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Case Studies: Culture as Content [3]

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The use of case studies to examine such concepts as intercultural communication, cultural conflicts and cultural misunderstandings is certainly not new; anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists have been using case studies for years to teach their respective disciplines. However, in the language classroom, the use of case studies can also be beneficial for the dual purposes of addressing cultural issues as a content area of study, and for presenting and practicing the target language in a variety of contexts. Case studies, also known as critical incidents, can be adapted to fit the student audience in terms of general knowledge background, course level and content, language level, purpose for studying, age, and other relevant demographic factors.

In her article "*Culture bump and beyond"* Carol M. Archer suggests that incidents in which:

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> ...someone from one culture finds himself or herself in a different, strange or uncomfortable situation when interacting with persons of a different culture.....provide a gold mine for the international educator. They lead teacher and student alike to an awareness of self as a cultural being and provide an opportunity for skill development in extrapolating one cultural influence on everyday life, expressing feelings effectively in a cross-cultural situation, and observing behavior. The entire process is language in action, leading to general improvement of communication in the target language.

While language teachers have often focused on the target culture vis-a-vis "other" or students' culture(s), we can also make a case for observing and studying interactions between various cultures across a wider spectrum as a means to more broadly define cultural behavior and to examine ways in which other cultures communicate, regardless of their relation to the target culture. Students are thereby exposed to a multitude of definitions and expectations of what constitutes, for example, polite behavior, and can begin to view their own cultures and themselves in a more global perspective. In addition, students can hopefully begin to appreciate the cultural diversity and the importance of subcultures in such countries as England or the U.S. where communicative norms and discourse styles for the "target culture" actually vary quite a bit depending on location, participants and settings. In a situation where university students have chosen majors in fields such as international studies, sociology, anthropology, speech communication or other social sciences which require in-depth studies of culture and intercultural communication, the English language teacher has a perfect opportunity to use the study of culture as the vehicle for language study. In such an environment both a content-based language teaching approach and an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) approach can be combined.

In accordance with the above rationale, I have been researching the use of cultural incidents, or case studies, in the context of an intensive EAP multiskills course in which students are studying outside the target culture at an American university campus in Japan, and are planning to complete Bachelor degrees in the U.S. This course is the last ESL course they take before they exit the ESL program, and become full time university freshmen. The course addresses the subject of sociology, using both a college-level sociology text and related readings in culture, intercultural communication, cultural concepts of space, time and interpersonal relations, gender issues and other topics primarily related to the study of culture, our main focus in the textbook and in the course. The personal goals and objectives of these students are quite clear and are actually two-fold: As previously mentioned, many students are preparing for a series of college courses in

the area of international studies, in which they will study subjects such as intercultural communication, sociology, anthropology, and cultural psychology. Their current EAP course thus provides a knowledge base which will benefit and enhance their program of study. The other, more common objective of all students in the class is their plan to eventually complete Bachelor degrees at American universities. While they are learning academic skills such as reading college-level materials, writing academic essays, critically evaluating and discussing issues, listening to lectures and note-taking, they are also learning a subject which will not only directly help them in future studies, but will also increase their ability to cope and communicate in a new culture.

In the above class, we have been using case studies as a means to examine communication issues and conflicts based on cultural assumptions. Because the course specifically addresses culture as a topic of sociology, students have already explored the components of culture and cultural identity, and have worked extensively with such concepts as values, norms, stereotypes, ethnocentrism, ethnicity, and subcultures, before they begin to work with case studies. For the purpose of teaching culture and language, a case study can be defined as:

> an example or illustration of an unresolved intercultural conflict, misunderstanding, or problem whose basis lies in differing values, norms, communication styles or any other aspect of cultural difference.

(In fact, the above definition could more narrowly be called the case. The steps taken to study and explore the case would actually constitute the case study.)

