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 HELP & FAQs

Teaching Cross-Cultural Competency

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Teaching language skills to develop some degree of communicative fluency is much more than merely imparting vocabulary, grammar rules and sentence patterns. An integral part of attaining communicative competency in a foreign language is also gaining an understanding of the cultural base of the language. This paper provides an overview of the various elements language teachers should pay particular attention to when teaching cross-cultural competencies in foreign language education. It also outlines some of the concepts involved in raising cross-cultural awareness, and give examples of classroom activities to develop this important aspect of students' language development.

外国語(英語)で、ある程度スムーズにコミュニケーションができるようにするためには単に語彙、文法、文型を教えるだけでは十分ではない。外国語でのコミュニケーション能力を獲得するためにはその言語の土台となっている文化を理解する必要がある。本稿では外国語教育の中で異文化について教える場合に教師が特に注意を払うべき要素について述べる。また、生徒の外国語学習に重要と思われる異文化に対する認識を高めるための教室で使える実例を示しながらその概要を示す。ここで述べられたアプローチの焦点は生徒が英語話者とコミュニケーションできる能力を向上させ、且つ、多文化の環境下でも機能していける能力を養うことにある。

Whether teachers like it or not, language and culture are inseparable elements if students are to be successful in attaining any degree of communicative competency in the foreign language they are studying. Teachers who attempt to teach only the linguistic elements of a foreign language drain not only the color out of it, as well as any interest most students might have had in it, but reduce it to the level of a dead language—a language no longer used for communication. As the development of students' communicative abilities is a stated goal of most language programs, incorporating at least some cultural elements into language classes is a must.

Unfortunately, culture is usually introduced as a collection of out-dated pictures, facts and figures. The topics covered always include geography, foods, sports, capital cities and general knowledge but little more than that. What is not included are building the cultural awareness of the speakers' target language and developing cross-cultural attitudes, that is, understanding, tolerance and acceptance of differences. It

is assumed students learn about the culture of the target language from the sanitized images and content of their textbooks and lessons, however this ignores the strong influences exerted by factors such as the influence of mass media and pre-existing cultural biases. In order to address such obstacles and develop students' cultural awareness and cross-cultural attitudes, issues such as ethnocentrism, prejudice, and stereotyping, as well as strategies to enhance cultural competence need to be introduced to students as a companion to their language development.

The following sections of this paper offer a brief overview of some of the elements language teachers should give more attention to and ideas for rethinking the common approach to teaching cultural through language learning.

Culture and language

What does one think of when “culture” is mentioned? It is perhaps one of the broadest terms used to describe the varied and unique developments of the human species. As a starting point, the *Tasman Dictionary* (1985, p. 448) gives the definition of culture as, “the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings, which is transmitted from one generation to another.” Of course, the word “transmitting” is easily understood to be the use of language, spoken or written, to communicate the collected wisdom, knowledge, customs and beliefs to others. Indeed, it can be said that language and culture are two-sides of the same coin, developing side-by-side from people living together and interacting in groups, communities, villages, cities, states and nations. Language and culture are the voice and soul of distinct and diverse groupings in the world community, each with something to offer and share as long as a means of communication and understanding can be established and maintained.

Why is culture important to language?

As the emphasis in modern language education in Japan has shifted towards the development of communicative competence, more teachers are asking just what this entails and are searching for answers. Hymes (1972, cited in Kitao, p.261) defined communicative competence as, “a knowledge of what is appropriate as well as what is correct.” Hymes also suggested that to achieve communicative competence a learner would have to acquire “a knowledge of ‘rules of speaking’ or ‘rules of use’ depending on the context.” This suggests that language knowledge hinges on an understanding of the people who speak the target language and their cultural background and that to master a language or attain a high degree of fluency requires having the tools for understanding native speakers. Canale and Swain (1980) went further and proposed a framework with four types of communicative competences: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic. Apart from grammatical competencies, the remaining competencies are all concerned with communicating to native speakers in a manner culturally appropriate to achieve successful interpersonal communication. Finally, Nagara, Chino and Nakanishi (1989, cited in Nakabayashi & Nagao, p. 92) in their study of communicative competence as it applies to a Japanese context contributed the following definition of communicative competence, “the ability to reply adequately by dealing with any variations occurred (sic) in the verbal act and understanding the intention of others in context.” This definition placed a greater emphasis on the interpersonal dimension of communication, that is, dealing with *people* rather than grammar. Therefore, as people are the product of their particular culture and interactions with others, it becomes clear that including culture in language studies and striving to develop

cultural awareness are major elements in helping students attain some degree of communicative competency.

