自文化中心主義と ESL の教育

Ethnocentric Learning and the ESL Classroom

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伝統的に、言語学習は常に本当のコミュニケーションが始まる前に、まずは文法を学ばなければならないという考えに根ざしてきました。この古い考え方は一般的には「コミュニケーション能力」という呼ばれ方にすり替えられ、言語習得への適切な手段として受け入れられてきましたが、それは曖昧で漠然とし誤解されています。

本論文は、学生がすでに知っている事柄でコミュニケーションすることが許さる学習過程を考察するための哲学基盤として、自文化中心主義な原理を使った学習過程に関する記録です。もし私たちが私たちにとって興味のあることや影響のあることだけを保持するということが正しければ、自文化中心主義の視点からコミュニケーションするということは、学生が目的言語を到達するための強力な基盤を与えることとして理にかなっていると言えます。

Traditionally, language learning has always been rooted in the idea that grammar must first be attained before true communication begins. This archaic idea has since been supplanted with what is popularly called, “communication skills.” While this has been accepted as the proper means to Language Acquisition, it is vague and misunderstood.

This paper is a record of a class that used ethnocentric principles as a philosophical base to devise a course which allowed students to communicate from what they already know. If it is true that we only retain what interests or affects us, then it stands to reason that communicating from an ethnocentric point of view gives students a strong base from which to attain target language.

Essayist and novelist, David Foster Wallace, addressed a college graduating class in 2005 by declaring that every one of us is essentially, “the center of the universe.” What he meant by this is more than the surface notion that we are inherently selfish beings, however true that may be; but that we are mirrors of the world. We hold up reflections of ourselves through those we meet as much as through ideas we encounter, the culmination of which is the heart of our education. To understand this concept through a pedagogical lens, we must embrace the idea that learning is a selfish endeavor. Moreover, it must be deeply personal in order to effectively resonate with the individual learner—individual being the optimal word.

When approached to teach a course on English language communication and world culture, it seemed a daunting task, considering the homogeneity of the learning group—a Japanese class of 25-30 students, most having never been abroad. The course was to entail fifteen weeks of study covering five vastly different countries and cultures: Spain, Canada, India, Australia, and Brazil. Students came into the course with little to no knowledge of the aforementioned cultures, armed with essentially limited English skills and a cartoonish, almost discriminatory perception of what foreign cultures represent. One need only refer to the buffoonery and antics of foreigners who appear all too regularly on Japanese television.

In an effort to authenticate the lessons, a brief, simplified overview of cultural facts, rituals, and customs were presented. These chiefly consisted of little-known oddities of said countries, the sensationalism of which would spark debate or interest, however superficial. Most of these elicited reactions of, “Hen da yo ne,” or “How strange that is!” This was expected. Therefore, after summarizing said cultural facts to review TL, students were encouraged to come up with a list of 3-5 authentic, yet odd facts about their native Japan. This immediately made students tilt their heads in bewilderment, having never thought about such things. There was even some offense taken as students were told that their culture may be strange, and thus a defensive posture was taken to protect their beloved lifestyle. Encouraging them with examples, they soon set to task and came up with a variety of appropriately henna responses. One such example was how Japanese students go to cram schools after school. Another was the abiding by the clock for almost every daily activity. Yet another was public bathing habits without shame or embarrassment.

The outcome of such a lesson was to reflect on one’s own identity as a culture before judging
another. With the inherent understanding that we are all individually and collectively strange in our daily lives and thought processes, we can better exercise patience and even affection towards other cultures that seem strange upon first glance. The self becomes a mirror, and understanding and prudent judgment become learning outcomes through an ESL communication exercise in cultural awareness.

In his treatise on education, *Emile*, French philosopher and poet, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, emphasizes the importance of sensory learning over reason, particularly with young people. He reflects David Foster Wallace’s aforementioned sentiments about youth being the “center of the universe,” but takes it to a much deeper level. According to Rousseau, “our first duties are to ourselves; our first feelings are centered on self; all our instincts are at first directed to our own preservation and our own welfare” (Rousseau 61). Therefore, it is fair to conclude that learning must stem from one’s own experiences, however limited they may be to a teenager in a homogeneous setting. But this must not be construed as limited in a traditional sense, for one’s senses cannot be limited other than through arbitrary means. In fact, many theorists of education would argue that senses are heightened in youth. Thus lessons must focus on deeds rather than words. And students should focus on experiential deeds that are familiar in order to better strengthen their senses and perceptions before reasoning and criticizing can be considered.

