The Florida ELI-Gator

On Culture

JC Casagrande, Director

To the reader:

Whether you are reading a printed version of this issue of the ELI-Gator on the campus of this university or, through the world wide web, from a beach in the Caribbean, an oasis in the Arabian desert, the frozen banks of the Volga, a high rise building in Tokyo, or a beach front home in Rio, this issue will strike a sensitive cord. It addresses a topic dear to everyone. How do we get to understand people who don’t think like us?

Cultural traits unite and divide us. The family, for example, constitutes a unit, but it is divided by age. Parents and children know all too well that they are split along generational lines. Mother and daughter, though split by age, are grouped by their gender. They share views and values not shared by fathers and sons, and vice versa. Nearly every human grouping is divided along cultural lines, creating opposing subgroups. These divisions are so commonplace that most people take them for granted. And they are taken so much for granted that they are the subject of much important research—cross cultural, cross-gender, etc.

While these cultural divisions are not commonly obvious, others are very obvious. They often involve displacement (e.g., travel). Archetypes that come to mind are Marco Polo’s arrival in China, Joan of Arc leading an army, Tarzan in New York City, an inexperienced driver unexpectedly thrust in a congested multi-lane divided highway, or a foreigner with minimal language skills. These circumstances pit the “outsider” against an “indigenous” group. The indigenous group expects norms not shared by the outsider. In some cultures, outsiders are unwelcome; in others they are tolerated; in yet others, an apparent tolerance is in fact rooted in the belief that the outsiders cannot be expected to behave properly because they are inferior.

For as long as there have been travelers crossing language and cultural boundaries, people have been keenly aware that learning language INCLUDES learning culture. No one is more aware of this than the students who come to the ELI to “study English”. If they didn’t realize it before, they quickly discover that our program is predicated on the conviction that language is a cultural phenomenon. Upon their arrival, incoming students are directed to a Culture Seminar, where the ABC’s of US and campus culture are broached. This two-hour seminar serves as an overview of the many concepts which will be part and parcel of the instruction provided by the ELI.

Even before they arrive, students are expected to learn to act as individuals. They are expected to inquire and to apply for admission as individuals instead of counting on agents to have their application forms filled out. This is a first step in becoming aware of the importance of the individual in US culture, a trait that is a sizable challenge to students whose cultures emphasize the group over the individual. Similarly, we put great emphasis on students’ doing their homework individually instead of as a group, introducing the concept of individual intellectual property.

Opportunities abound for students to make the shift from one culture to the other, and the ELI staff and teachers reinforce this shift. By the same token, our staff is ever conscious of the need never to suggest that the new behavior is a rejection of the students’ own cultural heritages. We underscore that their effort is to reach bi-culturalness, to enrich themselves culturally, while maintaining their attachment to their native culture.
An Interview with the Editor

Kathy Dilcher, Assistant Academic Coordinator

Todd Allen, the ELI publications editor and an ELI instructor, writes a column for the weekly newsletter, the ELI Weekly, titled “Manners and Culture.” The column has been a huge success and has become an important part of the culture component of ELI instruction. Here are Todd’s responses to some questions about the column.

Q: What prompted you to start a manners column?
A: Well, I had done a lot of exercises in my reading/writing classes dealing with manners questions, and I had heard a lot of the questions that I have actually wound up dealing with in the column on more than one occasion. When I was thinking of ways to make the Weekly more interactive, it just seemed a natural progression.

Q: Where do you get the questions for your column? Are there certain topics you feel are more important than others?
A: Most of the questions actually do come from the students themselves—some teachers have even made the whole thing into a class project from time to time. I have also had specific issues suggested to me by teachers and staff, and in those cases I usually make questions out of them and answer them in the column. As for the topics? Well, there have not really been any that I have ignored. I have, from time to time, consolidated similar questions into one—like, for instance, questions about dating and asking people out.

Q: How do you decide what to answer? Do you rely on your intuition, consult a reference book, or . . . . ?
A: It’s a combination of things. When the questions are strictly about manners and what is absolutely correct or appropriate, I have been known to consult and credit Judith Martin’s Miss Manners books. But most of the time, the situations are such that intuition plays the greatest role. I have to anticipate what the students are actually looking for and answer according to their needs.

