Intercultural Communicative Competence

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to identify the importance of Intercultural communicative competence (hereafter ICCC) and examine how it is taught in a Japanese setting. ICCC focuses not only on other cultures but also on one's own culture (Kramsch, 1998), and many researchers emphasize its importance especially in the language teaching context. Nevertheless, there seems to be little specific pedagogy. In language classroom, the knowledge and information about foreign countries, and differences and similarities between foreign countries and one's own country tend to be emphasized. The understanding of ICCC in the educational context seems to require careful interpretation. Not only knowledge but also the willingness to accept diversity and respect both one's own culture and other cultures should be emphasized in ICCC teaching. To achieve this, the focus should be directed towards the process of problem solving and awareness of effective intercultural communication rather than on attempts to find one answer for understanding one's own culture and other cultures.

Keywords: Intercultural Communicative Competence, Willingness to accept diversity, Problem solving, Open-ended question activities

Introduction

According to Roberts (1998), communication between people from different backgrounds entails some risks and is difficult to achieve due to differences in culture, history, values, belief, and so on. Language and culture are inseparable, and language cannot be understood without some cultural background (Byram & Fleming, 1998). However, merely studying other cultures is not sufficient while acquiring another culture may not be easy. After World War II, because of the economic development especially in the U.S and Japan, the focus fell on communication between people of widely differing cultures (Inoue, 2007). Intercultural communicative competence (hereafter ICCC) focuses not only on other cultures but also on one's own culture (Kramsch, 1998), and many researchers emphasize its importance especially in the language teaching context. Nevertheless, there seems to be little specific pedagogy, and language teachers who are willing to teach ICCC may do so on the basis of their own belief. In language classroom, the knowledge and information about foreign countries, and differences and similarities between foreign countries and one's own country tend to be emphasized. However, not only knowledge but also the willingness to accept diversity and respect both other cultures and one's own culture need to be emphasized more strongly in ICCC teaching.

As regards the statement of Sercu (2006), ICCC should be emphasized in language classroom rather than communicative competence (Sercu, 2006). However, because of the broad definition of ICCC, the understanding of ICCC in the educational context seems to require careful interpretation.

The aim of this paper is to identify the importance of ICCC and examine how it is taught in a Japanese setting. To investigate these issues, first of all, the claims made in the paper of Sercu (2006) will be carefully analyzed. Secondly both some positive and negative opinions regarding ICCC will be introduced. Finally, since knowing what own students have learned before they enter Konan university seems to be very important, ICCC in a Japanese setting will be described, and an English textbook for a communication course used in Japanese high school will be analyzed from the viewpoint of the importance of ICCC.

1. Intercultural Communicative Competence according to Sercu (2006)

As mentioned before, ICCC should be emphasized in language classroom rather than communicative competence. However, Sercu's interpretation of, and belief in, teaching ICCC are in question.

First of all, Sercu points out the aims of teaching ICCC: knowledge, ability of interpretation, skill of interaction, critical cultural awareness, and curiosity and openness. To foster students' curiosity and openness toward other cultures seems to be significantly important because these two points would be the main starting points to learn ICCC, and also the principal goal. In contrast, knowledge and critical cultural awareness may need to be carefully considered. As Shibuya (2011) points out, cultural knowledge tends to include food, fashion, festivals and statistical data, and this may lead to stereotyping. Although, Holliday (2010) states that cultural stereotyping is natural and a good start to understand the differences, once students engage in finding cultural differences, they may also start trying to judge these differences. Distinguishing between stereotyping, being biased, judging, and criticizing may be difficult due to the overlapping features of these endeavors. Teachers should emphasize recognition and awareness rather than judging others' values (Thorp, 1991). The aims of teaching ICCC that Inoue (2007) suggests are to foster respect, empathy, flexibility, patience, interest, curiosity, willingness to refrain from judging, tolerance for ambiguity, and a sense of humor. On the basis of these aims, students may realize how cultures affect communication and acquire the ability to respond to the cultural barriers effectively.

Secondly, Sercu claims that teachers should be able to immerse themselves in the target culture and be apt to teach ICCC. In addition to this, teachers should know ICCC teaching methods and choose appropriate teaching material. However, these requirements are unrealistic especially for non-native teachers of EFL, because as she points out, ICCC is now based on each teacher's belief. Moreover, ICCC cannot be assessed because it does not belong to a clearly defined rubric. Therefore, teachers and researchers may still be in the process of developing effective ICCC pedagogy and materials.

