

The Teaching of Direct and Indirect Language in an Intercultural Context

Maidy Giber Kiji

Students who learn a second language need to become aware of the different cultural “rules” for communicating in that language. The sociolinguistic “rules” of behavior should be included in classroom activities so as to foster a broader understanding and command of the second language. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the teaching techniques, students’ reactions and students’ ability to utilize knowledge regarding North American cultural rules in conversation. The use of silence in disagreement, ways to ask for clarification, interruption of a speaker and expressing opinions are the focuses of this expose which is drawn from actual classroom experience.

Background

For the past two years in Japan, I have utilized a text whose theme is cross-cultural communication, in my first and second year classes. The text is entitled ETC 4 : A Competency Based Listening / Speaking text : Cross-cultural communication by Elaine Kirn. I purposely chose this text in order to introduce my students to the “rules” of intercultural communication. Through transactional or message oriented listening tasks, descriptions and activities, the students gradually built up schemata or background knowledge from April to July and September to October. The five chapters we worked through dealt with topics such as under-

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standing customs of respect, using appropriate body language, describing feelings and tone of voice, apologizing and expressing forgiveness and understanding consumer complaints and requests. Each topic explored North American cultural concepts and points of view. This background knowledge served as a basis for the sixth chapter of Communication which is the focus of this paper. The competencies listed in this chapter are as follows: Recognizing direct and indirect language, communicating effectively, expressing interest and understanding, keeping a conversation going and communicating across cultures. "... a pattern of learned, group-related perceptions-including both verbal and nonverbal language, attitudes, values, belief systems, disbelief systems, and behaviors-that is accepted and expected by an identity group is called a culture." (Singer 1987 p.6). The students in my classes became aware of North American culture as they explored it in contrast to their own Japanese culture.

Literature regarding Cross-cultural Studies

In Hughes (1987) there is a brief list of techniques for teaching cultural awareness. He includes a comparison method in which the teacher begins a discussion of items in the target culture which are different from those in the students' culture. The second involves cultural assimilators or brief descriptions of cross-cultural interaction which students usually misunderstand. Activities such as these were part of our lessons.

Hughes laments that we cannot expect teachers to be "linguists, psychologists, philosophers and cultural anthropologists..." (p. 168). My own background includes an M. A. in Latin American Studies, with majors in literature, anthropology and education, as well as an M. A. in TESL. I have also lived and taught abroad in South America, Europe,

the Middle East and the U.S. My TESL studies included Cross-cultural communication.

Dunnett et al (1981) suggest that intercultural activities be given the same importance as other language activities in a given curriculum. They advocate an integrated approach. "The sophisticated EFL teacher, while introducing foreign students to some aspects of American culture, must also encourage students to maintain their own cultural identity. To achieve this, the teacher must be trained to talk about cultural relativism as well as the universality of certain components shared by different cultures. The teacher should guide cultural discussions so that they do not become judgemental and lead to conclusions that some cultures are superior or inferior." (p.158).

It was within these guidelines that I entered the project of teaching direct and indirect language in the classroom. We approached each situation together, allowing ample time for questions and discussion following my explanations and the presentations of students in groups of two or three. Students were asked to comment on various aspects of each others' presentations-use of language, tone and gestures were considered after every situation was dramatized.

Dunnett et al advocate a technique which they refer to as the "culture assimilator" (p.151). This approach outlines and describes an incident involving a misunderstanding between a non-native speaker of English and an American. Following this, questions are presented from culturally different points of view. The students must then decide which of the statements they feel are the valid interpretation of the event. If the students do not choose the correct interpretation, they are told why their answer is incorrect. Then they are encouraged to try a second time.

Another technique is brainstorming in which students explore and

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discuss cross-cultural themes as they work at learning English. Vocabulary lists are essential tools to introduce such themes. Topics may include role play in which students take on “American” identities to deal with Japanese as in my classroom. Another is making lists of values and putting them into order. One example might be educational goals. A third technique is compare and contrast which I have already mentioned.

