



Different Cultures, Different Customs

Customs, etiquette and communication styles around the world

C1

90–110 min

Vocabulary

Reading

Listening

Speaking

Use of English

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- **Vocabulary:** learn 8 core and 8 advanced terms for customs and cross-cultural communication.
- **Reading:** compare customs across Europe, the Gulf, Turkey, Hong Kong and South Africa.
- **Data:** compare paid-leave entitlements across eight countries.
- **Listening:** watch a real TED talk on the cultural meaning of chopsticks.
- **Speaking:** compare these customs with your own culture and experience.

1 Warm-Up

Places in this lesson



Poland



Germany



Abu Dhabi (UAE)



Spain



France



Switzerland



Slovakia



Turkey



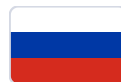
Hong Kong



Finland



Ukraine



Russia



South Africa

DISCUSS WITH YOUR TEACHER

1. Which countries or cities have you lived in, worked in, or visited for a long time?
2. What is one custom from your own culture that often surprises people from elsewhere?
3. Is 'culture' more about visible things (food, clothes, festivals) or invisible things (values, attitudes to time, communication style)?

2 Vocabulary A: Core Terms

Match each term (1–8) with its definition (A–H). Write the letter in the box.

1 custom	☐	A the quality of doing things or arriving at the exact time agreed
2 etiquette	☐	B the friendly and generous treatment of guests or visitors
3 hospitality	☐	C polite conversation about unimportant subjects, often used to build rapport
4 taboo	☐	D the formal rules of polite and acceptable behaviour in a society or profession
5 greeting	☐	E a traditional way of behaving or doing something in a particular society
6 hierarchy	☐	F a subject, word or action that is avoided because it is considered offensive or embarrassing
7 small talk	☐	G a word, phrase or action used when meeting someone
8 punctuality	☐	H a system in which people or things are ranked according to status or authority

3 Vocabulary B: Advanced Terms

Match each term (1–8) with its definition (A–H). Write the letter in the box.

1 individualism	☐	A a communication style in which much of the meaning is implied rather than stated directly
2 collectivism	☐	B a cultural tendency to prioritise personal goals and independence over group loyalty
3 high-context communication	☐	C a cultural tendency to prioritise the needs and harmony of the group over individual goals
4 low-context communication	☐	D the confusion and anxiety you may feel when you first experience an unfamiliar way of life
5 personal space	☐	E a communication style in which meaning is expressed explicitly, in clear and direct language
6 egalitarian	☐	F the physical distance people feel comfortable keeping between themselves and others
7 culture shock	☐	G a fixed, oversimplified idea about what a particular group of people is like
8 stereotype	☐	H based on the belief that all people should have equal rights, status and opportunities

4 Word Formation

Complete each sentence with the correct form of the word in capitals.

1. Business visitors are often given a short _____ to local customs before meetings. **INTRODUCE**
2. Some communication styles are far more _____ than others; a lot is left unsaid. **IMPLY**
3. Punctuality is considered a sign of _____ in many Northern European cultures. **RELY**
4. Misunderstandings can easily arise between more _____ and more collectivist cultures. **INDIVIDUAL**
5. Visitors are generally expected to show _____ towards local traditions. **RESPECT**
6. In South Africa, sharing food at a _____ braai is an important part of social life. **COMMUNE**
7. In many cultures, disagreement is expressed _____ rather than through a blunt refusal. **DIRECT**
8. Bringing a small gift when visiting someone's home carries _____ social meaning. **SIGNIFY**
9. Business meetings in Germany tend to follow a stricter level of _____ than in France. **FORMAL**
10. Cross-cultural training helps employees build greater _____ of local customs. **AWARE**

5 Reading: Different Cultures, Different Customs

Read about customs and communication styles in thirteen places around the world.



A Central & Eastern Europe

Across Central and Eastern Europe – including Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine and Russia – hospitality carries particular weight. Guests are often welcomed with food and drink almost as soon as they arrive, and arriving at someone's home with a small gift, such as flowers or chocolates, is considered good manners. In Russia specifically, a host may feel genuinely put out if a guest leaves without eating enough, and sharing a toast – sometimes with vodka – is treated as a small ritual of trust and friendship. Communication in these cultures tends to be relatively direct once relationships are established, though first meetings can be more formal and reserved than visitors expect.



