

Integrating the Intercultural in Discussion Class: An Experimental Attempt

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ABSTRACT

Successful language learners learn not only language, but also cultural aspects *through* language (Brown, 2007). Furthermore, learning about culture is a key element in cross-cultural communication. As the globalization progresses, English language learners especially are expected to learn how culture affects communication. In this paper, the author presents how Intercultural Language Learning, or IcLL, can be incorporated into a discussion classroom. Compared to a past study on a similar topic conducted by Buck (2015), the author found that IcLL may be plausible in the current context with simplified and focused questions and observed several positive discussions from students.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that language has inextricable connections with culture (Brown, 2007). Same utterances can be interpreted differently depending on what connotations the utterances have for people with different cultural backgrounds. Learners who have only grammar and vocabulary knowledge are “not well equipped to communicate in that language” (Liddicoat, 2008, p. 278) without learning how culture affects communication, so learning the language-culture connection is an unavoidable path for any language learners. Considering that a growing number of people speak English as a second or foreign language worldwide, learning this connection is essential for mostly English language learners. Given this background, the current project describes an experimental attempt to develop students’ interculturality through intercultural language learning (IcLL) in an English discussion class.

In this paper, I will first provide the theoretical backgrounds of IcLL and related concepts, then describe the activity that I conducted in class with possible variations for different levels of students. Next, I will provide brief excerpts from students’ discussions, before concluding with limitations and future directions.

DISCUSSION: THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

IcLL is an approach to language learning that sees language, culture, and learning as fundamentally integrated (Liddicoat, 2011). It serves learners by helping them to develop “an understanding of their own language(s) and culture(s) in relation to an additional language and culture” (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scaring, & Kohler, 2003, p. 46), and successful IcLL learners will be able to notice, describe, and analyze cultural differences, and interpret ideas and feelings shared when communicating with others. Its main goal is not to “master” a language or become “native-like”, but to develop an ability to mediate between learners’ own and new culture/language (Liddicoat, 2008). Its importance has grown more than ever as globalization progresses, as language and people move beyond national boundaries easily, and as the number of people speaking English as a second or foreign language continues to rise. Consequently, learners will increasingly have to cope with “otherness” that they encounter in communicating with other English speakers in a foreign cultural context.

In order to achieve the goal above and to create a successful IcLL classroom, the definition of “communicative competence” should be reconsidered. In the past, being communicatively competent meant to be “native-like”, and learners’ communicative competence was assessed based on how close their (socio)linguistic ability was compared to that of native speakers of the target

language (Aguilar, 2007; Alptekin, 2002; Cook, 1999; Inda, 2010; Savignon, 2007). This is both an unrealistic and inappropriate goal as language teaching hardly ever achieves it, and it implies learners abandon their native culture and language. When communicating in a second language, language users use both their own and target languages, cultural beliefs and values; Instead of assimilating to the target culture, they reach an accommodation between their own and target culture (Liddicoat, 2008). Bearing this in mind, IcLL aims for developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) proposed by Byram (1997), defined as the speaker's ability "to interact effectively with people from other cultures that he/she recognizes as being different from his/her own" (Gómez, 2012, p. 51). In this view, learners are not required to have a native-like proficiency or to "master" the target language, but they are encouraged to develop the following abilities:

1. To recognize cultural diversity and its impacts to communication;
2. To deepen cultural understanding through comparisons between learners' own and other's cultures; and
3. To acquire adjusting abilities to deal with otherness. (Inda, 2010, p. 167)

IcLL is to educate an intercultural speaker (IS) as opposed to a native speaker, who possesses the ability to manage cross-cultural/language communication, to come out of their own cultural perspectives and take other's perspectives, and thus to serve as the "mediator" of communication between different cultures (Aguilar, 2007).

In order to acquire skills for successful intercultural communication, Liddicoat (2008) suggested the *noticing*, *comparing*, *reflecting* and *interacting* loop (Figure 1).

