Linking Intercultural Internet Information and Ideas for Language Instructors

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There is a wealth of intercultural information on the Internet that can be used to supplement regular ELT classes or be used as the backbone of a course on Intercultural Communication. However, the information is not organized in a way that would help ESL/EFL instructors easily find relevant websites. Thus, the author developed a website with intercultural links and learning ideas in outline form that would make this information more accessible for use in EFL classes. This website <bjapan.bravehost.com> assists instructors and intermediate- to advanced-level students in finding relevant information, and it also gives ideas on how to use the Internet and surveying to increase learners' cross-cultural understanding.

Linking Intercultural Internet Information and Ideas for Language Instructors

Numerous searches on the Internet in the summer of 2004 revealed an enormous amount of intercultural information on the Internet, but no one website that linked it in a way that would be useful in an EFL setting. Hence, many of the websites of interest were located and then links put together in outline form on a two-page website located at <bjapan.bravehost.com>. Included in the outline are also some ideas for developing students' intercultural knowledge beyond using the Internet, such as a method to survey international people, who are often found in a university campus area.

The author teaches in Japan but originates from the U.S.A., where the teaching style is much more informal, so he tries to make students conscious of these differences. One way is to have them use the nickname "Mr. B" in addressing him. Thus, the website is entitled "Mr. B's Links to Intercultural Information" (Bronner, 2004). The website outline is divided into six major areas:

I. Explicit Intercultural Info Sites

II. Interactive Internet Use

III. WWW Cultural Information Comparison Searches

IV. Global Issues & Heroes Websites

V. Educator Cultural Resources (ELT & other)

VI. ELT / Intercultural / Global Advocacy Links [Sidebar]

The first two sections are on the website's first page, and three through five can be found at a linked site <bjapan.bravehost.com/culture.html>, while the sixth is in the sidebar at both sites.

I. Explicit Intercultural Information Sites

A. Intercultural Studies Websites

Section A includes intercultural studies website links, the first of which are excellent E-books developed by the Peace Corps. The first E-Book, *Culture Matters* (Peace Corps, 1997) introduces intercultural terminology, has case studies, online quizzes, cultural adjustment journals, worksheets, etc., at various levels. Then there are E-books full of Peace Corps (2003 & 2004) volunteer stories from various cultures, along with insights to develop intercultural understanding. The other links in Section A vary in quality with an excellent site for detailed intercultural learning developed by the Centre for Intercultural Learning in Canada (Intersource, 2004) and one for teachers in Canada to develop multicultural sensitivity designed by DuPraw (1997).

B. Cross-Cultural Comparisons

Section B includes links to websites that have cross-cultural comparisons between various cultural and national groups. In the link "humorous cross-cultural comparisons", for example, Rosenfelder (2004) provides a site with cross-cultural comparisons submitted from those of various cultures. The cultures are described in different areas like "food", "education", and "politics" using a somewhat light-hearted sample format like "you know you are (culture or nationality name) if you…" In a contrasting link, "Gestures: Nonverbal Communication & Body Language", Imai (1996) gives a much more academic article with charts comparing a variety of Asian and North American nonverbal communication areas.

C. Video for Intercultural Insights

For those who use video, subsection "C" has a link to an excellent Intercultural Relations site article with ideas for using video clips complete with summaries of a large number of mainly U.S.-produced movies that involve two or more cultures like "Gung Ho" (America-Japan) and "Mississippi Masala" (African American – Indian American). There are also specific clips for some of the movies suggested to show various intercultural ideas like "individualism versus collectivism" and then groups of suggested questions for these clips. The "English-Trailer" links is to a site developed by ELT professionals in Japan and has a variety of movie trailers like those for "Last Samurai" followed by a list of questions. Though this site and the movie scripts site links are not specifically devoted to intercultural communication, they can be used as tools in analyzing a film for intercultural content (either to get a film clip or decipher its words)

D. Critical Incidents.

Critical incidents are short case studies of cultural miscommunication to enhance awareness of ways in which cultures differ and analyze how to bridge these cultural differences. These are a regular part of many cross-cultural

texts, including the *Culture Matters* E-Book in section 'A' above. Yoshida's article (1997) includes some interactive critical incidents in which participants can play the roles of two people from different cultures interacting with the given scenario setting up two people of varying values regarding time, work ethics, etc. These incidents are good to use in groups and have students discuss what the dilemma or trouble is and what they would advise the various people in the case study to do. Though some of the sites give suggested answers or explanations, it is good to emphasize that there is often more than one way to think about these situations.

E. Japanese Culture (from a non-Japanese perspective)

There are a wide variety of sites on the Internet that cover various facets of Japan and Japanese Culture written in English, usually by non-Japanese living in Japan. Most of these sites, like "Japanese Culture – A Primer for Newcomers" also link to the other websites. Japanese and internationals living in Japan can critique these websites from their own experience and add information in groups. For many Japanese, it can be the first time they think about their culture from an 'outsiders' perspective, so as well as learning about other cultures, they can expand the depth of their own knowledge and be able to better explain facets of Japanese culture to non-Japanese.

