

Informing Cross Cultural Understanding Curriculum through Classroom Research¹

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Abstract

A short survey consisting of two questions was given in the first week of a Cross-Cultural Understanding course. The first probed for students' schemata for culture. The second probed for their awareness of cultural differences, as found in compliment-response adjacency pairs in Indonesian and English. The answers were analyzed and conclusions drawn as to which elements of the curriculum were redundant for that particular class, or needed less attention, and which elements needed more time and focus. Most students' definitions of culture included behavior, specific place and identity. Few included beliefs, values or environment. The curriculum was adapted to spend less class time on cultural behaviors. Instead, from the second lesson, behaviors and places were linked with cultural norms, rules, geography and history. The compliment responses showed that most students were aware of differences between Indonesian and English. That concept therefore did not need to be taught. Instead the curriculum built on from this example to directly introduce the topics of conversational analysis and pragmatic failure. Later in the semester the cultural meanings and functions of different English and Indonesian responses to compliments were analyzed. Each CCU class brings a level of cultural and language awareness. The curriculum can be adapted to take this into account.

Key words: classroom research, schemata, culture, compliments, curriculum

Introduction

This research grew out of the realization that English department Cross-Cultural Understanding (CCU) students came to the initial class with a variety of understandings about culture and pragmatics. In addition, a conviction that those understandings could and should be discovered in the first week of a course and be used to update the curriculum to reflect the needs of that group of students.

A mistake often made is to assume that students have a workable definition of 'culture' because of other related subjects they have taken. In addition 'culture' is often used outside the CCU class to refer to observable phenomena such as material artifacts, language, proverbs, associated with a particular ethnicity. Therefore the first question of this research set out to discover what formal understanding of 'culture' a group of students had individually and in common.

Related more directly to the topic of this seminar, language awareness, a second question set out to discover those students' understanding of pragmatics by seeing whether they differentiated between replies to compliments in English and in Indonesian. English department students study compliments in Speaking classes and study pragmatics in Linguistics classes before taking the CCU course, which is towards the end of their undergraduate degree.

Literature Review

Curriculum

One aspect of preparing a curriculum is to ascertain what students already know. This is a component of undertaking a needs analysis when putting together a curriculum.² The known

¹ I would like to acknowledge Dr Desmawati Radjab's help in formulating the idea for this classroom research.

becomes the starting point for teaching new concepts. Curricula should be adapted for each course taught. Some needs analysis can be undertaken before each course gets fully under way. What students do or do not know about culture needs to be factored in when writing a new curriculum or preparing the lesson plans and making adjustments to an existing curriculum.

Classroom research

The type of research undertaken for this purpose of adjusting the CCU curriculum to meet the needs of a certain class, was a one-off description,³ based on a survey given in class⁴. This is an example of classroom research.⁵

Schema theory

Schema theory, which is used widely in teaching reading, is also relevant to CCU where the course is heavily reliant on wider reading and general background knowledge.⁶ Douglas Brown suggests that a reading micro-skill is to find cultural references in texts and interpret them by use of the developing cultural schemata.⁷ This begs the question: what is in the CCU students' cultural schemata? In which directions do their schemata need to be developed during the course? For teaching CCU I wanted to discover each student's content schema for the concept of 'culture'.

Part of the CCU curriculum is taken up with pragmatics, or the analysis of the function of utterances. As pragmatics and language are culture specific, formal cultural schemata need to be developed for each culture or language being studied. These schemata can then be used to help explain cross-cultural differences.⁸ A simple example is that responses to compliments in English and Indonesian are performed somewhat differently. My question was: at the beginning of the CCU course do students show the ability to differentiate between appropriate responses to such similar situations in these two languages?

In conversational analysis of English compliments, the adjacency pair consists of complimenting and the response usually thanking, though explaining or disclaiming are also common responses. The response to Indonesian compliments is often some kind of 'downplaying': disagreeing or denying.

