Incorporating Intercultural Communication Activities in English Language Classes

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Abstract

Intercultural Communication has become a relevant focal point within a variety of fields – science, psychology, politics, journalism, economics, and education, to name a few. Yet, current university students may not even be aware of Intercultural Communication's role in these fields, as well as their studies and future careers. A survey was first conducted to show the absence of Intercultural Communication in higher education, as well as the need for incorporating exercises and activities that stress the importance of communicating to people from different cultures, and respecting their differences. Two classes involving intercultural communication activities were then given to two groups of Japanese students who were studying English in a Japanese university. Results from another survey revealed a majority of the students felt the exercises helped them with self-reflection, as well as evaluating their beliefs and biases, thus supporting the notion of incorporating more Intercultural Communication exercises and activities in English language classes.

Keywords: intercultural communication; cross-cultural communication; second language learning

Introduction

The field of Intercultural Communication has expanded along with a world that is constantly impacted by advanced technology and globalization. Robert Muller (1982), the "father of global education," provided a hauntingly relevant example of why intercultural communication is so important, and he did so in the form of a quote that could very well be uttered by one of your students, now graduated, as he or she stares into the face of a global society and thinks back on his or her education: "Why was I not warned? Why was I not better educated? Why did my teachers not tell me about these problems and indicate my behavior as a member of an interdependent human race?" (p. 6).

The lesson is easily identifiable, and yet it is still common to find English education programs strictly adhering to a curriculum that relies heavily on textbooks, their accompanying CD-ROMs or DVDs, and easy-to-digest lessons plans that require little-to-no preparation. Curriculum that is textbook-driven is not uncommon, particularly in Asian countries where second-language acquisition can be challenging for a number of reasons. Kumar and Subramaniam (2011) point out that while many Asian countries follow a textbook-centric curriculum,

> Not all the resources prescribed in the textbook may be suitable for a classroom and a teacher may need to consider the level of conceptual development as well as the sociocultural background of students to select and use resources from the textbook. Thus, teachers need to develop a critical eye for evaluating textbook content for their classroom and a pedagogy based on their own informed decisions rather than relegating such decisions to the textbook. (p. 87).

There is definitely a right time and place within daily lessons where incorporating readings and activities from a textbook are not only appropriate, but also enhance the lesson: "Textbooks are a detailed sequence of teaching procedures that tell you what to do and when to do it. There are no surprises – everything is carefully spelled out" and provide administrators and teachers with a complete program . . . [that] is typically based on the latest research and teaching strategies" (Fredericks, 2005). That being said, diversification in classrooms around the world has caused educators to pause and reflect on new approaches to educating the ever-changing classroom.

This is not an argument for a radically new approach to curriculum design, for as much as educators welcome changes to the field, such as the recent development and implementation of The Global Scale of English (Pearson English, 2015), certain aspects of curriculum design must remain: "Curriculum design involves the integration of knowledge from many of the areas in the field of Applied Linguistics, such as language acquisition research, teaching methodology, assessment, language description and materials production" (Nation & Macalister, 2010, pp. xv-xvi). Nation and Macalister also include steps in introducing change, which include making sure change is necessary, ensuring the change is neither too dramatic nor too trivial, and preparing for a potentially long period of time to pass before the change yields positive results and is fully accepted (p. 173).

While most experts and educators would probably agree that these are fundamental aspects of curriculum design, and the steps necessary to ponder, some educators, and perhaps even some learners, will disagree with the following viewpoint regarding realistic change to a school's or department's curriculum:

> The people who will receive the ultimate benefit of the change, usually the learners, are often not negotiators in the change process . . . A change . . . can involve the learners in suggesting and endorsing, or rejecting certain types of activities. Although they might not be involved in the decision . . . they could be involved in how the approach is applied (Nation and Macalister, 2010, pp. 175–176).

Learners should be involved in the process of change in some way, and it seems logical to at least solicit input on the types of activities that are included in class lessons. This leads, however, to the fundamental question regarding whether or not students have the knowledge and understanding to know what may be best for them.

