

**Equilibrium**  
School

# REDUCING UNINTENTIONAL OPPRESSION THROUGH CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Presented at the Languages Canada 2016 Conference by:

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# AGENDA

- Introduction and Overview
- What is oppression?
- How are language learners oppressed?
- What is cultural competence?
- How can cultural competence reduce unintentional oppression?
- How can language schools enhance cultural competence?
- Case Examples
- Questions and Discussion



# OVERVIEW

- This presentation combines two concepts ... oppression and cultural competence.
- These are both BIG topics which can be explored academically and experientially.
- Why are these topics important?
  - Multiculturalism continues to expand in Canada (Kymlicka, 2008)
  - Diversity - language learners are generally not homogenous (del Rosario Basterra, Trumbull, & Solano-Flores, 2011)
  - The desire to recognize the existence and effects of oppression
  - Allowing oppression to exist contradicts the encouraging and empowering role of educators (Coppus, 2008)
  - The desire to mitigate the effects of oppression on diverse groups
  - The desire to improve practices and standards and create more inclusive learning environments

# WHAT IS OPPRESSION?

- Oppression is created when power is exercised in an unjust / burdensome / cruel manner.
- Oppression is:
  - Gaining more and more attention in many professions (ex: anti-oppressive social work)
  - Best defined by those who are oppressed
    - (ex: How “Chinaman’s” Peak became Ha Ling Peak)
  - Connected to / resulting from social privilege (Mullaly, 2010 ; Black & Stone, 2005)
  - Often underappreciated by members of society’s dominant group(s) (Cheney, LaFrance, & Quinteros, 2006)
- Oppression can be:
  - Experienced at the personal, cultural, and structural / institutional levels (Mullaly, 2010)
  - Intentional vs. Unintentional /unconscious (Dermer, Smith, & Barto, 2010 ; Pieterse, Evans, Risner-Butner, Collins, & Mason, 2009)

# HOW ARE LANGUAGE LEARNERS OPPRESSED?

- **Eurocentrism** (an exclusively European worldview / implied belief, often subconsciously, in the pre-eminence of European culture)
  - Policies / Regulations / Systems
  - Learning Materials
  - Overall Engagement
- **Assumptions about different cultures** (Mullaly, 2010 ; Coppus, 2008)
  - Assumptions about knowledge of / similarity to society's dominant culture(s) (ex: Everyone knows The Beatles, right?)
  - Assuming people from X group are all the same / share the same values, experiences, and etc. (ex: "Happy Holidays!")
  - Assuming people from X group are all completely different from the dominant culture
- **Assuming a Eurocentric worldview from others**
- **Viewing culturally diverse people as in need of cultural policing / enforcement** (ex: assumed responsibility by an organization to teach social standards)
- **Language and culture are connected and acquiring a new language can be oppressive to learners from very different worldviews** (Liggett, 2014 ; Jiang, 2000 ; Brown, 1994) (ex: gender, titles, positive / negative connotations)

# Oppression Can Effect:

The ways learners are evaluated

Learner comfort

Successful learning / learner engagement

The ways in which learners respond to power dynamics / show respect

Quality of relationships between learners and organizations



# WHAT IS CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

- **Culture itself is a BIG concept**
  - Is it even possible to be fully knowledgeable of / competent with every culture in the human family?
- **Cultural Competence is hard to define**
  - Multiple similar definitions exist and are often tailored to specific professions
- **Cultural competence is not simply 'political correctness' (Sutton, 2000) ... and does not demand personal agreement with another culture**
- **Cultural competence is the opposite of cultural destruction (Ngo, 2008)**
- **Achieving cultural competence involves gaining knowledge over time and applying it with the goal of consistent improvement**



