Explore National Identity and Stereotypes Through Tandem Learning

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This paper addresses the nature of National Identity (NID), self-awareness and reflection and examines how these may be introduced to adolescent and young adult learners. The paper provides an introduction for readers new to the topic and highlights what basic considerations teachers should be aware of and the role they should take when introducing identity and awareness raising tasks. Socio-contextual tandem learning activities are recommended with practical activities suggested for use, or development, with the aim of providing intercultural experience and development opportunities.

Key Words: Stereotypes, National Identity, Tandem Learning, Third-Place, Culture, Intercultural Studies

INTRODUCTION

“The real voyage of discovery is not in the seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes”.

Proust (1913-1925)

As English continues to spread as a lingua franca, educators in EFL situations are stepping outside their traditional roles of teaching the nuts and bolts of the language, and teaching the more abstract cultural issues. This hopefully better equips learners not only as language users, but also as intercultural communicators. This not only makes lessons more interesting for learners but also more useful and meaningful, as communicating across cultures successfully not only requires language ability, but also increasingly the need for cultural awareness and sensitivity. This trend can be seen if we examine many current popular textbooks, where it has become common to use foreign countries, customs, culture or people as the main focus of activities or tasks. Unfortunately, many textbooks rarely pay anything more than lip-service to the idea of introducing cultural awareness. At best, students are taught a few facts about a foreign country or culture, but have no chance to examine their own ideas about the foreign culture or the source of their ideas. In other words, there is a transmission of knowledge, but no personal transformation opportunities. Consequently, instructors are left to devise their own materials or tasks so that learners can experience National Identity (NID) at deeper, more meaningful levels.

Instructors have often struggled with ideas of how to make ‘English and Englishness’ meaningful for language learners and how to make the learners feel connected to the language beyond the purely linguistic level. However, such one-sided Anglo-centric approaches are inappropriate in our increasingly intercultural contexts where English is now just as likely to be used between non-native speakers as a contact language. Using intercultural approaches in the classroom which introduces the multi-faceted uses and users of the English language community, can help learners better understand their own source culture (C1) in contrast with any stimulus culture (C2). Whereas, the traditional foreign culture approach focuses solely on the ‘target’ culture (C2)
but without any investigation or reflection on the source of any stereotypes that learners may have about, or between, the C1 and C2.

Any encounter a student has with a second culture should involve a Janus-faced perspective of their own culture and the stimulus culture (Pulverness, 1995). (NID), involving the feelings and images we hold true about ourselves as a nation, culture or group, also involves a symbiotic relationship between the C1 and C2 and consequently all the positive, negative or biased feelings we hold true about ourselves and others. Therefore, in our age of increasing globalisation, all students, not only EFL/ESL learners, would benefit from approaching NID inter-culturally to aid moving toward an understanding of foreign cultures’ differences and moving towards one global community.

THE CONCEPT-IDENTITY AND STEREOTYPES

Making National Identity (NID) meaningful is somewhat of a contradiction, since identity is a complex social construct and means infinite, equally valid, different things to many different people. Each person’s identity is therefore influenced by demographic and geographical differences and perceptions, which are constantly shifting. On a macro level, stereotypes we hold true about ourselves (and importantly other countries and cultures) provide psychological security, ensure cohesion in difficult times and enable people to function and perform within their complex and varied contextual roles. Danger arises when these stereotypes are extrapolated to individuals on a micro level, leaving students ignorant of their own or other foreigners’ true and complex identities. As Byram (2001) notes, “it is not the purpose of teaching to try and change learners’ values, but to make them more explicit and conscious” (p.7). Therefore, the teacher’s role should be to help raise awareness and facilitate the deconstruction of stereotypes rather than to destroy them. Learners should work on getting behind them and analysing them objectively, whether they are positive or negative, investigating the origins of any stereotypes and what they tell them about themselves and/or others.

