

Chatter¹⁴

Class time needed: 40 minutes

Materials

- Photocopy of the “Chatter” etiquette sheets
- A whistle and a timer to help you pace the game

Objectives

- Students will experience the challenge of using and interpreting unfamiliar communication patterns.
- Students will identify strategies for successful cross-cultural communication.

Introduction

Language is one of the most obvious and one of the most complicated defining features of a culture. And language—vocabulary, syntax, intonation—is but one aspect of the complex communication patterns that groups use to share meaning and experience. Kristyn Leftridge¹⁵ served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco from 1991 to 1992. In the example to the right from the Peace Corps’ collection of “Hello Data,” she describes the difficulty of a simple greeting.

“Chatter” is a simulation game that asks players to pay attention to the subtleties of communication and to discuss how these influence our perceptions of individuals and groups.

Procedure

1. Cut the photocopied etiquette sheets into strips and distribute as wide a variety of individual strips as possible.
2. Move the classroom furniture to the sides of the room so that the players have plenty of room to move around.
3. Help the students organize themselves into groups of four to six members. Select another group of three to four students to act as observers.
4. Shuffle the etiquette sheets, and give one to each student. Ask the students to keep their sheets hidden from each other and to study them carefully.
5. Explain that they will be attending a party with guests from many different cultures. The etiquette sheets define the roles that students will play as they make small talk at the party. The observers will look for behaviors indicating frustration or special efforts participants make to understand the “rules” of communication.

In Moroccan Arabic the standard basic greeting is “Salam oo-alley koom.” It translates literally to “Peace be unto you.” The appropriate response is “Oo-alley koom salam,” meaning “And unto you peace.” But knowing the words is not enough. Greetings in Morocco will go on for many minutes—sometimes up to half an hour—as the parties ask about each other’s health, faith in Allah, families, work, etc. Moroccans will shake hands when greeting, touching the heart immediately after the handshake to show that the greeting is sincere. Sometimes instead of touching the heart, they will kiss their own hand after the handshake as a sign of particular esteem or affection. In the case of family or close friends, women greeting women and men greeting men will kiss each other’s cheeks back and forth a few times. In the north, it’s right cheek—left cheek—left cheek. In other parts of the country, it could be right—left—right, or right—left only. How much you kiss cheeks also depends on how much you like the person, or how long it’s been since you’ve seen them. The longer it’s been, the more kisses are exchanged. Women and men who are not related NEVER kiss.¹⁶

6. Ask the members of each small group to talk with each other using the conversational rules described on their etiquette sheets. Students should not divulge the contents of their sheets. The teacher and the student observers should watch the groups as they converse, looking for behaviors to discuss during the debriefing.

7. Blow a whistle after seven to 10 minutes and ask the students to form themselves into new groups.

8. These groups should start a new conversation, with the students continuing to follow the instructions on their etiquette sheets. Again, the teacher and observers should watch the groups as they converse, looking for changes that might occur between the two sessions.



9. Blow the whistle again after another seven to 10 minutes and ask the students to stop talking.

10. Tell them that there are 12 different etiquette sheets and that it is possible for more than one person in each group to have the same sheet. Ask the students to think back silently about their conversations and to guess what instructions each player had on his or her sheet. After a brief pause, ask the participants to take turns telling their guesses to the rest of the groups. However, no student should confirm or deny anyone's guesses at this time.

11. Tell the participants that some etiquette sheets said, "Be yourself." Ask the students to try to guess if any member of the group was acting as himself or herself.

12. Ask the students to tell one another what their etiquette sheet said. Were the students' guesses accurate?

Debriefing

Use questions such as the following to guide discussion about the challenges of cross-cultural communication. Be sure to ask the student observers to share their observations of group and individual behavior to help give participants a broader view of the activity.

1. How did you feel about this exercise? Were you relieved or disappointed when it came to an end? Why?
2. What happened during the simulation? Did any of you feel embarrassed or frustrated during the conversations? What made you feel that way? Was it the way your etiquette sheet asked you to behave? Or the way someone else was instructed to behave? Why do you think you reacted the way you did?
3. Did you consider any of the behavior patterns in this exercise rude or offensive? If so, was it one of your behaviors or someone else's? Why did this behavior bother you?
4. What were the differences between your conversations in the first group and in the second group? Why do you think these differences occurred? Does this happen in real-life situations?
5. Did you correctly guess the etiquette-sheet behaviors at the conclusion of the activity?
6. Discuss the following statements. Ask students whether they agree or disagree with each statement. Ask them to use examples of their experiences from the game and from real life to support their opinions.
 - There is more to a conversation than just the words and sentences.
 - We tend to judge other people based on what we think is "normal."

