

Avoiding Reinforcement of Stereotypes while Incorporating Culture in the EFL Classroom

Carla S. Wilson

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether having EFL students conduct individual research on a given country as part of a semester-long English conversation course would have any effect on existing stereotypical attitudes held by students on that country. Questionnaires to assess stereotypical attitudes held by the students were conducted at the beginning and end of the semester and the results compared to investigate any changes that had occurred over the course of the semester. The results indicated that students' amount of knowledge on the researched country had increased, and the students' focus on physical characteristics and tendency to make generalisations about national character had decreased. This suggested a decrease in stereotypical attitudes. There was also indication that students were aware of their own perceptions changing.

Key words: EFL, culture, stereotypes

It has been generally assumed that the learning of English required cultural knowledge of the target culture i.e. the US or the UK. However as Kramsch (2009) points out, "the goals of traditional language teaching have been found wanting in this new era of globalization. Its main ten-

ets (monolingual native speakers, homogeneous national cultures, pure standard national languages, instrumental goals of education, functional criteria of success) have all become problematic in a world that is increasingly multilingual and multicultural” (p. 190). Despite these problematic assumptions, many EFL teachers - native and non-native English speakers alike - continue to use predominantly American and British cultural materials in the classroom. This is not only unrepresentative of the global use of English today but also, as McKay (2000) suggests, can result in two practical problems in the classroom (p. 7–11). For teachers who aren’t themselves from one of the two main target cultures, i.e. American or British, answering the questions of students about these cultures may be difficult, and may require a lot of time spent researching the culture they wish to teach about. For teachers who are from the UK or the US, incorporating British or American culture in the class can often lead to the teacher talking excessively about their own country and culture thereby leaving little opportunity for students to talk about themselves, their own culture or any other cultures.

McKay presents an alternative to a US/UK target culture for the classroom - “an international target culture in which a great variety of cultural information is presented, representing many English- and non-English-speaking countries” (p. 10). In order to avoid the pitfall mentioned above where the teacher is not an expert on the target cultures, the students themselves can become the “experts”. One way of doing this is to assign each student a country which they then have to research and present in some way in the classroom. As Nault (2006) points out, “self-generated materials can help students actively engage with the topic at hand and thereby gain valuable cultural insights” (p. 323). I wanted to incorporate this kind of activity into EFL conversation classes.

As well as hoping the students would gain valuable cultural insights

through this activity, it was also hoped the activity would provide a focus in each class on fluency-building, and also bring one advantage of a multilingual class to a monolingual class. The activity provided an opportunity for fluency-building. Nation (2009) suggests that about 25% of course time be devoted to fluency-building. The activity involved students giving the same information to four or five different partners thus giving an opportunity for fluency to increase over the course of the class activity each week. The activity also brought one aspect of a multinational class to a mono-nationality class. One advantage of a multinationality class is that exchanging information on even the most basic topics such as what they have for breakfast is generally interesting for the students as they learn about people from other countries. By making each student a representative of a different country, this aspect of multinationality classes could be transferred to some extent to a mono-nationality class, making fairly easy, low-level topics more interesting.

However I was aware of the danger that explicitly using culture in the classroom could have “the unfortunate result of misrepresenting foreign cultures by reinforcing stereotypes” (Guest, 2002, p. 157). Guest argues that there is a tendency in the EFL classroom to “approach cultural teaching/learning as if it were an exercise in creating a taxonomy of differences between familiar and ‘exotic’ cultures. Under this paradigm, fostered by the approach of cultural anthropology, cultural ‘knowledge’ and understanding is uncovered primarily by applying contrasts to similar phenomena in different cultures” (p. 157). There was then a danger that this activity could result in increased stereotypical attitudes. This study was an attempt to assess whether this happened. There was a reasonable level of confidence that finding out more about a country, and doing this relatively independently rather than being given information by the teacher, would help to decrease rather than increase stereotypical views.