**Ngo, 2008 defines cultural competence as follows:**

**Cultural competence, in the organizational context, encompasses personal and collective abilities to function effectively in cross-cultural situations. At the individual level, cultural competence involves congruent personal philosophies, attitudes, knowledge and skills that enable individuals to interact with people from diverse cultural values, beliefs, customs and practices with respect, appreciation and effectiveness. At the system level, cultural competence refers to the demonstrated capacity of an organization to work effectively with culturally diverse populations, through explicit integrations of cultural diversity into all aspects of its organizational values, structures, policies and practices. (p. 30)**





# HOW CAN CULTURAL COMPETENCE REDUCE UNINTENTIONAL OPPRESSION?

- The more you know about unique cultural realities, the more effectively you will be able to engage culturally diverse learners. This can involve ...
  - Instituting culturally competent systems / regulations / policies / etc.
  - Applying cultural competence to create a more inclusive and understanding learning environment
  - Understanding the specific needs / realities of diverse people so that they become less mysterious and more familiar
- Potential problems / misunderstandings / uncomfortable situations can be avoided.
- Cultural competence leads to understanding ... understanding leads to validation ... validation leads to respect.
  - When we understand, validate, and respect unique cultural realities, the chances of exerting unintentional oppression diminish.



# CASE EXAMPLES

The following case examples are based on actual past events and situations

All personal information has been changed to ensure privacy

As you consider the case examples, please also consider the following questions:

1. Does the example demonstrate oppression? If yes, how and to whom?
2. How could enhanced cultural competence reduce / eliminate the oppression?
3. How would you react in this situation?

## EXAMPLE ONE:

“COME ON, JANE ... HE’S A REALLY HOT GUY!!!”

Jane is a twenty year old immigrant who moved to Canada with her family two years ago. She is taking an upper intermediate level ESL program at a small language school.

During a recent class activity aimed at generating W5H questions to ask a new friend, Jane’s teacher asked the students to create questions they might ask during a first date with a new boyfriend / girlfriend and then read the questions to the class.

Jane’s classmates were very excited about the activity and participated with enthusiasm, but Jane seemed hesitant to participate.

When prompted by her teacher to read her questions, Jane smiled uncomfortably and stated that she had no idea what to ask and could not think of any questions for a situation like this.

Jane’s teacher attempted to encourage her by asking her to imagine being on a date with “a really hot guy” and telling her that there was no need to be shy because the activity was just for fun.

Jane continued to state that she had no idea how to create questions for this situation until her teacher suggested that Jane might need to review W5H questions more carefully.

After class ended, Jane’s teacher told her very politely to work harder at participating in class.

# EXAMPLE TWO: "ARE WE KEEPING YOU AWAKE, JOE?"

Joe is a twenty five year old refugee who has lived in Canada for nearly eight years. He speaks English at a near fluent level as a result of being employed by a predominantly English speaking company for over five years.

After experiencing a workplace accident, the provincial Worker's Compensation Board sent Joe to ESL classes to upgrade his language skills for future employment.

Joe's teacher has noticed that Joe seems disinterested and unmotivated during class activities.

Whenever the teacher asks Joe a question, Joe responds quietly while staring at the floor and usually doesn't offer more than very short answers.

The teacher has spoken to Joe about this and has suggested that he might not be getting enough sleep.

During a recent class discussion, the teacher became frustrated and asked Joe if the lesson was keeping him awake.

When the teacher prepared his monthly assessment of Joe's progress, he graded Joe as needing improvement with motivation and participation ... and commented that Joe appears to have no interest in achieving his true potential.

# EXAMPLE THREE: “THAT WORD IS COMPLETELY UNACCEPTABLE!”

James is a 45 year old immigrant who arrived in Canada less than one year ago. Before coming to Canada, James was an assistant professor at a university in his hometown.

James is taking advanced level ESL courses at the local community college because he intends to further his education and needs to take the IELTS exam.

Recently, James submitted an essay to his teacher entitled “How to Empower the Mentally Retarded”

Although the essay was very well written and displayed a high level of grammatical knowledge, James’ teacher refused to award a passing grade.

The teacher wrote a comment on James’s essay about how his choice of words was unacceptable and hateful.