Personal journals which involve free-writing are another way to reflect on cross-cultural elements in the classroom. Students can express their own personal reactions to events and make observations about inter-cultural themes.

Dunnett et al (p.155) cite the example of an intercultural text entitled *Living Language : USA Culture Capsules for ESL Students* (Johnson 1979). The author’s introductory statement is as follows: “The purpose of these capsules is not to teach you one specific way of thinking about any particular aspect of United States culture. Rather, they are designed to help you analyze different areas of culture in the United States and compare them with your native language The capsules do not attempt to make any value judgments with regard to U. S. culture. You may make these judgments for yourself after some investigations and thinking of your own.”

Communicative Competence

The rules of speaking are both “culture-specific and largely unconscious” (Wolfson 1989, p.37). As a native speaker, I am able to use such patterns, but may be unable to explain why I do so. Wolfson feels that many native speakers are not even aware of how they speak. In her discussion of communicative competence, she refers to Paulston’s suggestions regarding communicative teaching methods. These include role-

plays which will give students practice in real-life situations. Paulston had incorporated Hyme's idea of communicative competence and applied it to second language teaching. I decided to develop the idea of role-plays into dialog form and critique / discussion to assess my students' ability to utilize the knowledge gained through my discussion of the questionnaire. I agree that communicative competence requires a knowledge of the rules of conversation, the sociolinguistic rules which Wolfson refers to.

The Lesson Plan and Teaching Approach

The first lesson in the cross-cultural communication unit involved a pairwork activity taken from Kirn (1989). Students were asked to evaluate and answer the following questions for the U. S. / Canada and for Japan: "1. Is it rude to interrupt someone who is talking? 2. Do you say 'thank you' in response to a compliment? 3. In social situations, might silence feel uncomfortable? 4. If you disagree with someone's opinion, should you keep quiet? 5. Are politeness and comfort more important than truth and honesty? and 6. If you don't understand what someone is saying, should you smile and pretend you do?" The students numbered 25 and they answered in the following manner:

	U. S. / Canada	Japan
Question 1.	yes (25) no (0)	yes (25) no (0)
Question 2.	yes (25) no (0)	yes (0) no (25)
Question 3.	yes (0) no (25)	yes (0) no (25)
Question 4.	yes (2) no (23)	yes (25) no (0)
Question 5.	yes (23) no (2)	yes (25) no (0)
Question 6.	yes (23) no (2)	yes (25) no (0)

Based on their own presumptions, some students did not answer

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correctly about the U. S. / Canada. I explained each answer in detail as the text suggests. In the case of question 1, there may be instances when interruption is allowed in the U. S. / Canada, whereas in Japan it is considered rude. For the second question, students were aware that Americans say "thank you" to compliments. But they explained that Japanese do not necessarily say "thank you". For question 3, students were unaware that silence may be uncomfortable in an American context. I explained that Americans usually talk when there is silence and they try very hard to keep a conversation going. This is in contrast to the Japanese acceptance of silence. For question 4, two students rightly felt that Americans can disagree and let it be known that they do. For question 5, the majority of the students answered incorrectly that politeness and comfort were more important than truth and honesty in the U. S. / Canada. For question 6 again, the two students who had been to the U. S. answered correctly while the others felt that you should smile and pretend when you do not understand. We spent an entire hour and a half in class discussing this survey and the attitudes / answers which would be correct in the U. S. / Canada.

During this discussion, I was sure to stress the fact that neither the attitudes in Japan or those in the U. S. / Canada were better or worse. I emphasized that these attitudes are a part of each cultural system and that they are unique. I did not ask the students to adopt American attitudes, rather to try to understand them as they relate to cross-cultural encounters. We spoke about examples in each culture and the students offered their own anecdotes.

The second step in this cross-cultural unit included the writing of dialogs in pairs or groups of three. The situations were written by me and student groups were assigned one particular situation. They were

instructed as follows:

Please write a dialog of eight complete sentences-six words in each sentence for one of the following situations. Be sure to base your dialog on American behavior. Answer what you think an American would do in this situation even though you are Japanese. Pretend that you are in America.

