

Breaking Stereotypes, Building Bridges and Taking Notes: Insights from an Intercultural Studies Course

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Abstract

Courses on intercultural studies that follow the CLIL methodology can provide valuable opportunities for learners to deepen their knowledge of other cultures and reflect on their own cultures while developing their intercultural competence and academic language skills. This paper reports on how participating in an Intercultural Studies CLIL elective course created a space for students to consider and reflect on the meaning of culture and learn about some causes of cultural misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. It describes how discussing stereotypes led course members to reflect on their experiences and recognize their subconscious biases. In addition, learners discovered some ways in which intercultural understanding can foster tolerance between countries.

Keywords: *Intercultural competence, CLIL methodology, Cultural reflection*

Introduction

The Intercultural Studies course described in this paper is an elective course within the FLER curriculum held weekly in the 2024 spring semester. The class was comprised of 15 students from first to fourth year studying in various faculties, with three first-year, seven second-year, three third-year, and two fourth-year students, including one international student from Korea. Per the course syllabus, the course aimed to enhance students' intercultural knowledge and communication skills by exploring and comparing global cultures and varieties of English and practicing appropriate responses for everyday situations in preparation for studying abroad.

Literature Review

Many scholars have extensively discussed the value of language learners studying intercultural studies to improve their intercultural and communicative competence, particularly those who intend to study or work in an international setting. For example, Byram (2008) describes intercultural competence as identifying and navigating relationships between different

cultures. Additionally, he suggests that intercultural competence enables people to critically analyze and recognize that cultural perspectives are shaped by cultural influences rather than being inherently natural. More recently, Pereira (2024) has stated that intercultural competence can help to identify and appreciate cultural differences, leading to a more extensive range of perspectives. In addition to heightening learners' abilities to navigate more effectively in other cultures, Hall (1973, p. 32) reminds us that "One of the most effective ways to learn about yourself is by taking seriously the cultures of others. It forces you to pay attention to those details of life which differentiate them from you." Therefore, learning about other cultures can not only raise awareness of other cultures but can also provide opportunities to reflect more deeply on one's own culture.

Learning about other cultures and developing intercultural competence goes hand-in-hand with language learning, as language and culture cannot be separated (Curtis & Sussex, 2018; Curtis, 2018). And as Kramsch (1995, p. 86) points out, "one of the significant ways culture manifests itself is through language" and that language is how culture is interpreted, recorded, and passed on.

To ensure that the course had a good balance of content and language learning, a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodological approach was employed. The CLIL methodology combines content and language instruction, which are equally important, and the 4Cs (Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture) framework of CLIL provides an effective and practical framework for implementing a language course that fosters intercultural understanding. (Koro, 2018).

Course Content, Teaching Goals and Learning Outcomes

The following section describes the content and language items covered during the course, the materials and methods employed, and the outcomes based on my observations, which were recorded in a teaching journal after each class.

Defining Culture

Academic skills: Discussion, Listening, Writing

Materials: YouTube Video: Cultural Iceberg (GCPE BCGov., 2016), listening questions

An important starting point for this course was to assess students' understanding of the definition of culture and to have them share and compare their definitions with their classmates. Discussing their definitions enabled them to reflect on and synthesize their definitions of culture to develop a more detailed definition.

In small groups, each student was given a piece of paper and two minutes to write a definition of culture that included two examples without using dictionaries or devices. Then, students placed their papers in the center of the table so all group members could compare,

comment on, and synthesize them to produce a group definition. During this process, I asked if they noticed any specific patterns or recurring themes emerging from their definitions and examples of culture. While students could notice certain patterns, particularly from the examples of culture they had offered, they did not have the linguistic tools to explain them. To help identify and clarify these patterns, I introduced a short video (0:01:50) entitled Cultural Iceberg (GCPE BCGov., 2016). Before watching the video, students predicted the content based on the title. Then, they identified the main points introduced in the video using listening questions such as “What are the two main types of manifestations of culture? What are some examples of each kind of manifestation of culture?” According to Hall’s Cultural Iceberg Theory, visible cultural elements (extrinsic manifestations of culture) such as language, food, and art are like the tip of an iceberg. However, most cultural aspects lie beneath the surface, including beliefs, values, and attitudes toward authority and time (intrinsic manifestations of culture). These intrinsic manifestations of culture influence behavior and become more apparent as one becomes more immersed in the culture (GCPE BCGov., 2016).

