



Interdisciplinary Contact Assignments to Enhance Cross-Cultural Understanding

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A contact assignment requires students to make personal contact with someone outside of the class for one or more purposes. For ESL students, it is an opportunity to make authentic use of English, often with native speakers of English. Other purposes may include collecting facts or opinions about a specific topic, practicing a specified mode of communication, observing behavior, and gaining insight into the customs or values of another cultural group. The contact assignment can have substantial cognitive and affective value, especially when conducted between people with different cultural backgrounds.

ESL students have experienced success interacting with other English speakers outside the classroom for such tasks as learning about the services offered by a school's financial aid office and health center, finding out the difference between Granny Smith and Fuji apples at a supermarket, and interviewing voters about their opinions regarding candidates in an impending presidential election.

Depending on the objectives of a particular course or lesson, the instructor can create specific questions that the students are to ask. A second way to develop questions is to have the whole class brainstorm questions related to a theme or topic. Another alternative is to have the students come up with their own questions individually. No matter how the questions are finally developed, the instructor ideally selects the specific objectives of each contact assignment carefully, explains the procedures to the students, and provides preparatory activities as necessary. In-class preparation might include communication strategies and language formulas for functions that range from asking for repetition and elaboration to persuading strangers to become informants. After the contacts are completed, the students may report their findings in either written or oral form.

Interdisciplinary Exchange

One type of contact assignment involves an exchange between students in two different disciplines. This is one in which all participants benefit. This article focuses on one arranged recently between an ESL class and a speech communication class.

Students in my high-intermediate ESL reading and vocabulary class met with students in an intercultural communication class for about 40 minutes when the two class times overlapped. The speech students were mainly native English speakers although a small number were foreign-born students who had lived in the United States from 2 to 17 years. Their ESL partners were mainly from Vietnam but also included students from Taiwan, Somalia, and Korea. The great majority of the ESL students had lived in the U.S. for only two years. Students from both classes paired up and interviewed each other.

The speech students had been instructed to discuss some similarities and differences between their native culture and their partners'. They had also been instructed to ask the ESL students about their experiences moving to another country, particularly about the communication challenges they had encountered. A further task for them to accomplish was to explain or demonstrate a concept or skill that they had learned in the intercultural communication course.

My students had written 10 questions relating to topics we had been reading about in our ESL textbook and had reviewed them with partners in class. The topics we had been reading about ranged from women's and men's roles to nonverbal communication to racial conflict. The students had been instructed to ask some of their questions during their interviewing turn. I also had my students tape record the interview to use as a reference for writing a report. They summarized the responses garnered from their partner on the questions they asked, the information they gave to their partner, the concept or skill their partner explained, and their overall impressions of the contact assignment.

The students in both the ESL and speech class engaged in the interaction with such enthusiasm that there were discernible vibrations of excitement and pleasure emanating from the classroom out onto the lawn, where some groups chose to meet. When asked to react to the interview assignment, they responded with a resounding, "We liked it!"

Cognitive Value

An interdisciplinary contact assignment allows all the students to become informants who share their knowledge and experiences with other,

perhaps less knowledgeable, less experienced individuals. In turn, it allows each participant an opportunity to gain knowledge from another.

The types of questions that the ESL students asked in this instance and the responses summarized covered a wide range of topics, as these examples demonstrate:

Q. Can males and females in America do the same jobs?

A. Job isn't divided with the sex as the lady can work at the construction company and the man can be a babysitter. Boy can help his mother wash the dishes or sew clothe and daughter can help her father cut grass or fix the car.

Q. What is the origin of conflict between blacks and whites in the United States?

A. The conflict between black and white has a long history. People who first lived in North America came from Asia. About five hundred years ago, Europeans came to North America. At that time Africans were brought to North America to sell to the rich landowners. They were slaves and were considered inferior and treated badly.