Literature Review

With the rise in global communication brought forth by various reasons (from business to war), intercultural interaction is becoming an important topic for researchers, educators, businesses, and governments. Saint-Jacques (2015) suggests there are three stages of globalization – political (beginning with the founding of the United Nations in 1945), economic (with the spread of free-market capitalism since 1980), and cultural—and that the world's focus has been primarily on the political and economic, "but the powerful impact of globalization on culture had not been sufficiently analyzed and researched" (pp. 16–17).

With the impact of globalization and the need for deeper cultural understanding, Intercultural Communication is a field that needs more attention in multiple fields, but most importantly in modern academia. Sadri & Flammia (2011) highlighted two of the four aims of the Association of American Colleges and Universities Presidents' Campaign for the Advancement of Liberal Learning, both having to do with intercultural knowledge: "Expanding cultural, societal, and scientific horizons," and cultivating democratic and global knowledge and engagement" (p. 18). With the rise in Liberal Arts programs across the globe, Intercultural knowledge should be at the forefront of every program; and yet it is questionable whether current university students are being molded into interculturally knowledgeable members of society.

Martin and Nakayama (2014) highlight four skills that are important when developing as an ethical student of culture: "Practicing self-reflexivity, learning about others, listening to the voices of others, and developing a sense of social justice" (p. 21). However, as important as these skills are, current university students may not even be aware of the field and its importance in their lives and future careers.

There is another situation that many countries, including Japan, face that adds to importance of teaching intercultural communication skills to students. While an aging population seems to have little connection to education, it does, in fact, have a tremendous impact on it, as Yoder (2004) elucidates: "College entrance exams do not fit the present times. Japan is an aging society with fewer young people entering college than any time in the postwar period. This dwindling college population is now requiring colleges to downsize or even close and the situation is projected to get worse" (p. 170). Yoder (2004) was right in his prediction, as the situation has become seemingly bleaker with each passing year. With the rise in interest in globalization, education programs are become more engaged in global and intercultural studies and communication, but, returning to the original concern stated above, just how well these topics are being taught remains unclear.

In 2016, twenty-three (23) Japanese students studying English in a liberal arts department in a Japanese university were asked to define *intercultural communication*. Before revealing the answer, it is important to first provide a few definitions so that the reader is has a certain understanding of the meaning: Rogers and Steinfatt (1999) define intercultural communication as the "exchange of information between individuals who are unalike culturally" (p. 1); Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, and Sam (2011) define it as the "exchange of information (verbally or non-verbally) between members of different cultural populations" (p. 471); and Zhu Hua (2011) offers this academic definition: "A subject of study that is concerned with interactions among people of different cultural and ethnic groups and comparative studies of communication patterns across cultures" (p. 422). From these three definitions, an overall working definition of the term *intercultural communication* can be formed.

Going back to the survey that asked 23 Japanese students about the definition of *intercultural communication*: Out of the 23, 100% of the students could not even construct a simple definition. Hall (2003) describes learning about intercultural communication as "freedom from ignorance" (p. 22). If incorporating intercultural communication activities brings forth a freedom from ignorance, and can be supported by a variety of "motives" – personal growth, social responsibility, economic, cross-cultural travel, and the media (Baldwin, Coleman, Gonzalez, & Shenoy-Packer, 2014, pp. 5-13) – perhaps it is time to look more closely at some of the activities that may benefit English language learners in higher education institutions. Current studies have focused on the importance of intercultural communication, most recently Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), and although research focuses on the importance, few actually focus on English-as-a-Foreign Language (EFL) classroom application, specifically precise activities that have shown to be successfully incorporated into lessons.

This paper, therefore, investigates the applicability and effectiveness of intercultural communication activities by addressing the following research questions:

Can intercultural communication activities help students self-reflect and critically evaluate personal beliefs and potential biases, as well as think about other people in new ways?

Should intercultural communication become a required part of English-as-a-Foreign Language (EFL) instruction?

Method

Twenty-three (23) Japanese students were selected for this study. The students were divided into two groups based on their TOEFL scores – for the purposes of this research, they will be referred to as the "Intermediate" and the "Advanced" groups. The students were given two identical 1-hour-and-fifteen-minute classes that included an introduction of Intercultural Communication, as well as three different intercultural communication activities.