During an instructional unit on the Inuit People of Northern Canada, a brief presentation was made on their practices, family structure, and education. A comparison was made between their way of life and that of the Japanese way of life, including a theory that the Japanese language may have roots in some Native American and Polynesian/New Zealand aboriginal dialects, such as Maori. The lesson then turned to the practice of totem pole making as it pertains to names, family, influences, role models, accomplishments, and future goals. After students identified these six topics linguistically, they proceeded to artistically design a personal totem that told their life stories up to this point in their lives. The lesson proved most successful as students were engaged in the idea of creating a personal brand. It was a chance to share part of their life story and engage in a creative endeavor—something that has been lacking in most of their classrooms until this point.

A comparison was made with totem poles to tattoos as a modern form of the totem. Tattoos also reflect personal stories or belief systems. They tell children’s birthdays, lovers’ names, or personal adages that one chooses to live by. Students embraced this aspect of the activity as a real world concept; not merely a historical relic. Students are asked far too often to engage in speculative studies and deal in reason and abstract thought without first being asked to find his or her own proper place in the world. The above activity helps guide students toward finding said initial place with some self-examination combined with their sensory, aesthetic proclivities. Reflecting on personal achievements, inspirations, and future goals enabled students the opportunity to practice sensory memory as well as tell a personal story.

Taking this a step further, famed child psychologist, B.F. Skinner, often made reference to the importance of the moratorium in a young person’s life. The moratorium can be described as a place that a youth can go to reflect on a period of adjustment, a difficult problem, a trying incident, or a cause for celebration. As most students are far too preoccupied with full schedules and technology that never ceases to relinquish control of their free time, they are left lacking this all-important moratorium in which to take stock of themselves, and thus grow.

The course culminated with an ambitious project involving all three of these great thinkers’ philosophies of ethnocentric learning with the creation of a make believe school. This was broken into three parts: design of the facility, a daily schedule with classes and activities, and a curriculum or core educational philosophy. International culture students were given the responsibility of curriculum design and classes; Cultural Management students were put in charge of rules, discipline, class sizes, and other such logistics; and finally Design students were given the responsibility of facilities and structure. These groups and responsibilities were broken up over the course of three full weeks. At which time, the three departments were brought together and asked to cooperate by sharing their collective visions in hopes of creating a school that they perceive to be an ideal educational environment.

Working with students who have primarily grown up in a linear-minded school system, guidance was necessary to move this project forward. A series of questions were given according to the plan assigned to each group. At first, a presentation was made of a very progressive, somewhat radical school located in Manhattan called The Calhoun School. The daily life of said school was a genuine wakeup call as Japanese students have never perceived such
an environment. It included a rooftop vegetable garden where students take turns by grade to pick vegetables and cook student lunches in the kitchen as a course on agriculture and nutrition. There is also a nap time set aside during the school day. Cell phones are checked every morning. Classes are conducted outdoors whenever possible. And the classrooms have no walls, doors, or bells. The only assessments consist of what the students are capable of demonstrating to the teacher and their classmates what they have learned by cultivating the material into something creative or applicable. For example, Geometry students designed the structure, measurements, and costs for a swimming pool.

With this model in place, students were prepared to be as creative as they wished in regards to their given assignments. First they made compare and contrast sheets to note the differences between a school such as Calhoun and their own respective high schools. Students even enjoyed learning about their classmates’ respective high school experiences as they had never shared such stories prior to this lesson. Then, I broke down the areas of concentration for the individual classes as outlined above. Students were paired up with one other student in the class in order to create their vision relative to their task. They had two and half weeks of class time in which to work. This further allowed me the opportunity to consult individually with each group in small conference meetings to develop their ideas with questions and brainstorming tactics in a small group setting to nurture student confidence and creative thought.

The assignments were presented in a power point format of 10-15 slides combining text and visuals. I gave the students the paradigm that TEXT PLUS VISUAL=IDEA(S). Following this paradigm, they were able to construct coherent and detailed presentations based on their assigned tasks.

The aforementioned semester of study, which was initially intended as a cultural exploration of various countries through English Language Learning activities soon became molded into a personal examination of Identity which culminated in the students critically examining their own views on culture and learning about culture in the context of their very own educational model and environment.

Works Cited