

Can Culture Affect How We Receive Knowledge?

Looking at the Role of Culture in Teacher Training

Kathleen Hylen, MA

Diversity, Education and Inclusion Consultant, Rockland, ME, USA

Email: kathleen.hylen@gmail.com

Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Internationalization and Global Learning; Partnerships; Program Design; Professional Training

Setting

JoAnne is an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in an American school in Eastern Europe. Two different peers have asked her to co-present teacher trainings to local secondary ESL teachers. Both trainings will incorporate 3-4 group workshops where attendees will collaborate on exercises based on methodology presented. The objective for both is to provide new ideas for lesson planning and teaching ESL in a student-centered classroom. Examples include games, realia (authentic artifacts from everyday life) and music.

The American School has a partnership with the local public high school in this small town. The partnership requires one ESL teacher training to be offered to primary and secondary school ESL teachers from the region, per year. JoAnne will co-present this regional training with Katea, an ESL teacher in the aforementioned high school. The attendees, whom Katea knows but JoAnne has never met, have all been teaching for at least ten years.

The second training is sponsored by the American embassy which offers teacher trainings in the capital once a year as part of their Fellowship Educational program and is co-led by a Fellow, Annalise. While JoAnne has spent considerably more time with Katea, she knows Annalise fairly well and feels confident presenting with both.

JoAnne, Annalise and Katea have all been teaching ESL for a minimum of five years. Annalise is the only one who is new to the country having been there just one year. All three espouse the benefits of student-centered teaching as the best method for language learning.

Case

The day of the regional training has arrived and JoAnne is excited about sharing the stage with Katea, as their discussions and preparation have gone smoothly. Both seemed to agree on what and how to present.

During one of the exercises, JoAnne is monitoring the room and she hears a pair of teachers discussing how they have already done this exercise in a previous training. The exercise was Katea's suggestion, so JoAnne was not aware of this. During the all-attendee discussion after the exercise, JoAnne announces that she had overheard a pair saying they were familiar with this exercise, so she asks if anyone else has done it before. More than half raise their hands. JoAnne asks the teachers who have participated in the exercise previously to share with the group whether or not it was successful, when incorporated in their classrooms. No one responds, so Katea jumps in to rephrase the question and asks, "do you use this exercise in your classroom?" Most shake their heads no.

Later in a different exercise, a few attendees state that they know a similar exercise to this one and feel it is redundant. JoAnne suggests that instead of doing the exercise they discuss how their version was effective. She hears hushed discussions and moves in closer to listen. Again, they admit they do not use the exercise so she asks them to think of how they might incorporate it in their classes and discuss that instead, which they do. She listens intently hoping to glean some understanding of why they do not use it, but nothing arises. At the end of the session she asks if anyone would volunteer as to why they do not use the exercises and only one woman comes forth. She says that the students do not react well to them; they do not learn from them. This is odd to JoAnne because she has great success with these types of exercises in her own classes. While Katea does assist with discussions on methodology and group work, JoAnne notices that she does not help with questions on effectiveness.

After the training ends JoAnne tells Katea how disappointed she was to learn that teachers who have received training were not using it in their classrooms and asks Katea if she knows the real reason why. Katea tells her that she also does not use these exercises in her classes, which astonishes JoAnne because Katea was so excited to present them. Katea tells her that the teachers prefer teaching the old way, their way. The teachers come to the trainings because they are fun and they get paid to attend.

The second training comes one week later and JoAnne is nervous about having the same reactions from this group. She wants to train teachers who are excited to implement what they learn. She has a few different exercises as this training partner brings new ideas but, otherwise the training is similar.

The second training goes off without a hitch. Teachers are excited, sharing ideas and discussing ways they have used similar methodologies and exercises with great success. As for the attendees, they are similar to the other group who were born and raised in the country and come from all over; towns, villages, and the capital city, and share a nationality and language, so she can't understand why they respond differently.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Could cultural differences play a role in how the trainings were presented? In how they were received? If so, how?
- What could have been reasons that some of the teachers did not use the presented teaching methods in their classrooms?
- Were the trainings failures if the participants did not use what they had learned?
- What role did Katea play in ensuring the success of the training of her peers? What could she have done differently?
- What should a facilitator keep in mind when planning a training for an audience with a different nationality than themselves?
- What could be the reason for the two different outcomes that JoAnne experienced at two seemingly similar events?