

The Importance of Culture in the University Classroom

大学の授業における文化の重要性

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Abstract

Intercultural communication has always been an important issue but as the globalization of business and leisure propels international contact at an amazing rate, “intercultural communication” is a phrase heard more and more often.

The culture we have acquired as we grow up of course influences how we communicate. Our culture endows us with a set of expectations as to how people should act and react when we communicate with them. When communicating within our own culture group these expectations are met. When we are placed in a foreign or multicultural environment, however, we may find that our expectations are inaccurate. A course in cross-cultural communication or intercultural communication helps us manage our behavior so that it harmonizes better with the local culture. We learn more about foreign cultures, how to become more understanding, open and tolerant of what is different and if the culture norms of specific countries are examined, a set of “dos and don’ts”.

At present these courses are offered only to students from the Faculty of Education yet students from all faculties often ask their teachers for cultural information during their regular English classes. The results of a survey of students in the Faculties of Education and Technology show that students believe that this information is important, necessary for their future careers and are interested in taking such courses.

The Importance of Culture in the University Classroom.

1. Introduction: Why is “culture” necessary in the classroom?

One of the aims of a university education is to prepare students for the world outside the classroom. We encourage them to study English, take the TOEIC test and enroll in advanced language classes at university believing that English is a vital skill in the workplace today yet the teaching of intercultural and cross-cultural communication is largely ignored. In this era of globalization, an increasing number of companies and organizations are sending their employees overseas, including numerous smaller companies that previously did not see the need. In a survey of U.S.-based multinational corporations, 52 percent indicated they had increased the number of employees sent overseas, including to Japan, and more than 60 percent said they expected this number to continue to increase for the foreseeable future (Windham International Survey, 1999,8). In the past overseas assignments were for the more adventurous but now have become the norm for almost anyone on the path to senior management. Even if employees remain based in Japan, it has become more likely that the

company they work for will have contact with overseas partners, subsidiaries, foreign buyers and distributors.

The Windham International survey identified three main reasons for “assignment failure”: spousal dissatisfaction, family concerns and the inability to adapt. These suggest that changing cultures is a challenge for most people. The costs of cross-cultural failure have been well documented. There are personal costs and family costs; financial, professional and emotional costs; and costs to career prospects, self-esteem marriage and family. There are also costs to the company: recruitment and selection costs, moving costs, training costs, low moral and reduced productivity. There may even be damage to the reputation of the organization in the foreign country.

When employee cross-culture failure occurs the employee will either go home early or stay with greatly reduced effectiveness which may harm their companies and personal lives. Therefore it is important for students to develop their cultural awareness and understanding in preparation for their role as future employees, travelers and tourists and citizens of this new global village.

2. Defining Culture

Culture lies at the meeting point of many fields of study and academic disciplines, each of which views culture in a slightly different manner. Stern (1983) cites anthropology, sociology and sociolinguistics as key disciplines. Also important are communication theory, intercultural communication, the study of a specific language, culture studies, history and semiotics. In additions there are hybrid fields such as anthropological linguistics, cultural linguistics (Palmar, 1996), and the ethnography of communication (Saville-Troike, 1982). These fields all offer a distinct perspective on culture. As a result it can be difficult to give a definite definition of culture but the definition used here is: “Culture is a frame of reference consisting of learned patterns of behavior, values, assumptions, and meanings, which are shared to varying degrees of interest, importance, and awareness with members of a group; culture is the story of reality that individuals and groups value and accept as a guide for organization of their lives” (Seelye, 1996).

Culture as defined here is culture with a small *c*, not culture with a big *C* (Halverson, 1985). Big *C* culture refers to the traditional view of culture as theater, music, dance and art. Small *c* culture is subjective and has no existence expect in human behavior. It describes how we create meaning in our lives and how we behave according to the meanings we create. These patterns of behavior are learned and passed from parents to children and so on down through the generations. They are widely shared by members of the same group and are not overtly discussed. However, they cause an emotional reaction when violated and are most obvious when contrasted with the behaviors of another group.

In studying culture we are studying the common rules, assumptions and values that are the foundations of the external behavior we can observe. These common rules assumptions and values create a reference through which we examine and make sense of the world around us.

3. Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication involves communication between people who are more different than alike and more often than not results in cultural misunderstandings or “cultural incidents”. Young Yun Kim (1992) describes this as: “ The crux of intercultural communication that distinguishes it from the rest of the communication field is the relatively high of difference in the experiential backgrounds of the communicators due to cultural differences. An underlying assumption here is that individuals who belong to the same culture generally share greater commonality (or homogeneity) in their overall backgrounds than those from different cultures.”

