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# The Novice ESL Teacher and Culture in the Classroom: Understandings and Adaptations

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**The Novice ESL Teacher and Culture in the Classroom: Understandings and  
Adaptations**

by

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A Thesis

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St. Cloud State University

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### **Abstract**

When working with English language learners from diverse backgrounds, knowledge about the cultural backgrounds of the students can promote more effective teaching and interactions. To explore how novice teachers' knowledge of their students' cultures affects their teaching, this qualitative study used a survey and cross-sectional, one-on-one interviews with 10 graduate assistant teachers in an M.A. TESL program teaching courses in a college-level IEP and College ESL program. Analysis of the surveys and interviews revealed common themes including interpersonal interaction such as group work and conflict as well as pedagogical challenges related to cultural differences. All of the participants acknowledged the importance of understanding their students' cultures and some effects of culture on their practice. The participants who had taken a for-credit ESL and Culture course prior to the interviews were more confident in their roles and identities as teachers, scored themselves higher on the self-assessment of cultural knowledge, and were more hesitant to make generalizations about groups of students.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study**

### **Introduction and Background**

Educational expectations vary from culture to culture, and educational approaches emerge from a historical cultural context. Rubenstein (2006) claimed that those researching and learning about educational approaches should attempt to understand “each educational system...in terms of the sociopolitical culture in which it is embedded” (p. 433), as each educational system has been influenced by politics and nationalistic ideals, gender roles, group versus individualistic orientations, and other cultural norms and traditions.

How students and teachers interact and understand each other is complex, to say the least. Factors such as personality, prior knowledge, and attitude, as well as cultural expectations and approaches are related to effective, or not so effective, teaching and learning. Cultural knowledge and awareness is relevant in any teaching and learning environment, but is even more important in an environment with international students and English language learners (ELLs), as these students come to the classroom with varied expectations of their role as students, the role of a teacher, and other classroom norms (Crabtree & Sapp, 2004; Rubenstein, 2006).

As a young, emerging teacher in an M.A. TESL program, I found myself in a classroom for the first time teaching an English as a second language (ESL) writing course to 16 international students from eight different countries, of which I knew very little of the cultural similarities or differences we would share. Students, even those from the same country, in this ESL program often came from distinct regions and cultural backgrounds. I knew that their cultural and educational backgrounds would influence our interactions in the

classroom, but I was not sure how, so I was continually taking in advice and methods from the courses I was taking, my peers, and personal research. Through this process, I collected many generalizations, which included anecdotal information as well as research-based information, about students, which shaped my understanding of my students' abilities and their common language learning challenges based on their backgrounds. With time, I also slowly became more comfortable navigating the cultural differences in my classroom.

I often noticed the cultural differences and challenges acutely when there was a problem. Some of the problems that I faced as a young teacher that fueled dialogue with my peers and personal research were plagiarism, heated oral arguments in the classroom between students, or general disrespect or misunderstanding in student-teacher interactions. I would try to figure out how to make the situation better, but I also tried to reflect on the cause of the problem.

A few problematic situations that I found to be culturally grounded in my first years of teaching have noticeably changed how I approach teaching, assign homework, evaluate student work, and choose the types of activities that I do in class. For example, I experienced that students would cut-and-paste plagiarize whole essays. In speaking with the students, I got the impression that although they heard me talk about the fact that it is wrong and unacceptable, they did not think it was really all that serious of an offence. In one instance, the student explained that he did not see it as culturally or morally wrong for him to get help from a friend and that he completed the assignment, as requested. He had used the resources available to him, in this case a friend, to complete the task. It was not so important to him how the assignment got completed.



As a young teacher, I came to my role with an understanding of how the United States educational system works and an unquestioned understanding that this is how an educational system should work. I quickly learned that my cultural expectation and understanding of what an educational system works like and looks like was not the same as my students' expectations and understanding. As a relatively new teacher, it seemed that a lot of the frustration and problems in the classroom revolved around miscommunication or culture rather than pedagogy or language issues. I wondered what kind of preparation students need to receive to adjust and thrive in a United States university environment. I also wondered about whether the instructors who work with international and ELL students are aware of common cultural expectations of their students and how to manage differences in expectations.

From this line of thinking, I considered how to address these cultural differences that can, and often do, cause ESL students to be less successful in an American academic classroom and what I can do to prepare them. When working with students from all over the world, how important is it to take into consideration the background of the students from different cultures? Can the teacher be more effective if he or she is familiar with the cultures represented in the classroom? How important is it to prepare teachers with cultural understanding and relativism as well as the standard pedagogical and linguistic knowledge? To start finding out the answers to these questions, I will look at how teachers deal with culture in their classrooms and how culture may affect their teaching.

### **Problem Statement**

Many of the studies carried out in the area of teaching international students and cultural differences in the classroom focus on the students, the presence of cultural variety in the curriculum, ESL student identity, and/or the representation of culture in the classroom. Various searches in academic databases provided few relevant matches when I searched using key terms such as ESL OR ELL OR EFL, cultur\*, college OR university OR IEP. Few researchers have focused closely on cultural training and preparation for university ESL teachers or how those teachers might adjust their teaching practices based on the cultures of the students represented in their classrooms. To this end, it is not clear how a teacher's cultural knowledge of his or her students may affect how he or she creates or implements curriculum or deals with classroom management. This gap in the literature regarding how cultural knowledge may affect teachers' actions, practices, and approaches is what I seek to narrow in this study. I will explore novice teacher's experiences and perceptions qualitatively to better understand how culture affects their practice.

### **Research Questions**

Through this study, I seek to uncover some specific instances and interactions to demonstrate if and how teachers make adaptations in the classroom based on their own cultural knowledge. The following questions will be considered in the research process:

In what ways do novice ESL teachers make adaptations or adjustments based on their knowledge and awareness of the cultures of their students? Are there differences in the adjustments made between teachers who have taken a for-credit ESL and Culture course through the M.A. TESL program and those who have not?

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

A number of texts focus on the cultural identity of the ESL student in the classroom, how it is shaped, and how it affects learning. Many researchers have discussed the benefits of using culture as part of the curriculum in a language classroom to promote understanding and teach about the larger picture from which language has developed (e.g., Crawford & McLaren, 2003; Lafayette, 2003; Rowsell, Sztainbok, & Blaney, 2007). Rowsell et al. (2007) discerned, from their study on using culture in the ESL classroom, “(1) that culture and language cannot be divided and seeing them as interwoven leads us closer to a more informed understanding of the learner; and (2) ESL learners frequently feel silenced—especially in their use of a first language” (p. 153). By becoming more aware of culture in the classroom, and possibly using culture as a topic of study in the classroom, teachers can empower and support students.

Most people have a general understanding of the term culture as the interpersonal norms, traditions, and typical actions and ways of thought of a group of people. It is widely agreed upon that culture is a term that is difficult to wholly define. Hinkel (1999) pointed out that culture is often discussed on a small scope as relating to a specific location, genre, or organization, and posited that language researchers do this culture defining as a way to closely examine the relationships between factors in language learning (e.g., students, language, culture, genre, etc.). Researchers discuss the culture of schools and families as well as regions and countries. For the purpose of this study, I will use Hinkel’s (1999) description of culture, as related to language research, which encompasses “social norms, worldviews, beliefs, assumptions, and value systems that affect many, if not all, aspects of second or foreign

language use, teaching, and learning” (p. 2). Hinkel discussed language research as focusing on “ways in which people’s worldviews affect their learning, understanding, production, and interaction in a second language and a second culture” (p. 2). A person often does not notice culture or cultural differences until he or she confronts these differences for the first time (Deidrich, 2014). Teachers in a language classroom with students from cultures different from their own will learn about and experience culture through these cultural differences on a regular basis.

