Using Task-based Learning to Develop Multi-cultural Literacy in the Classroom

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Introduction

The world is changing rapidly with the advent of globalization of the economy. More businesses are becoming multinational, setting up offices and factories all over the world. "Globalization has arrived in the world, but not in most of the world's organizations. Yet there is little doubt that to be viable during the next century all organizations, whether domestic or international, will need to become more global in their outlook, if not in their operations" (Rhinesmith, 1993:3). Because of this, many conflicts can arise from cultural, business style and language differences and misunderstandings. "A breakdown in multi-cultural communication usually occurs when the individuals involved do not understand the differences between their cultures. Subconsciously, members of each culture group assume that all people around the world share their perceptions and beliefs. Most of us have tunnel vision and are so locked into our own culture that we do not see the subtle differences in other cultures" (Odenwald, 1993:45).

How can these issues be addressed in the university classroom so that students will be prepared for work and business environments that are inter-cultural in nature? This paper introduces and explains a systematic, consistent approach for teaching multi-cultural literacy and cross-cultural conflict resolution in a Japanese university. A series of discussions on cross-cultural conflict cases were videotaped between Japanese seminar students and Scandinavian exchange students over a two year period. Students watched the videos after each discussion and commented on how they performed and summarized what they learned. All cases were in an international business context. The seminars were conducted using the task-based learning approach in a cooperative learning environment, which is discussed in detail in a subsequent section of this paper.

Multi-cultural Literacy and Group Work

One of the goals of cross-cultural conflict resolution is to achieve "multi-cultural literacy," which is defined as "the process of linking the cultural experiences, histories, and languages that all students bring to school with language learning and academic learning that take place in school" (Diamond and Moore, 1995:7). To accomplish this, there must be new ways of creating learning conditions that help students learn new ways of communicating with each other.

The author has determined through classroom observation over the past two years that the following principles, (which are confirmed by the research below) are inherent in multi-cultural literacy group work:

1. Cultural diversity and heterogeneity are valued and affirmed in task-based learning groups;
2. Students in such groups take responsibility for themselves and others;
3. Such groups are democratic, and
4. Students learn about people from different cultural backgrounds as they work together.

The way students and classrooms are organized for instruction plays an important role in the achievement of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Teachers need to reconsider their traditional ways of structuring classrooms and opportunities for learning. Small group arrangements, which encourage interaction, cooperation, and group processing, can improve the academic performance of many ethnically and culturally diverse students (Johnson & Johnson, 1986). Recent studies further suggest that reading and writing instruction that permits students to collaborate in discussing and interpreting texts results in dramatic improvements in both reading and verbal intellectual abilities (Au, 1979; Mason & Au, 1990).

English as a Second/Foreign Language in Multi-cultural Group Work

Because English has become the global language and in particular the language of international business, teaching English as a second/foreign language inevitably involves not only a consideration of the relationships between different cultures and how these are mediated through the medium of English but also how English is becoming a practical solution for global business and academic communities which are multi-lingual.

"The need for a global language is particularly appreciated by the international academic and business communities, and it is here that the adoption of a single lingua franca is most in evidence both in lecture-rooms and board-rooms, as well as

in thousands of individual contacts being made daily all over the globe. A conversation over the Internet between academic physicists in Sweden, Italy, and India is at present practicable only if a common language is available. A situation where a Japanese company director arranges to meet German and Saudi Arabian contacts in a Singapore hotel to plan a multi-national deal would not be impossible, if each plugged in to a 3-way translation support system, but it would be far more complicated than the alternative, which is for each to make use of the same language" (Crystal, 1997:10-11).

