

NEUPANE Sudha

## Intercultural Studies in the Foreign Language Classroom: Student Perspectives

### **Abstract**

Learning languages through the use of intercultural activities to more effectively learn languages is a highly topical issue in the field of Foreign Language Education. This study attempted to examine whether students were able to improve either their language skills or cultural awareness through intercultural activities, and whether intercultural group activities could be said to enhance social motivation in the language classroom. The participants in this study were the 34 students on a course held by the National University in Intercultural Communication in the 2016 Fall Semester. A questionnaire was developed to collect the data for this study. The answers received from the students indicate improvements in their language skills, cultural awareness and social motivation. Key words: language skills, culture awareness, social motivation

### **Introduction**

Studying a new language involves much more than merely learning syntax and acquiring a lexicon. Both researchers and students concerned with the study of foreign language have begun to acknowledge the complex connections between any language and its culture (Genc & Bada 2010). Moreover, learning a language is incomplete without the study of the culture concerned.

Brown (2007) illustrates the close relationship between language and culture, affirming that the acquisition of a second language is also necessarily the acquisition of a second culture. If we look to the work of early linguists such as Sapir (1962) and Whorf (1956), they were also concerned with the relationship between language and culture, and how different cultural groupings and their beliefs are deeply rooted in a given language, which in turn influences cognitive categorization. The term applied to how speakers of different languages think and behave differently is *linguistic relativity*, otherwise known as the Sapir-Whorf principle. In addition, philosophers such as Saussure (1966), Foucault (1994), and Chomsky (1969) have also argued that culture and language share mutual connections. Previous studies on the teaching of culture have clearly shown that language and culture are interconnected and are best acquired simultaneously (Byram 1989; Kramsch 1993; Brown 2007).

However, it can be difficult in practice to bring culture into the foreign language classroom. Therefore, the focus of this study was to examine students' awareness of language, culture and motivation in the foreign language classroom. Are students aware of their own learning process? Or they are just lost within the piles of new words and phrases? In the foreign language classroom, many students may become demotivated or discouraged when struggling with the complexity of a new language and culture. As Shaules puts "It is easy to say that cultural learning is important for language learners, but it is hard to integrate this with the nuts-and-bolts of everyday classroom teaching." (Shaules, 2016, p. 3). Students may memorize new words and cultural facts or improve their grammar yet still face difficulties in expressing themselves easily and accurately. In this situation, it is not easy to maintain motivation.

Motivation is a factor which concerns all language teachers. Basically, enthusiastic, eager, committed or devoted learners are the motivated learners in any classroom. Motivation is defined as one's decision to do something, relative to how hard it may be to pursue and how long one is willing to sustain that activity (Dornyei 2001a). In this study, the teacher concerned employed a sociocultural theory of motivation to conduct the classroom activities. Students were asked to choose their favorite country as the subject for group presentations. Students could then take part in enjoyable discussions, teamwork and team building activities, and act in collaboration as well as competition with other groups. The research assumption was that students may not be motivated to do the same task alone, but they may be motivated to do so in group.

## **Literature review: language learning, culture learning and social motivation**

In a globalized world, people learn foreign languages for several reasons. It may be due to migration, the need to learn additional languages, or for other reasons. According to Risager (2015), people carry assumptions and knowledge from their own cultural context into another and use them to apply logic or interpret meaning during language learning.

Thus, the study of language and culture together is a sensitive, complex and dynamic process, which changes depending on the person and the language concerned. The acquisition of a language is not only the mastering of grammar but also the ability to use language appropriately in social and cultural contexts (Byram 1989; Fantini 1997a, 1997b; Risager 2015). The concept of a linguaculture in language learning is very broad, and a full exploration is beyond the scope of this article. In brief, language and culture have traditionally been treated as two different fields of study, but there is an increasing desire to understand intercultural awareness and intercultural relationships in an internationalized world. Cultural linguist Farzad Sharifan (2015) expands upon the theoretical and analytical frameworks for how language and culture might be considered jointly. American scholars Paul Friedrich (1994) and Michael Agar (1989) bring linguistics and culture together under one discipline, known as linguaculture, to raise intercultural competence. Intercultural competence

is understood as the ability to communicate with different cultures in an interconnected world. Intercultural competence in language classrooms focuses on the understanding both of other cultures and one's own culture, in order to develop awareness, reflect on the reality behind stereotyping, and build collective harmony (Byram 1997). Language teaching is a social and political activity too (Byram 2008).

