

〔コミュニケーション情報学篇〕

【論文】

Cross-cultural Dialogs as Critical Incident Methodology : Distinguishing Materials from Approach

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要旨 (Abstract)

Many English language teachers at universities in Japan are required, either explicitly or implicitly, to address the issue of raising cross-cultural awareness among their students. While this is best achieved through contact in naturalistic settings which properly situate authentic interaction and authentic communicative agents, there remains a role for an instructed approach to fostering such awareness, and this role becomes amplified when students have little access to authentic cross-cultural communication settings. At some point instruction will involve generalization about different cultures, and for many teachers this represents perilous ground for want of not incurring the politically and morally charged criticism of essentializing cultures. Cross-cultural dialogs, as communicative versions of cross-cultural critical incidents, are particularly inviting of this form of criticism. It is illustrated in this paper, practically and through pedagogical sign-posting, how these materials can be used in a manner which actually does precisely the opposite. It is argued that a studious distinction should be maintained between the dialogs themselves and the pedagogical approach mounted upon them.

キーワード (Keywords) :

Cross-cultural dialogs, Critical incidents, Intercultural communication, Cross-cultural communication, Pedagogy, EFL, ESL

Introduction

The teaching of cross-cultural awareness and understanding in Japanese tertiary institutions is an agenda which is consistent with a sense of mission at the national level, often expressed via policy documents published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), to align Japan in such a way as to be effective in the international environment. This has been expressed in the wording of the Course of Study issued by MEXT (2008) for secondary schools, and in major new initiatives such as the Top Global University Project (MEXT, 2018a, 2018b). While this could be construed as rooted in purely economic and trade imperatives, this would probably also be a mistake, as an effective international posture has benefits with regard to many other issues as diverse as cultural and artistic exchange, and peace and security. But whatever the case may be, these policies have the effect of trickling down into subordinate institutions of education, and the teacher often finds him/herself at the point where all subordination really ends and where policies are given expression; that is, face to face with students in a classroom.

While this paper engages with the issue of teaching cultural awareness and understanding at the tertiary level of education, it is important to recognize that this is not the only level of education in which the issue is prescient. Junior and senior high schools in Japan, and now even elementary schools, increasingly see an

emphasis on English education, which obviously is not the same thing as cross-cultural understanding, but which nonetheless has become associated with the objective of cultural outreach in ways which are analytically interesting and important, but nonetheless beyond the scope of this paper. Certainly, the issue of ensuring that English teaching textbooks at schools are more culturally representative of the world is an example of trying to maintain a balance between promoting the use of English for outward cross-cultural engagement, and not having this promotion become construed as desire for alignment with the Anglophone world specifically, or worse, sycophancy to it. This issue has a long research pedigree and it would be fair to say that over the years there has been some improvement (see Kawano, 1987; Kitao, 1979; Ookawa, 2016; Yamanaka, 2006).

For college and university educators, however, engaging with cross-cultural awareness and understanding has typically proceeded beyond teaching through nationally recommended textbooks and curricula. The teacher is expected to take a more autonomous, and pedagogically innovative, approach to assisting students in this direction, though it would be relatively safe to argue that, as with schools, English classes are the most likely venue for students to receive instruction in this area. This is perhaps because English is viewed as a tool for outwardness and wider engagement with other cultures in the world more than anything else. Nonetheless, and in whatever context the instruction may occur, the distinctive problem faced by teachers working in this area is that while it would be wrong to say that contact with people from other cultures is impossible, it is nonetheless difficult. This would be compared to, for example, countries which have experienced recent immigration on a significant level.

Cross-Cultural Communication at College and University

In the context of this problem with respect to finding authentic contexts for cross-cultural interaction, teachers at colleges and universities might turn to alternatives. Novels, for example, whether fiction or nonfiction, may provide students with access to characters from other cultures by form of literary proxy, and this solution is perhaps underestimated, and especially so for its license to facilitate more empathetic access to these characters (Ostman, 2018). A little differently, video calls and video conferencing may also offer workarounds for the problem, even if the conversations are somewhat remote and not concretely situated. Another method which has gained some traction in teaching practice, but which has also come under criticism (e.g. Guest, 2002) for being associated with an apparently fallacious approach to culture (Guest, 2006), involves the use of critical incidents which typically come in the form of a personal account or short story of cross-cultural misunderstanding.

