Researching *Culture* in University English Language Classes

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Abstract

Culture is considered an important element of language courses by most teachers yet it remains an underdeveloped part of the curriculum often because of uncertainty about which aspects of culture to teach. In the world we live in today with frequent contact with people from vastly different cultures it is important for students to learn how to communicate across cultural and linguistic barriers.

This paper discusses what culture is and offers some practical techniques on teaching cross-culture courses. Additionally, the influence of textbooks, including the "hidden curriculum" is discussed with some guidelines for choosing textbooks whether for cross-cultural courses or general English classes.

Introduction

Cross-cultural communication is a popular subject at universities in Japan and although most teachers consider it to be important, it has remained "insubstantial and sporadic in most language classrooms" (Omaggio, 1993, p. 357). Omaggio mentions several reasons for this, including lack of time, uncertainty about which aspects of culture to teach, and lack of practical techniques.

Culture in English language teaching materials, in particular which aspects of culture to teach, has been the subject of much debate among professionals and teachers for many years. While many teachers believe that it is important to have a cultural content in their language classrooms and students may wish to acquire some cultural knowledge of various English-speaking cultures, it is important to relate the content of the culture-based courses to the real needs of the students both present and future, their previous learning experiences, and the attitudes that the students have towards learning the target language.

This paper shall explain the importance of cross-culture understanding, briefly suggest some practical techniques that have proven to be successful in culture-based courses and then offer some advice on choosing textbooks for culture-based classes.

Part 1. Teaching Culture

1.1 What is *Culture* and How Do We Teach It?

Defining culture is difficult and can have different meanings for different people. According to Kramsch (1998), culture is 'a membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, and action' (p. 127). Goodenough (in Wardhaugh 1992: 216) suggests that:

"A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves. That knowledge is socially acquired; the necessary behaviours are learned and do not come from any kind of genetic endowment."

In the world we live in today with frequent contact with people from vastly different cultures, it is important for students to learn how to communicate across cultural and linguistic barriers. English is the lingua-franca of international business and in the new global economy, students will undoubtedly encounter different varieties of English, from both native and non-native English speakers. Learning about different varieties of English and different cultures that use English, as either a first or second language, will help students widen their knowledge of the language, and prepare them better to cope in today's global society where awareness of important issues such as multilingualism and the functions of English as an international language are vital.

Moreover students should learn that one variety of English or one culture is not superior to another. Japanese students have a tendency to associate English solely with the United States, due to the close relationship between the two countries. Students who appreciate that English is truly international and develop a tolerance for speakers of different kinds of English and of people from different cultures are at an obvious advantage to those who do not. On a personal note, many students who spend time overseas, tell me they are often asked "You are Japanese, but you have an American accent. Why?" As well as language, students who spend time overseas also often comment that their lack of knowledge of the historical relations between Japan and its neighbours can sometimes lead to misunderstanding. Kachru (1985) has been influential in developing the idea of English as a truly international language, and emphasizing the roles of the many varieties of Englishes and English-speaking cultures in the world. A good course at the university level should try in some way to deal with at least some of these issues.

1.2 Some Teaching Techniques for Cultural-Based Classes

Because of the huge and complex nature of culture and languages, it can be difficult for teachers of a cultural-based course to decide what aspects of culture are important for students to be exposed to, and even when they can narrow this down to particular aspects of language or culture, this still leaves them with the difficult task of how to teach such a complex issue.

Oxford (1994) used the term 'cultural texture' to describe the many aspects of culture that students need to be exposed to. To achieve this "texture" we need three different parameters:

1. information sources
2. activity-types
3. interesting and/or controversial points

The New Zealand Ministry of Education, in its curriculum for Social Studies, lists the following areas that students "will demonstrate knowledge and understandings of", (1997: 34)

– identify cultural groups in their community

– describe features of their own culture and heritage (e.g., language, ways of doing things, names, greetings, food, dress, music)
– describe similarities and similarities between features of their own culture and heritage and those of other groups.

Both of these descriptions can be related to classes focussed on cross-cultural communication here in Japan, where as well as a contrastive focus, and ability to know one's one culture and explain it has recently been emphasized in many general English classes.

1. Information Sources

In order to get a complete picture of the target culture or cultures, it is important to expose students to different kinds of information. There are many possible sources of information which can be used as materials for teaching culture. These include:

TV programmes, movies, CDs, the Internet, newspapers, music, pictures and photographs, students' own information and even guest speakers.

One very interesting Internet site for students to access is Steven Weinberger's *the speech accent archive* (accent.gmu.edu) which has speakers from various linguistic backgrounds (including Japanese) reading a set passage. Their speech is available as an mpeg and also is transcribed using the IPA convention. This is an interesting site to stimulate students' awareness of varieties of English and to look at Englishes, native and non-native, all over the world.