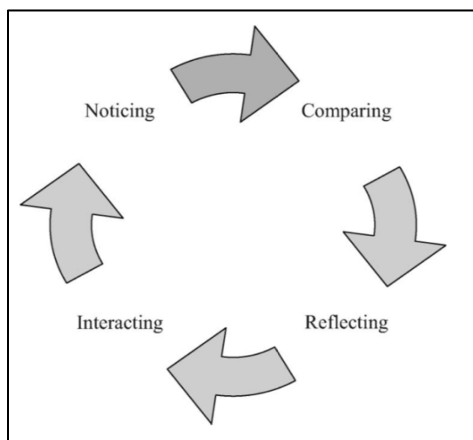


Figure 1. The interrelated process of IcLL (Liddicoat, 2008, p. 284)

Noticing, a fundamental process to learning (Schmidt, 1993), means to "examine the new information in their [i.e. learners'] own terms and seek to understand what it is they are experiencing" (Liddicoat, 2008, p. 282). Despite this, however, noticing does not automatically occur unless teachers frame questions properly (Liddicoat, 2008). *Comparing* is the most basic level of operations that learners can perform on their experiences of language and culture, and this includes both comparisons between learners' own culture and target culture, and comparisons between what they already know and new input. What follows is the *reflecting* stage, which means more than a mere reflection of how they felt about cultural diversities discovered in the previous stage. Reflection here means to make "personal sense of experiences" (Liddicoat, 2008, p. 284), where learners are able to realize how they felt about diversity, what diversity means to them, and

find ways to actively engage with diversity. Finally, in the *interacting* stage, IcLL learners are encouraged to engage with interactions based on what they learned in the previous stages.

In the context of the English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University, Buck (2015) incorporated IcLL elements into one of two discussions in each lesson. In the example, four Japanese characters in the textbook (Jun, Ryo, Eri, and Aki) who express their opinions about the death penalty were replaced with four non-Japanese people with their nationalities juxtaposed (Chen (China), Franz (Germany), Mike (USA), and Aki (Japan)), while keeping the given opinions themselves the same. The activity (preparation and discussion questions) remained the same so as not to affect the regular purpose of the EDC lesson. He observed that, generally, the IcLL contents (i.e., cultural comparisons) were too difficult for students and there were not many benefits other than generating new ideas for subsequent discussions. Considering that fostering ICC takes a long time, it is not surprising that he could observe only a very modest improvement in learners' intercultural communicative competence.

PROCEDURE

Rikkyo University's EDC offers 14 lessons per semester, and each lesson has a broad discussion topic to be discussed (e.g. *Money, Social Media, or Gender in Japan*). Learners are placed into four different levels from level 1 (the highest) to level 4 (the lowest) based on TOEIC placement test results. Regardless of level, all learners learn six Discussion Skills (i.e., a set of functional phrases used for a better academic discussion) and three Communication Skills (i.e., another set of functional phrases used to convey attention and comprehension and to find and fix communication breakdowns). They also complete three designated discussion tests each semester. Each lesson, except for the test lessons, contains two extended discussions, which last 10 minutes (Discussion 1) and 12 to 20 minutes (Discussion 2) respectively, depending on participant numbers. Each discussion is preceded by a preparation activity to help students generate ideas.

In the current project, I replaced one of the two extended discussions with cultural comparison questions and focused on the *noticing* and *comparing* stages in Liddicoat's (2008) model for four reasons. First, based on Buck's (2015) suggestions, I tried to keep the questions simple and limited in number. Second, as IcLL takes a long time to foster, just as Buck mentioned, I thought it would be more time-efficient to focus on the fundamental stages rather than trying to complete the full cycle of Liddicoat's model. Third, I tried to balance matters with the EDC's original lesson aims, that is, teaching Discussion/Communication Skills and evaluating learners primarily based on their Skills use. Learners are expected to use the learnt Skills in each discussion, thus asking "How would you react to unfamiliar situations?" (the *reflecting* stage) did not always fit the lesson aims. Fourth, since EDC employs a unified syllabus, where every instructor uses the same textbook and employs a similar teaching approach, I did not want to diverge from this by replacing both extended discussions with the original questions.

For this project, I interviewed my colleagues from China, the U.S., Singapore, and Russia and collected cultural differences regarding each discussion topic. For instance, if the lesson dealt with different punishments for different crimes, I asked about punishment systems in their countries that do not exist in Japan. After collecting the data, I drafted four different cultural facts with cultural comparison questions. The questions were different from one lesson to another so that learners could notice and compare cultural differences while still using the target Skills (see Appendices A and B). I intentionally did not include country names in each statement to avoid any cultural determinism or biases. Also, I did not use this activity in every lesson either because I had insufficient amount of data or I anticipated that comparisons would be still too difficult for some learners. In total, I used this activity in four different lessons with eight different groups in levels II, III, and IV.