Identity should not be seen as or presented to learners as being stable or self-contained. Rather identity, whether on a micro or macro level, implies mutability, shifting and reconstructed perceptual borders with constant adjustments due to changes in roles and attitudes within societies. As Barker (2000) also points out, “a teacher should help learners realise that identities are not arbitrary either, for they are temporarily stabilized by social practice or need” (p.193). It therefore seems appropriate to encourage our learners to analyse what it is that makes them who they are, be it European, British, Londoner or London East-ender; or be it Asian, Japanese, Tokyoite or rural-dweller. It is important to help learners to consider and understand other people or groups, but also how they may be represented or seen in the eyes of those other people or groups. The challenge for teachers is to provide a viewing platform for learners to view themselves and others.

CULTURE 1, CULTURE 2 AND THE THIRD SPACE

Using a metaphor of a disco mirror-ball is useful to aid us in describing NID, as it has many facets and responds to how light is cast upon it. Just as this metaphorical disco mirror-ball appears brighter and more homogeneous in harsh light, so does NID when directly confronted with ‘otherness’. Kramsch (1993, p 205) also suggests that teachers using intercultural tasks in class are faced with a kaleidoscope of at least four different reflections of facts and events. These are made up from the (C1) source cultures auto-stereotypes and hetero-stereotypes of itself, (in other words the positive or negative stereotypes it has about itself) and the auto- and hetero-stereotypes of the (C2) being studied.

If we wish to help learners investigate, understand and deconstructing NID, it is necessary to guide them towards Bhabha’s (1994) ‘Third Space’, from which the learner can then view their NID as both an insider and outsider. By doing this, learners then gain deeper insight into their own culture and its interrelations with other cultural groups and examine what and why auto-stereotypes or hetero-stereotypes may exist between them. From there, they can then investigate and the possible source of them. (see Fig.1).
ADOLESCENTS AND THE THIRD SPACE

Adolescence is a crucial age in terms of both developing and understanding personal identity and also developing intercultural skills. Many may initially find it difficult to occupy a so-called ‘Third Space’. Primarily, difficulties may arise due to the fact that adolescents are still experimenting with their own identity in their late teen years. Tribal identity is not innate and young people learn theirs in order to function within the variety of communities they belong to. They are emotionally committed to primal identities such as their family or community and their L1 language, but also typically start to explore their own and different possible identities at this age, for example, nationalistic, community based or gender role identities. They are sufficiently mature cognitively and intellectually to deal with an abstract issue such as NID and are therefore at a pivotal age for developing intercultural skills. With suitable guidance and sufficient C2 exposure and analysis, they will be better equipped to acculturate to a global, rather than a regional/national community and to become skilled intercultural mediators.

Educators, however, should be wary, as ‘some’ young learners may react to C2 with xenophobia, the strong negative feelings and reactions to something other than their own C1. In contrast, others react with exoticism, a specific form of xenophilia, the love and adoration of the foreign. Both of these extreme reactions reinforce ethnocentricity, thus preventing the learner from occupying an objective ‘Third Space’. Alred et al. (2003) describes why being an intercultural mediator is preferable to being a xenophile:

Being intercultural...is not synonymous with abandoning one’s own groups and rejecting one’s social identities...it leads to a heightened awareness of these, and the interaction of ‘own’ and ‘other’, an interaction which, whilst maintaining distinctions, creates a sense of communality, of community. (p.4)

Seelye (1997) also suggests that C2 differences should not be reified but rather that they should be used as points of interest from which to access the stimulus culture. Once inside, the students can be helped to realise that even apparently bizarre or exotic behaviour, whether their’ own or others, makes sense when seen in context. Therefore, to mix metaphors, it seems that to successfully deconstruct NID or become an intercultural being, we have to exchange our rose-tinted spectacles for 3-D ones. In terms of dealing with auto-stereotypes, this gives us, as the Scottish poet Robert Burns (1786) put it “the giftie...to see oursels as others see us [in original]”.

BENEFITS OF TANDEM LEARNING

Sen Gupta (2003) suggests out-groups often appear more homogeneous due to lack of detailed information about them. By definition, becoming an intercultural mediator necessitates direct contact and two-way interaction with people from other cultures. Therefore, Tandem Learning (TL) is an ideal and natural way for exploring NID (the term NID being used for both macro projects examining other foreign cultures or people, also micro project dealing with nationalistic or regional differences). The central principles of TL are “reciprocity” (equal mutual help and support) and “learner autonomy”, fostering the development of transferable skills such as analysis and interpretation (Dodd, 2001, p.166).

