Collaborative Teaching Methodology:

Global Approach to Teaching English as Foreign Language

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Abstract

The interwoven relations between nations world wide has become a new challenge for educators in all fields. It is no doubt that language learning can contribute to the communication and awareness of people from different countries. English as foreign language learning bare the responsibility to promote cross cultural understanding between English spoken by various nationalities, whether they are native or non-native speakers. Owing to the technological advancement, teachers exchange and learn from each other with no border constraints. This technology can also be incorporated into our classroom today for students of English learners to use the language in real communicative style through internet intercultural communication forum designed and guided by their teachers. This study is regarding the cooperation and collaboration between the teachers of English in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. The three teachers completed a project from setting up the communication forum to implementing the intercultural activities among their students. Each teacher possesses different methods due to the nature of cultural background and educational philosophies in this collaboration. The detailed process of how the teachers of these countries overcome their differences and work towards a common goal of promoting intercultural awareness among their students are recorded and analyzed for future EFL international collaborations.

Keywords: collaborative teaching methodology, globalization, international communication, international awareness, multiculturalism

Background of the study

Ever since Netscape Corporation had made a successful hit on the market with
its web browser in 1995, chances of intercultural communication have been stupendously raised with people all over the world conversing with one another mostly in English language. The computer technology has brought forth this current trend of globalization that is destined to dominate the future of human beings in every aspect, particularly in English education as it had been foreseen by Curtis Bonk in his newly released book The World is Open: How Web Technology is Revolutionizing Education, an educational counterpart to Thomas Friedman’s The World is Flat. With the overwhelming power of computer technology, interminable globalization trend gradually changes the societies in all sectors (Wu and Kawamura 2010), English language learners are faced with two main challenges in their learning environment. First, globalization brings forth an English multicultural learning environment through the interwoven relationships between countries, cultures, and races. In the past, even though multicultural environment claimed its own unique position in English education, most EFL learners studied in a single cultural environment; namely, a culturally secluded classroom with students of homogeneous nature. Nowadays, EFL English learners can still choose to shun themselves in a single cultural learning environment in any non-English speaking countries in a certain educational institute if they determine to only interact with their own race as a future career. However, if they recognize the precious truth of a dialogical paradigm (Jay 1991) for English language study, and if they are willing to embrace advancing computer technology, freshen up newly invented online English vocabularies, multicultural learning environment can be accomplished easily through all types of synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC). The multicultural learning environment is made feasible and virtual through internet and is even replacing, dismantling the previously prejudicial framework for English language learning.

Accompanying the venture of online multicultural learning environment is another important issue demanded regarding the learning of English language in this digital age; that is, intercultural competence. As this ability gradually gains weight in the eyes of scholars (Lee 2006), there are reasons to take heed of intercultural competence. One, with the number of non-native English speakers grows larger, we are conversing with people of diverse cultural backgrounds and therefore English as a global language indeed is rooted in “its dynamic multicultural backdrop” (Nault 2006, 316). Second, new variants of the English language, the creations interweaving authentic English and non-English speaking cultures are already mushrooming everywhere in the globe which forces us to pay attention to cultural diversity in the English speaking society. The prevailing computer technologies, which opened up abundant opportunities for international communications and cross-cultural encounters, (Fuchs 2007) had already given substantial supports to the multicultural
background of English learning (Lee 2006). It is undeniable that cultural backgrounds heavily influence the production or formation of a language, thus Derrick Nault, insisting upon the importance of “culture teaching” in language education, urges English educators to include “global culture” in English teaching with highly influential cultures like British and American being put shoulder to shoulder with other cultures. To manage English in the light of globalization, intercultural competence is one of the keys (Yukiko 2007). In order to succeed in personal, social, or even professional areas available through either real life or online situations, or both, English learners shall acquire skills regarding how to interact with people of other cultures.

This study seeks to gain insight into the skills English teachers employ for a cross-cultural collaboration carried on in Fall 2009 by illustrating experiences of three English teachers from universities in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. By reporting and discussing these experiences of three different educators of three different countries in Asia, the researchers hope to contribute to the related academic field by proposing some practical strategies and suggestions.

