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TEACHING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN A PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE COURSE

ABSTRACT

In the following article, we will discuss culture instruction and the necessity to include information about the native culture. Culture instruction can also include stereotypes in order to permit students to confront their own use of stereotypes. Then we discuss background information about culture, including self-construal, the distinction between independent and interdependent cultures, and paradigm shifting. This background information provides the basis for demonstrating how culture can be taught in a business German course by using, for example, marketing and culture assimilators.

Our ever increasingly globalized world makes it imperative that foreign language students be well prepared in order to compete in a global economy. To achieve this, young professionals need a mindset that is open to foreign cultures and facilitates international encounters, dealings, and decision-making (Rhinesmith, 1996). The following discussion will show how teachers can accomplish this through the use of culture in a professional language class. First a short review of culture in general, and of culture in foreign language instruction in particular, is necessary.

Teaching culture in a language course is often achieved through the use of culture tips. Palmer and Sharifian (2007) point out that learners acquire necessary cultural knowledge primarily through language and diagrams that only provide them with a glimpse of cultural “skeletons.” However, we need to go further and supply students with more background information and practical experience so that they better understand their own culture as well as the target culture. Palmer and Sharifian (2007) maintain that standard approaches to culture systematically apply categorization theory but do not require vivid cultural experience. Culture instruction in a course for the professions should stimulate students’ awareness and appreciation of underlying elements of their own culture and the target culture in general as well as business culture in particular. In culture instruction, learners are often shown how to bridge the gap between their own culture and another. However, it is not enough for them to learn how to enter the other culture on

its own terms (Kramsch, 1993). In a professional language course, students need to be aware of cultural boundaries, how to negotiate such boundaries of reality in the target business world, and concurrently prepare themselves to enter their own culture's workplace.

Therefore, teachers need to provide learners with the necessary cultural background knowledge and skills in order for them to become at least interculturally competent if not bicultural in order to succeed in a foreign work environment. But just providing the necessary cultural information is not enough: instructors need to guide their students' learning so that learners are able to competently navigate the L2 culture and freely switch between cultures at will. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how this can be achieved.

CULTURE INSTRUCTION

Culture study must include looking at the behavior and values of the majority of a particular cultural group that shape the group's observations and theories. Understanding and appreciating elements of another culture make it clear how important it is to provide cultural clues to language learners in order to assist them in a new environment. In order to be successful in a foreign work environment, students of culture need to know which values and behavior patterns of the target culture will assist people in their future endeavors in the new culture. Learners require guidance in developing their understanding of a foreign culture in order to achieve this goal (Valdes, 1986).

In this learning process, the inclusion of information about the native culture is paramount. For example, Sanders (1997) asserts that "American students typically lack awareness of the elements of American culture, taking their own milieu not for one possibility of living among many, but as the 'normal' way of life" (135). The inclusion of the study about native culture should make foreign language learners aware that the standards of their culture are not universal. By providing learners with information about their own culture and the target culture, we are expanding their "world knowledge" and supplying them with the basis to become interculturally competent. Scollon and Scollon (1995) define world knowledge as "encyclopedic" knowledge one has about a type of situation. This knowledge supplies the procedures or general knowledge that one needs in order to navigate a certain situation (58). Moreover, Rings (2000) maintains that this "world knowledge" is extremely culture specific.

In the process of making students interculturally competent, the instructor has the opportunity to openly confront preconceived stereotypes. Various

scholars (Weber, 1990; LaCerra and Bingham, 2002) assert that stereotypes are the result of a normal cognitive process. Through stereotypes human beings attempt to make sense of their worldly encounters. According to Weber (1990), if we critically confront stereotypes of the L2 culture, we acknowledge the implicit and pervasive presence of them. Exploring why stereotypes exist and to what extent the categorization is valid, we can contribute to our students' general knowledge base about the target culture as well as increase reflection on the foreign culture, the learners' own culture, and the process of forming judgments in general (137).

CULTURAL BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

One of the most popular models of culture makes contrasts between individualistic¹ and collectivistic societies (Hofstede, 2001; Oyserman and Lee, 2008; Triandis, "Culture," 2007). No construct in the study of culture has had more impact than the individualism-collectivism dichotomy. It is used to comprehend, explain, and predict cultural differences and similarities across an array of human behavior. The concept of individualism-collectivism refers to the amount of emphasis placed on the individual in contrast to the social group (Triandis, *Individualism*, 1995) and it appears in almost all cultural contexts in some form.