Cultural education has been largely product based, focussing on knowledge (savoirs). Knowledge is important but not primarily knowledge about a specific culture, but rather of how social groups and identities function, both one’s own and others. In contrast, TL is process-based, with particular stress placed on developing intercultural skills such as ‘savoir apprendre/faire’, or the skills of interpreting and relating, and ‘savoir etre’, thus developing readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own. Byram et al., (2001) considers this ability to ‘de-centre’ to be the foundation of intercultural competence and which potentially leads learners to the ‘Third Space’ (p.5). The more sophisticated skill of ‘savoir s’engager’ underlies all the other ‘savoirs’, focusing on critical comparison and evaluation of perspectives and practices in one’s own and other cultures. Youths may not necessarily develop ‘savoir s’engager’ until later, but by nurturing the other ‘savoir’ skills, the instructor will have equipped the students to interrogate NID for themselves.

As Kramsch (1995) suggests that using a TL approach enables teachers to develop their roles as intermediary, facilitator, catalyst and ‘impresario’, rather than obliging them to dispense their possible subjective or biased knowledge (p.91). Teachers can ideally learn from and collaborate with foreign counterparts, for example, on materials design in both ELT and cross-curricula studies.
IMPLEMENTING TANDEM LEARNING

As Stiehl and Hofer (2001) report, to date there are few suitable TL materials available. Therefore, the activities briefly described below are offered as suggestions as to how one might introduce the concept of NID to learners and make it meaningful. Teachers should keep documentation of all plans, ideas and communication. Post-lesson or project analysis is crucial for reflection and to chart the effectiveness of any tasks and the development of the learners' intercultural awareness. Learners should also be encouraged to document their work, preferably in a diary form, as it is of paramount importance that any activity designed to question stereotypes should be personally tailored to ensure that the students’ own stereotypes are those tested. By using a diary, learners can reflect on any ideas they had and self-monitor their own work and progress, checking to see if previous stereotypes have changed or have been reinforced, or newer false ones created. Therefore, after the issue of NID has been raised, students should be made explicitly aware of this possibility and encouraged to check their growth, hence challenging their own hetero- and auto-stereotypes.

Adolescents are unlikely to have experienced 'de-centring' before, that is, never been asked to investigate the source of their own stereotypes, nor question their own fundamental identities. Therefore, teachers will need to start from the first principle. A safe and excellent starting point is to study inter-class personalities. Regional or multicultural differences can be highlighted through simple surveys where learners have the chance to question stereotypes, and develop valuable skills for later use when deconstructing macro NID. As Duffy and Mayes (2001) report, comparisons of regional-cultural differences can serve as ciphers for inter-cultural ones. By reflecting on regional identity, possibly by twinning students with each other, or classes with students from another C1 school, conflicts and contradictions within the C1 can be revealed. Topics to focus on can be as simple as regional differences in food, sports, festivals, famous people in the history of that area, and perhaps local fashion. Within Japan there is wide variation in local historical festivals and their meanings. Even simple regional eating habits can reveal interesting differences, such as people in the Tokyo area prefer to eat natto, (a fermented soy-bean dish), whereas historically people from the Osaka region have never enjoyed it. Although this is changing with younger generations, learners would notice differences if there were regional diversity in the class and if they interviewed their parents or older relatives about this. It is important that students be encouraged not to just acknowledge differences, but understand the reason for them. As students are often unfamiliar with other parts of their own country, this will give them a broader concept of C1 to reflect upon when they encounter any C2 later. This would conform to Pulverness and Reid-Thomas’ (1998) advice to start (and finish) with reflection on auto-stereotypes before any comparison with hetero-stereotypes.