By watching and discussing the video, the students had the tools to re-examine their definitions of culture more critically and identify extrinsic and intrinsic manifestations of culture. As a follow-up, students discussed why intrinsic manifestations of culture are more difficult to understand than extrinsic ones and shared examples of incidents they had observed or experienced that occurred because of a lack of knowledge about extrinsic and intrinsic cultural manifestations in other cultures. This discussion laid the foundation for the class and prepared us to tackle the next topic: Cultural differences and misunderstandings.

Cultural Differences: How Lack of Knowledge Can Lead to Misunderstandings

Academic skills: Discussion, Listening, Note-taking, Writing

Materials: HSBC: Funny Culture Ads (tuoxie208, 2012)

Once students had defined and identified different manifestations of culture and shared some of their experiences of navigating other cultures, the next step was to look at more specific examples of how a lack of knowledge about culture and customs can lead to misunderstanding.

First, students discussed the slogan “The World’s Local Bank,” used between 2002 and 2011 by HSBC, one of the world’s oldest and largest banking and financial service organizations. By scaffolding the discussion with questions for students to consider, including “What are some local banks in Japan? Why do some people prefer local banks to larger banks with numerous branches? What message is HSBC trying to convey with this slogan?” students suggested that the message HSBC was trying to convey was that even though HSBC is a global financial institution with branches worldwide, it endeavors to care for the needs of the local people where its branches are located. When asked what they thought was important for caring for the needs of the local people, the students agreed that an understanding of local culture was essential.

As the first example of the importance of understanding local culture, students watched a one-minute TV commercial created by HSBC, which depicts an English businessman out to dinner with several Chinese businessmen in China. Following his cultural conditioning, the English businessman cleared his plate, which resulted in the Chinese businessmen ordering him larger and larger portions of the meal (which appeared to be steamed eel with vegetables).

For the first viewing of the video clip, students watched without audio while thinking about where the scene was taking place, the relationship between the people in the video, the situation, and why it was problematic for everyone involved. After viewing the video, students discussed their predictions in response to the above questions. For the second viewing, students took notes while listening to the following voice-over:

The English believe it's a slur on your host's food if you don't clear your plate, whereas the Chinese feel that you are questioning their generosity if you do. At HSBC, we never underestimate the importance of local knowledge, which is why we have local banks staffed by local people in over 80 countries across the globe. HSBC, the world's local bank. (tuoxie208, 2012)

Watching this video led to a lively discussion on the rules about "clearing one's plate" in different cultures, including in Japan, which provided students with an opportunity to reflect on and share their own cultural customs and practices in terms of food. Students were highly engaged in this discussion and commented that it helped them realize that it is essential to be aware of food customs before visiting another country since food is an important way to understand other cultures and develop relationships with people from different cultures. The students commented that it was important for visitors to Japan to understand Japan's food culture and customs. The commercial was humorous but made a critical point about how a lack of knowledge of other cultures and customs can lead to misunderstandings and awkward, uncomfortable situations.

In the following class, we watched another one-minute TV commercial with a different example of the importance of understanding local culture from the same HSBC series, which depicted a scenario that students were very familiar with and could give a great deal of input on: people falling asleep on the shoulder of the person next to them on the train.

In this commercial, set on the subway in New York City, an Asian businessman closes his eyes and rests his head on the shoulder of a Caucasian man sitting next to him on the subway. At first, the man looks taken aback and slightly irritated but then decides to rest his head and nap on the shoulder of the woman sitting next to him. The woman looks bewildered and uncomfortable. The voice-over that played during the scene was as follows:

In some Asian cities, it is considered acceptable for a commuter to fall asleep on the shoulder of a stranger. In New York, it is quite a different story. Of course, you can

always adapt. We are the global bank that never underestimates the importance of local knowledge. HSBC, the world's local bank. (tuoxie208., 2012)

As a class, we unpacked the voice-over in detail together. We discussed whether it was “considered acceptable for a commuter to fall asleep on the shoulder of a stranger,” a question that elicited various responses. Several students stated that it was important to empathize with and be tolerant of people who sleep on other commuters' shoulders on the train because of the work culture in Japan—businesspeople are tired because of long working hours followed by obligatory socializing with coworkers. Students are also exhausted because they are busy with their studies, extracurricular activities, and part-time jobs. Some students (both male and female) commented that they could tolerate being slept on by someone their age or younger but not by older businessmen because “nobody wants a sweaty head on their shoulder!” which may have indicated a gender or age-based bias among the students. A few students commented that although they did not like being slept on, they did not feel like they were in danger of being robbed or assaulted because they believe that Japan is a “safe country.”