The review of literature

Intercultural competence helps with quick adaptation in interaction or environment, broadening of one’s horizon, forestall miscommunication and misunderstanding (Yukiko 2007), appreciation of other cultures and even tolerance toward cultural differences. Carolin Fuchs (2007) reported on Claire Kramsch’s analytical framework by stating that intercultural competence may encompass openness and contribute to willingness to active communication. In the process of discovering the values of a new culture, one also rediscovers one’s own culture. All these above-mentioned advantages come along as intercultural competence deepens in the world of globalization. In his theoretical assumption Kramsch urged English teachers to prepare EFL students for their cross-cultural communicative skills in the light of internationalism. It is indeed that the global culture course in the framework of English language education not only challenges English learners but also English teachers. Today, many English teachers who are aware of the domination of technologies try to “prepare” their students for the growing population of global citizens, with all these tasks made feasible by CMC-based projects. This means that before, whilst, and after those CMC-based projects are being conducted, many English teachers of diverse backgrounds are eagerly and enthusiastically consulting, communicating, negotiating, discussing, and comprising with each other about intercultural collaborations. The perspective and philosophy that drive English teachers to support learners’ willingness to develop intercultural communicative skills demand the same attention as it does for learners, for these teachers need to develop
personal intercultural beliefs, negotiate with each other about professional experience, educational goals, and various schedules, and compromise among diverse teaching philosophies before they engage their students on the intercultural program. All in all, the collaborative teaching method is crucial in a CMC-based cross-culture project.

It has been shown that with concerted effort, teacher collaboration has measurable affect on student improvements (Goddard, Y. L., 2007). In fact many countries that have different education systems set up, have students that outperform their peers in other countries. Countries such as Finland, Japan, Singapore, etc. all have some kind of collaborative teaching and their students outperform their American counterpart (Pollak, C. J., 2009). Implementing teacher collaboration is not an easy task. Often the teachers are set in their ways and fearful of being exposed of any shortcomings (Wang, H., Cheng, L., 2005). Many teachers are set in their ways and implementing new teaching system would be a difficult task (Gauthier, K. R., 2009). Implementing a top down approach may also be badly received by the localities (Gauthier, K. R., 2009) and the individual teachers in the trenches (Wang, H., Cheng, L., 2005). Concerted effort needs to be implemented at all levels, from the commanding principals to the ground force teachers (Krovetz, M. L., Arriaza, G., 2006). This also implies to cross-cultural efforts between teachers to bring a new paradigm to our students.

There are various ways to implement collaboration such as intra-department coherent curriculum creation to methods of teaching other teachers (Pollak, C. J., 2009). Cross class collaboration, especially for those studying English as a second language in English speaking countries, can significantly improve the needs of those students (DelliCarpini, M., 2008). For higher education instructors who often read their peers’ research but have little time to socially exchange ideas (Fives, H., Looney, L., 2009), other types of collaboration can be created such as a cross border and cross cultural platform for teachers to share ideas and resources (Gauthier, K. R., 2009). One can expect the conflicts to occur in any collaboration especially since the teachers now must change from an isolated mode to a communicative sharing mode. Each with their own zeal for teaching has already established their own supposedly best methods and theories for teaching. But proper communication between the conflicting parties can enhance the learning of each and contribute to the greater good (Achingstein, B., 2002).

Collaborative Methodology--Skills needed for a cross cultural project

The three teachers of this study recognized the possible difficulties in this pursuit and acquired new skills in the process of this study. Contrary to a common methodology of comparative and contrast investigation, a discussion was carried out among the English teacher from Taiwan, Japan and South Korea. Through their
discussion, tradition and contemporary communicative methodologies were developed. Combining their cultural differences and similarities, educational backgrounds and professional experiences, three skills were proposed to ensure future success in multi-cultural teaching collaboration.

**Communicative skills**

Communication in every stage of the cross-cultural activity must take place because it can ensure smooth interactions. This calls for passion and effort of all cultural parties to ensure a solid and productive environment. The cross cultural collaboration between the EFL teachers from Taiwan, Japan and South Korea were faced with the interpreting of the online dialogues and suggestions, comments, feedbacks from each other. This is a particular challenge when English as second language is used as the main conduit for communication among non-native English speaking teachers. In the case of this collaboration study, two teachers, Taiwan and S. Korea are using English as second language for communication. In certain situations, the meaning of one’s native language can not be translated perfectly and other expressions are needed for clarification for conveyance. Factors such as cultural differences occasionally affect the command of language in the teachers’ communication. Verification of the requests or commands was part of the communication process. Interpersonal skill in an international context is the key to carry out cross-cultural commitment. This skill also requires the effort to solve misunderstandings and build a professional relationship. Each teacher was conscious of this factor and took caution in the communication process. They understand that dialogue is a major value in teacher’s collaboration (Johnston Parsons, 2010).

