

Transcultural Learning with English as a common language : A case of Japanese and Thai cultural exchange in university EFL classrooms

英語を共通語としての異文化学習

—大学 EFL クラスにおける日本とタイの文化交流のケース

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Abstract: With globalization and increased mobility across Asia, opportunities for transcultural learning, teaching and other forms of international, educational exchange are on the rise. Collaboration between universities is expanding as professionals cross borders for personal development and academic exchange. With this trend comes an increase in multicultural classes where students and teachers alike have varied cultural backgrounds, but can communicate and interact using English as a common language. This paper reflects on the experiences of two instructors who, through international collaboration, used the EFL classroom to exchange culture and learning between two universities. It highlights the role that experiential learning played through the use of supplementary materials such as videos, crafts, and games, and how they were used as effective communication mechanisms to engage students in the classroom. Using English as a common medium, classes became student-centered as hands-on experience empowered them to take part in their learning.

Keywords: transcultural learning, academic exchange, multi-culture classroom

要旨

グローバル化とアジア全域の可動性の高まりにより、異文化学習と教授、別の形での国際的、教育交流の機会が増え続けている。専門家が自己啓発や学術交流のために国境を越える事で大学間の協力は拡大している。このトレンドにより生徒や教師が異なる背景を持ちながらも英語を共通語として話し交流する事のできる多文化クラスが増加している。この論文は国際交流を通して2つの大学のEFL教室を文化と学習交流の場として利用した2人の講師の経験を再考するものである。ビデオや技能、ゲームの様な補足教材の使用を通じた体験学習が果たした役割と、教室内の生徒達を引き込む為の効果的なコミュニケーションの仕組みとしてどの様にそれらを使用したのかに重点を置く。英語を共通の媒体として使いながら実地体験が生徒達を学習に参加する力づけとなり、どちらのクラスも生徒主導型になった。

キーワード：文化共通の学習、学術交流、多文化教室

Introduction

Conducting classes in unfamiliar settings can be intimidating, particularly when differences in language, cultural norms, pedagogy and other variables cause inhibition and doubt in even the most experienced teachers. Stepping out of one's comfort zone involves developing new relationships, facing communication challenges, and providing content that engages students. These challenges are highlighted when an instructor teach as a guest lecturer in a different institution.

In particular, giving a guest lecture at a foreign university can present a unique set of challenges. Differences in assumptions can create uncertainty and the implications of what one does, or avoids doing, in the classroom cause uncertainty. Beyond the challenges of teaching, such as linguistic and cultural differences, there is also the simple question of the appropriateness of the lesson to the cultural context and language level of the students.

The rewards, however, far outstrip the uncertainties. It is with an eye towards lessening further potential challenges that we here share the experiences of two instructors who embarked on a lecture exchange between the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) of Chulalongkorn University and the Institute of International Education (IIE) at Otemae University. The following stories depict their experiences of teaching in a foreign classroom and the results of their visit.

Encountering multi-national students at Otemae University by Satita Watanapokakul

On 2-3 June 2015, it was my honor to have a chance to visit Otemae University and participate in teaching two-course subjects: LEO, the core English-language program at Otemae University, and a Japanology course that taught content lessons about Japan and comparative culture in English.

I had been informed there were between 18 and 20 students in both classes. They were at an intermediate to high conversational level in English. Most students were Japanese, and there were some international students like American and Pilipino.

In both courses, the Active Learning Instructional Model (Watanapokakul, 2011) adapted and synthesized with the concept of active learning articulated by Fink (2003 : 108) as well as Baldwin and William (1988 cited in Tepvorachai, 2000 : 36). This was employed together with the educational technology, Kahoot. The theoretical framework of active learning, which was used to create each activity in the lesson, consisted of three main stages : getting information and ideas, experiencing by doing and/or observing, and reflecting. Each of these activities can be done via individual work and/or (small or large) group work.

For the LEO class, I chose the topic “Thai Festivals” to present to the students. Loy Krathong was the main festival presented in the lesson. Loy Krathong, a festival that takes place on the full moon of the 12th month of the Thai lunar calendar, is one of the most popular festivals in Thailand. I started the lesson with a warm-up activity asking the students about the meaning of the word “Sawaddee.” Then, I presented a short Power Point presentation regarding the Loy Krathong Festival to the students. After that, the students had a chance to create their Krathongs, or a basket made from banana leaves decorated with flowers that are traditionally floated down rivers during the Loy Krathong festival. The materials for creating Krathongs were prepared for the students. By the end of the session, the students presented their Krathongs to their classmates with a short explanation of the inspiration and concept of their Krathongs. The students also took pictures with their Krathongs. Last but not least, I ended the class with a Thai word “Khob Khun,” which means “Thank you.”

In the Japanology class, I chose the topic “Japan-Thailand : Views from Our Students.” I started the class with a warm-up activity. I showed a world map and asked the students to identify the location of Japan and then

Thailand, respectively. Then, I proceeded with an individual activity. I had created a short questionnaire consisting of six questions asking 120 CU students about Japan (e.g. Have you ever been to Japan?; Do you like Japan? Why or Why not?; Talking about Japan, what do you first think of?) The results from the questionnaires were analyzed by the SPSS Program, and the results were presented via Power Point to the Otemae students. After that, the same pattern of the questionnaire, but with the words Japan and Thailand switched, was administered to the Otemae students in the classroom. They were given ten minutes to complete the questions, after which I asked for the responses to each question from the students. A short discussion was then held about each question among the teacher and students.

