**Cultural Adjustment and Language Learning**

Anyone can learn a language, but that doesn’t mean it’s necessarily easy!

Meet Yurie and Thida, two people who have immigrated to the United States and have spent time learning English:

Yurie is a 44-year-old Russian immigrant who came to the U.S. with his family in 1995. He completed an advanced degree in Russia and worked as a researcher at a prominent university. His son, Gregor, was born in the U.S. and has been going to school here since kindergarten. As a family, they always speak Russian at home, and Gregor is completely bilingual. Upon completing the highest level of ESL courses in the adult education program in his district, Yurie found a position as a researcher at a local university. While he is satisfied with his professional situation in the U.S., he misses the professional status and respect he had gained in Russia. Yurie and his family take part in sports, go to the YMCA, and are involved in Gregor’s school. They return to Russia regularly and have family visit them every year.

Thida is a 39-year-old Cambodian widow and mother of four. She and her family came to the U.S. in 1985 from a refugee camp in Thailand, escaping from the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. She came from a family of rural farmers, so she has no formal education and no literacy in her first language. Two of her children were born in the refugee camp, and the other two were born in the United States. Thida’s husband died after the birth of her fourth child. Her two younger children seem to be learning English and adopting American ways very quickly. Her culture expects extreme respect for elders, which she doesn’t see her children extending to her. As a widow, she would like her children to stay with her, but her daughters want to live and work away from home. Thida has been on and off public assistance through the years, but she has held the same job as a line operator in manufacturing for the past three years.

Complete the chart about Yurie and Thida.

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| **Yurie’s advantages** | **Yurie’s disadvantages** |
| --Came to the U.S. with an advanced degree |  |
| **Thida’s advantages** | **Thida’s disadvantages** |
| --Is currently employed |  |

**Think about it:** What impact might these variables have on Yurie or Thida’s ability to learn English? What could they tell us about how to teach?

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| Acculturation | Assimilation |
| The scientific definition:  C:\Users\Sarah\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\X3RSWIUD\MP910221073[1].jpgThe ability for minority cultures to adapt to the dominant culture, which involves an understanding of the beliefs, emotions, and behaviors of the new culture, without letting go of the first culture (Scarcella 1990)  The “salad bowl”  Acculturation actually helps English learners! | The dictionary definition:  C:\Users\Sarah\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\BU3T05BL\MC900112344[1].wmfComplete absorption of the second culture practices, beliefs, and norms  The “melting pot” |
| \*The ability to acculturate is *not* based on conscious choices, but rather on one’s life circumstances. | |

There are several factors that might affect a person’s ability to adjust to a new culture.

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| **Factors** | **Things to Consider/Questions you need to ask yourself** |
| 1. Country of Origin | * Are there any similarities between life in the first and second cultures (shared religions, customs)? * Have there been waves of immigration from that country at earlier times? |
| 1. Reasons for coming to the U.S. | * Is your learner an immigrant or a refugee? * Has she or he come by choice, or due to war or other trauma? * Was she or he forced to leave because of political circumstances? * Does immigration mean improved economic conditions? * Many refugees may feel ‘unsettled’ in the new country because they may have hopes of some day returning to their country if the political or social conditions there change. |
| 1. Age at which the person emigrated | Age can affect how someone:   * Learns a new language * Adjusts to a new cultural norms |
| 1. Financial resources/ Changes in status | * Immigration may bring an extreme change in economic conditions or social status. * Many immigrants and refugees come with few resources and find themselves with no work or in low-paying jobs, even after a number of years in the new country. |
| 1. Difficulties in the journey/Extent of life disruption and upheaval during war | * Did the student escape his or her country? * Has she or he spent time in a refugee camp?   Many learners may have been victims of torture or may have experienced the trauma and atrocities of war. The result may be post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or, at the very least, feelings of insecurity. It can be extremely difficult for these learners to concentrate and attend to the task of learning language. |
| 1. Immigration status (official refugee, legal or undocumented) | * As an undocumented worker, is there fear of arrest? Even those who are here legally can be uncertain of immigration laws. * A distrust of government and authority may result in immigrants not taking advantage of social and government services from which they could benefit (health, education, etc.). |
| 1. Education and level of literacy in first language/Previous exposure to English and other languages | * Is the learner preliterate? Has she or he had any formal education and, if so, are the education conventions in his or her country similar to or very different from those practiced in the United States? Education and literacy have an enormous impact on one’s ability to acquire literacy and other skills in the second language.   Knowledge of English will facilitate the process of cultural adjustment tremendously. Even knowing other languages will facilitate the process of learning English. |
| 1. Extent of family separation | * Did the person come alone or with family? * Is the extended family in the new culture, or have they been left behind?   Whether or not family members have opportunities to reunite or visit one another can have an impact on cultural adjustment. |
| 1. Experience living in another country | * Has the person been through the experience of navigating new systems (education, government, etc.)? |
| 1. Status of cultural group/ Amount of discrimination they face | * There may be groups that hold more status, perhaps due to history, familiarity of the immigrants’ culture (e.g., North Americans are more familiar with Chinese culture than they are with Sudanese culture). * Do immigrants face discrimination? There may be limited job possibilities due to educational background, literacy, and different life experiences. |