Although we might traditionally think of a case study as a short story or anecdote that describes such a situation, there are actually a number of other ways to present and approach these cases. One such way is to present a short, dramatized example from a movie or TV program. There are a number of movies with excellent material, such as *The Joy Luck Club, Anne Hall, El Norte, Eat a Bowl of Tea, Gandhi, Cry Freedom, Mi Familia, Double Happiness, Witness, Come See the Paradise,* and others. It's probably worth noting that although movies and TV present obvious opportunities both for examining language and content, movie directors have their own agendas and scenes are often biased accordingly. For example, the juxtaposition of Christian-Anglo-Saxon and Jewish-American communication styles in *Annie Hall* is clearly prejudiced toward the Jewish-American communication style which is presented as warmer and more affectionate than the scene featuring the Christian family, which seems extremely

cold—and anti-Semitic to boot. A scene of *The Joy Luck Club* in which the American fiancé of a Chinese-American woman visits her family and commits a series of faux-pas is clearly prejudiced in favor of the Chinese-Americans and greatly exaggerates the cultural ineptitude of the American man. Teachers should be aware of such bias in films so that scenes can be used appropriately.

Generally, little or no previewing activities are needed for "setting the scene", as the first step includes viewing silently and guessing character relationships, affiliations, location, ethnic or cultural groups, nationalities, etc. The amount of previewing needed often becomes clear only after using the scene, in other words, through trial and error. One example, helpful for examining racism and institutional discrimination is an early scene from the movie *Gandhi,* in which Gandhi is kicked off the train in South Africa for riding in the whites-only first class compartment. The first time I showed the *Gandhi* scene students seemed very confused and just didn't seem to "get it." It turned out that these Asian students didn't realize Gandhi was considered "colored" by the British. To them, he just looked like another white man. However, this confusion in itself opened the door to an interesting discussion about the fact that "race" is not necessarily a biological classification but is more accurately a sociological construct (Macionis 1997); in other words, the label of white, black, or colored depends on who is doing the labeling. In any case, the amount of pre-viewing and explanation needed before showing a particular movie scene varies according to the scene, the student group, and the students' familiarity with various ethnic groups and locations.

As an example, the scene in the movie *Mi Familia* when the Mexican-American family meets their son's upper-middle class fiancée and future in-laws is interesting for exploring the immigrant experience in first and second generation Mexican-American families, the language of introductions, and discourse styles centering around small talk. The cultural conflicts and differences in this one short scene include:

- the upper-middle class American family's reaction to the working class Mexican-American home;
- the Mexican-American parents' reaction to the fact that their son has changed his name from Guillermo (Memo) to William (Bill);
- generational differences in values between both Guillermo and his parents, and the fiancée and her parents;

- the upper-middle class parents' reactions to Mexican-American communication styles, noise levels, interpersonal space, child-parent relations, and other physical aspects of communication.

In addition, the 5-minute scene can be easily transcribed to provide students with a dialog that can be used for language study and practice. Students thereby use the target language both in straight dialog practice, and for speaking about the above elements of the scene in discussion and comprehension activities.

The lesson activities for such a scene would include previewing the first minute or so silently so that students can guess the location, the two ethnic groups involved, the relationships between the characters, the time period, the feelings of the characters evident in their facial and body language, the class level of the two groups involved and any other aspects evident just from initial observation. Students can also describe the house, the room and the neighborhood in some detail. They can then guess what the characters might be saying and how the scene might play itself out. The previewing step can thereby be used to generate a great deal of language use, and to activate schema and establish context. Of course, for students who are unfamiliar with these groups or with the setting, the teacher would need to supply information such as the ethnic group or time period in order to help students carry out the above pre-viewing activities.

