



Life in English Podcast

Transcript

&

Key Vocabulary

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Life in English Podcast | Episode #109 - Your Eyes or Your Culture?

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Episode #109 - Your Eyes or Your Culture?

Sep 29, 2021

[00:00:00] Do you see the world through your eyes or through your culture?

[00:00:03] INTRO MUSIC

[00:00:09] Do you see the world through your eyes or through your culture? This is a question that I've thought about **from time to time**¹ whenever I had an interaction with someone from another country.

[00:00:19] I've talked to people from every continent from various **walks of life**². And a lot of those people had these **preconceived**³ ideas of what the U.S. is like, and what Americans are like and what we think and believe.

[00:00:30] Most of the time they were partially correct and partially incorrect in their assumptions, but that's always the case when you're making general statements about hundreds of millions of people, right? And that's true for every country, I suppose. We have reputations that we've created for ourselves and reputations that other people have given us as well.

¹ occasionally

² socioeconomic status or background

³ (of an idea or opinion) formed before having the evidence for its truth or usefulness

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[00:00:51] None of them ever tell the whole story, though. And we, as humans, have this tendency to look for patterns and then make generalizations about everyone and everything based on those patterns. Although this helps us say things when trying to find the answers to our questions or come to conclusions, it doesn't mean that we will always find the right answers to our questions or come to the right conclusions.

[00:01:13] Most of the time, the generalizations we make are based on observations that were made without context, which only increases the chances that our generalizations will be inaccurate. Maybe I'm not making a lot of sense here. So let me give you an example.

[00:01:28] People from Latin America have a reputation for being very warm and friendly people. The people seem happier and enjoy life more in Latin American countries. It's easier to make friends in a Latin American country, or at least that's what they say.

[00:01:45] I've talked to hundreds of people from Latin America, and most of them have told me the same thing, "Americans are so much colder than we are." "You Americans are so serious all the time." Although I think that's a question of opinion, I still think there may be some truth to that depending on the situation, but there are a few problems here.

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[00:02:06] Number one, not all Americans are the same. We have to acknowledge the fact that the U.S. is a **gigantic⁴** country. There are over 300 million people in this country. And within that group of 300 million, there are many sub-groups. Black people, white people, Africans, Latinos, Asians, Europeans, and within those subgroups, there are many more subgroups, right? The rich blacks, the poor blacks, blacks from the south blacks from up north, the rich whites, the poor whites, the liberal whites, the conservative whites African-Americans, foreign Africans Ethiopians, Kenyans, Moroccans, Egyptians, American Latinos, foreign Latinos Hondurans, Colombians, Mexicans, Nicaraguans, American Asians, foreign Asians, the Chinese, the Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese. And let's not forget the native Americans, right?

[00:03:02] All of these people in all of these groups are a part of the United States of America. And all of these people come from different walks of life. All these people were raised inside their own version of American culture.

[00:03:17] For example, there are many types of black Americans culture. There are many types of white American culture, as well as African-American, which is not the same thing as black American, also Latino American, and Asian-American. We're all the same and yet completely different, just like everyone else from every other country in the world.

[00:03:40] So when you say, "Americans are so bah, bah, bah..." to which Americans are you really referring? Do you even know? Most of the time, it's the Americans

⁴ of very great size or extent; huge or enormous

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that you see on TV and social media. It's the pop culture stars, the actors, the politicians, the athletes, the YouTube and TikTok influencers, but that relatively small group of people can not and will not ever represent the entire United States of America. **Such**⁵ a minority could never represent the majority.

[00:04:15] Problem number two, 'cold' is a subjective word. Another thing we must take into consideration is that the word cold is subjective. What's cold to me, may not be cold to you. As a Latin American, you might think you're being very warm, friendly, and funny while I, as an American might think you're being fake **as fuck**⁶.

[00:04:39] I might think that you're just smiling and acting like my friend, because you're trying to give me a certain impression of who you are or because you want something from me. I might think you're trying to force the feeling of friendship and connection onto me. And there are many ways to interpret the same behavior, and many times we **interpret**⁷ other people's behavior through the lens of how we would behave.

[00:05:01] That's not always a good idea because we are not other people and other people are not us. And you might think Americans are extremely cold and **unapproachable**⁸, but I think that the people you're referring to are not cold. They simply are not fake. We're just not the type of people to meet someone for the first

⁵ In more formal situations, we can use 'such' to mean 'of this or that kind'

⁶ *rude slang* - a phrase that usually follows an adjective as an intensifier

⁷ to decide what the intended meaning of something is

⁸ Someone who is unapproachable seems unfriendly or a little frightening, so that other people are less likely to speak to them

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time and immediately act like we've known them for years. Now, in this case, when I say 'we' I'm talking about myself and the people in some of the places where I **grew up**⁹. However, I've also grown up in places where people are, what you might think of as really nice and friendly. When in reality they're just fake and they only care about appearances.

