

Intercultural Communication Benefits in the Classroom: Findings on the Research Tour in New York

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Abstract

Intercultural Communication Theory has become an increasingly researched subject in recent years. A review of the currently available research has revealed the benefits towards creating a more student focused classroom which helps develop, not only their interaction skills with people of other cultures, but also their language skills. In this brief research paper, the authors' observation of a class which implements such theory, and our interviews with professors about the subject help us to confirm such claims. In the conclusion, we can find the importance of implementing such methods in classrooms in our own institution.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, English Education, Culture Training, Overseas Visit

1. Purpose:

The authors of this report embarked on this research trip to observe overseas multicultural classes and discuss with professors about Intercultural Communication methods, as well as how to facilitate a more student-centered classroom. The secondary purpose of this research trip was to visit various libraries and find materials on Intercultural Communication Theory. In order to accomplish this goal, we visited two large public libraries (The Brooklyn Public Library and New York Public Library) and two City University of New York (henceforth referred to as CUNY) institutions (The College of Staten Island, in Staten Island, New York, and the CUNY Graduate Center, in Manhattan, New York).

2. The Brooklyn Public Library and New York Public Library:

A day before visiting the two CUNY campuses, the authors of this report visited two public libraries to gather information about Intercultural Communication. The first library we visited was called the Brooklyn Public Library, in Brooklyn, New York. The library was well stocked with books and did offer a variety of research rooms. Unfortunately, a majority of the research spaces were full and many of the materials concerning our research were unavailable in this location.

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Pictured Above: Brooklyn Public Library

Despite its larger selection of books, the authors encountered a similar situation at the New York Public Library in Manhattan, New York. Most of the research stations were occupied, or reserve-only. In addition to this, there were not many materials available in relation to Intercultural Communication, as we were only able to locate a total of three books concerning the topic. Searching the databases revealed that there was not a lot of material concerning the topic of Intercultural Communication.



Pictured Above: New York Public Library

3. The College of Staten Island:

The first campus we visited was the College of Staten Island (henceforth referred to as CSI). Here, we met Dr. Bellamy, a specialist in Multi-Ethnic American literature, for her African Diasporic Literature course. Dr. Bellamy is a well renowned professor throughout the CUNY institution, for her student focused classes achieved through Intercultural Communication methods. This classroom, in particular, was made up of students from a variety of cultures which opened up many opportunities to see said Intercultural Communication methods in actual practice as opposed to taught in theory. Her class opened with a discussion about their homework assignments. Students were expected to attend one of three events: a museum exhibition about West African art, a movie showing titled “Blacking Out”, and a presentation by Saudia Hartman (the topic being the dual aspects of cultural assimilation). This segment of the lesson gave students the opportunity to express their interpretation of a culture different to their own where the authors observed the accomplishment of the aspect of Intercultural Communication called Intercultural Competence (Lustig & Koester, 2010); namely Display of Interest, and Interaction Posture. Display of Interest was accomplished through the students of various cultures showing respect for the topic they were discussing (African Culture). As

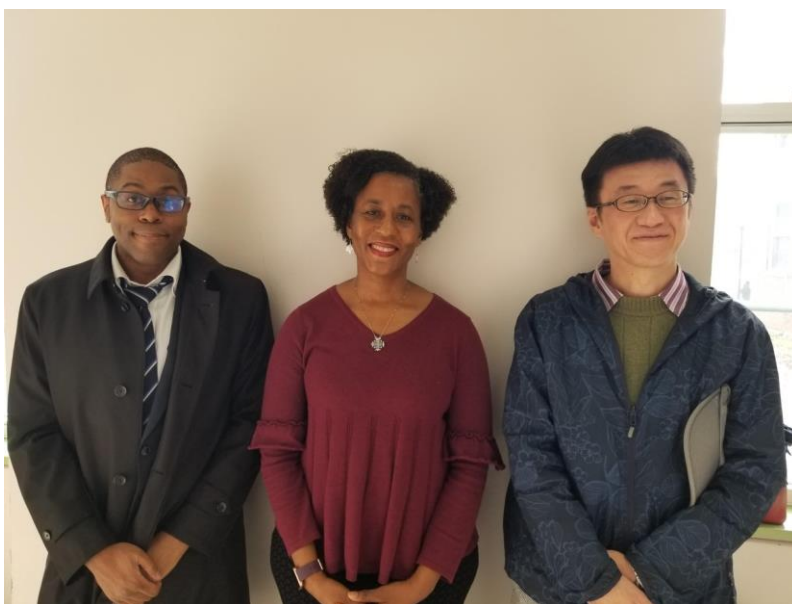
the subject content was quite sensitive the students made sure to speak in a manner which showed respect towards the discussed culture, while also being honest about their opinions of what they experienced during their assignments. Both the teacher and students displayed Interaction Posture through their respectful yet challenging questions for each other.