The statement in the narration, “Of course, you can always adapt,” sparked a lively discussion about whether it is necessary to adapt to other cultures and, if so, to what extent. Students were asked to discuss and give examples of situations they thought people should adapt to and situations in which it may not be necessary to adapt to other cultures. The consensus regarding whether or not people should “do as the Romans do” when visiting another country was that visitors should respect and adapt to other cultures as long as they do not compromise their principles and beliefs. For example, removing your shoes before entering someone's home in Japan and not leaving food on your plate when you are a guest are ways of respecting Japanese culture, but refraining from eating certain foods or drinking alcohol because of dietary restrictions, religious or personal beliefs is not being disrespectful.

Students' comments indicated that watching and discussing the HSBC commercials had given them much food for thought, and they agreed that knowing more about other cultures and customs is one of the best ways to be respectful and to avoid misunderstandings and intercultural communication breakdowns.

During the “Sleeping on the Train” commercial discussion, some students commented that while they could tolerate having someone sleep on their shoulder on the train in Japan, they would not feel comfortable with the same situation in another country because they believed that they might be robbed or assaulted. One student said that Asians are kinder than people from other countries, so they are more tolerant of situations like people sleeping on them on the train. Another student commented that Japanese people try not to get involved with others to avoid conflict, so they tolerate someone sleeping on their shoulder (even if they do not like it) rather than confront them. Discussing these comments was an effective way to lead into our next topic: stereotypes.

Stereotypes

Academic skills: Discussion, Listening, Cornell Note-taking Method, Writing

Materials: TED Talk: Stereotypes: How do we break the cycle? (Markaryan, 2023)

Based on the discussion in the previous class about train manners, students were asked to agree or disagree with the following statements and explain their opinions with reasons and examples.

1. Japanese trains are safe compared to foreign countries.
2. In public places, Japanese people try not to get involved with others to avoid danger.
3. Many Asian people are kinder than people from other countries, so they accept people sleeping on their shoulders on the train.

After students discussed these 3 questions, some follow-up questions were added: Are these stereotypes? If so, on what are these stereotypes based, and what might be the results of such stereotyping?

As with the exercise described in the first unit of the course, Defining Culture, students wrote their definitions of stereotypes and some examples of different kinds of stereotypes individually, then shared them with the members of their group. Then, each group shared a summary of their definitions and examples, which were recorded on the blackboard. After that, we discussed the Oxford Learner's Dictionary's definition of a stereotype: "A fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is often not true in reality and may cause hurt and offense." (Oxford University Press, n.d.)

Unpacking this definition led to a discussion about how stereotypes are formed, why they are often not true in reality, and the ways in which they may be hurtful, harmful, or offensive. Following this class discussion, the class was divided into five small groups, and each group was assigned one kind of common stereotype (cultural, social, racial, gender, and religious). Groups used their phones to find some facts and figures about their assigned stereotype and prepared a brief explanation, some specific examples, and how it can be hurtful or offensive. After approximately 15 minutes, students were regrouped so that each of the five stereotypes was represented, and students shared what they had discussed in their original groups. After all students had finished sharing their research and eliciting the comments and opinions of their group members, they discussed which (if any) stereotypes they had experienced personally and if they had felt discriminated against because of that stereotype. Due to time constraints, the discussion of these questions was limited, but students were asked to think about them because they would be revisited in subsequent classes.

In the following class, after reviewing what we had previously discussed about stereotypes, we watched a short (0:04:34) TEDx Talk video entitled Stereotypes: How do we break the cycle? (Markaryan, 2023) The speaker, Olivia Markaryan, a 13-year-old American

junior high student, shares personal experiences highlighting the common nature of stereotypes and their impact on individuals in a way that would be relatable to the students.

To practice taking notes more effectively, as they watched the video, I introduced the Cornell method of notetaking, developed by Dr. Walter Pauk of Cornell University in the 1950s, because this particular talk was clear and well-organized and would align well with the Cornell method's systematic approach. The Cornell method suggests dividing the page into three sections: The right column is for recording the main ideas and details, the left column is for writing down keywords, questions, and comments after the activity, and the area at the bottom of the page is a space to summarize the notes and comments. (Pauk & Owens, 2010)

For the first viewing, students were instructed not to take notes but were given a few minutes after watching the video to discuss ideas and details they had heard and observed. Students took notes during the second viewing and discussed what they heard with their group members. After that, students worked individually to record keywords, questions, and comments in the left column of the paper. Then, in small groups, students discussed their generated questions and comments. Each group summarized their discussion and shared their unanswered questions or comments, which we discussed together as a class. This exercise provided an excellent opportunity for students to be more autonomous and generate their own questions rather than having them provided by the teacher.