[00:05:42] It's something that's hard to explain to someone who isn't from here because of the difference of culture, just like in your country or state or city, I'm sure that you're aware of cultural behaviors that I would never notice as a foreigner because I'd be seeing your world through the lens of my culture. That's just the way it is. And when I say culture, I'm really talking about my history as a human being, all of my life experiences. Those are the things that create and mold my perspective.

[00:06:13] Another example of people who have a reputation for being cold is Russian people. So many people from around the world, including Americans have told me that they think Russians are crazy, extremely cold and difficult to approach. However, my experience with Russian people has been the exact opposite. I've never met a Russian person that I did not like... ever. I've never met a Russian person and felt like they were cold at all. The Russian people I've met are some of the coolest people on the planet actually. However, another person from another country might interpret their behavior as cold, and it would be hard for them to make friends with those same Russian people.

⁹ The past tense of the phrasal verb **grow up** which means to gradually become an adult

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[00:06:56] So I think part of your interactions with people depends on how you perceive the people. If you enter the situation with preconceived notions about who these people are, it will inevitably have some effect on the way you interpret their actions and the way you treat them. This is what I call **projecting**¹⁰. You're taking your internal vision of who someone is and putting it on them, instead of letting them show you who they actually are without being judged. When you do this, you're likely to misinterpret all kinds of things and **reinforce**¹¹ all kinds of inaccurate beliefs that you already have.

[00:07:32] However, if you would've just taken the time to understand their culture and behavior, just a little bit better, not from your perspective, but from theirs, you might see that they aren't cold at all. They just have a different way of communicating and forming relationships.

[00:07:50] Problem number three. Maybe, if you understood the reason for the difference in cultural behavior, you would find a way to adapt and still make great friendships with the people you thought were cold and unapproachable. Now, technically it's not a problem. That's a statement, but subject number three or observation, number three, let's say it that way.

¹⁰ to wrongly imagine that someone else is feeling a particular emotion or desire when in fact it is you who feels this way

¹¹ If something reinforces an idea or opinion, it provides more proof or support for it and makes it seem true

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[00:08:10] You need to understand the culture and the **mindset**¹² of the people you're communicating with. I'm not saying you must adopt the culture or the mindset of those people, but you need to understand it. Your understanding of things **dictates**¹³ your perceptions and behavior, right? So the better your understanding of people is, the better your interactions with those people will be. And I am, of course, speaking in general terms.

[00:08:35] People spend so much time focused on the technical aspects of language, like grammar, vocabulary, words, pronunciation, et cetera. Now, of course, those things are really important when you're trying to learn a language. However, it seems to me that a lot of people don't understand that it's culture that dictates how the language is used. So if you want to sound like a native or make friends with natives, work with natives, you must understand how their culture influences their communication style. You don't have to change who you are just to make friends or be understood by being able to adapt your communication style to the current situation is a very valuable skill to have.

[00:09:20] Number four... I think. Maybe these people that you see as cold and unapproachable, maybe, just maybe they don't like you. You have to agree that it's a possibility, right? All those people that you think are super cold and rude or mean, or whatever it is, maybe they don't like you, maybe it's just you. It's possible.

¹² a person's way of thinking and their opinions

¹³ to influence something or make it necessary

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[00:09:48] I remember I was talking to this girl from Ecuador and she was helping me with my Spanish and I was helping her with her English. And when we first started talking, everything she said was like, so full of energy and emotion. It was actually quite **intoxicating**¹⁴ at first, you know, I liked it. It was a pleasure to talk to someone who seemed to be so full of life and so **charismatic**¹⁵, you know? It didn't really feel fake or forced at all. However, after a day or two, I noticed that she was like that all the time.

[00:10:19] Putting so much energy and emotion into every word **exaggerating**¹⁶ at times, you know, making the most mundane sentences and ideas sound **extraordinary**¹⁷ and extremely important. After a while, it started to feel very fake and very forced. "There's no way she's like this all the time." I thought to myself.

[00:10:41] The problem was that I simply didn't know. I hadn't had much experience with Ecuadorian people and I hadn't had much experience with her, the individual. So I really couldn't come to any conclusions about who she was or why she behaved the way she did. Then we had our first video call and she had that same **over-the-top**¹⁸, always excited, always joking, always happy to be here, type of energy, you know? And that smile, that type of smile that looked forced to me, you know what I'm saying?

