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## Intercultural Adjustment: Comprehending and dealing with culture shock

James G. Ellis

When you are in Rome, live in the Roman style:  
when you are elsewhere, live as they live else-  
where.<sup>1</sup>

— St. Ambrose to St. Augustine, late fourth century.

Unbeknownst to most individuals, the above quote is directly related to the conflict and confrontation that can result when people from different cultures must function together. The term *culture shock*, although non-existent in the fourth century, is now very much a part of everyday speech, yet most people do not understand its exact meaning. For such a popular and loosely utilised expression, its ramifications are extremely far reaching. Unfortunately, some of them are negative and for language learners in an intercultural situation this can seriously affect the amount and type of discourse they produce.

As communication rules are both culturally and contextually bound, a person who is unprepared to function in an intercultural event may be in for a disappointing experience. The intercultural situation can be one of high stress, both physically and mentally with the effects of this stress being culture shock itself. In order to avoid culture shock, it is necessary to have a full understanding of communication context and how it differs culturally.

1) Sullivan, M. W. (1981) "The Mutual Adaptation of Cultural Outsiders and Insiders", *The Mediating Person: Bridges Between Cultures*, (Edited by Bochner, S.) Schenkman, Cambridge, Mass., p. 273.

Fortunately, in most cases, there is an evolution which takes place during the period of cultural adjustment and according to various hypotheses, it usually leads to a more positive orientation for the language learner. Directly related to culture shock is the quality of the sojourn experience. This is linked to the kinds of social networks the foreign students have been able or unable to establish which in turn affects their language learning depending on the networks they are associated with. The concerns of culture shock and social networks are forever present in an ESL situation, both in and out of the classroom. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to understand the varying effects of culture shock and how the establishment of social networks can lead towards a positive cross-cultural learning experience and increased language learning. This paper will examine the research done on culture shock and social networks and the implications of each in the language classroom. To further substantiate the research claims, numerous interviews with Japanese university students studying in Canada for one academic year were conducted and excerpts have been included in this paper.

Before addressing the topic of social networks it is necessary to briefly outline the history of the term "culture shock". The reason for this is that culture shock can be seen as the malady affecting attitude and motivation towards language learning. Social networks, on the other hand, act as a form of cure or buffer when going through a difficult cross-cultural experience. Originally used by Oberg (1960) in his work with Foreign Service Officers, the term describes the extreme anxiety experienced by everyone who must move from the familiar to the unfamiliar. One gets into a situation which is so alien, that even doing basic things become difficult. Oberg refers to the loss of all the known signs and symbols of social interaction as the cause for this condition:

These signs or cues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and

what to say when we meet people, when and how to give tips, how to give orders to servants, how to make purchases, when to accept and when to refuse invitations, when to take statements seriously and when not... Now these cues which may be words, gestures, facial expressions, customs or norms are required by all of us...<sup>2</sup>

Oberg (1960) was also the first to describe the problem of culture shock in terms of a number of stages. The first of these being the "honeymoon" stage. An appropriate term since it refers to an initial reaction of enchantment, fascination, enthusiasm and cordial, superficial relationships with the hosts. This is followed by the "crisis" stage in which the initial differences in language concepts, values, familiar signs and symbols lead to feelings of inadequacy, frustration, anxiety and even anger. Weaver (1993) mentions that the three basic causal explanations for culture shock are: (1) the loss of familiar cues, (2) the breakdown of interpersonal communication, and (3) identity crisis. As a result of these points, many foreign students may feel a strong desire to return to their native country and Schumann (1975) states that such a mental set may block the commitment to the host country which is necessary for successful second language learning. The stress of constantly being "on guard" takes its toll and sojourners will probably be affected by "culture fatigue". According to Barna (1983):

... the innate physiological makeup of the human animal is such that discomfort of varying degrees occurs in the presence of alien stimuli. Without the normal props of one's own culture there is unpredictability, helplessness, a threat to self-esteem, and a general feeling of "walking on ice" — all of which are stress producing.<sup>3</sup>

