

Discussion-centered Lessons for Cross Cultural Communications

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Cross Cultural Communications (CCC) is part of the Language and Culture Course (LCC) which aims to raise students' awareness in intercultural issues. This course has often been regarded as challenging since many students have not yet reached a sufficient level of English to grasp, let alone discuss, concepts such as "culture" and "identity" in English. A lecture-style CCC class in English is bound to fail since few students would stay focused for 90 minutes. However, spontaneous discussion is even harder when they find the subject too difficult to follow. To ease this problem, introduction of step-by-step discussion is proposed. In this report, the basic class procedure and the effects of discussion-centered lessons for CCC are presented.

Discussion-centered Lesson Procedure

Six chapters from the textbooks *Different Realities* and *Culture in Action* were covered over 12 classes in one semester. The basic lesson plan was worked out mainly to facilitate discussion. The following summarizes the key points of the class format.

(1) Group formation with a leader

- 7-9 groups of 4 or 5 students (total 40-45 students) were formed each time.
- A leader was assigned to each group to facilitate discussion and was responsible for writing a short report of the group discussion to give the instructor some insights into the actual operations and problems of group discussion.
- The report summarizes (a) successful and (b) difficult parts of today's discussion, and (c) things the leader did to make the discussion successful.

(2) Brief introduction of the topic of the day

- Discussion tended to be more successful when input to discussion is given to arouse students interests and provide them with background schema.
- A variety of initial input was given in the form of (a) instructor's personal anecdote, (b) a short passage to read, or (c) video or audio material.

(3) Group discussion based on a worksheet

- A handout containing 4-5 discussion topics was presented each time so that students can have a framework to oversee group discussion.
- The use of Japanese was tolerated; It was better than not sharing opinions at all.

(4) Follow-up class discussion and summary

- Each group was required to contribute to the class discussion and summary, this time, in English. This stimulated prior group discussion.
- A wider range of opinions became available and discussion was put into perspective with the summary of important concepts of the chapter.

(5) Review (as a homework assignment)

- A homework that asked 4-5 questions was given each time (though only 3 out of 6 homework assignments were required to be submitted)
- It was intended to promote further reading or research on their own as well as to be used for evaluating individual students more closely.

Reactions to Group Discussion and being a Leader

The results of leader's reports and the end-of-the-semester questionnaire were analyzed to assess students reactions to discussion-centered lessons. Overall, many students liked group discussion because they could hear their peer's opinions, but some cited the difficulty in conducting group discussion when they were unable to come up with things to say or when some of the members were uncooperative. These problems are a biggest challenge to any group discussion. Some measures were taken such as establishing a leader and a secretary that keeps record of the discussion, and offering extra points to those who presented ideas. Most students felt that having a leader was helpful though they preferred not to be one themselves.

The steps of giving input → group discussion → class discussion & summary → homework review seemed effective to reach the key concepts of CCC. Most students more or less stay focused for 90 minutes and liked well-defined format of the class with clear goals. Difficulty still remains as students receive little systematic assistance in improving speaking skills in LCC. However, even such difficulty should be regarded as a practical lesson of (cross cultural) communications. The attempt to communicate with their peers through discussion in itself is an indispensable part of learning CCC.