B Germany, Switzerland & France

Further west, Germany, Switzerland and France share a strong emphasis on punctuality and structure, though they express it differently. Germans and the German-speaking Swiss tend to value directness, clear planning and keeping strictly to schedules, sometimes surprising visitors from more relationship-first cultures. France, by contrast, blends punctuality with a strong culture of conversation: business meetings often begin with unhurried small talk, and long lunches remain an important part of professional and social life.



C Spain & Finland

Southern and Northern Europe offer a striking contrast in communication style. In Spain, conversation is often animated, expressive and loud by Northern European standards, with the tradition of *sobremesa* – lingering at the table long after a meal to talk – reflecting the value placed on shared time. Finland sits at the opposite end of the spectrum: comfortable silences are normal rather than awkward, personal space is valued, and modesty is prized over self-promotion, reflecting the country's strongly egalitarian culture.



D Abu Dhabi & Turkey

In the Gulf, Abu Dhabi's culture blends longstanding Emirati hospitality traditions with rapid modernisation. Offering Arabic coffee (*gahwa*) and dates to guests remains an important sign of welcome, elders are treated with particular respect, and modest dress is expected in many public settings, even as the city has become one of the world's most cosmopolitan business hubs. Turkey, straddling Europe and Asia, shares a similarly strong hospitality tradition: refusing an offer of tea is unusual, and guests are rarely allowed to leave a home without being offered food.



E Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, a former British colony now part of China, business culture blends Chinese tradition with international, English-language commercial practice. The concept of 'face' (*mianzi*) – a person's social standing and reputation – strongly shapes behaviour; causing someone public embarrassment is to be avoided wherever possible, and business cards are typically exchanged and received with both hands as a mark of respect.



F South Africa

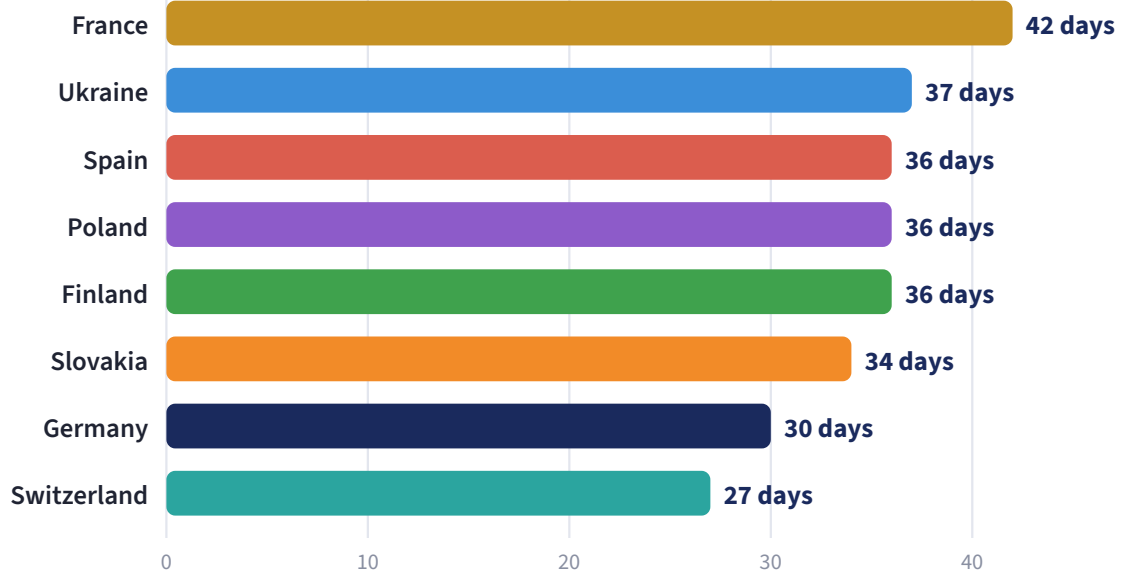
South Africa's culture is often described through the philosophy of *ubuntu* – the idea that 'a person is a person through other people'. This spirit of community and mutual care shapes daily life: greetings are rarely rushed, neighbours check in on one another, and the *braai* (barbecue) remains one of the most important social rituals, bringing together family, friends and often strangers around the fire. At the same time, queuing is taken very seriously and seen as a basic mark of fairness and respect for other people's time; jumping a queue is considered one of the more serious social taboos. Communication tends to be indirect and softened with politeness, hedging and understatement, so a blunt refusal is rare – disagreement is more often signalled through tone and context than through direct words.