**Think about it:**

* What factors did you expect to see?
* What factors were a surprise, or made you think about acculturation in a different way?

**You can use the Acculturation Checklist to think about and understand your learners.**

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| **Factors** | **Yurie** | **Thida** | **Your Learners?** |
| 1. Country of Origin | There are some shared holidays and religious practices between the U.S. and Russia. There were earlier waves of Russian immigrants, particularly at the beginning of the 1900s | Cambodia and the U.S. are very dissimilar in terms of religion, cultural beliefs, and practices. Thida came with the first wave (which started more than 20 years ago\_ of immigrants from her culture. There are many Cambodians residing in her city in the U.S. |  |
| 1. Reasons for coming to the U.S. | Yurie is an immigrant. He came by choice to continue education and then chose to apply for residency. | Thida is a refugee. She came as a result of war in her country. |  |
| 1. Age at which the person emigrated | Yurie came as an adult, but his son certainly has the advantage of youth. | Came as a young adult; two of her children came at a young age and have acquired language skills very quickly and have tried to assimilate into the second culture. This has caused a rift between Thida and her children. |  |
| 1. Financial resources/Changes in status | Yurie could afford to move to the u.S. and has sufficient funds to return to his country. Perhaps some change in his status; he was well-known in his field in Russia, and now needs to reestablish a reputation in his field. | Clear economic deprivation—on and off public assistance. She’s a single parent. Continued employment in past few years is positive. |  |
| 1. Difficulties in the journey/Extent of life disruption and upheaval during war | No particular difficulty | Extreme disruption and likely trauma during the war in Southeast Asia and during her escape. She has gone from living in a rural setting o living in an urban area unlike anything she’s ever experienced. |  |
| 1. Immigration status (official refugee, legal or undocumented) | Legal resident | U.S. citizen |  |
| 1. Education and level of literacy in first language/Previous exposure to English and other languages | Highly educated; was fluent enough in English to pursue graduate study; has studied other foreign languages as well. | No formal education; not literate in her first language; no experience learning other languages. |  |
| 1. Extent of family separation | Separated from extended family, but sees them twice a year. | Many of Thida’s family members are in the United States. While there may not be physical separation, there appears to be emotional separation with her children. |  |
| 1. Experience living in another country | Had never lived in another culture, but had traveled extensively. | None. |  |
| 1. Status of cultural group/Amount of discrimination they face | Highly regarded within the academic circle within which he words, though he feels some loss of status here as compared to that which he held in Russia. Difficult to judge the extent to which he experiences discrimination; many immigrants, regardless of their country of origin, feel some degree of discrimination by the majority culture. | Part of a group that is not well understood by many in the community. For Thida, this may come in the form of discrimination at work because of her limited education. |  |

Can you think of other circumstantial factors that your learners might be dealing with? Consider transportation and child care, for example.

What does all this mean for teaching?

These tested strategies can help all learners to be successful, not just the well-educated and well-adjusted.

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| **Use visuals, realia (real objects such as fruit, tools, etc.), and gestures** | Provide a visually rich classroom environment for your learners; include multiple means of instruction that appeal to a variety of learners. |
| **Teach language and do activities that are meaningful to learners** | Thida and Yurie have different backgrounds. Thida’s teacher would need to draw on background knowledge and experiences that are very different than those for Yurie. |
| **Build redundancy into your teaching** | Say things in more than one way; have students se the language, hear the language, “do things” with the language (sorting pictures, ranking, etc.) |
| **Create achievable tasks for your learners** | Learners with limited literacy can demonstrate understanding by pointing to pictures and sorting pictures as they complete a listening activity. |

Learn more

[www.culturalorientation.net](http://www.culturalorientation.net)

[www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org)

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