Tableaux vivants as vehicles for cultural exchange

Joseph V. Dias[1]

Abstract. Intercultural simulations, such as Barnga (Thiagarajan & Steinwachs, 1990), along with the use of critical incidents (Gibson, 2002; Gropper, 1996), have long been a mainstay of intercultural communication courses and have found their way into English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms (Apedaile & Schill, 2007). In this paper, a computer-mediated communication (CMC)-enhanced cultural exchange project, which is in the spirit of these intercultural simulations, will be described and evaluated. In the process of the exchange project, conducted between universities and high schools in Japan and the United States, students in the respective settings exchanged word associations and tableaux vivants based on the same word prompts. A variety of web tools facilitated the project: the forms and spreadsheets available through Google Drive to gather the word associations; word cloud creation websites to visually represent the word associations; as well as online forums for the two groups to exchange impressions and interpretations. It was found that the exchange facilitated interesting insights and interpretations and allowed for the critical analysis of the concept of culture itself. Some of the artifacts produced through a series of these exchanges will be shown and applications of the project to tandem language learning will be explained.

Keywords: e-tandem, intercultural, tableau, CMC.

1. Introduction

Critical incidents (Gropper, 1996) and intercultural simulations, such as Barnga (Thiagarajan & Steinwachs, 1990), Journey to Sharahad (Darg, 1999) and An Alien Among Us (Powers, 1999), have played an important role in intercultural

---

1. giuseppedias@gmail.com

communication courses, and they are occasionally used in ESL and EFL classrooms (Apedaile & Schill, 2007). They have been used with a wide variety of individuals: business people, missionaries, Peace Corps volunteers, diplomats, not to mention university students studying intercultural communication and foreign languages. These largely task-based simulations, which often involve role play, are intended to make participants more aware of their own cultural values, foster more positive attitudes toward the "other", help in identifying and avoiding stereotypes/ prejudice toward people of other cultures, facilitate the understanding of the sorts of problems that arise when communicating cross-culturally, and aid in navigating through culture shock smoothly and adjust to foreign host cultures with a minimum of tears and heartbreak.

This paper describes and evaluates a CMC-enhanced language and cultural exchange project, created in the spirit of the intercultural simulations noted above, which can be customized for use with students at practically any level or area of specialty. The project involves an exchange of word associations and tableaux vivants that are based on the same word prompts. Tableaux vivants are "living pictures" formed by a group of people who arrange themselves in a particular way, usually for dramatic effect. Concepts selected for the word associations/tableaux are negotiated by the teachers and students of the partner classes. Both word associations and tableaux are elicited to provide a wider range of artifacts to be used in subsequent discussions.

A variety of web tools facilitate the project: the digital affordances utilized in this project include Google Drive's spreadsheets and forms for the gathering of word associations, word cloud creation sites for visually representing the word associations, and forums for the groups to electronically exchange views and interpretations.

2.   Method

2.1.   Setting up the exchange

Partner classes for the exchange can be arranged through existing personal networks or by initiating an exchange request through online communities, such as those available on Edmodo (a learning management system with a Facebook-like interface2). If carried out as a formal class exchange project, the classes on each side of the exchange may have either a language or culture focus. The first exchange

---

2. https://support.edmodo.com/home#forums/20896730-follow-communities-and-connect-with-teachers

of this type attempted by the author, for example, involved a class of Japanese university students enrolled in an intercultural communication seminar and a class of American secondary school students studying Spanish. Students and teachers negotiated the concepts that were the basis of the word associations (which were to be transformed into word clouds) and corresponding tableaux vivants (which were photographed). The word clouds and the photos of the tableaux became the products and "conversation pieces" of the exchange.

2.2. Word associations

Members of the partner classes record their associations with the concepts selected. Concepts that lend themselves to a wide range of interpretations and representations are preferable. They might include, for example, "love", "sadness", "health", "happiness", "relationship", "peace", "future", and "endurance". They may be customized for exchange settings that share a specialization, such as business (Dias, 2014), in which case the concepts might consist of "honesty", "success", "fairness", "corruption", "trust", and "customer".

The forms feature of Google Drive (https://www.google.com/drive/index.html) can be used by students to record their associations to the concepts. Later, the words are transformed into tag clouds using tag cloud creation sites, such as Wordle (http://www.wordle.net/), Tagxedo (http://www.tagxedo.com/), or TagCrowd (http://tagcrowd.com/).