The first activity involved watching a video produced by a Chinese detergent company that caused a tremendous amount of controversy for its depiction of a Chinese woman "cleaning" an African man so that he becomes Asian, followed by a second YouTube video showing members of the American general public viewing the video and offering feedback (Yang, 2016; Phineqx, 2016). After viewing both videos, students were placed into small groups of three or four members, and discussed the prevalence of racism in the world and in Japan, as

well as their reactions to the videos. Each student then shared his or her thoughts, followed by commentary, feedback, and opinions from the rest of the group.

The second activity is called "First Words" (Velasco, 2013), and involves showing participants several different pictures and eliciting the first word or phrase that comes to their minds. The words or phrases given cannot be simple descriptive words (for example, "schoolgirls" in response to a photo of a group of Japanese schoolgirls). The goal is to collect honest responses of what participants think or believe about what or who they see in the image, and oftentimes responses reveal certain misconceptions, biases or even prejudices that participants may not have even been aware they were holding onto.

The third activity is called "Evaluate, Analyze, Describe" (Velasco, 2013; 2015), or "EAD," as it is most commonly referred to. This activity is based on the D.I.E. (Describe, Interpret, Evaluate), one of the first intercultural communication exercises developed. In both exercises, participants are shown a picture, and asked to provide a description (without being influenced by personal feelings or analyses), an interpretation or analysis of what is occurring, and an evaluation or judgment of who is in the picture and/or what is happening. While the order does not seem important, the E.A.D. is based on the notion that judging is a natural first reaction to new stimuli, and therefore should not be forced back. In other words, the instructions for participants to follow the D.I.E. go against human nature to immediately judge who and what they encounter, and therefore take away potential avenues for open communication among participants. This open communication will allow for self-reflection and growth in ways that will promote openness, understanding, and respect for different cultures.

After the activities concluded, the participants were given a two-statement survey using a standard Likert scale format that asked if they believed the activities helped them self-reflect and critically evaluate their personal beliefs and potential biases, and if they felt Intercultural Communication activities should be a part of English language instruction (see Appendix for complete survey questions). The survey was anonymous, and no personal identifying information was collected, nor attached to any of the forms.

Results

The collected survey results from both the Intermediate Group and Advanced Group are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Both Groups.

Statement #	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree	*n*
Group 1	1	2	0	9	11	23
Group 2	1	1	1	9	11	23

Table 2 below shows the results from the Intermediate Group.

Table 2: Intermediate Group.

Statement #	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree	n
Group 1	0	2	0	5	5	12
Group 2	1	0	0	5	6	12

Finally, Table 3 shows the results from the Advanced Group.

Table 3: Advanced Group.

Statement #	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree	n
Group 1	1	0	0	4	6	11
Group 2	0	1	1	4	5	11

When both Intermediate and Advanced Groups are combined, the following results emerged. For Statement #1, 87% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that the Intercultural Communication activities they experienced over the course of the two one-hour-and-fifteen minute classes helped them engage in self-reflection, critically evaluate aspects of their personal belief systems and potential biases (some of which were carried over from childhood), and think about other people's thoughts and opinions in new ways. Specifically, 39% of the participants agreed, and 48% strongly agreed with Statement #1.

For Statement #2, 87% of the participants also agreed or strongly agreed that Intercultural Communication activities should be incorporated in regular English language classes. Specifically, 39% of the participants agreed, and 48% strongly agreed with Statement #2.

When looking at just the Intermediate Group, the following results surfaced. For Statement #1, 83% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that the Intercultural Communication activities they experienced helped them self-reflect, critically evaluate their personal beliefs and potential biases, and consider other people's thoughts and opinions in new ways. More specifically, 42% of the participants agreed, and 42% strongly agreed with Statement #1.

For Statement #2, 92% of the participants also agreed or strongly agreed that Intercultural Communication activities, such as those completed in class, should be incorporated in English language classes. More specifically, 42% of the participants agreed, and 50% strongly agreed with Statement #2.