Individualism is concerned with oneself and one's immediate family or primary group and it emphasizes the individual. In this system, societal structures are highly regarded because they support individual happiness. Groups benefit individuals. On the other hand, collectivism is concerned with others and emphasizes the group. It highly regards societal structures and the keeping of traditions and values that preserve and enhance group resources. Individuals benefit groups, and collectivist group norms² will probably control individual behavior (Oyserman and Lee, 2008; Shiraev and Levy, 2001).

The prevalence, dominance, or the distribution of the individualism-collectivism emphasis will vary (Markus and Hamedani, 2007). The extent of

¹ In the literature, some researchers refer to individualistic cultures, while others call these cultures independent. In the case of collectivistic cultures, some researchers refer to this type of culture as interdependent.

² Bierbrauer et al. (1994) maintain that norms are broadly accepted standards of conduct and they are appropriate for controlling the behavior of societal members. Values are interesting standards of orientation in an individual's life. They include personal evaluations of any questionable behavior or practice and thus reflect to what extent the behavior or practice is appealing (191).

individualism and collectivism in a given society and its variations influence what has meaning and value, what requires continuing effort, and how one makes sense of oneself and others (Oyserman and Lee, 2008). Our perception of the world and our mentality are influenced by our culture, and the way we use cognitive content, procedures, and motivation is a good example of this (Oyserman and Lee, 2008). Oyserman and Lee (2008) define cognitive content as “culturally characteristic content that is relevant, moral, central, of consequence; procedures as culturally characteristic ways of thinking and making sense of oneself, others and the world; and culturally characteristic motivations as to self-enhance or self-improve, to assert confidence and leadership or not to offend” (238). These elements make up what “goes without saying, that which feels transparent, right, and logical in context” (238).

Westerners seem to approach the world “analytically” and divide what they perceive into individual parts. Easterners seem to tackle the world more “holistically”; they perceive the whole and emphasize the interconnectivity of all things (Doidge, 2007; Na and Choi, 2009; Nisbett and Masuda, 2006). Oyserman and Lee (2008) challenge the concept of a sole “Western” culture and the simplistic manner of contrasting “East vs. West.” Studies of the analytical vs. holistic approaches show that Anglo-Americans tend to be more individualistic than Western Europeans and much more than Asians (Oyserman and Lee, 2008). And Oyserman and Lee (2008) maintain that Anglo-Americans and people from other English-speaking nations differ little on individualism and collectivism. In sum, English-speaking cultural groups demonstrate less collectivism than Western Europeans and much less than Asians.

Scholars (Cohen, 2001; Oyserman and Lee, 2008; Oyserman et al., 2002) remind us that all cultures are based on evolutionary and natural selection with similar adaptive needs. All societies probably provide sufficient experience of both individualism and collectivism. Consequently, both concepts are relevant in any given culture and are applied depending on the situation, and they are not discrete opposites (Oyserman and Lee, 2008).

SELF-CONSTRUAL

Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue that our cognition, emotion, and motivation vary, depending on whether one’s culture supplies individuals with an independent or an interdependent self-construal. Western cultures exhibit an independent self typified by a self-contained and context-independent entity, and Asian cultures demonstrate an interdependent self focusing on belonging to, and dependent on, a context (Lin et al., 2008). Dixon (2007), Harb and Smith (2008), Kobayashi (2005), Marian and Kaushanskaya (2004), and

Markus and Kitayama (1991) examine the fact that an individual's concept of self is shaped partly by internalizing cultural characteristics rooted in a given culture. North American and European cultures usually value autonomy, individualism, self-realization, self-confidence, and independent agency, and these features are highly developed in those cultures and direct one's self-concept.

