Iconesoft Edizioni
Terni – Italy

Cultus

THE JOURNAL OF INTERCULTURAL
MEDIATION AND COMMUNICATION

2009, 2

Iconesoft Edizioni
Terni - Italy

Registrazione al Tribunale di Terni
n. 11 del 24.09.2007

Direttore Responsabile Elisa Paradisi
Editore Iconesoft Edizioni
Finito di stampare da Tipografia Vighi & Rizzoli - Bologna
nel mese di novembre 2009
ISSN 2035-3111

via Garibaldi 89 – 05100 Terni
www.iconesoft.com

CULTUS

the Journal of Intercultural Mediation and Communication

2009, Volume 2

TRAINING AND COMPETENCE

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Intercultural Mediation in the Mono-lingual, Mono-cultural Foreign Language Classroom: A Case Study in Japan

Stephanie Houghton

Abstract

Mediating between conflicting interpretations of phenomena is a goal of the intercultural speaker (Byram 1997). But can intercultural mediation skills be developed through foreign language education when the only foreigner in the class is the teacher, and the students all share the same native-language and cultural background? One possible teaching approach involves teachers encouraging learners to analyse and evaluate cultural difference, but also attempting to align their values with specific universal values to develop a democratic society supportive of human rights (Guilherme 2002). In this study, qualitative data were gathered over a twelve-week period from twelve Japanese student participants and me as a British teacher-researcher. Value differences between students were systematically uncovered, and mediation generated change. Critical evaluation was found to support the mediation process but although the teacher transmitted specific target values, the impact of the values and viewpoints of other students seemed to be just as, if not more, important.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will start by presenting the theoretical background to a teaching approach within which teachers not only encourage learners to analyse and evaluate cultural difference, but also attempt to align their own and learner values with specific universal values to develop a democratic society supportive of human rights. I will then provide an

overview of a syllabus designed to present university students of English in a mono-lingual, mono-cultural Japanese class with opportunities to experience cultural difference. The study took the form of an action research case study. Qualitative data were gathered over a twelve week period from twelve Japanese student participants and me as a British teacher-researcher.

Data collection techniques included the audio recording of lessons, the gathering of student work as a form of documentary data and post-class student and teacher diaries. Data collection techniques were combined in this way to gather different perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation from different people. Ethical issues related to research site access, selection of participants, informed consent, confidentiality, data ownership and disclosure were duly considered (Cohen *et al* 2000: 50-64).

In this paper, I will provide an overview of syllabus design before tracking the progress of three students through a series of tasks. Selected pieces of data will be presented to illustrate the extent to which this teaching approach appeared to have succeeded, which sheds light on the nature of the process itself. I will conclude by considering some of the pedagogical implications. This particular teaching approach is one of three that were explored in depth in the author's doctoral thesis (Houghton 2009), which addressed the question of how foreign language educators should manage the evaluation of difference in foreign language education. Three possible teaching approaches were identified and it can be seen below that the particular teaching approach presented and discussed in this paper falls under the third category:

1. The adoption of a non-judgmental stance with a view to empathising with others intellectually
2. The adoption of a judgmental stance with a view to raising unconscious values to the conscious level to control them, developing critical cultural awareness in the process
3. In addition to the second teaching approach, teachers can also attempt to change learner values in support of human rights and democracy

Before proceeding, let me note that an underlying bone of contention in the relevant academic literature is whether or not it is possible for mediators to remain neutral, and considerable disagreement can be found. This very issue was addressed in the first issue of Cultus when

Mona Baker argued against the possibility of neutral mediation (Baker and Chesterman, 2008), and will be revisited below.

2. Theoretical Background

First, let us explore the theoretical roots of the teaching approach described in this paper. The view of identity underpinning the teaching approach is that socialisation leads to the development of the self, the cognitive component of which is known as self-concept, which refers to the information a person stores in schemata in memory about their own attributes which form the knowledge-base for social interaction (Nishida 1999). Lantolf (1999: 31) highlights the role of unique personal experience in thought, endorsing Shore's point that linguistically structured conceptual frameworks contain both cultural and personal models. The former are sets of conventionally constructed concepts constituting the shared cognitive resources of a community, constraining what people attend to and perceive as salient in the world while the latter are unique sets of concepts, based on life experience, that are heavily influenced by, but not totally determined by, cultural models.

