

# Promoting students' cultural context acquisition through Web-based inquiry

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**Abstract:** Since the term intercultural communication was introduced by Edward T. Hall in his book (1959), *The Silent Language*, issues about intercultural communication have been not only been dealt with in the field of Humanities but also in any area related to human interaction. Moreover, recent researchers have devoted systematic attention to developing “cultural fluency”, “cultural literacy” or “intercultural competence”. The methods through which culture is acquired also have changed from a traditional information acquisition approach to a process-oriented constructivist approach. That is, there has been a movement from approaches where learners are largely simply told about the target culture by the teacher to students' active participation in construction of understanding about the target culture along with reflecting on their own culture. Using technology as a means to acquire culture is no longer particularly new, but, as Goodyear (2005) argues, the use of technology holds particular promise for the creation of learning settings that can interest and motivate learners. In order to promote students' active participation in learning culture and to help students' understanding and reflection on various cultural context—including their own—this study adapted an inquiry-based activity using WebQuests. One of the attractive sides of WebQuests is that students are able to use various resources actively to do a task through organizing information and applying the knowledge acquired to real-life situations. The aim of this study is to help students enrolled in an intercultural communication class to understand various cultural contexts through a systematic inquiry-based approach using WebQuests, and with the goal of eventually improving their intercultural competence. The study used concurrent quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-surveys and an adapted version of the GENE (Generalized Ethnocentrism) scale questionnaires during the course. The analyses of students' reflection during class discussion and essays written on completion of the WebQuests were measured as the qualitative data. The results of the study show students' positive improvement qualitatively and quantitatively.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, cultural context acquisition, inquiry-based activity, WebQuests

## 1. Introduction

Advances in telecommunication tools and the development of faster transportation means has brought people together from different parts of the world into contact at school, at work, in their neighborhood and in cyberspace. Today only 10% of the countries in the world are racially or ethnically homogeneous (Harris, Moran & Moran, 2004). This means that in an increasingly global environment, developing intercultural understanding and an ability to live and work with people having very different backgrounds is a key in succeeding in our global lives. In fact, developing “cultural fluency”, “cultural literacy” or “intercultural competence” have received systematic attention from many researchers since the 1990s, and many scholars have defined and suggested models of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 1995; Howard et al., 1998; Kim, 1991; Neuliep, 2006; Rathje, 2007; Stier, 2003; Ting-Toomey, & Kurogi, 1998).

Neuliep (2012) defined intercultural communication competence as “the degree to which you effectively adapt your verbal and non-verbal messages to the appropriate cultural context” (p. 424). For this, he suggested that speakers are required to have some knowledge of the person with whom they are communicating, the motivation to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds and the appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication skills in order to encode and decode messages. In addition, Stier (2003) suggested that there are two competencies referred to in

intercultural competence: content competencies and processual competences. Content competencies are related to “knowing that” – the aspect of not only other cultures but also one’s own culture. Processual competences refer to “knowing how” – the aspect of intercultural competence involving intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies. The intrapersonal competencies are related to cognitive and motivation skills and the interpersonal competencies refer to interactive abilities.

Based on the claims from Neuliep and Stier regarding acquisition of intercultural competence, it can be said that in order to develop intercultural competence, we need to know and understand various aspects of our culture and also other’s cultures. Related to this process, we need to have the cognitive and emotional motivation to cope with encountering unfamiliar settings as well as some appropriate verbal and non-verbal skills to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, it is essential to reflect on this process in order to developing intercultural competence into cultural acquisition classes.

The methods of learning culture have been changed from a traditional information acquisition approach to a process-oriented constructivist approach (Shrum & Glisan, 2005). That is, the approaches where learners were predominantly simply told about the target culture by the teacher have moved to approaches encouraging students’ active participation in construction of their understanding of the target culture along with reflecting on their own culture. There have been already a number of studies which discussing the use of technology in order to promote students’ active participation in learning culture (Belz, 2003,2007; Chun, 2011; Chun & Wade, 2004; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Levy, 2007; Müller-Hartmann, 2000; Schneider & von der Emde, 2006; Ware & Kramsch, 2005). According to Goodyear (2005), this is due to the fact that the use of technology holds particular promise for the creation of learning settings that can interest and motivate learners.

This study adapted inquiry-based activities using WebQuests to help students understand and reflect on various cultural contexts, included their own. Dodge (1997) defines WebQuests as “an inquiry-based activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the Internet” (p. 2). There are several previous studies which have highlighted various aspects of WebQuests, in particular the program design (Dodge, 2001; Halat, 2008; Hassanien, 2006; Maddux & Cummings, 2007; March, 2004, 2006). One of the attractive sides of WebQuests is that students are able to use information actively to do a task through organizing information, preparing them to apply the knowledge acquired to real-life situations. Students’ active engagement can be done both in individual work and/or cooperative group learning which goes beyond simple information gathering, rather bringing up important skills such as critical thinking, peer interaction, problem solving, and decision making, which would also be expected to foster learner autonomy (Ikpeze & Boyd, 2007; Lara & Reparaz, 2007; Luke, 2006; MacGregor & Lou, 2005; Oliver, 2008; Schweizer & Kossow, 2007; Sen & Neufeld, 2006). In recent years, WebQuests have been widely used in both higher educational setting and secondary educational organizations in the United States, a tendencies that has also extended to other countries (Dodge 1995; Dunn & Marinetti, 2004; Wang, 2007).