Q. What do you usually do when a stranger stares at you?

A. When the strange lady stare at her, she feel uncomfortable. When the strange man stare at her, she o.k. and proud.

Likewise, in response to the speech students' inquiries, the ESL students elaborated on behaviors and attitudes in their respective cultures:

My native culture (Vietnamese) is influenced by Chinese culture. Younger people must have their respect to the older. Men usually are the "boss" in their families. Children must absolutely obey their parents until they are over 18 years old, otherwise they can be beaten by their parents.

To do abortion in Somalia is illegal, because the Somalian constitution forbidden. But people may go outside of the country to have abortion, on the other hand doctors may do abortion if they sees the child is very danger to the life of the mother.

The ESL students learned about some communication concepts and skills from their partners.

My partner explained that the body languages are most important for audience to understand. By their actions, gestures and behaviors during the speech, they can be understood easily all the problems.

One of the skill is paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is when you tell another person what you thought he or she said, using your own words.

In her class, she learn how to talk to people of different culture, how to understand their culture, how to learn about their culture and make good communicate with them.

Linguistic and Affective Values

Both the ESL and speech students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to interview a person from a different culture. Cognitive and affective benefits to the ESL students can be seen in the following remarks.

I like the interview assignment because it help me learn how to talk and hear with another person and try to get the main information from interviewing. I'm also have a new friend.

I like this interview assignment. However, my partner spoke so fluently and I spoke so haltingly. I was ashamed when I listened to the tape. This assignment is a interesting job, it can make ESL students get acquainted with talking to American people.

I think this is a good practice English for me. It helps me communicate with another with self-confidence. I can learn several new words, American culture and lifestyle. It is really exciting. I hope that we will have another interview like this one later.

Cultural Value

In addition to giving students the opportunity to use their language skills, to share their knowledge, to gather information and perceptions, and to increase their self-esteem, the interdisciplinary contact assignment enables students to gain an appreciation of the cultural diversity in our society in several ways. First, it gives them license to ask questions that they may not otherwise bring themselves to ask a speaker of a language other than their own. This permits students to learn about the views of an individual from another culture on at least one topic. In addition, it gives them

insight into their own culture as well as that of others. It thus provides grounds for a comparison of cross-cultural behavior and values. Furthermore, because some topics may be of interest to both parties, the contact assignment can promote an understanding of the commonality of human needs and the diverse practices by which these needs are met. Clearly, this type of task promotes culturally pluralistic perspectives rather than ethnocentric viewpoints. Cross-cultural contact assignments help diffuse stereotypic notions that foreign-born individuals may have about "all Americans" and that Americans may have about "all Vietnamese" or all the people of any other country.

Adaptability

The assignment described above can be easily adapted and incorporated into a number of teaching disciplines. For instance, students of sociology or anthropology might conduct an oral history with a member of another culture, linguistic, or ethnic group. Students of nursing might interview members of a different group on typical ways of interacting with health care givers. Students of law might gain a different perspective on how the legal system and authority figures are perceived by different cultural groups. Whether the students are native or nonnative speakers of English, native or foreign born, they all stand to gain some cultural insight when paired with someone from another culture for a contact assignment.

Setting Up an Interdisciplinary Contact Assignment

If this type of class activity intrigues you, follow these tips to set up an exchange with another class. Examine the schedule of classes at your school and choose classes in other disciplines that meet at the same time as yours. Contact the instructors of the selected classes, describe the parameters of the interdisciplinary exchange, explain the purposes of the assignment, convince the instructors of its multiple values, discuss appropriate objectives and/or questions for the assignment, and schedule a meeting for each pair of classes. Plan appropriate preparatory and follow-up activities for your students. ¹ Let the students interact, and watch the gains they make in awareness, knowledge, skills, and confidence. ■

¹For procedures on developing pre- and postcontact assignment activities, see Chan, Marsha. (1993, June, August). The cross-cultural contact assignment. *CATESOL News*, and Chan, Marsha. (In press). The contact assignment. In Kathleen Bailey, (Ed.), *New ways in teaching speaking*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL.