

Each week, the Listening/Speaking 300 classroom teacher split students into small groups of three to four for Conversation Partners. Most teachers chose to have a semi-structured activity for Partners to do over the hour and a half class period. For example, the first day in L/S 300 we received a list of getting-to-know-you questions like “Where are you from?” and “What is your favorite thing about Ft. Collins?” Often Conversation Partners were asked to help students with their current class project. Once we discussed American idioms, which was highly entertaining. Some of them, like “silver lining”, I thought commonly occur in spoken English, but others I had never heard of. Surprisingly, a few of the idioms had a direct translation in English and Arabic, though not between English and Chinese. This served to remind me of the fascinating link between language and culture. It also meant that the Arabic L1 speakers seemed to understand the content more easily than the Chinese L1 speakers.

In the Listening/Speaking 300 classes, students work on long-term research projects and presentations. First, they research a topic of interest by creating a survey and asking twenty Americans to answer it. Since the class is L/S, the survey is conducted orally and students take notes as the American responds. Then, students use this survey to create a presentation about their topic to the class. Conversation Partners in L/S 300 revolve around a different aspect of this project each week. One day the students practiced asking their surveys with me. We discussed what makes good survey questions, and the type of expected response that would be most appropriate. Some of the students had already begun surveying out in the community, and this led to an interesting cultural discussion. Some students were upset because some of the Americans they had approached had rudely refused to take the survey, or had simply ignored the student altogether. We talked about how this had made the students feel, and

some possible reasons for getting this reaction. Specifically, using polite language like “Please”, explaining what you are doing, and remembering that Americans like to do things quickly were all found to produce the best results by successful students. As an American and a Ft. Collins local, I was disappointed in the unfriendliness of some of the people these students had encountered. However, they decided to view it as a learning opportunity. One student pointed out that he had thought that all Americans were nice, like their teachers and Conversation Partners, until the survey incident. As a group, we came to the conclusion that there are different types of people in America, just like there are in their home countries.

Another of my favorite cultural conversations in this program happened when students in L/S 300 were doing initial research about their topics. The topics were all current debatable issues in American news, which created a wonderful opportunity to explore cultural relativism. At the time, Colorado had just passed the legalization of marijuana law, and many students were very interested about this. My group asked good questions about my opinion on the legalization of marijuana. We discussed the different sides of the issue, and had some enlightening conversations about how drugs like marijuana and alcohol are viewed in their home countries, and how different stakeholders may view them here. We addressed how American college movies that depict drunkenness as the norm at college have affected international students’ perception of what America will be like, even before they arrive. The influence of American movies on foreign students’ perceptions of America is a factor I had never thought about before.

Exchanging ideas and opinions on controversial contemporary issues with students from Arabic and Asian speaking countries was a highlight as a Conversation Partner. Challenging

topics like this not only motivate students, but they also serve as great fluency practice. In addition, the passionate exchange of cultural values helped me to shed light on what these students value, believe, and expect from the world around them. As a Conversation Partner, I was able to familiarize myself in advance with the general cultural backgrounds of the target population that I am currently teaching in an interactive and meaningful way.