Viewing activities for such a scene would closely adhere to established video techniques appropriate to the clip (Stempleski, Tomalin 1990). Such activities could include viewing the entire scene with no sound and having students describe what happened, again concentrating on body language and emotion conveyed through facial expression and gestures. This step alone not only stimulates language use through the task of describing and talking about the scene, but also identifies some cultural differences in communication styles and involves using observation skills. A second viewing step might include a standard cloze activity in which students fill in the missing words of the film segment's dialog. The entire script of the segment can then be used as a dialog activity. In the above referenced scene from *Mi Familia* typical language used in introductions and making small-talk can be introduced or reviewed, and practiced. Ensuing discussion activities focus on the cultural aspects of the scene. The scene from *Mi Familia* can generate some interesting discussion about why the son, Guillermo, has lied to his future in-laws about his background and his family, the in-laws' reaction to the fact that Guillermo's brother has just been released from jail, why the various characters seem to feel uncomfortable and what language

and movements they use to disguise their discomfort, generational differences in the immigrant family and the cultural values evident in the scene.

Case studies based on film clips such as this one are also fruitful for language work with English modals and conditional forms. Questions such as what the characters could have or should have done to handle the situation, how they could have better prepared for the situation, and what might have happened had they done something differently, arise naturally from scenes which depict cross cultural misunderstanding or conflict. For example, after a brief presentation of the grammatical form, students can be asked to reply to questions such as:

What would have happened if Guillermo had been truthful about his background?

How could Guillermo's parents have made their guests more comfortable?

Would you have acted differently in the same situation?

If you were (name of any character) how would you feel about (the situation)?

Students can easily personalize such situations and continue practicing modal forms by discussing how their own parents would react if they brought home a foreigner, what they would do to prepare a visitor for dinner with their family, or what visitors should study before visiting their country. All of these activities can also be extended to writing activities such as summarizing the scene, describing the cultural differences or problems, writing a letter to a character in the scene or writing a comparison of one's culture with those viewed in the clip.

Case Studies Adapted from Other Sources

The more familiar type of case study is presented in written form and there are a number of books that focus on cultural knowledge and feature case studies. There are also plenty of case studies which can be adapted from sociology and anthropology texts, and recent intercultural communication texts use case studies extensively. Books by such well-known authors as Edward Hall (*Beyond Culture, The Silent Language)* and Deborah Tannen (*That's Not What I Meant)* use examples of cultural miscommunication and misunderstanding throughout, and can be easily adapted. In addition, from personal experience and imagination, teachers can create a wide variety of their own case studies appropriate to individual classes. Many of the case studies found in books are difficult, inappropriate or sophisticated and have to be re-written to suit the class. Case studies I have recently used and or adapted include the Japanese student having trouble in the American university classroom (Gaston 1984); American sojourner in the Middle East

who has to deal with different concepts of space (Hall 1959), Asian workers in Canadian factories, Western teacher in a country that uses corporal punishment on children, Latin American older executive dealing with U.S. companies, and many others. A variety of studies which focus not only on the native and target cultures, but on other cultures as well, can provide a wide range of cultural aspects for students to explore.

Again, focusing solely on the student culture vis-a-vis the target culture can reinforce stereotypes and unwittingly establish an "us vs. them" mentality. Japanese students, for example, sometimes tend to think of cultural differences between American and Japanese culture in stereotypical ways ("we're cooperative and they're individualistic") and this simplistic generality is often reinforced by teachers. Such values are much more complex and variable within individual cultures and, in fact, the presence of one value does not preclude its opposite. According to sociological research, core values are actually quite similar from one culture to another and it is primarily the degree of dominance which varies (Rokeach 1973). The same rationale would apply to behaviors across culture which also tend to become stereotyped: "we're intuitive and they're direct"; "we're warm and they're cold" are examples encountered in Latin American groups. By shifting the focus and looking at a variety of cultures and ethnic groups, the complexity of cultural values, behavioral norms, and appropriate language based on values and norms can be explored, and students may begin shedding some of their own stereotypes.