Situation 1. You are Japanese and your classmate is American. She has some ideas about Japanese education. She thinks that female students are only preparing to get married, not to have careers. YOU DISAGREE. How do you tell her your opinion?

Situation 2. You are Japanese and your classmate is American. She is talking about the recent presidential election in the USA. You do not understand her completely. What do you do? How do you tell her that you do not understand? Do you remain silent?

Situation 3. You are Japanese and your classmate is American. She has been talking on and on for twenty minutes. You have something to say to her. What do you do? Do you interrupt her or do you keep quiet?

Situation 4. You are Japanese and your classmate is American. She is wearing a new dress and it looks awful on her. What do you do? Do you tell her the truth or do you give her a compliment?

Each of the dialogs was performed for the class. Students commented on the appropriateness of the language and the roles of the 'American' and Japanese in each encounter. This discussion and use of roleplay was a successful technique as I will share with you some of the dialogs written by my students. (see appendix)

Conclusion

Without a doubt, these second year students were able to incorporate the sociolinguistic rules of conversation into their cross-cultural encounters. They became aware of a new set of attitudes and behaviors which they could use in dealing with Americans or Canadians. Therefore, I reiterate my initial premise that it is worthwhile and indeed essential to instruct students in direct and indirect language in an intercultural context. These sociolinguistic rules of conversation will enable them to fully participate in cross-cultural encounters. They will also aid in the development of communicative competence which requires a knowledge of attitudes and conversational rules as well as the language itself.

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Appendix

Cross-Cultural Communication Tasks and Student Dialogs

Situation 1 : You are Japanese and your classmate is American. She has some ideas about Japanese education. She thinks that female students are only preparing to get married, not to have careers. YOU DISAGREE. How do you tell her your opinion ?

Student dialog :

American : Japanese female students are only preparing to get married, not to have careers.

Japanese : I think you may be wrong.

A : Tell me some ideas you have.

J : Some people do so, but many people don't.

A : Do many Japanese women have careers ?

J : Yes, they do. They have careers after they graduate school.

A : When are they preparing to get married ?

J : Most Japanese women begin to think about marriage while they are working.

Situation 2 : You are Japanese and your classmate is American. She is talking about the recent presidential election in the USA. You do not understand her completely. What do you do ? How do you tell her that you do not understand her ? Do you remain silent ?

Student dialog :

American : Clinton was elected in the recent presidential election.

Japanese : Yes, Yes. I know.

A : Can you really understand me? What do you have your opinion about it?

J : I'm sorry. I don't understand you. Please tell me again.

A : O.K. Clinton was

J : (silent) I'm sorry. Please explain it in another way.

A : Oh yes. It is good for you to say truly. In America, to keep silence is impolite.

J : I see. I don't know it.

Situation 3 : You are Japanese and your classmate is American. She has been talking on and on for twenty minutes. You have something to say to her. What do you do? Do you interrupt her or do you keep quiet?

Student dialog :

American : Why don't you give your opinion?

Japanese : Well, I think it will be troubled if I interrupt you.

A : Oh, it's so bad. I don't understand if you remain silent.

J : In fact, I couldn't understand you.

A : What? Why don't you say that at first?

J : In Japan, silence is the most polite in this situation.

A : Well, in America we have to express our view. If we can't understand, we ask someone.

J : I know it's important to understand the difference of culture.

Situation 4 : You are Japanese and your classmate is American. She is wearing a new dress and it looks awful on her. What do you do? Do you tell her the truth or do you give her a compliment?

Student dialog :

Japanese : Hi! You wear fancy clothes today, don't you?

American : I don't think so, but why?

J : Because you wear your shirt with a check pattern and skirt with a big flower pattern.

A : I bought them recently, so I wanted to wear both shirt and skirt.

J : I think each clothes are very nice, but you had better wear them separately.

A : I don't know how to combine. Please tell me.

J : These clothes will look very attractive if you wear this shirt with jeans
and if you wear this skirt with a white shirt.

A : Oh very nice. Thank you for your advice.