Thirdly, in Sercu's research, the participants claimed that they were familiar with other cultures and knew how to teach ICCC. However, the most frequent teaching method they use is comparison of cultures and identification of differences and similarities. This may strengthen stereotyping and over-generalization toward other cultures. In addition, she claims that many language classes tend to have a teacher-centered structure, and teachers pay little attention to students' needs, interest and ability, which can be equated as an imposition of teachers' belief on students. Thus, ICCC class should not be teacher-centered.

Fourthly, the teachers claim that there is a conflict among ICCC teachers and between the teachers and their students. Misunderstanding of the concept of ICCC may be the cause of this conflict. Each situation depends on different factors. Therefore, it may be natural for people to have different opinions when judging cultural differences and attempting to find one common answer. Kramsch (1998) points out that when people judge other cultures, the process of judgment is influenced by their own cultural values. Thus, ICCC teaching should be open-ended and students need to develop flexibility and awareness of diversity toward intercultural communication rather than try to find one common answer. To succeed in this, tolerance toward ambiguity is also important.

Fifthly, Sercu emphasizes the importance of teacher training, teaching material and clear policy. In terms of textbooks, even though the textbooks are for language learning, they always include cultural aspects to some extent. However, some points that people have to consider is that both teachers and students tend to treat textbooks as authorities and believe their contents to be always correct. However, teachers and students need to look at the textbooks critically. For example, language textbooks often use a man as the main character (Gray, 2002). Appendix 1 shows the criteria for textbook evaluation (Huhn, 1978; Byram, 1993; mentioned by Cortazzi and Jin, 1999). Sercu (1998) also suggests some questions that can be used for the evaluation of textbooks. On the basis of that list, ICCC would encompass not only different nationalities but also include gender, ethnicity, religion, occupation, social class, interest, history, diversity, emotion, and so on. Therefore, teachers would be required to be able to match what cultural aspects textbooks contain with students' needs. In addition, some teachers and researchers suggest the use of the media, the Internet, movies and TV as authentic materials (Zhang, 2010). However, these materials require more careful attention, because they could contain a lot of biased information. Moreover, Kramsch (1998) claims that authenticity in one society

may not be authentic in another.

Sixthly, Sercu raises the question of whether the ICCC teaching approach is universal and can be used in different teaching contexts. Judd (1999) states that ESL and EFL are different, and teachers should consider who their students are and the students' current and future needs. In terms of teaching methodology, as already discussed, providing some questions that do not have one correct answer to students is one of the approaches. Antal and Friedman (2003) suggest role-playing such as problem solving activities. In this approach, teachers should emphasize not the solutions or results, but the process of thinking and negotiation in the intercultural context.

Finally, many teachers in Sercu's research claim that they know and are familiar with other cultures. However, this may be the most dangerous belief towards teaching ICCC. As Sercu mentioned, some teachers learn other cultures through the media or overseas trips, but this can be a very superficial knowledge of the concerned culture. In addition, culture is constantly evolving. If people think they know and are familiar with other cultures, and feel satisfied with that, they may stop learning. Therefore, both teachers and students should always view for further learning.

2. Positive and Negative Aspects of Intercultural Communicative Competence

There are some positive and negative aspects of teaching and learning ICCC. First of all, motivation seems to play a big role in ICCC. Walker (2005) claims that there is a correlation between ICCC, confidence in language skills and willingness to communicate. Gardner and Lambert (1972) found that students who possess integrative motivation are successful language learners, although Skehan (1989) states that both integrative and instrumental motivations are effective for language learning. Thus, ICCC seems to have some positive influence not only on learning ICCC but also on language learning.

Secondly, there are controversial issues involving students' identities and their own culture. It is often considered that learning other cultures before their own identity is established may be harmful (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999). On the other hand, Kramsch (1998) points out the coexistence of many multicultural people of different backgrounds to whom different situations may apply. In addition, Claudia and Finkbeiner (2008) also suggest the concept of hybrid culture and personality. The opinion of not teaching ICCC is often discussed in the Japanese context because of the belief in a single ethnic group (Iino, 2010). Although there are many other ethnic groups in Japan in these days, Iino (2010) and Shibuya (2011) point out, minorities in Japanese society should also be taught in ICCC classrooms. The idea of learning other cultures from an early age having a negative influence on students' identity would be very biased. Since learning other cultures is not harmful, believing that learning only one's own culture does not present any adverse effect on establishing one's identity is a narrow and inflexible way of thinking, because of the constant evolution of each culture and of the interaction between different cultures. Kramsch (1998) claims that people can learn their own culture by learning others.

