Learning about Culture
Language and culture are interrelated and to do one without the other can result in distortions or misunderstandings. There is a natural progress in learning especially as your understanding and ability to hear what people say and ask more meaningful questions. There are three basic ways in which culture is learned: observation, listening, asking questions.

Observation
Observation is a very basic skill, but we are often lazy with what we observe, so we fail to notice important details. We need to actively observe what is going on around us. Sometimes a framework of questions helps us to observe. For example, could I describe to someone what I am seeing here? What activities are people doing? Describe the activities, people, or place.

Listening
Listening is a form of communication and we should learn the appropriate ways of listening in order to show a person I am listening to them. There are cultural things I can learn through the sounds that I hear, through listening to people talk, and hearing the contents of their interaction.

Asking Questions
Asking questions is a very basic way of learning. It is much easier to ask questions of people with whom you have built rapport or with whom you have made friends. If you are going to specifically talk with a person that you do not know well, just visit with them initially. Tell them the reasons why you have come and ask them if they would be willing talk with you about the topic and when it would be convenient with them. Allow them the privilege of saying “no.” Find out from someone else if it is appropriate to give a gift to the person.

Asking people questions is not a simple matter. In different societies people ask questions differently and there are some matters that may not be openly discussed. We need to learn to ask questions sensitively and in the way that they would ask them. The more you learn a language, the easier it is to know how to ask questions in their way.

When initially talking with people, it is often easier for them to respond to a “descriptive” question than a “contrast” question. When people describe things, they learn the basic information and then are able to follow with questions about the different things, ideas, or activities. “Contrast” questions ask people to describe the differences and similarities between things. (Spradley 1979)
When talking with people and learning about cultural things, there are some points that we need to remember:

- explain the purpose of why you are wanting to learn about things
- learn to ask questions in different ways
- show an active interest in what they are saying
- express ignorance on the issue
- restate what they say so that they know you have heard
- encourage them to expand on what they have said
- spend time just sitting and chatting when you have finished
- take leave of them courteously.

**Working with Cultural Helpers/Informants**

In order to begin understanding and learning about the host people, their expectations, and their life, you will need to begin observing and interpreting what you see. If we are to do this effectively, then we will need people to assist us in this. There are people who can help us culturally or who can give us information. All people are in some sense cultural informants; however, some people are better at helping us understand culture than others. These are some guidelines when seeking to learn things from people.

Cultural helpers or informants are people who are
- knowledgeable of their own culture
- involved with their culture currently
- willing to talk and have adequate free time
- non-analytic; they do not analyze their own society from a social science training, but are willing to describe and explain. (Spradley 1979, 45-54)

**Important Everyday Issues**

Misunderstandings often arise over very small issues. Learning these issues early is of vital importance to the way we relate to people everyday.

**Greetings**

Every group of people has distinctive ways of greeting one another and leaving each other. Learning phrases that are appropriate in the main language of the area and then subsequently the vernacular of the place where you will be finally assigned.

- Are there appropriate ways to greet, for example, the way you shake hands, hugging?
- Who do you do this with and how?
- If someone continues to hold your hand after shaking it, what does it show?

**Space and Privacy**

The way people use space often tells us something about their culture, the way people relate to one another and how people view privacy. We need to try and identify mainly through observation how people use the space that they have.
Eating Habits
Eating is a basic necessity of life, but it also has an important social function. It is hoped that you will be invited to a person’s home to eat with them during your first few months. You will need to explore the following questions with a cultural helper. If you move to different ethnic group, then you will need to review these same questions in that area.
- What times of day do people usually eat?
- When in a home do the members of a family always eat together in the same room?
- What types of food are eaten when?
- If you are offered food but do not with to eat it, are there polite, culturally acceptable ways of refusing to eat without causing offense? What are these ways?
- What phrases do you say during a meal if you want someone to pass you something?
- Is it polite to talk during a meal?

Concept of Time
Some people operate by clock time and some do not. Still others utilize both systems.
- What functions and businesses operate on clock time? What do not?

Gestures and Signals
In every society, non-verbal signs and gestures have their meanings. It is important that we learn not to cause offense by gestures we make or handing something to someone in the wrong way.
- When motioning to someone, passing or receiving things, is there a particular way in which this should be done, or a particular hand used?
- What are the significant gestures of the head, face, hands, arms, or body?
- Do the gestures of men and women differ?
- What do gestures express? (denial, approval, anger, grief, command, blessing, curse)
- What gestures are resented as insulting?

Learning about Living
- What are some of the differences between city life and rural life?
- How do the different regions in the country affect the way people live? Their housing styles? Their expectations?

Friendship
- What activities do friends do together?
- When do friends get together?
- How does a person show another person that he/she wishes to be a friend?
- What are the ways in which people make friends?

Family Life
How do people live in the family? Try to describe the typical daily routine of men and women. When you have gotten to know people, ask them what takes place or if you can spend a day learning about their work. (This is easier to do in a rural area than in the city.)
- What is a day in the life of a family like?
- How is the day divided?
• Are their habits and routines orderly or irregular?
• Whose routine differs markedly from the majority of people you know?
• Is this difference due to special social status, occupations, or a ritual condition?

Marriage
In all societies there are specific rites associated with marriage, but the form of these can vary enormously from one place to another. Understanding the customs associated with marriage can help bring to light a new understanding of people’s beliefs and values.
• What specific ceremony is associated with a marriage?

Courtship
Ask people to describe to you the way a man gets a wife.
• What are the ways people court?
• Who is involved in the process?
• How are marriages arranged?
• Is marriage strictly a contract between the bride and groom, a contract between the parents of the bride and groom, or both?
• Are economic arrangements or promises made prior to marriage? This could involve gifts, bride price, dowry or prenuptial agreements.

Birth
• Where does birth normally take place?
• What activities do people do during the birth and immediately after the birth?
• Is the mother subject to special treatment, rest, diet restrictions or purification after the birth? If so, how?
• Is the husband treated in any special way? If so, how?

Old Age
• Observe how old people are regarded in the society.
• What are the family responsibilities toward and benefits received from their elders?
• How strongly do older people influence decisions that are made in a house?
• What are the beliefs about death?
• What happens to a person’s spirit/soul after death?
• What do people believe about life after death?
• When a person dies, what do people do?
• How is the body disposed?
• Are there options open? (internment, cremation, exposure, preservation, etc.)
• What activities occur associated with the burial?

Mourning
• How do people express grief?

Religions of the Country
• What are the different forms of traditional religion-Christianity or Islam?
Influence of Religion

- What are some of the religious holidays of the year?
- What reflections of the religious beliefs of the people are seen in rituals, practices or attitudes of the people in their daily lives?
- In what ways does the predominant religion affect the political and economic structure?