James’s was also told that further action may have to be taken.

# EXAMPLE FOUR: “DON’T HOLD BACK, GUYS!”

Mr. Gray teaches ESL at a school that receives a large number of teenage students from different countries in Asia. Recently, Mr. Gray facilitated a class activity where students would have an opportunity to politely disagree with and even challenge him.

“This is your big chance to tell me what you really think!” laughed Mr. Gray as he explained the activity.

Mr. Gray began offering clearly exaggerated statements such as:

“Canada is the best country on the planet!” ... “Mr. Gray is the best teacher in the universe!” ... “Even babies can learn English!”

He asked the students to use language they had studied earlier to either politely disagree with him or challenge him directly. However, the students remained largely silent, and Mr. Gray was confused. He knew the students had acquired the language necessary for participation.

“Don’t hold back, guys!” he said encouragingly.

Some students offered very simple responses that usually involved simply rephrasing the statement into a yes or no question.

Eventually, Mr. Gray ended the activity and chose to re-explain the language lesson from earlier.

# EXAMPLE FIVE: “DON’T TRY THIS AT WORK.”

Jack is a forty-five year old refugee who has lived in Canada for nearly seven years. He is currently taking a government funded ESL program at a service provider with a strict attendance policy that has been designed to meet the strict requirements of the government funded program.

On Monday morning, Jack approached the service provider’s program administrator and stated that his second cousin’s husband had died over the weekend.

He also requested a full week of excused absences to attend to family matters.

Due to a previous illness and some other personal issues, Jack does not have any more excused absences available to him for the remainder of his program.

The program administrator offered to allow Jack an opportunity to be absent from classes for a half day only on the day of the funeral. Jack was also told that he will need to provide “evidence” that he attended the funeral. He was also reminded of his previous absences and informed that his request would never be accepted by any employer in Canada.

# EXAMPLE SIX: MS. WHITE AND THE CASE OF TOO MUCH FOOD

Ms. White is an administrative assistant at ABC English Academy. She has been tasked with organizing the academy's annual summer bar-be-cue picnic.

On the day before the picnic, Ms. White gathered all the academy's students together for an assembly and told them that they should NOT bring any food at all to the picnic because she had arranged everything that was needed. She further informed everyone that she had arranged food to accommodate religious requirements as well as bread and vegetables for any vegetarians. After giving these instructions, Ms. White had the students repeat her words out loud and in unison.

On the day of the picnic, Ms. White was surprised to see a very close-knit group of middle-aged female students arrive with coolers full of homemade food products, tea, coffee, and homemade fruit drinks.

Ms. White was unimpressed and announced angrily that there was now, "way too much food!" She also commented sarcastically that, "some people obviously missed yesterday's assembly."

After the picnic ended, Ms. White took the group that had brought the extra food aside and told them that their actions were very rude by Canadian standards. She also informed them that they should have asked before doing what they did.

When the next school activity took place, the majority of the students Ms. White spoke to did not participate.

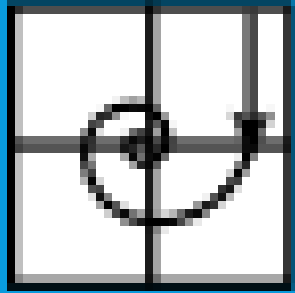


# HOW CAN LANGUAGE SCHOOLS ENHANCE CULTURAL COMPETENCE?

- **Selecting Resources / Materials Carefully**
- **Acknowledging the Influence of Eurocentrism ... and Striving to Reduce It**
- **Culturally Competent Policies and Regulations (ex: validating diverse family structures)**
- **Opportunities for Professional Development (ex: attending cultural events, guest presentations)**
- **Offering Student Guidance / Counselling Services**
- **Incorporating Cultural Competence into School and Class Activities**
- **Encouraging Cultural Events / Cultural Sharing / Cultural Teaching ... Facilitated by Learners and Imparted to Faculty, Staff, and Other Learners**

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