**Overcoming teaching philosophies and other conflicts**

The skill to overcome pedagogical differences and teaching practices due to each individual, cultural and educational difference were another essential task faced by the teachers in this collaboration project. Although all three teachers are in the field of language teaching, particularly English teaching, there are different requirements in each of their professional department and personal differences in their envisioning on how English can be used as a tool among their students. This is especially crucial in an international cooperative teaching framework. Each teacher’s difference in their experiences of schooling, living environment and teaching philosophies developed through out their careers made compromising a unique skill. The gaps between a shared vision for students learning and students achievement (Nelson, 2009) was a hurdle to overcome in this collaboration. Professional and technical skills only can not make this collaborative effort a success. Moreover, open mindedness and each teacher’s self awareness of cross cultural differences are needed to pursue a project and eventually strive toward a common purpose.
Tolerance toward other cultures

Exactly the same as students, teachers also need to be patient and tolerant toward another culture if they wish to set up an international collaboration. These include the skills of open-mindedness, unbiased attitude toward other culture, willingness to cope with cultural differences, and active communication. Before teachers plan for a cross culture activity, they need to ask themselves if they have a correct attitude toward other cultural parties in the collaboration. Acquire culture of another, being flexible and tolerant, respect and enjoy are considered very good strategies for developing a cross-cultural collaboration.

Compromising and negotiation

Compromise and negotiation are two important elements that are striving toward a successful collaboration. Even though an academic collaboration does not include any profit-making in a materialistic sense just like those on a business table, a fair compromise is needed to be reached in order to craft outcomes that can satisfy various interests. In business negotiation many people suggest that “honesty” and “openness” are two best policies to create a win-win situation. In an academic collaboration these two elements are hold true, while other elements like “sacrifice,” “altruism,” and “sense of coordination” also contribute to compromises. All in all, strong sense of individualism will not find a solution but destroy a negotiation.

Being equipped with technological knowledge

It is vitally important that English teachers support the idea of globalization, the role of technology, and intercultural communicative competence (Cho, M, and Hagenson 2005) in the English education; these are the key elements that push English teachers to international collaborations. With similar teaching philosophies regarding technology-based courses, the possibility of a cross cultural collaboration will increase.

Student and teachers’ academic schedule and geographic time differences were other factors which made the organization of the project a challenging task. This calls for teachers’ relentless efforts to search for a medium for all parties in the project. The teachers organization skills are needed to maximize efficiency. To share and discuss their project ideas, design and implementation, a communication medium via email was the basic tool used in this collaboration project. For conferencing, a face to face communication via Skype was used as a secondary tool. The drawback of email was the lack of simultaneity and the frustration of waiting for response to solve an immediate problem may occur. Another factor is the technological availability in the universities of the teachers. Teachers must negotiate on communication methods and availability to ensure smooth flow of interaction. The face to face communication via Skype was carried out in the teachers’ private time at home. Prior arrangement was
necessary to maintain professional integrity and consideration.

The design of an international collaboration

Globalization and international competence is now one of the hottest topics in Japan, and the concentration on the issue had resulted in either reschedule of curriculum or appearance of new focuses in many departments. The Japanese researcher, inspired by the global trend promoted in her educational environment, proposed a framework for international collaboration for her English class to two English teachers of different nationalities. In July 2009 the three English researchers, authors of this paper, agreed upon the idea that English learners must develop cross-cultural communicative competence, and together they design and carry out an international pilot study in autumn 2009. Ten participants from each country joined the cross-cultural program, students majoring in Economics from Kwansei Gakuin University of Japan, students majoring in English from Chien-kuo Technology University of Taiwan, and students with diverse majors from Dongseo University of South Korea. Participants from Japan and South Korea were all sophomore day school students, while participants from Taiwan belong to the weekend program and were generally older in age and had rich working experience. At the end of the activity, participants were cross-culturally interviewed by teachers of different nationalities. The challenges they had been faced with are described as follows.

Setting up a collaborative schedule

The collaboration requires a schedule that fits into the three academic schedules of different nations. Universities in Taiwan and South Korea share a similar academic schedule, with both begin their Fall term in September. The universities in Japan have a different schedule from the other two countries which have the semester beginning in July and include many national holidays in October. Because of the staggered schedules, the length of the intercultural project is constrained to a short term in order not to run into any holiday, term exam, and school activity of the participating countries. The final agreement for the pilot study of the paper is that the students’ part of the project had to be done within one month, that is, November 2009 so as not to cause any conflict with the three universities’ activities. On the other hand, the duration in which the three English teachers worked would depend on the complexity or actual happenings of participants’ performance, and the collaboration for the current project continued for an additional six months.

Planning for the intercultural collaboration

The planning of the intercultural collaboration took a great amount of time, patience, and energy but is necessary to minimize any irretrievable mistakes. Planning for an international partnership project actually includes two major aspects: working as a whole and working as an individual. As a whole, the three English teachers set up
a plan for the project that included description of procedure, timing, methodology, expectation, and a backup plan B. As individual, each English teacher fit this research activity into his or her own regular school schedule and prepared for reactions from students based on their ethnic/cultural/social/educational backgrounds.