Such difference gives rise for the need for intercultural mediation, a concept elaborated in Byram's (1997: 31-38) Model for Intercultural Communicative Competence in which 'the intercultural speaker' is conceived of being able to interact across cultural frontiers deploying knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, and skills of discovery and interaction to exchange information effectively and to establish and maintain relationships. Further, Byram (1997: 35) claims this involves the development of critical cultural awareness as learner socialisation is challenged and brought into question through intercultural education.

Byram (1997: 38) notes that intercultural speakers may be called upon to mediate between people of different origins and identities, and this is the point at which this study is located. For example, it may involve developing the ability to work with conceptual difference between languages that can cause misunderstanding, considering (a) words or concepts that exist in one but not both languages in use, and (b) words that exist in each language but have different meanings (Byram 1997: 37-38; de Bono 1991: 81-92; Barna 1982). The question then arising, from a

pedagogical standpoint, is how teachers should nurture intercultural speakers capable of the kind of intercultural mediation described above.

Guilherme (2002: 141-144) endorsed Byram's analytical evaluative approach towards other cultures to allow the conscious control of biased interpretation in recognition of the fact that value-free interpretation is unlikely to happen. Guilherme (2002: 166) also seeks to combine foreign language education, human rights education and democratic citizenship education taking a multi-disciplinary approach, endorsing Osler and Starkey's (1996) position that all teachers should deliberately set out to bring student values into line with 'universal' values such as human rights (Guilherme 2002: 207). In Byram and Guilherme (2000: 76), Byram recognised that "the interaction between human rights education and foreign language education can be enriching for both". Drawing upon this theoretical background, a teaching approach was devised within which the teacher not only encouraged learners to critically evaluate cultural difference, but also attempted to align their values with specific universal values to develop a democratic society supportive of human rights.

Before moving on to course design, let us take a step back to reflect momentarily upon the definition of mediation and consider the issue of neutrality because it may be argued that rather than taking sides, mediation should entail a genuine attempt to convey each partner's perspective to the other. Such a view would be in keeping with the first teaching approach explored in the author's doctoral thesis (Houghton: 2009) mentioned earlier, which involves the adoption of a non-judgmental stance with a view to empathising with others intellectually.

Whilst it is recognised that some readers may intuitively favour such a teaching approach in the name of neutrality, one purpose of this paper is to highlight competing views of mediation bringing neutrality itself into question. Indeed, in neither of the definitions of mediation given by the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary or the Compact Oxford Dictionary is mention made either of bias or neutrality, which suggests that neither can automatically be taken as the default setting in mediation, intercultural or otherwise.

Uncertainty may yet remain in the mind of the reader and indeed, Byram's position on the issue of evaluation changed significantly between 1994 and 2002. In Byram *et al* (1994: 29), Byram recognised that the "neutral empathetic construction of cultural norms is necessary to appreciate the relevant cultural construct" but he also noted an uneasy

uncertainty in the literature as to the nature of the cognitive dimension of empathy, and a general tendency for it to be explained in terms of feelings and sympathy, which was also recognised by Gudykunst (1998: 232-233).

By 1997, Byram was rejecting the notion of empathy for being "uncritical and normative", claiming that accepting and understanding the viewpoints of others is insufficient and went on to absolutely reject neutrality (Byram *et al* 2002: 36), recommending teachers to reflect instead on how their own stereotypes and prejudice affect teaching and learning. Regarding the role of the teacher, Byram (1997: 44) suggested that teachers should encourage students to judge by making the basis for their evaluation explicit before justifying it, but should not try to change student values, supporting complete freedom of choice as part of democracy. This view, which shaped the second teaching approach mentioned above that was also explored in Houghton (2009), is a slightly softer approach to democratic citizenship than that favoured by Guilherme (2002: 207) who endorses Osler and Starkey's (1996) position that all teachers should deliberately set out to bring student values into line with 'universal' values such as human rights.