Through this review of the literature, I intend to discuss research currently available in the areas of cultural knowledge and preparation for ESL teachers, differences in cultural pedagogies around the world, and differences in culturally-based learner expectations to better understand how ELL teachers address cultural differences and use cultural knowledge in their classrooms.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

In order to conduct a thorough review of the research that is currently available on the topic of culture in the classroom, I searched for articles using Academic Search Premier, ERIC, and Google Scholar. I used search terms such as the following: *cultur\**, *ESL* or *EFL* or *ELL*, *teacher* or *instructor* or *faculty*, and took recommendations from faculty and colleagues interested in the same topic.

### **Review of the Literature**

Effective teaching requires a teacher to break down barriers that come between instruction and learning. In an ESL classroom, cultural differences and expectations can be a barrier to learning, engagement, and communication. Rowsell et al. (2007) asserted the

importance of an instructor or curriculum developer noting these cultural differences, such as unfamiliar contexts or information that may be foreign to students in class materials, because a text with a contextual or cultural reference may be almost impossible for a student not familiar with that context or culture to understand, regardless of linguistic ability.

Using culture as a focus in the language classroom has changed over the years. Lafayette (2003) stated that up until the introduction of the audio-lingual method, the use or presence of culture in the language classroom was limited to written literature, which was typically introduced at an intermediate to advanced level (p. 54). This was also a time when classes may have included a more homogeneous population.

Cultural differences may be more important to understand in schools now than ever before because of an increase in multicultural communities, organizations, schools, and countries. Specific to higher education, international student enrollment has consistently increased from 2006 to 2014, with international students making up 4.2% of the students enrolled in higher education in 2014 (Institute of International Education, 2014). International students come to the United States with varied language proficiencies and diverse expectations and understandings about U.S. academic culture. Because language is so integrated with culture, how it is dealt with in schools can either support or marginalize students (Rowse et al., 2007). By understanding culture, a teacher is able to empower and support students rather than allowing differences to be a barrier.

### **ESL Teacher Training**

Many researchers and educators claim that the acquisition of cultural knowledge is essential for ESL and EFL teachers (e.g., Crabtree & Sapp, 2004; Liyanage & Bartlett, 2008).

Calabrese, Goodvin, and Niles (2005) found through an appreciative inquiry study including observations and interviews that effective teachers working with at-risk, and often culturally diverse student groups, were more successful as teachers if they practiced and demonstrated certain traits including caring attitudes and cultural understanding of and respect for the cultures of their students and the community. This understanding and respect may come from some sort of training or formal cultural education at the university, or it could come from a personal experience with a student or group of students, community members, or colleagues. Often it comes from a combination of sources.

Many university teacher-training programs incorporate a cultural education component. In a study at a university in the Midwest, Patridge and Robinson (2009) surveyed current and former students of the Masters in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) program at the university on their cultural competence, comparing those who had taken a graduate level course in ESL and Culture with and those who had not. Using a Likert scale survey, they found that the completion of the program's ESL and Culture course significantly improved the graduate students' self-reported scores relating to acceptance of and adaptation to other cultures.

Bollin (2007) noted cultural sensitivity and knowledge as necessary for ESL teachers. In her study about the service learning approach, Bollin analyzed how an experience of service learning can better prepare students planning to teach English as a second language to understand their future students and emphasized the importance of a service experience for the teaching student to understand the normal life of the particular ESL students at their homes. For future ESL teachers, this type of experience can break down some biases and

prejudice that the future teacher may have (Bollin, 2007) as well as orient the teaching students the cultures of their potential future students.

While observations and experiences may help teachers learn about the cultures of their students, teachers need to be wary of making a generalization about how all people of a certain culture act or are. Lanteigne (2007), in a study on ESL and culture, noted that although some generalizations can be made from experience working with students and/or teachers from another culture, these specific students or members of a distinct culture very well could be exceptions to the norm of their culture in the sense that they violate accepted social norms or are rude, rather than follow cultural customs. Therefore, it is necessary to learn to distinguish between what might be a culturally acceptable behavior and what is behavior that is outside of the acceptable realm. Lanteigne suggested that a teacher working in a new, distinct culture pay attention to cues, such as people's reactions to everyday behaviors that will help them understand more accurately what is considered normal, socially acceptable behavior. Some generalizations will be and must be made, but there is a danger in over-generalizing based on a teacher's experience with one or two students.

### **Teacher Identity**

Novice teachers will be constantly shaping their identity, and often in an ESL or EFL context are balancing two or more pedagogical and cultural norms and expectations. New teachers will have various factors affecting their perceived identity, such as their educational and cultural experiences, and ESL teachers face the additional factor of differences in cultural expectations. Certainly these factors are often interwoven. Musanti and Pence (2010) concluded that "teacher identity and knowledge are intricately interwoven", discussing

culturally relevant teacher identity factors such as individuality and collaboration. Singh and Richards (2006) advocate for teachers finding their identity by discussing what a teacher looks like or does, yet any observations of what teachers look like or do will be shaped by the cultural context.

### **Cultural Differences in Pedagogy**

In a college ESL classroom, teachers and students may struggle with cultural differences in pedagogy. Researchers such as Crabtree and Sapp (2004) discussed the dilemma of whose pedagogy should reign. Typically, the teacher chooses, whether consciously or not, the pedagogical approach for a class. Students may then be navigating not only learning the language and content for the course but also the approach to teaching.

In their study, Crabtree and Sapp (2004) examined EFL pedagogy in a foreign classroom. They discussed the common practice of a teacher imposing his or her own pedagogy on the students of a distinct country and/or culture and claimed that it is rather ethnocentric for an EFL teacher to compel his or her Western educational approach and culturally influenced pedagogical beliefs on students in a society that does not have those same values and norms. Specifically, they observed an EFL classroom in Brazil taught by a visiting professor from the United States. They illustrated the frustration occurring within the first few days for both the North American professor and the Brazilian students because of lack of cultural and pedagogical harmony. The lack of approachableness and the perceived insensitivity of the professor, as well as the physical closeness of the Brazilian students in normal interactions contributed to the misunderstanding by both parties and diminished motivation of the students to engage in the class. The researchers conclude that “[this] cultural



asynchrony illustrates the need for intercultural training for visiting instructors prior to departure” (Crabtree & Sapp, 2004, p. 120). The researchers promote the teacher adapting to the students in this case of a foreign teacher of EFL dealing with a relatively homogeneous population of students.

Similarly, Toren and Iliyan (2008) found inconsistencies in the roles and pedagogies introduced to ESL/EFL teachers around the world. They posed the problem of teachers in the Middle East not knowing or understanding their roles as teachers after having experienced both Western educational practice instruction and the other in their Arab roots, as the western pedagogies taught to up-and-coming teachers in some educational institutions in the Middle East do not agree with the traditional educational norms. “Given that most Arab schools are characterized by strictness and authority, the beginning teacher faces a conflict between the different western, democratic reality she/he has been lately exposed to and the traditional culture of the school” (p. 1053). The inconsistency in the teaching pedagogies creates a difficult transition for the beginning teachers and their students into the established school norms.

Liyanage and Bartlett (2008) also considered intercultural teaching methods and practices. In examining language teaching students, they found that learning how to teach in one culture or context is not necessarily fully transferable to another culture. There may be barriers to the utilization of teaching skills and strategies that are learned in one context or culture when that teacher returns to the home context or culture. There may be different expectations that teachers have for their students as well as different expectations that students

have for their teacher. Liyanage and Bartlett recommend that the relationship between the pedagogies in the distinct places be examined and considered.

### **Student Expectations of Teachers and Educational Settings**

The literature also gives some suggestions for ways that students can adjust to the new environment in an ESL context with unfamiliar practices. Crabtree and Sapp (2004) stated that ESL teachers should suggest that the students find “cultural informants” at the institution in order to learn about and adapt to the academic and general culture.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

I conducted a qualitative study to find out how novice teachers interact with culture and make adaptations in the classroom. I first had the participant teachers fill out a background and cultural self-assessment survey and then conducted and recorded semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 10 participants using purposeful sampling. Interviewing the teachers was the best way to collect data about their personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts about culture and adaptations in the classroom.