The ideal solution for this situation is where all the participants at an international meeting automatically use a single language for practical purposes. "This situation seems to be slowly becoming a reality in meetings around the world, as general competence in English grows" (Crystal, 1997:11). The students in the seminar were fully aware of the need to strengthen their English skills, besides learning about other cultures. The students also became aware that the way English is being used by non-native speakers is forcing old notions of mimicking native speakers as the best way to speak English to die quickly. According to Schnitzer (1995:227-236) who uses the acronym 'EIL' (English as an International Language),

"Force of circumstance is moving us away from the 'ideal native speaker' to the 'ideal EIL user' as the model for teaching, learning and, indeed, use. A living language is a malleable medium of communication that by its very nature adjusts to meet the communicative needs of its users. It is not a guardian of cultural purity; it can do nothing, only be done to. If the theoretical model is the pure, unadulterated, monolingual, monocultural native speaker, this necessarily entails a view of all other speakers as "deviant" from the standard" (Schnitzer, 1995:230).

Schnitzer argues, "Intercultural communication is the order of the day, not integration into native English-speaking cultures" (Schnitzer, 1995:230). This is an important awareness that the students slowly developed and it plays a crucial role in developing a sensitivity to accept how people from other cultures speak English.

Multi-cultural Literacy in Japan

Despite the growing support from educators to increase university students' awareness of other cultures, only a few programs in Japan have been designed specifically to achieve the goals of creating curricular materials that are compatible with the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students and promoting cultural understanding and appreciation. There are several problems in promoting such programs.

One problem is that the foreign population in Japan is quite small. Less than 1.5% of the total population are foreign born (Kawai, 1998). And there are only 55,000 foreign students attending Japanese universities (Kawai, 1998). Japanese students have few chances to interact with non-Japanese people. Another problem is that many of these multi-cultural discussions have to be conducted in English, which requires a high level of proficiency. Finally, using English as a second language to help students from different cultures bridge some of the culture gaps they experience, and to understand each other's cultures, requires a need to facilitate awareness of group dynamics and related sociolinguistic skills. Just having students working in small groups may not be enough. For the most part, communicative teaching materials and teacher training courses seem to assume that learners will simply carry out group activities designed to promote natural language use on an extended basis (Gray and Soucy, 1994). "But, in fact, students in Japan frequently have had little or no experience working with students from other countries in a multi-cultural group environment. In addition, teachers and learners often lack understanding of their own implicit cultural values and assumptions related to working in groups. In cross-cultural classroom environments, traditional group work clearly overlooks the specialized and highly culture-bound nature of most social skills required for successful performance of group activities" (Gray and Soucy, 1994:54). The skills Gray and Soucy are talking about are called cooperative learning skills and are discussed in the following section.

The Cooperative Learning Environment

The seminars were conducted in a cooperative learning environment. Cooperative Learning is defined as:

> "An approach to teaching and learning in which classrooms are organized so that students work together in small co-operative teams. Such an approach is said to increase students' learning since a) it is less threatening for many students, b) it increases the amount of student participation in the classroom, c) it reduces the need for competitiveness, and d) it reduces the teacher's dominance in the classroom" (Richards, Platt, Platt, 1985:87).
>
> There are many aspects of cooperative learning in task-based learning and vice versa. In every cooperative learning group there are tasks to be accomplished. In every task-based learning group, the spirit of cooperative learning must prevail in order to achieve results.

"Assigning group tasks involves a major change in traditional classroom norms. Now the student is asked to depend on other students. Now students are responsible not only for their own behavior but also for group behavior and for the product of group efforts. Instead of listening to the teacher, they are asked to listen to other students. In order for the group to work smoothly, they must learn to ask for other people's opinions, to give other people a chance to talk, and to make brief, sensible contributions to the group effort" (Cohen, 1994:40).

The task is the specific activity that is designed to help students achieve particular learning goals. The cooperative learning environment helps students achieve these goals and also improve their social communication skills. In her review of research on second language acquisition in cooperative learning, McGroarty (1989) concludes that students gain in both comprehension and production of the second language. She also finds that tasks used in cooperative learning foster many different kinds of verbal exchanges, which leads to improved social interactions among students. There are more possibilities for fluent speakers to tailor speech and interactions so that they can be understood by the less proficient speaker. Even when all the students in a group lack fluency in English, the students will correct each other and attempt to fill in the gaps of their understanding by repairing and rephrasing what their partners say in order to come to agreement. This is one factor that made the cooperative learning environment so favorable for the seminar students. In the follow-up interviews, the group support for lower level English speakers was mentioned favorably by almost two-thirds of all the students.