After concluding the discussion segment of the class, Dr. Bellamy gave the students a 10-minute quiz about the reading that they had to complete before the class. The book they were reading at the time of this observation was titled “Abeng” by the author Michelle Cliff. After the professor collected the quizzes, she reviewed the answers with the students. Here, she used acculturation tactics to express culturally distinct language very carefully to be both understandable to the multicultural students while also teaching new vocabulary to help potentially broaden their knowledge of the lexicon. This second step was instrumental to the discussion portion of the class, as the text they were reading used many colloquialisms which would be considered difficult to understand solely from a general knowledge of English vocabulary.

The third portion of the class included student presentations based on their reading of the class text. While we were only able to see one presentation group, as she has one group presentation per week, the authors noticed that this group was very multicultural. This seemed to accomplish the purpose of having students from various backgrounds work together and communicate past their cultural differences. Here, the students, while not very experienced with giving presentations at this point in their education, showed that they developed an understanding of standpoint theory (described as a difference in worldview based on your ethnic and social standing) and how to communicate and achieve their goal (in this case, a coordinated presentation) despite these differences. Dr. Bellamy gave critiques after their presentation, and had the presenters answer questions about the presentation from herself and the students.

The final portion of the class included the Literature Discussion that the quiz covered. Here the professor and students used the language from the book to communicate and create context. Dr. Bellamy read certain portions of the book to open up topics of discussion concerning the meaning of each passage, the students’ personal interpretations of the text, and sometimes how that related to their personal perspectives. The content covered a variety of issues, but mostly covered coming of age, and social hierarchies; two subjects that are experienced in multiple different cultures, though different enough to discuss the complex distinctions.

Overall, the class was very well organized, and Dr. Bellamy made sure to have a student focused discussion class despite being a literature course.



Pictured above from right to left: Dr. Ichikawa, Dr. Bellamy, Professor Sainte

4. Graduate Center:

A day after visiting CSI, we visited the CUNY Graduate Center; an institution where graduate and PhD students gather for research towards their degrees. Here, we met Dr. Brooks, a specialist in psycholinguistics, and her PhD Student, Professor Raffaele. Instead of a class observation, we had a discussion over our teaching experiences, their research, their application of intercultural communication methods in the classroom, and how they feel intercultural communication methods can be better implemented into the classroom in the future. As the two professors teach in New York, which mostly has culturally diverse classrooms, they focus on using intercultural communication methods to elicit rich, conversational input from students.



Pictured Above: CUNY Graduate Center

The authors of this report discussed the importance of having students give group presentations (with members being of various cultures as in Dr. Bellamy's class) which are not over-reliant on slides. As they feel that students are usually unprepared to give presentations even after graduation, the professors explained that these presentations give students research experience, and also give them chances to teach the class, and thus improve their communication skills. Professor Raffaele seemed to be more technologically focused, suggesting that students work on online blogs and create audio and video projects outside of class. In situations where classroom time is very limited (large classroom, short lesson time, involved syllabus, etc.) he suggested having students create prerecorded videos for student presentations (to be further discussed in the following section).