ACTIVITY 1. REPRESENTING YOUR HOME TOWN

An easy and fun way to exploring NID is to ask students to represent their town to a partner school from overseas. On a simple level, activities like Kramsch’s (1993) ‘From City X with love’ could be used, with each student sending a postcard or drawing, with a short text explaining why they chose it, to their counterpart (p.229). However, the following examples highlight the importance of warning students to question their auto-stereotypes. Colleagues told this author of their experiences where British pupils sent pictures to their Japanese counterparts of old white thatched cottages with rose-gardens: an archetypical English house. Later investigation revealed that none of the students lived in any such house. Similarly, this author’s own class sent stereotypical images of local historical festivals and their meanings where British pupils sent pictures to their Japanese counterparts of old white thatched cottages with rose-gardens: an archetypical English house. Later investigation revealed that none of the students lived in any such house. Similarly, this author’s own class sent stereotypical images of cultural dwellings depicting traditional thatched-roof Japanese houses to their Scottish counterparts. They in turn sent pictures of Scottish castles and beautiful stone cottages with vast gardens, even though, as my counterpart and I confirmed to each other, both schools were in a very urban area of their respective cities. Once the students were made aware of what had happened, they found it at very funny at first, but then later started to see the reflective value of the task, and how they had formed distorted, positive cultural stereotypes of themselves. It made them reflect on how they wished to be seen by others. Although this type of activity is popular in ELT classrooms as a way to help non-native students use authentic English with native-speaking counterparts, seldom is it used in such a valuable way to make students reflect upon their own auto- and hetero-stereotypes and how they may subconsciously distort their images so that others see them, as they wish others to see them.

Other related tasks could be for learners to produce a guidebook, poster or webpage for visitors, not only describing tourist sites, but also highlighting what the visitor may find strange or unusual by
writing it in the ‘survival guide’ genre. The main aim would be to develop students’ abilities to relate to both cultures with non-ethnocentric attitudes. This will help students occupy a ‘Third Space’ and to see the theme and context from both perspectives. Such activities encourage learners to reflect objectively on their own culture and experiences and consider activities that may be easy and understandable to them, but may not be so transparent to an outsider. This activity proved very useful for a group of Japanese high school students welcoming foreign visitors to their school, when they were faced with the challenge of instructing the visitors on how to find and enjoy certain tourist attractions in their area of Japan. The students suddenly became aware of not only the obvious language barrier that their guests had to deal with, but also with the trouble they would have with transportation, eating, shopping and general social manners. In regards to the issue of social manners, the Japanese students discussed what areas they felt their guest would need instruction in, and why there was a difference between what the Japanese do and their British guests do. Later near the end of the British students’ trip, the two student groups were brought together to discuss the validity of the Japanese students’ concerns and understanding of British mannerisms, and why the Japanese students had formed such ideas. It proved very revealing to both groups and helped them question the images they had about themselves and others.

**ACTIVITY 2. USING PUBLISHED MATERIALS TO ANALYSE STEREOTYPES**

Another activity is Kramsch’s (1993) ‘Behind the looking glass’ activity (p. 230). Students are challenged to write a review of tourist materials or foreign textbooks (in the style of a letter of complaint to the publisher), contrasting published representations of their country or town, with reality. These materials could be exchanged between schools, and the findings fed back to sensitise the students to how clichés are used, and how the tourism and heritage industries manipulate and exploit stereotypes. Students were made aware of this when this author showed them a selection of tourist books showing images of Scotland. One student innocently asked if Scotland had any cities, because all the pictures showed lakes, hills, mountains, derelict castles and a few quaint little villages. Her remark was an interesting one.

**ACTIVITY 3. MAKING USE OF TECHNOLOGY**

TL programmes use modern technology to attrite stereotypes of NID by enabling individuals to interact more easily than ever before. One such programme is the Comenius programme, a European Commission funded programme named after Johann Amos Comenius (1592-1670). The programme’s goals are modelled on Comenius’ own belief that education was the only way to achieve full human potential and understanding. The programme aims not only to prepare students for a future in wider Europe, but also the world. As such, technology has become important to be able to maintain easy constant contact with counterparts. In the past, crudely conceived materials allowing C2 exposure often confirmed rather than dispelled stereotypes, and these first impressions, favourable or otherwise, influenced future attitudes towards entire groups or nations. Previous pen-friend partnerships between schools, groups or students were often crudely conceived and mismatched, and without any real purpose, and therefore were doomed to fail.