#### **Participants**

Participants were 10 graduate assistant teachers from an intensive English program and an advanced college-level ESL program at a university in the Midwestern United States. Because I was also a student at that university and worked in those programs, I selected participants using convenience sampling, meaning that these participants were available and willing to be studied (Creswell, 2012). I worked to find a group of teachers representative of the teacher population in the two programs with at least 1 year of experience as graduate assistant teachers of international ESL students through a Master's in TESL program. All participants have had numerous interactions with students from the various countries represented at the university in the Midwest and have taught intermediate to advanced college ESL courses. Some may have had prior teaching experience or study abroad experience.

Of the participants, just over half had taken an optional for-credit ESL and Culture course in their program of study for the M.A. TESL, and the others had not. While analyzing the data, I also looked for any patterns in the interview responses between those who have taken the course and those who have not.

### **Description of Data Collection Instruments**

Initially I had participants fill out a survey containing questions about their background and a self-assessment of cultural knowledge (see Appendix A). I included other questions about language and teaching backgrounds in order to better understand their experiences with students before starting the M.A. TESL program.

I conducted one-on-one cross-sectional qualitative interviews with participants in a familiar environment, and the interviews were audio recorded. The recording was done with a digital audio recorder and stored on my personal computer, which is protected by a password for access. Additionally, I took some notes during the interviews to record any non-verbal data or to note any additional information.

### **Procedures**

The participants met with me, the researcher, for one-on-one interviews shortly after spring semester 2010. I had them first fill out the self-assessment survey and then conduct the interview. The interview questions were used in the order that they are listed (see Appendix B), and I asked follow-up or probing questions as I saw appropriate. For the interviews, I created a collection of open-ended, non-leading questions that allow the participants to tell about their experiences. The purpose of the interview was to elicit descriptions and stories that demonstrate a reaction or adjustment made while teaching based on or relating to their knowledge of the students cultures, as well as changes they have made in the management of class or curriculum choice based on the cultural knowledge.

The style of interview was conversational, and given the nature of the questions, I provided ample time for the participants to reflect and think about the answer, if necessary.

The types of information I was looking for were similar to those found in a reflective writing or teacher journal, but I want to have the opportunity to retrieve information from the participants in a shorter period of time and ask follow-up questions. The questions were a starting point for discussion, and based on the answers provided by the teachers, I sometimes asked follow-up questions to ask them to expand on an idea.

In order to account for the fact that participants may answer my questions with brief answers that they assume I am looking for, the questions focused on bringing out stories and accounts of their experiences in class or with students. Also, to not be overly explicit about the information I was looking for, and therefore receive responses that the participants think that I was looking for rather than authentic responses, I chose specific questions that require thought and reflection about an experience or set of experiences. Accordingly, I arranged the questions in an order so that they begin with little to no focus on culture to questions that focus more specifically and explicitly on culture. If the participant answered a question in a way that was not related to cultural interactions during the interview, at times I led her or him back with short questions or comments.

One week after the initial interview, I followed up with the participants by e-mail to ask about ensuing reflections. I asked them if they thought more about one of the answers they gave me or if they had any related thoughts. This follow-up was meant to collect any answers or thoughts that the participants were not prepared to give or maybe had not thought about at the time of the interview.

When writing about the participants responses, I used pseudonyms to protect their anonymity and did not provide any specific information that would easily identify them to those reading the study.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

I followed Creswell's (2012) guidance regarding qualitative data analysis and began by organizing and transcribing the data. I collected the surveys and kept them together in a folder until I start the data analysis process. I also organized all of the digital audio interviews into one folder in my computer and transcribed them for analysis. During transcription, which I did manually by listening to and repeating content from the interviews into the audio-to-text program on my computer and then refining the transcriptions by listening subsequent times, I also reoriented and refamiliarized myself to the content of each interview, which helped me get a general sense of the material and note any obvious themes or categories. Finally, I conducted an iterative process of reading, coding the data, and finding themes.

### **Expected Results**

Given my experiences, I had expected to find that graduate assistant teachers with more than a semester of experience teaching ESL to multicultural students assess their experience and the knowledge they have gained about the cultures of their students to adjust their teaching practices in the future. Novice teachers who have recently begun teaching multicultural students may be very conscious of differences and cultural generalizations, but may not know what to do about it or how to act in certain situations regarding cultural differences.

Based on a previous cross-sectional study done at the same university with a similar focus on cultural education for teachers, it is expected that teaching assistants who have taken the ESL and Culture course will notice and adapt to cultural differences more so, more often, and/or differently than teaching assistants who have not taken the ESL and Culture course.

I also expected that teachers who have taken an ESL and Culture course are more aware of cultural differences in the classroom and make conscious decisions about curriculum and activities regarding how they think the materials or activities will function given the cultures represented in their classrooms.

From the literature and teacher responses, it may be possible to consider some teaching implications. For instance, teachers with cultural training and understanding may be more prepared to know how to more effectively teach in a multicultural classroom.

### **Limitations**

As a research study, there are a number of limitations to the methodology and possible results. To start with, the interviews were with participants who teach and study at a specific institution, so the results may not be generalizable to other groups of teachers in different locations and institutions, with different groups of students. Also, the results may not be generalizable to non-novice teachers or teachers in other contexts, such as EFL teachers or teachers of other age groups of students.

The results of this study will be reflective of only a small group of teachers. They are all novice graduate student teachers from an M.A. TESL program at a university in the Midwest. All of the teachers have taken the same introductory coursework and had similar teaching opportunities and instruction. They are all from one of two ESL programs at the

university in which there are students from beginner to advanced language instruction in English. Their experiences and perceptions may be unique to this demographic and therefore not generalizable.

The data collection is dependent on the participants' memory of what happened in classes with students and their perception of what is important to explain to me. The limitation is that participants may not recall any specific situations in their responses to the questions asked or they may overlook something that could be relevant or important. This limitation should be helped by the follow-up e-mail a week later. Also, participants will have a biased perspective about what happened in the specific situations that they recall based on their own thoughts, background, and comfort level with the situation. McMillan and Schumacher (2001) stated that participants may select their responses to different questions and prompts based on different factors, which makes qualitative research complex. However, they stated that "social scientists believe that individuals cannot be studied meaningfully by ignoring the context of real life" (p. 24). Therefore, no matter the reasons that participants choose to respond a certain way, there is meaning in the response. The purpose of the study is to get information about what the participants think about what happened.

Additionally, the participants have been working and teaching at the university with a "community of learners". This is a term given to programs such as these where the international student community learns from and reflects each other's actions and attitudes. What the teachers experience from the students may not be representative of the home cultures of the students, rather of the culture created and nurtured among the international student population in a program.



Finally, my analysis of the data may be biased by my own knowledge and experiences in the classroom as well as my personal relationships with the participants, who were my classmates and colleagues. I followed Creswell's (2012) guidance on analyzing data and be conscious of my relationships with the participants and how those relationships may affect my understanding of their responses.

## **Chapter 4: Discussion**

After recording the interviews and collecting the data from the participants, I listened to the audio recordings of the interview multiple times, transcribing, coding, and organizing the relevant responses into themes. In this section, I will provide further information about the participants that I retrieved from the survey and discuss the themes that emerged from my analysis of the interviews. I focus on participants' stories about if and how they make adaptations in the classroom based on their own cultural knowledge, and also note additional relevant themes that emerged in the interviews.

### **Participants**

As previously discussed, the participants were all Master's students in an MA TESL program and were teaching in the university's IEP or the College ESL program, and they were in their second, third, or fourth semester in the program. The participant teachers had varied previous teaching experiences and some had significantly more experience either teaching international students or working and living abroad. Based on the responses in the survey, all of them had taught English language learners (ELLs) in some capacity prior to enrolling in the MA TESL program, though their amount and type of experience varied. Some participants described their prior teaching experience in the survey, though two participants left the question blank. Responses ranged from volunteering for a few months at a local adult basic education (ABE) English program to 10 years teaching both abroad and in the United States.