In the TEDx Talk, Olivia Markaryan posed several questions to the audience, but the following questions promoted a deep and meaningful discussion in our class:

1. Have you judged someone else based on their appearance, gender, or where they come from? Explain what happened.
2. Have you felt judged based on your appearance, gender, or background? Explain what happened and how you felt about it.

The discussion of the first question, "Have you judged someone else based on their appearance, gender, or where they come from? Explain what happened," prompted several important reflections on personal experiences. As they were speaking, students noticed that they had made judgments based on their biases. For example, one student shared a story about assuming she should speak English to foreign customers at a café where she worked due to the appearance of the foreigners, only to discover that the customers spoke fluent Japanese. While she felt embarrassed, she did not regret the interaction as it was an attempt to improve her English skills, but she agreed that she had assumed not only that the foreign customers did not speak Japanese but also that they were English speakers. Another student admitted feeling intimidated when assisting a man with tattoos at her part-time job, assuming he was dangerous because of his appearance. However, when the student spoke with him, the tattooed customer spoke kindly, challenging her initial judgment. Another interesting gender-based assumption was shared by a female student who acknowledged having once said, "It's only natural that he

can do this because he's a boy," reflecting a stereotype she has about boys' abilities. Through this discussion, the students recognized that their initial judgments were based on stereotypes or appearances, and they realized that making such generalized assumptions could be hurtful or lead to misunderstandings.

The second question, "Have you felt judged based on your appearance, gender, or background? Explain what happened and how you felt about it," resulted in many comments about gender-based stereotypes in sports, particularly about girls being given preferential treatment, such as getting extra points in some circumstances, but not being allowed to participate in certain sports such as baseball because of their gender. One female student commented that she was told that her interest in action and sci-fi movies was "unusual for a girl," while other female students recalled being judged for how much they ate and being told that "girls should not eat as much as boys." Another female student expressed sadness after being told by her grandmother that she should marry soon because she was a woman, which made her feel as if marriage was the only path to happiness.

The students' responses to this question reflected their understanding of how these kinds of judgments could be hurtful and offensive, and the general consensus of the class was that it was important to respect individual differences and break away from assumptions based on gender, appearance, or background.

The topic of stereotypes was highly impactful, and the heightened self-awareness and reflection that this topic promoted raised the students' interest and motivation to an even higher level. For the midterm project, students chose to make group presentations on cultural differences and/or stereotypes. All of the groups' presentations reflected their interest and commitment to the topics that they had chosen, which included cultural differences between Japan and Korea, Japan and the Philippines, language-based differences between American and British English, and gender stereotypes. Their presentations were well-researched and presented and inspired their classmates to ask many post-presentation questions and learn even more about these critical topics.

Mending Relationships Through Intercultural Understanding (Part 1)

Academic skills: Discussion, Listening, Reading strategies, Writing

Materials: Love for J-pop blooms in South Korea thanks to young fans news article (Ota, 2024)

A common theme in the topics we studied was that a deeper knowledge of culture and customs can help people avoid misunderstandings and stereotyping. Building on what we had learned about culture thus far, the next topic focused on how intercultural communication and understanding can be a way to bring people from different cultures together.

To begin this unit, we revisited Hall's Cultural Iceberg analogy to discuss which aspects of culture can bring people from different cultures together and which aspects of culture might make it more challenging to bring people from different cultures together. The consensus was

that extrinsic manifestations of culture, such as music and food, were likely to be more effective than intrinsic manifestations of culture, such as religion and values, in bringing people together.

To explore this theme, students read an article titled *Love for J-pop blooms in South Korea thanks to young fans* (Ota, 2024). By employing reading strategies such as predicting from the title, photos, subtitles, and introductory paragraph, students could effectively predict the article's main points and have an open and honest discussion of one of the subtitles, "Dark History." Students were able to share their knowledge of the reasons for tensions between Japan and Korea, and based on the title of the article, predicted that although young people in Korea may be more accepting of J-pop, it was likely that the older generation was not, given that that generation was closer to the experience of having been colonized by Japan from 1910–1945.

