

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' OWN CULTURE.

Nasiba Jakbarova

Namangan davlat chet tillar instituti

“Ingliz tili o’qitish metodikasi” kafedrası o’qituvchisi

jakbarovanastinka@gmail.com

Nasiba Djakbarova

Prepodavatel angliyskogo yazыka

v Namanganskom gosudarstvennom institute inostrannyx yazыkov

jakbarovanastinka@gmail.com

Nasiba Jakbarova

English Instructor at

Namangan State Institute of Foreign Languages named after Is’hokkhon Ibrat

jakbarovanastinka@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the importance of intercultural communication competence in today’s globalized world. The reasons why culture and language should be interconnected are explained in detail. The real-life cultural scenario is used to explain how intercultural communication helps learners to understand their own culture. The readers can use such authentic materials to develop their language skills and intercultural communication.

Key words: communication, cultural elements, cultural scenario, collaboration, exploring the culture

Introduction.

Due to the increasing impact of globalization, there has been a noticeable increase in global communication. As a result, educators, scholars, and practitioners have become more interested in incorporating diverse perspectives into English Language Teaching (ELT). Both students and teachers are now seeking to enhance their intercultural skills, as highlighted by Olaya and Gomez Rodriguez (2013). In the past, educators typically categorized culture as either "Big C" or "little c". Initially, language teachers viewed culture through the lenses of aesthetics (fine arts, literature, architecture) or anthropology (festivals, food, folklore, music). Over time, this definition expanded to encompass all aspects related to individuals (Moore, 1995). More recently, various perspectives have started to attribute a deeper significance to the term. Kramsch (2013) adopts a post-modernist view of culture as "a social semiotic construction" (p.68), emphasizing the act of constructing meaning. She suggests that culture is intertwined with the shared meanings assigned by a community to practices, and a lack of this understanding can lead to misinterpretations of others.

This research employed the intercultural language teaching approach as a novel technique. Given that language acquisition emphasizes the link between language and culture, along with the importance of understanding different cultures, educators teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) should integrate intercultural aspects into their instructional methods. Ho (2009) suggests that challenges remain, such as creating appropriate intercultural learning

activities for diverse student populations and planning for continuous professional development in the long term.

Similar to Kramsch, Wandel and Holmes (2003), Arnaudova (2006) also acknowledges the close connection between culture and language in education. She emphasizes that culture and language are inseparable and interdependent, serving as fundamental aspects of foreign language teaching. Consequently, an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher should prioritize imparting cultural information, knowledge, and equipping learners with the necessary skills to communicate effectively in a multicultural setting.

According to Liddicoat's (2002, 2013) theory of intercultural language teaching, the approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of language, culture, and learning from a reflective perspective. Through activities such as noticing, comparing, and reflecting, students are guided to not only understand their own language and culture but also to appreciate and respect those of others. This process helps students explore social norms and perspectives. The innovative teaching method provides a platform for potential negotiation and allows for the presentation, mediation, and acceptance of different viewpoints (Liddicoat, 2008). Furthermore, this approach considers culture as a collection of dynamic practices, emphasizing that cultural knowledge extends beyond factual information to include how language is utilized and how concepts are expressed and interacted with within cultural contexts (Liddicoat, 2020).

During the process of Intercultural language teaching (ICT) students will investigate other cultures by reflecting and relating them into their own. (Liddicoat, 2002). In the process of acknowledging, comparing, discussing, and mediating meanings, learners engage with language and culture by exploring, evaluating, and responding in a non-biased manner. This approach goes beyond merely presenting cultural facts and involves activities such as identifying stereotypes, exploring values, and examining cultural misinterpretations. The goal of ILT is not to assimilate students into a new culture, but rather to empower them to recognize and articulate their own cultural perspectives while appreciating the differences with the new culture in a distinct manner.

Method. Observation and reflection methods have been selected to examine how the development of intercultural communication skills can shape our students into globally competent individuals.

In following cultural scenario, we can witness to above mentioned ideas how ICC will help to understand our students' home culture:

WHY CAN'T I LOVE BEING JAPANESE?

Mikoto Masui

Nanzan University, Japan

Country of Origin: Japan

Context of Narrative: Online learning

This story is set in my home country, Japan. During the pandemic, I participated in an online international project that changed the way that I think about myself. I worked in a team with two African-American students, and having the opportunity to talk with them changed the way I think of my identity. Although I was born and raised in Japan, I had mixed feelings about being Japanese for quite a while. However, since the project, I have come to think that understanding people from different cultures could help me find ways to love my own cultural identity.

