

# TESOL Teachers as International Managers

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TESOL teacher and international managers face similar challenges. Some of the common principles in the international management literature are examined and suggestions on how these principles can be used by TESOL teachers are made.

## International Business Research

While no one is likely to confuse the pay packages and stock options of expatriate and international managers of multinational companies with the compensation received by English teachers working in foreign countries, the two groups do share some similarities. Both international managers and English teachers operate in multicultural environments. Both of their duties include planning for, leading, organizing, and controlling individuals (e.g. employees and students) from cultures other than their own to achieve organizational and individual objectives. Furthermore, both groups will be required to operate in organizational cultures based on different underlying assumptions than one has grown used to. Both teachers and managers operating in multicultural environments will also need to enlist cooperation from individuals from different cultural backgrounds that they have no direct authority over (e.g., co-workers, bosses, and business partners). Taking a closer look at some of the principles and issues in international management may provide a fresh perspective for teachers that they can use to improve their performance in the classroom as well as to more fully enjoy the international lifestyle that attracted so many TESOL teachers to the profession in the first place.

## Clash of Cultures

Many of the problems teachers have the most trouble handling are cultural in nature. Whether one is reading the online forums for English teachers, overhearing conversations in staff rooms of international language schools, or spending an evening out with one's teaching colleagues, the same topics creep up over and over again. One of these topics is about the students. In some countries one might hear how the students are lazy and never come to class on time, while in others a more common complaint might be how the students lack imagination and are only able to memorize grammar rules. The lack of management skills of the local managers of the schools is also a common theme of conversations of English teachers around the world. Apparently, it is not the technical aspects of teaching English, (e.g., preparing lesson plans, modeling the target language, or understanding specific grammar points) that cause teachers the most difficulties; it is dealing with intercultural working relationships. While these days, most international managers receive substantial cultural training before embarking on duties in a multicultural environment, TESOL teachers normally receive virtually none.

## Culture in and out of the Classroom

"Culture is a set of beliefs and values about what is desirable in a community of people and a set of formal or informal practices to support the values" (Javidan & House: 292). Furthermore, it has also been suggested that culture exists on a multitude of levels and dimensions in which nationality is only one. (Griffith, Hu, & Ryans, 2000: 303; Slater, Boone, Price, & Martinez, 2002:198). Furthermore, people are affected by regional, organizational, family, and work group cultures in addition to national culture, and there are not always clear boundaries where the influence of one culture ends and another begins.

Teachers can teach vocabulary definitions and grammar rules to students, but until the students gain a "feel" for the language and can use the language naturally, the students will not have mastered English. The same principle applies to teachers working

in multicultural environments. The teachers can learn the basic dos and don'ts of working within a multicultural environment, but until the teacher gains a feel for how to act in specific situations and can interact in the environment in a natural manner, unnecessary conflict and confusion will persist.

While it is important to have some level of understanding of the cultures of the individuals one is working with, the first step in gaining a real feel for working internationally is to understand one's own culture. Individuals are often keenly aware of how culture affects the behavior of those of another culture while not being aware of how their own behavior is also culturally oriented (Javidan & House, 2001: 291, Hofstede, 1983: 77; McBurney and White, 2004: 5).

## **Teacher Expectations**

Many of the native English-speaking teacher's expectations of students and management are culturally based and can be explained by using Hofstede's (1980, 1983) framework. Western teachers from nations with high masculinity scores often expect students to place a high emphasis on success and are disappointed and often angered by students from cultures with lower masculinity scores who don't place the same value on successfully mastering the subject. Other western teachers may get frustrated over the perceived lack of imagination and creativity of their students without realizing the differences in uncertainty avoidance between cultures may be at the heart of this reluctance to stand out from the crowd. Lack of understanding of underlying assumptions regarding power-distance is often at the center of difficulties between foreign native English speaking teachers and local managers in schools around the world. In fact, there are significant differences in underlying cultural assumptions and principles governing the behavior of managers in different parts of the globe and misunderstandings between managers and workers from different cultures don't only happen in educational institutions (Chong & Thomas, 1997; Javidan & Carl, 2005; Kanungo & Wright: 1983; Neelankavil, Mathur, & Zhang, 2000; Suutari, Raharjo, & Riikkila, 2002; Zagorsek, Jaklic, & Stough, 2004). Additionally, the differences in individualism and collectivism of cultures can be especially problematic for all native English speaking international teachers, and especially so for Americans, working abroad. "The extreme position of the United States on the Individualism scale leads to other potential conflicts between the U.S. way of thinking about organizations and the values dominant in other parts of the world" (Hofstede, 1980: 61).

However, when attempting to gain an understanding of cultural differences one needs to be careful not to drift into stereotyping. People are generally more aware of the variations within one's own culture than in others. However, teachers should remember there are great variations in individuals in every culture. There is no more a single Japanese or Portuguese way of teaching or managing than there are single British or Canadian ways of teaching or managing.