Even so, cultural elements are commonly introduced in language classes as a patchwork of “facts” and figures or snapshots and snippets of information indiscriminately peppered into lessons to emphasize sharp differences between the target and host culture. Such approaches, however common, universally fail to address the most central issues relating culture to language. In the following section, I give a brief description of the path I have traveled in developing a broader understanding of these issues.

Developing teacher awareness

Accommodating a shift in thinking about how to teach language and culture is a slow process involving self-analysis, as teachers must first understand their own cultural traits and perspectives. My own interest and experience in this area has developed over the past fifteen years as I have taught English language and foreign culture in Japan and observed my own students and other classes. At first, I taught English language classes much the same as my peers (i.e., introducing snippets of “culture,” mainly American, from time to time in an attempt to add some interest to the standard lessons). This required some study on my part as I am not American, but the textbooks used in class were based on American English and contained illustrations portraying American life (e.g., hamburger restaurants, drive-in movies, or an American house).

At that time, the proposition of structuring this material to raise cultural awareness to assist students in their language learning never entered my mind. Then in 1993 I had the opportunity to teach my first “culture” course in English, called “An

Introduction to Australia,” and at that time I became acutely aware of students’ lack of tolerance and understanding of things foreign. I was surprised how easy it was to shock the students simply by describing something different from the students’ own culture (e.g., Australians often eat rice as a dessert! Audible gasps!). I realized that though I was trying to raise their awareness, I was not sure if it was having a positive or negative impact or even if what I was introducing to students was helpful in developing better cross-cultural attitudes.

In the following years I continued to teach Australian culture courses, experimenting with different approaches and continually seeking new ideas as to how I could introduce cultural elements into my regular language program classes to develop students’ cross-cultural competencies. In 2001, I collaborated with a colleague, Andrew Reimann, in a semester-long study to examine the attitudes to a foreign culture, in this case Canadian, and cross-cultural understanding of Japanese students (O’Dowd & Reimann 2001). The aims of this study were (1) to examine students’ understanding and attitudes towards the target culture and (2) to raise cross-cultural awareness through various classroom activities. Through this study, we were able to explore some of the problems experienced by Japanese students when confronted with foreign culture and language as well as what types of activities could be useful in helping address these problems. The elements and concepts identified below for developing learners’ cross-cultural awareness were derived primarily from this study.

Developing cross-cultural awareness

Learners need to engage in some way with the target culture as well as acquire the necessary knowledge of the technical

aspects of the language. In order to become truly proficient in the four skills they must also gain a greater awareness and understanding of the language's cultural base. This can be achieved by involving the learner in a variety of topics and tasks and on many different levels of exposure. The teacher also needs to use good judgment and knowledge of students' backgrounds to ensure the materials, topics and tasks introduced are appropriate for the level of ability of students. Of course, nurturing such a new awareness of another culture does not come naturally to everyone; it is something that must be consciously worked at.

The following are some of the more important concepts involved in the raising and developing of learners' cross-cultural awareness (O'Dowd & Reimann 2001).

Encouraging students to step back and re-examine their own culture and society

Students need to understand why they think the way they do, how their attitudes have been shaped and by whom. This will give them a better starting point to compare and contrast their own beliefs and values with others.

Use a diverse range of source materials

What students know of other cultures is often very limited. Usually the information they have is just a mishmash of generalizations, oversimplifications and stereotypes. Teachers should direct and encourage students to look for cultural information outside the narrow parameters of textbooks, such as can be found in books, magazines, mass media, movies, materials offering cultural perspectives and of course native speakers themselves. It is also important for students to realize that cultures and language are not stagnant or unchanging, but are constantly in a state of flux.

Distinguishing monoculturalism from multiculturalism

People often interpret intercultural interactions from their own monocultural perspectives. In some cases, "different" is equated with "inferior," which sometimes leads to negative attitudes like prejudices or stereotyping. The goal in class is not to entirely eliminate such negative attitudes but to increase awareness of what these elements are, how they develop, why they are hurtful, and how they can influence daily interactions with native speakers. To this end, class activities could aim to simulate the experiencing of such attitudes to allow students to better comprehend their impact. However, teachers need to be especially careful not to inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or let prejudices go unchallenged. The emphasis in any activity should be on discovery and raising awareness of differences to promote understanding.

