Aspects of Intercultural Communication In Language Learning

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Abstract

This paper is an introduction to some aspects of intercultural communication and ways they can be made part of language learning. It describes a 40-hour English elective course for high school senior girls at Fuji Seishin Joshi Gakuin (Sacred Heart Girls' High School), a private school in Shizuoka Prefecture. Part One contains a description of the class, the basic format of the course and considerations for teachers who may be interested in this type of course. Part Two includes samples of materials and activities used and some of the students' reactions. The basic format centered on student participation in various experiences, discussions, and evaluations of these experiences. Included were such themes as cultural perception, nonverbal communication, language and culture, and cultural and personal values, using application of drama techniques, values clarification strategies, cross-cultural orientation activities, etc. The two main objectives were to improve the students' language skills and develop skills for communicating with people of other cultures.

This paper is an introduction to some aspects of intercultural communication and ways they can be made part of language learning. I will describe a 40-hour English elective course for high school senior girls at Fuji Seishin Joshi Gakuin (Sacred Heart Girls' High School), a private school in Shizuoka Prefecture.[1] In Part One there are a description of the class, the basic format of the course, and considerations for teachers who may be interested in this type of course. Part Two includes samples of materials and activities used

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[1]Most of these materials have also been used with businessmen, other adult classes, and in teacher orientation and training seminars.

and some of the students' reactions. The course activities included applications of drama techniques, values clarification strategies, cross-cultural orientation activities, human relations training activities, and other materials.[2] The basic format centered on student participation in various experiences, discussions, and evaluations of these experiences. Included were such themes as cultural perception, nonverbal communication, language and culture, and cultural and personal values. The two main objectives were to improve the students' language skills and to develop skills for communicating with people of other cultures.

This course is still at an experimental stage and, though the course as a whole was successful, there are still revisions necessary. By reporting on it at this time I hope to help others who are interested in this area and to invite ideas from others.

Part One: A Description of the Course

There were 12 students in the elective course during the 1978 academic year with two 50-minute classes per week. The students had been at the same school for two to five years and were also members of a regular English class of 40 taught by the author and a Japanese teacher; thus, it was a relatively small group who knew each other fairly well.

The course attempted to reach the following goals, which are part of many cross-cultural training programs and language teaching/learning approaches:

1. self awareness
2. social awareness
3. cultural awareness
4. factual background
5. communication skills
6. problem solving skills
7. learning skills
8. language skills

As can be seen, this was not a course for the Japanese on American studies, or even an attempt to teach American, British, or other cultures. The emphasis was on the students becoming aware of themselves as cultural persons and as learners. The activities were designed to help the students develop awareness about their own cultural and personal perceptions, and develop skills necessary to learn to communicate effectively in other cultures and languages.

Essential to this course was a "contract" or "agreement"

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[2] I wish to express my appreciation to my husband, Michael Joy, for the support and advice he has given throughout the course and the preparation of this paper.

between the students and the teacher and among the students themselves. It was made at the beginning of the course and adapted or renewed periodically. After introduction of the areas to be dealt with, the types of activities they/we would be participating in, and the goals for the course, the format was decided. A process of reflection, evaluation, and feedback was contracted as part of the class procedure, and it was agreed that only English would be used in the course.[3]

The series of activities were drawn from a variety of areas, so procedures varied at times. However, there were five common, basic steps in conducting any of them:

1. Evaluation of the group in terms of their skills, interests, and needs, and selection of appropriate activities.
2. An introduction to the theme and objectives of each activity, so that they were clear to everyone.[4]
3. Engaging in the activities.
4. A reflection time and feedback session.
5. Evaluation of the activities.

These steps were important and helped the students learn from their participation in the activities. The students gained from knowing where they were going, knowing the reasons behind the activities, and having a voice in the structuring of the class. As there was an emphasis on the students learning through their own experiences, the final evaluation of each activity was essential to clarify what had happened to keep in touch with the students and to allow a smooth progression from one theme or activity to another.

Though there was not a set progression of material, especially in regard to some of the themes chosen, there was a gradual building on vocabulary and concepts throughout the course. Themes chosen for the first part of the course included nonverbal communication, perception of space and time, and the relationship of language and culture. Themes chosen for the later part of the course included cross-cultural comparisons, information on certain cultures, and cultural and

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[3] This process took relatively little time because the students knew each other and they were already familiar with the concept and process of "contracting" a class. See below, page 35 for more details on contracting and page 36 regarding the agreement to use only English.