The aim of this study is to help students in an intercultural communication class to understand various cultural contexts using a systematic inquiry-based approach incorporating WebQuests, with the goal of eventually improving their general intercultural competence.

## **2. Method**

This study was carried out in a Communication Studies course entitled, “Intercultural Communication” at Hosei University, in Japan. The course is an undergraduate seminar course. The aims of the course are to enable students to be aware of and respect cultural diversity through exploring various cultural contexts and eventually to apply the knowledge learned in class into their intercultural experiences. There were 20 students in the seminar, and although the classes were conducted in English, it is not a foreign language course. The students were of an intermediate level of English, and important concepts of the lessons were presented and explained in both Japanese and English. This study involved the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were collected through a pre-test and a post-test during the course, and the qualitative data were analyses of students’ reflections in class discussion and in post-treatment essay.

## *2.1 Pre-test and post-test*

All of the students who were enrolled in the course completed the GENE (Generalized Ethnocentrism) scale questionnaire to measure their ethnocentrism. They completed the same questionnaire in the first day and the last day of classes during the course. The questionnaire was adapted from the GENE scale by Neuliep and McCroskey (1997). The GENE scale is composed of 22 items, 11 worded positively and 11 worded negatively, and was designed to reflect a conceptualization of ethnocentrism that can be experienced by anyone, regardless of their culture. The original questionnaire was in English, but was translated into Japanese, with the Japanese version of the questionnaire being re-translated by a different translator into English for comparison with the original. The questionnaire was in form of five-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Scores on the GENE scale range from 15 to 75, with higher scores representing higher levels of ethnocentrism (i.e., are more likely to believe that their own culture is better).

## *2.2 Design*

To improve students' intercultural communication competence, the course was designed in four stages: (1) lectures about fundamental concepts about culture, (2) completion of WebQuests tasks, (3) class discussion, and (4) writing an essay. These are explained in more details forthwith.

- (1) Lectures: Based on previous studies about developing intercultural communication competence, it is important for students to have motivation to adopt other cultures. This motivation is related to having an open and receptive mind as well as a reduced degree of ethnocentrism. For this, teaching some basic but essential issues about culture is very important. Before students explore their own and other cultures, the lectures focused on fundamental concepts such as; culture is not innate but learned, how our culture influences our perceptions, behavior, language, habits, daily lives, various cultural patterns in the world, and deceptive factors in intercultural communication such as stereotyping, racism, ethnocentrism and so on. These concepts are helpful for students to explore their culture and other cultures from a third person's position. Lectures were provided for seven weeks
- (2) Webquest activities: The main purpose of doing the WebQuest activities was to make students actively aware their own culture and other cultures through finding some of the roots or backgrounds of the images and behavior of their own culture and other cultures. In completing the WebQuest tasks, students needed to find out general images and fixed images of Japan(ese) and America(ns) from their communication styles, business activities, school or daily lives, and so on. After identifying these images, they needed to find out and explain the historical background of how these images came into being, the social organizational structure, religions, language, and the diverse cultural patterns such as may be defined through Hofstede's five characteristics of cultures, Hall's theory of high and low-context of culture, the M and P-time of cultures, and so on. Lastly, they needed to identify the unique cultural patterns for Japan(ese) and America(ns).

Topics for the WebQuest tasks were:

1. Find out general images and fixed images of Japan(ese) and America(ns).
2. Find out how these images came into being. You can explain these images through the historical background, the social organizational structure, religions, language, and the diverse cultural patterns and so on.
3. Identify Japanese cultural patterns and American cultural patterns based on the result of task.

All of the resources needed for the tasks were selected online by the researcher, taking into consideration students' cognitive capacities and linguistic abilities. The various resources were selected to maintain students' motivation to find out the necessary information, and thus included a balance of both heavy and light contented materials such as academic sources, news reports, personal blogs, and video materials written in either Japanese or English. These activities were carried out in class over a four-week period combining both individual work and group (consisting of around three students) work. Students found out information through the provided websites individually and on the final day of the WebQuest tasks, each group of

students shared their information and discussed some similarities and differences between the two cultures.

Group discussion before class discussion was deemed as important for the Japanese students because it allows them to support and confirm their views with each other. Through doing this, it is much easier for students to voice their opinions confidently in front of other people in class discussion.

- (3) Class discussion: After finishing the WebQuest tasks, students shared their experiences, and discussed their perceptions and understanding toward Japanese culture and American culture and people.
- (4) Essay writing: Students were required to submit a reflective essay based on the WebQuests by the final day of the course. Students were asked to organize their knowledge from the lectures and the WebQuests, including comparisons of the cultural context between Japan and the United States.

