

*An Introduction to Intercultural Communication Using Scenes from the Film,
Zootopia*

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The Asian Conference on Education & International Development 2018
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study reports on the use of the Disney film, *Zootopia*, as an educational tool in a college-level English course. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) prioritizes the advancement of international education. We argue that, to this end, it is important to develop activities to enhance students' intercultural understanding. Using interesting clips from popular films is an effective way of motivating students and nurturing their understanding. This study aims to enhance participants' intercultural understanding through a practice-based EFL (EFL: English as a Foreign Language) course. To this end, students were divided into pairs and group and were required to discuss and note their ideas on worksheets. The practical EFL course was designed especially for students from Kosen College, Japan. The results of questionnaires administered before and after the classes revealed that the course enabled the students to enhance their intercultural competence. In particular, screening certain scenes from *Zootopia* enabled the students to enhance their intercultural competence and capacity for intercultural communication. This study can also be used a framework for designing practice-based EFL classes to enhance students' intercultural understanding.

Keywords: communication, EFL, film, intercultural competence, intercultural understanding, material development, stereotype

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Introduction

As the number of countries dealing with the phenomenon of immigration has increased recently, the question of multiculturalism has become more salient among the international community. Notably, the United States of America (USA) alone has received approximately 60 million immigrants from all over the world since the mid-nineteenth century. As a result, it is currently the most multiracial and multicultural state in the world (Nakano, 2010). Immigration does not only engender diversity and multiculturalism; it also complicates intercultural communication, and this sometimes results in communication problems.

Zootopia (2016), a recent Disney film, calls attention to the challenges posed by intercultural communication. Interestingly, the animated film does so by presenting a diverse world populated by various species of anthropomorphic mammals. Unlike previous Disney films, *Zootopia* focuses on real-life interracial or intercultural problems. In addition, the film is also a significant departure from Disney's preference for formulaic happy-ending stories. For the purpose of this study, we designed an intercultural workshop based on the theoretical work of Kim and Gudykunst (2003). Feedback received from the participants showed that the workshop enabled them to become more aware of the challenges engendered by increased intercultural interaction. The workshop facilitated in-depth discussions in the participants' mother tongues to improve their awareness and understanding of the nuances of intercultural communication.

Literature Review

Although the Ministry of Education, Technology and Science (hereinafter referred to as MEXT) has prioritized the cultivation of intercultural competence in its drive to develop global human resources, Japanese higher education, however, does not provide many opportunities for students to develop their intercultural competence. Nonetheless, to address the challenges posed by increasing globalization, the ministry aims to develop global human resources with good English proficiency and a sound understanding of the demands and nuances of intercultural communication. To this end, the Japanese government also seeks to enhance intercultural competence at the tertiary levels of Japanese educational settings (Central Council for Education, 1996 and 2010).

Japanese teachers, therefore, focus on facilitating intercultural communication to enhance students' intercultural competence, which is fast becoming a critical skill in the context of global human resources. Aoki's *Intercultural Communication* (2016), one of the most popular books in this field, argues that intercultural understanding is mainly impeded by the wide circulation of one-sided stereotypes, which, the author argues, is mostly politically motivated.

It is especially important to tackle stereotypes to enhance intercultural competence through formal education. Moreover, it is not possible to acquire unbiased perspectives without challenging and eliminating the assumptions we produce naturally and unconsciously in our daily life. Hanamitsu et. al (2013) suggest that stereotype is a form of patterned thinking, which mostly affects people's perceptions of social categories, such as sex, occupation, and race. Human beings also tend to rely

on stereotypes to process information, which in turn has a negative impact on their capacity for intercultural competence.

The DIE theory, developed Gudykunst and Kim (2003), focuses on the cognitive processes involved in social interactions, including the application of stereotypes. In particular, the theory focuses on three cognitive processes people typically employ when they meet strangers: description, interpretation, and evaluation. Description pertains to the ways in which we cognitively register objective details of our meeting. Our interpretations, the theory suggests, are shaped by on our experience and perceptions. Our evaluation of the person and the meeting are based on our points of view, which in turn are shaped by our cultural background. As per Gudykunst and Kim, although we typically go through these process without much cognitive mediation, a person of high intercultural competence, they argue, is capable of controlling not only these processes but also their assumptions or stereotypes. Therefore, one way to enhance students' intercultural competence is by teaching them to control these cognitive processes.

Research Questions

Given the above, this study mainly examines the following two questions:

Q1) How do films help students to improve their intercultural competence and communication?

Q2) Can the *DIE Theory* enable students to understand the nuances of intercultural communication?

Methods

Research Site: Kosen college in Japan

Unlike most Japanese universities, Kosen College offers a five-year, practical and professional education program for junior high school graduates. In some cases, the college offers seven-year education programs for students, especially engineers, enrolled in advanced courses. These courses cater especially to students who already the possess the capacity to work in mid-level roles in industrial production sites. In the earlier stages of the regular five-year program, students are offered both general and specialized education, but the focus lies on providing quality general education. In the later stages, however, students are offered more specialized education. Students enrolled in the regular course become members of the Monozukuri Engineering Department and receive associate degrees, whereas students in the advanced course receive a bachelor's degree in Creative Engineering.

Main Educational Goals:

Both courses focus on developing the following skills: practical skills, basic skills, humanity and social skills, communication skills, and creative skills. By developing students' communication skills, the college aims to produce engineers who can communicate clearly in a globalized world and workspace.

The college mainly prepares students for TOEIC (Test of English as International Communication). However, the college does not offer courses to help students understand the nuances of intercultural communication. Therefore, this study aims to introduce students to the basic principles of intercultural communication, thereby creating awareness about this type of communication.

