Cross-cultural Communication: Future Teachers and the Roots of a Liberal Arts Education

Hywel Evans

Abstract

The need to teach a communicative, content-based course that is suitable for prospective teachers of English at junior high and high school level presents a number of challenges, not to mention paradoxes. However, finding solutions to such problems is suggestive of fundamental issues that go beyond language learning, extending to the general educational process, indeed to the very roots of a liberal arts education and the creative process itself. First, it is clear that the content of the course must be of some relevance to such students. This means that complex difficulties related to communication across cultures need to be properly contextualized for (mostly) Japanese university students. At the same time, methodology needs to be relevant to students' needs or, arguably, the classroom experience will remain empty. More precisely, the methodology employed in classes should be usefully suggestive to the students, at least to the extent that there is a possibility that they

might get some ideas about how to teach. Furthermore, it is vital to attempt to foster a creative response in students, not just because the content will have no life otherwise, but because the students will certainly themselves be expected to create stimulating content for their own students in the future. It is suggested here that successfully meeting the challenges presented above involves a developmental cycle in which improvement in content and the communication of content, a process involving active involvement of both students and teachers, is required in order to yield the development of the true creative ability that will undoubtedly be required by students in their chosen profession.

Introduction

(1) The "circularity" problem in teaching cross-cultural communication

The need to teach a course in cross-cultural communication to future teachers raises complex problems and is suggestive of interesting challenges and opportunities. In teaching a course in cross-cultural communication, a western teacher of (largely) Japanese students is in the interesting position of actually attempting to carry out a complex task that she is also preparing students to undertake themselves, perhaps in the actual class being taught and certainly in the future. To be more precise, in this case the act of communicating content to students is itself an example of cross-cultural communication. It is, therefore, important for the teacher to not only communicate effectively but also to be aware that there might be special difficulties involved in this particular

communicative process that have the potential to sabotage the whole enterprise.

(2) **The culture "debate"**

For example, a review of texts employed in teaching cross-cultural communication (Charlebois & Sakuma, 2015; Lewis, 1999; Stewart & Bennet, 1972) reveals an enduring preoccupation with concepts employed in the fields of cultural psychology (Cole, 1998; Heine, 2007) and cross-cultural psychology (Berry et al.,2011; Hofstede, 2003; Shiraev & Levy, 2004).

However, if you are in agreement with Holliday and Aboshisha (2009), to take an example from the second language acquisition field, this kind of focus could lead to at least a serious quandary and perhaps even a paradox loop that is impossible to resolve. Holliday and Aboshisha, in fact, reject *all* references to cultural differences in language teaching as inevitably and undesirably reducing students to stereotypes. In support of this view, they cite Bond et al. (2000) and McSweeney (2009) in suggesting that the work of Hofstede (2003), for example, may be usefully criticised as too simplistic.

However, the rejection of cultural differences as an explanatory mechanism tends to lead to a rejection of the problem of cross-cultural communication altogether. Most damagingly perhaps, for language teachers, such a rejection limits, indeed completely rules out, opportunities for generating discussion of the relevant issues which are being debated in the various fields. This is seriously problematic for a class at a liberal arts university that seeks to prepare young teachers for future challenges. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to see how cultural differences can be removed from the list of problems preoccupying researchers in the field of English language learning and second language acquisition (SLA). To take an obvious example, with the emergence of the importance of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) in SLA theory, we have arrived at a stage in which it is possible to characterize the field as split into two parallel worlds (Zuengler & Miller, 2006), the mainstream variety and the sociocultural variety. However, it is no exaggeration to claim that cultural psychology *actually is* sociocultural theory (Nisbett, 2003: 86). Therefore, it seems that we have to accept that the textbooks on the market are not completely misguided, and that it is a good idea to refer to concepts discussed in cultural and cross-cultural psychology. While it would obviously be a mistake to think that these various explanatory mechanisms should be accepted uncritically, research from these fields should certainly be presented in class by teachers and discussed critically by students.

