Developing Cross-Cultural Understanding through Dialogue

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As we enter the 21st century, the significance of understanding cultural diversity increases. Cross-cultural understanding develops in situations which require negotiation of meaning and identity in the context of another culture. In our presentation, we showed how students can achieve negotiation and develop cross-cultural understanding through dialogue in culture-based courses. We also demonstrated effective techniques for facilitating dialogue in class and illustrated this dialogue with students' voices from action logs. We conclude that developing cross-cultural understanding entails redefining both the native and target cultures in each learner's mind through interactions in a collaborative classroom environment.

21世紀を迎え、異文化理解の重要性はますます高まっている。異文化理解の能力は、新たな文化に触れ、自分自身の価値観を問い直すことによって発達する。本稿では、特に、我々の学生が授業の中でどのように異文化理解を深めていくのかに焦点をあてる。さらに、具体的な例として、授業で使った教室活動及び学生のコメントを紹介する。結論として、異文化理解の発達には、協力的な学習環境の中で、学生がお互いに学び合い、自国と他国の文化を見つめ直すことが不可欠であると主張する。

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Ever increasingly, as people from different cultures come into contact, tensions can arise in the form of misunderstandings, discrimination, and political conflicts. At the root of most of these tensions lies a lack of understanding of one's own culture and that of others. In this paper, we will report how our JALT 2001 presentation and our classroom research has caused us to focus on dialogue as the best means of developing cross-cultural understanding.

The Importance of Dialogue

Many readers are probably familiar with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which suggested that thought is constrained by language. In other words, people of different cultures think in different ways because of different languages. Although this strong form of the hypothesis has been criticized, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is still relevant for models of cultural understanding. However, today it is usually stressed that a person's language does not set limits to "what people *can* think or perceive", but influences "what they routinely *do* think" (Kramsch, 1998, p. 14, italics original).

The thoughts that we have and our identity are created through the use of language in our social relationships with others; i.e. through dialogue. Indeed, we are constantly renegotiating our own identity through our use of language in external dialogues with others and internal dialogues with ourselves. The best expression of this idea was in the work of the Russian psychologist, Vygotsky. In the words of Radzikhovskii (cited in Cheyne and Tarulli):

> For Vygotsky, dialogue was the concrete, psychological equivalent of the social nature of the mind, i.e., the totality of all social relations constituting the human essence. Thus, dialogue characterizes the human mind and consciousness.

Dialogue and Cultural Understanding

If people are suddenly exposed to an unknown culture, especially through the medium of a foreign language, the unfamiliar dialogue can lead to tensions as the familiar structures of identity and thought are threatened too quickly to adjust. In a culture-based classroom, we can prepare our students for this adjustment process by providing opportunities to engage in dialogue based around unfamiliar cultures and allowing them to slowly come to terms with the need for renegotiating identity. It is not possible to prepare students to deal with every possible culture. Instead, our goal must be to offer tools to help students to understand any culture and to promote understanding of all cultures including the students' own one. We believe that the most effective way to develop these tools is through dialogue.

To use a metaphor, a fish does not know that it is living in water until it is taken out of the water.

Similarly, we can only know ourselves by looking at others, and only understand others by comparing them with ourselves. Other cultures provide a model with which to compare ourselves. By engaging in dialogue about another culture, students can ensure that they give the fish a greater awareness of both the water and the air.

Much has been written on how to teach culture, but little is known about how students actually develop their cross-cultural understanding in a classroom situation. As Lantolf (1999) notes, further research needs to document students' learning processes by focusing on *students'* perspectives. To illustrate these perspectives in our presentation, we introduced students' voices from action logs and extracts from videos of students engaged in dialogue in the classroom.

Cullen's Presentation

In this presentation, participants took the roles of students and I led them through a series of dialogues based around the topic of moral and sexual issues in modern Ireland. I started off with a summary of the concept of cultural texture (for a full explanation, see Cullen & Sato, 2001) as a useful framework for teaching culture. Cultural texture is an attempt to look at a culture in many different ways in order to build up better understanding. By building up cultural texture through different information sources and activities, a range of dialogue types can be facilitated. Conversely, dialogue is an important way of developing cultural texture.