This attention to interaction between people from different cultures is at the heart of intercultural communication. How people adapt and adjust when directly encountering others who practice unfamiliar processes of perceiving, valuing, and behaving in the world is the core of intercultural communication studies.

Cross-cultural comparisons may supply part of the information necessary to support people who are learning to live and work in unfamiliar situations (Hofstede, 2004). This involves the learning of a large amount of culturally specific information. In educational and consultative work a lot of time is given to learning culturally specific knowledge then applying such knowledge when interaction with people from different backgrounds and experience. This focus on interacting with those who are culturally different is supported by research about predictors of effective intercultural performance and how to become part competent in another culture (Wiseman & Koester, 1993).

4. Intercultural Courses at Kagawa University

At present two intercultural/cross-cultural classes are offered to students in the Faculty of Education. The two courses, cross-cultural communication and intercultural communication are offered on alternate years. There are no courses offered on intercultural and/or cross cultural studies to students from other faculties although these students do acquire some cultural information of English-speaking countries from their regular English classes.

The contents of the Cross-culture Communication and Intercultural Communications courses vary depending on the syllabus designed by the teachers involved but in general focus on topics such as culture shock, avoiding cultural “incidents”, various aspects of verbal and nonverbal communication such as conversational styles, gestures and body language. Other topics included are differences in company organization work practices and attitudes, family types and traditions, educational values and expectations, and relationships with friends and acquaintances. Students are also exposed to specific cultural practices of countries where English is used as a first or second language. Students are usually well aware that English is used in the USA or UK but are often surprised to learn that English is widely spoken in countries such as Kenya or the Philippines.

By the end of the course students have not only gained specific knowledge about countries where English is widely spoken but also the skills and knowledge to help them become world citizens.

5. Students' attitudes to Cross-Culture Studies – Survey results and discussion

During regular English classes students from all faculties often ask questions about the cultural practices of different countries. From their textbooks they are also exposed to different cultural practices, attitudes and beliefs. Students' questions suggested there was an interest in cultural information but it was unclear if this was just a passing interest or if students genuinely found it interesting or important. To learn about students attitudes to cross-cultural studies and English language learning, a small questionnaire was given to all students taking my SW (Speaking-Writing) classes in the Faculty of Technology from 2004 to 2006. In total, 256 students were surveyed. Additionally, students from the Faculty of Education taking a cross-culture course were asked to answer a short questionnaire about their attitudes to cross-culture courses and if they saw a need for these courses to be extended to students from other faculties.

a. Students from the Faculty of Education.

A survey conducted during the 2006 spring term Cross-cultural Communication course showed that the majority of students, 93%, believed that cross-cultural competence was a very important part of their language learning experience. A further 5% believed it was important and 2% were unsure. None of the students believed that that it was unnecessary. Furthermore, 97% said they were interested in taking further courses in cross-cultural communication and 91% believed that cross-cultural competence would be important in their future careers. The course was described as useful, interesting, and informative by more than 90% of the students.

When answering the question "Do you think courses in cross-culture communication should be offered to students from other faculties?" 87% answered "yes", almost 10% answered "maybe", 2% answered "don't know" and just under 1% and answered "no". Students who answered "yes" or "maybe" were asked to answer a further question: "Who should cross-cultural communication courses be offered to: economics students, law students, technology students, agriculture students or "all"?" (Students were allowed to give more than one suggestion.) More than 60% indicated that students from all faculties would benefit from cross-culture communication courses, 20% answered both economics and technology, 15% answered law but less than 5% answered agriculture. When asked to explain their reasons, those that answered "all" often said that in the contemporary world everyone has contact with people of other languages and cultures. Students who indicated that students from the faculty of economics would benefit from cross-culture communication courses usually said that cross-culture studies would be important for students interested in international business and students who indicated technology said that technical information was worldwide or that a lot technical developments came from the US.

This survey suggests that students taking cross-culture communication courses believe the content of these courses is important for their future careers, their language skills and not only students studying education but also students from other faculties would also benefit from such courses. (See appendix for questionnaires.)

b. Students from the Faculty of Technology

At present only students from the Faculty of Education can take courses in cross-culture information

but students from the Faculty of Technology also showed an interest in cultural information. Of the 256 students surveyed, 81% said they were interested in learning more about the cultural practices and beliefs of other countries, 13% said “maybe” and 6% answered “no”. 73% believed that they would have contact with people from different cultures and languages during their working life and 85% said they would have to use English at work. However, even though the majority of students believed that English was important for technology students, only 18% said they actually liked English.