When looking at just the Advanced Group, the following results were revealed: 91% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed with Statement 1. Breaking this percentage down, 36% of the participants agreed, and 55% strongly agreed with Statement #1. 82% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with Statement 2, specifically, 36% of the participants agreed, and 45% strongly agreed with Statement #2.

Discussion

This brief study is actually a continuation of a previous study conducted in 2014 with 180 university students from Japan, China, South Korea, and Brazil (Velasco, 2015). In that study, the university students were given the same exercises as in this current study, however with much more focus on the E.A.D. exercise, as well as a similar survey with a statement measuring the effectiveness of the E.A.D. in promoting self-reflection and an evaluation of personal beliefs and biases, and with that survey, 87% responded "Strongly agree" (ibid.).

Combined with this current study, the total number of students surveyed is 203, with 87% strongly agreeing in 2014 and 83% agreeing or strongly agreeing in 2016 that Intercultural Communication activities help with opening the lines of communication cross-culturally while providing crucial opportunities to reflect on personal thought and opinions on a variety of topics. Although a considerable amount of time has passed before administering the survey, the impact intercultural communication strategies have on English language classes is clear – students enjoy the activities and see value in them. They realize the impact these types of activities have on their current way of thinking and their use of English and communicative skills in their future careers, and this realization should be fostered in a way that ensures personal and academic growth each semester.

Past research has shown the impact globalization has had on the world, and stressed the importance of communicating appropriately and effectively with those from different cultures. With the rise of academic departments, educational programs, and post-secondary degrees, such as Intercultural Communication, Global Studies, and International Psychology, incorporating intercultural communication activities in classroom lessons could provide much needed cultural aspects for students, and foster self-reflection and growth.

Of course, there continue to be limitations to this research project, namely the number of participants, as well as their shared nationality, language, culture, and traditions. That being said, this research project was designed with non-native English speakers in mind, so further longitudinal research needs to be conducted using a larger, more culturally varied sample size, similar to the study that was conducted in 2014.

Conclusion

The original objectives for the D.I.E. (Describe, Interpret, Evaluate) Intercultural Communication exercise were to foster self-awareness and discernment between objectivity, inference and speculation, and judgment and personal opinion (Nam & Condon, 2009). The E.A.D. (Evaluate, Analyze, Describe) Intercultural Communication exercise shares the original objectives of the D.I.E; however, it aims to move beyond self-awareness to a conscious level where positive change can occur. The E.A.D. can help foster better relationships between people of different cultural identities by providing unique and oftentimes rare opportunities to address racial tension or other prejudicial beliefs that could be undercutting goals the larger group may be trying to accomplish. The E.A.D. accomplishes the goal of directly confronting prejudice by asking participants to immediately evaluate what they see, so, by moving backwards through the D.I.E. process, people are able to make progress on improving self-awareness, cultural sensitivity, and effective intercultural communication.

Racism, sexism, homophobia, and most recently xenophobia, have become a part of the global society, and unfortunately, with the Orlando LGBT-friendly nightclub massacre (National Broadcasting Company, 2016), the threat of terrorist attacks, most recently in Brussels (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2016), the controversial vote for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, known as "Brexit," being fueled by xenophobia (Karabell, 2016), and President Donald Trump's "America First" policy that has incited racial division and xenophobic reactions in the United States (Patterson, 2017), there is no end in sight to these negative aspects of humanity.

There has never been a greater need for effective intercultural communication than now, and educators have a responsibility to society to help nurture future leaders through education. Although intercultural communication strategies will not solve the world's problems, exercises such as the E.A.D. may certainly prove to be an effective tool for assisting future teachers, managers, trainers, and leaders with opening the doors of communication between different cultures, and perhaps rid the world of underlying issues of racism and other prejudices one person at a time.

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Appendix

Survey

Please respond to the statements as honestly as possible:

1) Intercultural Communication activities, such as the E.A.D., helped me self-reflect and critically evaluate my personal beliefs and potential biases, as well as think about other people in new ways.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Agree

Strongly agree

2) Intercultural Communication activities should be a part of English language classes.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Agree

Strongly agree