GLOBAL ISSUES AND CRITICAL THINKING IN EFL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of a two-month project on teaching culture that integrated the essential skills of critical thinking in a Japanese university. Particularly, this overview tries to advance an approach of raising learner awareness of the cultural issues in three countries that Japan regularly engages with. A variety of teaching tools, such as pictures, presentations, small group discussions and performances, were employed for learners to build their understanding.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is often shaped by historical events and shared beliefs. In this world of globalization, developing intercultural competence is of paramount importance. According to Scriven and Paul (1987), critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. Furthermore, Cunningham (2016) states that cultural competence or awareness refers to the foundation of communication that involves the skill of observing our cultural values, beliefs, and perceptions. Therefore, the significance of incorporating critical thinking skills into a language and culture curriculum cannot be understated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As language educators, if we wish to raise successors who will be able to shoulder the responsibility of the world, we should first raise their awareness of the nature of existing crises across the world (Cates, 1990). Furthermore, Cates asserts that critical and creative thinking skills are necessary to understand and solve global issues. According to Long (2013), the academic reforms at the elementary school level by the Japanese Ministry of Education, the addition of a *sougoutekina gakusyu no jikan* (period for integrated study), was done to foster independent thinkers who could learn, think and act for themselves, and develop problem-solving skills. These are some of the basic skills of critical thinking. Critical thinking involves asking appropriate questions, gathering and creatively sorting through relevant information, relating new information to existing knowledge, re-examining beliefs, reasoning logically, and drawing reliable and trustworthy conclusions (Jacob, 2012). There are differences between the definitions; however, most of them point out that critical thinking is a means to think creatively.

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

This two-month project was implemented at a Japanese academy to raise future coast guards' awareness of some of the 'hot button issues' in three countries—India, Sri Lanka and the Philippines—that Japan regularly conducts joint defence exercises with. Besides triggering interest in the issues, another purpose was for learners to learn necessary vocabulary required to understand these issues. The final purpose of the project was for learners to demonstrate critical thinking abilities through a variety of ways (Atkinson, 1997; Durkin, 2008).

METHODOLOGY

Overview
The participants involved in the project were 26 Japanese students (low to intermediate English level) in their senior year of the academy. The project did not involve participants' identities and was a part of their English curriculum, therefore, verbal consent was secured. Weekly English lessons are a required course, and the teacher can autonomously design and execute the course curriculum. Three countries, India, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, were chosen by the teacher considering the Japanese coast guard's high engagement with these countries. The project also involved researcher's interviews and discussions with two native EFL teachers from Sri Lanka and the Philippines respectively. The interaction with the two teachers allowed the researcher to gain an extensive and thorough understanding of the hot button issues in their respective countries. In addition, the teachers attested to the authenticity, reliability, and credibility of the online resources that the researcher studied to acquire knowledge on the respective issues. The entire methodology was divided into three crucial steps spread across 2-3 weeks for each country: comment on pictures using an online medium, analyze pictures in the class followed by group discussions, and demonstrate understanding. At the end of the three steps, learners also wrote reflective journals to share their understanding. As part of the course, learners had to fill an evaluation form; however, the researcher modified the regular evaluation form into a Likert scale (see Appendix A) for learners' ease. The Likert scale identified key areas, purposes and goals that the researcher wanted to achieve through this project. In order to analyze results, learner responses on the Likert scale were converted to percentages. Since the total number of participants was only 26, the responses on 'general feedback' were not coded; however, they were used as an explanation to justify the scores on the 10 statements (see Appendix A). The 10 statements on the evaluation form were coded as 'constructive' if the score was either 1 or 2; 'neutral' for 3 and 'unconstructive' if the score exceeded 3. The data from the responses on the 10 statements of the Likert scale were converted into percentages. The percentages have been rounded up/down to avoid ambiguity.

Process and Project Tools
In order to prepare for the project, the researcher conducted semi structured interviews with the native EFL teachers of the respective countries. The first week of the project kicked off with clear instructions on how to create a free account on livejournal.com. The researcher uploaded 1-2 thought-provoking pictures and the learners were allowed to write or change their comments

within 1 week. Their responses included the whereabouts of the images, the issue pertaining to the image, and their personal feelings about the issue.

The second week of the project began with the researcher handing out the essential vocabulary required to explain and understand the issue (see Appendix B). The class was split into 4-5 groups and the learners were allowed to study the vocabulary for about 5-10 minutes. The researcher then showed a series of 4-5 pictures that focused on an issue in a specific progression with no written information on it. The pictures highlighted the issue, their correlation to each other, and the impact on society. Learners spent about 3 minutes analyzing each picture. Their analysis of pictures was supported by the vocabulary provided by the teacher. The researcher then introduced Hall's Cultural Iceberg Model (Hall, 1976). According to Hall (1976), "When one enters a new culture, only the most overt behaviors are apparent. As one spends more time in that new culture, the underlying beliefs, values, and thought patterns that dictate that behavior will be uncovered" (Hall, 1976, p.222). The researcher explained how some of the visible aspects in any culture stem from invisible aspects. These invisible aspects often are shrouded in history and tradition. For instance, Indian society suffers from great economic disparity which is a result of unequal distribution of resources owing to its deep colonial history. Learners were encouraged to ask questions to develop knowledge and comprehension. This classroom activity followed the final stage of demonstrating understanding. Learners were given a week to research historical and cultural beliefs that may have led to the specific issues in the country. In addition, they needed to prepare a performance that could display their understanding of the issue.