Modern technology such as chat-rooms, video-conferencing or Skype, offer opportunities for live, multi-voiced and visual discussions between groups of students. Where this is not possible due to technological or financial constraints, students can send videocassette recordings, as they can allow even more reflection with the playback option. To allow more cultural representation, students could record an evening’s television viewing (ideally frequently changing channels to broaden the spectrum and compensate for short attention spans) to show partner schools other aspects of culture to which they are not usually exposed.

Slow postal correspondence often hampered C1-C2 contact in the past, but there was a greater sense of anticipation. However, in this author’s own students’ cases, this sense of anticipation often wore off after a short time due to long periods of waiting and inactivity. Paradoxically, even though email is faster, students are arguably less motivated to make the effort as they can be distracted in so many ways on the W.W.W. Developing TL tasks helps motivate students to make an effort as they provide subject matter and goals, whereas pen-friendships often fizzled out in the past because correspondents had nothing to say or reflect upon after the initial contact and excitement. Experience has shown, groups of my learners have found that not only was it interesting
to learn about other cultures from their counterparts, they were excited each time to make contact and exchange information because there were clearly defined goals and timelines. If the goals were not met, it affected at best their outcome and grade, and at worst, classmates and counterparts’ outcomes as well. This depends on how the tasks are designed and how interdependent learners or counterparts are on each other’s effort. Teachers should keep a class record, visible to all, to show how much progress a student or group is making with their task, or how much contact with counterparts they are making or research they are doing. Adopting such a transparent approach, showing everyone’s progress, makes it competitive and motivating for students, since most youths enjoy a sense of competitiveness against each other.

An unforeseen benefit of TL and technology was highlighted when students commented that is that it was interesting to hear their counterparts talk. This is revealing since most classrooms in Japan (and most EFL countries) are monolingual. Students commented that this was their first time to use their L2 with another L2 speaker and became more aware of their linguistic and phonological output when using video recordings. Consequently, they wanted to be seen as being competent users of English in the eyes of their counterparts.

If students have access to software programmes such as Skype, allowing face-to-face real-time communication, there is a greater awareness-raising potential. Learners notice the need to develop linguistic and phonological accommodation to necessitate international intelligibility. This author’s own Japanese learners became more aware of their problems of ephen thesis and paragoge, which leads to their Katakana-balisation (sic) of sounds adding syllables and changing word stress, causing intelligibility problems with those not used to hearing Japanese (Katakana) English speakers. Therefore, computer programmes like Skype, have shown to not only benefit students’ intercultural understanding through real-time negotiation with counterparts, but also to motivate them to improve their linguistic and phonological output as well.

TL projects also throw up many unpredictable points for learners to reflect upon. A colleague also commented that her own Japanese learners noticed, because of the large number of correspondence the internet had enabled, that all their Emiri student counterparts made the same grammatical errors in their writing. This in turn led them to investigate if they, as Japanese learners of English, had predictable L2 error patterns in their writing. Although not one of the original task goals, this was an excellent observation by the students, which enabled them further ‘Third Space’ reflection as to why these possible errors existed in both L2 groups’ output.

**ACTIVITY 4. VISUAL MATERIALS AND REALIA**

Visual materials and realia offer a rich source of information and are independent of linguistic ability, as a picture (or item) speaks a thousand words. One activity which would probably appeal to students in schools without uniforms, would be to contrast photographs of their counterparts in uniforms with others of the same students in mufti to illustrate diversity within apparent uniformity; for example, contrasting Japanese or Thai students with British, Irish or European counterparts. By highlighting similar fashion choices or how certain groups accessorize, it could be demonstrated that dress itself is a construct. For example, some Japanese students were incredulous to learn that their Thai counterparts wore a uniform not only to high school, but also (usually) to university. This provoked much discussion into the possible reasons why Thai students did this and the benefits of both cultural norms and liberties.

Another visual method is to use realia in TL. Jones (1995) describes a tested cultural awareness project, in which students each chose an item they believed represented their lifestyle and attitude to their country, put the items in a shoebox and sent it to the partner class, including written justifications for their choices. Before opening the box, recipients speculate about the contents in order to express their hetero-stereotypes of the donors. After viewing the contents, recipients record their reactions and questions, which they return in a box containing their own realia (the box could even include a video of them receiving the partner school’s box). Students may even include questions as to why certain objects are included/excluded. Jones (1995) also comments that Maltese students were surprised to find that a UK shoebox contained no tea-bags or references to royalty and concluded that these were less important than anticipated, revealing the complexity of auto- and hetero-stereotypes.