F. Religious & Nonreligious Worldviews

For advanced level English classes, students can contemplate the various worldviews and how they differ from their own. McCallum (2005) has an excellent summary of five major worldviews and which major religions and philosophies tend to fit into these views. It is a short enough table, that students can get a better handle on how worldviews can differ and begin to contemplate what they believe and why. Then learners can think about how worldviews and culture interact, for example, which worldviews tend to be more internally oriented (i.e., "I" or "We" effect our own destiny) and which more externally (the gods, God or fate determines our life path) oriented.

II. Interactive Internet Use

A. English Language Learner Chat & Keypal Sites, Language Exchanges and Debate

This section includes links to English learner chat sites (both typing and voice), email keypals, language exchanges and even a site with culture debates, in order to help learners interactively develop ideas on cultural similarities and differences. Depending on the computer network safety settings of a university, students can access various types of chat sites, including voice chat and real-time video exchanges if java scripts or Active X is enabled (ask a computer administrator if you are not sure). The chat sites here were chosen based on their ease of use and their orientation to ESL/EFL students. One site at <www.study.com> allows students at two different levels to interact with people around the world via both typing and voice chat. Periodically, there are also free language classes offered. Even if the university network settings won't allow the small download and java script needed for this site to work, it can be recommended to students for use on a home computer.

The language exchange sites usually allow both individual learner exchanges and for teachers to set up a classroom keypals or even chat-based exchanges. The last link in this section is to a site called "Cultural Debates" designed by Scholastic's Tom Snyder Productions. It has short quick time videos on the Mentawai culture in Indonesia that is yet to be greatly impacted by the modern world. Questions for debate include whether technology is necessary for such a culture. It is designed for Grades 6 to 12, so if university students submit opinions, they may not be chosen for display, but the content is appropriate for university students in Japan.

B. Articles/Links on Keypal & Chat Exchanges

For teachers and advanced students who wish to find out more about the pros and cons of chat, keypals and other facets of online exchange, this section has articles written by ELT professionals like Robb (1996), Stevens (2002), and Almeida d'Eça (2003). Conveniently the online articles have links to various chat and keypal links.

C. Surveys Online & Student Generated Survey/ Interviews of Internationals

This section first lists sites where students can see formal surveys and their results. They are not specific to culture but learners can search for surveys related to some aspect of culture (cf. Ezzell, 2005). The second part of this section has no links but instead explains a way in which students can generate their own cross-cultural survey or interview questions. Basically students in groups design a survey or interview, the teacher checks it, and then it is printed out so that individuals in the group can survey or interview internationals (and sometimes Japanese to make comparisons). Feedback on this activity has been very positive as some students for the first time end up talking to internationals and feel like they are using English authentically.

III. WWW Cultural Information Comparison Searches

Section three, on Internet cultural comparison searches, includes links that enable students to see similarities and differences in cultures inductively through looking at websites on similar content across cultures. Links here allow learners to compare the following:

A. News items as reported in different places

B. Differences in website design across cultures

C. Proverbs, which are often loaded with cultural information (cf. Steen, 1997)

D. World folk/artistic culture

E. Worldwide cartoons online (mainly political ones)

For website design comparison, students can look at websites of similar or even the same companies, universities, etc., as presented in different countries or languages. An example would be comparing a Ford Motors website in the U.S.A. with one in Japan or elsewhere. Similarly, students could observe how similar news items are reported by different cultures (limited somewhat by language unless English or the students' native language is used). These types of links are the tip of the iceberg as students can come up with their

own ideas for getting at cultural information inductively, though it is important to caution against overgeneralization from small group of samples.

IV. Global Issues & Heroes Websites

Section four on global issues and heroes is designed to inspire students to consider worldwide issues and people working on them, especially youth, across many cultures. These include links from the "My Heroes Project" (2005) to stories about youth like Craig Kielburger, who at age twelve was so concerned about the murder of a child labor advocate in Pakistan and his cause, that he started a now worldwide organization called "Free the Children". These heroes span the six populated continents and include a fair number of young heroes that can be an inspiration to younger learners. There are also links to a global issues educational site for students called United Nations CyberSchoolBus (2005) that has a huge amount of fascinating, well-presented information.

V. Educator Cultural Resources & VI ELT/ Intercultural/Global Advocacy

The last section and sidebar include Educator Cultural Resources that have further, more advanced links to cultural information, country information, global statistics, intercultural organizations, advice for educators in multicultural settings, global advocacy groups, publishers of intercultural materials and so forth. These can be used for teachers to generate further ideas for intercultural activities and interaction and to develop intercultural sensitivity. Some of the links are to sites like the Internet TESL Journal <http://iteslj.org/Articles>, which is not specifically an intercultural site, but one can scroll down to the culture section. The sidebar has further links for educators and students to explore that more loosely relate to intercultural issues, and some of which are rather temporal, like the 2005 World Expo in Aichi.

Conclusion

Developing the above website was a difficult procedure, since the vast amount of available information on the Internet had to be sifted through to determine what could be most useful to English learners and educators. It is by no means perfect, so suggestions are welcome. Nevertheless, it puts in one place some useful intercultural links and ideas that can be adapted to various ELT levels and ages. Thus, it is the author's hope that other instructors and learners will find beneficial the effort to organize the vast amount of intercultural information available on the Internet in order to enhance their classes.

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