King (2005), Antal and Friedman (2003) point out the danger of stereotyping and over generalization toward other cultures in teaching ICCC. As already discussed, teachers should always be aware of the danger of stereotyping, and should not emphasize the differences and similarities between cultures but diversities. Lantolf (1999) states that it is possible to develop a positive attitude toward other cultures by carefully avoiding cultural stereotypes in the classroom.

Lastly, regarding authenticity, non-native language teachers are often regarded as inappropriate models by their students, their parents and some non-native teachers (Kramsch, 1998). However, the concept of native speakers is uncertain nowadays because of globalization. If the aim of communication is to communicate only with English native speakers who were born and raised in the U.S, the U.K, and so one, it may be inappropriate to see non-native speakers as models. However, the aim of ICCC is to be intercultural speakers and in this case, we may be forgiven for not regarding some speakers as models of ICCC.

3. Intercultural Communicative Competence in the Japanese Context
3.1 Background of English Education in Japan
It seems to be very important to know own students' educational background and what the students have learned before they enter Konan university. In this section, ICCC in the Japanese context will be analyzed.

According to Byram and Fleming (1998), many countries have similar language education policies. In Japan, the Ministry of Education proposed a five-year Action Plan to cultivate Japanese with English abilities in 2003. The importance of communication and understanding globalization are increasingly emphasized (Gao, 2006). In elementary and junior high school, teaching intercultural understanding is recommended. However, many schools do not have sufficient resources to introduce students to some food, festivals and music of other countries (Shibuya, 2011). In high school, there is a huge gap between the official policy and the actual school environment. Although policy emphasizes ICCC, most of the students' immediate need is to pass the university entrance examination. The entrance examination does not measure the communicative competence, thus, teachers tend to use the traditional translation-oriented method to meet the students' need. This situation may lead to an adverse effect on students' language learning experience.

In the first year of high school, an oral communication class, which is one of the requirements, is taught once a week. Sato (2002) points out some reasons why many oral communication classes are ineffective such as poor instruction, low motivation of both students and teachers, less support and poor textbooks. This may be true to some extent. However, there seems to be other reasons as well. To begin with, the structure of the class may be inadequate. For instance, even though this falls within the EFL context, and students can acquire little explicit language and ICCC learning, the size of the classes tends to be large and students are allowed only a limited time for direct contact with their teachers.

Secondly, there seems to be some misinterpretation among native and non-native teachers and students because of their cultures and customs. One aspect, which is often noticed by English native speakers in Japanese language classrooms, is the silence. Periods of silence often occur in Japanese communication and tend to be of long duration. There are several reasons for this. Thorp (1991) points out that many Japanese children are taught not to interrupt others, especially if their interlocutors are older than they. At school, correctness is emphasized and students have little opportunity to speak. This silence appears to be misinterpreted as lack of intelligence, lack of personality, humor or immaturity (Moss, 2010). Yoshima (2002) suggests that Japanese students need to adjust and adopt a more direct form of communication. On the other hand, Van Dijk (2010) claims that mimicking another culture's communication style may not be effective and students would be frustrated. In addition, Japanese culture and Western culture are not diametrically opposed (King, 2005). Thorp (1991) suggests that teachers should act as a bridge between the students' own culture and the target culture. Teachers can also define explicitly the acceptance of silence in their class, and introduce paralinguistic devices such as 'well…, umm….', but should allow students time to think. On the other hand, native teachers should also familiarize themselves with their students' culture (Thorp, 1991; King, 2005).

3.2 Analysis of a High School English Textbook for Communication
The textbook selected for this analysis is the most frequently used among 20 textbooks (16 publishers) in Hyogo prefecture in Japan. To begin with, some key words, that are associated with culture and could be affected by culture and identity such as culture, international, communication, foreign, country, Japan, we, our, they, their, you and your, were examined and analyzed from the ICCC point of view with reference to the textbook criteria (Appendix1). From this textbook analysis, four ICCC aspects such as information about own culture, gender, geography and comparison between Japan and overseas, were established.

First of all, when culture is discussed in this textbook, the corresponding information is limited to superficial features. One dialog is about an international potluck party. The context is limited to

talking only about who brought what kind of food. One of the sections deals with famous Japanese food in the U.S as a cultural tip while another section is about international dessert fairs. Another dialog is about future jobs and Japanese culture. In the dialog, one student says that computer games and animation are the new faces of Japanese culture. As Shibuya (2011) points out, these topics call for criticisms since culture is often introduced with only limited and superficial information.