There had been a lot of communications, updating, and discussions during the process as the three researchers expected. Since cross-cultural project planners are basically technological activists, computer technology becomes the most natural tool for its ease, cost effectiveness, and flexibility for communication. For most of the time the three researchers touched base with each other through Skype when face-to-face discussion is earnestly demanded, e-mail if some minor questions needed to be resolve, or when documents needed to be attached for review, and sometimes phone calls when there was an emergent problem to be settled.

Brainstorming is a good method especially in a multicultural, team-working project. To carry out the intercultural activity, the three teachers brainstormed some suitable topics for asynchronous communications. This basically includes some seemingly simple steps like drafting and feedback giving, but mutual intelligibility is supporting the whole process. If teachers involving in an international collaboration do not support each other’s ideas, stick stubbornly to one’s own core, or is too rigid to be flexible, things cannot move onward. The three researchers first made each other’s acquaintance in an international conference. With hearty talks exchanged, the short encounter brought them together for further collaboration. Rapport along with mutual respect and understanding becomes the cornerstone of the cross-cultural collaboration.

The spirit, respect, and sense of responsibility of team work are extremely important in an intercultural collaboration. Each teacher took up a part of the responsibility that would eventually move the activity on, and each teacher supported each other by encouragement and help. In this intercultural activity, the thirty students from different nations had several chances to meet teachers of other countries. The Japanese teacher supervised the ongoing of on-line conversation by giving direct advice or suggestion; and students had been interviews by a teacher of another country. But when the students encountered any problem, they would immediately seek their own instructor for assistance. It is crucial that each English teacher provide the proper cultural and national perspectives when making explanations to their students.

**Choosing a proper and trustworthy tool for computer-based communication**

The three teachers discussed for a proper, easily-operated, and reliable tool for the on-line cultural exchange activity. The teachers take their own school resources into consideration. Chien-kuo Technology has developed web-CT for academic usage, however it does not support the international language and is unsuitable for any
international project. Another consideration is Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment), a widely popular computer communicative tool in educational institutes nowadays but the program was not chosen as it needs more technological supports for teachers as well as instruction for students. After some discussion, the Japanese researcher recommended a free, non-profit communication tool for on-line teaching and learning opportunities supported and maintained by the Nicenet (www.nicenet.org). This tool is dedicated for asynchronous communication only and thus is regarded fitting for the cultural exchange program. This modern tool is open for public usage with easy and flexible steps for setting up or joining in an on-line class. It does not require too much technological support or operation instruction, and the teachers can publish their materials using very simple web-form for participants.

**Recruiting participants**

Participants of the three nations have different university ranking, majors, goals for learning, and performance. Even though the three researchers agreed upon a “voluntary” selecting method to recruit participants with intercultural awareness at the onset, the methods recruiting participants for this intercultural pilot study were somewhat different from country to country. It is typical that Japanese and Taiwanese students work part-time after school. Since most of them were occupied with their private business after school both the Japanese and the Taiwanese participants were given extra points to participants as an act of encouragement. Korean participants, on the other hand, were strongly inspired by the importance of the international language and the trends of globalization, and thus they all voluntarily joined.

**Evaluation of the international project**

The outcome of collaborative effects can be measured through school performance (Goddard, Y. L., Goddard, R. D., Tschannen-Moran, M., 2007). It can also be measured through questionnaire to faculty. The present research develops a collaborative measurement with participants interviewed cross-culturally by teachers of different cultural parties. The Korean teacher interviewed Taiwanese students, the Taiwanese teacher interviewed some Korean students and some Japanese students, and the Japanese teacher interviewed some Taiwanese students. All the cross-cultural interviews were conducted through Skype. The cross-cultural qualitative methodology brings forth culturally / pedagogical different perspectives from the three parties and leads to a triangulation methodology.

**Conclusion**

Teachers’ collaboration cross-culturally will become more common under the trend of globalization. It is notable that by changing the traditional teachers into scholars, leaders, and colleagues for learners, the students become more competent
individuals. But cross cultural collaborative efforts can overcome the limitations of intercultural communication and to bring forth an international learning environment not only for our students but for teachers as well. To successfully conduct an international collaboration, teachers must come together to make a central purpose and to develop certain collaborative methods. What bring these teachers together are the values and beliefs of respect and tolerance, passion and interest, curiosity and openness, and appreciation and understanding. These are the elements that kindle the fire of a cross cultural collaboration. It seems vital for teacher educators to be prepared for cross cultural experience prior their international collaborative project, and to foster skills discussed in this paper to fully elaborate a successful cross cultural collaboration.

Reference
College English, 53:3, pp. 264-279.