Cooperative learning is particularly beneficial in developing improved relations in multi-cultural classrooms. Slavin (1983, Chapter 4) evaluated fourteen cooperative classroom experiments whose groups were ethnically and/or racially mixed. In eleven of these studies there were significantly more friendship choices across racial and ethnic lines among those students who had worked in cooperative multiethnic groups than among students who didn't have this opportunity. He concludes that through interaction, individuals perceive underlying similarities across racial lines. Sharan and his colleagues have reviewed how members of different ethnic groups treat each other while working together to achieve a cooperative task. They compared cooperative learning techniques with traditional whole classroom instruction and concluded that cooperative learning produces more cross-ethnic cooperation and less negative and competitive behavior between members of different ethnic groups (Sharan, et al. 1984, pg. 73-103).

A Closer Look at Task-based Learning

A task is "any structured learning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task" (Breen, 1987:23). The emphasis is on understanding and conveying meaning in order to complete the task successfully. Meaning is negotiated between students. While learners are doing tasks, they are using language in a meaningful way. Another important feature of task-based learning is that it requires the learners to function primarily as language users rather than learners (Ellis, 1994). Research on task-based learning points to different types of tasks that enhance learning (for example, open-ended, structured, teacher fronted, small group, pair work) and tries to define task-specific learner factors (roles, proficiency levels, styles), teacher roles, and other variables that contribute to successful completion of goals (Richards, Platt, Platt, 1985). The tasks used in the seminar were almost all opened-ended in small groups.

The Different Stages of Task-based Learning

The parts of the Task-Based Learning cycle are (Willis, 1996a, 1996b):

Pre-task

This is the introduction to the topic and to the task that students are expected to complete. The teacher helps students to understand the main concepts and objectives of completing the task. Students are given preparation time to think how to accomplish the task. The topic area must be well defined by the teacher and he/she should encourage students to ask questions for clarification.

Task cycle

There are three parts of the task cycle-doing the task, planning and reporting. The task cycle offers learners the chance to use whatever ideas, concepts and language they already know in order to carry out the task, and then to fine tune their understanding of these concepts and language, under teacher guidance, while planning their reports of the task (Willis, 1996). Learners get feedback from the teacher when they need it most-during the planning stage and after the report.

1. Doing the Task: Students work in pairs or small groups to accomplish the tasks and students can use whatever concepts and language skills they have. "The emphasis is on spontaneous, exploratory talk and confidence-building, within the privacy of the small group" (Willis, 1996a: 56). Most importantly, students' motivation increases by successfully achieving the goals set forth "without the

teacher's direct support" (Willis, 1996b: 53). At this point, it is important for students to put all their ideas out on the table without worrying about accuracy of their second language skills. The teacher acts as a monitor, without interfering with students' language production and there is no correcting language or suggesting better ways of doing the task (Willis, 1996b: 54).

2. Planning: This is the preparation stage for the next phase which will involve reporting to the class on what happened during the activity and what was the outcome. At the planning stage, students decide on what they want to say and then rehearse it. Because they are working towards a public presentation, students must be conscious of organization and accuracy and making sure the audience understands what is being said. The teacher walks around and gives suggestions. There is a clear focus on form.
3. Reporting: A spokesperson for each group reports findings to the whole class. The teacher may make comments on reports but makes no corrections. Because the seminar students are using English as a second language, the students requested a fourth part of this process. It is called language focus. The aim of language focus "is to help students to explore language, to develop an awareness of aspects of syntax, collocation and lexis, to help them systematize what they have observed about certain features of language, to clarify concepts and to notice new things" (Willis, 1996a: 58). It "adds opportunity for explicit language instruction" (Willis, 1996b: 101). Although language instruction is not the main focus of the cross-cultural seminars, it is an important part of developing multi-cultural literacy and learning about how other cultures use English.