Information about each participant's teaching and language experience can be seen in Table 1. The information comes from the survey implemented before the interviews and has

been simplified to maintain participant anonymity and provide ease of reading. Seven of the 10 participants did not study to teach English language learners prior to enrolling in the MA TESL program, but all had some experience working with ELLs prior to entering the program. Three of the 10 participants, Raheem, Karolina, and Tomas, claimed that English was not their first or native language, and two of those participants, Karolina and Tomas, were international students in the MA TESL program. All of the participants had some experience learning a second or additional language. Susan was the only one who indicated that she does not speak another language in the survey but noted in another question that she had studied German for four years in high school.

Table 1: Participant Responses to Survey

	Alex	Susan	Nicole	Karolina	Kristi	David	Anna	Raheem	Tomas	Mary
<b>Did you study teaching ESL/EFL for your undergraduate degree?</b>	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Have you taught ESL/EFL before? If yes, where? For how many years?</b>	1 year, Europe	A few months in the U.S.	China, 2 years	6+ years, Europe	1 year, abroad	10 years, abroad and in the U.S.	2.5 years, abroad and in the U.S.	n/a	n/a	1 year, abroad
<b>Is your native/first language English?</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
<b>Do you speak any other languages?</b>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Have you taken the ESL and Culture course?</b>	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>How familiar are you with the cultures of the students in the ESL classes that you teach at [the university]? (Likert Scale: 1=unfamiliar - 7=very familiar)</b>	6	3	5	6	5	7	6	7	6	6

Note: n/a indicates that the participant did not answer the question in the survey.

## **Themes**

To help understand what adaptations teachers make regarding cultural knowledge, I will present the findings of my research and data analysis in three main categories. The first is participant beliefs about culture and its relevance to teaching ESL students. I will then discuss pedagogical challenges and choices including group work, feedback, and teachers' expectations of students' background knowledge. I will then discuss the teachers' reflections that they shared with me during the interviews. As applicable, I will also include comparisons between those participants who had taken the ESL and Culture course and those who had not within or at the end of each subsection. Kristi, David, Anna, Raheem, Tomas, and Mary had taken ESL and Culture; Alex, Susan, Nicole, and Karolina had not.

### **Beliefs about Culture and Teaching ESL Students**

I began the interviews by asking the participants about their reasons for teaching. Over half of the participants started by discussing their love of or connection to learning another language and interest in learning more about culture. Many of the participants mentioned their experience abroad and/or their language learning experience as formative in their decision to teach ESL. Of those who did not mention their love of language or learning about cultures, they mentioned that they were drawn to teaching or just kind of "fell into it". Karolina mentioned that she wanted to teach, but that what she taught was not as important as teaching itself, and Nicole indicated that she just found herself in teaching English, though it was not planned.

When asked to describe their students, all but two of the participants focused on nationality and culture, and the majority referred to their students' nationality or cultural

background as the first or second characteristic they shared. Karolina shared how she had taught rather homogeneous groups of students in the past, so it was a new experience for her to teach multicultural groups of students. She explained:

The difference between my experience back at home and my experience here is that back at home I taught students who have the same background as I did, and all students were very homogeneous. So I could just look at them and know what they are thinking and whether they do things and why they do up things if they're interested.

She went on to explain that her experience working with multicultural groups is very different. Susan focused solely on cultural background and gender, and provided a long response to the question. She seemed to focus on the student characteristics that were most different from her, as she is about 15-20 years older than her students and noted that having all-male classes was surprising to her. Other common characteristics that the participants shared were age, socioeconomic status, and proficiency. The two participants who did not focus on nationality and culture, Nicole and Kristi, mentioned proficiency, age, and students' dedication and work ethic.

In analyzing the differences between participants who had taken ESL and Culture and those who had not, I noted that Karolina and Susan (who had not taken the course) were the two participants who discussed the characteristics that were most seemingly different from themselves. The other participants focused on various categories, such as nationality, age, culture, proficiency, and socioeconomic status, often just mentioning the name of the category, whereas Karolina focused on the multicultural groups, which were different from the rather homogeneous groups she previously taught, and Susan focused on gender (male),

age, and cultural background, expanding on their answers to demonstrate the difference between themselves and their students.

Students' nationalities and cultural backgrounds seemed to be at the forefront of teachers' responses through the interviews. Toward the end of the interview, I asked them explicitly about what culture means to them. The responses all seemed to follow a similar pattern, in that the participants began with some of the words and concepts like language, behavior, values, traditions, and beliefs. Some of the initial responses would closely align with a brief textbook definition of culture. For example, Raheem answered the question by saying "Food, language, behavior, attitude, relationships, manners, a thing that shapes a person's personality and who they are. Every person has a culture." Then, all but two of the participants continued to provide more comprehensive explanations of their understanding of culture. Mary explained that it is "a huge part of who we are and where we come from". She continued to explain group think—a group thinking, acting, dressing, etc. the same way—and that culture relates to how a person perceives the world around him or her, coming from the whole group, is a reflection of whatever group you randomly happened to be born into this world. In one of the shortest responses, Karolina mentioned a group-oriented set of beliefs, similar to Mary's idea of group think: "Culture is a system of beliefs about the main things, activities, I don't know, events, notions in everyday life. What people from different cultures think about different concepts, and as a result of these beliefs they behave in a particular way and they judge in a particular way." This idea of individuals from one culture judging those from other cultures came up a few times during the interview with Karolina.

A subtheme of the discussions about culture was the idea of subcultures. Anna, Tomas, and Susan continued on to discuss subcultures and local cultures, such as class and families, and how those subcultures affect their students behaviors and reactions. David mentioned that it is not good to define a culture as a whole, as in to say “All Saudi culture is \_\_\_\_\_” because there is often great diversity within a country. Later in the interview, David discussed his realization that within Saudi Arabia (which is home to a number of students in the university’s IEP program), there is a wide variety of culture. He had assumed that all of the students got along and had similar outlooks and a strong sense of brotherhood, but found that there was great diversity. The range of length of responses and content of responses from the participants who had and had not taken the ESL and Culture course was similar.

A notable difference emerged in the survey regarding participants’ knowledge and familiarity of their students’ cultures. To the question “How familiar are you with the cultures of the students in the ESL classes that you teach at [the university]?”, the participants all ranked themselves between 3 and 7 on a Likert scale, indicating neutral to very familiar. Those who had not taken ESL and Culture averaged 5 whereas those who had taken the course averaged 6.2, demonstrating a higher perceived familiarity, and likely comfort level, with the cultures of their students.

The participants also discussed their transformation of cultural knowledge over time and through experience. David described his shift in thinking of culture as the “superficial things” to knowing that it is more complex, including people’s values and the way they think about different things. Karolina mentioned that when she lived in her home country prior to coming to the U.S., culture was something she understood very theoretically, as a concept that

is discussed and studied. She indicated that when she came to teach in the United States, her understanding of culture shifted from something very theoretical to something very practical. Kristi also discussed how her self-led learning and reading about her students' cultures helped her better communicate with them. She read literature about nonverbal cues that some of her Asian students used so that she would better know when to call on them. She also indicated that by reading about the culture of a student with whom she seemed to have a power struggle, she was able to create a better working relationship with that student. Kristi had taken the ESL and Culture course, but she indicated that she self-elected materials from the literature to help her better understand how to resolve the problem.

The participants all indicated that they found it important, and necessary, to be aware of their students' cultures. David explained that teachers need to be open to learning and making content relevant to students, but that while a teacher should become aware of students' cultures, it cannot be something teachers spend all their time doing, so there needs to be a balance. Many also brought up the fact that as teachers in a program like this one, it is their responsibility to teach their students about the local culture. This idea will be further discussed in the next section.