A first step in using such types of case studies would be to present a short anecdote or story which illustrates the case as an in-class reading. Several such cases can be presented at the same time to small groups within the class, so that each group (or set of groups) is reading a different case. Reading activities such as clearing new vocabulary and responding orally or in writing to comprehension questions would be a first step. Within the group, students can then discuss the problem presented, the cause of the problem and possible solutions to the problem. In all such cases, the problems presented are not resolved, thereby presenting students with the task of figuring out what might happen next and what the characters could or should do to resolve their dilemmas. After students have thoroughly understood, read and discussed their case, they can be paired up with members of different groups and explain, in their own words, the story they read and the solutions suggested. Verbal and written skills of paraphrasing and summarizing are emphasized and a short written summary would also be a useful assignment.

Such cases are also valuable opportunities to have students create dialogs and explore the relevant language, speech acts and register appropriate to the case. For example, in a case where a woman was misunderstood when she invited her male French friend to dinner and he assumed her invitation implied sexual intimacy (Lovejoy 1996), the students can create a dialog between the two characters, explore the language used for *inviting* between two single people, and role-play their parts accordingly. In more complex case studies, a group of students can do a number of dialogs and simulations between the various characters. In the above example, a second and third dialogs can be created between the woman and a female friend, and the man and his male friend. Such use of student created dialog and role-play can be used to develop communicative competence in the language by exploring sociolinguistic appropriateness and suitable phrases for preparing the activity (Paulston 1990). An opportunity for looking at problems of register also presents itself. Although students may come from cultures and languages in which register is quite important, they often have no idea of register and the use of polite phrases in different situations in the target language. In fact, the Japanese students in the EAP course typically create dialogs which are peppered with extremely direct language that would be considered rude in the target culture. Often, the use of such inappropriate language can be traced to the idea that students consider American English direct and egalitarian when compared to their own language which is based on a complex system of social hierarchy and tiered levels of formality. "If we can call the boss by his/her first name we can speak to him or her just as we speak to our friends," is one such rationale. By uncovering these generalities and misconceptions about the target language (and culture) students can be informed and presented with the appropriate language in a variety of situations.

Long (1990, p. 313) has suggested that this type of role playing, serves as a "forum for acquiring communicative competence." He further suggests that simulations which also stress particular language functions give them the opportunity of "trying the language on for size" and applying some of the grammatical forms which they're already familiar with but have perhaps only used in controlled practice activities. For each role play performed by a group or pair of students, the actual dialog and language used needs to somehow be evaluated for factors such as socio-linguistic appropriateness, register, and accuracy. Peers can evaluate the role plays for such factors, and teachers can take up important points and errors noted for further presentation and teaching. Videotapes of such simulations are also helpful for this purpose. Additionally, small groups can be assigned to read

case studies outside of class and given time to prepare actual skits based on created dialogs. Not only do we give students more time and space to use the language but the opportunity to function in a wider variety of roles and thereby use a range of communicative language functions is also valuable (Long 1975, 1990). Despite the fact that language students are often reticent to perform in front of a class, the playful nature of the simulation has been surprisingly enjoyable for most of the Japanese students, and the dialogs they create often contain a great deal of humor in the target language.

Because the EAP class also focuses on academic writing, these case studies and role plays are useful for a variety of writing activities such as reflective journal writing about the cases studied or cases presented by other groups, summaries of cases read, and note-taking on simulations performed by other groups. Longer essay assignments based on points discussed by the students are also relevant. Topics such as "The Importance of Observing Behavior in a New Culture," and "Different Ways to Express Politeness" are examples of essay topics chosen and written about by students.

Surveying for Real-Life Cases

A third possibility for using case studies involves students surveying others to find some real life experiences that involved cultural misunderstanding or conflict. Students can devise survey questions to elicit such information. Anyone, including other students, faculty or staff, who has lived or traveled extensively in another country can be surveyed. Because the examples elicited by the students are actual, real-life experiences that have happened to people they know, they are often more meaningful and interesting to students. Typical questions might include:

- Have you ever been in an uncomfortable situation in another culture?
- Have you ever been confused by something that happened in another culture?
- Have you ever had anything very upsetting or shocking happen to you in another culture?
- Have you ever been involved in a situation in another culture that was difficult to handle due to different values, communication styles, assumptions (etc.)
- Have you ever been in a situation in another culture where you felt you were treated rudely?