Reading and reformulation

First, participants were divided into pairs and each partner was given a different short reading on issues such as divorce and contraception in Ireland. After reading quickly, each tried to recall and explain the information to their partner in their own words--hopefully without referring back to the original reading. Similarly, students may be asked to do a reading for homework and to take notes on it. Notes can include pictures, keywords, or mind-maps. In the next class, students use their notes to reformulate the reading to their partner. Reformulation is a very simple idea, but it is one of the most powerful techniques available to teachers. Through the dialogue of reformulation, students not only improve language and knowledge of content, but also need to process the information in their own words which leads to a deeper understanding of the culture.

Survey of young Irish people

Next, participants were given some results from a survey conducted among young Irish people. These included statements about lifestyle such as "Religion is less important than work" and statements about relationships such as "The average 30 year old has had 2.6 sexual partners." I used another of my favourite

techniques, prediction, asking participants to predict which statements reflected the actual views of young Irish people and which were false. Using the information from the earlier readings, participants carried this out in pairs.

It is always important to personalize the content of culture courses. By talking about issues that are important to themselves, students are much more likely to be able to enter into dialogue and to question their own values. I personalised the content of these readings by asking the participants to discuss their own feelings and ideas about each of the statements and by providing simple discussion questions for pairs. This provides good opportunities for dialogue based on comparison of cultures.

Most students will not be able to go straight into discussion of cultural issues in a foreign language. You should sequence your activities. In the presentation, I moved from a simple true/false quiz about moral values to open-ended questions asking students to examine their own assumptions. The chosen topic, moral and sexual issues, definitely produced a lot of dialogue in this presentation.

Song

Finally, I taught the participants a short Irish song called "Wild Mountain Thyme." This is a beautiful song, seemingly innocent on first hearing, but actually full of sexual innuendo. Songs are very memorable and contribute greatly to internal student dialogue as the song keeps replaying inside the student's head. Songs can also contain different levels of meaning which add to the cultural texture.

In my culture courses, I do a lot of different activities to try to develop cultural texture in a few specific areas. Trying to cover everything will result in a superficial course that may not lead to useful dialogue. Also, teachers should remember to join the dialogue. Learn your students' language and culture and understand your own cultural baggage. Be a good role model for encouraging intercultural dialogue. As much as students, teachers must be willing to enter into dialogue and redefine their identity. Here is one student comment to illustrate the power of dialogue.

> Compared with before, I know the Ireland well now. It means that I have to abandon my own image towards Ireland and know the truth!! We gave an explanation by turns. When I read the material in my house, there is a section that I couldn't understand well. However, my partner Kazue gave me a good explanation. So thanks to Kazue, I can understand well! So, to talk and teach with my friend is very valuable, I think.

Sato's Presentation

In my presentation, I described a one-semester course entitled "Australian English and Culture". Different kinds of activities were incorporated and recycled to create a collaborative learning environment and to facilitate dialogue in class. Some of these are explained below.

1. Teacher's personal stories

I told four stories during the course including "How I learned English" and "My experience in Sydney." These stories encouraged students to share their experiences and ideas in class.

2. Pair-Work

Students participated in pair-work with a different partner every week. After small-talk, (ex. How was your weekend?), they reflected on what they had learned about Australia in the previous lesson and shared new information about Australia. Finally, each pair checked the answers of the reading assignment and shared comments with each other.

3. Group-Work

Group-work was usually the main activity in class. This included quizzes about Australia, understanding TV commercials, news, movies, and information exchange over the Internet.

4. Action logs/ Newsletters

Students wrote action logs after each class (see Cullen and Sato, 2001.) These were collected each other week and returned with the instructor's comments. Students sometimes exchanged their action logs and read their classmates' comments and information about Australia. Newsletters were also made from the comments in their action logs.

5. Reading assignments

Students had a reading assignment every week (a newspaper article) and were expected to prepare for the discussion in English in the next class. Topics included racism, the referendum about becoming a republic, the Sydney Olympics, bullying, Aborigines, and multiculturalism.

6. Group project

Each group of 4 to 5 students chose one topic and did research in a group. The group presentation was scheduled for the last two classes. Each member of the group was expected to contribute to the project and the presentation. Sample topics students chose were Australian English, food, the Sydney Olympics, and Aborigines. Each group presentation lasted about 15 minutes including Q & A.

Students learned many things about Australia not only from the instructor but also from other classmates.

As a result, they developed their cross-cultural understanding. Due to lack of space, I will focus mainly on how students developed their understanding about Australian language.