The question and discussion period was followed by a small-group activity. I divided the students into groups of three. I showed a variety of different situations on Power Point slides (e.g. When someone gives you a present, what will you do?) and asked the students to think about their culture. If a group consisted of all Japanese students, they used Japanese cultural norms to answer. However, if a group was multicultural, they have shared their cultural norms about the specific situation with the other group members. After each situation, I asked for the ideas from each group and discussed them with others. We shared our ideas regarding Japanese, Thai, and other cultures. I ended the session with a large-group activity. I used an online program called Kahoot (www.kahoot.it) to create a Thailand trivia quiz. The students used their mobile phones to connect to the Internet and logged into this program. I showed a question about Thailand trivia on a slide, and the students could choose the correct answer via their mobile phones. The questions were all about Thailand (e.g. What is the capital city of Thailand? A. Bangkok B. Chiang Mai C. Phuket D. Khon Kaen).

In both classes, the students were active and attentive. Moreover, they knew more about Thailand, and they could compare their own culture with others like Thailand. This opportunity was very meaningful for me as an EFL teacher to be exposed to international students and to have an opportunity to apply the Active Learning Instructional Model in Japanese EFL classrooms.

Engaging Thai athletes in an English classroom at Chulalongkorn University by Gordon D. Carlson

On October 27th, 2015, I had the honor of visiting the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI) in Bangkok, Thailand. It was arranged that I teach a class of 29 athletes enrolled in the university's Faculty of Sports Science Department's course, English for Academic Purposes. I would conduct a 90-minute class followed by a short class debriefing with the regular instructor.

As my teaching experience has only been in Japan, I did some research into Thai culture before engaging the students. I went into the classroom with the hypothesis that a successful class could ultimately hinge on the premise that the higher the intercultural competence, the lower the communication anxiety will be (Mothienvichchienthai, Bhibulbhanuwat, Kasemsuk, & Speece, 2002). My question, then, was how could I reduce possible anxiety or awkwardness (both in myself and in the students) while at the same time fostering a

meaningful connection with the students?

With this and other questions in mind, I based my preparation on methods I had used since I first started teaching in Japan. I built my lesson plan on the premises that fun, interactive activities, with a few supplementary tools, can be strong instigators for generating good interaction and student involvement. Being unable to rely on my use of Japanese language in the case of a communication breakdown, I constructed a wide range of visuals and pictures to use to support and enhance understanding. Even with extensive preparation and several backup plans, a myriad of questions still raged in my mind. Would my lack of Thai language and culture become an uncomfortable barrier? How could I arouse their interest in learning without idealizing English? Would the activities that work well in Japan work at all with Thai students?

When I arrived on campus, I was informed that the class that I was to teach scored the lowest on English proficiency in the institution. Furthermore, I was then informed that the students tended to speak to their regular English instructor in their native Thai during class. It is safe to say that my anxiety peaked in those moments, only to be undone a moment later when I was greeted by a group of radiant young people who immediately embraced the tasks that I presented.

For the first activity, the class was divided into pairs and teams. The students answered various trivia from an animated Power Point presentation that included five sections: (1) historical questions about the relationship between Thailand and Japan, (2) comparisons between the two countries, (3) Japanese language, and (4) interesting facts about Japan, and (5) trivia about myself. According to the level of difficulty, teams could score 100 to 400 points by choosing the correct answers. Rather than acting independently, the students consulted each other on each question. To give accurate depictions of Japanese things, I presented short video clips, such as sumo wrestling, which heightened interest and laughter. Appealing to their athletic instincts, teams cheered when their companions scored, and the atmosphere became buoyant. As the linguistically stronger members provided help and scaffolding for their weaker counterparts, all anxiety of being unable to communicate dissolved and the use of English progressively increased.

The second activity involved cross-cultural collaborative writing. In the spirit of peace and international cultural exchange, the students were given paper origami that was folded into a crane and contained messages from a class of their peers in Japan. Each message extended a greeting and a simple explanation of something interesting about Japanese language or culture. After reading the messages, the Thai students were given time to write responses to their Japanese counterparts on new origami paper. A flurry of activity ensued as I made rounds to help students with their writing. Armed with electronic dictionaries, a strong dynamic of peer teaching emerged as the most astute students helped the strugglers. Once the messages were written, I proceeded to use photos and select vocabulary on a screen to demonstrate how to fold the origami into the likeness of a crane. Through the power of collaboration and demonstration, this activity extended the physical walls of the classroom and created social interaction and adeptness between students who had never met in two distant countries. For many students, it was the first time that they experienced the value of having a lingua franca for cultural exchange as a foreign language was practiced through fun, authentic, and meaningful interaction.

Conclusion

Carefully selected supplementary materials, used with interactive activities, are powerful means of developing a vibrant cross-cultural classroom community, even for the short space of a single lecture. When used in unfamiliar, multi-cultural contexts, active learning activities serve to bridge the gaps between uncertain language levels and meaningful communication. They are also useful tools for communal inclusiveness as they reduce apprehension and anxiety between students and teachers of different backgrounds. Additionally, through bolstering classroom interaction, students collaborate to share what they already know and learn to communicate effectively with an instructor from a foreign land. By doing so, they use their thought processes to apply what they already know to communicate in a real-life situation. In this way, reflection on their cultural exchanges helps them to increase their understanding of the value of speaking a foreign language.

Faculty exchanges and collaborations across borders are enriching experiences for both teachers and learners on many levels. For instructors, they enhance personal and professional development as well as stimulate creative ideas, deepen relationships, and strengthen cultural sensitivity. Students are exposed to various teaching styles in a variegated environment that offer them a fresh perspective on learning. Both teachers and students become ambassadors of sorts of their own countries as they integrate new ideas and cultural awareness into their interactions. Such exchange leads the way to deeper cross-cultural ties and appreciation of the diversity shared by people across the world.

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