

How are we Similar: Enhancing World Understandings in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

Foreign language teaching often includes aspects of a foreign culture that differ from the students' culture, such as holiday celebrations. Teachers can, however, help students understand that native English speakers in other lands have many feelings and experiences similar to Vietnamese ones (The hope is to build friendship between peoples). Here are some examples of similarities. Feelings: love of family, love of country, belief in the importance of education, belief in the importance of rituals and celebrations. Experiences: Making a living, having to travel from home to school or place of work, having to decide how to spend money wisely. The workshop will develop ideas and strategies for including cultural similarities in the curriculum. Included will be ideas for essays, group work, question-and-answer exercises, etc., strategies for informal discussions with students, and informal teacher comments that might be made in class.

Introduction

Foreign language teaching necessarily includes the introduction of aspects of a foreign culture that differ from the students' culture, and differences must be included in the curriculum, because they help explain how language is used. All language teachers discuss cultural differences in the classroom. A problem often overlooked, however, is that introducing such differences can make the practices of another culture seem peculiar, strange, perhaps even abnormal. Arousing such perceptions can lessen appreciation of the foreign culture. In wartime, for example, grotesque representations of an enemy nation's culture can appear. How, therefore, can we explain aspects of the culture of English-speaking nations without making the people of these countries seem alien to the students? How can we discuss things that are culturally different without encouraging separateness? Can we introduce the concept of cultural similarities as well as that of cultural differences? This workshop enables Vietnamese and native English-speaking teachers to explore, in an informal setting, ideas that can help students see the similarities between peoples as well as the cultural differences with which all teachers are familiar.

It is much easier to pinpoint cultural differences than it is cultural similarities, because the differences stand out, while similarities are taken for granted, will not be noticed, and thus are not so interesting.

Children's play offers good examples of cultural similarities. Children in Vietnam and the United States (and elsewhere) play similar games, including activities such as hopping (hopscotch) and throwing or bouncing balls. School life also exhibits many similarities between cultures; moreover, students are intimately familiar with it. The similarities are endless. A teacher instructs a group of students, who study reading, writing, mathematics, etc. A classroom is a classroom, regardless of whether or not it contains sophisticated teaching aids. Students are supposed to pay attention, and they must write assignments and sit for exams.

A good topic for discussion in this workshop is the role of parents. How does the father's role differ from the mother's role? Is this true in both cultures? Also, are boys and girls brought up differently? Does this happen in both cultures? One should remember, however, that talking about family members can be problematic with students because of divorce, unmarried parents, etc.

If the venue and number of participants in this workshop make it possible, sitting in a large circle is effective for considering the ideas to be presented; audience participation can significantly enhance the discussion.

A handout for attendees includes a number of possible class activities that can be used to help students see that there are significant similarities between Vietnamese and native-English-speaking people. For example, the teacher can assign students to write about or discuss how to reassure a foreigner who is nervous about coming to Vietnam. What can they tell the foreigner (in English) to help him or her overcome such trepidation? Should cultural similarities play a role in this assignment? What similarities might be pinpointed?

If a class assignment or discussion happens to describe differences between cultures, the teacher can assign students to talk about or write about possible reasons for the differences. This would be a difficult assignment -- one suitable for university students rather than younger ones, but it can develop the students' insight into their own and the foreign culture.

To summarize this presentation, the key challenge to consider is how one can discuss activities and beliefs that are culturally different without encouraging separateness. Because this is a challenge, teachers should keep in mind the concept of cultural similarity.