Methodology

Hypotheses

The working hypothesis was that doing relatively independent research about one country over a semester would not result in an increase of stereotypical attitudes towards that country. This was further divided into three mini hypotheses. These were that the activity would:

1. increase students' knowledge of that country
2. decrease any existing stereotypical attitudes towards that country
3. make students aware of some similarities between that country and Japan

Participants

Participants were 44 female first year university students from several different departments. The classes were compulsory English conversation classes with an emphasis on learning functional English for travelling overseas. Classes were held once a week. All participants undertook the same activity.

Activity

The activity was conducted over a whole semester. In the first class of the semester students each chose a country from a list generated by the students themselves. Students had to choose different countries excluding Japan and the UK (the teacher's home country which was used occasionally to give examples). Each week the students were given a topic to research or a task to complete on their country. Topics included famous sightseeing places, popular food, transport systems, currency and

prices, and wild animals. Tasks included making a tourism advertisement and making a map. In class, students shared what they had found out, or presented their completed task, in pairs with four to five different partners.

Questionnaires

Stereotypical attitudes held by the students were assessed at the beginning and end of the semester by questionnaires which could be completed either in English or Japanese. The items on the questionnaires were open-ended to allow as far as possible students' own perceptions to emerge. The four items on the questionnaires used for this study were:

1. What is your image of this country?
2. What similarities are there between this country and Japan?
3. What differences are there between this country and Japan?
4. Any other comments about this country?

Attitudes are not something tangible that can be objectively measured but can only be inferred by observable behaviour, in this case the responses given on the questionnaires. I hoped that these questions were open enough to allow attitudes to be inferred.

Data Analysis

The main emphasis was on a qualitative analysis based on answer types that emerged from the data and seeing how this applied to the hypotheses. Although the analysis of the questionnaires included some quantitative data, these were simple head counts to compare student responses before and after the activity.

Results

Hypothesis 1: The activity would increase students's knowledge of one country

The questionnaires completed before and after the activity were firstly compared in terms of how many facts the students wrote about the country. Number of facts written was used as a way of evaluating the amount of knowledge held by the students. It is of course possible that some students didn't write everything they knew so this data can only be taken as a rough guide to knowledge held by the students. Each fact written about the country was counted and for each student these numbers for the before and after questionnaires were compared to see if there was an increase, a decrease or no change.

For about two thirds of students (66%) the amount of factual information written on the questionnaire increased after the activity, indicating that a majority of students had increased their knowledge about the country researched. About 18% showed no change in the number of facts written and about 16% showed a decrease.

Typical of students' questionnaire responses was an increase in detailed knowledge written about their country. For example, (bracketed parts added for clarity):

(Russia)

Before:

1. There are many famous historical places.
2. There is a railway.
3. Winter is very cold.

After:

1. Siberian railroad is very important transport for Russian people.
2. Russian doll is similar to *kokeshi* (Japanese wooden doll).
3. Price is cheaper than Japan.
4. There are fewer types of fruit than in Japan.

(Switzerland)

Before:

1. Buildings are beautiful. People are kind. Streets are stylish.
2. The national flag is the same colour as Japan's.
3. Culture and language are different in Japan and Switzerland.

After

1. Nature is beautiful. There are many mountains.
2. Heidi is famous and popular in Japan and Switzerland.
3. In Switzerland, 26th December is Boxing Day. Upper class people give maids etc a present.
4. In Geneva there is Lake Laman and there is a fountain in the lake.

These students showed an increase in the amount written about their country. Although they seemed to know something about the country before the activity, they found out many more details. This was true of several students who had some knowledge of the country they chose but their responses in the questionnaires after the activity showed an increase in detailed knowledge.

The following responses were also typical of many students' responses. They wrote very little about the country before the activity but could write a lot more after the activity.

(France)

Before:

1. I have a beautiful image
2. Human
3. Hair colour, eye colour, language

After:

1. I think there is a peaceful and wonderful country.
2. French and Japanese are thinking own culture is valuable.
3. A lot of things. For example, culture is most different thing between France and Japan.
4. France has borders with Spain, Italy, Switzerland and Belgium.

