

BaFa BaFa: Does it Work with University EFL Learners?

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Materials used to teach cross-cultural awareness typically fall into one of several categories: texts on theory, case studies, role plays and simulations. In the category of simulation by far the best-known is [BaFa BaFa](#) designed by R. Garry Shirts of [Simulation Training Systems](#), Del Mar, California. It is hard to image a professional in the field of cross-cultural and/or peace education who has not, at least, heard of it. A quick check on the World Wide Web turned up 18 references to BaFa BaFa, for example, see STS's own web page with descriptions of BaFa BaFa and other simulations at http://www.stsintl.com/edu_main.html (Simulations Designed for Non-profit Institutions and Schools).

BaFa BaFa was originally designed for the US Navy. As EFL teachers we must bear this fact in mind and I will return to this point later in the article. At any rate, it seems the navy was looking for a way to increase the cultural awareness of their sailors in hopes of reducing the number of often diplomatically embarrassing incidents between US sailors on shore leave and the local population. In Greece, for example, a lack of understanding of the local culture resulted in a US sailor assaulting a shopkeeper. Essentially, BaFa BaFa simulates the effects — both positive and negative — of traveling to an unfamiliar and disorienting "foreign" culture. If properly done, this can stimulate thinking about stereotypes, how cultural barriers are created, and about the profound impact of cultural differences in general.

Two fundamentally differing cultures, Alpha and Beta, are established and then members of each are exchanged on a "tourist-like" basis for very brief periods of time. It is forbidden to explain the rules of either culture to visitors so the only means of understanding is observation and trial and error participation. Alpha is patterned on closed "high-context" cultures where interpersonal relationships and physical closeness are prized values. Greetings are highly formulaic. Beta on the other hand is a "time is money", "you are what you earn" trading culture. To make the simulation even more realistic Beta even has a specialized "trading language" to replicate the effect of dealing with a foreign language. The name of the simulation, in fact, means "four" in the Beta language.

Issues for the EFL Classroom

As mentioned above BaFa BaFa was initially designed for the navy. Since then it has become very popular on the "conference trail" and at company seminars. While it has been used with people all over the world, those people, for example, educators, corporate managers, and government workers, often bring with them near-native English fluency. Using BaFa BaFa with university EFL students is more difficult and problematic in several ways.

First of all, unless you are working with advanced-level students with excellent listening comprehension skills (hardly descriptive of most Japanese EFL classes) you will have to adapt the instruction materials provided in the kit, i.e. a booklet and two audio tapes. According to the booklet, the role of the "director" is akin to that of "a flight attendant who points out the emergency doors and safety features of the plane during a pre-flight recording." While that might (but I have my doubts) work with native-speaker participants, EFL students will need more extensive preparation. In the end my co-director and I decided to do away with the taped instructions entirely because we felt the need to simplify the simulation in a number of minor ways — which of course rendered the taped instructions useless.

Fresh out of the box, there are several areas which in my opinion are simply too difficult for the most EFL students to successfully master in the short training time available. First of these is the Beta language. In principle the language is simple — just count the number of syllables, e.g. "Ba" is one "BaFa" is two, "BaFa Ba" is three and so on. However, according to the instructions any two consonants can be used so "three" could potentially be "DaMa Da", "GaBa Ga", "TaKa Ta" or any other combination. We decided to limit it to just "BaFa Ba". The colors of the cards were to be indicated by using the first letter of the English color word then adding any vowel. Once again too complex. We left this as simply the first letter + the "ei" diphthong, i.e. Blue = bay, Green = gay, Pink = pay, etc.

The Alpha culture required a greater number of alterations. First of all, Alpha is suppose to be a male-dominated culture where males play a significant social role. As I had only two males in a class of 35 (and one didn't show up on the day of the simulation!) this would have been problematic so I chose to ignore these aspects of the Alpha rules. Also the Alpha rules in the instructions call for a lot of fast, friendly chit-chatty casual conversation among members. When was the last time YOUR EFL learners acted like that? Rather than instructing them to "ask about male-family members" I had them learn very specific, formulaic adjacency pairs such as those below:

A: How is your [grandfather/father/uncle/brother/son]?

