

Teaching Intercultural Competence and Critical Thinking in EFL Classes in Japan – Developing a framework and teaching material

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Abstract

This is an interim report on a research grant¹ which aims to develop a framework, teaching material and evaluation criteria for intercultural competence and critical thinking as required for Japanese students to become able to solve problems in intercultural communication at different levels. The final purpose of the project is to create several comprehensive educational models in order to teach these skills in foreign language classes, which encompass a complete cycle of teaching objectives, exemplary teaching material and evaluation tools. Presently, the experiments have been conducted in different types of English classes, and the tested models will later be applied to other language classes with necessary adjustments and modifications.

Keywords

intercultural communication, critical thinking, framework, teaching material, and evaluation criteria

Introduction

In this globalizing, ICT-driven world, intercultural encounters happen every day, not only in the face-to-face mode but also in a variety of forms mediated through computers and the Internet (Warschauer, 2000). In the case of young people, they need to be able to function and participate in international communicative situations smoothly as future global citizens. Also, critical thinking skills are an inseparable part of solving problems in intercultural communication. Therefore, as educators, living in the Far East and in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment, we recognize the urgent need to explicitly teach intercultural competence with critical thinking to our students. The widely-accepted Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001), which focuses on language-related skills, does not explicate these thinking skills and simply refers to them as “existential resources.”

However, we consider these skills to be an indispensable part of being a competent global communicator.

1 The purpose of study

This 4-year longitudinal project aims to develop a framework, teaching material and evaluation criteria for intercultural competence and critical thinking which will address the specific needs of EFL students in Japan. We hope that these elements can be used as a guide and standard for Japanese university foreign language classes to teach problem-solving skills within intercultural communication at different linguistic levels.

2 The study

2.1 Creation of the framework

Our research began by forming the objectives and criteria tailored to our situation, while referring to the Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures (FREPA) published by the European Center for Modern Languages (ECML), and various critical thinking tests presently used in the U.S, including Ennis-Weir Test, Insight Assessment’s tests and ETS’ new i-critical test.

2.2 Validation

The initial, tentative objectives were written for our framework in the form of Can-do statements and have been validated both qualitatively and quantitatively for adequate modifications and adjustments. In addition to the statistical analysis of responses from approximately 500 students and 50 teachers to our questionnaire surveys, our qualitative research consisted of the analysis of free comments written on the questionnaire and interviews with selected subjects. One intriguing discovery is the gaps found between student self-evaluations and those of their teachers.

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2.3 Analysis of Autobiography of

Intercultural Encounters

We also incorporated the Council of Europe's "Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters", a reflective learning tool, in our qualitative inquiry in order to ascertain specific problems our students face. The text analysis of approximately 60 students' entries reflecting a variety of intercultural encounters proved useful in helping us understand how students tackle with, and attempt to solve communication difficulties in EFL contexts. In particular, some interesting characteristics among Japanese students have been observed. This data was used to do further fine-tuning of our Can-do statements.

2.4 Creation of teaching material and assessment tools

While doing multi-faceted validation of our initial Can-do statements, we have started developing and piloting teaching materials that fit our major objectives. With the creation of "generalizable," flexible models of teaching in mind, various language classes were categorized into the following 4 types:

- 1) basic language skill course
- 2) advanced language skill course
- 3) ESP/EAP course
- 4) general linguistic course

Then, for each category, the Can-do statements were differentiated into a major list of "core" items and the other with peripheral items. Again, based on the feedback from teachers and students in the experimental classes, the Can-do lists for these different courses have been modified to better reflect the purpose and needs of each course.

2.5 Development of assessment tools

From a statistical standpoint, the validity of the objectives and teaching material can be checked only through matching assessment tools. Thus, the assessment tools for different types of classes have been designed, and the analysis of obtained data will facilitate the finalization of teaching models with respective Can-do lists.

3 Future directions

We will continue to do recursive validation of the present Can-do statements of intercultural competence and critical thinking with an eye toward arriving at feasible, optimal models for teaching these skills in language classes. At the same time, teaching material and assessment tools of a comparable nature have been developed for other foreign language classes.

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