

*Confronting Underlying Issues of Racism
for Effective Intercultural Communication*

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Abstract

This paper provides a brief overview of pertinent research and major theories related to communicating with people of different cultural backgrounds, as well as fun and useful techniques and strategies to use when teaching in international or multinational classrooms; and working or consulting in international or multinational school offices, companies, and organizations. The paper will conclude with a description of my new approach to one of the most common intercultural communication exercises called the E.A.D.

Keywords: intercultural communication, cross-cultural communication, racism, white racial models, D.I.E. exercise

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Introduction

At the 2013 Asian Conference on Language Learning, I presented a workshop titled *Confronting Underlying Racism for Effective Intercultural Communication*, and provided an article briefly describing what I began to employ in classrooms, businesses, and organizations—an updated version of a classic exercise in intercultural communication training. For this year’s Asian Conference on Education, I decided not only to slightly alter the title, but also to provide a more thorough description of my workshop, particularly the E.A.D. (Velasco, 2013).

I will begin this article the same way I began last year’s article: Discussing racism in a classroom, an office retreat or professional development seminar is never easy, and can be an extremely uncomfortable and painful experience, particularly when one is exposing underlying racial tension among the group. However, if there are underlying issues of racism, it is my belief that racism can and will lose its power and influence with increased cultural awareness, sensitivity, and effective intercultural communication.

In order to contribute to this goal, this paper will reflect on

- pertinent literature that will assist in understanding not only racism, but also intercultural communication;
- several continuing research studies that help reveal racial tension among two different cultural groups; and
- the new intercultural communication exercise called the E.A.D.

A final note to those who choose to believe there are no racism present at your child’s school, your workplace or within your community: The recent occurrence in Ferguson, Missouri, has affected not only this community, but the entire world, and has brought the issue of racism to the surface. Although it may never be certain if racism played a role in the shooting of Michael Brown, the comments left by readers are telling of the underlying issues that permeate the world. Words to describe the police officer, who is white, ranged from “murderer” to “racist white devil”; however, the words used to describe the victim, who was black, ranged from “thug” to “criminal,” and the protesters were labeled the worst—“thugs,” “welfare thieves,” “uncivilized brutes,” and, probably the worst, “monkeys” (Salter, 2104; Zagier, 2014).

Confronting Underlying Issues of Racism

In last year’s article, I included such historical events as the Nanjing incident (Askew, 2002), or modern acts of xenophobia, such as the attack on a Chinese tour bus (Jize, 2010) as examples of racial tension that reached boiling points, culminating in unthinkable acts. The truth of the matter is that racial tension has reached new heights all across the world, not just in the United States and Japan; however, because I am currently in Japan, my research in the field of intercultural communication and racism has focused on these two countries.

Last year, I asked 50 Japanese participants (both male and female, between the ages of 20 and 55) two things: 1) their age, and 2) their immediate and honest response to one phrase: “Say the first word that comes to mind when I say *Nigerian*” (the phrase

was asked in Japanese, but translated into English for publication). Forty-eight responded, without hesitation, “怖いです,” which is Japanese for *They’re scary* or *I’m afraid* (many of the younger female participants made facial and hand gestures to indicate their fear, and although I did not officially document the second word out of their mouths, half of the Japanese females followed their response up with “やだ,” which has many translations, but most commonly, “I don’t want [to/it]”); and the remaining two, both older men, stated matter-of-factly, “犯罪者”—criminal.

For this article, I decided to poll nineteen Nigerian men and one Nigerian woman, and asked them the same two questions: 1) their age, and 2) their immediate and honest response to one phrase: “Say the first word that comes to mind when I say *Japanese people*” (Note: This study took place in October 2014, in Tokyo). All of the participants said one of the following four words: ignorant, close-minded, rude, and, racist.

There are many race models, and while the following are labeled “white race models,” I do not include “white” when I apply them to my research because I believe these models can be applied to all races. The most notable race models include Hardiman’s (White) Racial Identity Model (1992); Helm’s (White) Racial Identity Development Model (1995); and Rowe et al.’s (1994) (White) Racial Consciousness Model (Daniels, 2011). Kovel (1994) explores models of white racial identity development, and pointed to some startling research: “The less aware subjects were of their White identity, the more likely they were to exhibit increased levels of racism” (p. 265). Again, to be clear, while the Japanese should not be compared to white Anglo-Saxon Americans, I do believe there is a connection between the racial identity models and current racial beliefs with regards to immigrants inhabiting a country where there is one dominant race.

Again, the point of these surveys was neither to accuse the Japanese nor the Nigerian populations of racial profiling, but reveal the need to further cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, and cultural acceptance on a global scale, and this can be achieved, in part, through effective intercultural communication.