(3) **Presenting content**

Given that the general scope of content is largely given, there is still the issue of how English language content can be presented without overload in a manner that is palatable to the students. The solution suggested here is that a variety of supportive, burden-reducing tools should be employed in order to achieve this, while the teacher embarks on a continuing effort to improve both content and the

manner in which the content is communicated.

At the same time, it is necessary to make sure that ample opportunities are offered to students to assimilate and discuss the content in a critical manner, particularly as the issues are subject to debate. Also, the teacher should be involved in this process in order to positively influence outcomes for students. In this way, both teachers and students are engaged in a cycle of improved performance in which content is refined while the processes by which the content is communicated are improved.

Course content presentation techniques and student participation

As suggested above, it is commonly assumed that the study of cross-cultural communication should be informed by recent research in the fields of cultural psychology and cross-cultural psychology. The content provided in the course under discussion here follows a fairly traditional pattern in this respect, as will be discussed later. However, the course is designed so that student activities remain central to the enterprise. The goal is to achieve an open-minded yet critical response to the material under scrutiny.

(1) Online support

Twelve chapters were posted online (Evans, 2015), with video and quiz support, including innovative pair work quizzes that required students to exchange information with a partner in order to complete their respective problem set (www.fujisantrip.com). The same could have been achieved with paper handouts, but the online solution referred to here has the advantage of offering automatic checking capabilities, freeing the teacher to provide guidance in other areas. The concept seems to fit with Bax's (2003, 2011) notion of the normalization of computer use in the classroom. The material is easy to create, given fairly recent website creation software. In the actual classes, students overwhelmingly used their own smartphones to access the online material without any major difficulties.

(2) Student presentations

In addition, however, care should be taken to ensure that students have sufficient time to discuss the material offered in class. Students are required to make group (usually pair) presentations *without* written English support (the students' own notes in Japanese were allowed). This is to ensure a natural and smooth delivery in presentations. This format straightforwardly allows the teacher to prepare students to themselves address controversial issues. Importantly, this approach also gives the teacher an opportunity to reflect on the ideas offered by students and suggest alternatives etc. This in turn may prompt the teacher to update and improve the coursework presentation online. This will be shown, later, to fit the Creativity-Content-Communication Cycle (3CCycle) that I take to be the overarching guiding framework.

The McSweeney-Hofstede debate, for example, involves a marketing expert and a cross-cultural psychologist. The marketing expert, McSweeney, challenges Hofstede's categories employed in accounting for national-cultural differences. The students' presentations

16

tended to support the idea that we cannot have blind faith in the efficacy of the categories employed, but they at least offer an interesting starting point for making sense of and accounting for cultural differences, which students generally accept as having some reality. One might consider the obvious reality that a teacher-preparation course of this kind fits in a liberal arts structure that seeks to foster creative abilities in students so they can meet the challenges they will face in the future, particularly in their roles as teachers. The course is not merely a form of vocational training that requires them to adapt to the desires of marketing experts and other corporate entities. Rather we are seeking to help students develop structural, conceptual supports to aid critical thought processes. Hence, students should be exposed to ideas from a variety of fields (including the psychology of culture and marketing).

Coursework online
(1) First semester
The twelve chapters for the first semester (www.fujisantrip.com/communication-acr oss-cultures), for example, are intended to raise consciousness regarding foundational issues (Introduction; Overview; What is culture?; The absence of culture) involved in discussion of cultural differences, in particular where it comes to fundamental matters of perception that may lead to serious misunderstanding or failure to communicate. The chapters included an analysis of the historical background that cultural psychologists often assume (Historical background; Big differences). The most fundamental issue of all is how much, if anything, cultures have in common (Dreaming). Also, there is a serious focus on recent experiments that indicate certain tendencies with regard to perception (Stereotypes; Context; The assimilation bias; Motivation). In addition, an attempt was made to look at serious social issues that may be rooted in cultural differences and misunderstanding (Religious extremism).

