

Out of the box

M-Time Teachers Meet P-Time Students

by Roger Grainger

One of Rudyard Kipling's ballads contains the hoary line, "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." With apologies to Kipling, I would change that to say, "North is North, and South is South, and perhaps the twain shall meet."

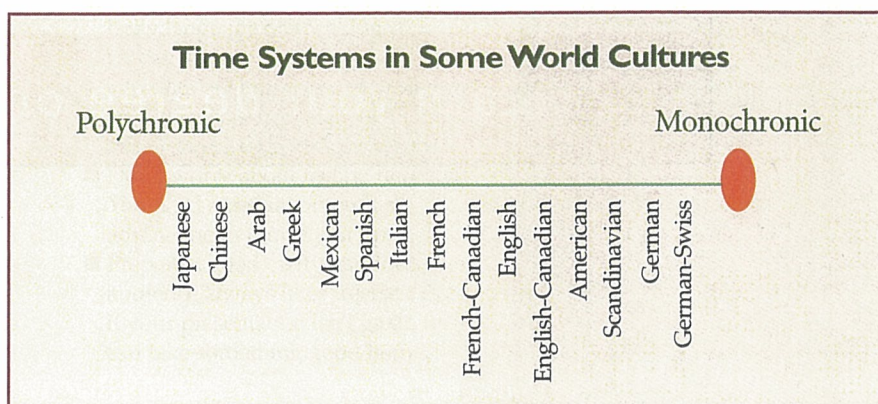
Where different concepts of time are concerned, the changed line may contain more truth than poetry. Since time is a human construct, how different cultures view time has strong cross-cultural implications for ESL teachers raised within one time system but working with students from an utterly different one. According to Hall (2000), two different views of time exist; these views can have an effect on teacher-student interaction.

Time as a Cultural Concept

Cultures with a single-track view of time are said to be *monochronic* (m-time); they are generally Northern cultures and are most comfortable accomplishing tasks one at a

time according to a schedule. Cultures with a multitrack view of time are said to be *polychronic* (p-time); these are generally Southern cultures and view events as happening in all dimensions concurrently. A scale of a sampling of world cultures from primarily polychronic to primarily monochronic (with some exceptions) would be as shown below.

Anglo-Americans are practically an m-culture stereotype in the way they tend to commodify time and emphasize efficiency. They are obsessed with controlling time. Whereas Latin, Arab, and many Asian cultures are considered p-time, emphasizing relationships and the ever-unfolding



present, mainstream U.S. culture (especially as manifested in the worlds of business and academia) is very much m-time, placing the emphasis on schedules and discrete time units (Hall 2000).

According to this widely referenced perspective, p-time cultures are more oriented toward people, and any appointment or plan can be changed at the last minute to accommodate the unpredictable needs of social relationships. Similarly, these cultures may not recognize conversation queues, and long waits are expected. M-time cultures, on the other hand, tend to "make a fetish out of [time] management" (Hall 1989, cited in Crabtree and Sapp 2004, 105), similarly valuing order in turn taking and completion of one task before moving on to the next.

Although there are certainly variations in the adherence to m-time and p-time within cultures, the important point is that moving from one time orientation to the other can produce a great deal of frustration as well as cross-cultural misunderstanding.

Time Warp

Events on the first day of an intensive three-week ESL course in Brazil illustrate how the move from m-time to p-time can create frustration for an m-time teacher; in this case an Anglo-American (Crabtree and Sapp 2004).

The first morning of this course, a welcome by various school officials and student introductions consumed nearly a third of the class period. After the introductions ended, the teacher eagerly began the class with a minilecture about time from a cross-cultural perspective, noting that in the United States people tend to view time as money to be made, spent, gambled, wasted, or lost. Checking her watch, the teacher reminded the students that she had a very ambitious course schedule, so it was time to "get down to business."

These first moments of class were an example of the asynchrony produced by the presence of an m-time teacher in a p-time classroom. The Brazilians interpreted the teacher's obvious impatience on the first day variously as personal rudeness, professional arrogance, or basic ignorance of the auspiciousness accorded the occasion from the Brazilian perspective.

What is wrong with this picture? The first error was the U.S. teacher's failure to remind herself she was in a p-time culture during the introductions. Self-correcting from an m-time to a p-time mind-set can often be accomplished simply by taking a deep breath and relaxing. This means, among other things, no obvious checking of the clock. During her introduction, the teacher could have made a gracious statement about welcoming the opportunity to spend the coming three weeks with the students. The minilecture might have been replaced with a tactfully worded suggestion that, since there was a great deal of work to be done in such a short period, the class would be conducted "on American time." Lesson plans should have been reevaluated to see what elements could be omitted.

"You're Late!" "No, You Are Too Prompt!"

Obviously, not everyone falls into one or the other group, but these different time orientations can be a major source of frustration when m-time people and p-time people interact. A Mexican student (p-time), for example, might make an appointment to meet a U.S. teacher (m-time) at 2:00 p.m., then appear at 2:30 p.m. fully expecting to meet the teacher. The time-bound p-time teacher complains, "You are always late." But the p-time student complains, "You are always prompt!" Teachers in p-time cultures should have plenty of work to do during office hours and be prepared to remain available even beyond the stated time limits.

A classic, if slightly more exotic, illustration of p-time culture behavior is the *dhiwan* held by Saudi Arabian leaders, in which a large chamber is set aside on particular days of the week for people to present themselves to the leader and talk to him and various other officials.

Multiple conversations proceed simultaneously. The leader greets person A warmly and talks with him intently for a few minutes. Then person B presents himself, and the leader greets him warmly and shifts his attention to him for a while, then shifts back to person A until person C presents himself and starts yet another conversation with the leader, who juggles conversations among all three guests. People raised in p-time cultures are quite comfortable with this arrangement. ▶

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