

Kim Sizelove  
ESL Program

# CULTURES IN CONTRAST, 2ND EDITION

Student Life at  
U.S. Colleges  
and Universities

MYRA SHULMAN

Brandeis University

**Property of  
ESL Department**

Ann Arbor  
The University of Michigan Press

## EXPLORATION

---

This activity will prepare you to read the case study by presenting you with the basic issues that the case study will address. Read the following statements. Then respond to each one by writing yes (Y) or no (N) in the blanks to express your agreement or disagreement. Although your first response to some statements may be "I don't know," try to make a decision about as many statements as possible. After completing the activity, discuss your answers with the members of the class.

1. A teacher's expectations strongly affect the academic performance of a student. \_\_\_\_\_
2. It is a teacher's responsibility to motivate students by creating a positive learning environment in the classroom. \_\_\_\_\_
3. It is a student's responsibility to let the teacher know about his or her academic problems or concerns. \_\_\_\_\_
4. Grades should reflect a student's effort more than a student's ability.  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Students who do not attend class regularly should receive lower grades.  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. It is not appropriate for students to question what their teacher says.  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. The relationship between a student and his or her teacher should be informal. \_\_\_\_\_
8. I will do better work when my teacher is very demanding. \_\_\_\_\_
9. I enjoy participating actively in a class by asking and answering questions.  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. In my culture, students are expected to sit quietly in class and listen to their teacher lecture. \_\_\_\_\_
11. In my culture, students and teachers have a more formal relationship than they do in the United States. \_\_\_\_\_
12. Teachers should be treated with great respect and honor by students.  
\_\_\_\_\_

## CASE STUDY: A QUESTION OF INTERPRETATION

---

This problem-solving activity offers the opportunity for group work in analyzing a case study and writing a case study report. Each case presents a dilemma that may be resolved in a number of ways; no one solution is correct. The cases are built around realistic situations that raise a number of complex questions.

After you read the case study, discuss the major problem the case presents and answer the discussion questions with the members of the class. Then write a case study report following the format that is provided on page 234.

Mei Chang is from mainland China. She is a sophomore who is studying for a B.A. in computer science at a large state university on the West Coast of the United States. Mei is having trouble in several of her college courses because her English is not at a high enough level for her to speak with confidence, and sometimes she doesn't understand what other people are saying. She tends to be quiet by nature anyway, and in class she almost never asks any questions or volunteers her opinions. She just listens respectfully, as she was trained to do in China. She is also afraid that the other students will laugh at her poor pronunciation. Most of her grades are in the C to C+ range, although in computer programming courses she gets Bs.

Mei is taking an advanced English course for non-native students. It is a requirement for graduation from the university. In this class (College Reading and Writing), Mei has been doing rather badly, especially because she doesn't take part in the class discussions on the works of literature the students are reading. Her teacher, Ms. Kramer, often calls on Mei, but Mei rarely has an answer to give. In fact, since Ms. Kramer has noticed Mei's lack of participation, she has begun to call on her even more often. This has caused Mei to feel uncomfortable and somewhat annoyed.

"Why does she have to keep on calling on me?" she wondered. "I wish she would just leave me alone."

Besides the problem with participating in the discussions, Mei has also been having trouble with the writing assignments. Because her grades have been low, she knows she should rewrite the essays. But she can't understand the meaning of Ms. Kramer's comments on her papers: *Organization is illogical and unclear. Topic sentences are not correct. Be more specific. Try to come straight to the point.* Although Ms. Kramer encourages students to come to her if they have questions, Mei hasn't tried to see Ms. Kramer during her office hours to ask her for help in rewriting the essays.

After the midterm exam, Ms. Kramer announced that she would meet with the students to give them a written and an oral evaluation of their performance at midpoint in the semester. Mei did not look forward to meeting with Ms. Kramer. She was nervous about having to talk with her and even considered

skipping class, but at the last minute she decided to go. When it was her turn to go into the conference room, her heart began to beat quickly.