The ability to respond in a similar way to a native speaker belongs to socio-cultural competence, which is one of the four parts of language learning according to Savignon.⁹

Cultural values

The reasons for different responses can be found in sociocultural values.¹⁰ Indonesian culture values modesty, which is related to group-orientation. One person feels uncomfortable

2 James Dean Brown, *The Elements of Language Curriculum: A Systematic Approach to Program Development* (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1995), p. 35.

3 M Lodico, D Spaulding, and K Voegtler, *Methods in Educational Research* (2nd ed.; San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), p. 199.

4 James Dean Brown, *The Elements of Language Curriculum: A Systematic Approach to Program Development* (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1995), p. 112.

5 David Hopkins, *A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Research* (3rd ed.; Buckingham & Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002), p. 53.

6 Douglas Brown, *Teaching by Principles: an Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* (2nd ed.; White Plains, NY: Longman, 2000), p. 299.

7 Douglas Brown, *Teaching by Principles: an Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* (2nd ed.; White Plains, NY: Longman, 2000), p. 307.

8 Douglas Brown, *Teaching by Principles: an Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* (2nd ed.; White Plains, NY: Longman, 2000), p. 300.

9 Savignon, Sandra J. *Communicative Competence: Theory & Classroom Practice 2nd edition*. McGraw-Hill:New York, 1997 p. 41.

being singled out, which is an effect of a compliment. Hence 'downplay' answers. In English the function of thanking is to acknowledge the person giving the compliment. This reflects a more individualistic orientation.

Procedure

Ethics

To fulfill ethical guidelines for this kind of research the 29 students were notified of the dual purpose of the research; to inform the CCU curriculum, and for the results to be written up as a seminar paper. Their verbal assent was given before proceeding. The results of the research were fed back to the students part-way through the semester.¹¹

Test

In the first CCU class of the semester a short survey was given to the 29 students, consisting of two questions, which were answered in a mixture of Indonesian and English.

1. What is culture? Apa artinya budaya? (Reply in either Indonesian or English).
2. Write suitable replies to these compliments
 - A. Tasmu itu baru ya, keren.
 - B. (reply in Indonesian)
 - A. You've got a new bag. It's cool.
 - B. (reply in English)

The answers were analyzed, and conclusions drawn about this group's understanding of these two CCU topics, and therefore what needed to be included in the CCU curriculum for these particular students.¹²

Analysis

What is culture?

The answers to this question were analyzed by circling the **Key words** in the answers and allocating each part of the answer to a column on the spreadsheet (see appendix A).

A typical answer was

Culture is a tradition that can be a habit for a group of people in their area.

This answer was plotted to four of the 26 groups of answers given: tradition, habit, group of people, specific place. See appendix A. Appendix B shows the answers grouped by topic against number of student answers.

The majority of definitions provided by the students included the ideas that culture is

* how life is habitually lived (using words such as 'behavior, way, do, perilaku, or habit, usual, custom, kebiasaan etc.)

* for a group of people and/or in a certain place

* thus, identity-forming

My definition of culture is 'a way of life and understanding about life - complex, complete, organized, learned unconsciously, controlled by beliefs and values, meeting felt needs, and constantly changing - for a group of people'.¹³ Some vital aspects of culture were not strongly manifested in the students' definitions, and therefore were specifically taught and emphasized in

¹⁰ Eli Hinkel. 'Building Awareness & Practical Skills to Facilitate Cross-Cultural

Communication' in *Teaching English to Second and Foreign Learners* (3rd ed. editor Marianne Celce-Murcia. Heinle: Boston, 2009), p. 450.

¹¹ David Hopkins, *A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Research* (3rd ed.; Buckingham & Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002), p. 195-196.

¹² James Dean Brown, *The Elements of Language Curriculum: A Systematic Approach to Program Development* (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1995), p. 112.

¹³ Brita and Kurnia Ningsih, *Cross-Cultural Understanding: a textbook*, 2014, p. 6.

the curriculum for the remainder of the CCU course for this class, in order to add to their content schema for 'culture'. These were

* that culture consists of invisible beliefs, values, norms, rules and attitudes¹⁴ in addition to behaviors (including language) and artifacts.