To know one's students was another topic that we discussed. All of the participants claimed that it is important to know their students, but they defined the idea of knowing their students differently. Five of the participants indicated that they found it important to know their students' proficiency or language level; while the others likely did not find this unimportant, they did not mention it. Four participants mentioned students' interests and motivations, and five participants mentioned country of origin or other basic background



information. One participant mentioned that getting to know her students' by asking about their families, interests, and origin helps create some buy-in, respect, and rapport with the students. Another participant mentioned culture as one of the important things to get to know about students and brought up the fact that "it is more important to know how educational systems function in a student's home country rather than what they do at home or what they eat", as this information will better help the teacher know how to approach that student. The participants' responses did not follow clear patterns based on whether or not they had taken the ESL and Culture course.

Throughout the interviews, a number of the participants made comparisons between their own home culture and their students' cultures regularly, with the most frequent and explicit comparisons being made by those who had not taken ESL and Culture. Karolina and Susan made the most frequent comparisons between their own culture and their students' cultures. Karolina often discussed the difference between a homogeneous class, which is how she explained her previous teaching experience with students all from her home country and in which she was familiar with the culture, and a multicultural class. At one point, Karolina said "Looking at different student from different backgrounds, you cannot tell if you're not familiar with the culture. You cannot tell if the student are interested or whether they like your class and whether they don't, so for me it was really, really hard." She found her lack of knowledge about social norms and nonverbal cues of her students from different cultures to be a challenge. Nicole also made comparisons, explaining the pragmatic differences that she had found to be challenging and the range of student motivation she found between her prior teaching experience and her current teaching experience at the university. When discussing

some of the cultures of his students, David, who had taken ESL and Culture, mentioned that he feels more “culturally distant” from some groups than others, indicating that after learning about the different cultures of the students he worked with, he felt like he better related with some more than others.

Some of the participants who had taken ESL and Culture claimed during the interviews that they tried to avoid making generalizations, while two of the participants who had not taken ESL and Culture seemed to make the most generalizations. One said “It’s kind of a common fact that Asian students are very silent”, and another participant, at one point during the interview, made various generalizations about students from different regions: East Asian students are very quiet and reserved in the classroom, Saudi students are very talkative, French students like an authoritarian teacher, and Somali students were high energy. There was a clear pattern that those who had taken ESL and Culture were hesitant to verbalize generalizations about students from specific regions or cultures by saying things like “I try not to make generalizations”. This difference in approach to talking about students indicates the value of a cultural education course in a teacher preparation program.

### **Pedagogy**

While analyzing the data, a few specific themes related to pedagogy emerged, and they will be discussed in this section. The participants all provided some information or story about their challenge with group work and group interactions in class. Included in group work and group interactions were discussions about student-student interactions and managing controversial discussions. The participants also discussed challenges related to feedback. One topic that coincided with a number of stories that the teachers told was their expectations of

the background knowledge that the students came to the classroom with, including various stories of failed lesson plans or activities related to lack of sufficient background knowledge.

A brief overview of themes presented by the participants in the pedagogy-related categories that I will discuss further in this section can be seen in Table 2. The table includes information on topics that either were asked about explicitly or that the participants offered during the interviews, though it is not a comprehensive representation of their answers; it helps to highlight some patterns in their responses. Throughout the rest of the section I will expand on the participants' responses and discuss trends.

Table 2: Themes from Interviews

	Alex	Susan	Nicole	Karolina	Kristi	David	Anna	Raheem	Tomas	Mary
Had taken ESL and Culture?	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pedagogy: Commentary on group work/group dynamics	Discussed personality issues related to grouping students	Discussed the impact of the "chemistry" of the class	Discussed the impact of the "group dynamic"	Discussed impact of the "group dynamic", "chemistry" of the class	Discussed group vs. individualistic mindset in cultures	Discussed how student bias affected group work	Discussed "group work" as culturally based	Discussed "group work" as culturally based	Did not discuss group work or group dynamics	Discussed "group work" as culturally based
Feedback: Indicated shift in approach to feedback based on knowledge of pragmatic differences	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Supplementary materials: Reason for choosing supplementary materials	Bring in multimedia resources; add'l practice, authentic materials	Recommendation from others	Recommendation from others	Add'l practice	Recommendation from others	Add'l practice; Connection between textbook and authentic materials	Add'l practice	Add'l practice	Bring in multimedia/multimodal resources	Bring in multimedia/multimodal resources
Students' Background Knowledge: To what did participants attribute "failed" lessons or challenges?	Student bias, lack of knowledge about structure of the activity	Student behavior	Own misunderstanding of student level/knowledge	Lack of student motivation; mismatch of student level and textbook	Students' lack of knowledge about the structure of the activity	Own misunderstanding; lack of background knowledge on the topic	Students' lack of knowledge about the structure of the activity	Students' lack of knowledge about the structure of the activity	Student behavior, unpreparedness	Students' lack of knowledge about the structure of the activity

**Group work and group dynamics.** The topic of group work came up in the interviews with various participants, especially when discussing an activity that did not work

or student behavior issues. A notable difference between the group of participants who had taken ESL and Culture and the group that had not was that those who had taken ESL and Culture tended to focus on explaining the pedagogical and logistical issues related to group work. They discussed the students' lack of contextual knowledge about the format of certain activities and student- versus teacher-centered classrooms. Those who had not taken ESL and Culture tended to focus on the chemistry of the class, or the feel of the class, and how it affected their communication with students and the students' engagement.

Anna, Mary, and Raheem talked about lessons that they found to be ineffective because of issues with group work. Mary planned a lesson in which different groups of students were responsible to research a topic and present their findings to the rest of the group. Each group had a related topic, and the idea for the lesson was that they would each share content that would help their classmates get a fuller picture of the topic. Mary explained that splitting them in to groups did not work because some of the students did not show up for the second part of the lesson, and students did not seem to know what to do. Additionally, students made comments that led Mary to believe that they did not see the method as a valid way to learn the content. The students were not familiar with the expectations or type of activity. She attributed the ineffectiveness of the activity to the students' familiarity to teacher-centric classes where the students always learn from the teacher and not from each other. She indicated that she never tried the same type of task again to see if it would work better in some other way, but on reflecting thought that the students would need a lot more prep about the type of activity and who has the authority in the classroom to make it successful in the future. Moving forward, Mary did little group work in which the students

had to teach each other. She explained “You know, I probably should have tried it again, incorporating what I learned the first time around, but I didn’t really think to do it. Maybe I was less eager to do it again because of that experience. But that’s something I should try again, I mean, yeah, that would be good to try.”

Anna explained one challenge she encountered that she attributed to the group versus individual cultural focus. She explained that “when a student asks a question, the other students think it’s between the student and the teacher, and that they don’t need to listen to each other, and that they don’t need to learn from each other.” She explained that Americans are accustomed to group work, which has an effect on student-teacher interactions. Anna indicated that she figures American students are more likely to listen to student questions to the teacher because they assume that the questions and answers might provide relevant information for them. “We’re so oriented to group work here that I think most students in the United States are really used to working in groups, and listening...like the idea of if you have that question, probably a lot of other people probably do too, so listen.” She noticed a pattern of students not listening to other students’ questions and asking repeat questions on a regular basis, so she started planning activities for students to improve their listening skills from each other.

While a few of the teachers indicated that they saw a connection between the challenges with group work and culture, a couple of teachers indicated issues of racism or judgments that caused group work to be challenging. David and Anna noted instances of their students’ judgments about their classmates that seemed to cause unexpected communication difficulties. David told about a Somali student he had taught in a previous teaching position

who said something very negative about Black people. David was taken aback because he associated Somali people with being Black. He said:

It just blew me away. I was just speechless; I didn't know what to say. I wanted to say something but I stopped myself. Because I wanted to say, um, you're black, you know? But I didn't say that because, she, and I know this, she doesn't identify as a Black person. She identifies as a Somali person.