The third week's lesson began with the performances. Long (2013) argues that critical thinking is a process that consists of a set of skills rather than a single skill. Moreover, the tendency of educators to assess Asian students using a single skill (i.e. voicing opinions) as the primary evaluative measure has been criticized by Long. Learners chose from a variety of performances. Poster presentations, PowerPoint presentations, role-play discussions, debates, and rap were some of their preferred ways. The performances followed a general classroom discussion where learners could ask questions freely to each other.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

At the end of nine weeks, learners were given a week to turn in their evaluation forms (see Appendix A). Appendix C contains an accurate breakdown of the figures. The majority of learners chose either 1 or 2 for statements 1, 2, 3, and 5. For statement 4, a mixed response was received. 40% of the class expressed dissatisfaction with the online journal approach. In their comments, they mentioned that they preferred seeing pictures on a more convenient platform, for instance, a LINE group or a Facebook group, etc. 80% chose 2 for statement 7. 30% chose 1, 50% chose 2 and 20% chose 3 or 4 for statement 6. Learners mentioned in their comments that they wanted extended interaction and regular discussion practice to gain improved levels of confidence. 70% of learners chose 2 for statement 8. Almost 80% chose 2 for statement 9 and expressed a desire to learn more about the countries. For statement 10, 60% of the class chose

option 3 and some of them mentioned in the comments that they were aware of these issues, but the class helped them to investigate the reasons and their causes more deeply.

From the researchers' point of view, increased enthusiasm in the class was observed. In addition, a surge in the number of voluntary participants in leading discussions was observed. Learners found the pictures engaging and discussions helpful. Some of the learners mentioned in their comments that the vocabulary scaffolding played a key role in triggering their interest. Critical thinking is an indispensable part of university education and should be supported by providing effective cognitive strategies to learners that enable them to process information (Jacob, 2012). Language scaffolding, thus, contributed to the overall learning experience.

CONCLUSION

The project was implemented in a Japanese academy with the aim and purpose to trigger interest in issues related to three countries. Cates (1990) asserts that a need to foster aware learners who can function in future societies is indispensable. The role of critical thinking is primary in raising cultural competence. As part of the 3-week long project, learners were shown pictures on a current issue from a specific country, in a certain progression that indicated their interrelatedness, cause, and effects, etc. Learners were asked to research the theoretical underpinnings that resulted in the issue. This was achieved by introducing the learners to Hall's Cultural Iceberg Model.

The results from the evaluation form confirmed a high level of learner engagement and an improved understanding of the social issues. The majority of learners identified language scaffolding (see Appendix B) as the key to demonstrating and developing their understanding. However, learners mentioned that they needed more time for discussion in the second week and a better online platform for the first-week picture guessing activity. The critical thinking approach triggers learners' interest and can become the prerequisite to investigating social and global issues.

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APPENDIX A Evaluation Form

Date: _____

		Strongly Agree				Strongly Disagree
1.	I could learn about the issues in the 3 countries	1	2	3	4	5
2.	The method of watching pictures on the PowerPoint helped understand the issue clearly	1	2	3	4	5
3.	I could learn new words that are used to describe problems in these countries	1	2	3	4	5
4.	I enjoyed writing my views on the pictures posted on livejournal.com	1	2	3	4	5
5.	I enjoyed the classroom discussions on the issues	1	2	3	4	5
6.	I feel more confident about explaining at least 1 issue in all countries that I learned about	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I enjoyed presenting on these issues in the classroom	1	2	3	4	5
8.	I would like to learn about more global problems with the same method	1	2	3	4	5
9.	I am more interested in learning about world problems than before	1	2	3	4	5
10.	I was not aware about these issues before I studied them in class	1	2	3	4	5

11. General feedback. You can use Japanese.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

APPENDIX B Useful Language

Important vocabulary to describe issues in India
1. Economy- 経済
2. Disparity- 格差
3. Economic disparity- 経済格差
4. Diversity- 多様性
5. Developed city- 先進都市
6. Slums- スラム街
7. Reservations/ Quota based on caste- カーストに基づくクォータ
8. Equality- 平等
9. Inequality- 不平等
10. Secularism- 世俗主義

Language for discussion-
1. I think the issue that this picture communicates is that of …….
2. I see how ………. and …….. are interconnected.
3. I agree with you because………………
4. I'm afraid I disagree because……..
5. My guess is that……….
6. I see how picture 1 impacts ………..

APPENDIX C Responses on the evaluation form

Statement No.	Statement	Below 3 (Constructive)	3 (Neutral)	Above 3 (unconstructive)
1	I could learn about the issues in the 3 countries	1	1	24
2	The method of watching pictures on the PowerPoint helped to understand the issue clearly	0	3	23
3	I could learn new words that are used to describe problems in these countries	0	1	25
4	I enjoyed writing my views on the pictures posted on livejournal.com	10	9	7
5	I enjoyed the classroom discussions on the issues	2	1	23
6	I feel more confident about explaining at least 1 issue in all countries that I learned about	2	3	21
7	I enjoyed presenting on these issues in the classroom	1	4	21
8	I would like to learn about more global problems with the same method	0	8	18
9	I am more interested in learning about world problems than before	0	5	21
10	I was not aware about these issues before I studied them in the class	0	16	10