Less-typically used, however, is another type of critical incident which takes the form of a conversational dialog with some form of communicative breakdown occurring during the conversation. The breakdown, or communicative critical incident, is there, or is at least potentially so, not only to illustrate how misunderstandings can occur, but also to offer an empathetic window into the mind of the cultural other. Students typically engage with the conversation and come to an analytic understanding of where and how the breakdown occurs, and then are assisted by the teacher in explaining why it may be occurring. All of this, of course, involves a comprehension of what is going on in the mind of the communicative parties appearing in the dialog, or in the mind of the other, so to speak.

The rationale behind this sort of method or technique is actually quite common in major branches of knowledge including child development, first and second language acquisition, and classroom pedagogy. It is that errors or mistakes are not a mere annoyance, obstructing progress, and therefore something requiring correction and/or elimination; precisely the opposite, in fact. It is when things go wrong that we are offered opportunity for understanding, provided that appropriate critical reflection takes place, and that the intellectual bearing towards the problem is inquisitive and open rather than judgmental and closed. Children's mistakes, for example, were the primary resource for Piaget's breakthrough insights into the developing mind of the child (Piaget, 2001a, 2001b ; first published in 1923 and 1947, respectively). Similarly, mistakes in children's spoken language, produced by the over-generalization of acquired syntactic rules, were also among the evidence Chomsky needed to reject behaviorist accounts of language learning in favor of a rule-based, generative account. These last two examples are the more famous and public examples of what most good teachers already know; errors or mistakes, which are not the product of laziness, should present pedagogically as opportunities, and not as evidence of failure.

While the rationale for using mistakes in communication as the jump-off point for teaching should, therefore, be quite apparent, the approach as mentioned above, has nonetheless received criticism. The criticism is generally offered from two main positions, namely, the theoretical and the political. There is also an analytical order to these in that the political case presumes the theoretical case to be true.

With respect to the first criticism, the theoretical one, the approach is typically criticized for being associated with the contrastive analysis typifying early cultural anthropology (Guest, 2002), an approach which tends to look for dimensions of culture, and then to locate specific cultures vis-a-vis these dimensions. Under strong criticism (e.g. Guest, 2002, 2006), this underlying approach to culture is apparently predisposed to oversimplification of a complex reality via various forms of observational and analytical reductionisms. Under more restrained criticism (Jin & Cortazzi, 2017), the dimensions themselves are not so much criticized, as is the tendency for people to take them as dichotomous when they are not intended to be so. In other words, a continuum should not be treated as a dichotomy.

With respect to the second criticism, the political one, this is usually built upon the first, whereby the reductionisms are critiqued for being non-neutral; that is, for being put in service to some form of malign exercise of power by one cultural group over another, often expressed as "othering." Sometimes the criticisms are quite emphatic. For example, Guest (2002) puts it this way :

[I]n educational materials such as 'critical incidents,' foreign cultures are 'otherized' and 'essentialized'—reduced to static, monolithic, caricatures. They follow prescribed essentialist patterns. In the style of a wartime newsreel, they broadcast a signal to 'know your enemy.' (p. 159)

While we should perhaps take the overstatement with respect to the latter part in stride, we should also not be indifferent to the essential point being made in the quote which is that reductionism is problematic, and malign reductionism is morally objectionable. But here again is the conundrum, because when does the analytically

useful function of generalization become something harmful? Even with respect to the term “reductionism,” one should be careful with the deprecation, because when does an analytically useful reduction become an analytically unhelpful “reductionism,” or worse, a morally injurious act.

Putting aside the suffix “-ism” for a moment, there are entire branches of statistics in the social sciences dedicated to the reduction of complex sets of observations to more workable and abstract constructs which are cognitively manageable and theoretically useful. The point is that simplification or cutting through complexity is a distinguishing feature of human cognition and is not inherently harmful. If students seek assistance in this from teachers, i.e. rough-guide descriptions of cultural patterns to help make sense of a complex international and cultural milieu, are they doing something bad which should be quietly sanctioned or something which, quite simply, comes naturally to humans? The logical fallacy *reductio ad absurdum*, or reduction to the absurd, which appears almost inevitably in any introductory course to Western philosophy, clearly denotes a long intellectual tradition where reduction becomes a problem precisely when it becomes absurd, but before that point not necessarily so. It may just be the case that treating dimensions intended to be scales as absolute dichotomies is a case of the fallacy, rather than a critical basis for eschewing any kind of reduction at all. We could also argue that the wholesale writing-off of materials which attempt some kind of good-faith sketch of identifiable patterns of thought and behavior (distributed both within and across cultural boundaries) is overreaction rather than critical caution; undertreating a problem which is complex, and which teachers cannot, and should not, duck. It is up to the teacher to model for students how passage through the necessary activity of generalization can be negotiated with humanistic temperance and without intellectual timidity.