But the line I have drawn between these authors is fine indeed and Byram has started to cross it more recently, which is why the third teaching approach was selected for presentation and discussion in this paper. In Byram and Guilherme (2000: 76), Byram did recognise "the interaction between human rights education and foreign language education can be enriching for both". Indeed, despite his 1997 claim that teachers should not deliberately try to change student values, he went on to recognise and possibly endorse the positions of Guilherme, Osler and Starkey in 2000 when he claimed that "human rights may provide foreign-language and culture education with culture-universals, basic principles, and values that traverse cultures" suggesting teachers might refer to documents produced by international organisations (Byram and Guilherme 2000: 70), precisely as advocated by Osler and Starkey (1996).

3. Syllabus Design

Bearing in mind Lantolf's argument that people tend to be unaware of how far their personal models are influenced by cultural models and cannot make them explicit, I provided a conceptual framework in weeks

1-8 to raise student cultural presuppositions (see Lantolf 1999: 31-32; Byram 1989: 107-108, 112-119; de Bono 1991: 77-144) to the surface in working configurations to reveal inter-student value differences. Developing student ability to accept both value and language difference was a main aim of this course. Having distinguished values from beliefs and norms (Lustig and Koester 1999: 30), the concept of values was further broken down using Schwartz *et al*'s (1995, 1997) taxonomy of ten universal value types which provided the overarching conceptual framework for weeks 2-5:

Week 2: Power and Achievement
Week 3: Benevolence and Universalism
Week 4: Tradition, Security and Conformity
Week 5: Hedonism, Stimulation and Self -Direction

To illustrate how values can underpin conversation, I drew upon my own personal identity to construct dialogues within which I stacked and layered hidden values for students to discover. Firstly, students had to read a dialogue (see task 4.1 below for an example) and answer some questions. Next, students had to read definitions of the values (see task 4.2 below for an example) before rereading the dialogue to identify the hidden values. Then, students had to complete six sentences about their own values before discussing their answers with others.

Task 4.1
(Sample conversation)

Alison: Hi, Stephen. How are things? Do you have any plans for the summer?

Stephen: No, not really. I think I'll just relax and take it easy. Jane and I really should start saving up to get married. We'll probably just go down to the pub as usual and spend time with friends. We see the same people there every week, which is nice. And we'll probably have a few day trips in the countryside…visit a few country pubs!

Alison: Well, we'll probably go to Scotland to see some friends. We want to go to the Edinburgh festival in August and see some traditional Scottish dancing. I love all those kinds of traditions. I really want to see the Military tattoo.

Task 4.2

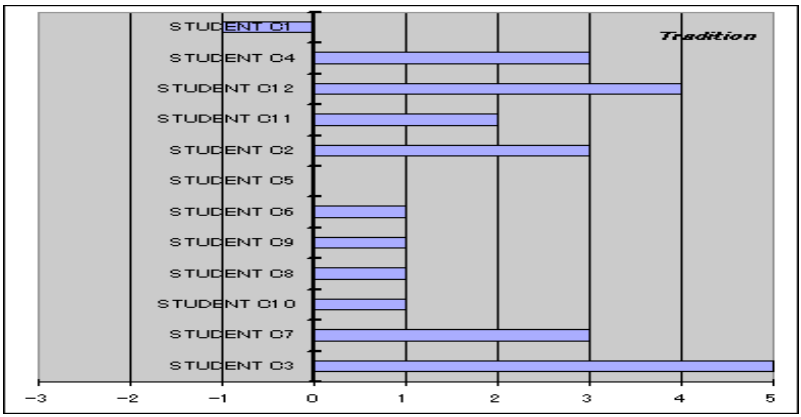
Reading: Tradition, Conformity and Security

People who value tradition accept, respect and are committed to their culture, its religion, customs and ideas. They accept their role in life and are humble. People who value conformity care about respecting social expectations and norms. They do not wish to upset or harm others and value restraint. They are obedient, value self-discipline, politeness and honour their parents and elders.