Both of the professors suggested that the teacher could help direct students during their presentations to keep their confidence up, and create discussions around their presentations while asking questions which may be ambiguous in nature. These ambiguous questions would help in two ways: one, by avoiding direct right/wrong questions, and two, by also opening the discussion up to the students' interpretations. Avoiding right/wrong questions would encourage students to speak by eliminating the possibility of embarrassment over giving an incorrect answer. Opening up the discussion to students' interpretations opens up the chance for students to use their language abilities more imaginatively. It gives them more chances to express themselves freely, potentially increasing their confidence in their language progress (while still under a controlled discussion).

Communication Accommodation Theory (Dragojevic, Gasiorek & Giles, 2015) described as the exploration of how people of different cultures will adjust their communicative behavior depending on the culture of their interlocutors – briefly came up during the discussion. Though brief, the professors expressed the importance of making sure that students are aware of this phenomenon.

5. Possible Application for Kagawa KOSEN English Classes:

Upon review of our notes, we, as KOSEN English teachers, found possible ways to introduce what we have learned to KOSEN English classrooms. In addition to Intercultural Communication methods, other possible classroom lesson additions include class discussion, quiz procedure, presentations, and extra assignments.

Concerning Intercultural Communication methods, we can give students out of class assignments concerning topics which explore basic variations between different cultures. Such topics can include subjects like coming of age ceremonies, greeting and eating rituals, typical conversation topics of certain nationalities, ethnic differences in proxemics (defined as how close people can be from each other before feeling discomfort) to name a few examples. Such assignments can be performed as thought experiments for the students (in classes with possible time constraints), or as presentations in which students could use to both teach the class and have further discussions, time permitted. Another possible homework assignment could be through the use of recorded videos as mentioned in the previous section. While this is admittedly not optimal for practical presentation practice, students could view video presentations outside of class, leaving time for in class discussions. As the presentations would not be too long, this could prove for a fast homework assignment which could potentially create a rich in class discussion. An added benefit to video presentations can be observed by commenting on student presentations outside of class. With a video, a teacher can view a student presentation outside of class, and write a note for the student, or give critiques during office hours. This would decrease student anxiety over how they are perceived by their classmates.

As Dr. Brooks explained, an increase in classroom discussion opportunities would greatly increase student competence and confidence in their language abilities. Speaking-focused classes can use homework assignments to prepare students for in class discussions. Reading and literature classes can use homework and carefully prepared in class questions (given as homework assignments to reflect on before class, or given during the class themselves) to open up opportunities for discussion in class about the text. Reducing questions with concrete right and wrong answers and replacing them with more open-ended questions can have students feel more comfortable with expressing their opinions in class by reducing their possible anxiety over giving a “wrong” answer. Giving such ambiguous questions can also give insight into how students are interpreting that language being used in the classroom and better help the teacher to carefully consider what language to use in order to facilitate further student participation with more comprehensible language. Those activities could be resulted in collaborative and active learning models and turn out to be conducive to the period of integrated communicative learning beyond the subjects called “English”.

6. Conclusion:

It is well known that being teachers in Japan requires hard work and commitment, as well as in KOSEN, too. Working at KOSEN means double-jobbing, which is required to be both a high-school teacher and college teacher. The authors of this report cannot give all of our time and energy for teaching, not more than one third or one fourth of all the time. Nonetheless, three professors at NYC provided an instructive example of the teaching, which could be used as ready valuable tools. If we could reduce the amount of work on KOSEN teachers and improve our work environments, it would bring forth bounty to the students.

From our observations of Dr. Bellamy’s class, we can see how teacher workload can be reduced while applying the many benefits that can be gained from applying Intercultural Communication methods to the classroom. More importantly, these benefits can help with student interaction, and help to create a more student focused classroom. Be it a speaking focused class or reading focused class Intercultural Communication methods can help increase opportunities for students to apply and further develop their language skills in and out of the classroom. Our discussion with Dr. Brooks made it clear that it is of ever-growing importance to actually try and use such methods for the students’ benefit. Further research would always benefit the development of such radical methods to the current procedure at KOSEN, however, no matter how difficult it will be to implement, the observed and discussed evidence helps to make a strong case for its validity.

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