

# Ethics in the Language Classroom: Gift Giving Culture

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## Gift Giving Scripts

While it is a common practice in many cultures, gift giving can create moral dilemmas for the teachers. What should a teacher do when she receives an expensive gift from her students a week prior to the final exam? If she accepts the gift, is she obliged to give them a better grade? If she refuses it, will she hurt the students' feelings? This article taps into this ethical issue in language teaching by drawing on the concept of script theory, which can be roughly defined as people's knowledge of the patterns that underlie common social practices, such as the prop, manner, timing, and roles of the giver and the receiver in gift giving. In a culturally diverse environment like the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, developing an awareness of the gift giving scripts across different cultures is important for both the students and the teachers, as the timing and the cost can distinguish a gift from a bribe.

## Examples of Cultural Differences

In some cultures, gift giving and receiving may involve presenting and accepting the gift in a specific manner. For example, in Zambia, the script for giving involves the gift giver being on their knees while presenting the gift with their right arm extended and the left arm supporting the right elbow. In China, a common gift receiving etiquette is to reject the offer three times before accepting it. Once the gift has been accepted, it is expected that the receiver will return a nicer gift. In Japan, where teachers hold a unique social status, the students may feel obligated to repay the teachers as a way of expressing their gratitude and respect. The fact that gift giving scripts vary from one culture to another can raise ethical questions for teachers. On the one hand, it is difficult for teachers to accept gifts from their students when the gifts are too personal, expensive, and given at an inappropriate time, such as right before an exam. On the other hand, refusing one's gifts may be deemed as a breach of etiquette and could hurt one's feelings.

## Raising Awareness about Gift Giving Practices in the Classroom

In order to prevent such dilemmas from occurring, the authors encourage ESL teachers to seize opportunities for raising students' awareness toward giving practices through classroom activities. For example, on special holidays and occasions (e.g., Christmas, Valentine's Day, graduation), the teacher can present authentic materials (e.g. movies, shows, advertisements about gift giving) to the students, using them as props to help students differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate gifts. Since the ESL classroom is a diverse environment with students coming from different cultural backgrounds, the teacher can lead class discussions by encouraging students to share how gift giving practices are like in their culture. Other suggestions include having the students role-play a given scenario and video-recording their interaction so that they can receive feedback on their body language and speech. The teacher can also implement vocabulary or problem-solving exercises to help students identify and evaluate what types of gifts are appropriate, when is a good timing for giving gifts to their teachers, and so forth.

## Conclusion and Practical Implications

Gifts are meant to make someone happy rather than uncomfortable. The article has suggested several ways in which ESL teachers could avoid this potential dilemma by having an open discussion with the students during class, creating interactive activities using authentic props, providing feedback on role-play interaction, hence raising students' awareness about gift giving practices in different cultures. Importantly, the authors caution that teachers should remain from being judgmental of the cultural differences or gift giving practices the students might be familiar with.

**Original Text:** Messerschmitt, D., Hafernik, J. J., & Vandrick, S. (1997). Culture, Ethics, Scripts, and Gifts. *TESOL journal*, 7(2), 11-14.