

# 15 Cultural reference

While you're living in your host country and talking to native speakers, you might hear things that you don't understand. Sometimes the reason you don't understand things is that people are using vocabulary that you don't know, or have an accent that you haven't heard before. Other times however, it could be because they're using cultural references that you don't know.

## What is cultural reference?

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A cultural reference is when people refer to something that relates to the culture of a country. It might be something historic that happened to that country some time ago or it might be something that is being reported in the news that day. Native speakers use cultural references to bond with each other as they're discussing shared experiences and knowledge.

In lectures, cultural references will also come up very often, and you may find them in the texts you have to read for your course as well. Cultural references are difficult for international students to understand as they haven't been in the country long. Even English speakers from other countries struggle with cultural references as they don't have the same shared cultural knowledge or experience. Cultural references are also not only specific to the country you're in. In cities, towns, or communities there may be cultural references that are specific to the people of that area.

Let's look at an example. If you're studying in the US and you're having a conversation with someone about a colleague's excellent predictions, and outcomes of stock

market behavior during a major presentation in the US, the person might say, “Wow, you’re better than the Oracle of Omaha!” You might then stand there, wondering what on Earth that means. The Oracle of Omaha in fact refers to Warren Buffet, who is from, and continues to live, in Omaha, Nebraska, USA. He is one of the wealthiest men in America, and one of the greatest investors in history, who has made his fortune mostly by making excellent predictions, like an oracle, of what will happen in the stock market. In this context, your colleague is trying to say that your predictions about the market could be as good as Warren Buffet’s. If you said “the Oracle of Omaha” in Britain, they probably wouldn’t know what you meant.

### **Why can cultural reference be so difficult to understand?**

Cultural reference takes a long time to build up through reading, conversation, and spending time in the host country. It often refers to things you don’t know about yet. It often uses unfamiliar language. And it can be very, very local. There can be huge cultural reference items to learn from country to country, region to region, or city to city. From the classroom, to a job, to a neighborhood, city, region, or country, there is always so much culture to learn.

For some students, cultural reference is less of a challenge because they come from quite similar cultures. If you’re from Costa Rica, for example, and you’re studying in the US, you’ll already understand a lot about the basics of the culture because you share a Christian background and Western philosophy. It would also help that you come from a country that’s geographically near to the US as you would have heard about your neighbor on the news, etc.

## Topics to research

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It's often difficult to know where to start when trying to improve cultural understanding and awareness. Here we'll highlight the topics that you should focus on. Many of your professors/lecturers will assume you already have a basic understanding of most of the topics listed.

### Education

The descriptions in this section act as a guide to the history of Western and Eastern education systems. It doesn't mean that they're always one way or the other, or true of all schools or systems right now. However, it's important for you to recognize the differences between the philosophies. The more you know about Western education, the easier it will be to understand what your professors/lecturers are doing, and what's expected of you as a student.

#### Western education

The education systems of Western countries were originally influenced by Ancient Greece and its philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. They have also been influenced by Christianity and Judaism over the centuries. These traditions passed down basic beliefs that affected the education systems of the Western countries. These beliefs include:

- The student is expected to actively participate in the classroom.
- The teacher is a guide, not the “holder of all knowledge.”
- Critical thinking is the goal for the student.
- Classroom discussion and questioning of ideas is expected.

#### Eastern education

Eastern education philosophy has been influenced by many different religions and philosophies, including Confucianism,

Taoism, Islam, and Hinduism. Although nations from the Middle East to East Asia have been going through a big change in their education systems in recent years, they have traditionally been based on the following ideas:

- The student is expected to sit quietly and listen.
- The teacher is the holder of knowledge.
- Traditional memorization methods, such as rote memorization (learning through repetition) have been the norm.
- Discussion is not often a big part of classes, and students are not often asked for opinions.

Knowing that your professor/lecturer is from England (a Western culture) will help you to understand why he or she asks you to share your opinion on the reading assignments in class. This knowledge comes from an understanding of the basics of Western educational philosophy. This is just one example of thousands that shows how culture can affect learning.

## Religion

Christianity is the traditional religion of Western culture and, although many people have stopped practicing the religion today, it still affects everything from holidays throughout the year to film and literature and how people think and behave.

A major thing to note here is that most English-speaking countries are diverse. For example, London is home to the biggest Hindu temple in Europe and has hundreds of mosques, including one that has room for 10,000 people. There are also a large number of non-believers in English-speaking countries. All beliefs are represented.

### Study tip:

Read about the basics of Christianity, focusing especially on vocabulary. You'll be amazed how often its influence

comes into conversation and reading. If you're really keen to understand Christian references, say, for literature classes, look online for websites that explain these (e.g. [www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/bible-phrases-sayings.html](http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/bible-phrases-sayings.html)), or try reading parts of the Bible. You can also buy Bibles adapted for ESL students to make it easier on yourself, as the language in the Bible is quite old-fashioned.

## History

Each region of the world has historical events that people in that region are expected to know. For example, when someone says the name, Adolf Hitler, or talks about "The Blitz," they all know that that person is talking about World War II. These words are examples of common cultural reference points.

### Study tip:

Read timelines on the Internet to help you understand the key events of the country you're studying in. You can also look up things such as "important historical figures of Australia" or "the wars of the British Empire," to learn more detail about individuals or key events in history.

## Politics

Politics can be an important subject for you to get some understanding of. If you know something about it, it can help you to understand the arguments that might go on between the locals around you at times.

### Study tip:

Make sure you know at least the basics. For example, learn the names of the political parties, who the President or Prime Minister is, and the symbols or colors of the different groups. Try to learn the basics of what each party supports as well.