He continued to explain that this student's identity and beliefs about Black people affected the student's willingness to engage in discussion. Anna noted a tendency among her students to "stick to one's own", especially at the beginning. "It always surprises me, the kind of, I don't know if I would call it racism, but the general, um, the cultures wanting to stick to their own kind and judging another culture." She explained that after the students are in the IEP program longer, they tend to learn more about each other and be more accepting, but noted that this can be problematic in the first semester or two. She did not explain any specific strategies she uses to address or prevent the judging, but it was also not something that I asked about explicitly during the interview.

Relating to the class group as a whole, Nicole, Susan, and Karolina explained that the group dynamic, or chemistry, was important and influential on their communication with students and decisions they made in the classroom. Nicole indicated that the group dynamic influenced her tone of voice and directness in giving instructions, explaining that she felt that she had to be more assertive with certain groups of students and certain group dynamics. Karolina mentioned one group dynamic that was very strange for her. She explained that in one class, the students were very quiet, not answering questions, and not really engaged. She said that it was "really weird and hard" that they seemed to have a lack of interest in discussing topics. She explained that [it is important to understand] "their personalities...

when you know the group and you know how to combine them, like who should work with whom.” In that moment she was explaining that she found it helpful to get to know the students better to know how to match them up in group activities together and create more engagement.

Discussions of the challenges of group work and group dynamics often included the topic of managing controversial or culturally uncomfortable topics and conversations. Over half of the participants discussed instances or patterns of being challenged in dealing with controversial topics. Karolina was one who mentioned it most often throughout the interview. She clearly found it to be a challenging aspect of the job. She mostly focused on how she needed to work on preventing students from sharing their judgments of one another. “Somebody will express his or her opinion and other students will react ‘oh come on’, ‘how come’, ‘it’s awful’, and things like that, so I think being a teacher, you have to prevent such things for students to feel secure in the classroom.” She saw it as her role to teach the students about how to appropriately respond to ideas that they did not agree with. She tries to ensure that students do not feel uncomfortable in the class.

Mary discussed a similar situation in which a student responded to another student with some disapproval or disgust. Specifically, the topic of marrying one’s cousin came up amongst a group of mostly Saudi students as well as a Korean and Chinese student. In the Saudi students’ culture, it is acceptable to marry one’s cousin, but the Chinese and Korean student were very surprised at hearing the idea. One of the Saudi students had recently married her own cousin, and when it came up in the class, the Korean student said something like “Oh my god, oh my god”, showing disgust. The Saudi men in the class talked about

keeping their own heritage and bloodline within the family. Mary explained that she focused on allowing the students to express and discuss their own opinions and focused on the fact that it is okay to have varied opinions and learn about other cultures even if we do not agree with them, explaining “We need to be open and accepting.” Mary valued the opportunity to talk about different opinions and reinforce with her students that while they have differing opinions, in a U.S. academic setting, they need to be able to discuss them respectfully. There were not clear patterns of difference in how the teachers who had taken ESL and Culture experienced or responded to controversial issues in class.

Four participants discussed instances in which differing religious beliefs caused heated discussion or uneasiness for them and students. Raheem told about a disagreement between students belonging the Sunni and Shia denominations of Islam that caused a heated situation within the classroom. He attributed his ability to identify the cause of the problem, deal with the situation, and calm the students to his knowledge of their backgrounds and language, as he is an Arabic speaker like his Saudi students. Afterward, he took the opportunity to discuss what type of language and interaction is appropriate within a U.S. classroom. Similarly, Nicole, Tomas, and Susan explained that they thought, at the moment of a heated discussion, about their role as a teacher to not participate in the discussion and add their opinions on the matter but to wrap up that specific part of the discussion so that they could focus on the lesson and students’ needs. They felt that their role as teacher was not to argue their point but to assess the situation and decide what is an appropriate way to move forward.

**Feedback.** The teachers’ approaches to feedback was another common theme in the interviews, as it was the focus of one of the interview questions. Most of the teachers



indicated that over time their approach to feedback changed, but considered that it was more so related to getting to know the students and their needs better, as well as increasing their pedagogical knowledge in their own M.A. TESL courses, rather than because of a better understanding of the students' cultural backgrounds. Specifically, Raheem and Susan indicated that they started using written feedback on papers less often, and Raheem used conferencing to discuss students' written work because he learned that it was a good approach in one of his classes and realized that his students' work seemed to benefit from it. Another participant explained that she would vary feedback depending on what she thought the student could handle, using more direct feedback with some students and more pragmatic feedback with others, which she called sandwich feedback: giving a positive feedback before and after a negative feedback. Nicole also mentioned that she thought more about pragmatics after getting to know her students. She explained that she had to look out for her own use of phrases like "well no, not exactly" and use more direct language instead. She attributed this pragmatic niceness to having grown up in the Midwest, where it is polite to use more indirect phrases to show disagreement, but noted that she needed to change her communication approach to be more direct and clear with her students.

While most of the participants did not attribute culture, specifically their increasing knowledge of their students' cultures, to their changes in approaches to feedback, the responses of a few participants seemed to show that culture was a factor. The realization by three of the participants that they needed to adjust their pragmatic style indicated an understanding of the pragmatic use in their own culture as well as a consideration of clarity for students.

Two of the participants indicated that they changed the way they gave specific types of feedback or feedback to specific students because of student-teacher clashes that they thought might have been related to culture and personality. Raheem told about his challenges giving feedback to two of his African students, indicating that they were confrontational with him about it, and thought that they were confrontational because he had insulted the students by giving them low grades or negative feedback. He indicated that he used a lot more phrases like “if you could” with those students, again, changing his pragmatic style. Susan also told about confrontational discussions with students in which they would question her grading. She was taken aback by their questioning and attempted negotiations regarding grades. She thought maybe it was related to cultural differences and said that she started to be very direct and firm when discussing grades. Overall, the participants indicated that changes they made were related to their increasing pedagogical knowledge and experience in the classroom.

**Supplementary materials.** The participants mentioned various reasons for choosing supplementary materials. Three of the participants explained that they mostly go from other people’s recommendations for supplementary readings. Another three indicated that they brought in multimodal/multimedia materials from YouTube and internet searches to supplement the content and match the theme in the current unit, and four participants indicated that they tend to bring in materials, as appropriate, to provide additional practice and skill/strategy building. The desire to and type of content that they all brought into the classroom seemed to also depend somewhat on the focus of the course (i.e. reading, writing, grammar, etc.), and their responses did not seem to follow patterns based on whether or not they had taken ESL and Culture.

Two of the participants mentioned cultural influences on their use of supplemental materials. David explained that he tries to use keep his students' cultural frame of reference in mind and choose supplementary materials that connect the content with something the students are familiar with and will find relevant. Nicole mentioned that she likes to find content on universal topics that are not specific to one region or culture. "For example, maybe something about health because, um, I mean, there are cultural overtones to everything...something they are at least familiar with. Like, I generally don't choose specific events in case they don't really keep up on the news, um, or like things that might be really controversial." The desire to avoid confrontation and controversial topics trended throughout the interviews.

**Students' background knowledge.** Based on the stories told in the interviews, the participants who had taken ESL and Culture were more likely to attribute a failed lesson to students' lack of background or contextual knowledge, or knowledge of how the activity works. Those who had not taken ESL and Culture tended to attribute failed or difficult lessons to a variety of factors: their own lack of knowledge about their students' level or understanding, student biases, or authority issues.

Many of the participants described situations in which they made assumptions about the students' background knowledge and/or understanding of the structure of an activity that caused problems or challenges with lessons. Alex summed up what some of the other teachers mentioned when he said "The beginner students not only don't know the language, but don't know much about how to learn a language." Many of the teachers realized that their

assumptions about their students' knowledge of the styles and approaches typically used in a U.S. classroom were problematic.

Nicole and David described situations in which they began a lesson that quickly seemed to fall apart. In both instances, the students did not have the vocabulary knowledge to understand the text, which was the focus of the lesson. Neither of them anticipated the problem prior to the lesson and found themselves giving an extended vocabulary lesson rather than being able to focus on the ideas or structure of the text. Nicole and David attributed this problem to their own misunderstanding of the vocabulary knowledge of their students and were more cognizant of picking texts to use in the future. Neither of them thought the issue was related to cultural misunderstandings.

