Culture Role Play

This is an activity that I adapted from the US Peace Corp’s classroom guide, *Building Bridges*. Students role play two different cultures and interact with each other. Then the class can discuss how cultural differences can be misinterpreted. The activity was originally designed for students in the US and I changed it around a bit to make it more accessible to ESL learners of all levels and to make it more universally appropriate.

I also have added a couple of variations because the original exercise relies on a mixed gender class. The first time I tried to use this was at an English Club and of course out of 15 students, only 2 were boys. In another class I also had issues with the gender focus of the role play because it gave middle school students a chance to harass each other and make sexual jokes. You can easily come up with your own role card to match the level of the students or perhaps to focus on particular vocab or concepts. Make sure that there is some conflict built in however. Some habits of the Pandyas should be easily misinterpreted by the Chispas and vice versa (Pandyas think the word “Hey” is a bad word. Chispas always begin conversations with the word, “hey”).

I added some thematic variations so students can have some activity to focus on besides role-playing. I found that some groups had a little too much fun playing their new role and forgot about the learning bit.

Objectives:

- To promote fluency
- To discuss culture and have students deconstruct their own culture
- To practice social English and small talk
- To give students practice in role playing
Materials:

Role Cards

Preparation

Clear some space in your classroom for students to mingle. When the students come, divide them into two groups and send them to opposite sides of the room. Explain that each group is from a different culture or society and that both groups are going to meet each other at an international students’ party.

Hand out the role cards below to each group and give them time to read and understand everything. They should think about how they will act. Go between each group clarifying things. Make sure that neither group can hear the other get ready though. This preparation stage will take some time. It is worth spending time with each group to make sure that they understand what they are supposed to do and how their culture acts. If you have the time, you can practice with each group to make sure they understand the role cards.

The Role Play

Once the students are ready, tell them that they are at an international students’ party and there are two different groups of students. Tell them to interact according to the rules of their cards. Give them a set time limit—20 minutes is usually enough. Let them go at it. It will take them some time to get used to playing their roles. Of course, if you let it go on too long, students will revert to their natural roles and may take this chance to gossip or ask about homework in other classes, so monitor them carefully.
A Variation

Instead of just a party, you can give students some sort of task. For example tell students that you all work for the same company and you must decide what to do about a scandal in the company. Or imagine that the Chispas have come to the village of the Pandyas in order to build a hotel and now you are discussing this proposal. By giving students a concrete goal, they are less likely to just begin playing around. However there is also the danger that they will forget their cultural role.

Debriefing

Once students are done interacting, have them sit back down and debrief. Ask the Pandyas to guess what rules the Chispas follow and ask the Chispas what rules they think the Pandayas had to follow. Now ask them what they thought of each other. Did one culture find the other rude? Or polite? Or interesting? Or strange? Ask the students if they think these cultures are based on real cultures or not (Note: The Chispas are more of a Western, modern style culture and the Pandayas are more of a traditional culture but they are not directly copied from any one culture).

Now ask students if it would have helped them to know about the other culture before they began interacting. It might be interesting to also discuss how much students describe other cultures as weird or strange or bad or good, instead of using neutral terms.

You can also follow it up with [Culture Shock](#), where students discuss manners in their own culture.