Adapted from Schwartz *et al* (1995, 1997).

Student reflexivity was further encouraged in homework activities for weeks 2-5 by asking students to write one paragraph about their values after each class. Students then had to develop their paragraphs on their ten values into an essay that they would present to the class in a speech in weeks 6-8, and make a value chart ranking the relative strength of each of their ten values numerically from -5 to +5.

Chart 1: Value Profile of the Class: Tradition



To develop critical cultural awareness, I also taught students how to perform critical evaluation in weeks 2-5 before the speeches on values in weeks 6-8. Here I would ask listeners to critically evaluate the speaker values in the following three stages: (1) compare (2) contrast, and (3) judge/justify. In weeks 8-12, I exposed students to value difference providing opportunities for experiential learning by juxtaposing their individual value charts to make a value profile for the class for each of the ten values, so that students could compare and contrast their values

with those of other students at a glance. See chart 1 above for an example.

I then paired students up by value difference to give them a chance to explore it in more depth. For example, students C5 and C12 were paired up because they valued tradition at zero and +4 respectively (see chart 1 above) but they could have been paired up by any of the ten values depending on where the value differences happened to lie. Student pairs then had to meet outside class for homework, discuss the apparent value difference, imagine a problem that might arise as a result of it and write a dialogue to illustrate it before presenting them to the class in week 9. Then other students had to critically evaluate them on paper. The same procedure was repeated in week 9 with different pairs. A further development took place in the week 10 homework when students were asked to critically evaluate their own values with reference to the target values recommended by the teacher.

The ultimate aim of this course was to bring student values in line with the target values set for intercultural communication in general support of the development of democratic society respectful of human rights, which was in keeping with the third teaching approach explored in Houghton (2009). This was not easy to implement in practice, however, partly because Schwartz' theory suggests that all ten values are universal and the issue of human rights was not addressed directly.

Thus, I took the position, partly based upon my own intercultural experience, that some values from Schwartz' theory support intercultural communication more than others with regard to the development of democratic society respectful of human rights. For example, since intercultural communication often involves getting to know too many places, novelty and new challenge were prioritised as target values, as were the promotion of equality and the welfare of all people since, in my view, such concepts underpin the notion of human rights.

By contrast, neither tradition nor conformity were set as target values since they involve commitment to one's own culture and following social norms. None of the values were, however, explicitly discouraged at this stage. Following this kind of reasoning, I gave students a list of target values in week 8 and asked them to decide whether or not they agreed that the values selected by the teacher would support intercultural communication. See table 1 below.

Benevolence	Stimulation	Universalism	Self-Direction
• help people close to you • honesty	• novelty • challenge	• social justice • world peace • equality	• independence • creativity • curiousness

Table 1: Target Values for Intercultural Communication (sample)

In week 11, students then had to critically evaluate their week 9 homework partners more deeply before presenting them to the class, whilst listeners considered what they thought each pair should do and why. Students were then split into groups of three for the homework activity. Each group of 3 consisted of a pair in a state of difference and a third student assigned to mediate the conflict with reference to the target values.

For example, student C7 was assigned to mediate the culture conflict between students C5 and C12 who valued tradition at zero and +4 respectively (see chart 1 above) with reference to the target values. In week 12, students had to present and discuss the mediation dialogue with other students. For week 12 homework, students had to reflect on their experience of mediation and write a report.

4. Data Analysis

To start, let us briefly consider extracts (which remain in the original, uncorrected English of the students) from the week 4 paragraphs on tradition from students C5, C7 and C12. It can be seen below that student C12 claimed she valued tradition at +4 and students C7 and C5 each claimed they valued tradition at +3 and 0 respectively. Thus, students C12 and C7 appeared to be closer in their values (ranking tradition at +4 and +3 respectively), whilst students C12 and C5 appeared to be more distant (ranking tradition at +4 and zero respectively).

Student C12: Week 4 Homework
Tradition (+4)
I feel the traditional event on anniversary should keep be following. Actually, my family always follow these customs, for example, the winter solstice, the Star Festival, and the Doll's festival. These customs

are the characteristic as Japanese. So I think we have to protest these customs.

