

Enhancing English Teachers' Intercultural Communication Skills through Professional Development

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English language teachers are increasingly required to serve as facilitators who are proficient in managing a wide range of roles in the communicative language classroom. This new role of facilitator has been promoted by the availability of professional development for in-service teachers, which provides thought-provoking insights into the issues for communicative language teaching. In the author's case, involvement in an online learning course and participation in a teacher seminar course have emphasized how important it is for Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) to empower their students to raise their intercultural awareness which allows for more effective intercultural communication through the medium of English as a lingua franca (ELF) in a multilingual and multicultural community. To this end, most importantly, JTEs continuously need to develop their own intercultural communication skills and incorporate their experiences or beliefs about the relevance of intercultural understanding into their teaching practices. To conclude, implications for teacher professional development are presented: these implications involve the importance of pedagogical approaches that integrate intercultural awareness with English language teaching and cultivate critical perspectives of ELF in a global context.

Introduction

Language teachers benefit from being language learners themselves and their students learn much by seeing their teachers as language learning role models (Casanave, 2012). It is vital that teachers keep learning an additional language and using it for practical purposes in a real setting, resulting in a great sensitivity to recognizing their students' problems or developing a better instructional approach. Such authentic language use can include taking part in in-service learning programs such as online learning courses or face-to-face learning opportunities, which are critical for professional growth and English improvement. Language teachers have been shifting from simply teaching linguistic knowledge to playing a wide range of roles to prepare students to participate in a multilingual and multicultural society (Crowther & De Costa, 2017; Hedge, 2000). These roles involve transmitting teachers' own experiences such as successes or failures as language learners into their day-to-day teaching practices (Crowther & De Costa, 2017). Given this shift, it is essential for them to become life-long learners with a joy of learning and have as many opportunities to use English for practical purposes as possible.

In actuality, my learning journey through professional development has broadened my horizons regarding pedagogical philosophy and instructional approaches. One of my findings is how significant it is for Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) to foster their own intercultural communication skills, taking into consideration the current landscape of the global spread of English as a lingua franca (ELF) used by both native

speakers of English and non-native speakers. Promoting intercultural communicative competence under ELF conditions requires demonstrating the ability to deal with a huge variety of communications in multilingual or multicultural settings. However, JTEs are faced with a limitation with regard to offering rich opportunities for intercultural communication for practical purposes in the classroom. Japanese students tend to lack a sense of urgency or necessity in articulating their ideas effectively to make themselves understood, or persuading others because they are considered to be from high-context culture and thus, not required to make detailed accounts in language. That may be greatly determined by particular cultural characteristics where Japanese students are more likely to "share a high quality of commonality of knowledge and viewpoints" (Frank, 2013, p. 5). There may be few demands for spelling out their intentions in an explicit manner to get meaning across in such a context.

With that in mind, Japanese students should engage in communicative tasks focused on fostering intercultural communication skills in English by practicing making appropriate language choices according to different situations and articulating their ideas for smooth spoken communication. In addition, they need to practice writing their ideas clearly and coherently enough to convey meaning by producing written texts in a contextualized manner in a range of genres. (Hedge, 2000). These basic skills for more effective communication can be promoted even in an EFL learning environment with little exposure to ELF or diverse cultures. I will discuss some pedagogical implications as to how these skills can be cultivated in the classroom with reference to my professional development.

Intercultural Communication in ELF

As the OECD PISA Global Competence Framework (2018) puts it, "learning to participate in interconnected, complex and diverse societies is no longer a luxury but a pressing necessity." On the other hand, a 2016 report on JTEs' preferences for professional development shows them preferring to focus on developing English speaking proficiency and other pedagogical skills over developing their own intercultural awareness (Tokyo Gakugei University, 2016). Yet, in line with ongoing increases in being interconnected globally, in-service JTEs should be more concerned about the current situation where we are in linguistically and culturally diverse societies and the issue of fostering intercultural communication skills by the medium of ELF.

Additionally, it is important for JTEs to become more aware that English is characterized by its plural nature. In this case, "plural" refers to the global usage of multiple forms of English, which stands in contrast to "a monolithic ontology of English: a belief in the existence of

a single definitive inventory of correct forms” (Hall, 2014, pp. 3-4). At the present, English is still somewhat affected by native English-speaking norms (Holliday, 2018; Jenkins, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2005), whereas English is no longer a communication tool used only by native English speakers as a first language. However, a large number of non-native speakers are eager to learn, what is called, “standard English” or “the best English” constructed by American or British native speakers or follow native-speaker norms (Hall, 2014). The same partly applies for Japanese learners.