The issues outlined above are quite difficult to handle from a critical perspective, and will not submit to the conceptual grapple of a brief paper such as this. Suffice to state that we should be cautious anytime we are advised to take sweeping positions with respect to any of the issues. However, and whatever the conceptual issues exceeding the scope of this paper, a clear distinction should always be maintained between teaching materials and the pedagogical approach mounted upon the materials, and this rather simple and commonsense distinction seems to have been hiding somewhat in plain site with respect to the debate thus far. The distinction lends teachers the professional space to feel comfortable about rescuing the positive learning opportunities of critical incidents, as expressed through cross-cultural dialogs, and without feeling they are automatically exposed to charges of over-simplification and cultural caricature. Furthermore, the simplicity of the distinction helps to bring everything down to earth. In this spirit of keeping things grounded, it is worth elaborating, by concrete example, how a potential cross-cultural dialog may be handled by the teacher, as a matter of approach, in such a way as to precisely avoid the failure of reductionism.

Sketching a Non-reductionist Approach

A single dialog is selected from Storti’s (1994) long-running and commercially successful book which has found continuing publication in a new edition (Storti, 2017). I emphasize commercially successful, because I make no claims to critical success, or lack of it, in this paper. The dialogs are authored by Storti for purpose; rather than recorded in the field as an exercise in sociolinguistic data collection, and as such, they lack the kind

of strong authority and authenticity which real recordings would have. For those not disposed to these kinds of made-for-purpose dialogs, this lack of brute ecological validity would obviously be the start point for criticism. My purpose is not to engage with these issues here, or conduct something like a book review, rather it is simply to use one of the dialogs in illustrating how materials do not embody, or put more strongly, even determine, the direction of instruction delivered upon them; it is teachers who do this. Cross-cultural teaching materials such as the dialogs in this book, and other books, are the jump-off point for education rather than its exhibition, and if teachers feel comfortable about this, they can begin to express themselves with autonomy and critical confidence as they use them.

Analyzing the kind of cross-cultural dialogs, which are exemplified in Storti's (1994, 2017) book, involves exposing students to a metalanguage, to one degree or another, which facilitates talking about and describing the moves being made in the conversation. The metalanguage and its level of sophistication can be decided by the teacher depending on the level of the students and the degree of analysis required for each dialog. However, it would be safe to say that the metalanguage does not need to achieve the level of sophistication seen in conversation analysis (also referred to as CA) which, having been pioneered by Harvey Sacks during the 1960s and 1970s (see Sacks [1992] for an edited volume of lectures delivered in the 1960s), has more recently emerged as a recognized method. For example, it may be sufficient to explain to students the notion of "turns" in a conversation (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974) without having to explain the notion of "adjacency pairs." One could talk about one speaker repeating what another speaker has just said with some ulterior communicative purpose, but without having to teach the technical term "echo utterance." While the technical metalanguage in CA is designed for high-resolution description of spoken discourse, theory generation and so forth, what the teacher requires in the classroom is not the full glossary, but the "lite" version, so to speak.

It is helpful for the students to engage with the dialog in terms of two fundamental tasks. The first task is essentially descriptive, and students should describe the moves and plausible intentions represented in the utterances, identify the turn at which the breakdown in communication begins to occur, and how the breakdown unfolds in subsequent turns. It is a notable feature of the dialogs in this book by Storti (1994, 2017) that very little repair is attempted, and if it is attempted it usually seems to compound or intensify the problem. Students can engage with these tasks individually or as groups, with the group option having the lateral but valuable advantage of generating opportunities for authentic task-based interaction under a communicative language teaching rationale.

The dialog selected here, and presented immediately below, is notable for its brevity, and involves an American (Ms. Smith) and a Greek (Mrs. Kallas) discussing a third person (absent in the conversation), Dr. Spetsos.

Extract 1.

Ms. Smith : Do you know Dr. Spetsos?

Mrs. Kalas : Yes, we know him very well.

Ms. Smith : I've heard he's an excellent surgeon.

