2003

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Non-Native ESL Teachers’ Reactions to Students’ Different Cultural Backgrounds in Classroom Interaction

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Thesis Submitted to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences at West Virginia University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Foreign Languages

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Morgantown, West Virginia 2003

Keywords: Teachers’ Reactions, Culture, Classroom Interaction

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Abstract

Non-Native ESL Teachers’ Reactions to
Students’ Different Cultural Backgrounds in Classroom Interaction

Livia Silva Lirio

There have been research studies done in the area of cross-cultural analysis that discuss the necessity of culture-oriented examiners or assessors as well as “culture-free testing” when assessing students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Despite evidence that “culture-bias” is present in oral examinations, few of the studies found directly approach the instructors’ reactions to students’ different cultural and backgrounds in classroom interaction. Therefore the purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate teachers’ perspectives on teaching in a multicultural classroom. The findings of this study conducted in an American language institute with non-native ESL teachers reveal a mismatch between what teachers think they do and what they actually do (between their conscious and subconscious) with regard to different cultural groups in the classroom.
Dedication

To my parents, José Ricardo and Lucy, and my family and friends
Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank my parents who always inspired me and showed me the importance of pursuing my dreams: “Pai e Mãe, não tenho palavras para descrever o quanto os amo e o quanto sou grata pelo carinho que vocês sempre me dedicaram. Obrigada por sempre se fazerem presentes mesmo estando longe, pelas palavras de conforto nos momentos em que me sentia só, por sempre me darem forças para continuar mesmo quando os obstáculos pareciam intransponíveis, obrigada por vocês existirem e por me darem o orgulho de ser sua filha. Amo muito vocês!”

To my sisters Viviani and Cintia, my grandmothers Luzia and Luzia, and my nephews Junior and Gabriel, “espero que vocês saibam que os tenho guardados em um lugar muito especial no meu coração e que seu carinho incondicional e seu suporte constante me trouxeram muitas das alegrias que foram imprecindíveis para que pudesse continuar caminhando e atingisse o meu objetivo. Amo muito vocês!”

To my dear friends Eduardo, Luciana, Marina, Stacy, Ralph, Irla, and Rosana, ‘vocês são demais! Obrigada pelo carinho e incentivo constantes. Obrigada pela amizade sincera e por me permitirem fazer parte de suas vidas. Amo muito vocês!”

I would also like to thank my committee members who so kindly and patiently helped me complete this project. Dr. Medley, for being so helpful from the very beginning. Thank you also for giving me support and encouragement every time I needed it. Dr. Wilkinson for her patience and comments that very clearly guided me through this process. Dr. Shaw for her encouragement and dedication to this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Shaw for her help and support during my stay in Morgantown.

Last but not least, I would like to express my appreciation to the instructors and the students who so kindly agreed to participate in this project. Thank you!
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: What is the study about? ................................................................. 1

Chapter 2: What is in the literature? ................................................................. 5

Definitions of Culture ..................................................................................5

Cultural influences in the Instructional Setting ..........................................9

Culture-bias in testing ...............................................................................9

Role-stereotypes .....................................................................................10

Choice of materials/ Nature of topics .....................................................11

Motivation ...............................................................................................12

Cultural influences in Classroom Interaction .......................................15

Teachers vs. Student-centered classroom .............................................17

Chapter 3: How was the study designed? .....................................................21

Research question ...................................................................................21

Choice of Research Methodology ..........................................................21

Setting .....................................................................................................22

Description of Participants ......................................................................24

Teachers ..................................................................................................24

Students ..................................................................................................27

Data Collection ..........................................................................................31

Questionnaires ........................................................................................31

Observations ...........................................................................................32

Interviews .................................................................................................32

Data analysis .............................................................................................33
CHAPTER 1

What is this study about?

There have been several research studies done in the area of cross-cultural analysis that discuss the importance of culture-oriented examiners or assessors as well as “culture-free testing” when assessing students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Zurcher (1998), Taylor and Davidson (1996), and Feng (1991), among others, mostly point to the fact that testing a student’s level of oral proficiency in a given language goes a lot further than simply testing his or her abilities to respond to a particular communicative task. These researchers maintain that these oral examinations do not take into account the importance of understanding issues such as motivational styles across cultures. Subconsciously, assessors superimpose their own interpretation on the verbal performance of international students, which, in turn, may “bias their judgment of the students’ general ability, efficiency, etc” (Gumperz 1971, p. 330). Taylor and Davidson (1996) even raise the issue of standardized oral examinations saying that these testing tools have “a culture of their own; few candidates will have experienced this type of speech event directly, and if they have, it’s unlikely that the same rules or norms such as the ones for turn-taking, negotiation, and interactive communication, etc., will apply” (p. 135).

Despite evidence that culture-bias is present in oral examinations, none of the studies cited above directly approaches the issue of instructors’ reactions to students’ different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in classroom interaction. In order to explain classroom interaction, this study will use Brown’s (2001) definition that says that
“interaction is the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings, or ideas between two or more people, resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other” (p. 165) will be used.

Research shows that there are a number of factors that need to be taken into consideration when dealing with international ESL adult learners in a communicative language learning environment (Galloway, 1992; Kaplan, 1972). According to these researchers, students’ learning experiences in their home countries and their cultural background will have an enormous impact on their perceptions and reactions to the new learning environment. Factors such as motivational styles, choice of materials, nature of topics, and role-stereotypes are some of researchers’ areas of concern when it comes to making sure that they won’t interfere with students’ accurate interpretation of the host culture or the instructors’ reactions to students’ behaviors.

Galloway (1992), and Taylor and Davidson (1996) among others address the issue of role-stereotype influences on students’ perceptions of American cultures, explaining that the ways in which the target language is perceived and used will very much be influenced by the students’ cultural background. The when, how, where, and with whom to use the target language will be dictated by the students’ cultural rules. Further, researchers such as Kaplan (1972), Hall (1976), and Nitko (1983) explain that people from different cultures perceive materials and react to certain topics differently. They add that materials as well as topics chosen to be used with international students need to be carefully picked in order not to generate uncomfortable and frustrating situations in which the students, not knowing how to react to the materials, may be underestimated.

Motivation is another area that is looked at by researchers with a certain amount of concern when it is related to students’ performance. As Richards, Platt, and Platt
(1992), Vivaldo-Lima (2001), Myers, Martin, and Mottet (2002) and many others point out, motivation plays an enormous and very important part in students’ perceptions of the teachers’ reactions to second language learning. According to the authors, it is much easier to teach motivated students and much easier to learn if you are motivated. As these studies show, students’ motives for communicating are, among other factors, strongly related to instructors’ communication behaviors in the classroom.

As the review of the literature will show, many authors have discussed the existence of bias in testing and have pointed out the necessity for cultural awareness in education, and although students’ cultural background is found to have great influence on their perceptions of the new language learning environment, it seems that few studies have taken the teachers’ perceptions into account. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how a selected group of non-native English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors react to their students’ cultural and linguistic differences in a communicative classroom environment.

Through a process including interviews, questionnaires, and observations, the researcher collected data for inclusion in the study. This study was conducted in the United States with three teachers who were asked to respond to a questionnaire and also were interviewed during the period in which the study was conducted. In addition, classes were observed by the researcher in order to add another source of data. Also, the students being taught by the instructors participating in this study were interviewed about their perceptions of their teacher’s conduct in the classroom as it relates to reactions to students’ different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
Chapter 2 of the present study presents a review of the literature related to areas in which cultural differences are found to most influence classroom interaction. This chapter also defines culture and shows its relation and importance to education. In Chapter 3, I provide a detailed description of the participants, the research question, as well as information on the setting in which the study was conducted, followed by a detailed explanation of the design of the study. Chapter 4 reports the findings obtained regarding teachers’ perceptions of students’ different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in classroom interaction. The results reported were obtained through the analysis of the data collected using questionnaires, interviews, and observations. The discussion is also presented in this chapter. Finally, the conclusion is presented in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 2

What is in the literature?

This chapter reviews information on existing literature related to some of the factors that play a part in teachers’ reactions to students’ different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in classroom interaction. First, several definitions of culture are presented, followed by considerations of the relationship between students’ culture and education. Next, the influences of culture in the instructional setting will be discussed. The discussion will include culture-bias in testing and researchers’ other areas of concern such as role-stereotypes, choice of materials and nature of topics, and motivational styles. The relationship among all these topics, the ways in which one’s home culture might interfere with accurate interpretation of a host culture, and the ways in which learners’ behaviors are interpreted by those teaching the host language will be considered.

Definitions of Culture

Defining culture is not an easy task. Different authors have tried to incorporate the various features that the term suggests. Adler (1993) writes that “… culture can be defined as any group of people who share a common history and a set of relatively common behaviors and/or communication patterns” (p. 40). Erickson (1999) describes culture as “a product of human creativity in action; once we have it, culture enables us to extend our activity still further” (p. 32). He uses an analogy to computers, which are information tools, observing that culture can be considered as software – the coding systems for making meaning and executing sequences of work – by which our human psychological and cognitive hardware is able to operate so that we can make sense and
take action with others in daily life. Culture structures the “default” conditions of the
everyday practices of being human.

Galloway (1992), herself a foreign language teacher and researcher, expands on
the definition of culture:

Cultures are powerful human creations, affording their members a shared identity,
a cohesive framework for selecting, constructing, and interpreting perceptions,
and for assigning value and meaning in consistent fashion. The complex systems
of thought and behavior that people create and perpetuate in and for association
are subtle and profound, so elementally forged as to be endowed by their bearers
with the attributes of universal truth: Things that fit into this cultural framework
are given the labels “human nature,” “instinct,” “common sense,” “logic.” Things
that don’t fit are different, and therefore either illogical, immoral, nonsensical, or
the result of a naive and inferior stage of development of “human nature.” (p. 88)

Erickson’s (1999) view of the relationship between culture and education is that,
in a way, “everything in education is related to culture – to its acquisition, its
transmission, and its invention” (p. 31). He continues by stating that there is a deep
connection between culture and the “processes and contents of education” (p. 32).
Erickson maintains that different issues such as types of learning and teaching
environments we encounter in our everyday family, school classroom, community
settings, and workplace are attached to culture and essential for educators to consider. He
adds, “educators address these issues every time they teach and every time they design
the curriculum. They may be addressed by educators explicitly and within conscious
awareness, or they may be addressed implicitly and outside conscious awareness. But at
every moment in the conduct of educational practice, cultural issues and choices are at stake” (pp. 32-33).

Adler (1993) expands on the subject of culture and education and talks about the relationship between the former and communication. He explains that the reciprocal relationship between culture and communication is so strong that “one cannot exist without the other; one cannot change without causing change in the other” (p. 40). The author explains that

… the meaning inherent in a message transmitted by intercultural communicants may be affected by the differences in social perceptions by either interlocutor, be they student or teacher. Misunderstandings can occur due to the difference in the communicants’ socio-cultural backgrounds, which may lead to a different interpretation of the message intended by the encoder (p. 40).

An earlier discussion on the issue of cultural differences and their effects on communication has been presented by Bennett (1979). The author initiates the discussion explaining the importance of worldview. Worldview, as she defines it, refers to the way reality is learned and people and events are perceived by a cultural group who shares the same dialects and experiences. This group of people will develop similar ways of perceiving, accepting, and judging others and their surroundings, Bennett explains. They will also share the same ideas and beliefs. She says that, “what [they] see as good or bad depends on whether or not it supports [their] view of reality” (p. 134). Worldview and different cultural orientations, as the author clarifies, “often lead to mutual misperceptions, hostility, or conflict… the same process of misperception that operates
between members of different nations who are unaware of each other’s worldview also operates in many of our schools and classrooms” (p. 134).