Hypothesis 2: The activity would decrease any existing stereotypical attitudes towards that country

The data was categorised based on what emerged from the students' responses. Two categories emerged that seemed to be related to stereotypical attitudes. The first was statements about the country based on the perceived physical characteristics of people from that country such as skin colour, facial features, height etc. These included statements such as "People have black skin." "People have flat features." "People are tall." This kind of focus on physical characteristics has been linked with social stereotyping (e.g. Stangor, Lynch, Duan & Glas, 1992, p. 215) and was therefore taken as evidence of stereotypical views held by the students. In the before questionnaires, 11 students made comments about the physical characteristics of people from that country. In the after questionnaires, two students made such comments. Another category that emerged from the data that seemed to indicate stereotypical attitudes was sweeping generalisations made about personality characteristics. This

category included statements such as “Korean people are kind.” “French people are outgoing.”

In the before questionnaires, 12 students made this kind of statement. In the after questionnaires, two students made this kind of statement. There was no overlap between the students writing statements about physical characteristics and those writing statements about personality characteristics. Counting both kinds of statements, about half the students gave responses that indicated stereotypical attitudes. About 10% of students gave similar responses after the activity.

The following student focused on physical characteristics before the activity but after the activity there was much more emphasis on detailed, non-stereotypical factual information. This was fairly typical of those students whose questionnaires before the activity included responses categorised as indicating stereotypical views.

(Kenya)

Before:

1. Hot. Black people.
2. There are no similarities between Japan and Kenya,
3. Japanese skin colour is yellow, Kenya skin is black.

After:

1. Kenya has more facilities than I thought.
2. Japanese hotels and Kenyan hotels are similar.
3. The transport system in Kenya isn't very good compared to Japan.
4. I thought there were no hotels in Kenya but there are. I was surprised that we can buy things like potato chips in Kenya.

The following response was not typical but is interesting in showing

a change in focus even though the student wrote again about physical characteristics after the activity.

(India)

Before:

2. Indians and Japanese have black hair.
3. Indians have clear facial features but Japanese people have flat features.

After:

2. In Japan and in India people eat curry.
3. In Japan the most common type of transport is cars but in India most people use public transport.
4. I thought Indian people's faces were originally black but it is caused by the sun. If Japanese people lived there, they would have the same colour skin as Indians. (肌はもともと黒いというイメージだったけどあまりにも日中の気温が高い, きっと日本人もインドでくらすと同じ肌色になると思う.)

This student, before the activity, could only give information related to Indian people's physical characteristics when responding to the items about similarities and differences. After the activity, the same items prompted responses not related to physical characteristics. For Item 4 after the activity there was a focus on physical characteristics but the student showed awareness that skin colour can be a result of climate as much as race, an increased awareness of similarity between Indians and Japanese physically, and an awareness of their own knowledge on this topic increasing and changing.

Hypothesis 3: The activity would make students aware of some of the similarities between Japan and the country being researched

This was felt to be important because of the tendency discussed above for culture learning/teaching to focus on differences. I felt it was especially important in the Japanese EFL classroom because of the widely held view among Japanese people that Japan is unique (see Yoshino, 1992, for a discussion of *nihonjinron*). This view can lead to a feeling of “us and them” where any non-Japanese are seen as very different from Japanese people. This in turn can lead to negative attitudes towards non-Japanese people and countries. Being aware of similarities between Japan and other countries may help to lessen this tendency. One item in the questionnaire asked the students to write down any similarities between Japan and the country being researched. Two types of answer seemed to indicate that the student felt there was no similarity between the countries. One type of answer included statements such as “I don’t know” and “There are no similarities”, as well as not writing any response at all to this item. In the before questionnaires, six students made this kind of statement. In the after questionnaires four students made this type of comment. The other type of answer gave a very superficial response such as “Both countries have a p in the name” and “They are countries.” In the before questionnaires, three students made this kind of statement. In the after questionnaires, four students made this kind of statement.