[4] There were occasionally times when some of the objectives were made clear *after* the activity had been completed.

personal attitudes and values. There was also a shift from activities focusing on describing and understanding Japan to considerations of how the students saw themselves and other cultures. The amount of time spent on each theme or activity depended on the nature of the activity itself, the difficulty of the materials used, and the students' response and interest. In general, two or three class hours were spent on each theme. Important points which were dealt with throughout the course included checking the sources of information; learning how to check their own assumptions, stereotypes, and generalizations; and a continual evaluation of what they were learning and the skills they were developing.

The students acquired new vocabulary through the various readings, activities and discussions. All of the students tried to use this new vocabulary in their discussions and reports as a way to reinforce their learning. It became obvious to everyone that it was becoming easier for them to express their opinions and ideas in English. In their final course evaluations, the students wrote that they had especially improved their discussion and hearing/listening skills; also they thought they had learned more of the cultural background of English and its usage and how they could use English to express themselves and things about their own culture.

As students evaluated their own language skills, they also set new goals for themselves. For example, at one point the students were unhappy that the more fluent students tended to dominate the whole-class discussions, so the quieter ones worked on speaking up more and the more fluent ones helped the others. They found that helping each other understand the material helped them learn it better. All of their written work was corrected by the teacher, usually by first indicating mistakes and having them correct themselves whenever possible. However, not all of the mistakes made during the discussions were corrected, as this would have impeded the flow of conversation at times.[5]

As can be seen, the class format and procedures which were contracted were important factors in building a climate for learning and allowing the students to gain as much as possible from the course. These activities need to be carried out in "an atmosphere of openness, honesty, acceptance and respect" (Simon, 1972, p. 8). Though this was *not* a Community Language Learning (CLL) course, much of the philosophy and many of the procedures for setting up the contract and guiding the reflection and feedback sessions were based on the work of La Forge.[6] As part of a description of CLL,

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[5]The amount and timing of corrections was also a contracted part of the course.

[6]I would like to express my thanks to Father La Forge of Nanzan Junior College, Nagoya, Japan, for allowing me to observe and participate in his classes and workshops.

La Forge (1976, p. 12) states, "The students learn in a supportive social situation by helping each other and exchanging information." In this course the contract was a verbal agreement made the first day of class after a discussion, with the major points written on the board. Changes and additions, which were initiated by both teacher and student, were usually decided upon quickly during the evaluation sessions.

The reflection time and the evaluation and feedback sessions were also important, and much of the learning took place through these processes. La Forge (1975, p. 227) writes:

> Events of the experience are examined (content goals), together with the way in which they were carried out (process goals). The problems and motivation (contract and need goals) of the students in learning as well as those of the teacher in teaching (interaction goals) come up for discussion during the CLL reflection periods. Accommodations in the group contract can be made in such a way that the learning goals of the group are emphasized.

The students improved their language and communication skills and learned about themselves and their own and other cultures through the activities themselves, as well as through the reflection, evaluation, and feedback processes. The evaluations were essential for the teacher in order to set ongoing objectives for and with the class and structure the course so appropriate activities could be used. Without these processes, many of the activities would have served little purpose, and the objectives would not have been met.

As mentioned earlier, the group of students who have completed this course decided on the first day to speak only English during the course, and there was a great deal of peer pressure to keep their discussions in English. A group of students taking this course as this paper is being written did not make the same decision. The students initially agreed to speak English when possible, but allowed themselves (though not the teacher) to speak Japanese if they couldn't express a difficult idea or when they didn't understand something. However, after two months (about 12 lessons) they became unhappy with this and after one of the reflection and evaluation sessions they decided they would learn more if they spoke only English. This is one example of how individual reflection followed by group evaluation and discussion helped in structuring the class and helped the students find ways to help themselves as learners.

It should be noted that both the students and the teacher were learners in this course. The author learned a great deal from working with the students as they expressed their ideas and information and through the evaluation and feedback

processes. First of all, when structuring and conducting this type of course, it is necessary for the teacher always to remain sensitive to the students and to what is happening during the class sessions. Some of the values clarification and human relations training exercises are risky, and could even be threatening. In the first two chapters of her book on humanistic techniques, Moskowitz (1978, pp. 1-39) gives useful information on the use of low-risk activities and important considerations for the teacher. Pfeiffer and Jones (1971, p. 1) also emphasize this by writing that "a basic consideration is not to leave the participants 'hanging' but to assist them in sorting out what happened, what were the results, and what are the implications of each event." Without a careful choice of activities and a means of evaluating and processing the activities, there could be a risk of students leaving the class with negative feelings about themselves, gradually withdrawing from class participation, or only feeling frustrated about their lack of knowledge or ability to learn.