More than four decades ago, Brooks (1960) pointed out that one cannot separate language and culture. Allamech (1998) adds to Brooks’ statement saying that, just as one’s mother tongue can interfere in the acquisition of a second language through interference errors, so can a person’s mother culture interfere with perception, reception, and production in a second culture. He defines interference in language errors as those rules, constructs, and vocabulary in a native language that cause students to test the wrong hypotheses in a second language. As an example, he cites an Iranian student asking in a supermarket for a pound of beef “language” when he meant “tongue.” Galloway (1992) adds that “members of a culture share their own frame of reference, their own perceptual apparatus for giving sense and making sense of their world. Understanding another culture means constructing a new frame of reference in terms of the people who created it” (p. 89).

As Galloway (1992) suggests, we have to consider that cultures have both functions and forms. Functions are the “meanings, purposes, and needs” of a individual and forms are “manifestations, realizations, and operations” (p. 90). She explains that some functions are fundamental and “survival-based, hence universal” (p. 90). As examples, she mentions nourishment, protection, and kinship. However, Galloway reminds us that the way “these seemingly shared needs are perceived, defined, prioritized, and met will display infinite and inexhaustible variety across cultures and subcultures: Even at this level, similarities should neither be expected nor, if they do occur, taken for granted” (p. 90).
Cultural influences in the instructional setting

Culture-bias in testing

In spite of the awareness of the importance of culture in the educational environment, review of research related to cultural-bias demonstrates that there are a limited number of studies that investigate whether or not teachers actually pay attention to the different cultural backgrounds of their students. Much of the reported research investigates bias as it occurs in testing, rather than in daily classroom interactions. Building on what Triandis (1972), Taylor and Davidson (1996), Zucher (1998), and others have identified as “culture-bias,” this study will use the term to refer to the tendency of an individual (the teacher) to favor one person or group from a particular culture more than another person or group from another culture, based on that teacher’s assumptions, beliefs and knowledge about cultural diversity that may not apply to the students in the class.

When discussing testing, researchers in cross-cultural analysis have recognized the existence of a culturally based bias built into the assessment criteria designed to reflect the development of a student not only in written but also in oral examinations. By extension, it is possible that the same kind of bias occurs in classroom interaction. Cuellar (1992) explains that bias is found in tests because they are prepared by people from a certain background. According to her, controversy exists among education theorists over the validity of standardized testing and the use of test scores when applied to international students. These theorists’ main concern, she continues, is not against the test itself, but how it is used. They explain that the score is taken as a predictor or indicator of how that
student will do and especially in the case of international students, standardized tests have been found to underpredict their achievement and their success.

According to Adler (1993), certain types of interactions between language assessors and the learners being assessed may be strongly affected by interracial, interethnic, and interclass relationships. The author explains that when “cultural beliefs, social patterns, and behaviors of the assessors are considered correct (or desirable or proper) while those of the [assessed] or student are perceived as incorrect (or undesirable or improper)” (p. 36), the reliability of the assessment may be compromised and negatively affected. Adler continues by saying that culturally different students, those with different types of “adaptive mechanisms, appearance, speech language patterns or style, or income/educational levels” from the assessor may be victims of bias and allocated fewer opportunities to speak as well as being expected to perform more poorly than those students whose cultural backgrounds are similar to the assessor’s (p. 39).

Other areas of concern about ways in which one’s culture might interfere with accurate interpretation of a host culture are role-stereotypes, nature of topics, choice of material, and motivational styles.

Role-Stereotypes

As the literature reveals, different cultures perceive communication roles differently. Allamech (1998) explains that questions such as “How are you?” “Where are you from?” “How much money do you earn?” are appropriate in some languages but that a man should never in greeting another Arab man inquire of the health of his wife (p. 4). Similarly, Galloway (1992) notes that culture plays a very important role in the use of language for communication and that “it’s one’s culture that orchestrates the range of
options for the why, what, when, where, how, and with whom of language in use” (p. 97). In the light of what researchers such as Allamech and Galloway have pointed out, the necessity of exploring in more detail the issue of role-stereotypes and their potential influence on the ways students behave in a communicative environment arises.

In order to better understand the ways in which role-stereotypes may influence ESL students’ perceptions of American culture, this study refers to research conducted by Taylor and Davidson (1996) in which they describe the format and process of an oral examination considered to be “standardized” given to two “fairly confident” Western European women and a middle-aged African man. The authors use this examination as an example of their findings, which revealed the existence of several traces of culture-bias in the assessment of oral communication skills. Taylor and Davidson noted that some of the assessment criteria used may have discriminated against the candidate from Africa. The findings in their study not only revealed the existence of culture-bias in tests in the area of role-stereotypes but also pointed to the problem of culture-bias in the area of materials choice and nature of topics used in testing. Choice of materials and the nature of topics chosen to be used by ESL instructors in classroom interaction can also have inherent cultural biases.

**Choice of Materials/Nature of Topics**

Nitko (1983) comments that one of the most common forms of cultural test bias takes place in the type of task found in the Taylor and Davidson study, where subjects are asked to describe a person in a picture unseen by the other participants, and are further asked to speculate on the feelings and emotions of the person in the picture. Kaplan
(1972) writes that “given acts and objects appear vastly different in different cultures, depending on the values attached to them” (p. 1).

Hall (1976), in his observations of the Japanese culture, raises the issue of showing of emotions in that particular culture. He explains that in Japanese culture for example, the showing of emotions is very limited and rarely takes place in public. He also mentions self-control, distance and inner-feelings. The author adds to this subject, commenting on the importance of placement in the social system and saying that in the Japanese culture for example, one “will keep his mouth shut and volunteers nothing even though he has information that would be useful” (p. 58) unless he or she is requested to do so. Hall’s (1976) observations not only support the issue raised by Nitko (1983) on the problem of culture-bias in the choice of materials for the tests but also leads us to another important area of concern discussed by cross-cultural researchers in oral assessment: motivational styles.

Motivation

According to Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992), motivation is related to “the factors that determine a person’s desire to do something” (p. 238), and it can affect second and first language learning. As Vivaldo-Lima (2001) explains, “motivated students are easier to teach…students who are interested in learning do, in fact, learn more” (p. 63). In their article on students’ motivations for communicating with their instructors, Myers, Martin, and Mottet (2002) explain that it is really through communication that instructors establish the climate in the classroom. They also serve as sources of motivation, promote a type of environment that is favorable to effective learning, and have the opportunity to facilitate the student-teacher interpersonal relationships (p. 121). According to Myers et
al., instructors’ socio-communicative styles not only affect the classroom environment and students’ communication motives but also play a great part in the way students perceive the instructor’s effectiveness.

Myers, Martin, and Mottet (2002) investigated the reasons that prompted students to communicate with their instructors. Using factor analysis, the researchers were able to identify five main reasons from the 112 provided by the fifty-four students enrolled in Communication Skills classes. The motives reported were identified as being relational, functional, participatory, excuse making, and sycophantic. Relational reasons were used by the students who were motivated to communicate with their instructors in an attempt to develop some kind of interpersonal relationship with them. Functional reasons were used by the students in an attempt to learn more about what was required in the course, materials and assignments. Students who participated were motivated by the will to show that they understood what was being taught. In order to explain why assignments were incomplete, students would use excuse making. And, those who intended to make a good impression on the instructor, communicated for sycophantic reasons. After analyzing the information provided by the students for the effects that students’ motives may have on their educational outcomes Myers et al. concluded the following:

- Students who are motivated to communicate with their instructors for relational, functional, and participatory reasons are more motivated to study, more satisfied with instructor interaction, and report higher amounts of affect toward the course, the instructor, and cognitive learning. These students also have lesser amounts of communication apprehension.
On the other hand, student motives of excuse making and sycophancy are not significantly related to either student satisfaction or learning, although a negative correlation has been found between student excuse making and student state motivation. Those students who communicate for sycophantic reasons also report having an external locus control. They are motivated to communicate for these reasons if they believe their performance in the classroom is beyond their control. (p. 123)

With respect to motivation, however, researchers such as Feng (1991), Allamech (1998), Chin (1983) and Triandis (1964 b) point out that tendencies to respect, cooperate with, be antagonistic or subordinate, for example, all have particular traits in different cultures. The Asians, as Feng explains, are normally defined as less dominant, aggressive, and autonomous, more introverted and less verbal. The author observes that the Chinese in particular emphasize humility, modesty, obedience, subordination to authority and inhibition of strong feelings. A Hopi Indian is not taught competitiveness and for this reason will never raise his hand to answer a question, for “he would be shamed and embarrassed to get ahead of his fellows” (Allamech, 1998, p. 7). On the other hand, says Allamech, Latin Americans are known for their extremely outgoing personalities, high level of self-esteem, and higher inclination to compete with one another. The more a teacher knows about the culture of his/her students, the less likely it is that misinterpretations will occur. Given the examples above of the general trait variations from culture to culture, one may conclude that motivation certainly is or should be taken carefully and seriously into account when evaluating the classroom performance of international students. Feng (1991) maintains that the world views and values of the
examiner have a great influence on the examinee’s results. His or her failure or success on a given task will often depend on how the assessor approaches cultural diversity and the depth of understanding of the examinees’ specific cultural background.

*Cultural influences in classroom interaction*

Despite evidence that “culture-bias” is present in oral examinations, many of the research studies presented in this project have not directly approached the issue of instructors’ perceptions of and reactions to students’ different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in classroom interaction. How can classroom interaction be understood? According to Brown (2001), interaction happens when people exchange ideas, thoughts, and feelings in a collaborative way. Similarly, Garton (2002) argues that “learner initiative, participation, and involvement in instruction represent an important aspect of classroom interaction” (p. 47). She adds that the type of interaction that takes place in the classroom will have as much influence on successful language learning as the teaching method chosen.

As Beykont and Daiute (2002) observe, students’ concerns about whether, when, and what to say in class play a great role in classroom interaction. These factors, according to the authors, “are in large part influenced by their values and experiences in education courses in their home countries” (p. 35). The authors state that the previous educational histories of adult learners play an important role in their new experiences in new educational contexts, especially in classroom interactions. Beykont and Daiute describe a study they conducted in which they explored the perceptions of international students about the nature of classroom interaction in their home countries in comparison with classroom interaction in the United States.
The participants of that study were students from England, South Africa, and Iran. They reported that in their countries very little in-class discussion takes place and the professor has the role of authority - meaning, distance and control over students’ responses, which, if at all, are normally brought up only at the end of the classes. Also, classroom interactions occurred in question-answer format, the students reported, with the teacher asking the questions and the student giving the answers. As one of the students stated, “The professor is the expert and the students are novices… students are to be taught.” Students also noted their professors’ lack of interest in helping students develop any kind of perspective for the future as well as providing assistance with any other difficulties. As the students reported, their responsibilities were very clear. They included attendance in class, listening, studying, thinking about the lectures given previously by the professor, reading and preparing for class, and writing exams and assignments. According to the students’ reports, going beyond readings and lectures given in class was not a required part of their assignments. Contributing to the classes was apparently not part of their responsibilities either. The teacher-student relationship, as one of the students pointed out, was “a transmittal relation in which the teacher is the deliverer and the student the receiver of the information” (p. 37). Volunteering was also another feature of classroom interaction that the students mentioned as not being something that was expected from them. Therefore, they were hardly ever afforded to any opportunities to either challenge the professor or express their opinions on a given subject. One student said, “students follow the trend of thought of the professor and take his positions further, and do not contradict the instructor” (p. 37). Such observations give rise to the question of the instructor’s role in shaping classroom interaction.
Teacher-versus student-centered classrooms

A number of researchers and theoreticians have explored the subject of teacher-versus student-centered classrooms (Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1967; Skinner, 1968; Beykont and Daiute, 2002). Skinner defines teacher-centered classrooms as those in which the information to be acquired by the students will come only through the teacher or from discussions he leads. Whereas in student-centered classrooms, according to Dewey, Piaget, and Beykont and Daiute, students’ learning will come from their active participation in situations where there is collaboration to solve problems. As Vygotsky (1978) explains, “learning and development occur… as students and teachers engage in a dialogue about a particular task” (p. 29). He adds that emphasis on social “interaction among students and between teachers and students is important and serves as an impetus for integration of knowledge” (p. 36).