Develop an appreciation of what other cultures have to offer

Focusing on specific differences in daily life, customs, beliefs and so on can be used to develop an appreciation of what the target culture has to offer students. Some students may be strongly motivated by their attraction to some specific aspect of the culture and may relish the opportunity to expend time and energy helping other students to understand their particular interest. After identifying elements such as these, the next step is to modify classroom practices to provide students with opportunities to learn and practice new language skills while gaining insights into the target culture.

Modifying classroom activities

The focus of the approach being developed here is on modifying instruction activities to develop language skills based

in both factual and socio-linguistic content and contexts. In this approach, particular emphasis is placed on encouraging active participation at all levels, that is, in individual, pair, group and whole class activities. It is not uncommon for students to “switch off” when confronted with materials or topics that they feel hold no interest for them (e.g., listening to a lecture about a distant country they currently have no intention of ever visiting). However, if cultural information is presented in a way that allows students to relate to it in a personal way, such as describing and comparing stereotypes, then the possibility for creating greater interest and awareness is made.

A common question asked about modifying activities is how to pitch topics and information to the right level for students. Presenting and using materials that are too complex or unfamiliar, no matter how authentic, is a sure way to make students lose interest in the target culture. And teachers using the target language in the classroom must constantly remember that the majority of students probably do not understand everything they hear. Experience and experimentation lead to the conclusion that simple activities with clear instructions and an achievable goal can be successful even with lower-level students. Such activities include developing bubble charts and mind mapping, brainstorming exercises, easy quizzes, simple surveys, role-playing, and poster displays and presentations. And as students advance and develop their abilities to express themselves it is also possible to extend such activities into open-ended discussions if the teacher believes they are ready for that big step. It is a fine line that teachers must constantly walk and hope to get right.

Here are some examples of activities I have modified for my classes.

Stereotypes

With regard to stereotypes, I first ask students to list all the key words to describe the characteristics of people from the target culture. Their descriptions can include a wide variety of vocabulary items related to physical descriptions, attitudes, beliefs, or habits, or they can be sentence building, depending on the level of the class and the language skills being studied. Students then share their descriptions, either reading or verbally, in pairs or small groups, and after this to the whole class.

The next step is for students to determine which attributes are positive or negative, along with an explanation of why for more advanced classes. Then the teacher may offer some perspectives on stereotypes and prejudices for the students to consider. Finally, the teacher asks the students to describe the stereotype and/or prejudices of their own countrymen in a similar manner, and proceed through the same steps as in the first round, only this time it will be compared to a model offered by the teacher.

Body language

Another activity popular with students is to examine aspects of non-verbal communication. Body language can be particularly perplexing for students unaware of the wide variety of gestures and signs commonly used in everyday life in the target culture. First, I ask students to think of as many gestures as they can which are used in their own culture and to demonstrate them to others to see if they can be guessed or recognized. Next, I ask them to explain what they mean and when they are commonly used. After that, I introduce a print with pictures illustrating twenty common gestures (American in this case) and ask students to determine what each could mean. Finally, I ask students to practice these gestures and have them make short role-plays to demonstrate their understanding. I have also used short video clips of Mr. Bean skits and asked

students to observe Mr. Bean's non-verbal communication. Students may be asked to count how many different kinds of gestures he used in a particular segment as well as if any other gestures are possible. For advanced classes, I ask students to construct a dialogue for Mr. Bean and then replay the clip and have students contribute their efforts.

After giving consideration to the elements raised in this approach, teachers should be able to create a more exciting class environment to nurture students' awareness of other cultures while at the same time developing a more functional linguistic fluency.

Conclusion

Still remaining is the primary challenge of how to better approach teaching culture. Teaching cultural competency is an enormous undertaking, and teachers can never be sure if they have succeeded or not. The only certainty is that it is not possible to cover everything in one semester or one year. Nevertheless, teachers should refrain from feeling disappointment at not being able to cover all the skills learners need to attain cross-cultural competency and instead be satisfied they are able to raise learners' intercultural awareness. If the teacher's approach provides some new pathways for learners to explore and opportunities to learn in a positive way about the target culture without imposing their own values, then they can consider their goal successfully attained.

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