Non-Western cultures are more likely to value and promote social cohesion, connectedness, and collective agency, mirrored in a person's self-concept (Dixon, 2007; Friedlmeier et al., 2007; Harb and Smith, 2008; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). This type of interdependent self-construal appears to be more dependent on the context or situation (Harb and Smith, 2008; Singelis and Brown, 1995). Kühnen et al. (2001) argue that interdependent self-construals promote context-dependent thinking. The independent self is most clearly found in various segments of North American culture and in many western European cultures, while interdependent self-construal is found in Asian, African, Latin American, and many southern European cultures (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

Self-construal across cultures can differ significantly. Even within a given culture, people may use either independent or interdependent self-construal to various degrees in different circumstances (Harb and Smith, 2008; Krishna et al., 2008; Oyserman and Lee, 2008; Park and Ahn, 2008). Individuals' self-construal markedly influences how they sample, process, and retain information from their surroundings. Self-construal affects, and in some situations determines, an individual's experience; this is due to the importance of the self in influencing human behavior (Kwang, 2005, 66). Independent selves tend to be more sensitive and responsive to information that emphasizes their personal roles, feelings, and thoughts (Marian and Kaushanskaya, 2004; Wang and Ross, 2005), which has a positive effect on independent self-construal. This in turn influences creative (unique) behavior positively (Kim and Markus, 1999; Kwang, 2005). In contrast, interdependent selves are more attuned to information revolving around social interactions and collective activities rather than independent selves (Marian and Kaushanskaya, 2004; Wang and Ross, 2005), which influences interdependent self-construal negatively while having a positive effect on conforming behavior (Kwang, 2005).

Understanding the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures provides language/culture learners a real advantage in becoming interculturally competent. This is true even for the students whose native group is an individualistic culture and the target culture is also an individualistic one, as in our case of English-speaking natives learning German business culture.

In my opinion, this can perhaps be even more of a challenge than learning a collectivistic culture because the differences between two individualistic cultures are much more subtle.

PARADIGMS AND PARADIGM SWITCHING

As a member of a culture, we possess that culture's beliefs, values, and perspectives, unconsciously applying them to anything we do. When learning a new language, this limited outlook will not always be appropriate for the target culture. Ferguson (1980) calls this type of outlook a paradigm. "A paradigm is a framework of thought . . . a scheme for understanding and explaining certain aspects of reality" (Ferguson, 1980, 26). Barker (1993) has defined a paradigm as "a set of rules and regulations (written or unwritten) that does two things: 1. it establishes or defines boundaries; and 2. it tells you how to behave inside the boundaries in order to be successful" (32). Eggert (1998) maintains that a paradigm is normally taken for granted and it is viewed as common sense, a normal way of making sense of things that one has in common with others. This set of fundamental assumptions and patterns supplies methods, roles, procedures, language, and structures that shape the foundation of our culture (2). Eggert (1998) believes that a paradigm is the most fundamental level of one's map of the world that one uses to maneuver in everyday encounters. Paradigms function as the basis for the metaphors, theories, and images that organize the framework of intellectual constructs we usually use (2).

Lehman et al. (2004) argue that cultural paradigms within the field of intercultural differences are ". . . a set of socially shared practices, norms, values, and other mental events that are loosely organized around some common theme" (695). They direct meaning construction in many areas of social life. The most widely researched cultural paradigms highlight two overlapping conceptual distinctions, independent and interdependent self-construal and collectivism and individualism (Lehman et al., 2004, 695). Cultural paradigms assist individuals and groups in solving complex problems of socialization. Culture is a basic element in an individual's physical and social environments that is unavoidable. Culture has everlasting consequences on an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Lehman et al., 2004, 695).

People frequently use varying cultural paradigms in diverse contexts. Through extensive experience abroad in non-native cultural settings, an individual can develop different cultural identities that result in a fusion of various cultural beings. The cultural need of a particular situation will determine which cultural paradigm needs to be used. This results in an individual's

cultural identities diverging and converging depending on the circumstances. Hong et al. (2000) and Lehman et al. (2004) call this type of flexibility “cultural frame switching,” while Barker (1993) calls it “paradigm switching.”

Cultural frame switching research has demonstrated that cultural paradigms work as consensually validated interpretive tools. Individuals with much multicultural experience probably possess more tools than mono-cultural people do. The manner in which individuals manage their multicultural identities affects how they choose among the different tools at their disposal. Cultural paradigms demonstrate important identity expression functions. Some bicultural people view their dual cultural identities as oppositional, while others see them as independent or complementary (Lehman et al., 2004, 702).

