

A Study of Cross-cultural Understanding in Lower Secondary English Course :

with Special Reference to American Dietary Customs

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1. Introduction

The newly revised Course of Study compiled by the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science holds the notion of "communication" in remarkably high esteem. The word "communication" tends to evoke simultaneous association with "conversation." However, in order for meaningful communication to take place between people from different backgrounds, something more profound than mere conversation is needed. Meanwhile, the majority of secondary school students are taught English, in many cases for 6 years, only to realize that they rarely, if not never, encounter the situations in which they are pressed to put it to practical use. Noting these facts, objectives of teaching English other than merely attempting to developing students' ability to speak it must be sought, though the value of being able to communicate in the English language has so far gone unchallenged. Promoting cross-cultural understanding offers such a challenge, since it raises communication beyond superficial linguistic exchange. It is, therefore, a worthy goal.

The main aim of this study is to search in the English language classroom for a way to direct the students to openmindedness and empathy toward the rest of the world, based on the result of a questionnaire.

The scope of this study is confined to culture with a small 'c' with special reference to American dietary customs.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Multi-cultural Awareness

How do people learn culture? In order to answer this question, Kleinjans' culture learning matrix (Damen, 1987, p.217) would seem to be of help.

This matrix suggests that the whole process starts from getting information about the new culture, perceiving it and becoming aware of it. This cultural awareness should be identified as a central objective in terms of culture learning in a foreign language class. A realistic approach implies that this is the best a teacher can possibly offer.

Why then in the sphere of language teaching? In order for the students to be cross-culturally sophisticated in one culture, the best condition is overseas experience. However, not so many learners will have a chance to visit the country where the target culture is lived out for a long enough period of time to assure the degree of immersion. Thus, the next best thing is to escort them through the quasi-experience in the language class where they can first obtain the knowledge of it. Louise Damen (1987, p.8) explains how the classroom can be an alternative:

Table 2.1 E. KLEINJANS' HIERARCHY OF CULTURE LEARNING MATRIX

Cognition	Affection	Action
Analysis	Appreciation	Awareness
Synthesis	Revaluation	Attending
Comprehension	Orientation	Responding
Insight	Identification	Interaction

Source: E. Kleinjans, On Culture Learning. Paper No. 13. (1972b:20) for presentation at the Japan Association of College English Teachers' Annual Conference, Hachioji, August 1971 (Damen, 1987, p.217)

The classroom community is managed, unreal, forgiving, and protective, but it is also an environment that offers unique opportunities for experimental intercultural communication. If administered well, this community can provide the first step on a long voyage of cultural discovery that will end in the world outside the classroom.

(Damen, 1987, p.8)

This involves not only fact-giving but the quasi-experience of different cultures, through which students can be brought to what might be called "multi-cultural awareness," the first step toward the attitude that will allow the learner to empathically view other cultures and accept people as they are. The assumption is that the very first phase of information-getting will lead to mono-foreign-cultural awareness that is expected to result in multi-cultural awareness. Rebecca M. Valette (Valdes, 1987, p.182) expounds on the process from the first facet to the second:

Tests of cultural awareness are generally built around measuring cultural knowledge...These bits of knowledge constitute the general background of members of the target culture, and the student who shares this knowledge demonstrates an increased awareness of the parameters of that target culture. (Valdes, 1987, p.182)

This concept can find a niche in materials design and construction in a quest for the class where the above-stated awareness is imparted to the students. Putting first things first, it is important to probe what the learners do and don't and want to know about a target culture.

2.2. American Dietary Customs

In view of the fact that human beings alone dine together, and that sharing meals indicates the absence of hostility as well as the readiness for friendship, and also the fact that eating is of current interest to many Japanese, discussing dining as part of the culture to be incorporated in the teaching of English is worth all the trouble.

Here the target culture is that of America. The possible explanations to this would be that 1) America is supposedly the most familiar nation to the Japanese to which relatively easier access is available, and 2) America, as a melting pot, has mingled dietary customs covering diversity of different cultures, which leaves a greater possibility of extending into other cultures.

3. The questionnaires and the results

3.1. The pre-questionnaire

3.1.1. Purpose

This initial questionnaire was conducted to obtain the overall picture of what the general knowledge or image that the normal Japanese students possess is, in prospect of using its result for setting the items to be listed in the more focused, streamlined questionnaire.

3.1.2. Participants

89 eighth graders at an attached school of Hiroshima University, comprising 47 boys and 42 girls, took part in the pre-questionnaire.

3.1.3. Procedure

The participants were required to give random knowledge about American eating habits in response to the comprehensive questions such as "List all the foods you think Americans eat for breakfast," "What do you think American junior high students eat in lunchtime recess at school and where do you think they eat it?," "List all the foods you think American eat for supper," etc.

3.2. The Questionnaire Proper

3.2.1. Purpose

This questionnaire was more explicit and aimed at detecting to what extent the average Japanese junior high student is familiar with the topic concerned, i.e., food, in this case, associated with the three main meals of the day.

3.2.2. Participants

66 seventh graders at the other attached school of Hiroshima University, consisting of 33 boys and 33 girls, responded.