(2) Second semester
The chapters for the second semester (www.fujisantrip.com/communication-acr oss-cultures-ii) deal with broadly the same kinds of issues and can be categorized in the same way. For example, matters of perception are revisited in a number of chapters (Health; Time; Beauty). However, the discussion in the second semester is framed more in terms of issues familiar from media treatments of culture-related problems (A changing world; Globalization; Multiculturalism; Tradition), with more of a focus on practical and language-related differences (Culture shock; Language; Language differences). This latter is assumed to be of particular relevance for prospective teachers, perhaps preparing their own students for study overseas. Experimental data is also critically reviewed (Motivation; Conformity).

As suggested, an array of video material is also employed in conjunction with quizzes and final tests. The online approach has the advantage of allowing direct links from coursework to video sources. This is particularly helpful when creating a quiz about a video, for example.

Methodology
(1) **Present, Practice, Produce**

While the online nature of the coursework allowed a significant degree of innovation, and can be characterized as a communicative, content-based course, the driving language teaching methodology was also consistent with very traditional approaches. For example, while students were able to access quizzes and videos, both in and out of the classroom, allowing more active learning in the classroom, there was also a degree of traditional teacher presentation, generally carried out via PowerPoint (a large selection of which can be viewed online at www.fujisantrip.com). The use of pictures, first language support (Garcia & Wei, 2013), and video presentations allowed sophisticated content to be communicated relatively painlessly. One should acknowledge, however, that teacher presentation should be constantly updated in response to students' needs, so assessing students' response is vitally important. In that sense, the presentation should be regarded as merely preparatory to student activities, which are the main event, with the teacher also expected to respond to the content produced by the students.

In this sense, however, the language teaching methodology employed can be usefully understood in terms of the traditional Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP) approach to language learning. The teacher presentation accounts for the first P, with students given the opportunity to practice (second P) their own presentations. The students are also required to produce their own responses in English, so this may be understood as the final P. However, I will argue that the approach here involves a cyclical process in which the teacher's presentation of content in turn helps students to produce, practice and present their own content. While teachers are involved in helping students to improve content and their ability to communicate this content, the teachers are also stimulated to learn from this experience and improve their own content and presentation. Therefore, instead of a traditional PPP approach, the methodology suggested here is perhaps better understood in terms of a cycle that leads to the improvement of creative capacities, both in students and teachers.

(2) **The three C cycle**

As a course that is intended to help prepare students for a career in teaching, the goal of the course dictates that methodology cannot be narrowly determined in terms of learning language. As students are very likely to become teachers themselves in the future, we must be concerned with fostering creative abilities that will allow them to adapt to various challenges. It is assumed that creativity may be understood as a function of a process in which communication of content is dynamically improved. It is also assumed that this subsumes improved language learning but goes beyond this, first to the roots of a liberal arts education and finally to the overarching need to foster creative abilities in students.

Our role in preparing future teachers requires us to consider our activities in the most profound terms as part of a

broad liberal arts education. The development of students' ability to use English should not be understood as merely a narrow vocational use of language as a tool, but part of a broader and deeper creative dynamic that we must hope will lead to improvements for society as a whole.

The guiding methodology, it is proposed, may be understood in structural terms as part of a dynamic cycle, referred to here as the 3CCycle, illustrated below.
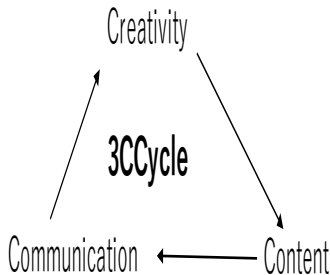
The 3CCycle may be understood as a simple encoding of a dynamic that guides pedagogical activity in the liberal arts, and particularly with regard to prospective teachers. The fundamental assumption is radical in the sense that it is concerned with the roots of a liberal arts education. However, it may also be understood as deeply conservative in that it is concerned with preserving and nurturing those roots in a healthy way. I would also point out that it is rather uncontroversial, almost to the point of being self-evident.