Individuals become bicultural naturally, from living in certain situations in which they negotiate and direct their own pathways. But what does this mean for learners of a foreign language and its culture? According to Byram (2008), people become intercultural by learning under the direction of a teacher in a classroom setting. During this process, the instructor has certain hopes and goals for the students that contribute to the learner’s education as personal development (59), through which the teacher can influence students to become interculturally competent. Because foreign language learners have often little if any natural exposure to the L2 culture, and in our case business culture, we need to provide them with the opportunity to become interculturally competent. But through which means?

CLASSROOM IMPLEMENTATION

In the following discussion, the following teaching suggestions will demonstrate how the information pertaining to culture and cultural paradigms can be incorporated into the teaching of Professional German. The following examples come from a fourth-year business German course. The general introduction to the paradigms of individualistic and collectivistic cultures takes place at the beginning of the course because it is relevant to discussions held in class about intercultural communication, e.g., the effect of intercultural communication on advertising and marketing (see Appendix 1 for class schedule).

To introduce the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures, the class read the following two descriptions in German, which were displayed on an overhead projector:

- Concerned with oneself and one’s immediate family or primary group; competitive strategies.

- Concerned with others and care for traditions and values; group norms are likely to control individual behavior; harmony-enhancing strategies.

Students were asked to decide which description best described American culture and which best described Chinese culture. Discussion in German revealed students' ideas and impressions of these two cultural groups. Some students tended to be skeptical about the validity of these descriptions. Another concern students had was whether these descriptions were valid because globalization is having such a great influence on all cultures. However, several of the Chinese students in the class confirmed that the second description was a good one for their culture, and that the fundamentals of Chinese culture still remain the same even though globalization is having a great effect on their culture. Scholars (Ng and Han, 2009) within the field of cultural psychology confirm this.

This discussion led to a discussion about which description was best for Americans and Germans. Students were well aware of differences between American and German cultures, and these discussions made clear to students that such differences depend on culture and situation. It became obvious to the students that American culture would always be more individualistic (description one). However, if the descriptions were applied to German and Chinese cultures, German culture was seen as more individualistic.

The goal with this type of activity is to introduce students to the concepts of individualistic and collectivistic cultures and to make them aware that those people considered more or less individualistic or collectivistic will depend on the cultures compared. Hofstede (2001) has proposed a ranking of individualism-collectivism (individualism at the top and collectivism at the bottom); the cultures in the top four positions are the United States, Australia, Great Britain, and Canada, respectively. German-speaking countries rank much lower, approximately in the middle of the list.

Solomon and Schell (2009) have proposed ranking business groups according to their group focus. They maintain that "group focus describes whether people identify themselves as part of a group or by their individual responsibility and whether work should be a collective output or a series of individual contributions" (98; see Table 1). On the left side of the table is the individual group, and on the right side, the group focus category, with three additional groups located between. Canada, New Zealand, and the United States are listed in the individual group, and Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam, for example, in the group focus category. The German-speaking

countries are found in the other three groups; Switzerland is in the group next to the individualistic category, Germany in the middle group, and Austria in the group next to the group focus category. In either the Hofstede or the Solomon and Schell system, we see that German-speaking countries are ranked as more collectivistic than Anglo-American cultures (e.g., the United States and Canada).

Table 1: Group Focus

Individual-Oriented			Group-Oriented	
United States	Australia	Argentina	Austria	Japan
New Zealand	Netherlands	Germany	Brazil	Malaysia
Canada	Switzerland	Hong Kong	Mexico	Indonesia
	Belgium	Portugal	Philippines	South Korea
	Poland	France	Turkey	Vietnam

(Adapted from Solomon and Schell, 2009, 98)

Solomon and Schell's ranking system provides information for an in-class discussion about why there are variations among the German-speaking countries. The Swiss are probably more individualistic than the Germans and the Austrians because of the Calvinistic tradition in Switzerland. Students quickly understood these ideas presented and came up with their own conclusions about why the Austrians were more collectivistic. The expanse and exposure of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire provided Austrians with much contact and exposure to collectivistic cultures in Eastern Europe. In addition, the occupation by the Ottoman Empire probably had collectivistic effects on Austrian culture. This discussion ended by talking about the differences between the former East and West Germanys in that East German culture tended to be more collectivistic than West German culture.