Q: How do the teachers use your column?
A: Well, as I said already, some have made projects out of coming up with questions. Others use the column for general class discussion; our oral skills teachers usually go over the Weekly with the students each week in class, anyway. And they all have reported from time to time that their students have generated some of the responses that have appeared among the students. The column can make for some pretty lively discussions.

Q: What sort of feedback have you gotten from students?
A: When they do talk about it to me, I have only heard positive responses.

Q: Would you give us a sample of a question and answer that have appeared in your column?
A: Sure. ‘Why is it so difficult to make American friends?’ is a good question. And one that even Americans can have difficulty with each other. The simple fact of the matter is, we are a friendly people, while at the same time being a rather private people. We tend to have many acquaintances, but not too many close friends, and for the most part, we tend to like it that way. This does not, however, mean that we can’t and won’t make new friends. But it does mean that it takes time. The best advice is that a manners column such as this can give you is to tell you that in order to have friends here, you have to be a friend, too. Talk to people. Introduce yourself. Make yourself available. Ask questions—not deeply personal questions, but questions that are designed to show interest in other people. The best way to do that is to listen to what people are saying publicly, and then indicate that you would like to know more. It can be amazing just how friendly you yourself come across when people think you are interested in what they have to say. You will find, over time, that the more you get out there and meet people, the more people you are going to know on a more personal level.

Every class involves learning about the culture in which students will be immersed. Classroom culture, involving note taking at lectures and oral reports in front of the class, are among the skills learned in Oral Skills. In Writing classes, emphasis is placed on report writing. Depending on the skills of the level at which writing is taught, these reports range from simple story telling to well documented and referenced formal papers.

Informal communication with peers is the main thrust of our English Interaction Groups, which meet every day for one hour. The informality of these groups is intended to effectively introduce the students to communication with peers on a level that approximates natural exchanges among native speakers. It is important that the students learn to hear and interpret contracted and elided speech, gain an understanding of some common cultural traits, idioms, sayings, and references that are common to North American campus culture.

The conversation partner program, which brings together ELI students and native speakers from the community—town or university, provides another informal means to interact within the ambient culture. Similarly, as students volunteer in the Gainesville community through the Volunteer Program, they are exposed to a number of behaviors which enable them to bridge the gap between their cultural traits and those of their host community.

A frequent dispenser of cultural information, our student advisor meets students who have problems or questions about a whole range of topics and issues from housing to admission to graduate programs, from health insurance to advice on where to spend the next vacation, from problems with roommates to cultural adjustment.

The rest of this issue of the ELI Gator focuses on other efforts to acculturate ELI students—through literature, through a newsletter column, and through a conversation course. We think you will agree that culture is given its due importance in our curriculum, our activities, and the services we provide students.
The U.S. Culture Class

Todd Allen, Editor

In the summer semester of 1996, the ELI began a class called U.S. Culture Through Literature and Film. It was designed to offer a content-based alternative to the more traditional academic-oriented high level reading/writing course. It was then and continues to be a very popular class among our students. The following are some impressions of various aspects of the class written by three of our teachers who have taught it. The first one is by Mr. Noah Bate, who is teaching it this current spring semester:

The concept of culture in the U.S. is a slippery one at best. Perhaps this is because it is as varied as the many peoples who contribute to it. We rarely think of the ballet, symphony, or theater when discussing US culture. Instead, we treat popular culture as a reflection of our mores, values, and traditions. But from this we can trace recent history and interpret the ever-changing nature of American culture.

What I believe this means for a class on US culture is that the easy stereotypes we conjure up about America need to be addressed, explored, and rethought. Most students at the ELI have certain preconceptions about US culture gleaned from film, television, magazines, and even novels. We ask them to rethink these ideas and look for the cultural biases behind these interpretations.

This class allows for a great deal of discussion and opinion, language use at its best, from which the students gain insight from each other. Their shared experiences about US culture and their shared interpretations of the films and literature covered make this a unique course—and a very enjoyable one to teach.

Next, Mr. Eric Hobbs, one of several of our past teachers of the course, writes concerning his impressions of the reasons for being of the class:

U.S. Culture Through Literature and Film is a course about perspectives. The reason for this is that there can be no single voice through which a culture as diverse as the United States can be defined. As a result, this class is at its best when it delineates markers of contrasting experience within the social, cultural, and historical continuum of our society. Armed with these differing perspectives, it is hoped the students will then be better able to navigate and interact with the ever-evolving landscape of U.S. Culture.