As van Lier (1988) explains, teacher-centered classrooms are pedagogically oriented. According to him, interaction occurs with the specific purpose of learning, and the participants involved take roles of “instructor” and “instructed,” consequently not being guaranteed equal rights of participation. Participation, as he explains, follows under such basic rules as “either one person speaks at a time, or multiple speakers say more or less the same thing” (p. 47). As van Lier adds, the principles that shape classroom discourse may be responsible for the drawbacks existent in teacher-centered classrooms once the teacher is the one who is generally in control of the interactions that take place in the classroom, assigning the person to talk, the time for it to happen, and the topic to be talked about (pp. 184-5). What could be looked at from a vantage point in terms of control and efficiency, may create problems. As van Lier comments, “… this efficiency
comes at the cost of reduced students’ participation, less expressive language use, loss of contingency, and severe limitations on the students’ employment of initiative and self-determination” (p. 48).

It appears that the organization of classroom interaction in teacher-centered activities is such that it seems more difficult for learners to take any kind of initiative. Learner initiative is defined by Garton (2002) as, “an attempt to direct the interaction in a way that corresponds more closely to the interests and needs of the learners, as evidenced by the interaction itself” (p. 48).

As these studies demonstrate, in classrooms with learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, classroom interaction will inevitably be influenced by students’ previous educational histories. These histories play a great part in their approaches to thinking and learning. Furthermore, it is important that teachers recognize, understand, value, and incorporate the cultural diversity of their students into classroom interaction. Moore (1996) warns that “frustration, anger, and disappointment over being left out are natural consequences when the experiences of other groups are ignored” (p. 24). Teachers’ attitudes and behaviors also can profoundly influence the academic success of these culturally diverse students, and, according to Brown (2002), it is the responsibility of every teacher to provide a classroom climate that is “comfortable, equitable, compatible, and conducive” for all students (p. 131). Grant and Tate (1995) describe successful teachers of African American students who were not rigid or authoritarian. The authors explain: “these teachers shared the power with the students because they viewed education as an empowering force… where students interacted collaboratively and accepted responsibility for each other’s education” (pp. 334-335).
Brown (2002) expands the discussion of “power” when she describes a study she conducted with a fifth-grade teacher recognized by her colleagues as an exemplary multicultural classroom educator, in which she investigated the teacher’s classroom practices. In the study Brown investigated, she reports that the teacher’s idea of power would be implemented as follows: “Allowing only one student to answer a question gives ownership of that question to the student and this forces those who would not otherwise participate in the learning process, to take responsibility for their own education” (p. 133). The teacher adds: “All of my babies are responsible for making a contribution to the group’s learning process, and the group is responsible for him” (p. 133).

The teaching of differences and similarities among cultures is an issue that has been a topic of discussion among multicultural educators (Wurzel, 1998; Moore, 1996). Multicultural education, as described by Wurzel (1988), serves as a reference for teachers and students to work toward the development of their awareness of multiculturalism and the skills necessary to live in a multicultural world. As Moore (1996) explains, “multicultural education encourages critical thinking, understanding, and dialogue, if – in its implementation – multiple viewpoints are acknowledged and respected” (p. 22). However, the conflicts continue. Moore adds, “We can’t teach everything. If we have to teach about culture X, culture Y will want a course about their group” (p. 22). So, we instructors ask ourselves if it is necessary for us to become experts in every culture of the world. Bennett (1979) explains that it would be impossible for us as instructors to understand completely all the different cultural orientations of the students we have in our classrooms. Benavides (1992) adds to this position saying that what is necessary in ESL instructors is the willingness to explore and work with different
cultures in a way that enhances the importance and value of each culture. He continues by saying that teachers’ attitudes should be one of acceptance of differences and openness to learning about those differences.

In spite of the evidence provided by the literature on the existence of potential cultural-bias in the oral assessment of non-native speakers of English and their perceptions of the host culture, it seems that not enough attention has been given to the instructor reactions to students’ cultural and linguistic differences in classroom interaction. Because in Communication Skills classrooms students have their oral proficiency assessed by the instructor, one might imagine that there are a number of similarities between the roles of the assessor and the roles of the instructor. By looking at the factors that may compromise the assessment of non-native speakers as presented earlier in this chapter, it is possible to visualize a connection between these factors and those that would be taken into account when dealing with international students in classroom interaction. Therefore, the purpose of this research study is to investigate how non-native ESL teachers react to students cultural and linguistic differences in classroom interaction. The next chapter will present the design and methodology used in this project.
CHAPTER 3
How was the study designed?

This chapter is organized in four sections: choice of research and methodology, setting, description of the participants, and data collection. The research question articulated, followed by information about the setting in which the study was conducted, as well as a detailed explanation of the design of the study.

Research Question

The primary focus of this study is on teachers and their perspectives of the students’ different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in classroom interaction. This study asks the following question: How do non-native ESL teachers react to the cultural differences of their students in classroom interactions?

Choice of Research Methodology

The goal of this study was to investigate ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers’ reactions to students’ different cultural backgrounds in classroom interaction. To do that, the researcher relied on participants’ views and perceptions. Given the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach was selected since it is best suited to gather the data necessary to respond to the research question.

According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), “qualitative research is grounded in social interactions as expressed in daily life and the meanings the participants themselves attribute to these interactions” (p. 2), which take place in the natural world. As Jick (1979) points out, the fact that qualitative research study results may not be replicated or generalized does not diminish the credibility of the data. The author explains that the method of data collection through triangulation of multiple sources, comprehensive
analysis of the data, the researcher’s involvement in the field, and the integration between the researcher and the informants ensure credibility of the findings which would not otherwise be possible through quantitative methods of data collection.

Setting

The research was carried out in the Intensive English Program (IEP) of State University, a major land-grant institution in the eastern part of the United States. This program offers Reading/Vocabulary, Writing, Grammar, and Communication Skills as its main courses. Courses such as Business English, TOEFL Preparation, American Culture, and English Through the Arts are also offered as elective courses. In all courses students are able to develop the four skill areas (reading, writing, speaking and listening). However, each course focuses on one area for skill development specifically. Students are placed at the appropriate level of the program according to two tests they took in the beginning of the term: the institutional Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Michigan Placement Test. The students with scores ranging from 410-449 in the TOEFL test and 55-64 in the Michigan test were placed at the low-intermediate level. The ones with scores ranging from 450-489 in the TOEFL test and 65-74 in the Michigan test were placed at the intermediate level. All the other students who scored higher than 490 in the TOEFL test and higher than 75 in the Michigan test were placed at the advanced level.

This research was conducted in the Communication Skills courses which met two times a week (Tuesdays and Thursdays) from 11:00 a.m. until 12:15 p.m. The Communication Skills course focuses on the improvement of the learners’ ability to
understand and speak English. For purpose of this study, Communication Skills classes at the low-intermediate, intermediate, and advanced levels were observed. Each class was taught by a different instructor, and these three instructors were the primary informants. The classroom where the low-intermediate group met was on the 4th floor of a university classroom building. It was a large room with a big window in the back with a view to the back of a brick building and partial view of the street. The room had good light. The temperature in the room was cool, regulated by a central system of air conditioning, despite the hot weather outside. Occasionally the windows were opened to allow some fresh air in the room. Two blackboards were available to the teacher, one in the front of the room and the other on the left-hand side of the room.

The classroom where the advanced group met was on the 5th floor of the same building. Similar to the other room, it was large and had a big window in the back of the room. From this room there was a wonderful view of a large part of the city, a river, and a bridge. The view from the window was like a picture in constant movement that made it very difficult for the people in the room not to be distracted. The room was incredibly bright. Also two blackboards were available, one in the front and one on the right-hand side of the room. The desks in both classrooms were arranged facing the front of the classroom.

The room where the intermediate group met was completely different from the other two. It was located in the basement of the building and it was very small and cramped. There was a small window in the room, but it was normally closed because of

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1 Pseudonyms have been used for institutions and people to protect anonymity. The participants of the study were assured of the anonymity of their responses. Therefore, no real names were used. None of the participants received any kind of payment or credit for taking part in the research study.
the very noisy air-conditioning unit placed close to it. Having the air-conditioning system on or off was always an issue. If the system was on, the teacher could barely hear the students and vice-versa. If it was off, the heat was unbearable and discomfort made it very difficult for all to concentrate. The desks in this room were arranged in a semi-circle.

*Description of Participants*

*Teachers*

The three teachers invited to participate in this study served as primary informants. At the time the data were collected all three teachers were teaching the Communication Skills classes offered in the land-grant institution; each one of them taught one level. Prior to teaching at this institution, the teachers participated in a few seminars where minimal training was given.

*Beatriz*

Beatriz is a female teacher, age 28, originally from Brazil. Her native language is Portuguese. She has a B.A. in English Language and Literature and has recently completed her Masters in TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages). She has been in the United States for two years and has been an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher since her arrival in the country. Before coming to the U.S. she had been teaching English in Brazil since her graduation from college in 1993. She says that the main reason for her to come to the United States was to get a Master’s degree. She received a graduate teaching assistantship to study in the US and taught English at the university’s IEP during the entire course period. When asked about what country she would choose to live in, besides her home country, if she had to, she chose Spain. She
said: “I just think that I’m not an easy person to adjust to things so if I had to move to a place and the culture there was completely different from my culture I think I would have a hard time trying to adjust. I don’t think I would be able to adjust.”

She described her experience teaching ESL as “rewarding” and adds: “I got to know people from different cultures, and I learned how to work with them.” As a teacher, she described herself as one who is patient, confident, and who encourages students’ participation in the classroom. She said that she finds herself to be very aware of her students’ different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and explained that she herself had been an exchange student in the United States before. She noted that at the time she participated in this exchange program she had the opportunity to share the classroom with people from all over the world and that this experience triggered her awareness of the existence of other cultures’ own characteristics and differences.

Luiz

Luiz was a 37 year old male teacher, from Brazil as well, and a native speaker of Brazilian Portuguese. He held an undergraduate degree in English Language and Literature and had recently finished his Master’s degree in TESOL. During the two years that he had been at State University, he had been an ESL teacher. Prior to coming to the United States, Luiz taught EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in Brazil for seven years. He came to the US to do his Master’s degree in TESOL.

Luiz described himself as a teacher as confident, patient, and a person who believes it is important to nourish a healthy relationship with students outside the classroom. Like Beatriz, Luiz had also lived in the United States before and he believed that his past living experiences and being in touch with other internationals allowed him
to become very aware of the different roles that peoples’ diverse cultural backgrounds can play in interaction.