However, this low point on the adjustment scale is common and does eventually pass, paving the way for increased language learning

- 2) Oberg, K. (1960) "Culture Shock: adjustment to new cultural environments", *Practical Anthropology*, 7, pp. 177-82.
- 3) Barna, L. M. (1983) "The Stress Factor in Intercultural Relations", *Handbook of Intercultural Training*, Vol. II. Pergamon Press, New York, pp. 42-43.

and a more positive intercultural experience. The following extracts from the interviews illustrate the difficulties experienced by some Japanese students learning English during their first semester overseas:

M: ... in November — I had a problem to speak English and it was about one week and I couldn't speak English as before ... I didn't feel well and I couldn't explain what I wanted to say and I didn't know what to say ... it was my problem ... but after that speaking English was more comfortable and I changed ...

Y: ... I miss home because my English wasn't understood by people so I couldn't speak English fluently and I couldn't communicate with people so I was very frustrated.

S: Sometimes I felt lonely ... a little bit nervous because during December — January I couldn't speak English very well ... I'm afraid — I'm wondering why — what will I do — ya — what can I do — ya — I was wondering ...

Brown (1986) states that it is exceedingly important that teachers allow the learners to proceed into and through the second stage or "crisis". Teachers should not expect them to deny the anger, the frustration, the helplessness and loneliness they feel. To smother those feelings may delay and actually prevent eventual movement into the third stage of "adjustment". For the ESL student, culture shock is inevitable but as Brown (1986) adds further:

... teachers can play a therapeutic role in helping learners move through stages of acculturation. If the learner is aided in this process by sensitive and perceptive teachers, he can perhaps more smoothly pass through the second stage and into the third stage of culture learning, and thereby increase his chances for succeeding in both second language learning and second culture learning.<sup>4</sup>

Teacher's should note, however, that students' difficulties in learn-

4) Brown, H. D. (1986) "Learning a second culture", *Culture Bound: Bridging the cultural gap in language teaching*, (Edited by Valdes, J. M.) Cambridge Language Teaching Library.



ing a second language often stem, not so much from their inability to handle stressful situations, nor from their negative attitudes or lack of motivation, but rather, from their lack of understanding of the social context of the language. (Clarke, 1976).

Gardner (1969), on the other hand, feels that an ethnocentric attitude which often occurs during the crisis stage of culture shock also adversely affects L2 learning. In addition, Schumann (1976) maintains that factors such as culture shock will create psychological and social distance from the target language. If learners feel hostile towards the host culture they will use language simply for denotative referential communication in situations where contact with speakers of the target language is either absolutely necessary or unavoidable. This restricted use of the language leads to pidginization and sensitive teachers who are aware of this stage can help their learners through it by providing direction when needed but never forcing language upon the students or eliciting more than they wish to produce.

The "recovery" stage is usually the third to occur and this is when the individual can breathe a sigh of relief as the crisis period usually resolves itself. One indication of this "recuperation" is that the person ends up learning the language and culture of the host country. For language teachers this may appear to be the optimum period for language learning and ideally it should be, yet many students tend to be afraid of becoming overly acculturated and experience *anomie* (Lambert, 1967) which is the concept of feeling social uncertainty and dissatisfaction. Lambert's theory relates to the concept of social networks and language learning in the following manner:

... the more proficient one becomes in a second language the more he may find that his place in his original membership group is modified at the same time as the other linguistic — cultural group becomes something more than a reference group for him. It may, in fact, become a second membership group for him. Depending upon the compatibility

of the two cultures, he may experience feelings of chagrin or regret as he loses ties in one group, mixed with the fearful anticipation of entering a relatively new group.<sup>5</sup>

Lambert also mentions that when advanced students become so skilled in the target language and begin to think and feel like a host national, they then become so annoyed with feelings of anomie that they are prompted to develop strategies to minimize or control the annoyance and reverting to their L1 is such a strategy.