Participant Profile:

In total, 164 third grade students from Kosen College participated in the study. The participants were divided into 4 groups and were required to enroll in English 3 during the course of this study. The average TOEIC score was approximately 327, which is a typical beginner level EFL score. Although most participants had not traveled abroad, all of them regarded English as an essential language.

Typically, one of us—the researchers—taught the students, whereas the other observed the class. We chose a scene involving Judy and Nick at the US Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) as the communication setting. In this scene, Judy and Nick find it difficult to obtain information from a clerk at the DMV.

In the film, all clerks at the DMV, a notoriously crowded place, are sloths, a slow-moving arboreal mammal. Judy and Nick find it extremely difficult to communicate with these sloths. This scene was chosen because it involved simple English dialog. In addition, the participants were able to empathize with Judy. Participants found it easier to relate to and understand Judy's body movements, facial expressions, and her tone of speaking.

This study is based on the content analysis method developed by Ishii, S. et al (2013). Content analysis is especially useful in the context of intercultural communication research, and it requires the researcher to register free descriptions in an Excel worksheet. We used this method to identify the keywords students tended to use in each task. According to AXSIS Corporations, a Japanese consulting firm, keywords can be identified using three main steps: extracting, arranging, and identifying. By doing so, researchers can identify frequently used key words or phrases.

Results

Participants were informed beforehand that they would mainly be required to answer subjective questions during the workshop; they were only required to substantiate their answers. Participants were also required to prepare for in-depth discussions.

Participants were required to watch the film the CALL classroom. However, they watched the film on their own PCs. After watching the film, the students were instructed to assess Judy's situation using the DIE theory. They were also required to register comments in a worksheet. Following this, students discussed the scene in pairs and groups. Students then presented their thoughts and ideas using a microphone.

We observed that the students were curious and excited about the workshop. In fact, the workshop was the students' first experience of a practical class about intercultural understanding. Overall, the atmosphere was conducive for learning and the students

were very willing to participate in the proceedings. Students were also required to complete a questionnaire at the end of the workshop.

Through the workshop, students realized that, as future engineers, it was important for them to develop intercultural understanding. They also realized the importance of addressing and overcoming stereotypes.

Discussion

Students were required to recall the basic points about the *DIE* theory before viewing the clip. We explained the task, including how to fill the worksheet, in Japanese. However, we did not inform the students beforehand that they were only required to focus on Judy's point of view. As a result, some students were confused and found it difficult to complete the task. For instance, some students assumed that they were required to focus on Flash's point of view. We realized that it was very important to provide clear instructions beforehand.

After watching the clip, the students discussed the significance of the scene. The discussion was also intended as an exercise in listening. In addition, the students also engaged in what Yashiro (2016) calls assertive communication. Overall, we encountered no problems during the workshop, and students were more forthcoming than anticipated. Almost all students answered the questionnaire positively. Some of their comments are as follows: "I enjoyed the class and sharing ideas is meaningful." "We should accept the difference in a global society." "In Japan, Flash is a representation for elderly people or people who work very quickly." "From now on, I would like to communicate with people without any discrimination." "I want to take this kind of lessons more in the future."

In addition, one of the comments read, "We should hire people for a suitable job. That is more effective." Through the workshop, the students also learned how to create efficient products. Approximately 67% of the participants answered the free description question.

Future studies should aim to encourage students to think about the stereotypes circulated within Japan society, as well as the common stereotypes about Japanese people.

Conclusion

In sum, by screening certain scenes from the film, *Zootopia*, we were able to enhance students' understanding of intercultural communication. In addition, this study can be used as a guide for designing introductory lectures and educational programs about intercultural understanding. The short duration of the workshop and the number of the participants limit the generalizability of the findings. We also aim to conduct experimental lessons for other students of the college as well.

Acknowledgment

Funding from Tokyo Metropolitan College of Industrial Technology is gratefully acknowledged. (Annual Funding for Education Improvement)

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Appendix: Worksheet

ZOOTOPIA Handout

Class No Name _____

Practice : 映画を観て、次の内容について考えてみよう。

Scene: Meeting Flash (哺乳類自動車局 DMV での場面)

登場人物 Judy ウサギ、Nick キツネ、Flash ナマケモノ

Description (状況判断): 客観的に状況を説明してください。誰がどこで何をしていますか？	
Interpretation (解釈): <u>Judy は</u> 、この状況から何が分かった？	
Evaluation (価値判断): <u>Judy にとって</u> 、解釈した状況は好ましいですか？嫌いですか？ その理由は？	

1. ビデオクリップを再度みて、()に英単語一語を入れなさい。

Nick: Flash, Flash, Hundred Yard Dash! Buddy, it's nice to see you.

Flash: Nice to ... (1.) you ... too.

Nick: Hey, Flash, I'd love you to meet my friend. Ah... Darling, I've forgotten your name.

Judy: Hmm. Officer Judy Hopps, ZPD. How are you?

Flash: I am... doing... just..

Judy: (2.)?

Flash: as well.. as.. I can.. be...

Flash:- What...

Nick: Hang in there.

Flash: - (3.) I... do...

Judy: Well, I was hoping you could run a plate...

Flash: - for you...

Judy: - Well, I was hoping you could...

Flash:..today?

Judy: Well, I was hoping you could run a plate for us. We are in a (4.) big

(5.).

Flash: - Sure... (6.) the... plate...

Judy: - 2-9-T...

Flash: - (7.)?

Judy:- 2-9-T-H-D-0-3.

Meeting Flash のシーンであなたが考えたこと、学んだことは何ですか。(in Japanese)

振り返り：今日の授業を全体的に振り返って、感想、自由意見を書いてください。(in Japanese)