Reflecting on the recent discussions on the nature of ELF, I recognize the importance of looking beyond English education affected by a monolingual perspective. It involves considering how JTEs can hold a more holistic view of English learning within the Global Englishes paradigm (Ushioda, 2017); or what Japanese students should do to develop their linguistic and cultural competencies as global citizens with a broader perspective. While I am exploring some feasible and constructive solutions, my potential avenues may include fostering students’ intercultural communication and critical thinking skills in order to prepare them to effectively use English in a wide range of sociocultural contexts with cultural awareness. The reality is, however, there seem to be many Japanese students who have never been abroad or have no chances to interact with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds, languages, social conventions. They often have questions about why they should study English or culture associated with it because they are in the social context where the recognition of the world being interconnected is not so much required. I find it challenging to make a convincing and reasonable account of the issue to my students.

To design a more effective learning environment for those who have few chances to interact with people from different cultural, social, or linguistic backgrounds, it is essential for JTEs to prompt students to bring up their own issues regarding cultural topics and construct their own perspectives of culture. In addition to mastering linguistic skills, it is also necessary to offer students rich opportunities to encounter a wide variety of views about culture, compare them with students’ own ideas, and develop their own critical thinking skills.

However, teachers with minimal intercultural experiences are more likely to be confronted with a couple of challenges. They may lack knowledge or skills that empower them to prepare their students to effectively use English in a wide range of sociocultural contexts with cultural awareness. In addition, such pedagogical proposals as stated above sound idealistic to them and it can be demanding for them to take concrete action on this matter. The biggest problem that teachers seem to identify is what approach to take in order to raise their students’ cultural awareness in class. Menard-Warwick (2008) argues for the necessity of teacher education which focuses on developing teachers’ interculturality, presenting some practical approaches or resources which help teachers to bring interculturality to their teaching.

However, there is still a paucity of practical proposals to address these problems, as research suggests a lack of

interculturally-oriented teaching materials or pedagogical approaches which incorporate culture into the English language classroom (Galloway & Rose, 2017). A growing number of proposals for improving current ELT approaches have been made, whereas there remains a lack of studies on concrete suggestions for creating tasks to raise students’ intercultural awareness of how to communicate in English effectively in lingua franca settings. The challenges or confusions of JTEs could be solved if professional development is properly given to them.

Developing Intercultural Awareness through Professional Development Opportunities

In an effort to facilitate students’ intercultural communication, one key component is that JTEs can provide their students with a variety of their own experiences, knowledge, or skills that represent cultural contents in their language classroom. That can be successfully accomplished by participating in learning programs for in-service teachers such as online or face-to-face learning opportunities for professional development. While teacher development opportunities may take different forms, this article includes three case studies reflecting my learning experiences. These examples might help teachers know about how professional development activities can be put into practice.

As one instance in my actual experience of intercultural communication dysfunction, I experienced a failure while engaging in a professional development program for in-service English teachers with diverse backgrounds. A peer review process with an English teacher from a different cultural background did not work properly when I was doing a task for an online learning course on TESOL delivered by a university in the U.S. My peer-review partner gave no concrete nor immediate feedback on my written products. I told my peer that I wanted to get feedback from him, but he simply emailed me sometimes to show his apology of his inactive engagement with the peer review. My instructor provided continuous support in addressing this problem by prompting my peer review partner to communicate with me in a timely manner. In spite of the instructor’s encouragement, the collaborative task ended up failing. That made me become fully aware that cross-cultural communication could be challenging on a number of levels.

I wondered whether or not my peer review partner fully understood the peer review system, which required reciprocal help of learning; he simply may have not been responsive. Sticking to the assumption that language should transmit a clear meaning from one to another, I saw his behaviors as inappropriate and disappointing for my expectations of participating in the online course as a mature learner. My belief was that the course participants were responsible for creating meaning in the online learning community through mutual assistance as Vlachopoulos and Makri (2019) mention. In the same vein, the culturally mixed groups of the participants were supposed to work collaboratively, showing respect or empathy of each other’s teaching situation in pursuit of making effective interaction or facilitating some cognitive

outcome. I am seeking out more feasible solutions to this cross-cultural-related challenge still now by connecting my personal experience mentioned above to relevant research.

