Familiarizing the Foreign: 10-Minute Cross-Cultural Reflections
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ABSTRACT

Over the past semester, I have implemented my 10-minute "Cross-cultural reflections" activity whereby students reflect upon the similarities and communication differences between Japanese and English-speaking cultures. My goal was to motivate students to cultivate an interest in cross-cultural communication and also help them see the practicality of learning the English language as a means of international communication rather than simply as an academic subject. In doing so, I believe that students will be more self-motivated to learn English or at the very least, cultivate a positive attitude towards the English language and the English-speaking world.

INTRODUCTION

Languages are socially and culturally bound, their effective study requires a positive disposition towards everything the L2 is associated with (Dornyei, 2001). Within the EDC context, not every student is positively disposed towards English since the program is a mandatory course. Therefore, I believe, it is crucial for EDC teachers to generate this 'positive disposition' towards English and the English-speaking world in order to generate greater student motivation and interest in the EDC program.

According to the literature, one of the ways to do so is "to increase intercultural awareness and the acceptance of intercultural norms and their validity" Cogan (1995:38). Therefore, I decided to adopt Kramsch's (1993) approach to use materials in a way that students are encouraged to "reflect on their own culture in relation to others, thus helping to establish a sphere of interculturality". In doing so, my project seeks to create this 'sphere of interculturality' by creating a positive disposition towards English and the English-speaking world through a series of 10-minute intercultural reflection activity at the end of every lesson.

CONTEXT

From my experience teaching the EDC curriculum, many students seem to hold limiting mental barriers about learning English language. Mainly,

1) Their English is not good enough.
2) They cannot communicate with 'native speakers'.
3) The stereotype that English-speakers are of Anglo origin (e.g. America, Australia, England etc.). Therefore, only people who need to communicate with this specific group of people should learn English.

Such mental barriers prevent them from seeing themselves as effective English-speakers and this creates a negative disposition towards English. Therefore, it is essential that I first create a 'positive disposition' towards English by helping students overcome the abovementioned mental barriers that give rise to a 'negative disposition'. After-which, I attempted to encourage students to create a 'sphere of interculturality' by asking them to reflect upon the similarities and differences in the way English-speakers and Japanese speakers communicate so as "to increase intercultural awareness and the acceptance of intercultural norms and their validity" Cogan (1995:38).

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PROCEDURE

The project is divided into three parts: *Part One (Lesson 5)* involves a piloting stage. *Part Two (Lesson 6-9)* involves the implementation of 10-minute self-reflection activities centered on the theme of "English as an International Language". This stage aims to help students challenge some assumptions and stereotypes they might have about English and English-speakers in order to mitigate any negative disposition students have towards learning English. Furthermore, the self-reflection questions are crafted in a way that they can relate their own culture and language to English-speaking cultures and the language. *Part Three (Lesson 10-13)* involves the implementation of the 10-minute activities centered on the theme "Communication styles across cultures". The objective of this stage is to help students see the similarities and differences in the way people communicate in English and in Japanese and help them develop effective strategies to communicate cross-culturally.

Piloting Stage (Lesson 5)

In the piloting stage, I worked out the time needed to successfully conduct a self-reflection activity. After trying out the self-reflection activity on a class from each level (i.e. lower level IV, intermediate level III and advanced level II), I found that there is sufficient time for students to discuss 2-3 self-reflection questions in pairs in 10 minutes if they read and thought about them as homework from the previous lesson. Therefore, the self-reflection questions for the next week will be handed out in the previous week and I named them the "10-minute self-reflection activity". Moreover, since the self-reflection questions are not related to the lesson topic, I decided to do the activity at the end of the lesson so as not to confuse the students. In a nutshell, the 10-minute self-reflection activity basically involves 2-3 self-reflection questions discussed in pairs at the end of every lesson.

Part Two (Lesson 6-9):

This stage involved the implementation of the first series of 10-minute activities on two level II, two level III and one level IV class. I designed 3 self-reflection questions for each lesson under the topic "English as an International Language" (Refer to Appendix 1.1). The activities were used right after the final feedback and in pairs because of time restrictions. The self-reflection questions for the lesson were given and the questions for the next week were given to them as homework.

Part Three (Lesson 10-13)

The procedures of this stage were similar to Part Two; the only difference is in the self-reflection questions posed. The questions were aimed at helping students reflect upon their own communication strategies and the communication strategies of English-speakers (Refer to Appendix 1.2).

Self-reflection questions

Two sets of self-reflection questions were crafted to 1) help students reflect upon their own language and culture and/or attitudes towards English and English speaking cultures 2) help students develop effective cross-cultural communication strategies. For example, in Lesson 6-9, students were asked to reflect on their own language and culture and then compare and contrast it with the English language and English-speaking cultures (Refer to Appendix 1.1). In Lesson 10-13, students were asked to reflect on their own communication styles and then compare and contrast them with the communication styles of English-speakers (Refer to Appendix 1.1).

