add. It seems a lot of importance has been placed lately on learning culture along with English. Many schools and programs emphasize the learning of culture as though it were just as important as actual language study. Perhaps this is true because you can neither separate the two, nor fully understand either, without some exposure to both.

Although obviously important, culture is not always easily learned because it must be experienced in a personal way in order to understand it. With this idea in mind, we will explore ten easy, entertaining, and effective ideas on how to bring this magical culture alive in the English class. Most of these ideas are intended to teach American (U.S.) culture, but they could be adapted to concentrate on other English-speaking cultures. They can be used at a variety of levels and with a variety of age groups. Most importantly, they all provide an opportunity to expand the student's knowledge of English while providing cultural insights.

1. Cheer for a football team

This first idea might be a bit more appealing to the boys in your class than to the girls, but it contains a wealth of possibilities for teaching culture. Just as soccer is somewhat of a national pastime here in Mexico, football in the United States is an important sport and cultural element (as are baseball and basketball). I suggest using college football because the schedule of games follows most of our course schedules, beginning in the fall and ending before the Christmas holidays, with games played every Saturday. A book could easily be written (and many have) on the cultural aspects of college football in the U.S., as many people "live and breathe" by football rivalries during the entire season. The schedule itself, while not only well-timed for the fall semester, provides an element of continuity for continuous observation throughout the course.

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I suggest you choose one team to follow--maybe a top team like the University of Miami, Nebraska, Notre Dame or the Auburn Tigers to keep things exciting. Get the season schedule of games from any college pre-season magazine and follow each game. Your class will become a unified group of fans ready to discuss in class every Monday the game from the previous Saturday, the results of which will be found on TV, radio, or in newspapers.

Among the many cultural aspects involved in this activity are the rules of the game of football itself, its many traditions, including details about your team (school colors, the mascot, the school's geographic location), and the same information about every opposing team.

In class, disguised as Friday's Pep Rally (wearing your team's colors, of course) and Monday's Victory Celebration (featuring the cheerleaders who thought they hated sports), you will observe the cumulative effects of team loyalty while your students experience true culture. For the adventurous, why not try to attend a game? A nice letter to the director of the athletic department would probably win complimentary tickets for the class (about \$20 U.S. each) and transportation may not be too expensive for a large group.

Similar variations can be made using other sports, or any current ongoing activity such as a political event.

2. Celebrate holidays

It is probably safe to say that nothing expresses a nation's culture more than its holidays. Holidays almost always have a foundation that is rich in history, politics, and religious beliefs. They also present an opportunity to compare cultures by comparing similar holidays (the Fourth of July in the U.S. with the *Día de la Independencia* in Mexico, for example). Before your course starts, check the dates to make sure all holidays are noted and preparations can be made.

For the fall semester, plan on celebrating Halloween in October with a contest for the best costume (making masks can be a fun arts-and-crafts projects) or jack o'lantern cutting, or go all out and make a "Haunted House" in an outdoor tent, and empty classroom, or part of the gym. The Haunted House will feature your class of little monsters, fully versed in Trick-or-Treat culture, and might even be a nice money-raising project if it's opened to the public.

In November, don't forget Thanksgiving, along with a full explanation of the Pilgrims, the Indians, and the Mayflower. If possible, try to plan a special lunch, complete with turkey, dressing, and cranberries to celebrate this day.

Before the Christmas break is the time to sing Christmas carols, make decorations for a classroom Christmas tree, and talk about the religious significance as well as the Santa-Claus side of this very important U.S. celebration. You might have each student

bring an inexpensive wrapped gift (set a price limit) to put under the tree. Then on the last day of class, trade presents (you could "draw names" in advance).

Other important holidays include Easter (how about an Easter egg hunt?) in April, and the Fourth of July--the All-American holiday with limitless possibilities for food (including hamburgers and hot dogs, naturally), patriotic songs and outdoor activities (try a parade around the school or a fair).

