

Breaking Down Barriers through Intercultural Writing Exchanges

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When discussing developing countries, my university students often described them as places that are “dark,” “dirty” and “poor” and those living there with “no education” and “no dreams.” Not surprisingly, they considered those in poverty as having less a life than themselves in Japan. Many of them admitted that their attitudes resulted from negative images depicted in the media. However, they were not aware that their attitudes were also formed from using Japanese cultural norms and values to compare other cultures. To help my students address such stereotypes and to foster their intercultural awareness I ran a 4-month writing exchange between my Japanese students at Aoyama Gakuin University and my Cambodian students at my own non-government organization (NGO), the Bayon English Academy (BEA), in Siem Reap, Cambodia. I ran this project five times from 2011 to 2015.

My Japanese students were in the English Literature Department and enrolled in either the department’s required *Integrated English Core 3* (IE3) course or my *Intercultural Communication* (ICC) seminar. The task-based IE3 classes center on discussion skills and presentations, as well as book reports and journal writing. The content-based ICC seminar focuses on theories and the application of them to cross-cultural communication. In both types of courses, learners met for 180 minutes each week during a 15-week semester. Student levels ranged from mid-intermediate to high-advanced, and most of the students were 20-year-olds.

The Cambodian students were from families living in extreme or moderate poverty, making US\$1 or US\$2 per day respectively (Ravallion, Chen, & Sangraula, 2009). Most of them live in Trapeang Sess village, which is less than 5 kilometers from Angkor Wat, the world's largest temple. They attend English lessons at my own language school that I started in 2010 to provide disadvantaged youth with language and social awareness programs from well-trained teachers in modern facilities, which is rare in Cambodia's education system (Takeda, 2015). Students attend their lessons from Monday to Friday for 1 hour a day with a Cambodian instructor who teaches them communicative and task-based lessons in a 1-year program that amounts to 200 hours of instruction. The learners who participated in the exchange were from the *Pre-Intermediate*, the *Intermediate* or the *Advanced EFL Course* with most being 17 years of age who were either in high school or had recently graduated. Their main goal for studying English is to find a job in tourism, which offers higher salaries than those in agriculture, construction or village markets. Higher salaries means they can help their families pay for public school expenses, such as uniforms, textbooks and private tutoring (Takeda, 2015).

There were three main goals for this project: (1) to have students develop intercultural awareness; (2) to identify stereotypes and prejudices; and (3) to compare and contrast cultures. Students wrote a minimum 3-page letter on three designated topics to help them achieve these goals. The first topic was a self-introduction and a description of their lifestyle; the next one was on a cultural practice; and the last one was about their educational experiences in different types of institutions. Learners also had to report recent news in their lives and ask and answer questions to and from their partners. When students got their letters in class, they participated in a variety of scaffolding activities to help them gain a deeper understanding of the content of their letters. These activities included a 20-minute lecture on the letter's topic, reading and

discussing each other's letters, and completing *Cultural Awareness Activities*. For homework, learners had to complete a reflective writing task about their partner's letter as a blog post on my teaching website and to write their next letter.

During this project, Japanese learners realized that most of their knowledge about Cambodia, and other developing countries, was based on stereotypes. The most common stereotype was that they thought their Cambodian partners "didn't look poor." They also did not expect their partners to have dreams because of their economic status: "My partner wants to run a company. Cambodia is a poor country, so I thought it's difficult to have a big dream like that." Students could realize such stereotypes through class discussions. By the end of the project, my Japanese students understood how intercultural communication could be affected by negative stereotypes. One student acknowledged: "It is embarrassing to realize my ideas about countries were actually stereotypes. Having them can hurt others and they make it more difficult to get to know each other." Another believed "throwing away stereotypes is the most important thing in intercultural communication [because] they can give us images of people that can hurt them."

Another important realization the students made was about the importance of knowing their own culture. They considered themselves as Japanese, but did not know what made them Japanese. One student explained: "I have been to other countries, but I feel like I have never explained Japan well. This made me realize that it is important to know my country." Exchanging cultural information also motivated students to learn more about Japan: "I discovered that I didn't know a lot about my own country. I was ashamed because I had thought that I knew a lot about Japan. I've decided to learn more about Japan." More importantly, such exchanges helped Japanese students learn how they were connected to their partners more through similarities

than through differences. One student summed up this sediment perfectly: “I learned that people are the same...I became aware that we can make friends with those of any age, nationality and religion if we open our mind...I feel my partner is my sister. I have never met her, but I feel that she is a member of my family.”

Finally, Japanese students realized that they had gained varying degrees of cultural awareness over a short period of time, only 9 hours of class time out of the 45 hours designated for each course. The variety of scaffolding activities and in-depth discussions helped learners understand and explain Japanese and Cambodian culture, which contributed to developing their cultural awareness. One student remarked on the impact of the project: “My partner made me realize that happiness does not just come from the accumulation of goods, but from the life you have and the people around you.”

By the end of each project, two groups of diverse students were brought together and realized that they were more alike than different. An essential blow to breaking down the barriers of stereotypes.

References:

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