## **The Reality of Globalization**

It is near impossible these days to read a magazine, academic journal, or watch the news on TV without being exposed to the notion that the world is coming closer together through globalization and national and regional differences are diminishing. For example, Kienle and Loyd (2005: 580) claim globalization is becoming "more prominent in all aspects of civilization." But the notion that the world is becoming more and more alike is not at all new, "National differences and antagonism between people are daily more and more vanishing" was a statement in one of history's most influential works written over 150 years ago (Marx & Engels, 2004/1848: 2). Is globalization really eliminating the cultural differences around the world or is the following true: "Globalization is often more a slogan and wishful thinking than a reality" (Hofstede, et al. p. 800).

If one looks beyond the surface, many differences remain between geographical regions. London and Hart (2004) and Ricart, et al. (2004) make the claim that the vast majority of the world's population lives in extreme poverty and outside anyone's definition of the global economy. Many others have also looked at the data and questioned the extent and impact of "globalization" (Chortareas & Pelagidis, 2004; Ghemawat, 2003; Leduc, 2005; O'Neil, 2004). While it is true that there are more intercultural contacts between individuals today than in the past, both the extent and impact of "globalization" needs to be kept in perspective. "The increasing connection between countries does not mean that cultural differences are disappearing or diminishing" (Javidan & House, 2001: 292).

## **Moving Beyond the Global View to the Worldly View**

Gosling and Mintzberg (2003, p. 58) encourage managers working internationally to move beyond having a global view to having a "worldly" view. The global view looks for generalities while the worldly view stresses "attention paid to particular responses to specific conditions." The worldly view takes into account the need for international managers to "add social as well as economic value." Furthermore, Gosling & Mintzberg believe one should not only see the surface differences but to realize when "landing in different places, we join a plurality of worldviews." Also, the global view assumes the "world is converging toward a common culture" while the authors find "this is a world made up of edges and boundaries, like a patchwork."

## **Practical Applications for Teachers**

Since international managers and TESOL teachers have much in common, adopting Gosling and Mintzberg's (2003) worldly view may have practical applications for teachers. The point about moving beyond generalization to paying attention to context, warns teachers about the overuse of standardized teaching material and methods. The vast majority of both educational and leadership theory is based on research conducted by Anglo-American researchers using frameworks developed in western contexts (Slater, et al. 2002). Teaching techniques learned in a teacher training course and standardized textbooks may be a good starting point for lessons, but one should not feel the need to follow either to the letter. Teachers working abroad with a majority of students coming from a single culture should often adjust the lessons to meet the local needs while teachers working in more multi-cultural environments may want to employ a variety of teaching techniques and material based on different educational theories.

Most adult students want to learn English for economic reasons and government schools primarily promote the learning of English also for economic purposes. Teaching English in order for both individuals and society to grow economically is adding social value to the societies teachers are working in. There are other ways English teachers can add social value, one of these is by generating new ideas and understanding through intercultural interactions. Most teachers feel enriched by the inter-cultural interactions that have experienced; the same applies for the students and co-workers the teachers come into contact with. However, one needs to be careful to not use the classroom as a way of promoting specific cultural or political viewpoints. A TESOL teacher's primary job is to teach English, it is not to stand on a soapbox for the entire class period and promote values based on the teacher's cultural or individual ideology. Understanding one's own cultural values will help teachers in promoting universal values rather than culturally specific values.

Everyone has a unique worldview based on their own individual personality and cultural background. Understanding that others have different world viewpoints can lessen the misunderstandings between native English speaking teachers and students and others who the teachers must deal with professionally. Working internationally or in a multicultural environment does not require one to abandon one's core values, but to be successful, one needs to suppress the urge to impose those values on others. With a little tolerance and patience, cultural differences will appear not to be something that should be eliminated, but to be celebrated.

## **Implementation of the Worldly View**

Like all suggestions, adapting the worldly view is easier to propose than to implement. It requires a great deal of self-reflection about one's own attitudes and behavior. The key point of the acquiring the worldly view is to understand oneself and one's own culture. Studying a foreign language is an invaluable method for an English teacher to gain a better understanding of the English language and to see the language from the perspective of the students. The same principle applies to learning one's own culture. Studying foreign cultures, living abroad, studying foreign languages, and getting oneself off the tourist trail can help to develop a worldly view, but only if one keeps an open mind. It is impossible for a teacher or an international manager to become an expert in the culture of every individual one will have to deal with professionally, but understanding one's own culture can help one in a variety of multicultural situations.

Developing a worldly viewpoint requires effort and an open mind, but there are substantial professional and personal rewards for the teacher willing to make the effort.

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