There are two parts to language focus, analysis and practice. Students watch themselves interact on video before language focus is used. 1. Analysis: These are tasks "that focus explicitly on language form and use" (Willis, 1996b: 102). Students study language forms that were used during the complete cycle. By this point students should understand meanings of text and spoken discourse that were used during the cycle. These tasks "give learners time to systematize and build on the grammar they know already, to make and test hypotheses about grammar and to increase their repertoire of useful lexical items" (Willis, 1996b: 103). Practice: This is a good chance for students to build confidence as they practice language they are already familiar with and will probably use in the future.

Application of Task-based and Cooperative Learning in Seminars

The seminars were taught completely in English. This posed a challenge for both groups, particularly the Japanese students. There were two groups of Japanese students over the two years, but each semester; new students came from Stockholm, Gothenburg and Oslo Universities. Each group of Japanese students had exposure to two different groups of Scandinavian students over a one year period. An average group had seven Japanese and seven Scandinavian students. Students worked in groups of three or four. The author focused on facilitating awareness of group dynamics and related sociolinguistic skills students need to participate in these discussions. A major theme in these seminars is how culture clashes can affect and disrupt business operations for different countries trying to do business together and how to resolve these conflicts. The cases were taken from two books, *Japanese Cultural Encounters* (Kataoka and Kusumoto, 1991), and *Cross-Cultural Dialogues* (Storti, 1994).

All groups worked on the same case so that they could try to come to a consensus as a large group. Each small discussion group was responsible to come up with a well-defined solution to each problem. After students met in small groups, they came back together in one group to discuss the conclusions reached. The purpose of the large group discussions was to negotiate down to one agreed upon statement for the case. Students were given comprehensive questionnaires to evaluate the effectiveness of using this approach, after they watched themselves interact on video.

The first meeting between the Swedish and Japanese students each semester was used as an icebreaker to help them get to know each other. There were two tasks to accomplish; 1. Students were asked to discuss cultural differences that they have experienced and how they felt about these differences. 2. They also had to define the concepts of "cross-cultural conflict" and "cross-cultural conflict resolution." Usually, there were a few Japanese students who had spent some time in native English speaking countries, usually Australia, America and Canada. Most of the Scandinavian students had spent little time in Japan, but had traveled extensively in Europe. The following example is from the fall semester of 1998.

The pre-task was to list on the board as many kinds of cultural conflicts that might occur when a person interacts with a foreign culture. The class was able to come up with fifteen examples. For the task, there were four groups and each group came up with a different example. One example that students related to strongly was entering a store and how the salesperson greets customers. In Japan, the custom is very set and the language is always the same. The salesperson says *"Irrashaimasu,"* which means welcome. The customer is not supposed to answer it.

When the customer leaves the store, all the salespeople say *"Arigato Gozaimuasu,"* which means thank you very much, at least twice. The Scandinavian students found the welcome and farewell salutations irritating and very stiff. The Japanese students found the informal and direct western style salutation too personal and they didn't know how to respond. For example, in a western store, the clerk will often say, "How are you doing"? This is a direct question and the Japanese students tend to feel awkward in this situation. Both sides felt this was a good example of what cross-cultural conflict means. Other examples discussed were; the use of eye contact, addressing a superior at work, and expressing one's own opinion.

During the planning stage, students worked out a consensus of what would be said to the class and choose a spokesperson for each task. Because this was a public presentation, they had to be conscious of organization and accuracy and make sure the audience understood what was being said. The teacher walked around the room and gave suggestions regarding grammar and style. Students were encouraged to ask questions regarding grammar, lexicon and style. There was a clear focus on form. For the reporting stage, a spokesperson from each group read the example from each group and each one was discussed.

For the second task, each group came up with their own definitions for cross-cultural conflict and cross-cultural conflict resolution and a different spokesperson from each group read the definitions and then wrote them on the board for the whole class to see. In this particular class, the students concluded that the best definition for cross-cultural conflict is "different ways of behaving and thinking that causes misunderstanding and stress between people of different cultures." The group defined cross-cultural conflict resolution: "the ability of a multi-cultural group to discuss cross-cultural conflicts without judging other cultures and without necessarily agreeing that one or another culture is good or bad. It means trying your best to accept other cultures even if you feel you don't really understand the other culture or the behavior of people in the culture."