Finally, the last stage which is referred to by Oberg is that of "adjustment". At this point, the sojourner begins to work in and enjoy the new culture, manifesting acceptance of the culture and more self-confidence in negotiating cross-cultural encounters. In ideal circumstances, individuals can move back and forth between cultures without any apparent internal or observable discomfort or conflict. In addition, they can switch linguistic and cultural systems almost at will; all of which indicates a multicultural orientation.

Other writers have also contributed their versions of the expression "culture shock". Smalley (1963) uses the term "language shock" — the role of language differences which contribute to cross cultural conflict. He asserts that language shock is one of the basic ingredients of culture shock. This is simply because language is the principal form of communication in human society and it is the area where the largest number of cues to interpersonal relationships lie. Often, many sojourners who begin to learn the language of the host culture end up by rejecting it. The pattern of rejection could be less studying by the individual and more contacts with compatriots or others who speak the same language rather than making contacts with host nationals or other foreign students. Language shock can also result in illness — genuine physical illness. It can sometimes mean animosity

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5) Lambert, W. (1972) "A Social Psychology of Bilingualism", *Language, Psychology and Culture*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California.

towards teachers since they are often perceived as the one's "forcing" the language upon the students in a severe crisis situation.

Also, Brown (1973) mentions that the self-knowledge, self-esteem, and self-confidence of language learners is linked to language learning. Moreover, students are forced to take on a new identity if they are to become competent in a second language and this can be highly traumatic for some. As Brown (1973) states:

The very definition of communication implies a process of revealing one's self to another. Breakdowns in communication often result from a person's unwillingness to be "honest" in revealing this self...<sup>6</sup>

Byrnes (1966) mentions "role shock" which refers to the unsuccessful relationships between foreign students and host nationals of equal or higher status. Many individuals who enjoy a certain status in their home country find themselves more or less "demoted" in the host country. This change in roles contributes in many ways to the malady of culture shock. Foreign students from Japan, for example, are often surprised by the degree of familiarity used when addressing professors and instructors in Canada and the US. In addition to this, as LaForge (1974) states, Japanese culture maintains a hierarchy system in which younger students learn from older ones and show them the utmost respect. Often, when in Canada, Japanese students may be taken aback by the degree of equality amongst all students regardless of their age, e.g.:

H: ... in Japan we use polite language ... here in residence I'm the second oldest person but the freshmen complain to elder person ... you know *sempai* — *kobai* (hierarchy system) ... it's a very strong relationship so I'm used to that situation ... so sometimes I feel uncomfortable ...

Clarke (1976) compares the psychological and social stresses of

6) Brown, H. D. (1973) "Affective Variables in Second Language Acquisition", *Language Learning*, 23, 2, pp. 231-244.



second language learning as being similar to those suffered by victims of schizophrenia. For individuals in a strange culture, social encounters become inherently threatening and defense mechanisms are employed to reduce the trauma. Here, the similarities between the schizophrenics and the behaviour of individuals in the crisis stage of culture shock are striking. Bateson (1972) describes the alternatives commonly adopted by schizophrenics to defend themselves:

1. He might . . . assume that behind every statement there is a concealed meaning which is detrimental to his welfare . . . If he chooses this alternative, he will be continually searching for meanings behind what people say and behind chance occurrences in the environment, and he will be characteristically suspicious and defiant.
2. He might . . . tend to accept literally everything people say to him; when their tone or gesture or context contradicted what they said he might establish a pattern of laughing off these metacommunicative signals.
3. If he didn't become suspicious of metacommunicative messages or attempt to laugh them off, he might choose to ignore them. Then he would find it necessary to see and hear less and less of what went on around him, and do his utmost to avoid provoking a response from his environment.<sup>7</sup>

Culture shock, however, is not an entirely negative experience. Adler (1975) sees culture shock as a transitional experience taking one from a state of low self and cultural awareness to a state of high self and cultural awareness. He refers to five stages of culture shock; *contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy* and *independence*. As Church (1982) explains, these five levels involve encompassing and progressive changes in identity and experiential learning — five stages which all ESL teachers should be aware of as their students will undoubtedly pass through most of them. Indeed, culture shock is most probably the result of a normal process of adaptation and may be no

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7) Bateson, G. (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Ballantine, New York.

more harmful than the psychological reactions individuals experience when adapting to such new environmental situations as entering college or moving to another city in one's own culture.

