Integrating Intercultural Communication into the Language Classroom

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I moved to Japan when I was 18. Having been born and raised outside of Japan to Japanese parents, I was able to speak and understand conversational Japanese but wasn’t familiar with its use outside my home. I didn’t know that I had to use a different set of words when speaking to those who were older than me, that asking questions could be perceived as belligerence, and that maintaining group harmony was more important than being “correct.” Being fluent in the language but completely oblivious to the cultural context made me what Milton Bennett (1997) calls a “fluent fool.” In fact, as my Japanese improved, it seemed like I got into more trouble because my cultural faux pas were no longer seen for what they were; I was often viewed as being intentionally rude or ill-mannered.

Tomoko tells this story to her students to explain why, as their language improves, it is imperative for them to understand the cultural context in which they use the language. While being “polite” might be valued across most cultures, what constitutes politeness varies from one culture to another. This article introduces a theoretical framework for organizing a course on intercultural communication training. Based upon this foundation, it then presents a set of critical incidents that can be used in the course. We close by providing short suggestions on different ways to use critical incidents.

Theoretical framework for teaching culture

Normally, when we enroll in a class to learn something (e.g., how to swim, how to cook) we are already (painfully) aware of why we need to learn this particular skill. For example, when Tomoko first started working for the Sheraton Hotel, she was given a computer running Windows, which she had never used before. To get any work done, she needed to learn how to use it. She signed up for a computer class where the instructor gave some basic information about using the computer (i.e., knowledge) and provided the opportunity to practice using the computer (i.e., skills). Most skills-based classes thus have two components: knowledge and skills.

What makes intercultural communication training unique is that most people are not aware of why they need to learn about culture and cultural differences. They think, “If I can speak the language and I am polite, why do I need to learn about culture?” They are often not aware that what is considered “polite” or “normal” in one culture might not be so in another. When teaching culture, we also need to be aware that cultural differences can trigger strong emotional reactions. When what we value is violated, few people calmly think, “That’s an interesting cultural difference.” Instead, we often feel angry or offended. For this
reason, when designing a course on intercultural communication training, Brislin and Yoshida (1994) suggest including the following four components: Awareness, Knowledge, Emotions, and Skills.

**Awareness**

In a one-year class, it is a good idea to spend at least a few weeks on helping students become more aware of how culture shapes the way they see the world — how it governs their values and behaviors. We should also help them understand how cultural differences can cause unintentional misunderstandings. Many authors have compiled various experiential activities for raising awareness about culture. Readers who are incorporating some cultural content into the language classroom might want to consult Fantini (1997). For those who are teaching a content-based course on intercultural communication or organizing a workshop where the focus is more on culture than language, Kohls and Knight (2004), Seelye (1996), Pedersen (2000, 2004) are useful resources. Those looking for a book of activities written in Japanese might want to examine Yashiro, Araki, Higuchi, Yamamoto and Komisarof (2001) as well as Yashiro, Machi, Koike and Yoshida (2009).

**Knowledge**

Cultural knowledge can be divided into two types: culture-specific and culture-general (See Bhawuk, 2017 for more details). Culture-specific knowledge refers to dos and don’ts such as taking off one’s shoes when visiting a Japanese home. Unless one is organizing a class for participants going to a particular culture, teaching culture-specific knowledge can be tedious and inefficient. However, to give students an idea of the range over which cultures vary, having students do presentations on gestures across the world (Axtell, 1991) or business manners from various countries (Morrison, & Conaway, 2006) can be a fun and effective activity.

In a university course on intercultural communication, teaching culture-general theories can help students organize and analyze cultural differences. While numerous theories exist, some of the classic ones include Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010), Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars’ (2011) seven dimensions of culture, E.T. Hall’s (1976) concept of high vs. low context communication, and Hayashi’s (1994) theory on M-Style vs. O-Style organizations and analog vs. digital communication.