An example of a case that was discussed (spring, 1997) involved a cultural mishap between an American couple and a Japanese couple (Appendix I). In this session, the students were able to use the terms (cross-cultural conflict and cross-cultural conflict resolution) they defined in the first session and apply them to the case. The task was to define concretely how the two terms applied in this situation. They agreed that the conflict originated from a misunderstanding of each other's culture and the resolution would have to come from honest discussion between Mr. Young and Mr. Yamashita about what happened. This would be difficult and could only happen over time. Both groups were critical of Mr. Young's lack of understanding about the farewell protocol and felt the best solution was cultural

training for business people who work in a foreign country. The Scandinavian students pleaded ignorance about this custom and the Japanese students initiated a role-play to show what usually happens in a typical farewell situation. They really enjoyed seeing the custom acted out for them. There was truly a sense of interdependence and cooperation as the two cultures shared knowledge about the different behavior in each culture related to this protocol.

Another case used is found in Appendix II. The task was to discuss the case and answer the question of why the section chief was so noncommittal during the conversation with Phyllis. Of all the cases discussed (used in fall, 1998), this one caused the most controversy and there was a difference of opinion based on culture.

The main split of opinion in the class was on the issue of whether *nemawashi* played a part in how the section chief responded to Phyllis. The Scandinavian students believed it did, and some strongly believed it was the most important part of the case. The following quote, in a book written for foreigners, explains what *nemawashi* is. According to Takamizawa (1991:28), "Nemawashi literally means 'to dig around the root of a tree to prepare it for transplanting.' As a business term, it is used to refer to the groundwork necessary to build support for a course of action, or secure an informal consensus before a formal decision is made. In the Japanese business world, as in the rest of Japanese society, group decision making is very important, and nemawashi is an indispensable part of the process." Japanese students felt that *nemawashi* had nothing to do with the case.

They expressed their opinions in a surprisingly strong way, but the Swedish students were able to express their opinions strongly and also influence the direction of the discussion without being pushy or arrogant. One Swedish student strongly believed nemawashi played a large role in the case, but he worked sensitively with the Japanese students to make his point of view clear.

There are no concrete, tangible facts in the case about Phyllis's proposal and when the Scandinavian students asked the Japanese students what they would say if Phyllis asked why the proposal was rejected, the Japanese students had a hard time figuring out what kind of answer the Swedish students wanted. But instead of asking directly, i.e., "I don't understand what kind of answer you are looking for" or "I can't answer the question because I don't know the details of her proposal," they were very passive when the Scandinavian students kept probing them.

But in many ways the probing was good because the Japanese students may not have given their opinions otherwise. The Scandinavian students were trying to help the Japanese students to express their opinions. While there was no one leader to lead-manage the group, leadership was shared by all members. But leadership skills were uneven and the Scandinavian students offered more leadership. There

maybe two reasons for this. The Scandinavian students had better English language skills than the Japanese had and they may have had more practice working in discussion groups. There is also no doubt that the Scandinavian students have had far more practice expressing their opinion in front of others. The Japanese students have repeatedly expressed concern to their seminar teacher that it was difficult getting used to seminar discussions because they were asked to express their personal opinions in front of the class and in a foreign language. *Shudan ishiki or* group consciousness, group-think in English (De Mente, 1994) is deeply ingrained in Japanese culture and many times Japanese students are hesitant to express their own ideas.

Mode of Operation for Giving Students Questionnaire

The questionnaire (Appendix III) was given to students at the end of the semester. The teacher went over the questions to make sure the students understood them. The students returned it within a week. There was a follow-up interview where each student brought his/her questionnaire back and the teacher reviewed it with the student and elicited clarification and additional feedback from the student.