2. Activity Types

Many textbooks that attempt to teach about culture offer only a limited range of activities with 'read and discuss' activities often the only ones. While discussion is valuable when learning about another culture, we cannot expect students to be able to discuss complex issues without some sort of preparatory activities before the discussion. Some examples of preparatory activities are:

a. Quizzes

Quizzes are often used to test materials that have been previously taught, but they can also be useful in learning new information for example, in this simple true/false quiz about Ireland designed for first year university students.

With a partner, answer true or false to the following questions.

1. Ireland is so far north that the sun doesn't set until mid-night in summer.
2. Ireland is as cold as Hokkaido in winter.
3. Ireland is about the same size as Honshu.
4. Ireland is part of the UK.
5. Some Irish people think that Japanese people eat sushi at every meal, etc.

Another type of quiz possible for this kind of activity is a type of multi-choice questionnaire such as the following quiz about New Zealand (abbreviated here) designed for second year university students.

In small groups circle the answer you think is correct.

1. In New Zealand people drive on the left/right.
2. The Head of State is a man/woman.
3. Wellington has the highest number of trees/ Internet users/cars per capita in the world.
4. Gun ownership is high/low in New Zealand.
5. Most people do/don't go to university.

Students attempt to answer the questions by sharing their existing knowledge and common sense. It is not important whether students get the right answer or not, but by guessing, students will become more interested in discovering the correct answer. As an extra option, points can be given for correct answers adding a competitive element to the quiz. Students can make their own quizzes for their

partners or the whole class about readings or other materials. Quizzes offer a high-interest activity that keeps students involved and learning. Another role is that they help dispel rigid stereotypes that many students have. From my experiences in the classroom with the New Zealand quiz, generally speaking, students' stereotypical image of the country, and their belief that most countries have similar infrastructures as Japan, causes them to get most of the questions wrong, which provokes intense debate and a flurry of questions and shocked expressions of disbelief!

b. Research, Reporting

Student research is extremely useful for university students because it combines their interests with the classroom. Students may present their findings to the class as presentations. They may also design activities for the class based on their findings such as games, short skits, quizzes, puzzles and roleplays.

One activity we have found useful is for students to prepare and perform a skit based on some aspect covered in a textbook. A 'cultural' scenario (differences in customs, etc) or even an historical episode, have been quite successfully handled by our students. While watching these skits, other students fill in a form writing their comments and questions, as well as points and/or individuals they feel deserve praise, and these are then collected and evaluated by the teacher.

c. Re-telling or Peer-teaching

When students have completed an activity, it is useful to have them retell or teach their partners what they have learned. This allows them (as well as the teacher) to check what they have learned and to reinforce it by retelling it to a partner. They may also discover things that they have missed from their partner, and improve their language by noticing gaps in their own ability to explain.

d. Noticing and Explaining

As students watch a video or are working with some other materials, you can ask them to 'notice' particular features. For example, when reading about an educational system in another country, students could be asked to 'notice' and take notes of any difference between that educational system and the Japanese one. Asking students to 'notice' gives a focus to the materials by making it into a task, rather than simply passive reading or listening.

There are many types of activities can be used prior to any discussions but the most important point is to ensure that the students are actively engaged in accessing knowledge about the target culture and language.

3. Interesting, Controversial or Contrasting Points

In order to create cultural texture, activities and materials should portray different aspects of the culture, and not just the pleasant features of a culture. Once method of doing this is by introducing contrasts found within that culture. By introducing deliberate contrasts within a culture, it is possible to further stimulate the students' interest. A few possible contrasts are:

Historical vs. Modern
Old people vs. Young people
City life vs. Country life
Stereotypical views vs. Reality

Possible controversial points include:

whaling
attitudes towards organ donations
vegetarianism
falling birthrates
the death penalty
welfare system
minority rights
women in society
religion

Knowledge of religions is almost always neglected in cross-cultural classes, even 'knowledge' of the various basic tenets is a kind of taboo, yet religion (as a sociocultural factor) is an essential component in understanding the culture of many countries, such as Catholicism in Ireland or South America, evangelical Christianity in the USA, and Islam in Arabic countries. Indeed, even here in Japan, many aspects of culture and custom are based in Shinto, Buddhist and Confucian view of the world. Without some knowledge of this type, cross-cultural understanding will be hindered.

Teachers should encourage students to learn about different cultures so as to help develop students' awareness of cultural similarities and differences but they should be careful not to try to make students think or become like people in the cultures presented. In particular they should not give the idea that one' s own culture is better than the target culture or vice versa.

Part 2 Choosing Textbooks

Intercultural language learning, a new trend in culture based learning courses, is an attempt to raise students' awareness of their own culture, and at the same time help them to interpret and understand other cultures. It is important to expose students to real descriptions and accurate information about different cultures however, there are a number of problems, including stereotypes, generalizations, and in particular, what can be described as a 'hidden curriculum'.