**Emotions**

Culture tells us what is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, polite or impolite. Entering a new culture where what we value is no longer the norm can therefore trigger strong emotional reactions, which can lead to culture shock (coined by Oberg, 1960). Any course on intercultural communication must prepare students for this emotional roller coaster. Knowing that one will have a strong gut-level reaction, however, is not enough. For this reason, effective intercultural communication training often uses activities such as games and simulations to help participants experience firsthand what it feels like to have their values violated.
One of the original cross-cultural simulations is called Bafa' Bafa’ (Shirts, 1977). In this simulation, participants first get indoctrinated into the norms of either alpha or beta culture. Next, they send observers and participants to the other culture to learn about them. This is a powerful simulation that allows participants to experience what it is like to enter a new culture (awareness) and experience culture shock (emotions), while developing techniques for learning about a new culture (knowledge and skills).

In Tomoko’s university class, she uses Rafa’ Rafa’, which is the children’s version of Bafa’ Bafa’. With non-native English speakers, the simpler rules make it easier to focus on the task. Ideally, 2-hours should be allotted for the simulation but it can be done in a 90-minute class. As with all simulations, however, much of the learning occurs after the simulation during the debriefing. If there is not enough time for a proper debriefing in class, students can do the debriefing on their own in the form of an essay.

A simulation that is effective in allowing participants to experience culture shock in less than 30 minutes is called the Outside Expert Awareness Exercise (Pedersen, 2000, 2004). There are numerous other simulations that have withstood the test of time, such as BARNGA (Thiagarajan, 2006), which is a card game that allows participants to experience various cultures with different rules. A more recent one is entitled Rocket, which is based on the experiences of individuals working at the International Space Station (Originally developed by Hirshorn, 2010; See Kirchhoff & Yabuta, 2017 for how they adapted it for the Japanese classroom).

An important note about simulations is that because they can trigger strong emotional reactions, facilitators need to be experienced. When running a new simulation, it is recommended that facilitators first experience it as a participant and then assist a veteran trainer before conducting it in class. Readers who are interested in experiencing and learning simulations are encouraged to come to the Society of Intercultural Education Training and Research (SIETAR) Japan’s monthly meetings, retreats, and conferences (http://www.sietar-japan.org/en/).

Skills
A common mistake that is made in many intercultural communication workshops or classes is that too much time is spent on awareness, knowledge, and emotions with little time left for skills. Even when there is time, because intercultural communication skills cannot be easily defined, they are harder to teach.

One skill that can be taught easily is the ability to analyze a well-intentioned misunderstanding by separating what actually happened (description) from the different cultural interpretations and evaluations. This technique is called D.I.E. and it is one of the most popular exercises in the intercultural field (See Nam & Condon, 2010 for more details). Another approach is to help participants cultivate their own intercultural skills through simulations and role-plays. For example, during the simulation Ecotonos (Nipporica, 1997), the facilitator creates three different cultures and participants collaborate in various business situations. As the trainer or instructor can create new cultures each time, it is possible to repeat the simulation multiple times to allow skill development. While the simulation can be
completed in 2-hours, a one-day workshop allows participants to experience the simulation multiple times so they can try out different strategies. Other experiential methods that help participants develop their own skills include the Contrast Culture Method (Stewart, 1966; adapted by Fujimoto, 2004) and the other is the Triad Training Model (Pedersen, 1977; adapted by Yoshida, Gimbayashi, Suzuki & Tamura, 2016).

**Critical incidents in intercultural communication training**

One way of raising learners’ awareness of certain aspects of culture is through the use of critical incidents. In the sense that we will consider them here, critical incidents are stories in which well-intentioned misunderstandings occur due to cultural differences (Flanagan, 1954). These misunderstandings occur because individuals from different cultures sometimes perceive and interpret the same situation differently. While well-intentioned misunderstandings occur between people from the same culture, it is more common between those from disparate cultures.