DID YOU KNOW?

The word *ubuntu* comes from the Nguni Bantu languages of Southern Africa and is often translated as 'humanity towards others'. It was popularised internationally by Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

6 Comprehension Check

Paid leave + public holidays per year



Minimum statutory paid holiday + public holidays (days per year). Source: national labour law summaries.

- ★ Look at the chart. Which country has the most days off? Does the amount of paid leave in your own country surprise you?

Now answer these questions about the reading in Section 5.

1. According to the text, how is hospitality typically shown in Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine, and what is distinctive about the Russian tradition of toasting?
2. How do German/Swiss and French approaches to time and meetings differ, according to paragraph B?
3. What is *sobremesa*, and how does it contrast with communication norms in Finland?
4. What does the concept of 'face' mean in the context of Hong Kong, according to paragraph E?
5. What does *ubuntu* mean, according to the text, and how does it shape everyday behaviour in South Africa?
6. How is queuing viewed in South African culture, and what does the text say about its communication style?

7 Gap Fill

Complete each sentence with a word from the box. There are two extra terms you don't need.

hospitality	punctuality	small talk	hierarchy	taboo
greeting	etiquette	custom	personal space	egalitarian

- _____ is highly valued in many Central and Eastern European households.
- In Germany and Switzerland, _____ is generally taken very seriously in business.
- French meetings often begin with a period of relaxed _____ before business starts.
- Finnish culture is often described as strongly _____, with modesty valued over status.
- Refusing tea in Turkey can seem unusual, since offering it is such an important _____.
- Business _____ can vary enormously between cultures, even within the same region.
- In some cultures, discussing salary openly is considered something of a _____.
- A strict workplace _____ often determines who is expected to speak first in a meeting.

8 Find the Word

Find a word or phrase in the reading that matches each definition. None of them are in Vocabulary A or B. The word class and paragraph letter will help you.

#	Word class	Definition	Para.	Word
1	n. phr.	an item brought to someone's home as a polite gesture	A	
2	adj.	not open or expressive in manner; cautious	A	
3	adj.	relaxed and not rushed	B	
4	n.	staying somewhere longer than necessary	C	
5	n.	the quality of not boasting about your abilities or achievements	C	
6	adj.	having existed for a long time	D	
7	n.	traditional Arabic coffee offered to guests	D	
8	adj.	containing people and influences from many different countries	D	
9	v.	being on both sides of something (e.g. two continents)	D	
10	n.	a person's social standing and reputation	E	
11	n.	the South African philosophy of community and mutual care	F	
12	n.	a South African social gathering centred on cooking food over a fire	F	
13	phr.	moving ahead of people who are waiting in line	F	
14	adj.	so direct that it may seem rude	F	

9 Key-Word Transformation

Complete the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first. Use the word in bold. Do not change it. Use between three and eight words.

1. As soon as guests arrive, they are almost always given food and drink.

WELCOMED

Guests _____ as soon as they arrive.

2. Germans generally prefer to say exactly what they mean.

DIRECTNESS

German culture _____ in communication.

3. In Finland, it is not strange to have moments with no conversation at all.

COMFORTABLE

In Finland, silence _____ awkward.

4. Turkish hosts almost always offer food before a guest leaves.

RARELY

Guests in Turkey _____ being offered food.

5. In Hong Kong, it really matters not to embarrass others in public.

AVOIDED

In Hong Kong, causing public embarrassment _____ possible.

6. Ubuntu teaches that no one exists in isolation from other people.

THROUGH

According to ubuntu, a person _____ other people.

7. In South Africa, jumping a queue is considered extremely rude.

SERIOUS

South Africans see jumping a queue _____ social taboos.