_Maya_

Maya was a female teacher, age 26, originally from Reunion Island, France. Her native language was French but she could also speak Spanish, English and French Creole. She held a Master’s degree in TESOL and was working on her doctoral degree in Curriculum and Instruction. Maya had been in the US for approximately three and a half years and had been an ESL teacher for one year and a half. Before teaching English in the IEP, Maya taught French for the French department, which is also part of the university where the IEP is located. Like the other two teachers, Maya experienced living abroad before coming to the United States. She lived in Australia and England for about five years in each country, and taught English in both places. Like Beatriz and Luiz, Maya credits her experience living abroad credit for her raised awareness of cultural differences.

When Maya was asked to describe her experience teaching abroad she said it was very rewarding. “Openness and tolerance have their own rewards.” Like Luiz, Maya also believes that a friendly relationship with the students outside the classroom is very important. However, Maya confesses that self-confidence has played a role in her experience as a teacher of the English language.

I felt that I could teach the language, that I could teach English. But when you teach the language you have to teach the culture too and I felt that I didn’t know enough of this culture to be teaching the language. I was afraid that whatever the students would be getting about the culture would be something that would be
processed through my own errors or something, psychological or emotional something and I was afraid that the information that they would be getting about the American culture was not as neutral and objective as it could be.

Students

The students served as secondary informants. In order to encourage the students to participate in this study I explained to them that I needed their cooperation so I could pursue my studies. After telling them all about the research, they were given the consent letter, in which they could find detailed information regarding the study and the researcher, and asked to sign it. All the students enrolled in all three classes were asked to fill out a questionnaire and to sign the consent letter. Although every student could have been used in this study, a total of 23, I selected 13 as secondary informants, using the following criteria:

- No student that shares the same cultural background with the teachers (Brazil and Reunion Island) was included.
- Japanese students would be included since they constitute a large part of the class groups being studied; the same would apply to the students from Saudi Arabia.
- The students from the Czech Republic were selected to participate in this study because they constitute a less familiar culture, as well as a minority among the cultures of the other students participating in this study.
- One student from Venezuela was included because she enriches the cross-cultural dynamics of the class.
The other ten students that were not included in this study would have been as well suited to address the research goal as those identified above, but were not used because the researcher felt that the 13 participants selected would provide adequate data to respond to the research question.

Table 1 provides personal information as well as information about the students’ educational level and reason for studying English. There were five males and eight females among the primary informants. They had come from four different countries and ranged in age from 18 to 32. With one exception, all had studied English at least one year. The other person had studied only three months. All had at least a high school education, two held university undergraduate degrees, and one held an advanced degree. Their English-language placement in the IEP varied from low-intermediate to advanced. Most indicated that their primary reason for being in the program was to master the language well enough to attend an American university.

Table 2 provides information on the students’ personal view of themselves in the classroom, their level of comfort with the topics proposed, with expressing their opinions, and with having non-native teachers in their Communication Skills classroom. Some of the participants categorized themselves as very talkative and liking to participate in class, while others said that they were very shy and did not like to participate. For the most part, they were all comfortable in the class most of the time, although some indicated that they felt uncomfortable when they had to express their own opinions. Most perceived that having non-native speakers of English as teachers was either an advantage, or was no different from having a native speaker.
# Student Profiles

## Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Yrs of English</th>
<th>Academic Degree Held</th>
<th>IEP</th>
<th>Reason for Studying English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>1 yr</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>intermediate</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fida</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>1 yr</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>intermediate</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astrid</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>25-32</td>
<td>3 mths</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>low-inter.</td>
<td>3;4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hisae</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>7 yrs</td>
<td>University Undergraduate</td>
<td>low-inter.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asako</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>7 yrs</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>low-inter.</td>
<td>1;3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nami</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>7 yrs</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>low-inter.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karsten</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>25-32</td>
<td>4 yrs</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>intermediate</td>
<td>“For life”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maki</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>7 yrs</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>advanced</td>
<td>1; 2; 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umar</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>25-32</td>
<td>9 yrs</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>intermediate</td>
<td>to do a Master’s in Public Admin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noriko</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>7 yrs</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>intermediate</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcela</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>1 yr</td>
<td>University Undergraduate</td>
<td>advanced</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuki</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>7 yrs</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>low-inter.</td>
<td>3; to improve my English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoshi</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>7 yrs</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>advanced</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Reason for studying English: 1= interest in the culture; 2= to get a better job; 3= to go to an American University; 4= to read English-language publications*
### Students’ personal view of themselves in the classroom environment

#### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>Level of comfort w/ topics proposed</th>
<th>Level of comfort expressing opinions/speaking up</th>
<th>Perceptions of non-native teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>not talkative but likes to participate</td>
<td>very comfortable</td>
<td>sometimes uncomfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fida</td>
<td>very talkative; likes to participate</td>
<td>sometimes uncomfortable</td>
<td>very comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Astrid</td>
<td>likes to talk</td>
<td>very comfortable</td>
<td>very comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hisae</td>
<td>very shy</td>
<td>very comfortable</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asako</td>
<td>very shy; doesn’t like to participate</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nami</td>
<td>a little shy</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karsten</td>
<td>likes to talk</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
<td>very comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maki</td>
<td>a little shy but likes to participate</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umar</td>
<td>not talkative</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
<td>a little uncomfortable sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noriko</td>
<td>shy</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcela</td>
<td>likes to participate; very talkative</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
<td>sometimes uncomfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuki</td>
<td>very active; likes to talk and participate</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoshi</td>
<td>quiet</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
<td>comfortable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Advantage of non-native over native = the student believes that because their non-native teachers have once studied the English language themselves, they are more able to understand the students’ difficulties and consequently provide more appropriate assistance.
\textit{Data collection}

For purposes of triangulation, data from questionnaires, direct observations, and in-depth interviews were utilized. Triangulation, according to Marshall and Rossman (1999), is defined as “…the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point” (p. 194). The techniques used for data collection for this study are described in detail subsequently. Even though the focus of the research is on teachers, the data gathered from the students are important since they can provide insight into students’ perspectives on the same phenomena and a more holistic understanding of cross-cultural influence in the classroom.

Data collection took place during the summer session. The research project was carried out in low-intermediate, intermediate and advanced communication skill classrooms.

\textit{Questionnaires}

This study utilized two different types of questionnaires, one for the teachers and one for the students. The teachers’ questionnaires were given to them at the beginning of the data collection. They were given a period of fifteen days to respond to the questions. Meanwhile, their classes were being observed by the researcher. At the end of the period of fifteen days I collected the questionnaires and a first round of individual interviews with the instructors followed. The questionnaire included nineteen structured response and open-ended types of questions (Appendix A). The items on the questionnaire for teachers focused primarily on information regarding the instructor’s linguistic and cultural background and teaching experience along with their opinions on their roles as teachers. The questionnaire given to the students included eighteen structured-response
types of questions (Appendix B). The items in the students’ questionnaire provided more personal information such as age, level of education, and reason for learning English.

Observations

During the process of data collection a total of twelve 50-minute classes were observed, four classes of each instructor, over a period of one month. Notes of events and behaviors in the classroom were taken so the researcher could have an additional vantage point from which to understand the teachers’ perspective. Observations also provided the impetus for questions that were asked in subsequent interviews.

Interviews

Both teachers and students were interviewed. The teachers’ were interviewed two times. The first interview (Appendix C) was conducted right after they submitted the responses to the questionnaires. The second interview, a follow-up (Appendixes D, E, F), was carried out at the end of the data collection period. Interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes with open-ended questions that focused on course activities, the teacher-student relationship, and the teacher’s knowledge of students’ cultural background and differences. In the student interviews (Appendix G), students were asked questions on characteristics of their personality as a student in the classroom, their level of comfort with the type of activities suggested in the classes, as well as their views on the teachers’ perspectives of the different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the classroom. Students’ interviews ranged from 30 to 40 minutes.
Data analysis

According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), “data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data. It is a messy, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating process. It does not proceed in a linear fashion; it is not neat. It is the search among data to identify content for ethnographies and for participants’ truths” (p. 150). Thus, in order to interpret the data gathered from the questionnaires, the word-by-word transcriptions of the interviews and observations were analyzed by the researcher through extensive and careful reading so she could become familiar with those data in very intimate ways. The “immersion strategies which do not prefigure categories and which rely heavily on the researcher’s intuitive and interpretive capacities,” (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, p. 151) helped organize the information collected into categories, that the process of analysis involved the researcher noting recurring patterns and subsequently organizing the information into categories. The following chapter presents and discusses the patterns that emerged from the questionnaires, interviews and observations.

Implications

The results of this research study revealed two implications for teaching multicultural classes. First, some teachers, such as those in this study, might benefit from explicit guidance regarding culturally diverse communicative classrooms. It is possible that by learning more about teaching different cultures, teachers might be able to foresee potential problematic issues and prevent them from happening in the classroom environment. Second, raising teachers’ awareness of cultural stereotyping and the potential for personal bias may facilitate the creation of a more friendly learning
environment by the teacher. Having teachers learn more about themselves and their personal interpretation of their surroundings first may be one of the keys to successful second language teaching.
CHAPTER 4
What happened?

This chapter reports the findings obtained regarding teachers’ perceptions of students’ different cultural backgrounds in classroom interaction. It also groups the data presented and discussed them in four categories: 1) How do teachers define classroom interaction?; 2) What cultural perceptions do teachers have?; 3) What impact do students’ different cultural backgrounds have on teachers’ pedagogical choices including the selection of material, time management, and the evaluation of student performance?; and 4) How transparent are the teachers’ own cultural templates to them?

How do teachers define classroom interaction?

During the first round of interviews, I asked each teacher to give his or her definition of classroom interaction. Beatriz offered a rather general perspective, stating that it is “any kind of contact that students have with one another in class or anything that has to do with me or any contact that I have with them in class.”¹ When I asked her to expand upon “any contact” she has with them she said, “I think I was talking about any kind of conversation they have and, not only conversation but interaction is the question so… but any exchange of ideas or thoughts, maybe even through gestures it would be interaction too.” Luiz’s definition was similarly broad, characterizing classroom interaction as that which “the students have among themselves and with their teachers. He further explained his perspective by saying that “classroom interaction is something related to group work or pair work or the interaction between the instructor and the student, such as questions that the instructor would ask and vice-versa.”
In contrast, Maya’s view emphasized the importance of interactions among students, rather than those involving the teacher:

I try to decrease while students increase, meaning by that it’s about them not about me… I speak as far as explaining the instructions to make them feel comfortable but then after a while, specially in a Communication Skills class, they need to be in charge, they need to be in control, they need to take control of their own speaking skills. They need to speak so… And also what I try to do in those activities, in pairs or in little groups, I try to make sure that everybody has a chance to interact with somebody from another culture and that they don’t just sit, you know, like they are not gonna think you’re dumb because you’re not answering the activity right, or don’t have the right answer but they go beyond this and I can help facilitating this.

Like Maya, Vygotsky (1978), Brown (2001), and Garton (2002) all stress the importance of students’ involvement in instruction and initiative to participate as essential in classroom interaction. Like Beatriz and Luiz, though, they also emphasize the necessity of teacher-student collaboration in the form of exchanging ideas, thoughts, and feelings, if successful learning and development are to take place in the classroom. To be sure, the teacher’s understanding of classroom interaction and of his or her role in communication can have an important influence on the success of the lesson and on the students’ affective impressions of the class. An observation in Maya’s class provides a case in point.