The intercultural sensitizer (ICS) or culture assimilator is a collection of critical incidents that end with a number of alternative explanations for why the misunderstanding occurred (See Cushner & Landis, 1996 for a more detailed discussion). ICSs can be culture-specific or culture-general. The purpose of the culture-general ICS is to help participants understand culture-general themes. (Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie & Long (1986) and Cushier & Brislin (1996) are examples of culture-general ICSs.) To this end, instructors can break the students up into small groups and give each group a set of critical incidents that share the same theme. Students are asked to identify the theme.

The ICS has been researched extensively with strong evidence suggesting its effectiveness in improving intercultural sensitivity (Cushner & Landis, 1996). However, despite this strong empirical grounding, there still exists a shortage of culture-general critical incidents written for Japanese students. In response, the authors drew on their pasts to choose events that actually happened to them, in order to create a set of critical incidents that might be salient for this particular audience. Through reading and guessing why the non-Japanese characters were puzzled by these incidents, students should be able to see the extent to which culture influences values and behaviors. Pseudonyms are used for anonymity.

**Critical incidents for Japanese students**

**A ride to the airport**

Naomi was visiting her friend, Keiko, in Hawaii. On Naomi’s last day, Keiko’s friend, Ricky, drove her to the airport. At the airport, Naomi got off and stood by the sidewalk and waved. Ricky waved back but Naomi continued to stand there and wave. Ricky waved back again but Naomi was still there waving. Finally, Ricky looked puzzled and asked Keiko why Naomi was still standing there. Why was Ricky puzzled?

1. Ricky was not used to people being polite to him.
2. Ricky was not used to people thanking him for a ride.
3. Ricky expected Naomi to just thank him and walk away.
4. Ricky was hoping Naomi would give him a hug.

A drive down the coast
One Sunday, Sam invited four friends to go on a drive down the coast of Oregon. Dan, Rina, Akemi, and Cindy were ready to jump in when Rina started giggling and pointing at the front passenger seat saying, “Dan, I think you should sit there.” Dan looked at Rina and said, “Why, because I’m fat?” Rina giggled. There was an awkward silence and the three girls sat in the back seat of the car. As they got closer to the coast, Sam stopped at a gas station. The five got out and bought different snacks. As Dan was eating beef jerky, Rina approached him, giggled, and said, “It smells.” By the time they go to the coast, Dan was not happy. Why was Dan unhappy?

1. As Americans tend to be sensitive about appearances, suggesting that someone is overweight is rude.
2. As Americans tend to be sensitive about the way they smell, suggesting that someone smells is rude.
3. Giggling can be considered rude in America.
4. Dan thought Rina disliked her.

One night in Tokyo
Professor Saito was hosting Professor Jones and his wife, who were visiting from the US. One evening, professor Saito took them to a members-only club for a kaiseki dinner. They dined in a private room where waitresses were dressed elegantly in kimonos and the walls were decorated in traditional artwork. Each dish was delicious and served in exquisite plates and bowls.

Professor Jones’s wife, who had read some books about Japanese culture and manners, admired and complimented each dish. At the end of the dinner, she was surprised when the proprietress of the club presented her with one of the dishes on which one course was served. She just said, “Since you were admiring these dishes, we present you with one.” Professor Jones’s wife was taken aback. She was visibly embarrassed but accepted the dish hesitatingly. Professor Saito seemed to be anticipating this gift because he came prepared and offered a return gift to the proprietress of the club, who accepted it after some hesitation.

When she returned to her hotel, she asked the concierge to wrap it so she could pack it in her suitcase. The concierge admired it, saying it looks very expensive. Professor Jones’s wife was embarrassed and told him that she hoped it was not too expensive. Why do you think Professor Jones’s wife was hoping the gift was not too expensive?

1. Because she was afraid it might break on the flight back home.
2. Because she was worried that she committed a cultural faux pas by praising the dishes too much.
3. Because she was worried that Professor Saito and his wife might have spent too much money on them.
4. Because she preferred to use cheap dishes.