8. The Spanish only really begin to relax and talk once the meal has finished.

NOT

It _____ Spanish conversation really relaxes.

10 Useful Expressions

These natural expressions are useful when you talk about cross-cultural experiences. Try to use at least two in today's discussion.



When in Rome (do as the Romans do)

you should follow the customs of the place you are visiting.

"I don't usually eat that early, but when in Rome – dinner at 6 p.m. it is."



Break the ice

to say or do something to relieve tension or start a conversation with strangers.

"Small talk about the weather is a classic way to break the ice."



Read the room

to correctly judge the mood of a group before speaking or acting.

"A good negotiator knows how to read the room in an unfamiliar culture."



Lost in translation

when meaning is lost or misunderstood between languages or cultures.

"His joke fell flat – it was clearly lost in translation."

11 Listening



WATCH

Jennifer 8. Lee: “Why 1.5 billion people eat with chopsticks” (TED, *Small Thing Big Idea* series · 3 min)

► [Click here to watch on TED.com](https://www.ted.com/talks/jennifer_8_lee_why_1_5_billion_people_eat_with_chopsticks)

https://www.ted.com/talks/jennifer_8_lee_why_1_5_billion_people_eat_with_chopsticks



Scan to watch

Before you watch

1. Do you use chopsticks, a knife and fork, or your hands most often when you eat? Why?

2. What do you think a simple eating tool can reveal about a culture's values?

While you watch

3. How many people worldwide eat with chopsticks?

4. Besides wood and plastic, name three materials chopsticks can be made from.

5. What kinds of food are chopsticks especially good for picking up?

6. How do chopsticks influence the size of the food that is cooked and the style of dining?

7. How do Chinese, Korean and Japanese chopsticks differ?

8. What example of prejudice connected to chopsticks does the speaker give from the late 1800s?

9. Which two American politicians had to practise eating with chopsticks, and why?

After you watch

10. Can everyday objects like chopsticks really carry deeper cultural meaning, or is that reading too much into it?

11. How does communal eating with chopsticks connect to the idea of *ubuntu* in the reading?

12 Discussion

1. Which of the customs described in the reading feels most different from your own culture?
2. Have you ever experienced a misunderstanding caused by a cultural difference? What happened?
3. Can communication styles (direct vs indirect, high-context vs low-context) really be generalised by country? Why / why not?
4. Which of the thirteen places in this lesson would you most like to understand better, and why?
5. How do you personally navigate cultural differences – at work, in the classroom or with friends?
6. Is it possible to avoid stereotypes completely when we talk about national cultures?

13 Wrap-Up

CORE VOCABULARY	ADVANCED VOCABULARY	USEFUL EXPRESSIONS
custom	individualism	When in Rome (do as the Romans do)
etiquette	collectivism	Break the ice
hospitality	high-context communication	Read the room
taboo	low-context communication	Lost in translation
greeting	personal space	
hierarchy	egalitarian	
small talk	culture shock	
punctuality	stereotype	

Before the next lesson: prepare a **2-minute presentation** for your teacher: **“A custom from my culture that visitors should understand.”**

Use all the words from Vocabulary A and B and at least two useful expressions. Tick each word off as you use it.

Different Cultures, Different Customs

Answer Key & Teacher's Notes

C1

Culture & Communication

Part 1 — Warm-Up

Open answers.

Part 2 — Vocabulary A: Core Terms

- | | | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| ✓ 1 E custom | ✓ 2 D etiquette | ✓ 3 B hospitality | ✓ 4 F taboo |
| ✓ 5 G greeting | ✓ 6 H hierarchy | ✓ 7 C small talk | ✓ 8 A punctuality |

Part 3 — Vocabulary B: Advanced Terms

- | | |
|---|--|
| ✓ 1 B individualism | ✓ 2 C collectivism |
| ✓ 3 A high-context communication | ✓ 4 E low-context communication |
| ✓ 5 F personal space | ✓ 6 H egalitarian |
| ✓ 7 D culture shock | ✓ 8 G stereotype |

Part 4 — Word Formation

- | | | | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| ✓ 1 introduction | ✓ 2 implicit | ✓ 3 reliability | ✓ 4 individualistic | ✓ 5 respect |
| ✓ 6 communal | ✓ 7 indirectly | ✓ 8 significant | ✓ 9 formality | ✓ 10 awareness |

Part 6 — Comprehension Check

Chart: France has the most (42 days); Switzerland the fewest (27). Accept answers in the student's own words.