From Stereotypes to Understanding

Quite a few students who are interested in studying abroad ask me a question such as, "Can I understand their English if I go to Australia, because they speak a bad English?" They have a stereotype that American English (or British English) is good and that Australian English is bad.

I explained the characteristics of Australian English using a handout, including accents, slang, and other characteristics (calling first names, shorter forms, reduction of postvocalic /r/). After that, I showed a shortened version of the movie--"Crocodile Dundee." I gave the class a quiz based on the movie, so that the students had a chance to actually listen to some slang words in a context. Students wrote their comments in their action logs.

> Today's class was enjoyable for me. Especially, I enjoyed the quiz from the movie. I could learn about conversational phrases. For example, "Bloody…" and "No worries" and "Gooday." Also I learned the pronunciation, /ai/ instead of /ei/. I was very surprised! I think that these phrases are very useful and easy to say. I have a question! Are these phrases used in America or Britain? Is it used only in Australia?
>
> I was surprised that Aussie English's pronunciation and abbreviation.. I think "Beauty" is cooler than "Good." I felt Aussie English is unique!

Students became more interested in Australian English. At the same time, they wondered if they could communicate with Australians. Interestingly, there was one scene where Mick (the main actor) used standard English; "How are you doing?" instead of "Gidday." In the next class, I explained that most Australians use standard English, which is similar to British English, in a formal situation.

Sharing comments

As students became accustomed to pair-work, they enjoyed sharing their comments and personal experiences. I also occasionally delivered newsletter made from students' action logs. Some of their comments are:

> I went to Australian school as an exchange student. My Australian teacher taught me about Australian English such as "Good day, mate," and I saw postcards that is written "Gooday, mate" there.
>
> When my host mother said "today," I thought she said "to die." So, I was confused. And I thought, "Did someone die?" It's my funny story when I

think about it now.

When I was in England, I heard people saying "Ta" when I bought something. So this was the same as you taught us today and it's true that word was used in U.K. as well.

Today, I found out Aussie accent. I know that people call a dog "doggy" and I've heard it in Canada.

I know Boston has a unique accent… the "r" at the end of words aren't pronounced… it sounds like pahk, cah, so Boston accent is similar to Australian accent. I have a family in U.S.A. (I did homestay this summer), so I'll try to send e-mail using Australian English in sentences. I'm looking forward to whether they understand or not.

As these comments show, students' personal experiences are valuable information. They are cultural informants (see Oxford, 1994). In the following class, I explained about the origin of Australian English, by introducing these students' comments. It is said that Australian English was influenced by Cockney, which is spoken in the East End of London. Also, postvocalic /r/ was lost in the 17 century in London area, but it was still used in the middle of England. Many immigrants to America were from that area and postvocalic /r/ was preserved in America.

Cultural awareness

Students came to be aware of cultural differences and similarities between Australia and Japan, among different countries, and even within Australia. Excerpts from students comments show:

I have learned that Cockney is the origin of Australian English and some British people still use it. So, Australian English is a dialect in Britain, just like *Kansaiben* in Japan!

Furthermore, some students talked to exchange students from Australia outside the classroom and found out that young Australians rarely use those slang words now.

I asked Australian friends about the differences of pronunciation. I asked if they say "Good day, mate." They answered to me, "No," and said that only old people say in that way. It's really interesting to find about languages and cultural differences between countries.

In summary, students developed their understanding about Australian English by sharing comments and negotiating the meaning through dialogue. Some students had a stereotype that Australians speak English with heavy accent and it is not a good place for studying English. However, as students learned that Australians vary their accent according to the situation

and Australian English was originally from England, they became interested in similarities and differences of languages. One student thought Australian English is like *Kansaiben*. Moreover, students noticed that there is a difference within Australia. For example, young people don't use some slang words.

Conclusion

The voices from the classroom clearly showed that facilitating dialogue in a collaborative classroom led to developing students' cross-cultural understanding. In particular, "tools of recursion" including pair-work, group-work, and action logs are very effective in creating a collaborative classroom environment (see Murphey, 2001). Students redefined their idea of the target culture as they developed their understanding through various communicative activities. Moreover, they compared the target culture with their native culture and redefined the native one. In this way, they could further develop their understanding of the target culture. These findings support Kramsch's (1993) claim that "understanding a foreign culture requires putting that culture in relation with one's own" (p. 205). In conclusion, the development of cross-cultural understanding entails redefining both the native and target cultures in each learner's mind through interactions in a collaborative classroom environment.

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