Using Authentic Cross-Cultural Dialogues to Encourage International Students’ Participation in Tutorial Activities

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**USING AUTHENTIC CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUES TO ENCOURAGE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS’ PARTICIPATION IN TUTORIAL ACTIVITIES**

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This article details a teaching method for intercultural business communication for ESL students in New Zealand and Australia. These students are often international students, many from Asia. In particular, in the past few years, a significant proportion of them have come from China. The diverse cultural backgrounds in the classroom pose challenges for teaching intercultural business communication. To meet these challenges, Canagarajah (2002) appropriately pointed out that it is essential for instructors to encourage students’ participation and contribution to ESL education; this advice can also apply to teaching intercultural business communication. To achieve this aim, I incorporate everyday authentic dialogues into teaching activities as an important method of involving students in classroom activities and encouraging their contributions. The idea of using dialogues was also inspired by Storti’s (1994) collection of dialogues. However, it is more appropriate to use authentic dialogues that students can identify with more easily. Therefore, I have applied this method in teaching the course in both Australian and New Zealand institutions. The following section details a tutorial exercise based on authentic dialogues collected from everyday life and also illustrates the method with a dialogue collected by the author.
Purpose of the Tutorial Activity

The purposes of the activity are to develop students’ understanding of different cultures and to illustrate how these different expectations may lead to misunderstandings in intercultural encounters. Specifically, participants will be able to

- identify cultural differences in authentic cases.
- interpret the findings from different cultural perspectives.
- understand how ignorance of cultural differences can lead to misunderstanding.

This activity is suitable for students taking an intercultural business communication course, particularly a class with ESL students. A comfortable size for the tutorial group that encourages student participation ranges from 15 to 20 students. The time required for this activity is about 35 minutes. As an instructor, I follow these steps to facilitate the tutorial activities.

First, define a cross-cultural dialogue (5 minutes). A cross-cultural dialogue is a brief conversation between two or more people from different countries or cultures. Generally speaking, the dialogues may vary in length, but all can be used to indicate cultural differences in problem solution, invitation, negotiation, and other relevant activities. These differences are indicated through multiple layers of messages rather than through explicit language, and these layers of meaning are related to the cultural norms and values of the cultures concerned. The following statements can be used as a theoretical framework in the discussion to help identify the differences in these dialogues:

- An authentic cross-cultural dialogue provides an insider’s perspective about the relevant cultures involved in it.
- A telephone conversation is also a dialogue. However, it differs from face-to-face conversation because the speakers cannot see each other. They therefore have to rely solely on verbal cues to interpret each other’s meanings.
- A dialogue also has communicative purposes, but the purposes may be interpreted differently across cultures.
- A cross-cultural dialogue involves the use of communication strategies to communicate with people from different cultures.
Second, go over the dialogues in class and brainstorm with students about the cultural differences in the dialogues. It is essential to refer to the basics covered in the explanation of cross-cultural dialogues and to focus on the relevant findings from the brainstorming. For example, the students can be asked to categorise the purposes, strategies, and different interpretations of these purposes and strategies (5 minutes).

Third, divide the participants into small groups of five or six students, and give them 10 minutes to go over the dialogues by themselves. After that, each group reports its findings about the dialogues to the class (15 minutes).

Fourth, ask volunteers to role-play the dialogues once again. One dialogue is assigned to each group if the class has more than one group. This practice reinforces students’ understanding of the cultural differences that have been identified (5 minutes).

Fifth, debrief by having each group report something they have learned. These points can be highlighted as concluding remarks for the session (5 minutes). Sum up the differences in the dialogues and focus on the different perspectives of each speaker in the dialogues for interpreting meanings. Point out the importance of using authentic data to identify cultural differences and multiple perspectives for interpreting the differences. Without these multiple perspectives, one is open to misunderstanding and communication breakdown.

Therefore, it is essential to understand differences in terms of purposes and communication strategies from the speakers’ perspectives or cross-cultural perspectives to reduce communication barriers and breakdowns.

An Example of a Telephone Dialogue:
“Why Didn’t You Ring Me?”

(A telephone is ringing)
Amy: Amy speaking.
Miss Ng: Hi Amy! Why didn’t you ring me in the past few days?
Amy: Is that all you wanted to tell me?
Miss Ng: Yeh . . .?
Amy: Bye then.
Miss Ng: Bye, Amy, but . . .
Notes to Instructors

This is a brief telephone dialogue between two people: Amy is a European New Zealander, also known as a Kiwi, and Miss Ng is from Hong Kong. This dialogue shows the different expectations of the two speakers as to how to start a conversation over the phone. To Miss Ng, “Why didn’t you ring me?” is almost like a greeting to start a conversation. The implied meaning here is “I miss you.” The statement is not really a question in this context but indicates friendship and closeness with a friend in a high-context culture such as Hong Kong. However, this message does not come across to Amy in their conversation. To her, “Why didn’t you ring me?” is a genuine question that indicates a criticism in this context. She does not think that it is appropriate to begin a telephone conversation with a criticism. What’s more, her friend shouldn’t interfere with her behaviour as to whom she should ring. Their different expectations about how to begin a telephone conversation with a friend apparently have eventually led to the communication breakdown, and Miss Ng has not even gotten to the point for which she rang Amy. Amy is not at all happy about being interfered with and criticised by her friend. The misunderstanding can be reduced if each has some understanding about her different expectations for a telephone conversation.

In sum, this article illustrates the use of everyday dialogues as a teaching method for an intercultural business communication course, because such dialogues focus on the underlying cultural values and expectations. On the basis of my experience, an instructor may expect a wide variety of explanations for the dialogues from the class. Instructors should accept all the different views that students contribute, because people have their own cultural perspectives on the incidents in the intercultural dialogues. However, instructors should focus on the basic and essential communication strategies and use these dialogues as a starting point for discussion and also for soliciting student contributions to the classroom discussion.

References

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RESPONDING TO THE UNIQUE EXPECTATIONS AND NEEDS OF GRADUATE STUDENTS WHO ARE NONNATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

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STUDENTS WHO ARE nonnative speakers of English are both a major component of today’s diverse student population and also a special constituency in our business communication classrooms. They may be foreign students or resident students who have primary languages other than English. Graduate students in this constituency have adequate language skills to be admitted to graduate programs and may have met some standard on a Test of English as a Foreign Language. Compared with undergraduate students, they often are substantially more mature in their understanding of business, more appreciative of the value of effective communication skills in business, and more likely to speak up about whether what is being taught is going to benefit them. They are likely to fall into one of two categories regarding their language skills: (a) They have substantial classroom instruction in English (and often know the rules better than our native English speakers do) and need only additional experience in communicating in English to be able to function well in business, or (b) they have adequate English training but are clearly not skilled beyond rudimentary levels; they are barely ready to work in an English-only business environment.

Business communication instructors face major challenges conducting graduate classes with such diverse and often divergent student needs. Meeting the challenges of these ESL students is especially daunting because instructors must respond concurrently to the needs of the native English speakers as well.

The purpose here is to suggest techniques, approaches, and exercises that respond to these nonnative, English-speaking graduate