**Thank you for waiting**

Karen was visiting Japan with her husband. She noticed that every time she used the elevator in the hotel, the elevator operator would say, “Thank you for waiting,” even if they had not been waiting at all. One day, she went to the beauty salon. After a long and relaxing shampoo, the stylist said “Otsukaresama—deshita!” When she found out what this meant, Karen wondered why the stylist would thank her for her hard work when all she did was sit there and have her hair washed. She thought to herself, “Shouldn’t I be the one thanking her for her hard work?” Why was Karen confused?

1. Karen was not used to people being polite.
2. Karen was not used to being thanked for her efforts.
3. Karen was not used to these particular greetings.
4. Karen was used to the slow service in the U.S.A. so she did not expect to be thanked for her patience.

**Toilet paper etiquette**

Kayoko studied Spanish in Tokyo. The first time she went out of Japan was to a Spanish-speaking South American country for work. She stayed at a hostel for women. On her first night there, she went to use the toilet and noticed that the toilet paper roll was hung the wrong way. (The loose end hanging from below the roll instead of above the roll.) She was disturbed and thought that someone made a mistake. She turned it around. But when she looked at all the other stalls in that hostel toilet, she found that they were all hanging the wrong way. Why do you think this happened?

1. Kayoko was staying at a cheap hostel so the service was terrible.
2. South Americans are laid back and don’t care which way the toilet paper is hanging.
3. They did this to annoy Kayoko.
4. This is the way toilet paper is usually hung in this country.

**The difficult landlord**

Jack had been living in his apartment in Japan for a few months. His Internet was slow, and he wanted to get a faster connection. He called the Internet company and asked them to install a fiber-optic line in his apartment. The Internet company told him he needed to get permission from his landlord. So, Jack called his landlord and asked him if he could install a fiber-optic line in his apartment. His landlord replied that it would be difficult to do so. Jack said he would do whatever it takes to get faster Internet. His landlord replied again that it would be difficult. Jack said he didn’t care how difficult it was; he would do anything. Again, his landlord replied that it was difficult. Jack asked if it was a matter of money, but it was no use. His landlord continued to say that it would be difficult, and Jack never got a faster Internet connection. Why didn’t Jack get faster Internet?

1. Jack’s Japanese was not good enough.
2. The landlord was being vague.
3. The landlord was lazy or afraid of doing anything difficult.
4. The landlord was hiding something.

The doctor’s diagnosis

It was Lito’s first winter in Japan, and he got a sore throat. Lito always got a sore throat in winter at home, and at home the doctor always diagnosed him with strep throat, gave him antibiotics, and he was better in a few days. So Lito did some research, translated “strep throat” and “antibiotics” and went to the doctor’s. When he met the doctor, the doctor asked him what was wrong. Lito told the doctor that he had strep throat, that he always got it this time of year, and that a few days of antibiotics would make him better. Lito was trying to save the doctor some time and felt he was being very helpful. However, the doctor didn’t seem pleased. He examined Lito silently, looking in his nose and throat. After a quick examination, he told Lito that it was only a cold and he should go home, drink plenty of tea, and rest. Lito explained again that the doctor was wrong, that this was the same sickness he always had, and that he needed antibiotics. The doctor got angry and left the exam room. Lito left the clinic without paying. Why didn’t Lito and the doctor get along?

1. The doctor made a mistaken diagnosis.
2. Lito doesn’t have strep throat.
3. Lito treated the doctor with disrespect.
4. The doctor doesn’t like foreigners.

The on-time arrival

Ian worked as an ALT at a Japanese school. He was invited to go along on a school bus trip. The teachers told him that since the buses were leaving at six, everyone should arrive at school by 5:45. Ian set his alarm, woke up on time, and arrived at the school at exactly 5:45. He was surprised to find that all the students and teachers were on the buses. The vice principal met him and told him what bus to get on. When he got on the bus, no one said anything to him and he could tell the other teachers were not happy. The bus started moving shortly after he sat down. Why were the teachers unhappy with Ian?