Following her belief that the students “need to take control of their own speaking skills,” Maya strived to serve as a guide only. In one listening activity, the students were
told that they would hear a recording and that they could take notes if they wanted to. No further instructions were provided before the tape began playing. The students looked very nervously around the room as if they were lost and not sure of what to expect, especially Fida, a student from Saudi Arabia who was in class for the first time that day. While the tape was being played, none of the students wrote down anything. They all had a nervous look on their faces. After the tape was played the instructor looked at the students and asked them, “What was the recording about?” Nobody said anything. The students all looked at each other as if they were searching for a clue of what to say. After a couple of minutes of silence the teacher intervened and said, “the woman in the tape said two key words: computer and addiction. These are the words you have to pay attention to.” One of the students then asked, “What about it?” so the instructor said that she was going to play the tape again and that the students should listen for those key words to see if they could understand the context of the tape recording. Fida yawned and doodled on his notebook. After the tape was played a second time, the teacher went around the classroom pointing to the students and saying, “You are number one, you are number two… numbers one get together and numbers two get together. Share your notes.” Students stood up and got together in groups as the teacher stood in front of the classroom saying, “I will give you five minutes to discuss your notes.” Two male students from Saudi Arabia were put to work together with a girl from Japan who remained quiet while the boys discussed their answers. Five minutes later the teacher told the students to stop what they were doing because they would then have to share their comments with the rest of the class. “Okay, who wants to start?” the teacher asked. No one volunteered. Maya responded, “I can’t believe this. What were you doing all this
time? Did you understand anything?” One student volunteered an explanation: “We were not sure about what to do exactly. I don’t think that everybody took many notes.”

In this example, Maya’s view that the instructor should adopt a minimalist role in classroom interaction seems to have backfired. Although the organization of classroom interaction in teacher-centered activities has been found to make it difficult for the learners to take any kind of initiative (e.g., Skinner, 1968), classroom interaction activities in which the students are left on their own to initiate interaction can also be unsuccessful and generate frustration in both teachers and students. During the interviews conducted with the students some of them revealed, “Sometimes I don’t understand. Don’t know what to do.” “Sometimes I feel frustrated because I’m not sure what to do. You feel you are doing a bad job.”

Students’ previous educational histories also play a part in the way they approach interaction. One student form Japan stated, “… in my country the student sit and they send the teacher and they teach… no talk in the class… be quiet to listen, me the same.” Bennett (1997) writes that “even the most sensitive and dedicated teachers can be frustrated in their attempts to reach individual learners if they are unaware of how their own cultural orientations cause learning difficulties for some students” (p. 136).

In contrast to Maya’s class, the classes of Luiz and Beatriz included patterns of interaction in the classroom that were not only student-centered but also teacher-centered. In one of Luiz’s classes, the students asked to discuss some of the challenges that African-Americans encounter in this country.

Luiz: What are some of the problems that minority groups face in the US?
Ali (a student from Saudi Arabia): They are called names. There is even a channel here only for black people.


Ali: This channel improves separation and prejudice.

Luiz: How about other groups? Handicapped people, for example.

Umar (another student from Saudi Arabia): Equipment, cars, scissors.

Yoshi (from Japan): Scissors?

Umar: For people that are left handed.

Luiz: Are these problems in your countries too?

Karsten (a student from the Czech Republic): In the Czech Republic handicapped people are discriminated in hospitals, public buildings, etc. And in your country, teacher?

Luiz: Well, in Brazil these people are very much discriminated against. And there are no facilities like ramps on the sidewalks, buses with devices to lift wheel chairs, and things like that.

Luiz: Ok, why don’t you all find yourselves a partner and talk to him or her about these problems in your countries. I’m going to be walking around and helping you if you need me.

The students stood up and started their conversations. After about ten minutes the teacher asked each pair to write a problem on the board. The students did it. They then started discussing solutions for those problems based on what they know exists in the United States. All the students were engaged in the activity which ended with a solution for all the problems they had put on the board.
In sum, the teachers’ personal definitions of classroom interaction seem to influence the way in which they orchestrate their classes. In Maya’s case, the strong belief in the importance of diminishing the teachers’ role actually resulted in confusing and frustrating interactions from the perspective of her students. In Luiz’s and Maya’s cases, the combination of students and teacher in interactions appeared to be beneficial and successful.

What cultural perceptions do teachers have?

All three teachers marked “very aware” in their questionnaires to the question about their level of awareness of their students’ different cultural backgrounds. In the interviews, I asked the teachers to report on general characteristics of the different cultural groups they had, more specifically, the Japanese, the Arabic, the South American, and their students from the Czech Republic.

Commenting on the students from Japan the three teachers reported that:

“Most of them are extremely quiet. They do not like to take part in the interactions, they are not likely to participate just because they want to.” (Beatriz)

“… they are quieter, calm…” (Maya)

“the Japanese tend to be a little bit shy, quiet. I would say that the Japanese are shy, they don’t like to talk much…” (Luiz)

“I think there is a rule with the Japanese students, they are shy I would say…” (Luiz)

Similarly, all three teachers concurred on their perceptions of their Arabic students’ main characteristics. They commented:
“Most of what they think is somehow related to their religion so I don’t think that they would have a way of thinking apart from their religion so, everything they do is religion oriented so… and that is reflected into their participation and their whatever in the classroom.” (Luiz)

“…they have a strong sense of personal work and they are very religion oriented so, I know I need to be careful and respect that…” (Maya)

“I think the Arabic students are motivated, they tend to participate a lot, they want to contribute somehow to the class so, I think they have a very positive attitude in class.” (Beatriz)

Thus, all three teachers expressed the opinion that religion plays a great part in the lives of their Arabic students and that it is strongly reflected in their motivation to participate in class.

When the teachers talked about the students from South America they said:

“They are easy going, they are not shy at all, they are really out there.” (Luiz)

“They are very cheerful, very…open, enthusiastic all the time… it was like sunshine.” (Maya)

“Extreeemely talkative and it’s a lot of fun to have them in class because when you have quiet students and you have some South Americans in class, it’s fun just because the class becomes more lively. They contribute a lot.” (Beatriz)

Last, I asked Maya and Beatriz to comment on general characteristics of their students from the Czech Republic. Luiz did not have a representative of the country in his class. One more time, a pattern was established and both teachers expressed very similar opinions about this group of students. They commented:
“…if I had a scale from the more lively and outgoing, and motivated, and dedicated to least category…I would put Asian on the bottom and then I would put European and then South Americans on the top.” (Maya)

“…very motivated…participate a lot… and very concerned about her learning…” (Beatriz)

The data above alone could easily make one believe that Japanese students are shy and don’t like to volunteer; Saudi Arabian students are motivated but only if they can talk about their religious beliefs; students from South America are extremely motivated, fun, and willing to contribute to the classes; and that students from the Czech Republic fall into the “nothing extraordinary” category. However, it is worth noting that many of the teachers’ impressions were based on very few students. For example, Maya and Luiz had only one student from South America in their Communication Skills class. Beatriz had none. There was also only one student from the Czech Republic in Beatriz’s and Luiz’s classes. Surprisingly, none of the teachers ever considered the students as individuals.

According to Román (1999), it is important to understand students as individuals and know that some aspects of their personalities cannot represent a whole culture. Román writes that problems can arise if teachers stereotype or generalize about their students and do not recognize their individuality by looking at them only as part of a group. She adds, “knowledge of a particular cultural learning style is useful and serves as a guideline, but it does not necessarily represent the learning styles of all members of that culture” (p. 144). She adds, “to have knowledge of another culture does not mean to be
able to repeat one or two words in a student’s language, nor it is to celebrate an activity or sing a song related to their culture” (p.144). In the interviews, two of the teachers comment on their preferences for the Spanish-speaking students, noting that these people’s cultures and personalities were very similar to their own, which made it easier for them to relate to those students. They said:

“Like I said, I just think that I’m not an easy person to adjust to things so when I have to deal with a culture that is similar to mine [Latin] I like it better.” (Beatriz)

“I felt much more attracted to South American cultures because these are cultures that are pretty similar to mine. They are very cheerful, very… open, enthusiastic all the time, you know, we talked a lot… it was like sunshine.” (Maya)

A couple of months after finishing the data collection for this study I ran into Maya who asked me how my thesis was going and told me that if I needed anything else she would be willing to help me. As the conversation continued she started telling me that she was concerned about what she had said to me in the interviews about general characteristics of Japanese students because of the new group that she had at the moment. She told me that she was totally mistaken thinking that Japanese students were quiet and did not like to participate. She continued saying that this new group that she had was, as she described, “all over the place,” participating enthusiastically. She said that all those qualities that we apply to them, that they are shy and calm, were proven to be false by this new group that she was teaching.

Since the focus of this research study is on teachers’ reactions to students’ cultural differences, the importance of investigating how much the teachers knew about the different cultures they had in their Communication Skills classroom seemed crucial.
Stereotypes seemed to dominate teachers’ impressions of students to the point that exceptions to these stereotypes were surprising for them. Moreover, preferences for particular cultural groups were based on the similarity of that culture’s stereotype to the teachers’ own cultural norms.

*What impact do students’ cultural backgrounds have on teachers’ pedagogical choices?*

“Depending on the kind of information that I get from the students, I will try to accommodate what they tell me, meaning, I will try not to offend them, culturally speaking; not to say something that, would make them upset or go against their beliefs, religion, or something like that” Luiz explained. He said that he was constantly asking his students questions about family relations, social events, and general aspects of their cultures. He continued by saying, “I try to include the students’ cultural backgrounds into the discussions in class. I would say I respect our differences, ideas, and cultures.”

The same idea of inclusion seems to permeate Beatriz’s ideal way of dealing with different cultures in the same classroom. She said, “I always try to give the same importance to everybody’s culture so if I ever ask a question about Colombia I also direct that same question to everybody in class… That’s what I try to do; to give the same value to everybody.” In different occasions Beatriz called on all the students, or at least on volunteers from all the cultures she had present in her class to participate with a comment in a discussion or give their opinion about a certain topic:

“Nami, let’s hear from you. How are invitations declined in Japan?” the teacher asked. “Do you agree with Nami, Hisae?” the teacher asked another student from Japan. “Astrid, what do you say? I want to hear the Czech Republic opinion.”
Maya also seemed to share the same kind of openness expressed by Luiz and Beatriz when she stated, “I’m willing to adapt, to change. It’s not easy when you have all your lesson plans ready until the end of the semester, but I’m willing to change, and they change too.”

The teachers were also asked if they felt prepared to accommodate ESL students’ needs and differences in the classroom, and they all remarked that they feel they have been learning a lot every day but that, in Maya’s words, it has been an “overwhelming journey.” Beatriz stated, “I’ve learned a lot in the past three years but I wouldn’t be able to say if I’m well prepared to deal with them.” She adds, “most of the experience I had teaching I had in Brazil so there I taught EFL students, all Brazilians. When I got here I had a bunch of different students in the same classroom. I had to learn by myself how to deal with them so I don’t know if I’m really prepared to deal with them.” Luiz’s answer to this question also showed a certain amount of uncertainty in relation to the best way to go about teaching ESL students. He said, “To a certain extent I feel prepared to deal with them. It depends on what their needs are. I don’t know a whole lot about international students but in general I would say I know how to handle the basics of an ESL classroom.” Maya confessed her alienation of other cultures in the beginning generated an overwhelming teaching environment for her. She clarified:

In the beginning I was a little overwhelmed by my own alienation of this culture like, here I am, I’m French… I was aware of my own cultural differences but… the problem was that I was not open to accept and learn from my students. I was like, I’m the teacher and I’m going to keep everything neutral. I’m going to erase
the cultural aspect of everybody. I’m just going to teach everybody the same thing but I learned that did not work.