Finally, Ms. Joyce Orr, another of the past teachers of the class, writes of her experiences in sharing culture with the students:

When I taught the U.S. Culture class at the ELI during the fall semester of 1996, I had a wonderful time sharing some unusual aspects of Southern culture with the students. One of the novels we read for the class was Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café. This novel focuses on life in the Deep South (Alabama) between the early 1900’s and the 1980’s. There were two things in particular that the students asked about. One was Southern barbecue—so one day, we had a Southern barbecue feast during our class time. The students got to sample barbecued beef and pork, baby back ribs, okra, corn bread, and collard greens. The other thing students asked about was the experience of attending an African-American church. At one point in the book, one of the main characters who is white has a life-changing experience when she visits such a church on Sunday. Quite a few of the ELI students had visited local churches that were mainly filled with white congregations, but none had ever visited an African-American church. So, one Sunday morning, we met at Norman Hall at 10:30 and carooled to Friendship Baptist Church. There we had a wonderful time experiencing rousing gospel music, the inspiring preaching of the minister, the warmth and friendliness of the members of the congregation, and the particularly elaborate and elegant clothing (especially the hats) of some of the women in attendance. It was a truly wonderful experience that left many of us with tears in our eyes and love in our hearts.

Student nations, 1993-present

The following is a list of the many places our students have come from in the past few years:

Argentina          Japan
Bahrain             Jordan
Bolivia             Korea
Brazil              Kuwait
Burundi             Lebanon
Canada              Lithuania
Chad                Mexico
Chile               Morocco
China               Netherlands
Colombia            Nicaragua
Congo               Oman
Costa Rica          Panama
Cuba                Paraguay
Dominican Rep.      Peru
Ecuador             Portugal
Egypt               Puerto Rico
El Salvador         Qatar
Ethiopia            Russia
France              Saudi Arabia
Germany             Spain
Greece              Sudan
Guatemala           Switzerland
Guinea              Syria
Honduras            Taiwan
Iceland             Thailand
Indonesia           Turkey
Iran                Turkmenistan
Israel             Uruguay
Italy               Venezuela
Ivory Coast         Vietnam
Culture in the Classroom

Annice Barber, Activities Coordinator

In real interactive ESL situations between people from different cultures, it is almost impossible to separate language teaching from culture teaching. In the class "Conversation Strategies," we study the structure of conversation and learn different techniques to empower the students to actively participate with Americans in rapport-building conversations. We learn strategies daily that are closely linked to the culture in this country. Often, we do cultural comparisons as a starting point for our lessons. For example, the students were recently asked for homework to consider how much speech overlap there was in their country and how differing perceptions of this overlap could cause problems when interacting in American English. Japanese students have told me that speech overlap is not so common in their culture, and that in fact, they frequently experience pauses between conversational contributions. These pauses common in Japan can prove to be problematic, however, when that Japanese student is talking to an American who tends to be uncomfortable with what they would term conversational huffs. The American may feel that they are "pulling teeth" and may interpret this as a reluctance on the part of the Japanese person to speak with an American. The Japanese person, on the other hand, may feel that the American is pushy. This is all due to a difference in cultural appropriateness in speech overlap. According to my student from Kuwait, however, speech overlap is more common in Kuwait than in the US, which sets the stage for further problems when Kuwaitis interact with Americans—not to mention with Japanese!

Also, in our class we discuss body language, which proves to have a myriad of cultural differences. One of the most noticeable is the difference in proximity, i.e., how close you stand or sit to someone when interacting. I often notice students from Venezuela, for example, stepping closer to their conversational partner, while Koreans frequently step back into their comfort zone. Again, this difference in proximity comfort between cultures can lead to false impressions and damage an already delicate rapport.

Certainly, as the teacher I learn as much as my students do about language and culture. I hope that by educating my students to American culture, they can begin to understand the inseparable connections between oral interactive language and culture and that if they want to learn one, they would be wise to learn both. However, I am careful to point out that the students need not adopt American culture to speak American English. They should just begin to understand the culture so that they know exactly what they are communicating.

In our class, then, we are constantly learning about one another's cultures, especially as they relate to conversational interaction. This gives us a more complete picture of conversational strategies, not to mention a more complete picture of the world. By education and understanding, we are slowly breaking down erroneous cultural stereotypes one person at a time.