1. The teachers were talking about Ian before he arrived.
2. Ian was late.
3. Ian mistook the arrival time.
4. The teachers told Ian the wrong time.

The pet-trimming student

Sean was teaching an English class of Japanese students. He told them to talk about their dream jobs. The class was going well, and Sean was walking around the class listening to the students’ conversations. He overheard a girl telling her partner about becoming a trimmer. He didn’t understand what she meant and asked what a trimmer was. She explained that a trimmer was someone who cut the hair of people’s pets. Sean was surprised and thought the student had misunderstood the assignment. He told her that this conversation
should be about her *dream* job: the job she would choose if she could be anything. He
gave examples like a doctor or an astronaut. The girl promptly burst into tears and ran out of
the classroom. Why was she upset?

1. Pet-trimming is a prestigious job in Japan.
2. The student didn’t understand the activity.
3. The student has an unusual dream.
4. Sean thought the student should have a more important job.

Irrashaimase
After graduating from university, Stephen moved to Japan to join his girlfriend. Shortly after
his arrival, he noticed that every time he entered a restaurant or a store or a hotel, the staff
would say *irasshaimase*! Stephen would smile back and say irasshaimase back to them and
bow. After noticing the shop clerks giggle or look shocked, he stopped doing this but even
after many years in Japan, when he hears irasshaimase he still wants to say something back
to the shop-keepers. Why do you think Stephen has this reaction?

1. Stephen likes to make people laugh so he is trying to be funny.
2. Stephen is used to storekeepers and customers giving reciprocal greetings.
4. Stephen was annoyed by the loud greeting and wanted to show his frustration.

You look tired
Brad really enjoys going to Tokyo on weekends to study with his friends. Saturday classes
are long and hard, but they are also interesting and he was looking forward to the class on
Sunday. He got a cup of coffee and was feeling happy and energetic as he walked into the
classroom. Some classmates looked a little sleepy and others had their noses in their
textbooks. Makoto was sitting alone in the corner and Brad went over to him. “Hey, Makoto,
how’s it going?” Makoto looked up. “Hi. You look tired!” he said. Brad felt embarrassed and
didn’t know what to say. Why was Brad embarrassed?

1. Makoto was worried about the narrator.
2. Makoto probably didn’t do his homework for Sunday’s class.
3. Brad thought that Makoto was rude.
4. Brad was tired from studying on Saturday.

(Explanations of these critical incident tasks can be found online at https://
speakeasyjournal.wordpress.com/2018/11/12/integrating-intercultural-communication-into-
the-language-classroom-appendix-explanations-of-the-critical-incidents/)

How to use critical incidents in class
Critical incidents can be used in many ways. An instructor can use them as an entry point to
introduce a concept, theory or theme to be discussed in class. For example, how the notion
of “politeness” varies across cultures (e.g., A Ride to the Airport; A Drive Down the Coast),
how business customs are different from country to country (e.g., Thank you for waiting; Irasshaimase; One Night in Tokyo), how communication styles can cause misunderstandings (e.g., The Difficult Landlord; The Doctor’s Diagnosis), how “common sense” is not the same in all countries (e.g., Toilet Paper Etiquette) or how there are various concepts of time across the world (e.g., The On-Time Arrival). An entire class can also be organized around the critical incidents. For instance, each group of students can be in charge of acting out one critical incident asking the rest of the class to guess why the confusion occurred. This can then be followed-up with students writing their own critical incidents based on their experiences. Critical incidents can also be used to teach the Describe Interpret Evaluate (D.I.E.) method (see Nam & Condon, 2010 for more details). Critical incidents are a versatile tool that can address each of the components that Brislin and Yoshida (1994) contend are essential in a beneficial course on intercultural studies: awareness, knowledge, emotions, and skills.

Conclusion
As culture and language are inextricably linked, the instruction of the two should similarly be taught together. We hope that this article has provided readers with an entry point for incorporating intercultural communication material into their language classes.

References


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