Four participants described situations in which they began a lesson that just seemed to fall apart because of students' lack of contextual knowledge of the type of task. In each situation, the students seemed to not understand the expectations, even when the teachers had thought they had clearly explained the steps in the task. Anna and Mary attributed the failure of the lesson to students' lack of knowledge about the type of task. Mary indicated that she realized that she cannot make assumptions about what students will understand in the class. "I literally need to teach them about this American way of learning before we use it in context." Similarly, Anna said:

I think the lesson, instead of learning those specific vocabulary words, it ended up being a lesson in how to follow the directions...They did not know what to expect and how to act in an American classroom, I think. And I think they just weren't sure how much they needed to...They perhaps had a different background.

Both teachers realized that they were expecting their students to understand and act like a group of students who grew up with U.S. academic traditions, but learned through their challenging lessons that this was not the case.

In another instance, Alex brought in a map of a city in China but with information in English to use in a lesson in one of his classes. The students rejected the activity that accompanied the map, explaining that if it was about China, it was not relevant for them. Alex thought the map was clear, and was surprised at the negative reaction and rejection of the activity by the students, who were not Chinese. He was not sure what to attribute the issue to, but seemed to suspect that the students were not able to see the applicability of the learning more broadly. He implied that the students would have probably seen more value in the activity if it had been a map of a U.S. city and that their negative reaction may have been because of some bias against China.

**Teacher desire/duty to acclimate students to U.S. culture and U.S. academic/classroom culture.** During the interviews, most of the teachers shared about their sense of duty or desire to help their students understand U.S. culture and their expectations as teachers in a U.S.-based institution as well as the behavior and knowledge that will be expected of students in the future in an American academic setting. The discussions focused around some of the highly visible aspects of culture such as holidays and traditions as well as discussions of classroom behavior and attitudes. Notably, the participants who did not discuss their duty or desire to acclimate students to U.S. culture were not from the United States.

Two participants told stories about how U.S. holidays were focused on or discussed in class, sometimes because of student questions and sometimes because they had integrated it

into the lessons. Susan explained “I also feel responsible for giving them some sort of introduction to the U.S. university atmosphere, holidays, traditions”. It seemed to be something she tried to integrate into lessons at times, and she went on to reiterate that she sees it as her responsibility as a teacher to prepare the students for the cultural environment where they are and where they will likely be when they enter the university. Anna explained that when a group of students asked about Easter, she started explaining it and then found herself hesitant to discuss the origins. She realized that it was likely due to the separation of church and state in the United States. She paused for a second and then realized she could just provide the factual information and explain it.

I think, me having taught in high schools that you, like you kind of skirt, you go around religion. People don't talk about it because, especially the teacher, because if you're affiliated with a certain religion, you could be, you know all the problems that could cause in high school. But I decided well, this isn't about choosing one religion over another. It's just about the education, so that they can learn that...

She came to find that her students' assumptions about Christmas and Easter did not align with the true origins of the holidays, and she found herself happy that she could help clarify.

Other participants focused more on attitudes, perspectives, and behaviors of American culture as something they explicitly explained or showed to their students. Mary explained “I tell them when I'm doing something that's really American. For example, this is how it is here. That's why I ask for your opinion because we talk about opinions here.” She explained throughout the interview that she wanted her students to be able to discuss ideas and their opinions and that after the fourth or fifth time of telling students it is okay to discuss and share their opinions, they seem to get it, but initially, they are hesitant to do so. Mary said that she

tells students it is an important part of the American academic classroom to be able to discuss one's opinions and to be comfortable doing so.

Alex seemed to promote intercultural interaction and share ideas about American culture. He indicated that he is aware of what might offend students, and sometimes intentionally says things that may cause a reaction from students to provoke their reaction. He said he has heard some chauvinistic comments from some students and tries to push back against it, that he wants to portray his Americanness. In an example, a male Chinese student brought up about how he thought wives should be very obedient to their husbands. Alex wanted to promote and model some dialogue, as he thought that would be an appropriate response. He then asked for a reaction from the female students in the class, promoting a moderated discussion about the controversial topic.

David was the only participant who put some of the onus during the interview on the students, as well as the teachers, to learn about the local culture. He explained that both the teachers and the students need to take on some of the responsibility; the teacher needs to educate the students about the environment and the student needs to work on understanding the cultural norms in the local environment.

Overall, the American teachers felt a strong responsibility to be cultural informants to the students. Raheem, who was not born in the United States but is a resident and spent a number of years studying and living in the United States, and Mary had a very similar sentiment: If you teach language, you teach culture. How could you have one without the other?

## **Teachers' Reflections on Their Experiences**

As the participants told me stories about their experiences in the classroom, they often shared their thought pattern that went along with that experience. For example, some participants would tell me what happened during a lesson and then tell me what they realized or learned from or after that experience, or sometimes after multiple experiences. I will focus on the realizations and reflections that the participants shared with me in this section.

**Empathy.** A few of the participants indicated that working with these students has helped them not only improve their teaching and pedagogy but also understand and be able to empathize with their students. Mary indicated that she had changed a lot by working at the university and with the ELLs. She was very struck by how much she has changed, explaining that she has become more empathetic and also enjoyed the community that was created with this international group, which was unexpected for her. Kristi also mentioned her sympathy/empathy for students. She explained that she's sympathetic yet fair when grading, and that even coming in to teaching with an undergraduate degree in intercultural studies, she felt like she had learned a lot from her interactions with students. She also indicated that her understanding of different cultures will be forever developing and changing.

**Role as a teacher.** A couple of participants discussed their struggles in identifying their role as a teacher, and the issues they discussed seemed clearly related to cultural differences. Susan explained that as a pregnant teacher, she was very sensitive and self-aware of how the students might perceive her. She found that her Chinese students were very concerned for her wellbeing because in their culture pregnant women do not work. She said she tried to fight against some of the stereotypes that she assumed her students had, and she



indicated that she actually tried to present herself as “not so feminine” in the classroom, to say less and be more assertive. She explained “That’s just a normal state of being, you know? We don’t stop life while we are pregnant in the U.S.” In reflecting on it, she was not sure why she felt hypersensitive about it, but that maybe it was some type of identity crisis she was having based on the various roles she was trying to play and her students’ expectations of her.

Nicole also mentioned the differing expectations of her students that caused her to question her role as a teacher. She explained that when she worked in China, students seemed to expect that she would point out every error and that if she did not address an error, it was like she did not know it. The teacher seemed to have a very clear role in the feedback process, and Nicole talked about trying to find a balance between her perceived student expectations and her idea of what was good practice. She experienced a similar reaction when teaching at the university in the U.S. when a student questioned the relevance of a peer-review activity in class and said “You’re the teacher; you know everything” implying that the activity she employed was a waste of time. She explained that these experiences caused her to reflect more on what her role was and how to approach the students.

Overall, three participants, all of whom had not taken ESL and Culture, made comments about their roles in the classroom and navigating the gap between the students’ expectations and their own understanding of the role of teachers. None of the participants who had taken ESL and Culture discussed or questioned their role as a teacher, though three of them explained what they thought their students’ previous student-teacher relationships likely looked like or mentioned differences related to teacher-centered educational traditions and student-centered educational traditions.