Student C7: Week 4 Homework

Tradition (+3)

I respect Japanese picture or object of Buddha. Also, I think it is connect with recent Japanese culture so deeply in heart. I like folding paper, and toss beanbags, this is good example Japanese culture.

Student C5: Week 4 Homework

Tradition (0)

I'll work at office after graduation if I'm employed. My parents wish that, too. Then there is conformity (I conform to the company), security (I can get salary) and tradition (the company has history). However I must restrain my idea, be obedient.

Because of this apparent difference, student C12 and C5 were paired up and asked not only to explore the value difference but also to imagine a conflict that might arise as a result of it. They also wrote a discussion dialogue exploring why they valued tradition differently before going on to write a conflict dialogue.

(Discussion: Students C5 and C12: Tradition)

C12: Why didn't you value the tradition?

C5: I like novelty, so I don't want to be prepossessed by old custom.

C12: But, didn't you think the old custom is also lovely? Because each tradition is the own unique custom in each country. Please imagine the Star festival. We string the Japanese paper that we write our wishes on the bamboo leaf. I don't want these customs that only Japanese follow to die out. What do you think about that?

C5: I agree with lovely tradition, but there are unlovely that, for example, religions treble doesn't cease. There isn't big difference of religion in Japan, but sometimes, religious trouble develop the war in all over the world.

C12: I never have thought such thinking because I live in Japan. But even if these problems happened, we could learn many things or different views through the experience of tradition. So tradition is important for our life.

(Conflict dialogue: Students C5 and C12: Tradition)

C12: Let's go to the museum to experience the papermaking on this Sunday?
C5: Why will we bother to make paper by ourselves? We can get paper everywhere!
C12: But do you want to make and use paper which old people also used?
C5: I'm not interesting in old customs, and normal paper is easy for us to write.
C12: That's not problem!! I just want to know old customs, and we must convey it to the young generation.
C5: There is no time for saying "papermaking" Now we must be able to use computer. I actually a plan to join the internet class on this weekend.

In essence, student C5's reservation about tradition lay in her associating it with religion and world war, which implied in turn that she valued world peace. This was a key aspect of universalism, and indeed a target value for intercultural communication that had been set by the teacher in week 8. In her week 10 homework, student C12 did recognise a possible link between tradition and war implying in turn that she also valued world peace and by extension, universalism (even though she had only valued it at -1 on her value chart in previous weeks). Indeed, she also recognised that her values were changing as a result of the interaction.

Student C12: Week 10 Homework
When I talked with student C5 about tradition, I very valued tradition, but she didn't much. And she explained to me that some traditional things, for example, religion, have possibility to occur serious problem like world war. After listening her thinking, I noticed I only consider about the beautiful point of tradition. As one conclusion, because my values have been changing little by little, these values affected my interaction.

When student C7 was assigned to mediate between students C5 and C12, she was asked to mediate with reference to the target values and identified common ground between students C5 and C12. Firstly, they both rejected war and secondly, they both liked what they considered to be positive Japanese traditions such as the Star festival. Student C12

claimed that she had not noticed the similarity because she had been focusing on the conflict with C5 attempting to affirm her commitment to world peace, whilst recognising the place of many traditions (i.e. not just Japanese traditions) within it.

(Mediation of C5 and C12 conflict by C7: Tradition)

C7: Student C5 thinks that sometimes traditions cause a war, and student C12 thinks that tradition tell us solutions of war. It looks in conflict between them at first, but I think they are both thinking that the war shouldn't happen. They don't hope someone is harmed or to be unpeaceful. Also, they both think Japanese lovely tradition (for example Star Festival) is good. Therefore, they are similar with that point. So they both are saying honestly. I think they should more listen each other's opinion, and they should do lovely tradition together.

C12: I concentrated to conflict with student C5, so I couldn't notice our similar point.