The homework assignment following this lesson called for students to read the article "Consumer Self-Constructed and Cross-Cultural Marketing Communications: Theory and Implications" by Wang (2008), which provided information about these two types of culture in a business context. This article shows how the concept of individualistic and collectivistic cultures can be applied to advertising and marketing. It served as the basis for another in-class discussion in German, and student reactions during the class discussion were positive. They found it interesting to see how these concepts can be applied to a business situation. Again the Chinese students in class provided

good information about their culture and the effects of North American and European advertising on China.

At the beginning of this particular lesson, students received a list of possible German words and terms that they might find helpful for the class discussion and for the following homework assignment. The homework assignment required students to write a summary of the article in German and include any ideas or comments they might have about the article and the concept of individualistic and collectivistic cultures. In general, the writing assignment demonstrated that students understood and were able to work with the concepts presented in the article. Even though students had received a list with necessary vocabulary, they had trouble expressing their thoughts on the subject in German.

To conclude this section on individualistic/collectivistic cultures, students completed an assimilator that incorporated the information about individualistic/collectivistic cultures. Various scholars (Brislin, 2009; Fiedler et al., 1971; Seelye, 1993) have suggested using culture assimilators to practice critical cultural incidents. A culture assimilator provides learners with a critical incident of intercultural interaction in which a North American and a native of the target culture interact. This situation can be puzzling or conflictive for both parties, or misinterpreted by both cultural groups. However, if students are supplied with sufficient background information about the target culture, the situation can be interpreted in a rather unequivocal way (Seelye, 1993, 162).

When using culture assimilators, learners read a culture episode (a problematic situation) and choose the best possible solution from a group of four answers, then they receive feedback to redirect any possible errors in their choices. Culture assimilators have three advantages: (1) they are fun, (2) they actively involve learners with an intercultural problem, and (3) they are effective (Seelye, 1993, 162). Brislin (2009) maintains that assimilators provide good examples that help elucidate complex concepts and they concretize concepts that otherwise might elude learners. Bhawuk (2001) believes that culture assimilators can provide information that is useful in understanding a broad range of intercultural adjustment issues.

Bhawuk (2001) and Brislin (2009) provide a good culture assimilator for business people to use in working with these cultural concepts (see Appendix 2). After completing this assimilator, the in-class discussion showed that the assimilator was helpful in providing students practical experience with the cultural information by supplying a realistic example. Because students found this type of activity useful, they later completed other assimilators on other

intercultural topics. (See Schmidt, 2002, for other assimilators for intercultural differences between the United States and Germany.)

The differences between an individualistic and a collectivistic culture can be found in the use of varying paradigms in a given situation. The paradigm differences between German and American cultures are usually very subtle; however, they can easily hinder successful cross-cultural communication. Hager ("Using the Media," 2002) points out that German companies believe it necessary to have abundant background information about their business counterparts to expedite their mutual dealings. Schmidt (2002) maintains that Germans value details, while Americans value unconventional thinking. In my opinion, not only are details important for Germans but also an abundance of information so that they are able to gather abundant information in order to be able to make thorough and effective decisions. This is a trait of collectivistic cultures. Unconventional thinking is more a trait of individualistic cultures (see discussion above by Kwang, 2005). Hager ("Using German," 2005) has pointed out that it is important to discuss such differences for various reasons: students may perceive their own culture differently than the counterpart culture does, instructors need to continually make learners aware of their use of stereotypes and the advantages and disadvantages of doing so, and the teacher has the opportunity to make North American students aware that their standards are not universal.

CONCLUSION

By doing activities such as those listed above, learners are compelled to better understand their own cultural viewpoints and those of their counterparts. These types of exercises simultaneously challenge the learner's self-construal, cultural identity, and worldview. This may result in the student experiencing a lasting change in self-concept, attitudes, and behavior, which ideally leads to greater openness toward other individuals and cultures, as well as an increased desire to interact with other peoples (Bateman, 2002).