RESULTS

Judging from the response of the students, the self-reflection activities seemed to have an overall positive effect on helping them rethink their previous assumptions or stereotypes about English and the English-speaking world. Below are some excerpts from the students' self-reflections about "English as an International language":

i. "I didn't know many Asian people also speak English"

ii. "I think British English is good English, other kinds of English are difficult for me to understand but I will try to learn about them because I want to have many foreign friends"

iii. "English is an international language, it is important for me to learn it for my future"

iv. "India has many English speakers but I don't understand their English. I did not know that so many people speak English as an official language, and first and Second language. Maybe in the future, I need English."

However, there were also students who did not change their views about the English language and English-speakers:

i. "American English is the best. I cannot understand other kinds of English, many people speak strange English"

ii. "My English level is too low so I don't know the difference between American English or other English"

iii. I know English is an international language, I did not learn anything new.

Excerpts from the students' self-reflection about "cross-cultural communication strategies" also have an overall positive effect in helping students think about developing effective cross-cultural communication strategies:

i. "Giving reactions is important in communication, I need to give more reactions when I speak in English"

ii. "I don't know reactions are important in communication, I want to use more reactions when I speak to English speakers"

iii. "Gestures are useful, but it is also dangerous, I want to learn more about gestures so I can communicate well with people from other countries"

Overall, from the student responses, the project was successful in fulfilling its basic objectives of encouraging self-reflection about students' disposition and assumptions towards English and English-speakers. Through the responses above, many students seemed to have been encouraged to challenge their own assumptions and stereotypes. Moreover, the responses also show that students also seemed to have learned new strategies to communicate cross-culturally

or become motivated to learn more about these strategies.

CONCLUSION

This project began with a simple desire to motivate students to cultivate an interest in cross-cultural communication and also help them see the practicality of learning the English language as a means of international communication rather than simply as an academic subject. Using the 10-minute self-reflections, I was able to address an even greater variety of issues such as stereotypes of English and the English-speaking world and the students' insecurity about their 'broken' English. Moreover, the project also helped students see the relevance between English and their daily lives by comparing and contrasting English and the English-speaking world with their own language and culture.

However, the biggest limitation to this project is the time factor. Sometimes, I am unable to complete the discussions in 10 minutes so I had to stop the discussions short and ask the students to write their responses and submit them to me as homework. Nevertheless, as the results show, overall, the project was successful in challenging and overcoming stereotypes and helping students develop a positive disposition towards learning English. Additionally, students also seemed to enjoy learning about different cross-cultural communication strategies, which generated interest and self-motivation in learning English. Therefore, I believe this project's simplicity enables it to be transferrable in the other EDC contexts where students have a negative disposition or low motivation towards English.

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A - Self-Reflection questions: English as an International Language

Lesson 6
I.   What variety of Japanese do you speak? (E.g. Kansai, Tohoku, Hiroshima etc)
II. What is different about these varieties of Japanese?
III. Do you think Japanese people should speak only standard Japanese?

Lesson 7
I.   What kind of English do you know? (e.g. American English, British English, Canadian English, Japanese English etc.)
II.   What is different about these varieties of English?
III. Do you think Japanese people should speak only standard American English? Why?

Lesson 8

I.   Circle all the English-speaking countries on the map
II.   What is your image of an English-speaker?
III. Which countries have the most English-speakers?

Lesson 9

Country	Number of English 1st language Speakers	Number of English 2nd language Speakers
United States	215,424,000	25,600,000
United Kingdom	58,190,000	1,500,000
India	350,000	200,000,000
Nigeria		60,000,000
The Philippines	20,000	40,000,000

Source: Crystal (2003: 62-63)

I.   What is interesting or surprising about the information above?
II.   What is your image of an English speaker now?
III. Do you think you have to speak *native* English to communicate well?

APPENDIX B - Self-Reflection questions: Cross-cultural communication strategies

<u>Lesson 10</u>
  i.   What kinds of gestures do you often use? What do they mean?
  ii.   What kinds of gestures do non-Japanese people use?
  iii.   Do you think gestures help you communicate better in English?

<u>Lesson 11</u>
Give short answers
  I.   Do you use reactions (*aizuchi*)?
  II.   When do you use reactions in Japanese?
  III.   Why do you use reactions?
  IV.   Do you think non-Japanese people use reactions?
  V.   Do you think reactions helps you communicate better in English?

<u>Lesson 12</u>
  i.   Are you a polite person?
  ii.   In what situations do you use polite language (*keigo*)?
  iii.   Why do Japanese people use polite language?

<u>Lesson 13</u>
  i.   Do you speak in a different way to your juniors and seniors?
  ii.   Do you think English-speakers use polite language (*keigo*) too?
  iii.   What are some ways to be polite in English?
                    ①   Speaking Business English
                    ②   Eye Contact
                    ③   Shaking hands
                    ④   Giving Reactions
                    ⑤   Your idea