- Behaviors that we consider to be bizarre or rude may be acceptable or polite in other cultures.
- Sometimes you may feel negative about another person because his or her conversational style seems strange.
- After time, people get used to unusual behaviors and begin paying more attention to the topic of the conversation.

7. What real-world situations are represented in this game? What do the etiquette sheets represent?
8. Can you think of any conversational behaviors you exhibit that others might find distracting or strange? (Hint: Do teenagers have ways of communicating that adults don't understand?)
9. What might have happened if the conversations had lasted for 45 minutes instead of 10?
10. What would have happened if you had been asked to solve a homework problem with the other members of your group?
11. What advice would you give a friend who is about to participate in this activity for the first time?
12. What if you were to visit a foreign country? Based on your experiences during this activity, what are some things you could do to make communication easier?

Extending the Ideas

- Use World Wide Web resources to help students communicate with people from around the world. Use a search engine to locate information. Have students begin their searches with broad terms like “culture” or “language” and refine the search to meet their specific interests as they browse.
- The World Wise Schools program web site <<http://www.peacecorps.gov>> offers resources for teaching and learning about various countries and cultures. Use the suggestions found in “Volunteer Views” for use of the “Hello Data.”
 - Find other countries where a greeting is accompanied by gestures or has a specific traditional format. Give your ideas about what these greetings indicate about the culture of the people. Prepare an oral presentation for your classmates detailing your findings and including a demonstration of the greetings you have discovered.
 - List the ways in which people greet each other in the United States, adult to adult, adult to child, and teenager to teenager. Be sure to include any regional and/or ethnic variations. Explain any accompanying gestures or mannerisms. Prepare a role-play that shows how you would teach a visiting foreign student how to say hello to different groups of adults and young people in the United States.
- View one or more World Wise School *Destination* video tapes. As students watch the tape, they should note customs, objects, and ideas that are unique to the cultures depicted. After viewing the tape, ask students to react to what they have seen. For example, would students feel comfortable shopping in a crowded outdoor marketplace? What adjustments would American families have to make in order to live in a yurt as many families in Kyrgyzstan do? Then work with the whole class to categorize their notes according to “Features of Culture,” found in the introduction to this section. Have students discuss whether these universals help them view cultural differences more objectively.

"Chatter" Etiquette Sheets

It is impolite to shout, so talk softly. Whisper. Even if people cannot hear you, do not raise your voice.



It is impolite to talk to more than one person at the same time. Always talk to a single person standing near you so that you can have a private conversation. Do not address your remarks to the group as a whole.



It is important to get others' attention before you speak, so hold your hand above your head and snap your fingers before you make a statement or ask a question. That's the polite way to get everyone's attention.



It is impolite to crowd people, so maintain your distance. Stand away so that there is at least an arm's length between you and the nearest person. If anyone gets too close to you, back off until you have achieved the required distance.



It is friendly to share your thoughts and feelings without any inhibition, so make several self-disclosure statements. Describe your intimate feelings about different subjects. Ask personal questions of the other members of the group.



It is impolite to stare at people, so avoid eye contact. Look at the floor or the speaker's shoes. Do not look at the speaker's face.



It is polite and reassuring to reach out and touch someone. Touch people on the arm or the shoulder when you speak to them.



It is important to show your enthusiasm, so jump in before other speakers have finished their sentences and add your ideas. Remember, it is rude to hold back your thoughts.



It is impolite to speak impulsively. Whenever somebody asks you a question, silently count to seven before you give an answer.



It is impolite to be aloof from others. Stand close to others until you nearly touch them. If someone backs off, keep moving closer.



Be yourself! Behave as you would normally behave at an informal party.



Where I Come From

Class time needed: 20 minutes for initial steps and then two to three additional classes for research and presentation

Materials

Paper and pencils

Objective

- Students will examine their own family traditions to identify how beliefs, values, and customs vary from culture to culture and how those traditions influence their perception of other groups.

Note: This activity asks students to share potentially sensitive aspects of their personal lives. Help students find “safe” ways to participate and set clear expectations for mutual respect in the class. Teachers should be sensitive to the needs of all students. Reassure students who live with single parents, grandparents, other relatives, or foster families that their experiences are valid and valuable contributions to this activity.