¹⁴ making you feel happy, as if you are in a pleasant dream

¹⁵ the quality of being able to influence other people and attract their attention and admiration

¹⁶ to make something seem larger, more important, better, or worse than it really is

¹⁷ very unusual and special; different in type or greater in degree than the usual or ordinary

¹⁸ too extreme and not suitable, or demanding too much attention or effort, especially in an uncontrolled way

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[00:11:12] And she was trying to, like, tell jokes and create a friendly **atmosphere**¹⁹ in the first few minutes of the call and things like that. And although I see nothing wrong with that, it's just not the way I do things, you know? I'm not the type of person to force a relationship or go out of my way to show someone that I'm happy, engaged, approachable, or anything like that. If something isn't funny, I'm not going to laugh. If I don't have a reason to smile, I don't smile. If I don't have anything to say, then I don't speak. That's just the way I am.

[00:11:48] So after this girl tried to make a few jokes, she noticed this about me and she said, "Man, you Americans are really serious no?" And I responded, "No, you're just not funny." I could see in her face that she wasn't expecting me to say something like that. And maybe it hurt her feelings, I'm not sure. But the reason I told you that story is to **illustrate**²⁰ the point that we were two very different people from two very different countries, and we both interpreted our behavior in different ways.

[00:12:17] I'm not saying which interpretation was right or wrong or better or worse. I'm just saying that she thought I was being cold and serious, and I thought she was being fake. The truth is most likely that **neither**²¹ of those things were true. It was probably just a cultural misunderstanding or maybe an individual misunderstanding that had nothing to do with our culture.

¹⁹ the character, feeling, or mood of a place or situation

²⁰ to show the meaning or truth of something more clearly, especially by giving examples

²¹ not one and not the other of two things or people

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[00:12:39] It's the type of misunderstanding that happens every day when we don't take the time to understand the people we're talking to, and instead we simply make **assumptions**²² based on what we think we already know. Then we see the entire world through this lens of our assumptions, which only reinforces the assumptions we've made, because when you're looking for something, you're going to find it. In other words, if you believe that all people from a certain place are this way, you're naturally going to look for examples that confirm and reinforce that belief and ignore the cases that **contradict**²³ that belief.

[00:13:14] And that's what I mean by making **observations**²⁴ without context. We all have these ideas about the way the world works and the way people are, but most of the time, our ideas are just assumptions, not conclusions based on context or facts. All of these assumptions affect the way we talk, the way we interact, the places we go, the things we believe, the fears and insecurities we have, they affect everything we think and do.

[00:13:43] So I challenge you to take a moment and ask yourself:

[00:13:47] Are you seeing the world through your eyes or through your culture?

[00:13:50] OUTRO MUSIC

²² something that you accept as true, although you have no proof

²³ (of people) to state the opposite of what someone has said, or (of one fact or statement) to be so different from another fact or statement that one of them must be wrong

²⁴ a remark made about something you have noticed

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Key vocabulary

from time to time: occasionally

walks of life: socioeconomic status or background

Preconceived: (of an idea or opinion) formed before having the evidence for its truth or usefulness

Gigantic: of very great size or extent; huge or enormous

Such: in more formal situations, we can use 'such' to mean 'of this or that kind'

as fuck: (*rude slang*) - a phrase that usually follows an adjective as an intensifier

Interpret: to decide what the intended meaning of something is

Unapproachable: someone who is unapproachable seems unfriendly or a little frightening, so that other people are less likely to speak to them

grew up: the past tense of the phrasal verb grow up which means to gradually become an adult

Projecting: to wrongly imagine that someone else is feeling a particular emotion or desire when in fact it is you who feels this way

Reinforce: if something reinforces an idea or opinion, it provides more proof or support for it and makes it seem true

Mindset: a person's way of thinking and their opinions

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Dictates: to influence something or make it necessary

Intoxicating: making you feel happy, as if you are in a pleasant dream

Charismatic: the quality of being able to influence other people and attract their attention and admiration

Exaggerating: to make something seem larger, more important, better, or worse than it really is

Extraordinary: very unusual and special; different in type or greater in degree than the usual or ordinary

Over-the-top: too extreme and not suitable, or demanding too much attention or effort, especially in an uncontrolled way

Atmosphere: the character, feeling, or mood of a place or situation

Illustrate: to show the meaning or truth of something more clearly, especially by giving examples

Neither: not one and not the other of two things or people

Assumptions: something that you accept as true, although you have no proof

Contradict: (of people) to state the opposite of what someone has said, or (of one fact or statement) to be so different from another fact or statement that one of them must be wrong

Observations: a remark made about something you have noticed