

Topics in cross-cultural communication

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Abstract

This study investigates topics in cross-cultural communication ESL classes for Japanese students and refers to 2 current text-books. A student survey and analysis of cross-cultural topics chosen by students for presentation in class confirmed the need for a cognitive approach. The findings might be of use for developing student-centred, cross-cultural approaches for university ESL classes where the focus is on meaningful independent student-research and presentation of it.

Key words : cross-cultural, student-centred, active acquisition, topics, internationalisation.

Introduction

Although there has been substantial research on the theory of culture teaching in ESL since the 1960's and 1970's, there is a scarcity of data on cultural content that is of interest to the student. Stern (92), comments in detail on the cultural syllabus, concluding-

'The most serious obstacle to using many cultural teaching techniques effectively lies in the lack of data and resources for the cultural content to be taught.'

Chastain (88), presents topics that are likely to be of interest to language students at high school or university level and Stern outlines 6 aspects of culture teaching. Although Chastain does not indicate where the information on these topics is to come from, Stern does refer to cognitive approaches, emphasising the importance of research as a way of enabling students to find out for themselves. Nunan (88), comments in detail on the desirability of fostering independent learning and of developing skills of 'learning how to learn'. Glasgow (97), also emphasises active student acquisition of information and skills appropriate to level-noting that 'learn to learn' is a life-long skill that can be utilised in the future. The Japanese Ministry of Science and Education recently brought out a directive for kokusai rikai kyoiku (education for international understanding) for Elementary School teaching. Shaules (2004) states that-

'The field of intercultural communication is spreading rapidly in university education as the traditional language teaching focus on literature and conversation shifts towards internationalisation.'

Recently 2 text-books employing cross-cultural concepts have had quite an impact on ESL teaching in Japan; J-Talk (2000, OUP) and Identity (2004, OUP). Both are communication courses for Japanese young-adult learners of pre-intermediate to intermediate level. Both are

divided into 12 units, contain a c-d for students and refer to cultures across the globe as well as exploring issues particular to Japan. The texts use a variety of visual imagery and techniques to make the books accessible and inter-active. The lay-out and lexis in J-Talk is simpler and uses a Japanese word-list in each unit. Identity includes a section on a real person such as a translator or journalist from around the world. In the academic year 2003/4 J-Talk was the text for 120 Nihon University, School of Dentistry first-year undergraduate students in the current writer's ESL classes, the following academic year, 2004/5, Identity was the classtext. As part of a feed-back survey done at the end of each academic year, student response was that J-Talk was 'too easy' and Identity was 'difficult'. In J-Talk the most popular units were 'First Date' (Unit 6) and 'Feast On This' (Unit 9), the least popular was 'Glued to the Tube' (Unit 12). In Identity, 'Gender and Culture' (Unit 9) and 'Politeness' (Unit 7) were the most well-received units. As with most text-books in ESL, classes were based on part of the unit and tailored to the needs of each group. In this case the students levels range from pre-intermediate to advanced. 'Gender and Culture' proved to be the most dynamic topic in 2004/5 with students preparing and presenting debates on gender in teams over a period of 2-3 weeks. Both J-Talk and Identity are teacher-centred, in fact text-centred with the authors of the text to some extent leading the class. In the same feed-back survey referred to above, students commented that the practical sessions in the classes (unrelated to the texts), such as an introduction of aspects of tea-drinking in Britain or apple-bobbing as part of an exploration of customs held at Halloween were the most useful. Even though some students naturally began contrasting these activities with their own cultural experiences (such as the Japanese tea-ceremony or the O'Bon festival), it seemed appropriate to investigate further the cross-cultural topics that students were most interested in.

Findings

In May 2005, 120 first-year undergraduate students of Nihon University, School of Dentistry (*1) were asked the following-

- A) To list the 10 cultural topics that were of most interest to them and why.
- B) To conduct research in teams of 3/4 on a cultural topic chosen by themselves and to present it in class 3 weeks later. These oral presentations in English lasted for 10 minutes and included visual images, such as photographs, photocopies, posters or drawings, realia, hand-outs, or diagrams of research findings. During the research period students used a variety of resources both within and outside the university such as books, magazines, the internet, personal experience, student surveys and team discussion to prepare the presentation. The presentations were assessed as a mini-test on the course. Student teams listening to the presentation wrote down their response.

The findings of the listed topics (A) and the topics chosen for presentation in class (B) are slightly different.

A) Top 10 topics

1. Festivals

This included Tanabata (Star festival), Oshogatsu (New Year), Christmas, Halloween, Harvest festival, the reasons were varied but included interest in different customs and enjoyment in the festival.