Introduction

One aspect of cultural identity is the unique set of traditions held in common by a group of people. We can observe evidence of these traditions in day-to-day activities as well as in the ways groups celebrate special occasions. Introduce or review this concept with students and help them generate concrete examples of traditions commonly associated with special events in the United States (fireworks on Independence Day, feasts on Thanksgiving, valentines on February 14, etc.).



Then introduce the idea that families are unique cultural groups. While a specific family will share many traits common to larger groups (religious beliefs, clothing styles, language, etc.), each family develops its own set of traditions that sets it apart from other families. These traditional activities become so firmly a part of “the way we do things” that we sometimes feel puzzled or out of place when these activities are not present in other families.

Procedure

1. Ask each student to write a list of special events that are observed by his or her family. Events can include annual holiday or religious observances as well as family milestones, such as birthdays and anniversaries. Some families have special traditions for observing annual events, such as the first day of the harvest season, or for celebrating special accomplishments, such as graduating to a new grade level.
2. For each item on the list, students should complete this sentence: On this day my family always _____.
3. Ask each student to share one or two sentences with the rest of the class. Be sure students understand that they need not share information that is considered private or sacred. Discourage students from making judgmental comments about others' lists.
4. Finally, ask the class to comment on the variety of events celebrated by the families represented in the room. Do some students celebrate special events in similar ways? What do their lists show about what the students and their families value? Which family traditions are truly unique and which are connected to community, ethnic, or religious traditions observed by larger cultural groups?

5. For homework, ask each student to choose one family tradition to explore more fully through interviews and library research. Students can compile this information into oral or written reports for the class. Work with students to formulate a set of interview questions that will encourage family members or acquaintances to discuss their traditions with students. Possible questions include:

- When did this tradition begin?
- Is this tradition associated with special food, clothing, decorations, music?
- Who participates in this event? Do individuals have specific roles or responsibilities?
- Has this tradition changed over the years? What led to these changes?
- Is this tradition associated with a particular season, climate or location? Would it be the same at another time or place?
- How do other family members feel about this tradition? Why do they think it is important?
- How would you feel if you were unable to participate in this event with your family?

Debriefing

Discuss with students how family or community traditions contribute to each individual's idea of what is "normal" and important. Help students extend this idea into their thinking about and accepting the traditions, values, and beliefs of other families and larger cultural groups.

Extending the Ideas

- If your class is corresponding with a Peace Corps Volunteer, have students explore how families in your Volunteer's host country celebrate special events.
- Volunteer Michelle Fisher¹⁷ commented on the importance of family gardens to the people she knew in Vilnius, Lithuania:

Most of the people here live in apartment buildings. Everyone has their own flat, or apartment, and typically they all have three rooms. Everyone has a garden, and they must have a garden because if they don't they're not going to eat in the winter. Most people have a pear tree, a plum tree, and an apple tree, strawberries—all kinds of vegetables and potatoes. Potatoes are the staple of the diet here. Kibelisks and cepilini are two traditional Lithuanian meals both made from potatoes. When it's time to harvest the apples, the people pick all the apples from the trees and all the apples from the ground and begin to make different things out them. Sometimes they make applesauce, apple cheese, apple cake, and they dry the apples. Just about a month ago every house I'd walk into had big strings of little cut apples strung throughout the house.

The gardens are usually 10 to 15 kilometers outside the town, and so in order to get to them the families must take a bus. The buses run once a day during the week, and so they have to spend the night. On the weekends they run two to three times a day. All the gardens are together, and they're all the same size. I'd say they're probably one-eighth to one-half acre.

A garden actually plays another role besides being a source of food. It keeps the family together because the children are needed to work there. So every weekend the children are taken there. Most people don't have cars, so they take the bus and stay over the weekend. Children stay with their parents and work. When they go to the garden, they usually go mushroom picking in the forests nearby. It's interesting because they usually break off—the sons tend to go with the father and the daughters all go with their mother. And so they have contests of who will get the most mushrooms. And it's a nice time because the parents are able to bond with their children. They work so much here that they don't have time to just sit and talk with their kids. When they're out in the forest, they tell the children what life was like, what life's going to be, what they need to get an education. And they just talk about family things. You know, they're able to bond.

- Ask your students if any of their family traditions revolve around working together. Compare their responses to Michelle Fisher's comments about Lithuanian families.
- Explore the World Wise Schools online resources <<http://www.peacecorps.gov>> to learn more about the traditions of the people who live in Peace Corps host countries.