When asked if they would be interested in taking a cross-culture communication course, 70% answered “yes”, 12% answered “maybe” and 18% answered “no”. Students who answered “yes” or “maybe” were next asked if they would prefer this course to be taught by a foreign teacher or a Japanese teacher, 75% answered “a foreign teacher”, 15% answered “a Japanese teacher” and 10% answered “either”. Students were then asked to explain their answers. The majority of students who indicated they would prefer a foreign teacher believed that a foreign teacher would have more experience of living and working in a foreign country and would have more knowledge about specific customs of English speaking countries. Of the 15% who answered a “Japanese teacher” the majority were worried they would not be able to understand a course offered only in English.

Students’ answers to this questionnaire suggest that their interest in cultural information about other countries is genuine and not just a passing interest. This also suggests that students believe that they will have need for this information in the future either in their careers or while traveling. Furthermore this is not restricted to students from the Faculty of Education since students from the Faculty of Technology expressed similar beliefs. The results of this survey suggest that there is a demand for courses in cross-cultural communication and /or intercultural communication for students other than those in the Faculty of Education. It could be inferred that with more than 70% of technology students expressing an interest in such courses students from other faculties such as law and economics probably have a similar interest. At present cross-culture communication courses are offered as an optional course for second, third and fourth year students in the Faculty of Education. If these courses were to be extended to students from other faculties it would be best to continue this policy of offering them as optional courses to students from second year and up.

6. Conclusion

Intercultural communication has been an important issue since the world began. Intercultural competence can end disputes, enable business and industry, and can even save lives. It is no wonder then that as globalization of business and leisure moves international contact forward at an amazing rate that “international communication” is a phrase heard more and more often in the worlds of business, education and training.

Students need to have an understanding of English-speaking countries and cultures about the world, and not just the USA and UK. Students need to be intercultural competent. They need to have an understanding of cultural differences, both factual and affective; and cultural skills - the ability to act and react in a variety of cultures, and to put this interaction to good effect. These skills include attitudes of openness and tolerance, and the ability to cope with what is different.

The results of this survey suggest that students have a desire to learn more about intercultural

communication. They appear to understand that this is a skill they are likely to need in their working lives and while traveling. However, at present they are not given this opportunity. What we must ask ourselves as educators is why we do not give all our students this opportunity.

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Appendix

Questionnaire given to Students of the Faculty of Education

Cross-cultural Communication Questionnaire.

1. Do you think cross-cultural communication is an important part of language learning?
1. very important 2. important 3. not important 4. don't know

2. Do you think the information you learned in this course (and any other cross-cultural courses you have taken) will be useful in your future careers?
1. yes, certainly 2. yes, maybe 3. no 4. don't know

3. Would you be interested in taking more courses in cross-cultural communication if they were offered at the university?
1. yes, certainly 2. yes, maybe 3. no 4. don't know

4. Would you be interested in general courses in cross-cultural communication or courses focusing specifically on the culture of English-speaking countries?
1. general courses 2. specific courses 3. both 4. no

5. At present cross-cultural communication courses are offered only to students at the Faculty of Education. Having taken this course do you think students from other faculties would also benefit from courses like this?
1. yes 2. no

6. If you answered "yes" to question 5, which students do you think would benefit most? (e.g. Agriculture, Economics, Law, Technology, all)

7. Please write any comments or suggestions you have about cross-cultural communication courses below.

Questionnaire given to students at the Faculty of Technology.

1. Would you be interested in learning more about the cultural practices and beliefs of other countries?
1. Yes 2. No 3. Maybe

2. Do you think that you will have contact with people from different cultures and languages during your working life?

1. Yes 2. No 3. Maybe

3. Do you think you will have to use English at work in the future?

1. Yes 2. No 3. Maybe

4. Would you be interested in taking a cross-culture communication course at university?

1. Yes 2. No 3. Maybe

5. If you answered "yes" or "maybe" to question 4 would you prefer this course to be taught by a foreign teacher or a Japanese teacher.

1. Japanese teacher 2. Foreign teacher

Why? _____

6. Do you like studying English?

1. Yes 2. A little 3. No