There are many other considerations for further development of such a course or program with a group. Briefly they include the following:

1. A careful evaluation of the group, their skills, needs, goals and expectations (as well as the teacher's) is essential. There should also be a constant reevaluation throughout the course.

2. The objectives should be clear to everyone involved and should be kept in mind as each exercise and activity is done. For this, the contract with the students and the reflection and evaluation processes are quite important.

3. To effectively conduct the activities, it is ideal for the teacher to have previously experienced them personally. This is not always possible, but the teacher should at least do what he or she is asking the students to do. In considering what skills a teacher needs to develop, Pfeiffer and Jones (1971, p. 1) write that the person who makes the best use of these types of activities is:

> ...the person who is skilled at (1) diagnosis of learning needs, (2) preparation for the group session, (3) introducing the group exercises, (4) setting up the group members to participate, (5) observing the process, (6) facilitating processing, and (7) evaluating the effectiveness of the exercise. It may be added that he would probably also be skillful in adapting the content and process of the experiences to a particular context in which he is working.

4. Reading the advice and suggestions made by the authors and editors of various collections of activities is extremely

helpful in learning the necessary considerations for conducting them. Because these activities come from a variety of resources, the objectives, procedures, and jargon used to present even the same activity varies. Examining how different people have used and adapted activities in different contexts can help in learning how to use them in structuring a course for a particular group.

5. There are numerous activities available and there is more of a problem of selecting and adapting them than a lack of possible activities. In addition to the aforementioned considerations, the teacher needs to consider the time available, the size of the group, the appropriateness of the themes, the students' ages, backgrounds, familiarity with each other, etc. (These activities can be adapted to almost any age or size group, though students below the senior high school level would probably have difficulty processing the information in a foreign language. These activities have been used with groups ranging in size from 10 to over 100, though large groups may require more than one teacher.)

6. Directions should be as brief and clear as possible, so that the students understand what to do and time is not wasted clearing up confusing directions.

7. The teacher needs to be aware that his or her own cultural perceptions, values and attitudes are factors in the course. Just as the values clarification approach is not intended to be a way of having the students accept the teacher's values, a course in intercultural communication is not an attempt to "Americanize" the students or have them adopt the values or behaviors of another culture. Nonetheless, the teacher's and the students' values and perceptions are present factors, must be subject to scrutiny by the group, and are also subject to change and revision.

8. Though a well-planned course is essential, the teacher must remain flexible so that students' evaluations and reactions can be adequately dealt with. Though many of the activities have somewhat predictable results, no two groups react in the same way.

Part Two: Samples of Materials and Activities

1. Nonverbal communication

The first theme dealt with was nonverbal communication, with an objective of having the students see how they communicate nonverbally. This was also an introduction to looking at their reactions to gestures, use of space, etc., and how these are components of communication as a whole. Secondary reasons for doing nonverbal activities first were: 1) the

exercises were fun to do; 2) there was a group-building function which helped the class members feel more comfortable with each other; 3) it acted as good background to future activities on themes such as use of space, time perception and visual perception; and 4) after being silent for about 20 minutes the students were eager to speak.

The students did a series of theater games nonverbally, which included different physical activities and some problem solving exercises (see Via, 1976, and Way, 1967). Some examples are: a) the group had to follow commands to form various shapes such as circles, squares and triangles without speaking; b) the students had to mirror their partner's actions while standing at given distances away from their partner; and c) the students, having been given numbers individually and secretly, had to line up in numerical order without speaking and with their eyes closed.

This was followed by a class discussion centered on the questions "Which activities were the easiest and hardest to do?" "Why?" and "What did you learn?" The students said that the exercises were fun and most of them were surprised at how easy it was to do the activiteis without using words. They said they had learned some things about themselves; for example, that they didn't move as quickly as others and that it was difficult to stand only 45 cm away from someone for very long. One student mentioned she'd never thought before about what she was "saying" with her hands and face while she was talking.

2. The use of readings

Short passages from various books, newspaper articles and other sources were used as readings for different themes. Selected excerpts from the book *Living in the U.S.A.* by Lanier (1973) were often used. (This book was written as a guide primarily for foreign businessmen, their families, and others living in the U.S.A. It proved to be a valuable stimulus for the students as they tried to describe Japan and gave them some new ideas about the United States and American culture.)

In terms of "engaging in the activity" (Step 3, page 34), the following format was used for readings:

1. There was a short introductory exercise to help the students focus on the issues presented in the reading. For example, there was a quote or proverb to comment on, an illustration, or a question to answer.