In order to deal with this kind of communication breakdown, it may be of some help to refer to literature focusing on incorporating theoretical perspectives about ELF into teachers' knowledge or beliefs. For example, applying the conceptual framework of intercultural competence proposed by Byram (1997), there is some relevance for some skills necessary to prompt interactive communication in an online learning platform: to employ different modes of communicative practices or to use various questioning strategies in order to elicit connotations or assumptions from interlocutors from diverse cultural backgrounds (Belz, 2007). Intercultural communicative competence may serve a crucial role in addressing a communication deficit by adjusting expectations to an interlocutor's norms or taking another form of action or adopting an appropriate one out of a range of alternative options.

Another instance for facilitating my intercultural awareness through professional development is that I gained a valuable experience of face-to-face intercultural communication by winning a scholarship for in-service JTEs. Attending a two-week teacher training course in the summer of 2018 in Cambridge, UK helped me to realize that my communications through ELF in the program apparently lacked the ability to utilize communicative resources or strategies effectively. Most importantly, I should prompt myself to develop my intercultural competency for successful communication in ELF. Such a skill will result in encouraging my students to gain intercultural competence with critical thinking skills.

Contrary to my expectation, I was often faced with some challenges in intercultural communication while engaging in discussions or tasks with English teachers from different backgrounds. I became fully aware that intercultural communication on a variety of occasions during my stay were characterized by different variations of English or communication styles. I have found it necessary to find more effective ways of getting meaning across through English that could make language more understandable to audiences with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. One way to promote successful intercultural communication is to improve one's own intelligibility in terms of pronunciation when conveying meaning in English.

While participating in the course, I often wondered why I sometimes had trouble in catching what is being said in English. Basic vocabulary used for everyday communication was also challenging for me to pick up immediately because it has multiple meanings, which may vary depending on the context. English phrasal verbs comprised of simpler words can be semantically confusing. For non-native speakers who struggle to identify semantic distinctiveness in English, phrasal verbs can have various meanings or semantic ambiguity (Strong & Boers, 2019). To be more specific, it is daunting for non-native speakers to associate the combination of a verb and a particle with the meanings (e.g. find out is

equivalent to discover, while carry on corresponds to continue). My incorrect inferences or slow grasp of phrasal verbs may have stemmed from this linguistic divide or L1 interferences, which non-native speakers may face in acquiring or using them during instantaneous communication. Conversely, there were several times when infrequent academic words or vocabulary derived from Latin could make me more comprehensible.

There was another intercultural-related opportunity of deepening my realization around how local cultural dimensions to language are shaped in the local communities. As Baker (2012) presents as a pedagogical implication, exploring the traditional arts through English can be applied to analytically evaluate how English is learned in local communities. For example, I went to see the Cambridge Shakespeare Festival as an extra-curricular activity while participating in the teacher training course in the U.K. It was a unique experience in that sense. Performances take place in the summer in the university's garden in Cambridge. I heard that so many tourists from across the world as well as local people were attracted by the performances. It was impressive that many families with small children enjoyed watching the play. I realized that the famous performances of one of the national art cultures are offered for those of all ages partly for educational purposes. This cultural encounter provided me with a chance to reflect on the relevance of language to culture and made me realize further that it would be conducive to developing an understanding of sociocultural contexts associated with language, English in this case. That may include an understanding of culture for intercultural awareness by making comparison to one's own culture.

Learnings from Professional Development

As already pointed out, it is important for JTEs to go beyond English education affected by monolingualism or native-English speaker norms. However, JTEs may wonder what approach to take in order to raise students' critical perspectives of culture and language associated with ELF. As regards to their challenges in how to promote students' intercultural communicative competence in ELF communication, JTEs should be aware of how ELF can be used in a global context. Specifically, there is a possibility of meanings not having been taken appropriately under ELF conditions (Baird, 2018). It is significant for ELF users with different cultural backgrounds to understand how their values or beliefs are shaped and both are reflected in their behaviors. Promoting intercultural awareness also involves pragmatic competence; successful intercultural communication concerns appropriate language choices and awareness of oneself as a cultural being.

Some learnings obtained through several professional development opportunities have led me to think about how JTEs can foster their students' intercultural awareness or how important it is for their students to construct their own critical view of how they use English in the multilingual and multicultural society. Inspired by those learnings, I have been able to see my teaching practice from totally different perspectives and have

started to seek more effective ways to help develop my students' positive attitude towards flexible and negotiated communication.