As Benavides’ (1992) points out, teachers’ willingness to accommodate cultural diversity can positively impact instructional effectiveness: “What is required is a willingness to work and explore different cultures in a manner that demonstrates genuine value for those cultures. During this exploration the students and teacher should also learn about their own cultures in order to understand it in relation to others” (p. 2). He stresses that acceptance of differences and openness to learning about other cultures should be part of teachers’ attitudes toward students’ backgrounds. Like these instructors, Román (1999) also sees the importance of teachers trying to learn more about their students’ lives outside the classroom. According to Román, teachers should learn about their students’ families, their visions of the world, the things they considered important in their lives as well as their values and expectations for the future.

Although the teachers were adamant about the necessity of accommodating cultural differences in the classroom, doing so turned out to be a challenge.

*Selecting the Material*

I asked the teachers to report their criteria for material selection to be used in classroom interaction. Maya explained, “I try not to pick topics for discussion that I know are not too engaged or too politically intense because I have some students I know would not feel comfortable discussing them.” Luiz and Maya also reported avoiding what they called controversial or offensive topics for discussion.

However, striving to select culture-free topics for discussion in the classroom, the subject suggested by Beatriz in one of her classes turned in a difficult direction:
In that class, Beatriz had her students work on jokes. The class seemed to be going smoothly as she asked the students what people in their countries usually joked about. Students responded with several examples. Beatriz explained that in Brazil people make fun of the Portuguese all the time and she told a joke about Portuguese people. None of the students laughed so she had to explain the joke. Students seemed a little confused and, as they were told to get themselves in groups, the teacher explained the activity they would work on. Each group of students was given a joke about Portuguese people that had been written down and cut in strips of paper, which were supposed to be put in order. As the teacher went around the classroom she found the students were having difficulties doing the activity. “Do you understand the joke?” the teacher asked Astrid, her student from the Czech Republic. Astrid said “I can’t understand it”, so the teacher reached to her desk for the handouts with the stories put in the right order, gave it to the students and told them, “read it and understand it because you will have to tell it to your classmates.” It was time for the students to tell their jokes. The students in each group stood up and went to the front of the room. One of the students made an attempt to tell the joke her group had been assigned but apparently didn’t understand it to be able to tell it. The teacher interrupted and said, “the man was so stupid that he thought the banana had made him blind.” The teacher laughed. The students remained quiet. The teacher said, “I told you this was funny” and told the students to go back to their places.

On the matter of material choice, the observations showed that sometimes the topics chosen for discussion or the material selected to promote interaction seemed to make students uncomfortable and unsure and, for that reason, many times unable to successfully complete the task proposed. Apparently, the students in Beatriz’s class that
day were not able to understand the context of the material proposed as it seemed to be aimed to a very specific audience, the Brazilian people. According to what several students reported, the main reason why they felt frustrated in the classroom was because they were unable to identify with the content of the activities proposed by the instructors. During the interviews conducted with the students they were able to express their feelings in relation to the topic selection for the classes:

“Sometimes I feel frustrated. If you can’t understand anything about the topic or if you don’t have any idea about this topic you feel uncomfortable.” (Fida)

“Sometimes I feel uncomfortable because I don’t know what to say about the topic she suggests.” (Marcela)

“I feel comfortable if I have a background. Sometimes they talk about American movies I don’t know what I can say.” (Ali)

As Taylor and Davidson (1996), Nitko (1983), and Kaplan (1972) explain, students’ responses or reactions to a given input will vary. Students will have difficulty responding to materials that are unfamiliar to their cultural orientation or that don’t have any of their cultural value attached to them. As the data showed, the material selected sometimes proved to be inappropriate, consequently generating discomfort and failure on the part of the students and frustration on both parts.

Beatriz, for example, confessed feeling extremely frustrated when she went to class, after putting a lot of time and effort into preparation, asked a question, and heard no answer from the students. She said “no matter what I try, nothing would make the Japanese students participate.” Looking back at the observations, it seems that many
times the students were not able to participate because they were not comfortable with the activity proposed.

In summary, the selection of materials and topics seemed to influence the effectiveness of the classes. In the case of Beatriz’s class, the data showed that choosing a topic which the students were not familiar with generated confusion and frustration on the part of both teacher and students. In the same way, management of time in the classroom can also be important in order for successful instruction to take place.

Managing Time

Time was one of the issues recognized by the teachers as being one of the factors that may have a positive or negative effect on students’ performance in classroom interaction. According to Maya, students need to be given time to talk and express themselves. She said “don’t try to jump in there thinking that the student doesn’t know the answer and that you have to do it for him.” She recognizes that “most ESL students have a limited ability to express themselves in a second language so they need to be given time.” Likewise, Luiz’s beliefs also stress the importance of considering the students’ cultures when managing time in the ESL classroom. In one of his classes Luiz put his students in pairs and had them analyze and discuss amongst themselves a few questions related to the topic “taking from the rich and giving to the poor.” They were later to bring their opinions to a group discussion. The students were given fifteen minutes before the teacher started asking them what they thought about the first question. Ali, a student from Saudi Arabia, gave his opinion. “What about you Yoshi?” the teacher asked, “What do you think about the first question?” Yoshi also gave his opinion about it. “Good,” the teacher praised. Now it’s Noriko’s turn to give her opinion. “What do think Noriko?” the
teacher asked. Noriko remained quiet. After a couple of minutes the teacher interfered, “Do you agree with the boys’ opinions?” A couple of more minutes had gone by already without her saying anything when Luiz interfered one more time saying, “It’s okay. We’ll get back to you later, all right!” Noriko smiled and nodded positively. After asking a few more students for their opinions about the first question, the teacher went back to Noriko who was able to contribute with her opinion followed by the teachers’ positive feedback, “Good, very good.” Noriko smiled.

In another class Luiz’s students were to give presentations. It was Yoshi’s turn. After he was finished presenting the teacher asked if anyone had questions for Yoshi. One of the students raised his hand and asked Yoshi, “How would I put your address in a letter if I wanted to send you a letter in the future?” Yoshi looked at the teacher as if asking for clarification. The teacher asked him, “What’s your address in Japan?” Yoshi still didn’t respond. Yoshi turned to one Japanese girl and started talking to her in Japanese. He turned back to the teacher and said, “Oh, I see!” He then went to the board and wrote his address in Japan. The teacher asked again, “Now, where would you write your address in a letter?” The Japanese girl interfered, talking in Japanese with Yoshi. Yoshi looked at the teacher who said, “It’s ok, take your time. She can help you.” Yoshi turned back to his friend who tried to help him with the answer. He then seemed to understand the question but didn’t know how to answer it. He turned to the teacher again and said, “I don’t know.” The teacher replied saying, “It’s all right. It’s okay not to know.” Smiling Yoshi said, “Thank you!” “You can go back to your seat now,” the teacher said.
During the observation of Luiz’s classes several occasions were noted in which he gave the students time to express themselves, respected their moments of uncertainty responding to a question and praised them for being able to orally respond.

In contrast with Luiz’s style, the students in Beatriz’s class seemed to be always rushed to answer the teacher’s questions. On one occasion the students were to learn about the American way of politely declining an invitation. Beatriz explained that in America people use excuses to refuse an invitation and she then asked the students if they knew why people do that in America. Before anybody could say anything she said, “Okay, for example, Nami, invite me to go somewhere.” Nami (a student from Japan) didn’t seem to be certain about what to do. The teacher told Nami she wanted her to make an invitation. “Invite me to go a restaurant,” the teacher said. Before Nami could formulate a response, the teacher called on Astrid (a student from the Czech Republic) for help saying, “Astrid, could you invite me to go to a restaurant, please?” Astrid asked the question while the teacher walked away from Nami and started interacting with Astrid. From this observation, it seems that Beatriz rushed Nami into replying to her command. The student’s short pause immediately pulled the teacher’s “speed trigger,” and she switched to another student with the question, leaving the first one with an apparent feeling of disappointment and frustration, feelings which also proved to be true for the instructor. Later into the class the instructor came to me and said, “See, there is nothing you can do that will get these students to participate.” Many times the instructor did not allow the students enough time to respond to a question or discuss a given topic with their classmates.
Questions such as “ready?” “finished?” and “over?” were observed to be constantly used in Beatriz’s classes. The students always seemed rushed into completing their tasks. The amount of time given to them appeared to be less than what they needed to be able to read or discuss so they could have the necessary input before they were asked to comment on something, give their opinions, or answer a question. This impatience on the part of the instructor was noted to be problematic, especially with the Japanese students.

Garton (2002), explains that giving learners time can create more opportunities for students’ initiative to participate as well as increase the length of their responses. The data showed that, when insufficient time was given to the students to respond to a task, frustration resulted. On the other hand, occasions in which the instructors did allow their students enough time to complete a task, or respond to a question also took place.

In sum, time does seem to influence classroom interaction. In Beatriz’s class, not allowing the students enough time to respond to a given command appeared to have generated an environment of disappointment and frustration. However, when time was not a constraint to students, as in Luiz’s class, positive outcomes were experienced.

Evaluating Students’ Performance

During data collection I also asked the teachers to brainstorm about their techniques for evaluating their students’ performance. Luiz said, “I tend not to expect much from students from Japan for example, because I know they tend to be shy. I don’t force them to speak. If they don’t want to speak I cannot force them.” Beatriz explained that it doesn’t matter how much her students are able to produce. She said that she evaluates whatever they produce and added, “I evaluate what that student is able to talk
and little things he says. I evaluate that little amount of talking.” She believes that there is nothing a teacher can do to get most Japanese students, for example, to interact with their classmates in group discussions or voluntarily participate with their opinions about any given topic in a Communication Skills classroom. She added, “don’t put them on the spot.” On the other hand she confessed that sometimes she “forces them to talk.” “I think I would not give up trying to make them participate.” Maya showed understanding saying that she knows some of her students feel intimidated by the classroom environment, which she believes is very different from the type of environment some of her students are used to in their home countries. She said, “I’m aware of the cultural shock it is for some of them; it’s overwhelming.” She explained that what she does in order to be able to orally assess them is to talk with them outside the classroom or even right after the class is over. She said, “What I try to do when it gets to grading them is interact with them outside the classroom. Sometimes quickly after the class while I’m erasing the board I ask them about their plans for the weekend. I’m always trying to find ways to get their knowledge out.” According to the teachers, evaluating the oral proficiency of international students is not an easy task. As they explained, a student’s success or failure in communicating will be strongly influenced by the student’s cultural background as well as his or her expectations toward learning a second language. Some of their comments were:

“Some students are here just because their parents want a break or because they are forced by their parents to learn another language.” (Beatriz)
“I have students that want to learn English for different reasons, some want to learn the language because it is a job requirement, others because their parents sent them here, others for personal improvement…” (Luiz)

Like the teachers, Lam (1995) believes that assessment of students’ performance can be very tricky in the sense that, among other factors, it many times overlooks some of students’ learning aspects which in many cases are influenced by their culture. He continues saying that: “performance assessment fails to diminish differential performance between groups… [because it does not take into consideration] prior knowledge and experience, … culturally enriched communication skills to present, discuss, argue, debate, and verbalize thoughts…” (p. 4). The data provided above seem to reflect that most of the teachers used as informants in this study were unable to recognize their students’ different cognitive styles.