VARIATIONS

After some trialing of different types of questions to see the balance between good cultural comparisons and questions where learners could use the skills, I found “What are some differences between this country and Japan?” was the best for many of my students. With this type of question, students were able to directly compare cultural differences (as opposed to, for example, asking “Do you think this country is comfortable to live?”). With other types of questions, I sometimes saw students share their personal experiences or feelings about a certain culture without any comparisons or it simply took them too much time to compose English sentences (this was especially the case for lower-level students). On the contrary, this type of question was easy to “get to the point” for students in any level, and also adaptable to almost any discussion topic. On the other hand, this question could induce only superficial comparisons such as “Japan is safer than this country”, which is not necessarily the aim of IcLL teaching. If one attempts to induce deeper comparisons that need critical analysis of culture, the following alternative/additional questions might be suitable:

1. **Altering “What are some differences?” to “How is it different from Japan?”:** While “What” questions ask about specific differences, “How” questions are more open-ended and can induce longer explanations.
2. **Asking why miscommunication happens between different cultures:** It is useful to ask why the non-Japanese feel Japanese culture is strange or uncomfortable. This requires learners to “put themselves in other’s shoes” and also analyse Japanese culture more objectively.
3. **Asking about other examples of Japanese culture that may seem strange to the non-Japanese:** Obviously this question requires students to analyse Japanese culture more deeply and objectively. Also, if they want to come up with other examples that could cause miscommunication, they need to understand *why* they happen.
4. **Asking what students have to be careful about when they communicate interculturally:** This question fits the last stage (*engaging* stage) of Liddicoat’s (2008) model. In order to answer this question, students have to understand *what* could cause miscommunication and *why*, in addition to *how* to deal with the situation.

Obviously, these types of questions do not necessarily require students to use the skills. Thus, I suggest these as follow-up activities separated from extended discussions, or moving from “What are some differences?” to these questions as a semester proceeds. In addition, the questions above require higher-level analytical skills, so choosing a right group of students is necessary. I tried some of the questions above (see Appendix A) with the highest-level class I had, Level 2, but students could not come up with other examples or what to be cautious of in cross-cultural communication. If one wishes to use the above types of questions, sufficient amount of time and scaffolding are evidently going to be necessary.

RESULTS

Not surprisingly, students’ reactions varied from one class to another. Some classes’ discussions ended up with simple comparisons between two cultures or discussions on which culture they like. In some cases, students could not understand what to discuss as they were unfamiliar with questions requiring them to “find differences” (i.e., they are more used to questions that ask their personal opinions). For example, one of the discussions by level 3 students on statements about “Asking for Money Online” and “Homeless People” (see Appendix B) was like this:

A: In Japan, people have money, so homeless people don't ask for money. Do you agree with me?

B: What? [Is your opinion] Finished!? Hmm. I think all Japanese people are in insurance plans, but not in other countries. Also, it's not common to upload pictures. Do you agree with me?

C: I agree that Japan is different from other countries. Maybe in Japan, there's no system like this (i.e., websites to ask for help online), I've never seen that. Maybe this system is good for Japan.

**Skills are underlined.*

In this discussion, all students simply pointed out differences between Japan and other cultures, or shared their person opinions with only a few skills. This is undoubtedly a good starting point because at least students could look at some differences, but the quality of analysis was insufficient, compared to the following discussion in another level 3 class:

A: In my opinion, although Ikebukuro has many homeless people, they don't talk to us. There's no communication between non-homeless people and homeless people. But I think it'd be also difficult for them to communicate, because if I were talked to, I'd feel scared. Do you agree with me?

B: I agree that it's difficult for us to communicate with homeless people. But in spring, I saw many homeless people collect cans after *hanami* [enjoying cherry blossom trees in spring]. If they had asked me, I would have given empty cans to them.

A: So do you mean this country is better than Japan?

B: Yes, that's right! Do you agree with me?

C: Yes, I agree that this country is better than Japan. But in Japan, we have *takidashi* [free meals for homeless people] for homeless people, so maybe they do not have to communicate with non-homeless people.