Adler's stages show a strong resemblance to Oberg's conceptualization but the final step is quite different and is very self-actualizing in nature. It implies that the individual who has reached the final stage should be better prepared for a future cross-cultural experience. Generally speaking, those who have repeated cross-cultural experiences become much more adept at adjusting to their new surroundings than those who venture from their home culture for the first time.

However, before the cross-cultural learning experience can occur there exists an important variable which can seriously affect the foreign students' sojourns and consequently their language learning: the number and type of social networks they are involved in.

The literature on social networks and social support (Cobb 1976) suggests that social support buffers cross-cultural adjustment stress by providing individuals with emotional support and guidance. In a culture shock situation, the students will need support to help make the adaptation a smooth process. According to Cobb (1976), social support provides people with three sorts of information: that they are cared for and loved; esteemed and valued; and that they belong to a network of communication and mutual obligation. Thus, it may be fair to predict that foreign students with a strong supportive friendship network would be happier and better adjusted than those without such a network. Also, students experiencing the stress and trauma of culture shock will undoubtedly find comfort if they belong to a viable social support group. From the interviews, the following data regarding social support networks was collected from the informants:

H: . . . I have about five Japanese friends . . . sometimes we help each

other. I have a friend . . . she was very depressed two weeks ago. She was almost crying . . . at that time we help each other and we talk our feelings . . .

The excerpts below indicate that some students prefer to speak with someone in their monocultural social network if they have a problem:

S: First I'll keep it a secret . . . after a while I'll talk about it with my Japanese friends . . . but never Canadian.

Y: . . . I talk to . . . of course Japanese friends because . . . it's difficult to explain my problems in English — that's why I speak to Japanese about my problem . . .

In a study of foreign students in Hawaii, Bochner et al. (1977) developed a functional model of overseas students' network patterns, stating that sojourners belong to three distinct social networks. These are:

1. A **primary, monocultural** network consisting of close friendships with other sojourning compatriots. The main function of the co-national network is to provide a setting in which ethnic and cultural values can be rehearsed and expressed.
2. A **secondary, bicultural** network, consisting of bonds between sojourners and significant host nationals such as academics, students, advisors and government officials. The main function of this network is to instrumentally facilitate the academic and professional aspirations of the sojourner.
3. A **third, multicultural** network of friends and acquaintances. The main function of this network is to provide companionship for recreational, 'non-culture' and non-task-oriented activities.<sup>8</sup>

In relation to the networks that form, the following examples from the data illustrate why some language learners maintain their monocultural bonds:

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8) Bochner, S. et al. (1977) "Friendship patterns of overseas students: A functional model", *International Journal of Psychology*, 12, 4, 277-294.

Y: ... after my class sometimes I spend time with my friends who are Japanese because I usually ... during day ... during the day I learn English, I speak English, I hear English ... I'm so tired and after my class I'd like to speak Japanese sometimes ... that's why it release my stress, my tension ... to speak Japanese sometimes ...

One student who said she had no close Canadian friends expressed a fear of meeting host nationals:

S: ... I am not so good at contacting people. I am very nervous and pessimistic about contacting persons ... especially foreigners (Canadians). Of course I cannot speak English fluently and am scared of different way of thought and a kind of prejudice and maybe that kind of thing makes me nervous ...

Bochner's findings were not interpreted within a social-network framework, however, and other researchers have found that the degree of social interaction between the host national and the sojourner is related to the latter's adjustment and therefore increased L2 learning. For example, Antler (1970), in a study of 170 foreign postgraduate medical students found that those who reported more frequent personal contacts with their American hosts were least distant from them culturally and socio-economically. Selltiz and Cook (1962) found that sojourners who had at least one close host national friend experienced fewer problems than sojourners with no close host-national friends.

However, the social-support hypothesis places emphasis on the quality and quantity of support rather than the nature or source of that support. Thus, it is the amount of social support that is seen by some as crucial as opposed to who provides it.