I have been fortunate to have never suffered from the difficulties that immigrants and people who have dual nationalities experience. Without a doubt, Japan is my home country and I feel that I should love my identity as a Japanese person. Yet, I have mixed feelings about being Japanese. Why can't I love being Japanese? I have suffered from self-hatred and an inferiority complex regarding my identity as a Japanese person for quite a while. Possibly, this is because I have always highly admired Western people and their culture. I really like people who have fair skin, big eyes and blonde hair, and speak beautiful languages. But at the same time, I feel inferior to them. Every morning I wake up, look at myself in the mirror, and wonder why I have such yellowish skin, small eyes, and black hair. I know that I am from a beautiful country, and I understand that some people may wonder why I feel inferior. My mother seems to know how to feel proud of being Japanese and always says to me "I like you just as you are." "Inner beauty is more important than appearance." I know that she is right, but I still struggle to love being myself For many years, I wondered if I might be able to overcome my concerns by talking with people from other cultures and listening to their opinions.

Last semester, I joined a class called "International Studies," and finally got an opportunity to have this conversation. In the class, I worked on a video project with students studying at the University of Maryland in the United States. They are studying Japanese. The goal of the project was to work with students from different cultures and to create a video about stereotypes, prejudice, or discrimination in both the U.S.A. and Japan. We started by recording a simple poster presentation about our individual Cultural DNA. Then we shared those with our teammates. I was surprised that one of my teammates, an African-American student, said "my identity is really important". Actually, I had assumed that they might have similar feelings to me because they had probably had to deal with discomfort and difficulties because of race. But the reality was that they knew how important their identity was and seemed to be proud of being themselves. This was a beautiful thing for me – much better than always wanting to be someone else.

I noticed a difference between our two countries; while Japan has only one race and Japanese people are not very aware of race, it is very important for people living in the U.S.A. to think about their cultural identity. They might be forced to be aware of race and ethnicity as they live in an ethnically diverse country. The two students in my team seemed to know many stories about their own ethnic roots. Their Cultural DNA videos contained a lot of information about their cultural identities, whereas I could hardly explain my ethnic roots to them at all. I actually did not even know what to write in the "ethnic/cultural background" information at the top of this essay, as I had never thought of my ethnicity and cultural background before. Through discussions with my teammates, I realized that I hated being Japanese without knowing the story of my own ethnic roots and cultural history. Japan has adopted a lot of things from foreign countries, so I feel like I have been surrounded by different cultures and have not really understood the beautiful parts of my own country. It is impossible to love things I do not know, so I think that I need to know more about Japan in order to love being myself, a Japanese person, just as the two African-American students love being themselves.

Since my experience with the online project, my initial question of why can't I love being Japanese has turned into, "What is the best part of being Japanese?" To be honest, I am still looking for the answers. These days, I enjoy reading books that introduce Japanese culture

to become familiar with my own culture, which always helps me to explain my cultural background when I talk to my non-Japanese friends. Moreover, since realizing that understanding one's identity is a key to effective intercultural communication, I have become interested in identity development in today's globalized Japan. I learned that some residents of Japan have a transnational or multicultural identity as a result of globalization. I learned that for non-Japanese, ethnic/ cultural identity is quite important. However, in general, most Japanese people tend to categorize people as either Japanese or *Gaijin*, foreigners, based only on appearance and language. I think that this simple categorization can ignore the complex identity of some residents in Japan. Besides, it can be offensive for those who do look Japanese but are not, too. Like Japanese Americans who may look Japanese but not speak the language. In Japan, we do not see the diversity that is so apparent in many other countries. However, I have come to think that we should not judge other people based only on nationality, appearance, and languages, but their individual personalities. I will continue my journey to not only accept my own identity and love being myself but also to find ways that those who have transnational or multicultural identities can live comfortably in Japan.

Conclusion and discussions.

Masui's essay emphasizes the importance of intercultural interactions in gaining self-understanding and the significance of recognizing one's own identity first. She suggests that in order to truly appreciate oneself as a Japanese person, it is essential to have a deeper understanding of Japan. Masui also points out that comprehending one's identity is fundamental for successful intercultural communication, as it lays the foundation for understanding the different perspectives through which individuals perceive the world. Prior to comprehending others' viewpoints, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of one's own identity. Masui warns against oversimplifying identities through basic categorizations like nationality, such as "Japanese" or "Chinese," which can lead to stereotyping and overlook the complexity of individual identities. In today's globalized world, embracing multicultural identities promotes inclusivity and enhances the ability to engage effectively in intercultural relationships.

Adler (2008) highlights the challenges that arise when collaborating with individuals from diverse cultures, emphasizing that cultural differences can create barriers that impede interactions. To navigate these challenges successfully, it is vital to understand cultural nuances and familiarize oneself with the values of different societies. This understanding facilitates seamless integration, communication, and ultimately drives success in business ventures.

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