There are various factors at play in developing intercultural competence in the language classroom, and motivation is a key factor for achieving positive results. Language learners pass through many levels of development, growth and complexity during the learning process. Shaules says "Linguaculture learning can lead to transformative experience and an expansion of the self. In that sense, this model is designed for anyone who sees language and culture learning as a form of cultural exploration and personal growth" (Shaules 2016, p. 14). Language learners' curiosity about others and the self is always rewarding within a learning process (Dornyei & Csizer 1998). Motivation can be both intrinsic (generated by one's own interest in the subject) Ryan and Deci (2000) and extrinsic (generated by external factors such as rewards, good grades, and either appreciation or pressure from teachers and friends) in nature (Noels, Clement, & Pelletier 2001).

Additionally, sociocultural theory introduces the concept of social motivation, or motivation which comes from social interactions. Examples of activities to increase social motivation might include group work, group discussions or solving problems jointly. These activities can take the form of sports teams, group study sessions or group classroom presentations, among others. However, these motivational techniques may not always work positively in a language learning classroom because of the variations in levels of student language proficiency (Dornyei, 2003).

This question was tested by Maya Sugita and Osamu Takeuchi (2010) in their empirical study on motivational strategies for teaching English as a foreign language at the lower secondary school level. This study concluded that the effects of motivational strategies vary depending upon the proficiency level of the student concerned.

## **Research Questions**

This study concerned itself with two key questions:

- Are the participants (students) in Intercultural Communication classrooms motivated to learn foreign languages through intercultural activities?
  
- Are the participants (students) in Intercultural Communication classrooms able to improve their language learning skills and cultural learning awareness through intercultural activities?

## **Methodology**

### **Data collection**

The data for this study was collected through student responses to a questionnaire, which included five questions based on 15 weeks of Intercultural Communication lessons, conducted in the 2016-2017 Fall Semester. Throughout these lessons, group presentation activities and lecture-type activities were conducted. Students were asked to answer the questionnaire after the presentation sessions were completed and submit it at the end of the course.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were 34 undergraduate students from the humanities and social sciences faculty at a national university. All the participants were Japanese, and so shared many cultural characteristics and values.

### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire includes five questions in total. Question 1 attempts to investigate about motivation in intercultural classroom, Question 2,3 and 4 are based on the guidance provided in Bada (2000, p.104) whereas, Question 5 asks about the benefits of learning culture in language classroom. The five questions are as follows:

Question 1: Were you more motivated to study a foreign language as a result of the intercultural activities you took part in?

Question 2:

2. A: Has this course contributed to any of your language skills?

2. B: If it has, to what skill(s) has it contributed most?

Question 3: Do you think this course was helpful in raising awareness regarding societal characteristics and cultural values?

Question 4: Did your attitude towards target culture change at the end of this course?

Question 5: What were the benefits of learning a language through intercultural activities?

The last question was an open-ended question. All students were asked to write up their responses to the questionnaire and submit at the end of the course.

## **Results and Discussion**

The responses provided by the students through the questionnaire clearly indicates an improvement in both language skills and cultural awareness through the use of intercultural activities. Social motivation theory used by the teacher for the group presentation activity was also successful in this particular class. The first question concerned whether students felt motivated

to study a foreign language as a result of the intercultural activities conducted. The overwhelming majority (94.2%) of respondents answered yes, as reported in Table 1 below, but the 5.8% percent who responded negatively cannot be dismissed. Students were encouraged to chose their favorite countries for the presentation, and were allowed to make group discussions about interesting cultural aspects of the chosen country, such as food, fashion, music, literature, tourist spots, and must-visit locations. The presentation accounted for 50% of their final grades. These factors may have also motivated the students in this particular classroom setting.