2.1 Hidden Curriculum

Most of cultural information comes from course books that are designed for teaching a specific language. Such course books will directly or indirectly communicate sets of cultural values. This is called a 'hidden curriculum' (Cunningsworth, 1995; Holly, 1990). Many educationalists claim that a hidden curriculum is more effective than the official curriculum and because of its hidden nature, more dangerous. Risager (as cited in Cunningsworth, 1995) states that

> "Foreign language teaching textbooks no longer just develop concurrently with the development of foreign language pedagogy in a narrow sense, but they increasingly participate in the general cultural transmission with the educational system and in the rest of society" (p. 90).

Since the underlying system is not explicitly stated, it requires a careful examination of course books in order to recognise any hidden curriculum.

2.2 Stereotypes

A stereotype can be defined as 'the conventionalized ways of talking and thinking about other people and cultures' (Kramsch 1998: 131). Stereotypes may result in learners whose cultural ineptitude will affect detrimentally their personal language acquisition (Clarke and Clarke 1990: 31). While analysing a course book in terms of stereotypes, it is necessary to identify unrepresentative negative stereotypes of particular nationalities or ethnic groups, unfair representation of men and women, religions and political systems (Cunningsworth 1995: 91).

2.3 Generalization

Most people agree that what is true of some parts is not necessarily true of the whole. In other words, we can say that something which is done generally in a given society or culture does not mean that all the people do it without a question. Guest (2002) states that

> "A certain degree of generalization is acceptable within certain genres of large-scale cultural interaction. But problems occur when we apply these general interpretive pegs to immediate

situations and personalized discourse" (p. 158).

It is therefore important that students realize that while generalisations may be useful when describing a whole culture, they are not useful on a person-to-person level. This is very important in Japan where students perceive that all citizens of another country share the same customs and traditions. This may be shaped by the official image of "We Japanese..." yet today many countries are multi-ethnic.

Ferit Kilickaya (1999) and Guest (2002) suggest the following guidelines when choosing textbooks:

- Does the book give any information, instructions or suggestions about how the book may be used and how the cultural content may be handled?
- Does the book address specific learners or are there any characteristics of the learners that the book addresses to?
- Does the book suggest any role that the teachers using it should have?
- Does it include a variety of cultures or just specific ones such as British or American culture?
- Does it fairly represent the reality about the target culture or just the author's view?
- Where is the cultural information taken from? Author's own ideas or empirical research?
- What subjects does it cover? Are these specific to the target culture? Are there any topics that might not be culturally suitable for the learners in class?
- What cultural and social groups are represented? Is there adequate coverage of a variety of people or is this limited to a particular people? Are there any stereotypes?
- Does the book include generalizations about the culture? Does it inform the audience of the fact that what is true of the parts is not necessarily true of the parts?
- Is the cultural information presented with comments such as being good or being bad? Or is it presented without such comments?
- Are there illustrations? If so, are these appropriate to the learners' native culture? Would additional information be necessary to explain them or are they self-explanatory?
- What are the activities asked of the learners? Are they familiar to the learners?
- Would a teacher using this book need specialized training to be able to use it or is there enough information given?
- What are the learners supposed to do with the cultural information such as using actively or just be aware of it for a better understanding of the target culture?
- What is your overall view of the textbook?

These points are only suggestions and can easily be modified to meet the needs of a certain teacher or group of students.

Conclusion

Teaching culture-based courses at university is exciting yet challenging for both students and teachers. Exposing students to a variety of cultures and a variety of types of English has become particularly relevant in the global village we all live in today. It is important that students know that standard American and standard British English are just two of many varieties of English and that many other varieties can be found in countries across the world. In today's global economy students will most probably meet English speakers from India or Jamaica, China or Korea, as well as people from American or Britain. If students are only exposed to the 'standard' varieties of English, students may form a limited view of the English language, especially in the EFL context (Leather, 2001).

When teaching culture-based courses it is useful to remember that only by personalising activities and content can we hope to lead students to better cultural understanding. Activities with simple instructions and clear goals, such as quizzes or surveys, are very successful even with low-level

learners. It is very easy to extend such activities into open-ended discussions if the opportunity arises but it is usually problematic to transform open-ended 'discussion' activities (usually with no clear goal) into activities which work effectively with low-level learners. By using the variety of approaches described above to create cultural texture, it should be possible to create interesting and informative classes for students.

Finally, it is important for teachers to remember that it is impossible to cover every aspect of culture. Any culture is enormous. It consists of all man-made aspects of every large group of non-homogeneous people. All we as teachers can do is provide some guidelines for our students to help them learn more about different world cultures. We should bear in mind that we cannot teach everything, and be happy that we are able to raise intercultural awareness at all. However, we sometimes are so immersed in our own culture(s) that we can only understand it by trying to see it from the outside. Imposing our own values without making an attempt to understand our students' values is imperialistic and arrogant. We must remember that intercultural understanding runs both ways, and that such classes as we have described above are a two-way interchange with our students.

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