2.3. Creation of tableaux vivants

Students in the respective classes form groups of three or four. After being briefed about the meaning of tableau vivant, they discuss with fellow group members, for 5-7 minutes, how they will represent the concept(s) they were assigned; chosen from among the prompts previously given for the word associations. Depending on the size of the class and number of concepts, some groups may create multiple tableaux, which are subsequently photographed. A tableau for "innovate" might feature one learner forming a light bulb gesture with his hands over his head, while another learner appears to be snapping her fingers in a "eureka" moment. Every member of the same team must show a different way of representing the assigned concept through the tableau, so it is necessary for the members to discuss what the concept means to them and how they can display their interpretations as a group. The members may also opt to create one unified scene, such as two participants preparing to catch a third who is about to fall, representing trust, or a random assortment of differing interpretations.

2.4. Tableaux vivants juxtaposed with word clouds and exchanged

Juxtapositions of the tableaux and word clouds can be exchanged among the international partners through blog postings or by sharing PowerPoint files (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Juxtapositions of tableaux vivants and word clouds
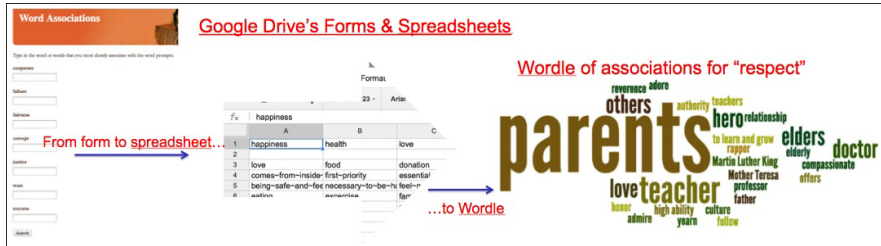
3.   Discussion

Students enlarge their vocabulary by familiarizing themselves with the semantic fields encompassed by the word prompts. There are ample opportunities for speaking, as groups must negotiate what their tableaux will look like before performing them for the class. When one is called upon to express a concept through the body, by necessity, it becomes concrete and revealing. It is possible to arrive at the concept's core, confronting preconceptions, feelings, and ambivalences.

Through the relative sizes of words, the tag clouds reveal which ones appeared most frequently and, therefore, represent commonalities among members of the same group. In a written exchange carried out on a forum, groups may be asked to explain the thinking that went into their tableaux and relate it to the assortment of concepts in the corresponding word cloud.

Intergroup comparisons are the real focus of the exchange and similarities revealing common humanity are as significant as divergences that may indicate cultural differences. When comparing representations of "justice", for example, learners might observe that both include "scales of justice", showing that justice is connected with fairness for the two groups, whereas one might associate it more with punishment by showing someone being arrested in the tableau, while the others link it to superheroes (e.g. Ultraman) who provide deus ex machina solutions for the achievement of justice.

The exchange could be carried out as part of an e-tandem language learning project (Brammerts, 1996; O'Rourke, 2007), that is, an electronic exchange between two groups that are native speakers of the target languages that the partner class is learning.

4.   Conclusions

Even if the activities described here do not give participating groups incredibly useful insights about their respective cultures, the practice provided in backing up claims about possible contributions of culture to behavior may reduce the predilection to stereotyping and cultural bias.

If this activity is done as an intercultural exchange with another group of business students, for example, as participants write and read analyses of the tableaux and word associations, they may have opportunities to make intercultural comparisons while at the same time reflect upon their own unconscious assumptions and values, leading them to speculate about the implications for business practices when different cultures come in contact.

One of the advantages of collaboration such as that described in this exchange project is that teachers and students on one side of the exchange who may be less well-versed in the technology necessary to accomplish the tasks, can help the other, providing additional opportunities for language and technological exchange.

References

Apedaile, S., & Schill, L. (2007). *Critical incidents for intercultural communication: An interactive tool for developing awareness, knowledge, and skills*. Edmonton, Alberta: NorQuest College. Retrieved from http://www.norquest.ca/NorquestCollege/media/pdf/centres/intercultural/CriticalIncidentsBooklet.pdf

Brammerts, H. (1996). Language learning in tandem using the Internet. In M. Warschauer (Ed.), *Telecollaboration in foreign language learning* (pp. 121-130). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Darg, P. (1999). *Journey to Sharahad*. Retrieved from http://globaledge.msu.edu/academy/course-content/exercises-and-simulations

Dias, J. V. (2014). Exploring business ethics through tableaux vivants. In C. S. C. Chan & E. Frendo (Eds), *New ways in teaching business English* (pp. 237-40). Alexandria, VA: TESOL.

Gibson, R. (2002). *Intercultural business communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gropper, R. C. (1996). *Culture and the clinical encounter*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, Inc.

O'Rourke, B. (2007). Models of telecollaboration (1): eTandem. In R. O'Dowd (Ed.), *Online intercultural exchange: An introduction for foreign language teachers* (pp. 41-61). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Powers, R. B. (1999). *An alien among us: A diversity game*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, Inc.

Thiagarajan, S., & Steinwachs, B. (1990). *Barnga: A simulation game on cultural clashes*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, Inc.