* that culture is both handed down and continually changing

* that culture is a systematic understanding about life

* that culture is a product of place - geography and history

Compliments

The answers for this question fell into six groups and the Indonesian and English replies to compliments were plotted next to each other on one spreadsheet (see appendix C). Appendix D superimposes numbers of student responses for Indonesian and English compliments on the same bar graph.

Most of the answers for the compliment in Indonesian was to give either an utterance of disagreement or surprise, or an explanation, in addition to thanking. Almost all the answers for the compliment in English were a simple 'thank you' or 'thanks'. Four students gave exactly the same answer for the the two compliments, i.e. simply a translation. Therefore it can be seen that most of these students had a sense that responses to compliments are not carried out in the same way in Indonesian and English. This is not surprising as compliments in English are drilled in Speaking classes. The CCU curriculum used this knowledge and example as a starting-point for introducing conversation analysis and analyzing other pragmatic features that are not drilled in Speaking classes. Some that lead to greater cross-cultural misunderstanding between English and Indonesian are making requests, small talk, leave-taking, how to speak and act at a party and so on.

In addition later in the course the students' understandings of each of these conversational behaviors (formal cultural schemata¹⁵) were linked and interpreted in the light of underlying aspects of culture, such as values, ideals, attitudes and beliefs.

In a class discussion some students explained that they felt embarrassed when complimented. Others said that they assumed the speaker's intent was to tease them by alluding to the fact that the bag was not new. Both these insights formed a helpful stepping stone from the 'visible' parts of culture, such as language to the 'invisible' parts such as being modest and not wanting to stand out (either positively or negatively), as epitomized in group culture. And more importantly that the invisible parts of culture guide what we do and say, and how we act and speak.

This example of the students' suggested responses to compliments was also used to encourage the students to both begin observing and analyzing other cultures¹⁶, and reflecting on their own culture. These two skills are needed in order to learn sociocultural competence in a second or foreign language.

Conclusion

One principle of Cross-Cultural Understanding is 'do not make assumptions'. Rather than making the mistake of assuming beginning CCU students know nothing about culture, or come

¹⁴ Eli Hinkel. 'Building Awareness & Practical Skills to Facilitate Cross-Cultural

Communication' in Marianne Celce-Murcia. *Teaching English to Second and Foreign Learners* (3rd ed. editor Heinle: Boston, 2009), p. 444.

¹⁵ Douglas Brown, *Teaching by Principles: an Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy* (2nd ed.; White Plains, NY: Longman, 2000), p. 300.

¹⁶ Eli Hinkel. 'Building Awareness & Practical Skills to Facilitate Cross-Cultural

Communication' in Marianne Celce-Murcia. *Teaching English to Second and Foreign Learners* (3rd ed. editor Heinle: Boston, 2009), p. 446-467.

to the first class with an adequate working definition of culture, the first research question helped me to ascertain that most of this group had some idea of what culture is, but their definitions showed some specific gaps. Another way of saying this is that they all had a content schema for 'culture' but that it needed to be extended, and this is what the rest of the course proceeded to do. Very little time was allocated to teaching that a culture operates for a certain group of people, or that behavior is a part of culture. More class time and assignments were allocated to analyzing the link between cultural values and behaviors, and researching how geography and history influence cultures.

The second research question showed that 25 of the 29 students were aware of differences in conversation structure in English and Indonesian. Their formal schemata for compliments in English and Indonesian were different. Therefore the curriculum was adapted to spend less time on how conversation structures are different, and more time was spent on why they are different. Indonesian 'downplay' responses to compliments were related to the cultural values of group and shame.

In the Cross-Cultural Understanding course students can be made aware of the complexity of language and culture by starting from their definitions of culture, and their own awareness of different conversational responses as lecturers and students work together towards sociolinguistic competence in the second and foreign languages in which they operate.