B: As strong as ever!

A: Praise be.

A: How many sons does your [] have?

B: He has ____ son(s).

A: And may he have many more!

**Note you may prefer to use structures suited to your particular syllabus.

For similar reasons I decided to dispense with the casual conversation that is suppose to follow the playing of the "match the leader" game. Another change we made to the overall simulation was in the length of time each visitor was supposed to stay — two minutes only according to the instructions. My Japanese EFL students often seem to do things in slow motion and because we felt that two minutes would not give them time to interact at all we changed this to 5 minutes.

Other than these changes we tried to keep the simulation as intact as possible. As the tape was no longer of any use (we thought about recording our own but on considering our students listening abilities decided against it) it was necessary to prepare instruction handouts for both the Alpha and Beta cultures. You will need to suit the language to the level of your students.

Be aware that the kit only contains enough cards and materials for 35 participants. If you have a larger class or plan to run two classes "against" each other, as we did, you will need more than one kit. By the way, it would be best to order these kits at the same time because STS seems to make minor changes from time to time. For example in the two sets we used, one set had pink beta cards and the other had bright red beta cards. We solved this problem by telling the students that red and pink cards were the same.

Another problem is that of time. The simulation is really designed to be done all at once. The whole group meets, they are split into Alpha and Beta groups, receive their orientation, the simulation is run then the groups get together again for the final discussion. This is practically impossible in the Japanese university EFL setting. Instead we elected to use three different days (which here in Japan means three 90 minute lessons spanning three weeks which is certainly less than ideal). The Alpha and Beta classes were oriented separately during normal class periods. However, due to scheduling conflicts the only possible time to bring the two classes together was during the 50 minute lunch break. For the same reason, we were forced to hold the sum-up discussions separately.

BAFA BAFA SIMULATION SCHEDULE

ALPHA CULTURE

DAY 1 (90min.) Learn Alpha culture rules DAY 1 (50min.) Run the simulation

DAY 3 (90min.) Discussion

BETA CULTURE

DAY 1 (90min.) Learn Beta culture rules

DAY 2 (50min.) Run the simulation

DAY 3 (90min.) Discussion

Evaluation

This was the first time either of the two "culture directors" (myself and the other teacher participating in the simulation) had ever run BaFa BaFa there were the inevitable slip-ups and glitches. Nevertheless, I believe that in general it was a worthwhile experiment.

Each culture really requires two supervising people to run it. One person is needed just to "process" visitors in and out of the culture and time their stays. The other is needed to act as a sort of roving "minister of culture" promoting suitable cultural behavior. For

example, in the practice session my Alpha students seemed to have gotten into the close "touching culture" and were having fun with the game. However, on the day of the simulation, without the gentle pressure from the teacher, they stood coldly facing each other, untouched and generally acting in very "un-Alphan" ways. Had I been able to circulate and play the role with them I'm sure the culture would have been more robust.

Another major weakness was not being able to unite the groups for the discussion. However, as mentioned, scheduling precluded this. A greater problem is with the idea of discussion in general. While Americans might be very willing to energetically discuss simulated cultural differences, students from other cultural backgrounds cannot be expected to do so without carefully laid out guidance from the teacher. Having to do so a full week after the simulation was run made it next to impossible. Several students when asked about the simulation answered simply "I don't remember".

So, does BaFa BaFa work with university EFL students — in particular students from Japan? I guess that depends on what is meant by "work". In the process of learning the Alpha culture I believe that my students discovered a lot about how cultures can vary. They learned, for example, about differences in proxemics and about male and female roles in society. They learned that several cultures are in fact very much like Alpha (e.g. Arab culture and Latino culture). And that even aspects of their own Japanese behavior in some ways parallel those of the Alphans. This is a lot to learn. From an English teaching point of view BaFa BaFa is a total, self-contained communicative learning environment if that's your bag. The simulation itself, well, it was at least entertaining and that's more than can be said of some English lessons. So, yes, all in all, if the teachers are willing to do the necessary preparation, I'd say BaFa BaFa "works" and I look forward to running it again in the future.

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<http://iteslj.org/>