The final essay topic was: "Identify unique cultural patterns of Japanese and American cultures from their communication styles, business activities, education, daily lives and so on, and explain these cultural patterns based on their historical and various social backgrounds and the diverse cultural characteristics covered during this course." Students were required to submit the essay in English.

### 3. Result and Discussion

The quantitative data through the pre- and post tests were analyzed using the Statistic Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 21.0 program. For this study, the reliability of the pre-test was .94 for the GENE 22-item scale ( $M = 36.70$ ,  $SD = 6.05$ ), as determined by Cronbach's alpha, while the reliability of the post-test was .97 for the GENE 22-item scale ( $M = 32$ ,  $SD = 5.26$ ), as determined by Cronbach's alpha. Higher mean scores indicated higher ethnocentrism, and scores above 55 are considered as high ethnocentrism. As the result showed, students' ethnocentrism score measured at the end of the course was lower ( $M = 32$ ) than the score measured at the first day ( $M = 36.70$ ) of the course. According to Neuliep and MaCroskey (1997), one of effects of ethnocentrism is that it clouds our perception of others. That is, we have a tendency to judge others based on our cultural standard. Therefore, it is obvious that at high levels, ethnocentrism is an obstacle to effective intercultural communication. Accordingly, the fact that students' scores on the ethnocentrism scale dropped indicated that their ability to put themselves into the position of others and their ability to understand other cultures improved.

Regarding the qualitative data through students' reflection in class discussion and in their written assignment, overall students showed a largely open and receptive attitude toward American culture. At the same time, many of them appeared to analyze some of the reasons why Japanese culture caused misunderstanding to others. They also suggested acting flexibly when they interact with people from different cultures. The following comments are examples of students reflecting on Japanese culture, their own culture:

- "One of Japanese people's characteristic is a "shy", so we, Japanese rarely say our own opinion publically. And I never try to speak up in front of other people. However, I found out that being quite, especially in a meeting can give negative impression. From now on, I will try to say my opinion more clearly."
- "I didn't know there are so many negative images with Japanese and Japanese food. I used to complain about people who don't understand about our food culture. However, I have had those foods since I was young, so I like it. Like me, American people and other country people believe their food is the best. If we respect each other's food, we will be not hurt each other's feeling"

Regarding American culture, the following statement from a student showed their understanding about American people's communication style and behavior based on information about American history and cultural patterns.

- "When I looked at American people who come to Japan, they look very rude and are noisy. They are talking each other loudly in public place. However, I found out they have learnt to say their opinion clearly since they were young and it is very important to communicate in their

multicultural society. I realized that the different society system can shape people's communication style."

As shown in this sample of students' reflections after the WebQuests, most students said that the information obtained through the WebQuests help them to better understand the content of the lectures. Students were able to be more aware of what other people think about themselves, that is, how they are seen by people from other cultures. Furthermore, they were able to think about that what elements of their behavior and communication styles might cause misunderstanding to people from different cultures. Towards other culture, American culture in this study, they showed an effort to try to understand widely the differences in cultural values, behaviors, and the communication styles which characterize American culture. Of course, there were a few negative comments about the WebQuests task, such as the amount of time taken to read all of the materials, the need for more resources written in Japanese. However, one of the more notable observations was that many students oriced statements such as the following: "culture gives great influence on people's thoughts, behavior and lives", "there is no good culture and bad culture", "culture is changeable so we can be flexible in our behavior depending on the situation" and so on. These are basic but very essential concepts to understand various cultural issues. That students used these concepts to explain the cultural issues might indicate they developed their cognitive and motivation skills in intercultural competence.

#### 4. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to encourage students in an intercultural communication class to understand various cultural contexts and improve their general intercultural competence using a systematic inquiry-based approach incorporating WebQuests. The course was designed in four stages to improve students' intercultural communication competence: (1) lectures about fundamental concepts about culture, (2) completion of WebQuest tasks, (3) class discussion, and (4) writing an essay. Combining knowledge of culture in general with WebQuests activities enabled students to keep a balance between understanding fundamental cultural concepts including the general nature of culture, and exposure to various cultural perspectives and experiences.

WebQuest activities have been used in many different university foreign language courses around the world., and many studies have shown positive effects of WebQuests. Through this study, it is suggested that WebQuest activities helps students to better understand the content of their classes through actively finding information through various resources—not textbooks, but rather real voices from other people on the Internet. This process is able to motivate students in their learning process. In addition, as the result of the GENE scale showed, WebQuests promoted the main objective of studying intercultural communication through changing learners' perceptions and attitudes about their culture and other cultures in positive way. Moreover, through the result of this study, it was possible to see the potential of using WebQuest activities in non-English language learning course. If teachers are able to design WebQuest activities considering their students' learning and linguistic capacity, WebQuests can be used to fit effectively into a range of class types and overcome linguistic barriers that might hinder their potential outcomes.

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