2. The students worked in pairs reading the article and helping each other understand it.

3. There was a check on comprehension and the whole group went over the reading once more.

4. The students worked in groups of three or four discussing the content, usually basing their discussions on one or two opening questions.
5. Another exercise, for example a related values clarification strategy or short research project, was done.

An example of this kind of activity is the following excerpt, "Personal Questions" (Lanier, 1973, p. 11):

> Conversational questions may seem to you both too personal and too numerous--especially when you first arrive. "Where do you work?" "How many children do you have?" "Do you play golf? What is your score?" are not personal questions by American standards. They are a search for common ground on which to build a relationship or base a conversation. Understand that such questions are meant to be friendly; the questioner is interested in you; he is not prying or being impertinent, or at least not deliberately so.
>
> To those coming from countries where opening amenities are normally handled more slowly, over a longer period of time, the American way can seem like an abrupt barrage of questioning, almost frightening in its personal intensity. Even here there are subjects which are avoided, being considered too personal and therefore impolite even by our relaxed standards. These include questions about a person's: a) age; b) financial affairs; c) cost of clothes or personal belongings; d) religion; e) love (or sex) life.

As an introduction, the sentence "What is a personal question?" was put on the board and the students gave their ideas. The students then read the excerpt, working in pairs.

Vocabulary items such as "standards," "common ground," "prying," "amenities," and "financial affairs" were explained. Yes/no questions were used to check basic comprehension; for example, "Is 'How many children do you have?' a personal question by American standards?" and "Is it polite to ask a stranger 'How much money do you make?' in the U.S.A.?"

The students worked in two groups making a list of areas that are considered too personal to question someone about in Japan, and this was compared with the American areas. Then the students discussed which of the areas were too personal for themselves.

Each student wrote one or two questions that they do not like being asked and possible responses were written on the board. The students then asked each other personal questions and practised how to respond to them. (For example, phrases such as "I'd rather not say" or "Enough" as evasive answers to the questions "What did you get on the test?" or "How much money does your father make?")

The students felt that the phrases they learned for

responding to personal questions were useful and the discussion on how to politely respond was interesting. The differences between using phrases like "It's none of your business" and more polite responses were also useful. They were also surprised to find out that it was impolite to ask someone's religion, and that many men prefer not to give their ages.

3. Spacial perception and the use of space

This area was introduced by having the students give their reaction to how they felt when the teacher stood or sat in different positions in the classroom. (For example, they felt there was a "friendlier feeling" when the teacher was sitting in a circle with them than when the teacher stood behind a desk in the front of the room.)

The students were given a sketched plan of a living room, with only the dimensions and positions of doors and windows indicated. They worked in pairs sketching in their choice of furniture. After completing their arrangements each pair showed and explained them to the other class members. They then demonstrated the patterns of movement that would be made by people using the room and compared their arrangements with ones done by about 20 Americans.[7]

They found that they had all tended to put tables with chairs around them in the center of the room, whereas the Americans had tended to leave the center empty. After they came to this conclusion, they decided that their arrangements were not representative enough to present them as "typically" Japanese; in the same way, they felt that 20 samples were not sufficient for them to determine what was "typically" American. They concluded that they would have to see more Japanese and American homes, or pictures of them, to check and see if their own conclusions were valid. There was also a discussion on the arrangement of the furniture in the classroom and they decided on what arrangements they wanted for different types of activities.

In addition to discussing the use of space, another objective of this activity was having the students learn and practice the vocabulary for describing furniture, the relation of objects, their homes and their ideal living arrangements. This kind of simple activity can be further expanded in a different way by asking discussion questions such as "How would the room be different if it was in an area of the world with no electricity?" or "What if a family of five had to live in this room?"

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[7]This data was accumulated by research done by the author prior to the course.

4. Defining Culture

Another theme introduced was defining culture and learning different ways of looking at culture. A revised version of Nelson Brooks' (1973) definition of culture and civilization and the parameters of each was used as a sample definition of culture which would also introduce areas for them to research about Japan. His definition of culture is as follows (Brooks, 1973, p. 3):

> Culture is the distinctive life-way of a people, whether tribesman, townsman or urbanites, who are united by a common language. The dual nature of culture links the thoughts and acts of the individual to the common patterns acceptable to the group. The community provides rules and models for belief and behavior, and these cannot be disregarded by the individual without penalty. The totality of the culture is the pervading medium that gives meaning to each individual's acts, yet his capacity for innovation, choice and rejection are never lost sight of.