*How transparent are the teachers’ own cultural templates to them?*

Another factor that appeared to have a great impact on the way students’ different cultural backgrounds were perceived and dealt with by the teachers was related to the teachers’ own cultural templates. Responding to a question that was asked in the first round of interviews on selection of material, Beatriz said that she avoids topics such as religion because she knows that topics like this will get her Arabic students “too excited and talking a lot about it as if they were trying to convince everybody of their cultural beliefs or something.” During the second round of interviews, I asked Beatriz if she had ever experienced a situation in which an Arabic student had done such a thing and she answered affirmatively. She then described,
It was the end of a class and one of my Arabic students said, “My teacher, my teacher, can I say something?” and I said, “Sure, go ahead”, and he said, “I want to talk to my classmates about Ramadan.” I think it was the first day of Ramadan and he was very excited and kept talking for ten minutes about what the Ramadan was, how they behaved during Ramadan, etc. The South Americans were very shocked. It was not something that they expected and I didn’t know how to interrupt him. I just let him talk. I’m sure the South American students were thinking he was crazy, and would laugh behind his back at the end of the class. I’m sure about this.

After Beatriz finished telling what had happened I asked her if any of the South American students had come to talk to her about what had happened or if she had heard them comment on the subject and she said, “no, but I know they laughed behind his back. People that are not very religious oriented are gonna mock on those that are. That’s a tendency I have observed.” “Do you consider yourself a religious oriented person?” I asked next. She replied, “Not really. My family is Catholic and my mother goes to church almost every day but I don’t. I don’t go to the mass on Sundays or anything like that.”

In spite of considering themselves aware of the cultural diversity present in their classes, the questionnaires, observations, and interviews conducted throughout the process of data collection did not always support the teachers’ claims. Many times the instructors’ cultural templates seemed to have been used to determine what was and what was not appropriate in their classrooms. The teachers’ cultural templates appeared to have prevented them from finding ways to deal with eventual problems they encountered in their classes.
Ovando and Collier (1985) say that in the ESL classroom “the ethnicity of the instructor can have an effect on the participation structure which evolves in the classroom and the degree to which that structure complements the students’ own communication styles” (p. 142). Bennett (1997) explains that “often we are unaware of, or fearful of recognizing our students’ cultural alternatives” (p. 136). According to Bennett, the greater the differences between the worldview of teachers and students, the more diverse students’ ways of communicating and participating will be. The author explains that those teachers who are not aware of their students’ needs and preferences force their students to do the adjusting and those students who have difficulty making the adjustment are most likely to learn less in the classroom. Galloway (1992), adds that we all have embedded in our subconscious:

…a framework that conceiving of other frameworks and other constellations of forms/functions, let alone functions for which we have no counterpart, will be a very difficult undertaking. In the effort to derive sense and making from another culture, one’s own associational system, being the only one available, is projected onto it, with the result that one is always finding what “one is in unconscious subjection to” (p. 92).

I also asked Beatriz if she ever felt that her personal opinions about certain aspects of a culture influenced her reactions to a student’s opinion about a given topic in the classroom and she responded:

I cannot say that the students have noticed that I’m not very fond of his or her ideas but I fake so if they say something I don’t like personally, I’m gonna smile and say, “Oh, that’s interesting.” I try not to be transparent enough so they will
see that the teacher doesn’t like their religion or, that the teacher doesn’t like the way they live, so I try to smile, I try to be very nice, and never let anything like this out. I try to make sure that, even though I don’t like certain aspects of some cultures, or I would never adjust to certain cultures, I try to show that I find it interesting.

Not only Beatriz, but also Maya has demonstrated traces of preference for aspects of certain cultures. During the first interview, Maya confessed, “I had a little bit of difficulty with the Japanese, Chinese cultures because they are quieter, calm…” In the follow up interview, Maya was then asked if she thought her easier relation with the students from South America ever had any positive or negative influence on her relation with these students or the Asian students. Her response was “no.” She believed she was able to recognize the necessity of being fair when it came to grading or dealing with the different cultures in the classroom. She explained that she knew she would be able to get along with the students from South America more easily because they were more full of energy and have traces of personality that are very similar to her own. She said, “my personality is very lively. I’m very enthusiastic as a teacher, I mean, I never sit down on a chair, lots of movement, lots of energy…” and added, “I think that most of the issues that came up had to do with the fact that I didn’t know so much about other cultures, like the Asian culture for example, or I was interested but only to a point.”

Luiz stated during one of the interviews that, “it’s a rule with the Japanese students; they are shy.” He then added, “I think being shy is a big obstacle. I would say these people need some kind of therapy. I don’t think there is much that can be done in the classroom. They are so different from the South American students, for example.”
continued, “the instructor can always direct questions to these students to see if they somehow wake up. But I don’t think there is much the instructor can do to help.” During the observation of Luiz’s classes however, several occasions were noted in which some of his students voluntarily participated with an answer or a comment and were ignored. On one occasion Luiz asked the students, “what is abbreviation?” and Yoshi, a student from Japan, responded, “USA.” Without saying anything, the teacher turned to the blackboard and wrote, “IEP.” The student didn’t say anything else until the end of that class. In another occasion, the teacher asked for a volunteer to read a question in the book that the students would later discuss. A Japanese girl started reading it when Luiz interrupted and said, “Maybe I should shut the window because of the noise and turn on the air conditioning.” The girl stopped reading. The teacher stood up and walked towards the window saying to the Japanese girl she should continue reading, he was following her. She started reading again while he shut the window and turned on the air conditioning. He walked back to his desk and asked, “Could you start again?” The girl started from the beginning again. In the middle of her reading, the teacher comments, “Much better. I can hear you better now.” The girl paused her reading and before she could go back to finish it, the teacher asked a male student from Saudi Arabia, “What do you think about this question, Ali?” With a question mark stamped on her face, the Japanese girl was silent through the rest of the class.

The data just presented above shows examples of two students who were completely ignored by the teacher when attempting to contribute with a comment or responding to a request from the instructor. Coincidentally, both students were from Japan. The fact that they quieted down during the rest of the class suggests that those
students may have felt overlooked or that they were thought of as less capable of performing than were their classmates.

Greetings such as “hello everybody. Awake today Yoshi?” were a constant in Luiz’s classes. Luiz was asked to expand on his statement in the first interview about the fact that women from Saudi Arabia don’t talk in the classroom. He explained saying that they do talk but not in front of men. He adds, “there is nothing I can do about it. I can’t do anything about the fact that they accept being submissive to men.”

Even though Beatriz also believed that there is nothing the instructor can do to get Japanese students to participate in classroom interaction, during the observation of her classes, several occasions contradict her beliefs. In one situation the students were supposed to walk around the classroom and make invitations to each other and Yuki, a student from Japan, kept talking after most of the other students had already finished and were back to their seats. The teacher interrupted her dialogue with another student saying, “Yuki, you’re inviting everyone. You never stop talking!”

Deriving from the information provided by the data it seems that the teachers’ views about different cultures did not always correspond to the actual behaviors in their classrooms. The next chapter will present an overall discussion of the findings of this research project as well as the answer to the research question.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

It is a part of a second language teacher’s job to learn about their students’ at least basic, cultural aspects. They must do extensive and careful reading on their students’ cultures and take all the more seriously the responsibility to educate themselves in cultural interpretation. It is essential that the teacher’s approach to culture, whether he be a foreigner or native speaker, should not be a chauvinistic one: he must overcome any temptation to try to prove the superiority of one culture over another. He is not in the classroom to confirm the prejudices of his students nor to attack their deeply held convictions. His aim should not be to win converts to one system or the other. (Rivers, 1968, p. 271)

The purpose of this research project was to investigate non-native ESL teachers’ reactions to students’ different cultural backgrounds in classroom interaction. In spite of all the discussion about the existence of bias in testing, the necessity for cultural awareness in education, and the effect that students’ cultural background has on their perceptions of the new language learning environment, the literature studied didn’t seem to give so much attention to the teachers’ reactions to a culturally and linguistically diverse classroom environment. Therefore, this study focused on investigating how teachers react to this kind of environment. Three methods of data collection were used: questionnaires, observations and interviews. During analysis of the data, four categories emerged: 1) How teachers define classroom interaction; 2) What cultural perceptions teachers have; 3) The impact that students’ cultural backgrounds have on teachers’
pedagogical choices; and 4) The transparency of the teachers’ own cultural templates to them.

The data organized in the four categories listed above revealed that the teachers’ personalized definitions of classroom interaction appeared to influence the ways in which they conducted their classes. Further, a number of cultural biases and misconceptions were revealed by the teachers as they expressed their views of different cultures. They believed they knew a lot about the different cultures they had in their classes. However, the number of difficult situations they had to face in their classrooms revealed they didn’t. The data also showed that time, evaluation of the students’ performance, and selection of pedagogical materials may be relevant and important subjects for consideration when dealing with multicultural groups of students. Finally, the teachers’ perceptions of different cultures was not always confirmed by their reactions in their classrooms. Many times the way in which they interacted with students from different cultures seemed to contradict their stated beliefs and awareness of the needs that students from those cultures might have.

Suggestions for Future Research

There are a few research possibilities that this study suggests. One of them would be to investigate ESL native teachers. It would be interesting to learn if similar results would be obtained. Another suggestion would be to do a second follow-up interview with the teachers in order to investigate the reasons why they reacted the way they did in a variety of situations in the classroom. A third suggestion would be to isolate a group of students from a particular culture and investigate the ways teachers adjust their teaching
strategies and classroom behaviors to better accommodate the learning patterns pertinent to that specific culture.
Works Cited


APPENDIX A
Teacher’s Questionnaire

1. Name: _____________________________________________________________
2. Gender: ( ) male       ( ) female
3. Age:        ( ) 20-26       ( ) 27-32       ( ) over 32       ( ) under 20
4. What country are you from? __________________________________________
5. What is your native language? _______________________________________
6. What languages can you speak? _________________________________________
7. What is the highest academic degree you hold? __________________________
8. How long have you been in the United States?
   ( ) less than one year       ( ) 1-3 years       ( ) 4-7 years       ( ) more than 7 years
9. How long have you been teaching English?
   ( ) less than one year       ( ) 1-3 years       ( ) 4-7 years       ( ) more than 7 years
10. How many students do you normally have in your classrooms?
    ( ) 5-10       ( ) 11-16       ( ) 17-22       ( ) more than 23
11. Have you ever lived in another country besides the United States?
    ( ) yes       ( ) no
    If yes, which country (s) and how long have you lived there?
    country ( s ):________________________________________________________
    how long: ( ) less than six months       ( ) 1-3 years       ( ) 4-7 years
         ( ) more than 7 years
12. If your answer to the first part of question ten is yes, then what was the main reason
    for you to go abroad?
    ( ) family       ( ) interest in the culture       ( ) job       other _____________
13. Have you ever taught English in any country besides the United States?
    ( ) yes       ( ) no
    If yes, where? ______________________________________________________
    And how would you describe your experience teaching outside the United States?
    ( ) indifferent       ( ) challenging       ( ) overwhelming       ( ) rewarding
Justify your choice: ______________________________________________
______________________________________________________________

14. From the options below, choose the one (s) that best describe you as a teacher?
   (  ) encourages students’ participation
   (  ) considers important to have small talks outside the classroom
   (  ) patient
   (  ) believes that the relation teacher/student should exist in the classroom
   (  ) confident

15. How aware of your students’ different cultural background are you?
   (  ) very aware (  ) not so much (  ) a little (  ) not at all

16. Do you consider your students’ cultural background when choose the material to teach?
   (  ) yes (  ) no

17. How do you deal with students’ difficulties in the classroom?
   (  ) ignore the student
   (  ) goes on with the explanation until he/she gets it right
   (  ) help to a certain extent
   (  ) offers to help after the class is over

18. If you could choose a country to live in besides your home country, which one would you choose? Justify.
    __________________________________________________________________
    __________________________________________________________________

19. Would you say you treat your students differently because of their cultural background?
   (  ) yes (  ) no
   If yes, do you try to avoid it?
   (  ) yes (  ) no
APPENDIX B
Student’s Questionnaire

1. What is your name? Please print. ___________________________________________

2. Gender: (   ) male  (   ) female

3. Age: (   ) under 18  (   ) 18 to 24  (   ) 25 to 32  (   ) over 32

4. What country are you from? ______________________________________________

5. What is your native language? _____________________________________________

6. What languages can you speak? ___________________________________________

7. Indicate the highest academic degree you hold.
   (   ) high school
   (   ) university undergraduate degree
   (   ) university graduate degree (Master’s level)
   (   ) Ph. D.