Effective Intercultural Communication

Countless articles and books have indulged in the now-cliché observation regarding the world becoming smaller. The world is, in fact, becoming easier to access, both physically and virtually, thanks mostly to advancing technology; however, it is deceiving to believe that an easier accessible world equals a diverse, accepting, and communicative one.

In an ongoing study ranging from 2010 to 2013, I surveyed 400 people from America, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, El Salvador, Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa, almost every country in Western Europe, Russia, Iran, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, China, Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand. They were all asked to respond to the same statement: “List the three things that are most important to you.” The results continue to reveal 98% of responses fall into these three categories:

1. Family
2. Career

3. Health/Quality of life

I presented these research results for the first time during the 2014 Asian Conference on Education in Osaka, Japan, but not before presenting the same statement to the attendees. Although their responses varied to some degree, the overall consensus mirrored my findings.

While some choose to believe that every human is part of one race—the human race—human beings are much more complicated than that, and grouping every cultural group together in an attempt to break down borders is both ignorant and disrespectful to cultural differences. In last year's article, I provided the first definition of culture: "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, law, morals, custom, and any other habits acquired by humans who are members of a society" (Tyler, 1871). Given this definition, intercultural communication—"a communicative exchange between persons of different cultures"—and the training involved has never been more in demand (Klopf and McCroskey, 2007, p. 58). Intercultural communities should reflect social structures and daily interactions that are defined by understanding, acceptance, respect, freedom, equality, diversity, and celebration, and yet there are challenges to intercultural communication: cultural assumptions, prejudices, stereotypes, miscommunications, misinterpretations, and racism, to name just a few. Strategies to overcome these challenges are self-awareness, avoiding stereotypes, honesty, respect, inquiry, and acceptance of differences and the difficulties that naturally occur in communication. These strategies lead into the E.A.D. exercise that does more than just foster effective intercultural communication.

The E.A.D.

As stated earlier, the D.I.E. is one of the most, if not the most common exercise used in intercultural training. The D.I.E. exercise asks participants to describe, interpret, and evaluate an ambiguous object or photograph (Bennett, Bennett, & Stillings, 1977). Finding the model and its acronym problematic, Nam & Condon (2010) suggested D.A.E. (Describe, Analyze, Evaluate), with "analyze" supposedly being clearer directions for participants compared to the previous term "interpret" (in other words, problem solving versus judging) (p. 84).

However, when I applied these models to various situations, ranging from classroom settings to teacher training sessions to business consultations, I found that the participants always struggled with not judging the pictures first. While the D.A.E. is more effective in its clarity, I found that allowing participants to first evaluate a picture, they often expressed their true opinions about certain individuals or situations that were shown in the pictures. I began using more ambiguous photographs, and decided to let them judge the photos first. The results were remarkable: Not only were racially charged comments made without censorship, but sexist and bigoted comments were openly made, as well. What followed was even more amazing: The groups began to openly discuss the roots of these comments, and worked as a group to dispel them.

So how does it work? First off, before I present the E.A.D. to participants, I explain that they are going to see an object, photograph or short video, or hear a scenario

(e.g., a case study), and that the goal is to first evaluate or judge it, then analyze it, and finally describe it in the simplest of terms. I then show them a picture (or play the movie or read the scenario). One of the most common photographs I use is the following:



When I use this photograph and conduct the D.I.E. or the D.A.E., about 98% of the time no one states the obvious—that all the students are white. When I conduct the exercise using the E.A.D., not only do participant immediately realize that all the students are white, but racially charged adjectives, such as “privileged,” become attached to the comments. This type of comment has led to incredibly honest discussions on race, power and privilege, and taking steps backward to then talk about analyses and descriptions opens the doors to further discussions and exercises that help begin to build (or in some cases repair) trust, respect, and open communication.

Conclusion

Regardless of whether you are an English as a Second Language instructor or a university professor, a teacher trainer or a department chair, a department manager or a Chief Operating Officer, this exercise can work to help foster better relationships among students and employees of varying cultural identities.

As I wrote in my article last year, if you are charged with improving work relations among your students or colleagues, and you suspect there are underlying racial tension or racist beliefs, there are many approaches you can take and strategies to implement. In my workshops, I teach several that teach participants how to better communicate with other cultures, and it is with these exercises that you can confront racism head-on. The E.A.D. accomplishes this goal by not asking participants to objectively describe what they see first, but instead, evaluate what they see; in other words, immediately answer the question, “How do I feel about what I see” (Nam & Condon, 2010, p. 85). By moving backwards through the D.I.E./D.A.E. process, we

are able to move forward, confronting underlying racism, sexism or other issues that may be causing undue hardship and stress in your classroom or workplace. The goals for each and every session you use the E.A.D. should be to help those participating improve their self-awareness, cultural sensitivity, and effective intercultural communication.

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