Results of Student Responses

Table I (also in Appendix III) shows question 1, a through j that was given to the students and shows the responses with student numerical ratings, using a 5 point Likert scale. The results for questions a and c are favorable, but the results of questions f, g, and h, had disappointing results, particularly for the Japanese students. During the follow-up interviews, seven of the fourteen Japanese students were critical because they wanted to speak better English when interacting with other non-native speakers. Some were genuinely unhappy about how they performed during the task, and during the language focus session they expressed dismay when they watched themselves on video.

One way to interpret the low self evaluation is that students were willing to be critical of themselves because they want to be able to communicate with foreigners using English when the foreigners are not proficient in Japanese. During the follow-up interview, one Japanese student said that although she was disappointed with her pronunciation, she was "very enthusiastic about having more chances to speak with foreigners in English and helping them to live in Japan." Another felt that "there will be more times when I can practice talking English with foreigners and now I know what I have to work on." Despite the shock at seeing the video, all of the Japanese students said they wanted to have additional discussions with foreign students. All the students stressed that communicating with foreigners is

becoming more important because of increased international trade and international cultural tensions. Many of the Scandinavian students said that the northern European countries saw Japan as a future important trading partner but that many northern Europeans found the Japanese culture to be enigmatic. Therefore, they felt the discussions are necessary to bridge the culture gap between the two regions.

Table I

Summary of Student Responses to Questions a-j Cumulative, October, 1997 to July, 1999, Four semesters, Japanese, 14 Students, Scandinavian 28 Students.

Question	Japanese Average	Scand. Average	Total Average
a. The discussions helped me to understand my own culture and the other students' culture.	3.9	4.3	4.1
b. The goal of these discussions was to reach conclusions about the cultural differences in communication between Scandinavians and Japanese. Do you feel satisfied with the conclusions that were reached?	3.2	3.6	3.4
c. I like the way the class was set up.	3.8	4.6	4.2
d. It was difficult to structure and organize my thoughts in a second language, considering the time limits on the small group discussions.	4.6	3.0	3.8
e. The teacher should have played a more active role in giving the discussion direction.	2.5	2.0	2.25
f. I am satisfied with my performance using English during the discussion.	2.0	3.5	2.75
g. Speaking English with Non-native English speakers is just as effective for learning English as speaking with native English speakers.	1.8	2.8	2.6
h. Having such different English proficiency levels in the groups was frustrating.	3.7	3.1	3.4
i. Despite the frustration I felt regarding language proficiency levels, I still felt that the two different cultures were able to communicate satisfactorily with each other.	4.0	4.2	4.1

Strongly Agree-5 Very Much Agree-4 Agree-3 Disagree-2, Strongly Disagree-1

The Japanese students gave a low evaluation for question d because several strongly felt that they needed more preparation for the discussion and they would have preferred to have met before the discussion to go over the details of the case. One student said, "We needed to make clear about the topics before the discussion." Another said, "For example, better to have a meeting before we go on to the discussion so we can think the matter in our own language." There is a good chance that if the case were reviewed beforehand, the Japanese students would have all agreed on a set of ideas and just voiced these without thinking the case through individually. Japanese usually like to consult in a group before issuing their opinion. Lewis asserts that ."..it is likely that westerners will initiate a person-to-person exchange of views, which poses an even greater danger to the Japanese. They represent their group, therefore they cannot pronounce on any matters there and then without consultation" (Lewis, 1996:259). This was true of the Japanese students in the group. Of the fourteen Japanese students, eight said they would have been more comfortable if the Japanese students would have been allowed to meet separately before the discussion group with the Scandinavian students. Mole (1990:161) goes further to explain this cultural attribute by saying, "Western culture values the ultimate superiority of the individual over the group. In Japanese culture it is the opposite. Loyalty to one's immediate group is paramount and not even self-interest overrides the commitment to the welfare of the immediate community." Group consensus is a very powerful cultural concept in Japan and Japanese sometimes express their opinion in lock step. But the purpose of the task was to have a free flowing discussion and give students a chance to speak extemporaneously in English.