3. Collect garbage

It has been said that you can learn a lot about a person by going through his garbage. The same is true of an entire nation. Not literally garbage, of course, but sample commercial products from the U.S. This idea was presented recently at a MEXTESOL Saturday Academic Session (Imm and Díaz 1993), and is an excellent method for teaching U.S. culture as well as useful language. You simply collect (or have your students collect) an assortment of American products (containers or packages with or without the contents) such as beauty and health products, foods, and household cleaning products. This immediately creates an American atmosphere and provides the means for many useful discussions and comparisons of Mexican and American products. The labels of these products contain quite a bit of useful vocabulary including instructions and weight measurements (often in both the Metric and English systems). Interesting role plays in the form of original skits or TV advertisements can be performed by your students. This idea is relatively inexpensive, generates enthusiasm, and is most certainly a great example of U.S. culture, while offering learning opportunities limited only by your imagination.

4. Adopt a city

There is no better way to learn about the U.S. and its culture than to examine it city by city. You will find that nearly all of the larger cities in the U.S. have very unique cultural personalities. Often affected by geographical location (on the coast, in the mountains, in the South), a city's inhabitants frequently have particular styles of dress, different accents when speaking, and individual festivities and occasions; all of which are influenced by the city's own histories. I suggest you choose two or three cities that are geographically separated from each other in order to make cultural comparisons while examining each city individually. For each city, try to locate a local telephone directory, a map, and a local newspaper. You might write to the local Chambers of Commerce for additional information, the addresses of which are available from the American Chamber of Commerce of Mexico.⁴ Also check the local library for a tour guidebook for each city, written for travelers, with a load of special information. *Forum*, the quarterly journal for English teachers (sponsored by the U.S. Information Service), frequently publishes special issues devoted to one U.S. city. I might suggest New York City, Los Angeles, and New Orleans as ideal cities, or even Atlanta (complete with *Gone with the Wind*, the Braves, the

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Hawks, the Falcons, CNN, Coca Cola, fried chicken, Southern accents--and the next Olympic games.)

5. It's Greek (or English) to me

By examining a nation's quotations, slogans, and sayings, you can make important cultural observations, especially those relating to customs, religious beliefs, morality, and history. Also, cultures can be compared by comparing their sayings. We find (Dobie 1935, 213) many comparable American and Mexican Sayings such as *Birds of a feather flock together* and *Siempre la res busca el monte*. Other Mexican *dichos* include *Agua que no has de beber déjala correr.* and *Suerte te dé Dios que saber poco te importe.* (Cortés, Islas and Montoya 1991: XV, XVI) For American quotations, use those of famous authors, such as Robert L. Stevenson, "Everybody lives by selling something," or Henry D. Thoreau, "It is not enough to be busy, the question is what are we busy about?" Simple proverbs, such as *A penny saved is a penny earned* or *An apple a day keeps the doctor away* are also useful. It's easy to adjust the level of difficulty to match your class level. For a good list of American quotations from which to choose, check *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* or similar books on idioms or sayings. Analyze each quotation, find a Mexican equivalent, study the vocabulary, translate from Spanish to English (and vice versa), then make up your own *famous words*.

While quotations provide an excellent source of material for learning culture, it has been observed that reading such phrases and slogans, especially those particularly appealing to you, provides enthusiastic charges of motivation. "Powerful statements tend to re-charge our batteries. (Davidson 1987, 108-9). They also hold secrets that expose our individual cultures.

6. Watch TV

If you are lucky enough to have access to cable TV with U.S. stations available for your English class, you have seen a great example of "live" U.S. culture. Even the act itself of watching TV is quite American (though perhaps not one of the better cultural habits). If cable is not available, you might ask someone living in the U.S. to record a video tape and send it to you for viewing.

Television offers valuable programming such as news, sports, and movies (if you want to use an English-speaking movie that has subtitles, tape a narrow strip of paper over the bottom of the screen to cover them). If you can add video to your use of songs in the classroom, it becomes more enjoyable (although rather limited to pop music). Educational TV programs are abundant, especially programs on Public Broadcasting Networks. You will find programs about symphony concerts, visits to interesting places, and a variety of special events. Even the sometimes too frequent and often annoying advertisements provide excellent views of current culture.