(i)   C1: Creativity
Improved ability to create yields improved content

(ii)   C2: Content
Improved content drives a need to improve ability to communicate

(iii)   C3: Communication
Improved communication in conjunction with improved content *is* improved creativity. If C3 fails, C2 is wasted and C1 fails.

(iv)   3CCycle for teachers
Teachers strive to achieve better content to present to students. This will involve research and the development of ideas. The effort to write, produce video and sound files etc., presentation techniques involved in the communicative process must be upgraded in keeping with this demand. Successfully communicating content (sparking students' creativity) means that the teacher has also become more creative, because creativity *is* the improved communication of content. This improved creativity means that further improved content can be produced.

(v)   3CCycle for students
Students receive stimulus from teachers in the form of the presentation of content. If successful, this will spark the students' ability to create content for themselves. Students practice and present content for themselves, getting ideas from other students, etc. If they succeed in communicating this new content (sparking the teacher's creativity), the students will further improve their own creativity because creativity *is* the improved communication of content.

Conclusion
A serious consideration of the needs of a preparatory class for future teachers

forces a reappraisal of goals and methods. The goal of producing creative individuals, capable of meeting the challenges of an uncertain future means that we have to examine the roots of a liberal arts education, rather than tick the boxes of a narrowly vocational checklist. Teaching a class in cross-cultural communication is particularly interesting and demanding in that it raises complex issues that require a critical response from both teachers and students. Course content should include a wide selection of sources from a variety of fields. The effort to present such demanding material successfully is richly rewarding, but also requires us to make sure that students have the opportunity to critically respond, develop their own creative abilities, and hence spark further improvements in the teachers own performance. The methods involved in meeting these complexities and challenges may be illustrated rather straightforwardly. This is offered, above, in the 3CCycle. It is hoped that this will spark further discussion about the goals of a liberal arts education among teachers and policy-makers.

References

Bax, S. (2003). CALL – past, present and future. *System, 31(1),* 13 – 28.

Bax, S. (2011). Normalization revisited: The effective use of technology in language education. *International Journal of Computer-assisted Language Learning and Teaching, 1(2),* 1-15.

Bond, M. H., Zegarac, V. & Spencer-Oatey, H. (2000). Culture as an explanatory variable: Problems and possibilities. In H. Spencer-Oatey (Ed.), *Culturally speaking: Managing rapport through talk across cultures* (pp.293–315). London: Continuum.

Charlebois, J. & Sakuma, A. (2015). *Cultural Portraits: Japan and the US*. Kinseido.

Cole, M. (1998). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Belknap Press.

Evans, H. (2015). *Communication across cultures*. Fujisantrip. http://www.fujisantrip.com/communication-across-cultures/

Garcia, O., & Wei, L. (2013). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism, and education*. Palgrave.

Hofstede, G. H. (2003). *Culture's consequences, comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Heine, S.J. (2007). *Cultural Psychology*. W.W. Norton.

Holliday, A., & Aboshiha, P. (2009). The denial of ideology in perceptions of 'nonnative speaker' teachers. *TESOL Quarterly*, *45*(4), 669-689.

McSweeney, B. (2002). Hofstede's model of national cultural differences and their consequences: a triumph of faith – a failure of analysis. *Human Relations*, *55*, 89-118.

Nisbett, R.E. (2003). *The geography of thought*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Shiraev, E., & Levy, D. (2004). *Cross-cultural psychology: Critical thinking and contemporary applications.* Boston: Pearson.

Stewart, E.C., & Bennett, M.J. (1972). *American Cultural Patterns: A cross-cultural perspective*. Intercultural Press.

Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind in society: The development of higher psychologicalprocesses.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Zuengler, J. & Miller, E. R. (2006). Cognitive and sociocultural perspectives:two parallel SLA worlds? *TESOL Quarterly*, *40*, 35-58.