After the students gave their opinions of this definition, they each chose one of the parameters of culture listed and wrote reports on Japan. The parameters are items such as taboos, sex roles, ethics, language, values, heroes and myths, and ceremony. (In contrast, parameters of civilization include items such as government, banks, police, and transportation.) The students gave their reports in class and there was discussion on each report.

The students felt that the vocabulary was a little difficult to understand and that it should be further revised for future classes. They said they learned about Japanese culture as they wrote and shared their reports, and that giving the reports helped them learn how to tell others about their culture in English.

A follow-up activity was done in which the students worked in pairs planning a one-week itinerary for an American high school student who would be visiting Japan and who was interested in learning as much as possible about Japanese culture. The students included a variety of places to visit, such as Kyoto and Nara, but also included activities like attending an English class at a *juku* and playing the "invader game" [an electronic television game], since this was part of today's youth's culture.

5. Describing communicative characteristics and cultural differences

The following activity was used to have the students learn more vocabulary for describing themselves, ways people act when relating with others, and stereotypes and generaliza-

tions made when describing Japanese and Americans. A role-description checklist developed by Barnlund (1975, pp. 47-64) was used. This is a list of 34 adjectives describing communicative characteristics, such as "formal," "independent," "talkative," "evasive," "silent," and "humorous." There are also graphs made according to the frequency with which each adjective was chosen by groups of American and Japanese students in a study done by Barnlund.

The students chose adjectives from the list that they felt described the Japanese, how they saw Americans, how they thought Americans saw Japanese, how they thought Americans saw themselves and how they saw themselves. There were two steps to choosing the adjectives for each part: first, they checked all those they felt applied, and second, they decided on the five most representative. After they had discussed their responses, they looked at the responses made by those who took part in Barnlund's study to see how others had responded.

The students concluded that it was difficult for them to describe how they saw Americans or how Americans saw themselves or Japanese because they did not know many Americans. They felt it would be important for them to check their impressions and stereotypes of Americans by meeting more people, and to learn how people see each other by reading articles and books by both Americans and Japanese about Japan and the U.S. In describing themselves, they did not choose the same adjectives as they had for Japanese in general and concluded that when people try to generalize about a culture they may create a false picture of the people. As for the study itself, they thought there were many adjectives missing from the list and that more people should do this activity so that a more complete profile could be made.

6. Cultural behavior and perceptions

To look more closely at how people act and how those actions are perceived, the students designed an "action/reaction questionnaire" for in-class use. This activity acted as a review and consolidation of some of the ideas and information they had learned. The questionnaire was structured so that each multiple choice question had two sets of answers, one for Japanese and one for Americans. Their questions included items such as a student's reactions to a bad test score, etiquette, and reactions to problem situations. Many of the questions led to interesting discussions on items like youth suicides in Japan, respect for the elderly, different usages of "I'm sorry" and "Excuse me," and other issues the students were interested in.

In evaluating this activity, the students said they had learned a lot from making and answering the questions, as well as from the discussions. They concluded that: 1) they

did not yet know enough about some aspects of American culture to say how Americans would act in some of the situations, which led to a discussion on how they could learn more; 2) it was important not to overgeneralize about how people in a culture would act in a certain situation based on only one event, in that the total context of the situation and individual differences must also be considered; and 3) some actions are more accepted in some cultures than others, and at times people say or do something even though they do not really feel that way.

7. "Brainstorming" as a technique

Brainstorming as used in this course was a method of eliciting a number of ideas from the students. It was used at times during evaluation and discussion sessions to try to gather ideas for solving problems, as well as to form a basis for further discussion. Briefly, brainstorming is an "information gathering" technique where people work in small groups. The groups are given a question or a problem and each group tries to come up with a number of answers and/or ideas. As used in this course, the rules were:

1. Give as many ideas as possible.
2. Do not judge the ideas.
3. One person should write down the ideas.
4. Stop when the time is up.

The problem that people were not getting enough practice with "formal" English was brought up after a reflection period. The students brainstormed on "What can we do to solve this problem?" and came up with a number of suggestions. They voted and decided to give short speeches on chosen themes and write a business letter for information about other countries to improve their skills at communicating in a more formal situation.

Brainstorming was also applied to a values clarification strategy. The students brainstormed possible completions to the phrase "It's important for a woman in Japan to..." Their responses were put on the board and rank ordered by consensus after discussions. (They then discussed how their ranking might change if the statement was changed to "a woman in America," or "a person in the world.")

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