



The Immigrant; dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1917, U.S.

Cultures in Contrast

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I didn't understand much at first—what was said around me, the words, the locations, the terms; what was done, the mannerisms, the poses; what was worn, the clothes, the colors. Everything was new and had to be absorbed. It was scary, yet it made my heart soar with happiness and longing. I hadn't the courage or the honesty to come right out and say to people, "Please explain this to me." I didn't want them to despise me or ignore me or make fun of me. So I had to learn while pretending I already understood everything. That meant putting on my own act within the larger social play taking place among the students on campus, in the little town, and in silent, heartland America.

—Philippe Labro, *The Foreign Student*

Preface

Cultures in Contrast is designed for intermediate to advanced foreign students who are studying English as a second or a foreign language. It offers these students a means for analyzing and evaluating the complex social and moral issues that young adults throughout the world have to deal with today. The text encourages the development of the requisite coping skills and opens the door to a free-spirited discussion of various ways of looking at the world. As students examine their own cultures and compare them with others, culture shock and cultural conflict may be lessened, and enjoyment of cultural differences may be strengthened.

International students in the United States face the challenges of understanding and integrating new customs and values into their own lives while maintaining their own cultural traditions and identities. Although we all have core values that reflect the culture to which we belong, when living in a foreign culture, we may begin to question these values. As Madeline E. Ehrman says in *Understanding Second Language Learning Difficulties*:

There may be aspects of the new culture that conflict with important values the students hold. In particular, for ESL students in the U.S., acceptance of American culture may (to them) imply rejection of their culture of origin. It is a sad fact that it often takes a high level of sophistication and maturity to see differences among people as opportunities, not threats.¹

Cultures in Contrast provides a forum to examine and clarify these differences. Such an examination may make it easier for international students living in the United States to feel comfortable and function successfully in the current moral and social climate while remaining loyal to their cultural values and traditions.

Today, more than ever, students on college campuses are expected to have a sensitivity to and respect for diversity as well as a heightened awareness of individual rights and responsibilities. This text attempts to prepare students for this academic environment. In each chapter, students move from a general exploration of their beliefs to an analysis of a case study, a discussion of readings, and finally a specific choice of a coping strategy for a hypothetical dilemma. The case studies and readings, while providing various perspectives on life in the United States, are also meant to strengthen students' cultural self-awareness. The anthropologist Edward T. Hall writes: "One of the most effective ways to learn about oneself is by taking seriously the culture of others. It forces you to pay attention to those details of life which differentiate them from you."²

The chapters begin with a question about the major issue each chapter presents, followed by an exploration activity in which students are asked to assess their personal and cultural beliefs. Next they read a case study, discuss the questions, and write a case study

1. Madeline E. Ehrman, *Understanding Second Language Learning Difficulties* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), 172.
2. Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1973), 32.

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report, usually as a group activity. The case is a realistic scenario that requires the students to sort out the ethical possibilities within the context of their own experiences, traditions, and cultures. The discussion questions serve as a guideline to writing the report and establish the nonjudgmental environment necessary for a lively comparison and contrast of ethics, values, and beliefs. (Examples of case study reports are provided in Appendix B and in the *Instructor's Manual*.)

Interactive tasks, including two role play scenarios, expand upon the case study, and a vocabulary task reinforces both vocabulary acquisition and major concepts from the case. Following these activities are related readings from a journal, newspaper, or book and comprehension questions on the readings. In the chapter's closing activity, students choose the strategy they prefer for coping with a difficult situation. Finally, specific films, articles, and book chapters are listed for those who wish to expand their knowledge of the topic. Through the process of reading, discussion, analysis, writing, and role playing, students will enrich their understanding of today's global society while at the same time they are sharpening their academic English skills.

The overall goals of *Cultures in Contrast* are to increase linguistic competence and to improve intercultural communication skills. The specific objectives are the following:

1. to develop students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills through discussion and analysis of current issues;
2. to facilitate students' social and academic adjustment to a new culture;
3. to present students with a multiplicity of viewpoints on social ethics;
4. to encourage students to clarify their own values and ethics;
5. to help students acquire coping strategies for dealing with ethical dilemmas; and
6. to discourage misunderstandings due to cultural differences, stereotyping, and prejudice.

Finally, since this is a book about culture, it would be helpful to define this term. Most anthropologists do not agree on an exact definition, but according to Margaret Mead:

Culture means human culture, the whole complex of traditional behavior which has been developed by the human race and is successively learned by each generation. A *culture* is less precise. It can mean the forms of traditional behavior which are characteristic of a certain society, or of a group of societies, or of a certain race, or of a certain area, or of a certain period of time.³

In fact, cultures are dynamic. They undergo growth, development, and change, which makes an analysis of cultural behavior and values challenging. Also, there is a great diversity of values, beliefs, and traditions within any one culture. Every generalization has many exceptions, and especially within the multicultural U.S. society, a broad continuum of attitudes and opinions exists. For these reasons, the case studies and readings do not present a falsely uniform picture of American values, attitudes, or ethics but recreate the ambiguity that characterizes much of human behavior.

3. Margaret Mead, *Cooperation and Competition among Primitive Peoples* (New York and London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1937), 17-18.

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To the Student

Cultures in Contrast focuses on improving competence in the area of cross-cultural communication, which is communication between members of different ethnic and cultural groups. In order to successfully communicate across cultures, we must be willing to recognize and accept beliefs and values that do not match our own. We may have problems in cross-cultural communication if we lack understanding of and compassion for the value systems of others. Furthermore, we often tend to prefer our own world view, which can lead to prejudice and stereotyped thinking. Stereotypes are barriers to listening to people in their own voices and to forming meaningful relationships.

