Superstitions vs Phobias

People & Society

- Teacher's Insights –

This speaking- and image-based class discusses superstitions and phobias. It is great for use on Halloween or whenever a class falls on Friday the 13th (or Tuesday the 13th in Spain or Greece) but also as a general conversation class. Vocabulary related to fears and being scared is also explored. It may be wise to check if your students have any great fears or phobias that could trouble them during this class.

Introduction: **Ask and answer the following sets of questions as a group.**

1. What is a phobia?
2. Do you have any phobias?
3. What phobias can you name?
4. Do you know of any crazy phobias?

i. What is a superstition?
ii. Are you a superstitious person?
iii. What superstitions can you name?
iv. Do you know of any crazy superstitions?

These speaking questions are designed for students to give their own opinions, so let them talk rather than answering the questions for them. In any case: (1/i) A phobia is an uncontrollable, irrational (or exaggerated) and persistent fear of something. Superstitions are belief in the supernatural, especially that which gives good or bad luck. (2/ii) Let students speak for themselves. (3/iii) There are many phobias and superstitions. We recommend having the Internet at hand or grabbing a list of each to reference. (4/iv) Some could be examples such as botanophobia (the fear of plants) or a Serbian superstition that it is bad luck to compliment a baby, but **do remember that everything is relative and to treat this question and class with empathy** in case any of your students suffer phobias or are particularly superstitious.

Speaking II: **Decide whether each picture refers to a superstition or a phobia.**

In the pictures from left to right: **a broken mirror**, a superstition which brings seven years of bad luck, dating back to the Romans who believed the soul regenerated every seven years, today found in Western, Greek, and Chinese culture among others; **Friday the 13th**, an unlucky day (although it is Tuesday in Spain and Greece where Tuesday is the day of Mars, and Mars is the God of war) on which there are actually—statistically—fewer accidents as people take more care, and also triskaidekaphobia which is a fear of the number 13 and paraskevidekatriaphobia, a fear of Friday the 13th; **black cats**, a superstition which brings bad luck, said that if a black cat crosses your path it is a bad omen, coming from their connection to witches; **acrophobia** (sometimes called vertigo), a fear of heights; a **snake** representing ophidiophobia; a **spider** representing arachnophobia; **un open umbrella indoors** which represents a superstition that opening umbrella indoors will bring bad luck, probably related to the fact that opening it indoors is likely to break something (or take someone's eye out), but may go back to the ancient Egyptians as an insult to the God of the sun, Ra; **aerophobia** or a fear of flying; **new shoes on the table** which is a superstition related to death; **mysophobia** which an extreme fear of germs; a **full moon** surrounding which there are many superstitions, some about bringing good luck, some about making people and animals crazy—some studies actually show that there are more hospitalisations from animal bites on a full moon, but it is unknown whether this is just due to the increased visibility and therefore increased animal activity; and **globophobia**, an irrational fear of balloons, or, more precisely, an fear of the noise that they produce when they pop and an extreme anxiety whilst around balloons (which have been filled with air) where the person will feel like the balloon may pop at any moment, also usually extending to a fear of firecrackers, fireworks, and sudden loud noises in general.

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Vocabulary Focus: Connect the words to the definitions on the right. Key words are underlined.

These words may seem similar, but the underlined words are key to understanding the differences. Also point out which words are verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs (or more than one).

uneasy	make a quick, nervous movement in fear
flinch	a frightening or unpleasant dream
dread	make someone feel nervous, scared and/or uncomfortable
give sbd. the creeps	causing or feeling anxiety, discomfort, and trouble
shudder	tremble suddenly and quickly in fear or disgust
panic	feel sudden uncontrollable fear or anxiety
nightmare	hide or shelter yourself from a threat
cower away from	feel great fear for something in the future

Speaking: Ask and answer the questions as a group.

These final questions are designed to get students to speak about the topics raised in this class and to use the new vocabulary from the previous exercise.

1. What situations can make you feel uneasy?
2. What never fails to make you flinch?
3. What situations do you tend to dread?
4. Can you recall a story that gave you the creeps?
5. Can you recall a film that made you shudder?
6. How do you avoid panicking when you get scared?
7. Has a film ever given you nightmares?
8. What animals would you always cower away from?

Extra: Research activity

If you have extra time, consider getting your students to research a fear or phobia online and then describe it to the rest of the group, perhaps making it a guessing game where they have to guess the name.

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