The Scandinavian students, because they were more assertive in their opinions and had a better command of English, were able to manipulate the discussion. As one student said, "I think some of the Japanese students had a hard time expressing their opinion. Therefore, it was easier for us (Scandinavian students) to lead the discussion in the direction we wished."

The groups operated under the premise of positive interdependence and strived for a conclusion to be successfully reached by group consensus. A main concept in cooperative learning is that everyone is a leader and no one person is needed to dictate the terms of the group. All of the Japanese students in the group have worked extensively in the cooperative learning and task based learning environments, which are based on the premise that "Potentially, group work can play a significant role in fostering interpersonal relationships and social ease, in building a classroom community. Such an environment can encourage risk-taking and more active participation which may in turn lead to further language

production" (Gray and Soucy, 1994:55). The spirit of cooperative learning was definitely present in the group. A Japanese student said, "We helped each other when we didn't know a word or when it was difficult to pronounce something." Another one felt that "There were some strong speakers and they helped the weaker ones even when we stumbled." A Scandinavian student received benefit from the discussion because, "While we helped the Japanese students with their English, they helped us to understand their culture." Another student said, "The Scandinavian students prompt me to go further even though my English is not so good."

For question g, the result was 2.6, with only one student very much agreeing. But it seemed that language proficiency level, besides the task of speaking with other non-native speakers, was also critical to the students. Johan, who strongly disagreed with statement f, felt that his English "deteriorated when I speak English with non-native speakers who have a lower speaking level than I do." A Japanese student felt that the discussion could have been more interactive if "people have the same language skill level." Another said that students "should have about the same levels of English speaking and understanding ability." But one Scandinavian student said, "I could practice how to make myself understood by people who are not so good at English."

Critical Reflections

There were several factors that influenced the outcome and effectiveness of the task-based learning project.

- Different English proficiency levels between the Japanese and Swedish students were most noticeable. Most students who evaluated the project felt that this encumbered the process of resolving cross-cultural conflicts. This is a problem that can't be improved by having equal levels of students because the student English level at the university is consistently lower than the Scandinavian students who study there. Based on the participants' responses to the questionnaire, one way to bridge the gap is for more informal situations where students can get to know each other and feel more relaxed using a second language to communicate.
- There were also time constraints on the project because the exchange students usually study for only three months. The Scandinavian students needed a chance to acclimate to Japan and the university lifestyle, and a month passed before they were approached about participating in the project.

There are several things that can be done to ameliorate these circumstances to have better results in the future.

- The Japanese seminar students need a lot more practice in discussing issues in English. Most of their seminar classes now include the same kinds of cases that were used in this last project. The pre-tasks will be structured to prepare them for discussion group activities. Teacher generated questions for the actual task case will be reviewed at least a week before actual discussion takes place.
- Many more informal situations for communication will be set up before the discussions are videotaped.

Conclusion

The results of the research show that when students from different cultures work together to solve problems and reach conclusions, they are able to learn about other cultures' communication styles and how they differ from their own culture's communication style. When problems and differences occur in a multi-cultural group, students must negotiate among themselves to come to a consensus before presenting their conclusions to the rest of the class. Students from homogeneous cultures in particular get an excellent chance to compare and contrast how other cultures work in groups to reach conclusions.

How important is developing multi-cultural literacy in Japan? From a business perspective, it is extremely important. Although there are complaints that Japan is closed to foreign businesses doing business in Japan, the facts point to a different reality. According to the Asian Wall Street Journal (Abegglen and Kirby, 1996), "Foreign companies that have set up wholly owned subsidiaries in Japan in the last 15 years and have kept control of their technology have met with spectacular success. But you won't hear much about them. The winners in Japan's competitive environment quietly bank their earnings; the losers whine that the Japanese government is to blame for their own failures. The top 100 foreign-owned companies in Japan have total sales of $155billion, a sum equivalent to the entire gross domestic product of Thailand or Indonesia. Foreign manufacturers and marketers have major positions in nearly all sectors of the Japanese economy. More than 40 have over $1 billion in annual sales each. The contrast with the picture of Japan as "mercantile" or "closed" could hardly be more dramatic." Japan is truly becoming more and more globalized. Business communication between cultures at all levels is becoming increasingly important because globalization increases the need for effective multicultural communication as it multiplies the number of contacts between employees of all levels in one country and peers, partners, and suppliers in other countries. "These contacts are often between individuals at varied levels of responsibility and include correspondence, phone, and fax communication and meetings with visitors from various countries" (Odenwald, 1993:8). Therefore

it is important to develop cross-cultural conflict resolution programs to minimize disruptions caused by these conflicts.