In this article, background information about culture and how it can affect our *Weltanschauung* were presented. It was demonstrated how the interconnectedness of diverse cultural components that make up a unified body of beliefs, practices, values, and ideas can be utilized in culture instruction. Through the teaching examples provided, we can see how it is possible to achieve Rhinesmith's goal (1996) of providing young professionals with a mindset that is open to foreign cultures and facilitates international encounters, dealings, and decision-making. In addition, this type of culture instruction

allows the instructor to show students how to bridge the gap between their own culture and another and simultaneously learn how to enter the other culture on its own terms, thus fulfilling Kramsch's criterion (1993) for culture instruction mentioned at the beginning of this article.

APPENDIX 1 COURSE SCHEDULE

Tentative Course Outline

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Woche (4. Jan. 2010) | Kapitel drei |
| 2. Woche (11. Jan. 2010) | Kapitel drei |
| 3. Woche (18. Jan. 2010) | Interkulturelle Kommunikation |
| 4. Woche (25. Jan. 2010) | Interkulturelle Kommunikation |
| 5. Woche (1. Feb. 2010) | Werbung |
| 6. Woche (8. Feb. 2010) | Werbung |
| | Test Eins am Freitag |

Break

vom 15.2. bis 19.2.10

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 7. Woche (22. Feb. 2010) | Internationales Marketing |
| 8. Woche (1. März 2010) | Kapitel vier |
| 9. Woche (8. März 2010) | Kapitel vier |
| 10. Woche (15. März 2010) | Die EU |
| 11. Woche (22. März 2010) | Die EU und Kapitel fünf |
| 12. Woche (29 März 2010) | Kapitel fünf |
| | Test Zwei am Freitag |

APPENDIX 2

CULTURE ASSIMILATOR

Mr. McCann, vice president of procurement of a garment distributor, had emailed a letter to Mr. Coloso, his Mexican supplier, to come and see him in Los Angeles to discuss “an important matter” for which he, McCann, was getting flak from his superior. Mr. Coloso called him and said that he had to attend to a number of personal engagements, and he would visit Los Angeles in two weeks. Mr. McCann was incredulous and did not hide his displeasure, and he hung up on a puzzled Mr. Coloso.

Mr. Coloso arrived in Los Angeles to see Mr. McCann four days later. After some pleasantries, Mr. McCann pulled out contract papers and told Mr. Coloso that according to these papers, the Mexican company could be billed a late delivery fee for two recent consignments.

Mr. Coloso was pleased that his company had done business with Mr. McCann’s organization for many years and that they had always provided high-quality garments. However, delivery deadlines were missed because of a local political problem, which had disrupted productions. Mr. McCann did not seem interested in hearing about this problem. Mr. Coloso appeared to be confused and upset.

What is happening here? Focus on cultural differences.

1. Mr. McCann knows how to deal with suppliers who do not meet deadlines. He is right in dealing with Mr. Coloso firmly.
2. Mr. Coloso is not used to this brusque and uncaring style of management.
3. Mr. Coloso is upset that he could not convince Mr. McCann of the genuineness of his case.
4. Mr. McCann is worried that he may lose his job.

Students read explanations corresponding to their choices.

1. This is the approach that many American and European (individualist) managers take when dealing with managers from collectivistic cultures. There

is an element of truth that many collectivist managers need to be pushed a bit to keep their deadlines in focus. However, for Mr. McCann to think that Mr. Coloso came to see him because of his firmness is rather parochial. Please choose again.

2. Among Latinos there is the concept of *simpatico*, which means being pleasant and interpersonally sensitive. In other collectivistic cultures (e.g., in Asia), smooth interpersonal relations are valued, and people make efforts to be agreeable even in demanding situations and are willing to adjust their behavior to fit in. They are also expected to be sensitive to interpersonal relationships developed over time and to explore problem solving through these relationships rather than refer to formal legal contracts. This is the best response.

3. It is quite plausible that Mr. Coloso feels dejected because he could not make Mr. McCann understand his limitations and that the political problems would not cause permanent difficulties. However, there is a more pressing issue here. Please choose again.

4. While always possible in fast-moving economies where job security is always tenuous, this is not the best answer given the advice to focus on cultural differences. Please choose again.

(Culture assimilator and possible answers
from Brislin, 2009, 388–89)

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