Becoming skilled in cross-cultural communication involves educating ourselves and increasing our empathy for others. It means developing an open-minded attitude toward cultural differences, an attitude of inclusion rather than exclusion. Such tolerance does not imply a weakening in our own beliefs and values; however, it does demand that we honor and respect the cultural beliefs and traditions of others. As Richard D. Lewis writes in *When Cultures Collide*: "We may enrich our own existence by absorbing certain features of other cultures—change them by our own efforts we will not."¹

Cross-cultural communication requires not only knowledge of another language but also familiarity with nonverbal behavior (gestures, facial expressions) and cultural practices, values, and customs. Extending beyond an understanding of the words, it is the ability to understand hidden meanings, motivations, and intentions. Mastery of these intercultural skills is essential because they will play a major role in determining your academic success. Of course, the learning process is not easy, and your cultural practices and perspectives may need to be expanded to allow for cultural differences.

As *Cultures in Contrast* sharpens your cross-cultural communication skills, it prepares you for the experience of living and studying in the United States. The following case studies, readings, and accompanying activities are intended to ease your social and academic adjustment to North American life. In addition, they will assist you in formulating and articulating your point of view on the complex social, cultural, and ethical dilemmas that students have to deal with today. You will encounter a multiplicity of viewpoints on sensitive topics ranging from academic motivation to sexual harassment and be exposed to various coping skills and strategies for such situations.

After completing an exploration task, you will read a case study and identify the major points of concern and conflict. Then, working in a group, you and your team members will write a report that offers a solution to the problem, bearing in mind that many valid solutions to each scenario exist. A vocabulary task clarifies your understanding of the topic, as do the readings, which present a variety of authors and styles. The related activities include role plays, writing assignments, surveys, and debates. A strategy session in which you confront a hypothetical dilemma closes each chapter, followed by recommended movies and articles.

1. Richard D. Lewis, *When Cultures Collide: Managing Successfully across Cultures* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1996), 315.

Reading and writing about these issues and discussing them openly may increase your understanding of and tolerance for ways of life that contrast with your own. Having such a multicultural perspective will be an advantage in the twenty-first century, when communicating across cultures will be the norm rather than the exception. With the advent of global communication, the world has grown smaller, and distant countries and cultures have become more closely connected. Nevertheless, the differences and misunderstandings among people remain large, and prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination still exist. The more we can discover about the values, beliefs, and traditions of others and empathize with them, the more likely it is that we will be able to live together in an atmosphere of mutual respect, goodwill, and harmony.

A Note on Terminology

The following are current definitions of terms that will be part of your discussions while you are using this text. The source of the definition is given in parentheses where appropriate.

- cross-cultural*: dealing with or offering comparison between two or more different cultures or cultural areas (*Merriam Webster* 1996).
- cultural relativism*: a belief that there are no absolute values that apply equally to all cultures, so all values are relative to time, place, and circumstance.
- culture*: the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group (*Random House* 1996).
the customary beliefs, social forms, material traits of a racial, religious, or social group (*Merriam Webster* 1996).
- culture shock*: a sense of confusion and uncertainty that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation (*Merriam Webster* 1996).
a state of bewilderment and distress experienced by an individual who is exposed to a new, strange, or foreign culture (*Random House* 1996).
- custom*: long-established practice considered as an unwritten law; the whole body of usages, practices, or conventions that regulate social life (*Merriam Webster* 1996).
- diversity*: the condition of being composed of unlike elements (*Merriam Webster* 1996).
- empathy*: the capacity for understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another person (*Merriam Webster* 1996).
- ethics*: (1) a set of moral principles or values; (2) the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group (*Merriam Webster* 1996).
- ethnic group*: a group that shares a common, distinctive culture, religion, or language (*Random House* 1996).
a large group of people classified according to common racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin or background (*Merriam Webster* 1996).
"An *ethnic group* is broadly defined as a group with which individuals are identified, or with which they identify themselves, on the basis of cultural characteristics. Every person has one or more ethnic origins, although not all individuals identify themselves strongly or consistently with an ethnic group" (Schwartz 1995, 43-44).
- ethnocentrism*: the attitude that one's own group is superior (*Merriam Webster* 1996).
- moral*: conforming to a standard of right behavior (*Merriam Webster* 1996).
- multiculturalism*: relating to, reflecting, or adapted to diverse cultures (*Merriam Webster* 1996).
- race*: (1) a family, tribe, people, or nation belonging to the same stock; (2) a class or kind of people unified by community of interests, habits, or characteristics (*Merriam Webster* 1996).
(1) a group of persons related by common descent or ancestry; (2) *anthropology*: a classification of physical characteristics such as skin color, facial form, eye shape,

and now frequently based on such genetic markers as blood groups; (3) any people related by common history, language, cultural traits (*Random House* 1996).

"The word *race* refers to a category of people identified on the basis of similar visible physical characteristics—sometimes characteristics perceived by the writer but having no scientific basis. Because even scientists disagree about the criteria for defining specific races, the term should be avoided or used cautiously" (Schwartz 1995, 43).

relativism: a view that ethical truths depend on the individuals and groups holding them (*Merriam Webster* 1996).

religion: (1) the service and worship of God or the supernatural; (2) commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance; (3) a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices; (4) a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith (*Merriam Webster* 1996).

"Not all belief systems are religions" (Schwartz 1995, 45).

society: a community, nation, or broad grouping of people having common traditions, institutions, and collective activities and interests (*Merriam Webster* 1996).

value judgment: a judgment assigning a value (as good or bad) to something (*Merriam Webster* 1996).

values: principles or qualities intrinsically valuable or desirable (*Merriam Webster* 1996).

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