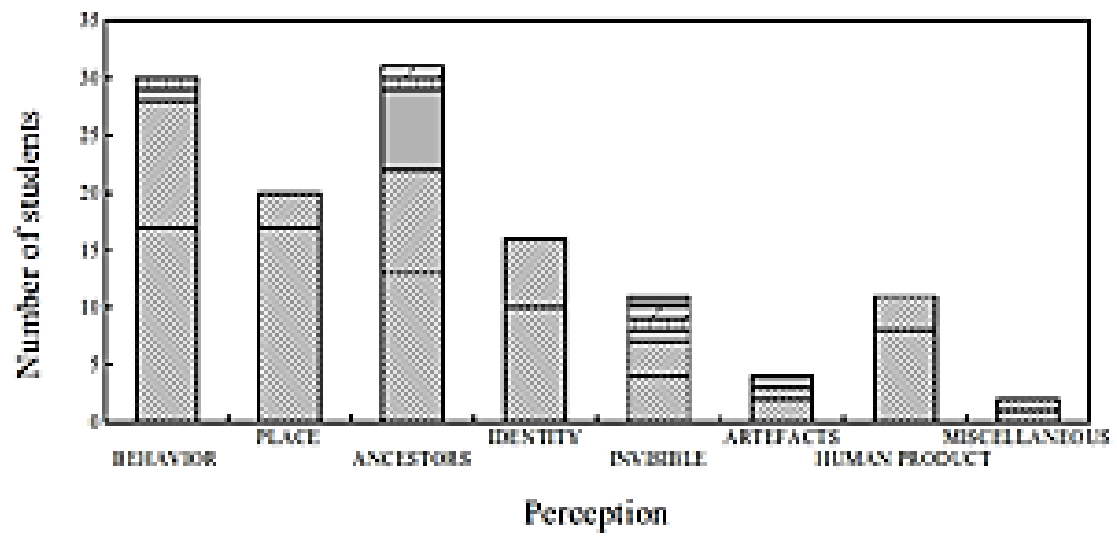
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Appendix A

	Student	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	Total
BEHAVIOR	daily life, habit, usual, custom, common, kebiasaan	√	√		√	√	√				√						√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√	√		17	
	behavior, activities, way, do, perilaku			√		√	√	√	√		√	√		√		√											√	√			11
	bagian dari kehidupan life, their lives											√																			1
PLACE	specific place, wilayah, climate, nature, environment	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	17
				√																							√	√			3
ANCESTORS	group, a society, tribe, ethnic	√				√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	13
	time, jangka waktu, berbagai sampai sekarang	√	√	√	√												√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	9
	tradition, dari dahulu, something much meaning	√	√														√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	7
	never change handell down, inherited, turun-temurun																	√									√				1
IDENTITY	identity, unique, characteristic, ciri khas different, differentiasi, perbedaan				√							√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	10
				√								√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	6
INVISIBLE	think, mengotakotai, dipukumi	√						√			√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	4
	system, set of law							√														√									3
	value																												√		1
	attitude	√																													1
	sewa fals											√																			1
ARTIFACTS	speak, language								√													√									2
	data																						√								1
	food																						√								1
HUMAN PRODUCT	human environment create			√						√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	8
	certain time									√												√					√				3
MISCELLANEOUS	certain time																												√		1
	fundamental			√																											1

Student perception of culture



Appendix C

number	Indonesian compliance							English compliance						
	alasan		agres	serpih	bungk	DIPA compliance	explorasi	alasan		agres	serpih	bungk	DIPA compliance	explorasi
	ada, ada, ada, berakad?	hina saja						ada	ada					
1														
2			d				d							
3														
4		d												
5			d											
6	d	d						d						
7														d
8	d									d				
9				d										
10														
11														d
12	d													d
13				d										
14														
15	d							d	d	d	d	d	d	d
16														
17														
18	d													d
19														
20	d													
21	d	d												
22										d				d
23														
24														
25			d										d	
26														
27														
28										d				d
29			d											
30														
Total	7	3	8	8	11	1	8	1	8	1	8	11	1	8

Appendix D

Compliments