Porto's (2019) suggestion is to design a learning environment which encourages students from diverse language backgrounds to work on a transnational project collaboratively. Likewise, as Baker (2012) points out, such a communicative practice may relate to an increased understanding of differing cultural contexts and interactional styles through discussions or reflections on the collaborative project. One of the possibly feasible steps is that we can move forward by building a network with teachers from diverse backgrounds through creating or sharing new ideas of our instructional approaches with them. That may include asking for a partnership with various schools on a global scale to promote students' intercultural interactions or designing a learning platform which allows them to do interactive tasks with partner students collaboratively. Having seen a similar practice planned and implemented by the US Embassy into secondary schools in Japan, a telecollaborative project may be a potentially achievable and noticeable approach.

Considering the orientation of ELF, interactions through ELF may cause misunderstanding or confusion. Interlocutors are required to make a considerable effort to establish successful communication or reach mutual agreement, as Margić (2017) has summarized. In this regard, there are a couple of pedagogical suggestions for successful implementation of instructional approaches to develop students' intercultural communication skills along with intercultural awareness. To be precise, Baker (2012) gives the key three skills that are required for ELF speakers to be involved in intercultural communication in an effective manner. These include *accommodation*, which encourages them to accept language or culture that is not familiar to them. *Negotiation* and *mediation* aim to cultivate abilities to deal with the situation properly where some communication breakdown or misunderstanding may occur by improving respect and empathy for people from different cultural values, practices, or expectations. According to the nature of ELF, for non-native speakers, communicative efficiency should be taken priority over appropriate English use prescribed by native-speaker norms.

Noting that both native and non-native speakers have an equal responsibility for communicating effectively and preventing misunderstanding (Margić, 2017), "adjust[ing] their habitual modes of reception and production" (Jenkins, 2012, p. 487) is essentially inevitable for native English speakers who use ELF. According to the findings of Margić's study (2017), "enunciating clearly, using fewer idioms and colloquial words, speaking more slowly and simplifying sentence construction" are the strategies most frequently adopted by native speakers in order to avoid misunderstanding or communication breakdown or build solidarity among interlocutors (Margić, 2017, p. 44). Native speakers' positive or generous attitudes towards such accommodation strategies can be of great help to achieve more effective communication in ELF.

Another important point is to provide students with tasks which encourage them to critically evaluate

information, texts, or documents relevant to culture study or intercultural communication in order to foster the skills for successful intercultural communication. Furthermore, another avenue is to get students writing papers coherently based on the understanding and interpretation of the sources, or giving an oral presentation of their ideas. To this end, materials or resources, including textbooks or media, should be designed in such a way as to help students from different cultural backgrounds recognize how culture can be perceived within a contextualized learning setting (Crowther & De Costa, 2017). Likewise, JTEs also need to aim to promote students' pragmatic and strategic competences, which require their cultural awareness and critical thinking skills for authentic intercultural interaction. A further approach is to present students with some potential challenges closely related to intercultural communication issues as case studies and offer them an opportunity to explore some solutions. An important achievement of this approach focuses on how students would manage different types of potential problems in a specific situation through engaging in a case study or role-playing task. This approach can be incorporated into both speaking or writing tasks in a regular classroom.

Conclusion

The above discussions indicate that JTEs should transform from mainly transmitting linguistic knowledge to demonstrating multiple roles in a communicative language classroom. In an attempt to bring about a transformative effect on the current traditional teaching practices, JTEs are continuously required to apply their language learning or intercultural communication experiences into their teaching practices through the use of expertise, knowledge or skills gained during their professional development opportunities. I would recommend that JTEs upgrade their current teaching practices with their own actual intercultural experiences as well as a theory of learning. JTEs' steady and conscious efforts will help Japanese students to construct their own critical perspectives of how they should or can use English as a *lingua franca* in the globalized, diverse society. As a result, Japanese students will enrich their communication repertoires with a wide range of linguistic competences and be equipped with the knowledge or proficiencies vital to actively participate in global contexts.

An expanding language teacher role of raising students' awareness of "the dynamic relationship between English and its diverse sociocultural settings" (Baker, 2012, pp. 69-70) needs to go beyond the norm of simply teaching linguistic knowledge of lexis, grammar, phonology in a decontextualized manner. For that purpose, it is more essential for JTEs to strive to cultivate their own intercultural understanding through ELF communication; they need to be actively involved in a wide range of tasks or practices in multilingual and multicultural learning communities for professional development. If JTEs take consistent advantage of such opportunities, then this will lead to providing their students with a variety of cultural sources or valuable knowledge and skills which they can apply to any contexts outside of the classroom.

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