Take advantage of resources available in the form of recorded video programs. The Benjamin Franklin Library in Mexico City⁵ (with branches in Guadalajara, Jalisco and Monterrey, Nuevo León) which is sponsored by the U.S. Embassy, has a useful (although somewhat limited) collection of video tapes available to qualifying institutions. The collection includes great American classics like *The grapes of wrath*, *To kill a mockingbird*, and *A streetcar named Desire*. as well as classic musicals and Broadway productions. Also available is a set of *Portrait of America* program tapes which highlight U.S. cities (perfect for use with idea No. 4, "Adopt a city").

If you have the necessary equipment, have your class act out and record TV advertisements in class (see ideas No. 3, "Collect garbage") and then play them for the class to watch and review.

7. Play games

Culture is also found in the games that people play. On a nice sunny day, get out of the classroom and try some outdoor group games. Try football (especially useful with idea No. 1, "Cheer for a football team"), baseball, or less active games like horseshoes, hopscotch, or hide-and-seek for children. Back inside, try American board games like "Monopoly" or card games. Nothing teaches cultural facts better than "Trivial Pursuit," which has questions and answers to trivial questions (written on cards) on a variety of subjects like sports, arts and entertainment, geography, etc. Better yet, make your own trivia games with index cards. Have each student write five questions on one side of the cards and the answers on the other side. Mix up the cards and you're ready to play. For advanced students, an interesting project might be to design and construct an original board game, in English of course, to be played by the other students after completion.

8. Talk to then natives

For an interesting culturally-enriching project, have your students actually record conversations or "interviews" with native speakers. Not only will the students learn about English-speaking cultures by asking for opinions from foreigners, but this is also an effective way to practice all forms of English ability: writing, speaking, listening, and reading. Have the student ask questions such as "What do you think of Mexican food?" or "How do you like Mexican music?" The interviews should be recorded on cassette (or video) tape and a written tapescript should be turned in with the completed interviews. Students can work individually or in groups. Of course, we need to find English speakers (preferably native speakers to help identify different accents) to interview for this project. In smaller cities, this might take a bit of imagination, but in Mexico City just take a walk around the Zona Rosa, the airport, or Coyoacán . Most tourists will gladly give a three-

⁵Biblioteca Benajmín Franklin, Londres 16, 06600 México, D.F. Telephone: (5) 591-0244, FAX: (5) 535-0909.

minute interview and it will be an important learning experience for your students. (Thanks to my friend Julia Walters for inspiring this idea).⁶

9. Speak Japanese

When studying a particular culture, it is sometimes refreshing to take a look at another one. "Teach Japanese in my English class?" you ask. Well, yes. It's amazing to watch the interest that develops when teaching Japanese words in English to Spanish speakers. You will find the pronunciation of Japanese particularly easy for Spanish speakers, as it is very syllabic, with most syllables ending in a vowel sound. Try one simple word or phrase each week (consult a Japanese language phrase book or dictionary). For each word or phrase, learn the Hiragana (part of the Japanese phonetic syllabary), the pronunciation, and the English and Spanish equivalents. For example:

"KON I CHI WA" means *Hello* or *Hola*. Not only is this an exciting and different change of pace learning Japanese will stimulate conversation (in English) on cultural and language differences. It might just add some confidence to learning English too--after trying just a few words of Japanese, English will seem, by comparison, quite simple! It might be the time, also, to emphasize the importance of learning English in order to be competitive in the international job market. Interestingly, it has been noted (Wharton 1983: 211) that "...according to *The Wall Street Journal*, eleven per-cent of all Japanese adults (more than nine and one-half million) speak or study English."

10. Take a trip

We have discussed nine ways of transporting culture from its place of origin to our English classroom. I'm convinced that this active approach to learning culture is more practical than just reading about it. But in order to fully experience a nation's culture, you need to hear it, observe it, smell it, eat it, and feel it. Even a quick trip to the source will bring a better understanding of the culture than months of study. If there are teachers who are interested in this idea of taking a trip to an English-speaking country, please contact me. I would also be interested in other ideas you might have for bringing English-speaking culture into the Mexican English classroom and your comments and/or suggestions on these ten ideas. I hope they will provide not only fun, but also valuable teaching opportunities to help *Add Culture to your English Class*.

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