

How to help students survive culture shock

By Colleen Miller

Have you noticed that about halfway into the school year, new ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students, who once seemed excited and energized, seem to hit a wall? Students who once were bright-eyed and cheerful come to school looking listless and detached. More than just the mid-year doldrums, they may be in the crisis stage of the powerful phenomenon of culture shock.

What is culture shock?

In the 1950s, a diplomat named Karl Oberg first used the term “culture shock” to describe the difficulties both he and his fellow expatriates experienced as they adjusted to their new lives overseas. He suggested that people depend on cues given by their familiar groups to define who they are and to support their self-concept. Without these cues, people are prone to anxiety and frustration, which can lead to physical ailments.

The stages of culture shock -

Honeymoon	Adjustment
Hostility	Humor
	Crisis

Most people move through a U-curve of culture shock stages. These include:

- 1. Honeymoon** - marked by enthusiasm and euphoria as students are stimulated by the novelty of their new situation.
- 2. Hostility** – characterized by irritability and negativism as the excitement wears off, difficulties become realized, and self-confidence slips.
- 3. Crisis** – typified by a deep sense of homesickness and/or hostility. Students may feel a sense of isolation and loss of control.
- 4. Humor** - enthusiasm begins to return, especially if new language skills are acquired. Students will see the humor in their mistakes and stop being critical of themselves and of their adopted country.
- 5. Adjustment** – characterized by gained biculturalism, and by a willingness to mentor new ESOL students. Culture shock subsides as students gain proficiency in the new language, become more familiar with their environment, and achieve greater success in their intercultural interactions.

By understanding the culture shock experience, and its inherent stages, teachers can better support the experience of the immigrant children in their classrooms. After all, educators don’t just work to help ESOL children build an “interlanguage” between their first and second languages, but also work to build an “interculture,” or a learner’s bridge from a child’s first cultural understanding toward a second cultural knowledge. The more scaffolding and support children have from their hosts or community, the faster they can bridge the misunderstandings.

What are symptoms of culture shock?

Be alert for signs of culture shock in your students. Symptoms can include flashes of anger over minor frustrations, excessive sleepiness, unexplained crying, changes in appetite, withdrawal, aches and pains, and even depression. Helping students manage culture shock can be crucial to maintaining individual and classroom morale. The key to overcoming culture shock is to give students the tools to adapt to their new life and to help them retain their appreciation of their native culture and family traditions.

How to help your ESOL students--

*Teach students about culture shock. Knowing what to expect can give students a sense of recognition and control.

*Encourage students to continue learning their native language. Make a dual language book library in the classroom and encourage students to borrow materials to share at home. Because knowledge transfers from one language to another, the more students read in any language, the faster they will connect to new content and skills. Also, as young students often excel at language learning, reading together with parents can help ease the detachment some immigrant children feel at home because their parents may lag behind in acquiring English. This disconnect can add to a student's level of stress. Making an excuse to cuddle up with a book can re-energize sagging spirits.

*Establish and carefully explain classroom routines to newcomers. By doing this, you create a classroom culture that students can settle into quickly, thus reinforcing their sense of safety.

*Plan for projects where students can teach you and their classmates about their culture. This will foster a feeling of mutual respect in the classroom. Each member will feel she has something valuable to contribute to your promotion of global understanding.

*Help students connect to activities that might interest them outside of school. Art classes, sports teams, and hobby programs can help students feel part of a new community network.

*Encourage students to find or form support groups with other students who may be at the same point in the U-curve of culture shock.

*Allow time for reflection. Teach students vocabulary for feelings. Using pictures of children showing different emotions can be helpful in teaching expression. If students are old enough, let them journal. You might encourage them to compare and contrast their old life and their new life. Also, have students explore how to handle frustrating situations and to examine moments of success.

*Teach and model conflict resolution skills. Have students role play scenarios, so when difficult real-life situations occur, they will have the tools to react in a healthy way.

*Periodically remind students how to get help at your school if feelings of homesickness become overwhelming.

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