**Table 1: Responses for Question 1**

Total no. of students	Question 1	Answers	Distribution	%
34	Were you more motivated to study a foreign language as a result of the intercultural activities you took part in?	Positive	32	5.8
		Negative	2	94.2

The second question concerned whether or not students benefitted from the intercultural activities, in terms of an improvement in their language skills. The answers for this question were 100% positive, which indicates that the course helped improve language skills (as shown in Table 2). The course was primarily based on presentation sessions, with students discussing, practicing and participating in oral activities about cultural topics. Therefore, most of the students thought their speaking skills had been improved, as shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 2: Responses for Question 2.A**

Total no. of students	Question 2. A	Answers	%
34	Has this course contributed to any of your language skills?	Positive	100
		Negative	0

**Table 3: Responses for Question 2.B**

Total no. of students	Question 2.B	Skills	Distribution	%
34	If it has, to what skill(s) has it contributed most?	Reading	4	11.7
		Writing	5	14.7
		Listening	5	14.7
		Speaking	20	58.9

The third question concerned an improved awareness of the target culture. More than 80% of the students gave a positive response, indicating that the intercultural course helped to improve their awareness, as clearly shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: Responses for Question 2.A**

Total no. of students	Question 3	Answers	Distribution	%
34	Do you think this course was helpful in raising awareness regarding societal characteristics and cultural values?	Positive	28	82.3
		Negative	6	17.7

Learning can be characterized as the process of transforming our point of view. The fourth question asked whether students had changed their view of the target culture. The percentage of positive responses from the students (70.5%) is very significant, indicating that the course helped students to change their attitudes towards the target culture. Table 5 below shows the full results.

**Table 5: Responses for Question 4**

Total no. of students	Question 4	Answers	Distribution	%
34	Did your attitude towards target culture change at the end of this course?	Positive	24	70.5
		Negative	10	29.5

The final question on the benefits of intercultural activities for learning language was an open-ended one. All students had to write up their responses on the questionnaire. Their responses have been grouped into five categories, as explored below.

#### *Theme 1: Communicative competence*

Chomsky (1965) distinguished between linguistic competence and linguistic performance, illustrating how language can be acquired through competence and polished through communication or performance. Moreover, the understanding of grammar, phonetics, syntax, and morphology, as well as the social context for where and how to use language efficiently and correctly, is known as communicative competence. Cultural activities rely on the actual practices of mankind; students were therefore given a platform to perform, practice and communicate not only linguistic learning but knowledge about the target culture. Thus, they improved their language proficiency as well as speaking ability, however minimally.

#### *Theme 2: Improved vocabulary and grammar*

Learning a new language is very challenging, primarily because a learner must memorize so many new words. The cultural activities used in this study facilitated the acquisition of new terms, words and phrases by the students, as well as providing an opportunity to use them. Because the students were using new words in context, it helped them more easily remember and use them appropriately. For example, cultural terms such as *globalization*,

*Americanization*, and *barbarians* were unfamiliar until studied in their context. As a result, the students agreed that cultural studies helped increase their vocabulary in the target language.

### *Theme 3: Culture shock lessened*

Most of the students reported that they plan to join foreign universities to pursue further studies, while others wish to travel abroad on vacation or expected that they might make a foreign business trip in future. Students also wrote, having studied a new culture, it should be easier to communicate more effectively as well as experience less culture shock. The topics provided in the cultural activities, which included food, greetings, non-verbal languages, dresses, tradition, religions and fashion, among others, provided information on different aspects of culture which might help avoid future stress. The more one is familiar with the cultural environment of a new country, the easier adjustment and adaptation becomes.

### *Theme 4: Confidence in speaking about target culture*

Students reported that they now felt be confident about talking and answering questions on cultural topics. This cultural studies course has allowed them to understand the cultural background of people who speak the target language. However, some students also mentioned that the concrete facts of a target culture were easy to study, but abstract aspects were more difficult to cope with. For example, it was easy to talk about food and clothes, but difficult to understand religious beliefs.

### *Theme 5: Motivation to learn*

Students reported being very eager to learn about people from the target language and culture. Moreover, they chose their favorite country for the group presentations. Culturally-based activities such as food, fashion, songs, dances, festivals and role-playing helped motivate the students. However, one student wrote, 'I enjoyed the group work with friends in the English class,' whereas another student wrote, 'I feel shy talking in front of everyone because my English is not good'. This indicates how their proficiency level affected their motivation.

## **Conclusion**

The result of this study clearly suggests that the participants were able to improve their language skills. This was especially true of their speaking skills, as they primarily performed presentations in the classroom. However, some students admitted to feeling shy speaking in front of the others, as they felt their language skills were poor. Students also increased cultural awareness after making their presentations on the countries they chose. As they worked together to jointly solve problems and collect ideas for their presentations, the group work allowed them to interact with one another and accomplish the classroom

activities smoothly without losing motivation.

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