Mrs. Kalas: He's a very kind man. (Storti, 1994, p. 14)

It would be important to assist students with understanding, in particular, the third turn in this conversation. This assistance could be given in advance of the students analyzing the dialog (i.e. as a form of scaffolding), or after they have attempted an analysis, and as part of the teacher's explanation of what is occurring in the dialog. Grammatically, the turn presents as a simple declarative sentence about what Ms. Smith has heard, and there is no question mark. However, in order to understand the conversation, this sentence has to be understood as Ms. Smith seeking confirmation from Mrs. Kallas about something she has heard, and something she presumes Mrs. Kallas may know more about. For teaching purposes, one could explain to students that the statement is a yes/no question in disguise, because Ms. Smith is expecting an answer along the lines of "Yes, he's a good surgeon" or "No, he's not a good surgeon." Foreign language learners will tend to parse this sentence with a more grammatical focus and, therefore, miss the real conversational function it performs which is of a request for confirmation.

In asking students to engage with these types of dialogs there is an important issue of format for the teacher to consider, which is whether to ask students to arrive at an analysis of the dialog without the assistance of the companion explanation (also provided in the text for each conversation), or whether to allow them to actually look at this explanation in advance of their own thoughts and analysis. Allowing students to look at the explanation in advance has the negative impact of implicitly signaling to them that there is a "correct" explanation which is not a good signal to send; rather students should be coached into a mindset where they understand that there is always a level of indeterminacy in explaining what is happening in dialogs like these. If students read the explanation provided by the text after they have analyzed it for themselves there are two advantages. Firstly, it encourages students to activate their own critical faculties in completing a task which has a problem-solving rationale (i.e. describing the moves in the conversation, identifying the place of breakdown, and then explaining it); and the tangential benefits here to a task-based and communicative classroom are, I am sure, quite plain to see for teachers familiar with such approaches. Secondly, if students have come up with their own explanations which are plausible, and therefore have been endorsed by the teacher, but which are different from the text's explanation, then this is all for the pedagogical good, and helps to amplify the indeterminacy of explanation.

The explanation provided by the text for this dialog (Storti, 1994, p. 23), which, given its length, is abridged here rather than quoted, highlights the difference between Americans and Greeks with respect to how they distinguish individuals; with Americans emphasizing what individuals do (i.e. their occupation) and Greeks who they are (i.e. their personal qualities). The explanation carefully points out these differences as distributional rather than emphatic (i.e. as a matter of degree on a continuum rather than as dichotomous), and implicitly signals their particular relevance when relationships are first struck-up and when knowledge about the interlocutor is in its infancy. Comments are also offered on how the American disposition makes being unemployed even more psychologically problematic, because in the American case one's employment is frequently the first place a new acquaintance goes to in getting an early fix on who you are. Notably, description of the discursive moves taking place in the dialog is not provided by the text. Therefore, the students, or failing

this the teacher, should point out that Ms. Smith's request for confirmation concerning Dr. Spetsos' abilities as a surgeon is not satisfied by Mrs. Kalas response, which effectively serves only to duck the issue by changing the topic to one of Dr. Spetsos' personal quality of being kind.

So far so good, and were the teacher to stop at this point, we could presume some interesting reflection has occurred, and if students have taken to heart the author's warning that these differences are distributional, and therefore tendencies rather than blanket statements about individuals comprising the respective cultures, then not too much damage has been done. However, there are other explanations not presented in the text which is where the work of the teacher really begins, and where the space opens up for the teacher to give expression to the material, rather than allow the material to give expression to him/her. For one thing, it is plausible that Dr. Spetsos is, in fact, not such a good surgeon. Under this assumption, Mrs. Kalas' avoidance of the question is quite simply the only way out of a catch-22 situation. If she disconfirms what Ms. Smith says she has heard, she is in danger of entering into a gossipy conversation with someone she hardly knows, and conversely, if she confirms the statement she is effectively lying. So what does she do? She does what the average person in almost all cultures would do, and changes the topic. Under this analysis, it is important that not only is her reaction one which would be relatively invariant across cultures, but the uncomfortable conversational circumstance could arise just as easily in any culture as well. There is also the additional possibility that Mrs. Kalas does not know Dr. Spetsos in his professional capacity and has never consulted him as a practicing medical doctor. She may therefore feel simply unqualified to answer the question, and rather than directly saying so and potentially elevating the issue a little beyond its importance, she chooses to shift the topic to what she does feel qualified to talk about. This is also a fairly innocuous conversational circumstance which has no particular cross-cultural import to it.