2. UK Music

This included a range from UK rock to punk. Interest was also expressed in J-pop and classical music. Many students seemed well informed in this area and wanted to investigate it further.

3. Soccer

Inspired by the recent world-cup hosted by Japan/Korea and the 2006 world-cup to be held in Germany, all voters for this topic were male students.

4. Basketball

There was a general interest in sports of all kinds but basketball was especially popular.

5. Tea-ceremony

Reasons given for choosing this topic were that it is unique to Japanese culture, revealing of 'wabi-sabi', graceful and calming.

6. Movies

American and Japanese movies were of particular interest. Reasons given were that movies are exciting and an enjoyable way to study English.

7. Samurai

This choice was closely related to 'katana' or swords. Most students choosing this topic commented that it related to Japan's past history or their ancestors and that they were proud of it.

8. Kendo and Judo

Reasons given were that these martial arts originate in Japan but have a world-wide influence (for instance judo games in the Olympics). There was also reference to kendo being studied at high school.

9. Japanese Food

Most of the students who elected this as their number 1 topic mentioned sushi. Reference was made to the popularity of sushi amongst non-Japanese people.

10. Hot-springs

The students who chose this topic were female, all commented on the health effects of hot-springs and also mentioned spa-culture elsewhere in Asia, 1 student referred to Bath Spa in the UK.

Other topics included traditional Japanese dress such as kimono/yukata, the Royal Family, polite etiquette and manners, architecture, Buddhism and Christianity.

B). The topics chosen in teams for presentation yielded slightly different results. 3 groups of the 35 groups in the year chose to present their research on **manga** (Japanese comic books), one group presented it as a debate on whether manga was damaging or not. 2 groups presented the tea-ceremony, the more interesting presentation briefly compared other cultural attitudes to tea. 3 groups presented topics related to martial arts, the student audience was especially responsive to these presentations as all included an element of demonstration of techniques. 2 groups presented the theme of Kyoto, using personal experience of a trip there. Other topics included karoshi (death through overwork), the seniority system, otaku ('nerd' culture) and animation (*2).

Conclusion

Although this research was conducted on a relatively small group of university students, certain patterns emerged. Over 50% of the topics chosen both in the list and for the presentation were from the students' own cultural background. This tallies with the approach of the 2 text-books referred to above, which encourage learners to consider their own cultural identities. Most of these topics were of a traditional cultural nature, although this changed to some extent when students considered topics to present. Some of the topics chosen were exclusively chosen by one gender, this may present difficulties in a mixed-class, or equally give an opportunity for alternative views. Although the most popular topic on an individual basis was festivals, manga was the most popular topic when it came to team presentations.

Student teams had to resolve issues within each group on which topic to present and how to present it. Sometimes this meant that the category broadened to 'sports' for instance, as an umbrella term for several topics such as tennis, soccer and golf, or referred to other cultures. Active gathering of information by the students, both individually and in teams was a strong motivating factor. Student-to-student surveys in English yielded a lot of peer information interesting to the groups. The inter-active nature of the cultural presentations meant that students in the audience wanted to listen to others' findings. Topics which required an element of demonstration or debate were preferred by both student presenters and audiences.

Finally, these lists of topics are not intended to be models for others, perhaps the most important aspect of this research is that of the approach, that of encouraging ESL students to actively acquire information for themselves and hopefully develop life-long skills that can be applied in an increasingly internationalised world.

Footnotes

*1. 120 second-year undergraduates at Nihon University, School of Medicine and 35 first-year undergraduate Nihon University, School of Fine Arts Design students were also surveyed (275 students in all). Results varied; the School of Medicine students' 10 top topics in order were as follows- tea-ceremony, soccer, festivals, baseball, music, Japanese food, tem-

ples, movies, kimono/yukata, judo and kendo. The School of Fine Arts Design students' 10 top topics in order were as follows- kimono/yukata, Japanese sword/sword guard design, contemporary Japanese designers, Japanese crests, shoe design, bonsai, car design, T-shirt design, chop-sticks, Doraemon.

- *2. The entire list of topics that were presented are as follows-manga, samurai, Japanese swords, Kyoto, judo, tea-ceremony, animation, sumo, death through overwork, martial arts, calligraphy, the Star festival, rakugo (Japanese comic story-telling), sukiyaki, donburi, sports, sushi, temples, otaku, Doraemon, ninja, Japanese musical instruments, kendo, famous Japanese, geisha and maiko, hot-springs.

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