## Current events

“Current events” refers to what’s happening in the news. The focus that each country has on local and world events can be quite different. At college/university, you’ll be expected in most situations to have an awareness of what’s happening in the news of your host country, and the wider regional and world news. This information can help you a great deal as an icebreaker in conversation, or to be able to follow conversations that other people are having about the latest news.

### Study tip:

Don’t just rely on the news from your country. Try to watch or listen to the news in your host country. Skim major news websites in your study country, such as [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com) (US), [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk) (UK), or [www.abc.gov.au/news](http://www.abc.gov.au/news) (Australia). There are good programs that you can watch including Fareed Zakaria’s GPS on CNN. You can also listen to programs on the BBC World Service to hear many viewpoints on current events.

Remember that there are two reasons it’s good to do this: you want to learn what’s happening from the perspective of someone from the English-speaking world that you’re based in, and you also want to practice your English and learn new vocabulary. Watching Al-Jazeera in Arabic, or reading China’s *Guangzhou Daily* newspaper isn’t going to help improve your English vocabulary.

## The arts

The arts includes all the creative arts, from dance to painting, literature to film and music. This is a fun subject area, because it also includes pop culture (popular culture), which includes famous people or celebrities such as Lady Gaga or Kim Kardashian.

Pop culture is perfect for conversations at parties.

**Study tip:**

To get a quick working knowledge of who people are in pop culture, buy a few gossip magazines, or look at entertainment websites. Although it's fun to know all about Lady Gaga or Brangelina (Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie), you should also learn something about the greats of the arts, such as Ludwig van Beethoven or William Shakespeare. Do some research online.

**Sports**

Like most countries, English-speaking countries are generally crazy about sports. Lots of people support their local team, and learning about the local teams is one way you can get chatting to people. Sporting terms make their way into all aspects of life. In the US, baseball has created an amazing number of idioms in American English. This is, of course, the same for Australian Rules Football in Australia, cricket in the UK (e.g. "to be bowled over," which means "to be amazed"), or rugby in New Zealand. Idioms are used a lot in spoken language, including lectures, so it's good to pay attention to them.

**Study tip:**

There are great websites related to sports-related language. It's also a good idea to try to watch or attend some of the most popular sports events in your host country. It'll help you to understand references, but also help you make small talk when you meet people for the first time. If you're at a college/university in North America, there will be dozens of teams that play for your school to go and cheer on.

**Business**

Culture affects business too. Whether it's the history of the Industrial Revolution, manufacturing in your host country, or the famous business leaders that everyone should know,

there's lots to learn about the business culture of your host country.

**Study tip:**

Read business-related magazines such as *Fortune* and *The Economist*, or newspapers such as *Financial Times* and *New York Times*. You can also get lots of information about business and the big names in it from cable news networks and websites such as [www.bloomberg.com](http://www.bloomberg.com). You don't need to read the whole article and understand every word. Skim read them and get an idea of the big players.

## **General ways to improve your cultural understanding**

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### **Reading**

We know you've already got plenty of reading to do for your classes. However, reading a lot all the time can build up your knowledge of the culture as well as help you to increase your reading speed. Read online, especially encyclopedias such as Wikipedia (but remember that you cannot cite from it in your academic writing). Reading history textbooks from high school classes is a good place to start. You can read a page or two while you're eating your breakfast. Take in small bits of information regularly, over a day, a week, or a month. Reading advertisement slogans on billboards is interesting too. See if you can work out what the advert is about. Reading fiction is also a great way to learn more about a culture or society. Choose a book set in America if that's where you're studying.

### **Chatting**

Though reading is of course important, nothing is better than learning culture directly from conversations with



local people. If you're in a social situation, and you don't understand a reference that someone has made, don't be shy. Explain that this is something about the culture you don't really understand. Most people will be happy to try to explain it to you. It may also interest them to know that it's something specific to their culture as they may not realize this.

## **Listening to radio talk shows**

There are many wonderful talk shows on the radio about current events, or other very specific subjects. In the UK, the BBC has many great stations, such as Radio 4 ([www.bbc.co.uk/radio4](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4)). In the US, the National Public Radio (NPR) and the local state versions help you to learn about culture on a national and state level.

## **Watching TV**

How many times have you heard people say they've learned English by watching TV? You can also learn a lot about culture. Try watching shows together with native English-speakers so that you can ask about references as they come up. Seeing how they react to the programs will also teach you a lot. For example, if you watch the latest popular comedy, you'll find out what exactly local people find funny. (Don't forget though that if someone is watching their favorite show, they may not want to be interrupted all the time. You need to check with your "TV buddy" first). Watching TV commercials can also be a great way to learn more about the society you're living in, because they show you what sort of marketing works on people.

## **Watching movies and documentaries**

Movies are another hugely popular way to learn about culture. Big Hollywood movies and smaller independents will be full of references. Try to watch some documentaries

as well. They will be about very specific issues and often relate directly to what a country is concerned with or feels needs to be talked about. It can be useful to put the English subtitles on while you're watching, so that you don't miss some of the references.

## **Getting out and about to experience cultural events with native-speaker students**

Try to join local groups or make friends with people who like to attend festivals, concerts, go to museums, or have fun doing any other social activity. If you're in Ireland on St. Patrick's Day (March 17), make sure you do something related to the day. Watch a bonfire on Guy Fawkes' Night (November 5) in the UK. Join in with Thanksgiving (the last Thursday in November) celebrations in the US. Whatever it is, just get out and have fun while learning at the same time.

Think about which parts of culture are most directly related to your major/course. If you're short of time, a good way to start is to focus on whatever part of the culture you think is most relevant to your major/course. If you're studying medicine or social work, learning about life and death, and the way families deal with such things, will be most beneficial. If you're doing an MBA, focus on business culture, pop culture, and sports (the pop culture and sports can be useful for small talk when meeting a new client).