3.2.3. Procedures

The participants were required to select the item or items under the four questions that they think is/are the most appropriate. The items decided upon were based upon the results of the initial questionnaire.

Three choices were to be made for question 1 whereas only one for the rest of the whole procedure.

3.2.4. Results

- (1) Picture a typical American breakfast and pick out 3 foods from the list below that you think are most likely to be served, and put them in the order of likelihood. If you pick 'others,' please specify.

Table 3.1

	Male	Female	Total
Bread	55	55	110
Soup	40	46	86
Salad	34	40	74
Cereal	34	19	53
Sandwiches	25	28	53
Pancakes	6	3	9
Omelet	6	1	7
Rice	0	0	0
Others	2	1	3

Others:

Juice(male), Milk(m),
Juice and milk(female)

The top three far surpass the others. It could be said that the ranking of bread is reasonable. However, in reality, soup and salads are hardly served at breakfast table. On the other hand, cereal seems to be placed way too low. The average American would conceive it as more typical a breakfast article than bread. Fewer students, it seems, picked pancake or omelet than they really should. As a matter of fact, omelet is one of the most likely American breakfast foods although many Japanese people would deem it to be eaten at such heavier meals as supper. *

*The general statements given here and in subsequent sections (indicated by *) stem from the author's personal experience in the U.S.A., and these points were checked with American informants.

(2) Where do you think American junior high school students eat lunch? Pick one out of those listed below. If you pick 'others,' please specify.

Table 3.2

	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Cafeteria	14	42.4	11	33.3	25	37.9
Home	11	33.3	7	21.2	18	27.3
Schoolyard	6	18.2	11	33.3	17	25.8
Hamburger Shop	2	6.1	2	6.1	4	6.1
Classroom	1	3.0	1	3.0	2	3.0
Others	0	0	0	0	0	0

Obviously the students appear to possess the correct image of where lunch is eaten at school. The information that they obtain through the media of TV dramas or cinemas could be referred to as being conducive to this result. Nevertheless, a faint touch of mistaken grasp still could be traced in that nearly 26 % think that American junior high school students eat lunch in the schoolyard, which, in actuality, is not altogether likely. **

(3) What do you think is American staple food? Pick one out of those listed below. If you pick 'others,' please specify.

As was expected, bread and steak came on top. These two account for no less than 83.4%, which is overwhelming. However, the truth of the matter is that there is no such thing in America as 'staple food' as Japanese would imagine it. *** Therefore the answer here is supposed to be 'nothing in particular.' The myth of "bread and steak as mainly and most frequently eaten by Americans" has long been on the mind of Japanese and it still remains intact.

(4) Where are you most likely to get information on American dietary customs? Pick one out of those listed below. If you pick 'others,' please specify.

This section simply depicts that TV is the major source of students' information concerning American eating habits. What is to be highlighted here, however, is that only 1.5 % of all the students questioned said that the English textbook was the source of

Table 3.3

	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Bread	21	63.6	22	66.7	43	65.2
Stake(meat)	7	21.2	5	15.2	12	18.2
Fried Chicken	2	6.1	1	3.0	3	4.5
Nothing in Particular	2	6.1	1	3.0	3	4.5
Salad	0	0	2	6.1	2	3.0
Rice	0	0	1	3.0	1	1.5
Corn	1	3.0	0	0	1	1.5
Fish	0	0	0	0	0	0
Potato	0	0	0	0	0	0
Others	1	3.0	0	1	1	1.5

Others: Wheat(m)

information about the target culture. It may be a fair assumption, therefore, that at present, the cultural aspect of foreign language teaching is being all but absent.

3.2.5. Interpretation

Looking at the outcome from all the four phases of the inquiry, it is hard not to interpret that there still is a substantial degree of misunderstanding or certain amount of ignorance as to the reality of the dietary customs of the United States, which is generally accepted as the most familiar nation to Japan.

4. Conclusion

Thus far, the lack of understanding toward the culture of America, which we would do well to acknowledge as a representative of the cultures to be dealt with in the language class, has been manifested. It is true that the citizens are bombarded with various forms of media-based information to form some illusory image about the target culture, but such purveyors of information feature only either as sight-seeing-related or amusement-oriented

Table 3.4

	Male	%	Female	%	Total	%
Television	21	63.6	18	54.5	39	59.0
Nothing in Particular	7	21.2	8	24.2	15	22.7
Magazines/Books	2	6.1	2	6.1	4	6.1
Parents	3	9.1	0	0	3	4.5
English Textbook	0	0	1	3.0	1	1.5
Other Classes	0	0	1	3.0	1	1.5
Friends/Seniors	0	0	1	3.0	1	1.5
Others	1	3.0	1	3.0	2	3.00

Others: Teacher at cram(juku) school(m)

Movies etc.(f)

and not the fundamentals that could be of help in developing the sense of similarity as well as difference between the two cultures. Therefore, this is where the possibility of organizing the materials around this "mystery spot" could be considered. More exactly, the answers to the unknown facts or clues to them could be incorporated in the textbook. The next phase would be to work out the principles and system of how to use such materials, which would include the concept of team teaching with native speakers.

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