Others (Bochner 1982), place more emphasis on the **source** of support and its function. This means help from a host-national network is important because through it foreign students can learn the social skills of their culture of sojourn. Help from the co-national network is equally important as it enables foreign students to main-



tain their culture of origin. In addition to this, they can speak their native language which is vital in times of cultural and language stress.

Bochner's theory predicts that the well-being of foreign students depends on them having access to both types of networks. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that most foreign students do not belong to a viable host-national network. In the data collected, it was discovered that many students felt that a language barrier was preventing them from developing friendships with host nationals. However, those students spoke at an upper intermediate level and were perfectly capable of maintaining extended discourse. They were also the informants who were the most anxious to return to Japan. In contrast, students who had formed bi-national bonds seemed to be much more content with their experience in Canada. Moreover, they appeared to be more relaxed during the interview and spoke at the same level of proficiency as those who felt that language difficulties prevented them from meeting Canadians. All of the students interviewed were approximately the same age and had the same educational background. Some sojourned previously in other countries but those who had were the least content. It was expected that those with previous cross-cultural experience would have the least amount of difficulty in adaptation and language learning but this was not the case with the sample used for this paper.

The numerous studies done in cross cultural psychology can be related directly to ESL students and those who teach them. To begin with, all those involved in an ESL situation should be aware of the importance of the monocultural bonds of foreign students. So often teachers criticize their students for "sticking together like glue" but these bonds should not be interfered with, regulated against or obstructed. Bochner et al (1977) have noted:

On the contrary, such bonds should be encouraged and, if possible, shaped to become more open to bi- and multi-cultural influences. In particular, mediating individuals who function as links between differ-



ent cultural networks, should be identified and supported. Bi-cultural (foreign student/host-national) bonds should be expanded to reach beyond their initial task-oriented function. This often happens spontaneously, and ways and means should be found to capitalize on this tendency. Multi-cultural associations...could likewise be expanded beyond their recreation-oriented function towards the non-superficial learning of each other's cultures.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of social networks and support groups is linked to sociolinguistics and the various forms of discourse that take place within the networks. For example, according to Milroy (1980), there exist *open* and *closed* networks. To relate this to Bochner's network patterns, the closed network is similar to the monocultural group in which speakers interact mostly within a defined territory and a given person's contacts will nearly all know each other. The open networks are linked to the bi- and multi-cultural groups. This means the individuals move outside territorial or cultural boundaries and develop their own contacts, none of whom know each other.

The importance of social networks cannot be stressed enough in ESL as a positive social network amongst the students will create a more relaxed environment for language learning. As Krashen (1987) remarks, one of the affective variables related to success in second language learning is anxiety; the lower the level of anxiety, the better the language acquisition.

ESL instructors should think twice before insisting on an *English Only* campaign in and out of their classrooms. Learning a second language in an intensive situation is mentally and physically fatiguing and learners should not be forced to speak solely the target language 100% of the time as that can create ill feelings between the students and teachers, e.g.:

T: . . . this situation (school) is not good for me . . . they (the teach-

9) Bochner, S. et al. (1977) "Friendship patterns of overseas students: A functional model", *Ibid.*

people and its language.

Culture shock is a state of malaise, and like a disease, it has different effects, different degrees of severity, and different time spans for different people. It is the least troublesome to those who learn to accept cultural diversity with interest instead of anxiety and manage normal stress reactions by practicing positive coping mechanisms, such as conscious physical relaxation. Ultimately, the psychological makeup of the individual may be the most important factor. Some people can tolerate a great deal of stress caused by change, ambiguity, and unpredictability while others demand an unchanging, unambiguous, predictable environment to feel psychologically secure. (Weaver, 1993). Being aware of the perils of culture shock and the necessity of social networks is certainly the first step in avoiding culture fatigue, but it isn't easy. For most people, it takes insight, training, and sometimes an alteration of long-standing habits or thinking patterns before progress can be achieved. The increasing need for global understanding, however, gives everyone the responsibility for giving it their best effort.

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