In her week 12 student diary, student C12 seemed to have started to value universalism more than before, recognising how it helped her to 'judge equally'. Notably, equality was also listed as a target value under universalism and in addition, she recognised the role of tolerance as a way of respecting traditions within the general value of universalism, which indicated she was developing her ideas.

Finally, remembering that the mediator has been expected to mediate with reference not to her own but to the target values, student C7 made it clear as she reflected upon the mediation process itself not only that she had identified world peace as a similarity between students 5 and C12 but that a similarity also existed between her own values and those of student C12. This had not, however, resulted in any apparent bias in favour of C12 during the mediation and she was pleased in the end to know that both students C5 and C12 were satisfied with the way she had mediated between them.

5. Conclusions

Mediating between conflicting interpretations of phenomena is a goal of the intercultural speaker (Byram 1997). In this paper, a teaching

approach was described and illustrated within which the teacher not only encouraged Japanese learners of English to critically evaluate cultural difference, but also attempted to align their values with specific values. Despite the fact that the only foreigner in the mono-lingual, mono-cultural class was the teacher, intercultural mediation skills were developed firstly, by uncovering value differences between students with the help of Schwartz *et al*'s (1995, 1997) taxonomy of values and secondly, by grouping students by value difference allowing them to explore and mediate it through discussion and critical evaluation.

In this study, the teacher prioritised some values to support intercultural communication; but was this necessary? In fact, the causal connections between developments in the data cannot be ascertained with any certainty. As student C7 compared and contrasted the values of students C5 and C12 during critical evaluation as part of the mediation process, she may still have identified the valuing of world peace and positive traditions as similarities between them. Indeed, tradition had not been transmitted as a target value but was still referred to in the mediation process. Critical evaluation, rather than teacher transmission of values, seems to have supported the mediation process. Indeed, the target value of universalism appeared to be in play even before the mediator was assigned to the pair, as student C5 introduced it to challenge student C12's valuing of tradition. Pre-existing learner values and viewpoints may impact upon each other through the kind of tasks described above, regardless of teacher value transmission.

Indeed, Crain (2000: 155-156) notes that being presented with alternative viewpoints may generate perspective shifts as new ways of thinking are considered. Similarly, Crain (2000: 166) notes that the cognitive conflict at work in Piaget's concept of equilibration (through which the child takes one view, becomes confused by discrepant information and then resolves the confusion by forming a more advanced and comprehensive position), is thought to be at play in the dialectic process of Socratic teaching, through which students express a point of view only to be challenged by teachers to formulate more comprehensive positions (Crain 2000: 135). Student C12 in particular did indeed seem to expand her way of thinking as she considered alternative points of view, integrating some points with her own in new ways. Thus, the impact of other values and viewpoints needs to be considered by teachers, regardless of the effect they intend to have.

Further, even if teachers consciously intend to transmit certain target values, engaging learners in self-analysis with reference to an overarching conceptual framework may itself may be considered the transmission of target values if learners come to see themselves in new ways as a result of the process. And grappling with abstract conceptual frameworks may be considered a legitimate goal of higher education according to Barnett (1997: 21-22), who suggests that it supports the development of understanding, autonomy and contemplation. He argues that working with multiple intellectual frames develops understanding of any one frame, increasing the possibility for autonomous thought as critical space opens up between student and the world. He also suggests that the frameworks themselves can be criticised in relation to competing frameworks not favoured, or selected, by teachers. Thus, the engagement of learners in the critical evaluation of the conceptual framework itself could supplement the teaching approach described in this paper, perhaps replacing the transmission of target values.

A more bottom-up approach may also be possible. Freire (1970: 77-105) takes as his point of departure the fact that language cannot exist without thought, and neither language nor thought can exist without a structure to which they refer implying that there is no need to provide a conceptual structure for self-reference, since the structure already exists and simply needs unveiling. Thus, he claims that teachers should strive to understand the structural conditions to which student thought and language refer before helping learners to deconstruct whole swathes of their own reality, analysing and decoding situations in their lives to discover interactions between the parts to shed new light back on the whole and generate new perceptions, understandings and behaviours. This may provide another alternative teaching approach to the one described in this paper.

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