**ACTIVITY 5. USING QUESTIONNAIRES**

Using questionnaires to investigate NID enables students to gain essential ethnographic skill and
provides a rich source of data about their own and the partners’ school culture for an inter-school dialogue. There are many online questionnaires that can be exploited as stimulus and then adapted according to individual or group needs in order to collect data from tandem school correspondents. EFL students, for example, could adapt and use the ‘Pleasantland’ questionnaire: (http://www.pleasantland.org/questionnaire-v3.html) to collect data on British lifestyles, auto-stereotypes, ethnic origins and NID beliefs. Individual students may actually find that they have more in common with their foreign counterparts than with their classmates. However, caution is needed, as a questionnaire designed to highlight the danger of forming stereotypes may have a reverse effect. Conducting micro-ethnographic type surveys online with tandem schools requires combining ‘savoir apprendre’ with ‘savoir etre’ (skills of interpreting and relating with a willingness to change beliefs) when examining whether any data supports or neutralises hetero-stereotypes. Jones (1995) describes an activity (‘Stereotypes or is this me?’) in which students respond in turn to feedback on their answers to a questionnaire on ‘what it is like to be (insert any nationality)?’ saying whether or not they agree with the stereotype (p. 19).

ACTIVITY 6. USING CULTURAL QUOTATIONS

Fennes and Hapgood’s (1997) ‘Cultural Quotations’ activity was designed for a mono-cultural setting but could be adapted for intercultural TL. To examine auto-stereotypes, ten quotations from the students’ national literature or well-known people are distributed and students are asked to choose which one they personally identify with the most and which one they think describes the culture of their country and why. They are then asked to explain how they deal with the ambiguity resulting from choosing two different quotations. Alternatively, students could be asked to identify with quotations/proverbs of unknown origin (possibly from the partner country) to compare the choices of students from different cultures. ‘A man’s house is his castle’ (Coke, 1628) would be an excellent example, as it is often misquoted as, ‘an Englishman’s home is his castle’ (p. 162).

ETHNOGRAPHIC OPPORTUNITIES

It is impossible to discuss intercultural learning and TL without reference to ethnographic skills, which are particularly relevant to the intercultural communicator. Obviously many of the outlined activities above involve ethnographic analysis and most echo the ‘savoirs’. These skills include introspection, raising critical self-awareness, participant observation and interviewing. These skills require taking an uncritical approach, in that they necessitate a de-centring in order to view one’s own community objectively. TL, and the ethnographic opportunities it brings with it, encourages learners to offer and accept objective appraisal of how their own cultural beliefs, attitudes and behaviours may affect any TL research or shape their auto- or hetero-stereotypes of themselves or others. However, such skills development are more likely to be developed if visits to the partner school are made possible, (or in lieu of a visit, videocassette recordings) where the students could observe their counterparts off-guard and outside class, and also observe the wider public, keeping a tally of how many stereotypes they see, such as men in bowler hats, or people wearing kimonos. The closer the learner can get to the actual C2, the more opportunity they will have to reflect and transform their image of the it.

CONCLUSION

By taking an intercultural approach using TL tasks such as those outlined above, instructors can help students realise that imagined NIDs are often at odds with real or individual ones, which are ultimately more important. The process of exploring NID is therefore even more important than the end result, as it is as much about learning about oneself as it is about understanding constructs.

This writer hopes to see more worldwide TL projects between schools developed, such as the ones regularly mentioned in British Councils online journal aiding such TL projects and school links (http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-world.htm). Although teachers often feel obliged to prioritise target language practice over wider considerations of cultural awareness, ironically such rigid insistence on target language use often deters students and impedes, rather than facilitates, the purpose of language learning, which is communication. It is hoped that an intercultural approach, using TL, will be increasingly adopted to enable students to see that no single identity, national or otherwise, is more valid than any other.
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