To delve further into the critical issues raised in the *Love for J-pop* article, I modeled methods for annotating the text by demonstrating how to write questions, comments, and reactions in the left margin and vocabulary items in the right margin. Students were given 15 minutes to read and annotate the article (approximately 1,000 words) and then engaged in small group discussions, asking each other questions about the content and vocabulary items. After that, each group generated a discussion question based on the article, and groups were reassigned so that each member could lead a discussion based on the question they had created with their previous group.

Through this lesson, students were able to see the positive impacts that some manifestations of culture can have on improving intercultural relationships, and it gave them valuable practice with reading skills, including previewing and predicting, annotating and summarizing, and discussion skills, including facilitating the discussion, supporting opinions, and summarizing.

Mending Relationships Through Intercultural Understanding (Part 2)

Academic skills: Discussion, Listening, Note-taking, Summarizing

Materials: TED Talk: "For more tolerance, we need more ... tourism?" (Abu Sarah, 2014)

Following the success of the *Love for J-pop blooms in South Korea thanks to young fans* article, I chose to focus on sharpening students' listening, note-taking, and summarizing skills by using the TED Talk video, "For more tolerance, we need more ... tourism?" (Abu Sarah, 2014).

After reviewing the ideas that we had discussed previously about how cultural elements such as music can bring people of different cultures together, students talked about their experiences with tourism (both as tourists and as citizens of a country that has a large tourism industry) and whether it was an effective way to promote intercultural understanding. Many interesting points were raised from both perspectives. There were several comments about both positive and negative stereotypes that existed about tourists visiting Japan, as well as stories about visiting other countries and bonding with the local people by playing sports and sharing

meals.

Before watching the TED Talk video on tolerance and tourism, we reviewed the Cornell note-taking method. After the first viewing and comparing of notes with their group members, students were given listening questions, including the following: What happened to his brother? How did this event affect him? Why did he decide to learn Hebrew? How did he connect with his Jewish classmates? Why was this important? which they listened for as they rewatched the video and discussed their answers.

Although this TED Talk is approximately 10 years old and preceded the current war between Israel and Palestine, it is a very impactful talk that shows how the speaker, Aziz Abu Sarah, a Palestinian, was able to overcome his self-proclaimed hatred for Israelis by studying Hebrew to find a job. By learning Hebrew, he was able to connect with Israelis who were not police or military and discovered they had a lot in common in terms of musical taste and other aspects of culture. These relationships inspired him to pursue a career in peacebuilding through tourism (Abu Sarah, 2014).

After watching this TED talk, the post-viewing discussion and reflections indicated how impactful and thought-provoking the topic and speaker were. Students discussed the question, “How can you, as an individual, help promote peace and understanding when you travel?” They discussed the importance of engaging respectfully with local cultures by trying local foods, participating in traditions, and learning basic phrases in the local language to foster mutual respect and understanding with the local people. They commented that rather than engaging in typical touristic travel, visiting places of historical significance, especially those related to past conflicts such as Hiroshima and Auschwitz, was important. They felt that visiting places where tragic events had occurred in the past could help people better understand the mistakes that were made and can help lead to a more peaceful future. It was also suggested that cultural exchange can help foster mutual understanding and intercultural competence.

Several students reflected on how fortunate and grateful they are to live peaceful lives and how easily such lives can be taken for granted. The TED talk helped to raise their awareness of the possibility of conflict and the importance of striving for mutual understanding. While complete peace may seem challenging to achieve, the effort to understand each other better can lead to gradual improvement in relationships and societies. For example, one student talked about the importance of learning from both positive and negative aspects of history and culture, as understanding the painful parts of history, especially war, can provide lessons for fostering peace in the future.

Course Reflection

In the final class, students reflected on what they had learned and enjoyed about the course. Their comments included appreciating having opportunities in each class to engage in academic discussions in which they could express their ideas and opinions openly and

confidently. They said that learning about other cultures helped them strengthen their intercultural competence and enabled them to reflect more deeply on their own culture. They enjoyed the group presentations, which allowed them to think more critically about cultural misunderstandings and stereotypes and to consider which aspects of culture they felt needed to be protected and preserved. Regarding their English language skills, they enjoyed the variety of videos and reading materials, which allowed them to brush up on and become more confident in their academic skills, especially note-taking in English.

During the 14-week course, I observed the course participants develop a strong learning community in which they could sharpen their English language skills, develop their intercultural competence, and deepen their understanding of other cultures and their own. These skills and experiences will help students who plan to study abroad and those who will pursue careers in international settings.

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