Both of these alternative accounts of what is happening in the conversation serve quite conveniently to illustrate to students how not every breakdown in conversation between people of two different cultures is cross-culturally caused. In fact, it is probably the fact that cross-cultural issues are among the less frequent of causes, and for students to be aware of this is very worthwhile, and will perhaps mitigate the human tendency to jump to group explanations of individual behaviors in the early stages of encounters across cultures. Teachers can reinforce this mitigation by simply pointing out that aside from all of the plausible explanations mentioned above, it may be that these two people differ purely as a matter of individual personality. In other words, the personality of the American person is more disposed to focusing on what a person does and achieves, and that of the Greek person on what personal qualities and character a person has as a human being. These alternative analyses of the conversation, which are not offered by the text itself, signal caution with respect to how the cultural explanation should be treated, and indeed how quickly one should jump to a cultural explanation. This sort of careful qualification, in the context of an open-minded analytical approach, illustrates how much of the class, even the majority of it, can focus on raising students' inferential radar to the dangers of drawing conclusions about individuals and their communicative behavior on the sole basis of their group or cultural affiliation. Supportive of this would be further discussion of communicative breakdown and repair being actually very common in intracultural conversations as well; something which students tend not to be explicitly aware of, but which tends to resonate strongly once it is pointed out and illustrated to them. In this way, the

generalization about cultural posture intended in the construction of the dialog by its author (in this case by Storti [1994, 2017]), and evidenced in the explanation of the dialog in the text, does not have to represent a lurch to essentialization of the cultural other. On the contrary, if handled in the context of alternative explanations, and if critically situated within what happens in intracultural communication anyway, it represents the careful circumscription of group-based explanations for communicative behavior as possible, but as only that, and because only that, as necessitating careful exercise.

Having covered what possibly, rather than certainly, is separating the Greek and American interlocutors in the dialog, the teacher could then proceed on an additional track of self-reflection for students about which of the two cultural positions comports more closely with the distributional tendencies of their own culture; presumably Japanese culture, but possibly not if exchange students are present in the class. In the case of Japanese students, it is relatively predictable that they will identify more with the American tendency, because what you do in Japan is arguably a central part of your identity, and early introductions, whether self-introductions or third-party introductions, typically move quite quickly to the issue of occupation much like they would in American culture. This will be experienced as somewhat arresting to many students, because quite often their experience of considering other cultures has centered around what makes them different rather than what makes them the same; and quite often these issues of difference are quite explicitly known with respect to America which, having a high global profile, functions as a point of cultural reference for many. Here, however, students would potentially discover something in common with a culture which they had previously been disposed to consider in terms of how it is different. This confounding of the tendency to think of cross-cultural study as only about difference is salutary, and helps reset students' expectations about such analysis to something more balanced and productive.

With respect to any dialog, and to the extent that the particularly cultural account of the breakdown is plausible, such account will always invite the further, and more difficult, question of why the culture does in fact exhibit the tendencies one is invoking for the explanation. In the above case, one would have to ask, if we presume the tendencies to be true to one degree or another, why do Americans tend to distinguish people by leaning on what they do, and why do Greeks tend to distinguish people by leaning on who they are? These are the hardest of questions, and yet the most unifying, because the further one delves into them, the more culture becomes understandable as being built on contingencies which are not pre-ordained but which are historically, and very often economically, situated. The more students engage with this, the more they begin to understand culture, including their own, as a moving target. This undermines the essentialization of culture rather than reinforcing it. However, for this to happen you have to allow generalization, because explanations are mounted upon generalizations.

Conclusion

Like any source which the teacher might consult for this kind of material, Storti's (1994, 2017) book has its limitations, with some of these limitations being understandable within the remit set for the book. My use of a dialog from this particular book was somewhat incidental to the larger objective of offering a defense for this

kind of material in general, against the charge that it is a class of material which promotes some sort of malign caricature of cultures. I have tried to illustrate, by sign-posting an approach to one particular dialog (with the approach not resorting to sweeping generalization based on group identity), that the objection to this kind of material amounts to a form of category error. This category error rests on confusion between the material itself and the method or approach mounted on the material. The selection of the briefest of the dialogs for the purposes of this paper was intentional, because the brevity of the dialog helps to amplify how the material itself is embryonic of the class it serves, and the discursive and critical direction taken by the teacher, rather than definitive of it. The teacher, and not the material, develops the educational experience of the student. Materials have no agency and are mere tools, and like so many other tools they can be put to good or bad use. In an environment at universities in Japan where an instructional approach to cross-cultural understanding remains an essential part of the curriculum, these kinds of communicative dialogs should not be dismissed, and more importantly teachers should not shy away from them for fear of morally charged criticism. The students' experience of the materials is mediated by the teacher, and this is the value which the teacher brings to the classroom.

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