Interviewees may or may not be asked how they solved the problem. It's also important to include some kind of check to ensure that the person

being interviewed feels comfortable and willing to share the experience. Students are also instructed to not include names of interviewees so that any experiences discussed remain anonymous. Students interview best in pairs so that one person can take notes and the other can ask the questions. They can then share their findings in small groups in the class, and/or write a summary or analysis of their findings.

The activity of creating and conducting interviews of native speakers outside of class is in and of itself a language practice activity in formulating and asking questions, listening, note-taking, and learning to ask follow-up questions. It is important to practice such interviews in class before sending students, however advanced, out to interview. The interview practice allows the teacher to identify and take up language problems with asking for clarification, asking for repetition, acknowledging answers, showing interest while listening, eliciting further information by asking follow-up questions, and taking notes. Even advanced students are often sorely lacking in what native speakers take for granted as simple conversational skills, such as clarifying something they couldn't understand or asking for further information. The interview practice activity is an excellent opportunity to identify and present the speech acts associated with such functions. As an additional benefit, by interviewing each other students can talk about their own experiences living or traveling in other countries or interacting with members of different cultures or subcultures within their own country.

In conclusion, in all case study activities, the teacher must maintain very good rapport with the students to ensure that they aren't reacting negatively or feeling offended by something they've read, seen or heard. Students are encouraged to identify and examine their own stereotypes and prejudices as much as possible. Obviously, such exploration is a difficult task and the language classroom is not a psychotherapy session. If students become even a little more aware of differing values, communication systems, and the appropriate use of the target language in a variety of social contexts, that in itself certainly represents increased knowledge and skill. The teacher is an objective facilitator and must be careful not to push personal views (and prejudices) on to the students, nor to use case studies which might be offensive or cause discomfort. Unfortunately, inappropriate material is not always that obvious or easy to spot. Even the most sensitive facilitator or teacher makes mistakes, and as in most teaching activities, learning the best approach and what works is a matter of ongoing trial and error.

Student reactions to these case studies and the accompanying activities have shown an increase in awareness and language skill evidenced by their discussion comments, their in-class performance, and their reflective comments written in daily journals. Such comments have included:

- *I know now it is very important to observe in a new culture, to see how people act, to be a good observer;*
- *I was surprised that Latin Americans and North Americans have different ideas of time, space and friendship. I thought before that all Americans have almost same ideas. This is interesting to think about.*
- *I thought Americans and British are the same. But to my surprise, in the way of privacy and politeness, British were more similar to we Japanese.*
- *If I act and speak with Japanese polite(ness) maybe I won't be polite....I feel people in the world can't communicate if they don't have a mind of trying to understand the other culture and the people's feelings.*
- *Body language and... reactions are different (in) each country... Therefore, we should pay attention to us(ing) them and reactions in another country.*
- *We have to be a good observer and understand the hearts of the people we are talking to.*

Case studies seem to be a useful method for examining cultural concepts as content, and for creating sources and material for language use, both oral and written. A multiskills approach helps students to not only learn some new content and develop some critical thinking ability, but also gives them plenty of opportunities to practice and use their language skills in a variety of contexts and functions. As evidenced by some of the students' comments, this type of content and practice also seems to increase the students' awareness of both the need for close behavioral observation, and the need for empathy in intercultural situations. In addition, case studies present opportunities for exploring sociolinguistic issues such as communication styles, different concepts of space and time and culturally diverse definitions of polite behavior, which can hopefully be of use to them as students or sojourners in other countries.

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