**The classroom as a safe space.** Most of the participants discussed the need to create a classroom that is conducive to learning. As discussed previously, a few of the participants talked about managing controversial topics in class and overtly explaining how Americans discuss opinions amongst each other and in class. Raheem explained that teaching ESL is unique from other subject areas: “Teaching ESL is not like teaching chemistry. Teaching ESL is about making the students comfortable in the classroom, to help them feel safe so that they learn. Teaching chemistry is not about feeling safe.” He seemed to imply that language teachers are dealing with content that is effectively learned only when there is a safe space for interaction and practice. Other examples came in when the participants were discussing student-student interactions or heated discussions in class.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The patterns that emerged during the data analysis process somewhat aligned with my expectations as a researcher. As I indicated in Chapter 3, I expected that the participants would be aware of culture and how it affects their interactions, pedagogy, and other factors in their teaching and classroom. Across the board, all participants indicated that they are aware of at least some of the effects of cultural differences in their classrooms. They also all acknowledged the importance of understanding their students' backgrounds in order to better teach them.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the participants explained various decisions they have made based on their knowledge of the cultures of their students. Many of these decisions revolved around the topic of interpersonal interaction, including student-teacher interaction and group work. There was also a clear pattern of desire to teach or share about culture itself, along with the course content. Most of the U.S. resident participants felt a duty to acclimate their students to the local culture, both broadly and at the university.

In analyzing stories and focus of the participants who had taken the ESL and Culture course and those who had not, there were some distinct patterns of difference. The participants who had not taken ESL and Culture, and who also had fewer average years of teaching experience, seemed to more often verbalize the differences that they noticed in their classes during the interviews and generalize the characteristics about their students based on nationality or region more often. Those who had taken the ESL and Culture course seemed more confident in their role as a teacher in an ESL classroom, as none of them expressed questions about their role as a teacher based on their students' expectations. Similarly, they

perceived their own knowledge about the cultures of their students to be higher, as seen in the average self-reported scores regarding knowledge of students' cultures. Overall, the combination of having taken the ESL and Culture course as well as possibly having more years of experience teaching ESL was related to greater confidence when working with ESL students, higher perceived level of cultural knowledge, and a lesser likelihood of generalizing students based on their nationality. This lower level of generalizing was seen in their voiced desire to avoid generalizations as well as their acknowledgement of the unique differences among students who come from a similar background.

Relating to group work and group dynamics, those who had taken ESL and Culture seemed to feel that they could in fact affect group interactions in their classes. While those who had not taken ESL and culture tended to attribute problems related to group work to the group chemistry or the feel of the group, those who had taken the course tended to attribute problems to their own pedagogical or logistical choices, indicating that they realized that they could change the situation by taking different steps, such as teaching the students about the format of the activity before asking them to complete it. These participants similarly tended to attribute "failed" lessons to the fact that students did not have sufficient background knowledge and that it was their responsibility to provide that base for the students. Essentially, participants who had taken ESL and Culture were more able to identify a specific cause of conflict or failure and know that they could address it by providing the students with different instruction and more background knowledge. Those who had not taken ESL and Culture tended to have a more difficult time identifying the root cause of a problem or were unsure of how to explain the root cause of the problem. As an example, Nicole was explaining

a challenging situation with a specific student at the university and started by presenting some of her theories on the cause of the problem, including her authority in the classroom and her expectations, but she showed throughout that she lacked confidence in her theory:

I think I assumed that, like, I think in China I had more of an authority presence. And it might have just been the group of students, not in all classes. I had a couple [of students] that didn't view me as such [as an authority]. I had more, like, control and if I was little bit more friendly, it was OK. And here [at the university in the Midwest], I think I just needed to enforce my things, my standards, my expectations more. And I guess with him [the student], I somehow made it seem, (pause) and I don't know how much of it was my fault and how much he would have just done it anyways. But I feel I somehow created an environment where he thought that it's OK to say something like 'this is stupid'. You know, like, instead of actually asking a polite question.

In this case, Nicole seemed to have a hard time identifying the cause of the problem and considered things she could try but was not very confident.

To that end, developing teachers, like my participants in a teacher preparation program, who may experience working in multicultural classrooms may benefit from taking a course on understanding culture as a concept, understanding the cultures of the students they will work with, and understanding how culture interacts with pedagogy and classroom interactions.

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### Appendix A: Background Survey

Background survey:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

How many semesters have you completed as a graduate student in the TESL Program at St. Cloud State University? (circle the closest whole number)

0      1      2      3      4      5+

Did you study teaching ESL as an undergraduate degree? Yes / No

Have you previously worked as an ESL or EFL instructor? Yes / No  
If yes, where? And for how many years?

Have you studied or lived in another country before? Yes / No  
If so, in which country/countries, for which purpose, and for how long?

Do you speak any other languages? Yes / No. If so, which language(s) and how long have you been studying the language(s)?

Do you ever speak to your ESL students in a language other than English? Yes/No  
If yes, do you do it in class, outside of class, or both?

Have you taken the ESL and Culture course English 463/563?      Yes / No

Rate yourself:

How familiar are you with the cultures of the students in the ESL classes that you have taught at SCSU?

1=not very familiar	8=very familiar
1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8	

### **Appendix B: Interview Questions**

1. Why do you want to be an ESL teacher?
2. Tell me about the courses you teach (have taught) and the students that take your classes.
3. Tell me about how you choose the teaching materials for your class. (reading texts, etc. depending on what courses the teacher teaches)
4. Tell me about how you choose supplementary materials that aren't part of the textbook or curriculum. Follow-up: Explain why [what they answer] is important or why that affects your selection.
5. Think of a time that as you started a new lesson and it wasn't working. What happened? Were you able to make changes? What changes did you make? As you reflected later on what happened, why do you think it did (or didn't) work?
6. Is it important to you that you know your students? What do you mean by know? As you got to know your students, what perceptions do you have of them?
7. Was there ever a time in class when you were going to say something, but stopped for some reason? Why do you think you stopped?
8. As you got to know your students, did you change the way you gave directions? Why do you think you did/didn't?
9. As you got to know your students, did you change the way you gave feedback? Why do you think you did/didn't?

10. Describe a problem you have had to deal with in your class(es). Are there recurring problems? What do you think causes them? How did you deal with them or adapt to them? Do you think it worked? Why?
11. What does culture mean to you? Do you think your understanding of culture has changed? Why do you think so?
12. Are you aware of your own culture when you are teaching ESL students? (Rowse, 2007) Do you think you think about certain aspects of your own culture when working with students from other cultures? As you get to know your students, which aspects of your own culture do you notice when working with certain cultures?
13. During your time teaching at St. Cloud State University, what was/has been the most striking thing about working with international students?
14. Do you think your perception of your students' cultures is reflective of their home culture? What do you think are some reasons or instances that make you think that (or not think that)?

## **Appendix C: Informed Consent**

**You are invited** to participate in a research study of ESL teachers and classroom behavior. You were selected as a possible participant because of your status as an ESL teacher in the SCSU Masters program in TESL.

This research project is being conducted by Amy Lindquist to satisfy the requirements of a Master's Degree in TESL at St. Cloud State University.

### ***Background Information and Purpose***

The purpose of this study is to analyze teacher behavior and responses in class based on teacher knowledge.

### ***Procedures***

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to fill out a brief background and opinion survey, and participate in an audio-recorded interview that should take between 30-45 minutes.

### ***Risks***

Participation should not cause any discomfort or risk of injury. Taking part in this project is entirely up to you, and doing so will not affect your relationship with SCSU. If you do take part, you may withdraw at any time without penalty.

### ***Benefits***

There are no monetary benefits for participation in the study. Your participation will assist the researcher in gaining knowledge in the content area.

### ***Confidentiality***

The confidentiality of the information gathered during your participation in this study will be maintained.

Your personal identity will remain confidential. Pseudonyms will be used in any published material. All data will be kept in the researcher's password-protected personal computer.

### ***Research Results***

Upon completion, my thesis will be placed on file at St. Cloud State University's Learning Resources Center.

### ***Contact Information***

If you have questions right now, please ask. If you have additional questions later, you may contact me at 320-905-3433 or [liam0802@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:liam0802@stcloudstate.edu), or my advisor, Dr. James Robinson, at [jhrobinson@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:jhrobinson@stcloudstate.edu). You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

***Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal***

Participation is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Cloud State University, the researcher, or the TESL MA program. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate.

You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty after signing this form.

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Name of participant

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Signature

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Date