8. What is your occupation in your country? _________________________________

9. What language do you speak with your parents? ____________________________

10. How long have you been studying English? _______________________________

11. In what countries have you studied English? _______________________________

12. How long have you been in the United States? _____________________________

13. What is your placement in the Intensive English Program (IEP)?
   (   ) 1/2  (   ) 3A/B  (   ) 3C/D

14. Why are you studying English?
   (   ) interest in the culture
   (   ) to get a better job
( ) to go to an American University

( ) to read English language publications

( ) other: ________________________________________________________________

15. Rank the English skills that you are most likely to use in the future:

( ) listening

( ) speaking 1= most likely

( ) reading 2= least likely

( ) writing

16. Rank the activities below from your favorite to the least favorite:

( ) games 1= most favorite

( ) role-play situations 5= less favorite

( ) reading texts and answering questions

( ) group work

( ) pair work

17. In class, you:

( ) participate a lot

( ) participate only when the teacher calls on you

( ) like to express yourself

( ) prefer listening to the others

( ) other: ________________________________________________________________

18. How often do you interact with native speakers outside your language school?

( ) every day

( ) 3 times a week
( ) 5 times a week

( ) other: ________________________________
APPENDIX C

Teacher’s Interview

1. How would you define classroom interaction?

2. Do you feel prepared to deal with ESL students and their specific needs?

3. How well do you know the cultures that your students come from?

4. How do you take your students’ different cultural and linguistic backgrounds into consideration when you selected your teaching material?

5. How do you prepare for classroom interaction?

6. Have you ever experienced problems with any of your ESL students that you would say happened do to his cultural background. If so, what kind of problems?

7. How do students’ different cultural backgrounds affect your evaluation of their performance in the classroom?

8. How do you think students’ different cultural backgrounds affect their perception towards your performance in the classroom?
APPENDIX D

Questions for Luiz

1. In our first interview you defined classroom interaction as “the interaction that students have among themselves and with their teachers.” Could you be more specific, explain a little bit more? Give examples?

2. When I asked you how well you think you know the cultures your students come from you said that you are constantly asking them questions related to their cultural background and that you think this helps you through in your teaching. In what ways?

How long have you been teaching ESL students? What have you learned so far in terms of dealing with international students in general? What would you say you know (general characteristics) about the Asian students in the classroom? and the European? and the Arabic? and the South American?

3. You said that if you have a Japanese student in your class you tend not to expect much from him as far as oral performance is concerned because you know they tend to be shy. Do you believe there could be exceptions to your assumptions? If not, what makes you say that? Couldn’t you be underestimating the potential of those students that are not shy and really wish they were? If so, what do you do to try to accommodate the students that are an exception? Do you believe that being shy is an obstacle for not being able to produce as much as students that are not shy? If it is an obstacle, do you believe it can be overcome? If so, what do you do to help students overcome it?
4. You said that women from the Middle East will not talk in the presence of men, right? How do you handle this kind of environment? Somehow they will have to produce something, isn’t it so?

5. In the questionnaire you answered that you treat students differently because of their cultural background. How is that? You also said that you don’t try to avoid it. Why?

6. Have you ever felt that your personal opinions or beliefs about certain aspects of a culture ever influenced your reactions to a student’s opinion about a given topic in the classroom?

7. Also in the questionnaire you answered that your experience teaching EFL was indifferent to you. Can you expand on your answer?

8. In our first interview you also said that you are aware of students’ different expectations towards you and that you do what you think is appropriate. What would you describe as appropriate teaching when dealing with international students? You also say that you don’t really care about what students expectations towards your teaching. Explain.

9. Can you think of any successful story/activity that you used in your Communication Skills classes that you would say worked out because it was culturally oriented? What are some of the things you do in order to handle a culturally diverse group of students on a daily basis?

10. Before participating in this study had you ever thought that so many relevant cultural issues could exist in the classroom? If not, why not?

11. Did your participation in this study affect you as an ESL teacher anyhow? How?
12. If you were to advise a teacher who was to start working with ESL students, what would you recommend?
APPENDIX E

Questions for Beatriz

1. In our first interview you defined classroom interaction as “any contact that students have with one another in the class or anything related to the teacher or any contact the teacher has with the students”. What do you mean by any contact? Can you give examples?

2. How long have you been teaching ESL students? In our first interview you said that you’ve learned a lot in the past years. What exactly have you learned so far in terms of dealing with international students in general? What would you say you know (general characteristics) about the Asian students in the classroom? And the European? And the Arabic? And the South American?

3. When I asked you if you felt prepared to deal with ESL students you answered you were not sure? What makes you say this? What are your insecurities? When and how do you think your insecurities would go away?

4. In another question in our first interview, when I asked you if you take into consideration students different cultural background when you are selecting your teaching material you said that you avoid topics such as religion that you know will get Arabic students, for example “too excited and talking a lot about it as if they were trying to convince everybody of their cultural beliefs or something.” Have you ever experienced a situation in which this happened? If so, what happened? Was the student outcome bad? How did you handle the situation? If not, what makes you assume that this is what is going to happen?
5. At the same time you say that the students are going to talk too much about it, you say that you are always trying to include students cultural background in the classes because you believe that “if it is something they know then they know how to talk about it. So they are going to talk a lot. Can you tell me what are some of the topics that you usually choose that would both engage students into active talking but at the same time would avoid the type of situation you just mentioned above?

6. Have you ever felt that your personal opinions or beliefs about certain aspects of a culture ever influenced your reactions to a student’s opinion about a given topic in the classroom?

7. When I asked you if you have ever experienced problems in your ESL communication skills classroom you said that the fact that you had this one big group with most Japanese students and only one student from the Czech Republic makes you feel like you are alone in the class sometimes because you ask a question and nobody answers you. Have you ever felt frustrated by this kind of feedback the students would give you? Was it the first time you taught Japanese students? If not, would you say there is any way one could you have foreseen this type of situation? What did you do to handle this type of situation when it happened? What would you do different in the future?

8. In my questions to you on the students’ different perceptions towards your performance in the classroom you said that you are aware of the fact that “students may find you a strange teacher in the beginning but that they eventually get used to it. That you behave as a teacher.” First, what makes you say that may
find you strange in the beginning? Then, in your opinion, how does a teacher behave?

9. You also said that you wouldn’t change your teaching style because you have people from different cultural backgrounds in your classroom. What would you call a change?

10. In the questionnaire you answered that you as a teacher don’t think it’s important to have a more informal relation outside the classroom with your students. Why is that? Was it like this as well with your students?

11. Also in the questionnaire you said that if you had to choose a country to live you would choose one where people had a culture similar to yours. Why is that?

12. What is different from teaching EFL and ESL?

13. Can you think of any successful story/ activity that you used in your Communication Skills classes that you would say worked out because it was culturally oriented? What are some of the things you do in order to handle a culturally diverse group of students on a daily basis?

14. Before participating in this study had you ever thought that so many relevant cultural issues could exist in the classroom? If not, why not?

15. Did your participation in this study affect you as an ESL teacher anyhow? How?

16. If you were to advise a teacher who will start working with ESL students, what would you recommend?
APPENDIX F

Questions for Maya

1. How long have you been teaching ESL? In my question to you about classroom interaction during our last interview you said that you try to make sure that everybody has a chance to interact with somebody; that they don’t just sit, and have others think that they are “dumb because they are not answering the activity right.” What makes you think that students would think such a thing about one another?

2. When I asked you if you feel prepared to teach ESL you said that in the beginning you were a little overwhelmed by your own alienation of this culture yourself and that you were aware of your cultural differences. Can you tell me what were some of the main differences you experienced?

3. Have you ever taught EFL? Was it different? How?

4. In our first interview you also said that you felt much more attracted to Southern American cultures because they were cultures pretty similar to yours. Were you aware of your “favoritism” when you first started teaching ESL? Are you now? Would you say it contributed to any specific attitude (good or bad) from your part in relation to the students from South America? And the students from other cultures?

5. The same about Asian students. You also say that you had a little difficulty with Japanese students because they were quieter, calm. How difficult was it for you to deal with them at the time? Would you say your ignorance created obstacles? If so, what were they? How about now? Has anything changed? How long have you been teaching ESL students? What have you learned so far in terms of dealing with international students in general? What would you say you know (general
characteristics) about the Asian students in the classroom? And the European? And the Arabic? And the South American?

6. In the questionnaire you didn’t mark confidence as something that characterizes you as a teacher but, in our first interview you said that now you feel prepared to deal with ESL students now. What don’t you feel confident about?

7. You said that you have a friend-friend type of relationship with your students. With all of them? Do you consider this type of relationship appropriate?

8. You said that in the beginning what you knew about Asian cultures came from books. Would you say it was possible you came into the classroom with a pre-concept of general traces of the Asian cultures? If so, what were they? Have you found them to be accurate? What was different? How much did you know about South American cultures? If about the same you knew about the Asian cultures, what would you say really made you feel more attracted to the South Americans? Personal empathy?

9. In the questionnaire, when you were asked about how you deal with students difficulties in the classroom you answered that you help to a certain extent? What is the limit? Why is that?

9. Have you ever felt that your personal opinions or beliefs about certain aspects of a culture ever influenced your reactions to a student’s opinion about a given topic in the classroom?

10. Can you think of any successful story/activity that you used in your Communication Skills classes that you would say worked out because it was culturally oriented? What are some of the things you do in order to handle a culturally diverse group of students on a daily basis?
11. Before participating in this study had you ever thought that so many relevant cultural issues could exist in the classroom? If not, why not?

12. Did your participation in this study affect you as an ESL teacher anyhow? How?

13. If you were to advise a teacher who was to start working with ESL students, what would you recommend?
APPENDIX G

Student Interview

1. What kind of student are you? Describe your personality.

2. Is it important to develop your communication skills? Why?

3. Have you ever left feeling frustrated a communicative skills classroom? Why?

4. How comfortable do you feel performing in front of your teacher and classmates?

5. How comfortable do you feel discussing the topics brought by your teacher to the classroom?

6. Have you ever felt uncomfortable discussing any topic brought by your teacher to the classroom? Why?

7. Do you feel your teacher takes into consideration your cultural and linguistic backgrounds when he/she picks the topics for discussion in the classroom?

8. Have you ever felt your opinions about a certain topic were not well received either by your teacher or any of your classmates from a cultural background that is different from yours? If so, why do you think that happened?

9. Do you think your teacher calls on you for participation as much as he/she calls any of your classmates? If not, explain why.