D: I agree with you. Recently, Ikebukuro is trying to "clean up" the city by kicking out homeless people, and I think it is very bad, because they can't feel good.

C: Ah, so you mean they feel uncomfortable to live in Ikebukuro.

D: That's right.

**Skills are underlined.*

Students in this discussion not only pointed out differences (e.g. communication between homeless people and non-homeless people is uncommon) but also talked about why Japan was different (e.g. non-homeless people feel scared if homeless people talk to them). In addition, Student B referenced their own experiences and proposed a way to act differently (B would have given empty cans or bottles to homeless people), which is an element of the *reflecting* stage. They also used several different skills.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I first described the theoretical backgrounds of IcLL and its necessity in the globalized era. Using Liddicoat's (2008) interrelated process of noticing, comparing, reflecting, and interacting, I then turned to the description of my activity and variations for different levels of students. In the result section, it was shown that some students successfully compared cultural differences and analyzed why there were differences while using the target skills. This means that IcLL may be plausible if teachers provide focused questions that are suitable to students' English

and cognitive levels.

However, due to its experimental nature, this project has certain limitations. The first is a concern about the language-*culture* connection due to the exclusion of country names. I believe that excluding country names in the activity could avoid cultural determinism and biases to some extent, because presenting certain cultural information as a universal fact of a particular country neglects diversity *within* that country. At the same time, one could also question how much connection they made between the statements and foreign countries without identifiable names. Providing county names could have helped students make language-culture connections and accept or acknowledge other perspectives more easily.

The second limitation is about effectiveness. Similar to Buck's (2015) project, many of my students focused on only one to two statements out of four. Though there should still be certain effects for developing ICC, the teacher could have guided students better towards discussing as many cultures as possible.

The third is about assessment. As this project's primary focus is to develop the activity itself, I did not assess students' overall improvement of ICC. Still, it is worth exploring how to assess students' intercultural attitudes in a discussion class, how students' attitudes change over time, and what discussion teachers can do to foster ICC. More experimental projects are needed to efficiently prepare students for intercultural communication.

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APPENDIX A – An Example of Cultural Comparisons

Discussion 2: Gender Inequality



Preparation

❖ *Below are four examples of gender-related issues in Japan.*

Language:	I'm an English teacher from America. The other day, a Japanese boy in my class said to me, " Jessica, you're sexy! " I was very surprised and even got a little angry. But maybe it's just a cultural difference.	Why do you think this problem happened?
School Custom:	I'm a teacher at a Japanese high school. In my school, all girls should have black hair and wear a skirt , because girls look more beautiful in that way. Of course, students from any country should follow this rule.	Is this a good or bad rule?
Men's Fashion:	In my opinion, men should not wear a skirt or makeup . Those are only for girls.	Is this a good or bad idea?
LGBTQ:	In July, 2018, a politician in Japan commented that LGBTQ couples are " unproductive " because they cannot bear children. This news was featured worldwide and created a big debate about LGBTQ couples.	Why do you think this comment created a big debate?

Discussion

1. What are other examples of gender inequality in Japan? Why can those be problematic?
2. How can we reduce gender inequality?
3. What do you have to be careful about when you talk about gender in English with non-Japanese people?

APPENDIX B – Another Example of Cultural Comparisons

Discussion 2: Poverty and Culture



Preparation

- ❖ *Below are four examples of cultural differences about poverty. For each difference, think what is different from Japan.*

Asking for Help Online: In my country, **if poor people get sick, they ask for money online** because the public health insurance cannot provide enough money. Also, poor people cannot pay for the insurance. Sick people upload their pictures and ask for help.

Charity: In my country, **donating money and goods are more popular than volunteering**. We see all kinds of donations, for example, UNICEF or the Red Cross, almost every week at the main stations.

Homeless People: In my country, **it's very common for homeless people to talk to non-homeless people**. Homeless people usually ask for money, cans, or glass bottles, and many people help them.

Poverty in Society: In my country, **poverty is very visible**. For example, there are different levels of supermarkets for people with different incomes. Supermarket A is for very rich people, B is for the middle-class, C is for very poor people, etc.

Discussion

1. What are some differences from Japan? Discuss:
 - a. Asking for help online
 - b. Charity
 - c. Homeless people
 - d. Poverty in society
2. What are some good ways to reduce poverty in Japan?