1. Guests are welcomed with food and drink almost as soon as they arrive, and bringing a small gift (e.g. flowers or chocolates) is good manners. In Russia, a host may feel put out if a guest doesn't eat enough, and sharing a toast – sometimes with vodka – is a small ritual of trust and friendship.
2. Germans and the German-speaking Swiss value directness, clear planning and keeping strictly to schedules; in France, punctuality is combined with conversation – meetings often begin with unhurried small talk, and long lunches remain important.
3. *Sobremesa* is the Spanish tradition of lingering at the table after a meal to talk. In Finland, by contrast, comfortable silences are normal, personal space is valued and modesty is prized over self-promotion.
4. 'Face' (*mianzi*) is a person's social standing and reputation; causing someone public embarrassment is avoided wherever possible.
5. Ubuntu is the idea that 'a person is a person through other people'. It encourages community and mutual care: greetings are rarely rushed, neighbours check in on one another and the braai brings people together.
6. Queuing is a basic mark of fairness and respect for other people's time, so jumping a queue is a serious taboo. Communication tends to be indirect – softened with politeness, hedging and understatement – so blunt refusals are rare.

Part 7 — Gap Fill

- | | | | |
|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| ✓ 1 Hospitality | ✓ 2 punctuality | ✓ 3 small talk | ✓ 4 egalitarian |
| ✓ 5 custom | ✓ 6 etiquette | ✓ 7 taboo | ✓ 8 hierarchy |

Extra terms not needed: **greeting, personal space.**

Part 8 — Find the Word

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| ✓ 1 a small gift (n. phr.) | ✓ 2 reserved (adj.) | ✓ 3 unhurried (adj.) |
| ✓ 4 lingering (n.) | ✓ 5 modesty (n.) | ✓ 6 longstanding (adj.) |
| ✓ 7 gahwa (n.) | ✓ 8 cosmopolitan (adj.) | ✓ 9 straddling (v.) |
| ✓ 10 face (mianzi) (n.) | ✓ 11 ubuntu (n.) | ✓ 12 braai (n.) |
| ✓ 13 jumping a queue (phr.) | ✓ 14 blunt (adj.) | |

Part 9 — Key-Word Transformation

1. Guests **are almost always welcomed with food and drink** as soon as they arrive.
2. German culture **places a high value on directness** in communication.
3. In Finland, silence **is seen as comfortable rather than** awkward.
4. Guests in Turkey **are rarely allowed to leave without** being offered food.
5. In Hong Kong, causing public embarrassment **is to be avoided wherever** possible.
6. According to ubuntu, a person **is a person through** other people.
7. South Africans see jumping a queue **as one of the more serious** social taboos.
8. It **is not until after the meal that** Spanish conversation really relaxes.

Part 11 — Listening

Jennifer 8. Lee, “Why 1.5 billion people eat with chopsticks” (TED, Small Thing Big Idea).

1–2. Open answers.

3. About **1.5 billion** people.

4. Any three of: **bamboo, jade, gold, silver, ivory.**

5. Small bits of food: **noodles, rice, dumplings, meat.**

6. Chopsticks influence the **size of the food that is cooked** (small, bite-sized pieces) and encourage a **communal style of dining.**

7. **Chinese:** long and round · **Korean:** flatter, often metal · **Japanese:** round and very pointy.

8. In the late 1800s some people claimed that Asian men, because they ate rice with sticks, were of a **different quality** from American men.

9. **Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger** – when China and the US began diplomatic engagement in the **1970s.**

10–11. Open answers – look for a reasoned opinion and a genuine link between shared dishes and ubuntu’s community values.

Part 10, 12–13 — Expressions, Discussion & Wrap-Up

Open answers. Assess range of vocabulary, accurate use of the useful expressions, and how clearly opinions are explained. In the next lesson, give the student 2 minutes uninterrupted and tick off the vocabulary as it is used.

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