Although there wasn’t a decrease in students who thought there was no similarity between the countries, there were some significant changes in the kinds of similarities that students wrote about. While one type of change - the decrease in number of students making responses indicating stereotypical attitudes - has been covered above, there were other inter-

esting changes in terms of details and levels of superficiality or “obviousness”, typified by the responses below.

(Germany)

Before

2. People eat vegetables.

After

2. Germany buses resemble Japanese buses. There are lots of hotels.

(Peru)

Before

2. Peru and Japan have “p” in their country’s name, and small country.

After

2. They are small, coastal countries. People like fish dishes.

(Italy)

Before

2. Both country have many people.

After

2. Price, many institutions, public transport.

Discussion

The data seemed to support Hypothesis 1. About two thirds of the

students seemed to display an increase in knowledge about the country they had researched over the semester. The students were not explicitly instructed to write everything they knew about the country so the number of facts they wrote cannot be said to perfectly reflect the students' knowledge. Some students wrote responses such as "There are a lot of differences. For example the culture is very different." Presumably this student could have written more examples if explicitly instructed to. Also, although students were told they could respond in English or Japanese, many responded in English. As the English level of the students is fairly low, responding in English may have restricted how much they were able to write. These two factors may indicate that in reality more than 66% of students had increased their knowledge of the country researched as would be expected after doing such an activity for a semester. Students who seemed to know nothing at all before the activity and students who had some knowledge of the country before the activity both tended to show an increase in detailed knowledge. This increase in knowledge would hopefully help to lead to a decrease in stereotypical attitudes as has been found in various studies on prejudice (e.g. Rudman, Ashmore & Gary, 2001, p. 861).

The data also seemed to support Hypothesis 2. The number of students writing comments about physical characteristics and personality traits of people from the country researched dropped from about half to about 10%. These kinds of comments were generally replaced with much more detailed, factual non-stereotypical comments about the country. While this doesn't necessarily mean that stereotypical attitudes have actually decreased, it does seem to give a strong indication that they have. Whether this decrease will be permanent is another matter. Some studies have shown that an immediate decrease in stereotyping and prejudice even after specific educational interventions doesn't necessarily

remain permanently even though the increase in knowledge may remain (e.g. Hill & Augoustinos, 2001, p. 243).

The data didn't seem to support Hypothesis 3. The number of students being unable to identify a meaningful similarity between the target country and Japan stayed about the same. This suggests that in order to become aware of similarities, there is a need for students to be explicitly instructed to find some similarities between the target country and Japan as part of their research. This kind of instruction will be included as part of the activity with future classes. In general it was the same students who couldn't find a similarity after the activity as before. This suggests that some students already had very strong views that the country they were researching was very different to Japan or perhaps held the view that Japan was unique and therefore dissimilar to all other countries. Their subsequent research on the country may have been influenced by one or both of these views, leading them to focus on differences and overlook similarities. Again, explicit instructions to find similarities with Japan may help students to notice points the two countries have in common.

The after questionnaires also demonstrated in many cases that students were themselves aware of how their image of the country had changed and how their pre-conceived ideas had been changed as they learned about the country. This awareness of their own knowledge changing was evident in many students' responses, indicated by the use of "I thought ... but" or "I was surprised that" such as in the responses above by the students who researched Kenya and India. Evidence of students displaying this meta-cognitive ability was something which emerged from the responses that I hadn't thought about previously with regard to this study. It is something that deserves further investigation.

Conclusion

The data seemed to show that the class activity didn't have an unintended consequence of increasing stereotypical attitudes. On the contrary, stereotypical attitudes seemed to decrease probably due to students' knowledge about a particular country increasing. This was indicated by the increase in number of facts that the students were able to write and far fewer responses being given that suggested stereotypical attitudes. Such responses were replaced in the after questionnaires with far more emphasis on factual information about the countries, and also with statements suggesting the students knew their perceptions had changed.

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