"Well, hello, Mei," said Ms. Kramer. "Please sit down. I'm sorry to report that your midterm exam was a C-, and your midterm average is also C-. It would have been higher if you had participated more in class and rewritten your papers that had the lowest grades. And I wonder if you are doing all the reading assignments."

Mei stared at Ms. Kramer. She couldn't say a word. But she knew that C- was a failing grade in this course. Her eyes began to fill up with tears, and she looked away so Ms. Kramer wouldn't notice.

"Unless you work very hard to raise your average by rewriting your papers and speaking up in class, you may have to take this course again. What can I do to help? How can I encourage you to participate in the class?" said Ms. Kramer in a kind voice.

Mei shook her head slowly and tried not to cry. "I don't know," she answered. Then she stood up.

"I'm sure you can turn things around if you put more effort into your English," Ms. Kramer continued, as Mei left the conference room.

Mei's attendance in College Reading and Writing became quite irregular in the second half of the semester. She really didn't care about English anymore, and she was so busy with her four other courses that she rarely had the time to do the reading or complete the writing assignments. Two weeks before the final exam, Ms. Kramer asked Mei to stay after class for a few minutes to talk with her. With embarrassment, Mei noticed that many of her classmates were still in the room when Ms. Kramer began her remarks.

"Mei, I'm worried about your work, and I just wanted to remind you that your final grade partly depends on class participation and attendance. You've missed a lot of classes, you don't contribute much in the class, and you also owe me two essays." Ms. Kramer's voice sounded louder than usual to Mei.

"I can't do them, and anyway, why does it matter? You told me I was going to fail when we had the midterm conference," replied Mei.

"I said no such thing! You must have misunderstood me. I simply asked you to work harder in this course," Ms. Kramer answered in surprise.

"That's not what you told me," Mei responded angrily, "and after you said I was going to fail, I lost my motivation."

Ms. Kramer looked worried as she tried to remember exactly what she had said at their conference, but Mei continued to argue.

"Why should I write these essays and why should I come to class or even bother to take the final if you have already decided not to pass me?" she asked, getting even angrier.

"Of course you should take the final, and I'm so sorry about this misunderstanding," was all Ms. Kramer could say as Mei walked out of the classroom.

The following morning Ms. Kramer received a call from the chairperson of her department, Dr. Harris. "A student named Mei Chang just came to see me. She complained that you told her at midterm that she would never pass

College Reading and Writing, which upset her and destroyed her morale," said Dr. Harris.

"What? I certainly didn't say that. She completely misunderstood me. I told her that she had a failing grade at midterm and had to study hard in order to pass. And I reminded her that poor attendance would affect her final grade. I was only trying to motivate her," answered Ms. Kramer somewhat defensively.

"Well, this seems to be a question of interpretation, and the student believes she should have another chance to pass the course. Be in my office at 3:00 so we can try to settle this with her," Dr. Harris replied.

## DISCUSSION

---

Answer the questions about the case study before writing the case study report.

1. How can teachers motivate students to study and also keep their morale high?
2. What could Mei have done to improve her performance in College Reading and Writing?
3. What could Ms. Kramer have done to motivate Mei and improve her attitude in College Reading and Writing?
4. Were Ms. Kramer's remarks to Mei at the midterm conference appropriate? How would you have interpreted them? Would you have felt motivated to do better or discouraged?
5. Should Ms. Kramer have talked to Mei about her academic work in front of her classmates? How could she have handled this differently?
6. How did Mei's interpretation of Ms. Kramer's remarks to her differ from Ms. Kramer's interpretation?
7. Should Mei have gone to Ms. Kramer's department chairperson to complain about Ms. Kramer?
8. Does Mei still deserve a chance to pass the course? Why or why not?
9. What could have caused the miscommunication between Ms. Kramer and Mei?
10. Can their misunderstanding be resolved? If so, how?