

## **Cross-Cultural Incidents Activity**

### **Critical Incident A:**

There are several students in your class with body odor. A number of other students have complained about this to you. In addition, a number of other students have made disparaging remarks about these particular students.

### **Critical Incident B:**

The students in your class range from 18 to 50 years of age. Several of the older students have indicated to you that they think they should be in a more advanced class because they are older and that they don't like working with such young students. At the same time, several of the younger students have let you know that they find it very uncomfortable to be in class together with older students.

### **Critical Incident C:**

A representative of several parents of Southeast Asian children has come to complain to the principal that the teachers often pat the children's heads, and teachers in other grades frequently hand out papers or pass out books over the children's heads.

### **Critical Incident D:**

Recently, a Canadian tourist went to Brazil. He found himself leery of taking taxis, because he had seen a taxi driver making a gesture that he couldn't understand and that he thought might mean something bad. Later, he learned that the driver had been making the gesture for "full".

### **Critical Incident E:**

Paul, an American, asked his friend, David, a Taiwanese student, whether he should invest all of his money in the stock market. David said he would think about it and get back to him. Paul was annoyed, because he expected an immediate answer.

## **Answers to Incidents**

### **Incident A:**

Cultures view body odor differently. Some cultures believe that members of meat-eating cultures exude a very offensive body odor compared to vegetarian cultures. Members of some cultures place a high value on heavily perfumed bodies, whereas others find that practice distasteful.

### **Incident B:**

In many cultures, age commands respect. It is inconceivable in such a culture to promote a younger employee over an older one, regardless of ability. Likewise, it is difficult to mix large ranges in age-groups in language classrooms, because of potential face-threatening situations, particularly when younger students perform better than older ones.

### **Incident C:**

The head is considered sacred in Southeast Asian countries, so it is inappropriate and indeed insulting pass an object over a person's head or to touch the head of, for example, a Thai person.

### **Incident D:**

Different gestures have culturally determined meanings; these are generally known as *emblems*. Although the same or similar gestures may be found in different cultures, the meanings often vary greatly. The North American index finger and thumb together signify "OK"; in Brazil, this is an extremely rude and offensive sexual gesture; in Japan, it means money. Emblematic gestures may also exist in one culture and not in another, as is illustrated by this particular critical incident.

### **Incident E:**

Americans are more independent than Chinese and love to solve problems by themselves. Chinese always do things carefully, solve problems thoughtfully, and are afraid to make mistakes. Because of this, Chinese often take time to express themselves, and Americans often do things impulsively.

### *Reference*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Crossing Cultures in the Language Classroom by Andrea Decapua, Ed.D., and Ann C. Wintergerst, Ed.D.

## Quiz 2. Cross-Cultural Trivia

- True False 1. Avoiding direct eye contact with the person with whom one is speaking is a sign of respect and deference.
- True False 2. Sitting so that the sole of one's shoe is pointed toward another person is considered insulting.
- True False 3. Frequent touching on the arm is viewed as a way to signal solidarity and rapport.
- True False 4. Giving someone the OK sign is the equivalent of what Americans term "giving someone the finger."
- True False 5. Touching a child's head is extremely offensive.
- True False 6. Nodding one's head in an up-and-down motion means "no."
- True False 7. Pointing with your foot or using it to perform such actions as moving a chair is considered poor behavior.
- True False 8. Public displays of affection such as hugging and kissing between members of the opposite sex are acceptable.
- True False 9. Hand-holding between same-sex friends is common.
- True False 10. It is important to stand an arm's length away from the person with whom you are speaking.
- True False 11. Waiting in orderly lines at cash registers and bus stops is the norm.
- True False 12. Honking your car horn is done frequently to signal a friendly greeting to a passing car or pedestrian.

### Discussion of the Quiz

1. In many cultures, avoiding direct eye contact is a way of showing respect and deference. In North America, however, eye contact indicates truthfulness and is a way to show a person is paying attention to the speaker.
2. In some cultures, the soles of a person's feet are regarded as dirty, given that they are used to walk on. Showing someone the sole of one's shoe therefore signals an insult. For North Americans, "putting one's feet up" is a way of relaxing and indicating that the person feels at ease and comfortable in a particular situation. In other cultures, the sole of one's foot should never face another person, nor should a person's foot be used for pointing at or dragging an object.
3. In many cultures, frequent touching between members of the same sex carries no sexual overtones. It is an indicator of the speaker's attention, affinity, and camaraderie.
4. Gestures that are used to replace verbal communication and that have designated meanings to the members of a particular culture are called *emblems*. The meanings associated with emblems are arbitrary and vary from culture to culture. What may have a positive meaning in one culture may have just the opposite meaning in another.
5. In many East Asian cultures, such as Thailand, the head is viewed as the repository of a person's soul and should therefore not be randomly touched.
6. See number 4.
7. See number 2
8. In many cultures, including most Asian cultures, it is inappropriate for members of the opposite sex to touch each other or show affection to one another in public.
9. While many cultures have taboos against members of the opposite sex touching one another, they often accept same-sex touching as merely a sign of friendship without sexual overtones. In some cultures, such as Russia, where members of the opposite sex engage freely in public displays of affection, same-

sex hugging and even lip kissing are a perfectly acceptable means of greeting friends.

10. The amount of personal space that feels comfortable between speakers varies from culture to culture. In general, members of high-context cultures prefer less space, while speakers of low-context cultures prefer more. In Arabic, for instance, there is even a saying that encourages speakers to stand close enough to smell each other's breath. In general, speakers from North America, who prefer a greater distance, will continuously try to move away from an Arab speaker.
11. Waiting one's turn in line rather than pushing and shoving one's way to the front is generally the norm in North American and most northern European cultures (although not so in Belgium). One's personal space includes an immediate area around one's physical self that should not be violated by contact with strangers. In addition, densely populated countries simply do not have the room to allow each individual the amount of personal space expected by citizens of more spacious and less densely populated countries. Indeed, even in the United States, New York City, the city with the highest population density in North America, is somewhat of an anomaly in terms of personal space. Most New Yorkers have a much tighter and smaller definition of what constitutes personal space than do other North Americans.
12. Different cultures have different ways of greeting; what is offensive and even forbidden in one culture may have just the opposite meaning in another. In the Cayman Islands, for instance, people not only honk their car horns as a greeting but will often honk their horn when driving up to someone's house—even if that person is not expecting the other person to visit. Local people will go to their door or window to see who it is and then go out and invite the other person in.



I, A

*To adapt for the language classroom,*

See chapter 2, Activity A, for suggestions.