Secondly, three dialogs deal with gender. One is about occupations in which some neutral designations such as 'a police officer' instead of 'a policeman', 'a flight attendant' and 'a businessperson' are explicitly introduced. Another dialog discusses men's housework. The last lesson provides an example of discussion, and the topic is about school uniforms; whether female students should be allowed to choose between wearing skirts and wearing pants. In comparison with other topics such as nationality, ethnicity, and so on, people feel more comfortable talking about gender in Japanese society, and thus, we find in the occupational topic a political belief in gender. However, some topics tend to be limited to fashion while sensitive topics appear to be avoided.

Thirdly, in terms of geographical aspects, Japanese famous places are introduced in many dialogs, and little attention is paid to other countries. Gray (2002) mentions the importance of '*global textbooks*' that focus on both world and local aspects, the subject of which should relate closely to the students.

Finally, the last chapter teaches how to debate, and the topic is about whether students should visit foreign countries for their school trip. In this lesson, one example of debate is suggested. In this example, one group recommends that students should travel in Japan because they might incur accidents or be victims of crimes if they travel overseas. Moreover, they claim that learning one's own culture is more important than learning other cultures. This is only one example of opinion to show the extent of acceptance of the textbooks by teachers and students. In the ICCC context, teachers and students should not compare the values of their own culture with those of other cultures.

Discussion

From the analysis of an oral communication textbook, seven points that do not meet the ICCC criteria were found. Firstly, only superficial cultural information is introduced. As already discussed, this approach may lead students to think that learning ICCC is acquiring general information about other countries while the importance of the awareness of and understanding each other in the intercultural communicative context is disregarded. Secondly, most of the topics are about Japan and little attention is paid to other cultures. Even when attempts are made to introduce some other countries, the choices of countries are limited. One of the aims of ICCC is to communicate effectively in English, therefore, the choice should not focus on English-speaking countries and native English speaking people, but diversity needs to be emphasized. Thirdly, sensitive topics are mostly avoided. Limited non sensitive topics may lack authenticity and fail to raise students' motivation. Fourthly, some biased and inaccurate information are included. All information should be carefully selected, unless teachers and students are allowed to discuss the information critically. Fifthly, all photographs in this book are very old and not up to date. Not only information but also culture is in continuous evolution, thus, textbook creators should always check the authenticity, the accuracy and the validity of the information they intend to impart. Sixthly, inappropriate pragmatic discourse is used in both English and Japanese language. Even Japanese translation is not straightforward and this may have an adverse effect on the students' motivation. Lastly, the situations proposed in the dialogs lack variety. To teach diversity, a wider variety of situations would be required.

Conclusion

The importance of teaching ICCC in language classes seems to be closely related to globalization. However, there seems to be little specific pedagogy, and because of the broad definition of ICCC, language teachers rely on their own belief. As a result, information about foreign countries, and differences and similarities between foreign countries and one's own country tend to be the main focus in ICCC classrooms, which may lead to stereotyping. In the Japanese context, ICCC teaching seems to be conducted in an ineffective manner. The cause of this seems complicated due to several

factors, such as the mismatch of policy, teachers, entrance examination and students' needs. In addition, ICCC teaching tends to focus only on the majorities of one's own country and those of other countries. However, as Iino (2010) and Shibuya (2011) point out, minorities in Japanese society should also be taught in ICCC classrooms.

In conclusion, the understanding of ICCC in the educational context seems to require careful interpretation. Not only knowledge but also the willingness to accept diversity and respect both one's own culture and other cultures should be emphasized in ICCC teaching. To achieve this, the focus should be directed towards the process of problem solving and awareness of effective intercultural communication rather than on attempts to find one answer for understanding one's own culture and other cultures.

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Appendix 1

Criteria for Textbook Evaluation

- Social identity and social groups include social class, regional identity and ethnic minorities
- Social interaction includes different levels of formality; as outsider and insider
- Belief and behavior such as moral, religious beliefs; daily routines
- Social and political institutions include health care, law and order and social security
- Socialization and the life cycle include families, schools and employment
- Geographic factors seen as being significant by members
- Giving factually accurate and up-to-date information
- Avoiding stereotypes by raising awareness
- Presenting a realistic picture
- Being free from (or questioning) ideological tendencies
- Presenting contextual phenomena rather than isolated facts
- Explicitly relating historical material to contemporary society
- Making it clear how personalities are products of their age

(Huhn, 1978; Byram, 1993; cited in Cortazzi and Jin, 1999)