A good example of this is the Japanese Society's crash course conducted in English, on how to bridge the chasm between Japanese and American managers. It forces participants to examine their own cultural assumptions, as well as to learn about the other side. For example, behavior, which Americans consider trustworthy, is often precisely that which Japanese associate with shifty characters—and vice versa.

"To Americans, people who pause before replying to a question are probably dissembling. They expect a trustworthy person to respond directly. The Japanese distrust such fluency. They are impressed by somebody who gives careful thought to a question before making a reply. Most Japanese are comfortable with periods of silence. Americans find silence awkward and like to plug any conversational gaps. The cherished American characteristics of frankness and openness are also misunderstood. The Japanese think it is sensible, as well as polite, for a person to be discreet until he is sure that a business acquaintance will keep sensitive information confidential. An American who boasts "I'm my own man" can expect to find his Japanese hosts anxiously counting the chopsticks after a business lunch. As the Japanese see it, individualists are anti-social. "Team players are sound" (Harris and Moran, 1979:120).

The program for the Japanese and Scandinavian students is designed to examine and resolve these kinds of cultural conflicts and increase understanding of each other's culture. These kinds of programs are essential if global businesses are to be successful in the new century.

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Appendix I

The Yamashitas and the Youngs

Reprinted with permission by the publisher, Passport Books from the book, Japanese *Cultural Encounters, by* H. C. Kataoka and T. Kusumoto, Chicago, 1991.
Mr. Young and his family have been sent to Japan on a long-term business assignment. Mr. Young's company subsidized a fairly large house since they knew the Youngs had a large family. One evening the Youngs invited the Yamashitas, Mr. Young's colleague and his family, to dinner at their home. The Yamashitas seemed to enjoy the American dinner Mrs. Young cooked for them, and the children enjoyed one another's company too. The language barrier caused a few awkward moments, but in general everyone talked, laughed, and ate a lot. Around 10:30, the Yamashitas said that they had to go soon so they could catch the bus home. The two families promised to get together again, and the Yamashitas walked out the door. After saying good-bye, the Youngs closed the door and started washing the dishes. The next morning at work Mr. Yamashita thanked Mr. Young for the dinner. Mr. Yamashita sounded strangely formal, and he then apologized profusely for staying so late. Mr. Young felt surprised, and he wondered why Mr. Yamashita should be apologetic when the Youngs had actually wanted him and his family to stay longer.

Why did Mr. Yamashita assume that he and his family had overstayed?

After the discussion was finished, the teacher gave students the following solution, which is the proposed answer by the authors.

In Japan, seeing people off is almost a ritual. You are expected to wait until the guests (or whomever you're seeing off) are out of sight. While you wait, you either wave good-bye or bow. In fact, the Youngs should have gone outside with the Yamashitas and have stayed there until the Yamashitas were out of sight. The Yamashitas, who were unfamiliar with American custom, were probably afraid that the Youngs were eagerly waiting for them to leave.

Appendix II

Reprinted with permission by the publisher, Passport Books from the book, Japanese *Cultural Encounters, by* H. C. Kataoka and T. Kusumoto, Chicago, 1991. Phyllis works in a Japanese company. She and her section chief were discussing her proposal for improving work conditions that she had written up and submitted to him a month earlier. As they talked, Phyllis became frustrated because her section chief seemed noncommittal. Instead of concentrating on the specifics of her plan about the budgetary problems involved, he talked vaguely and about what other people in the section would think. Phyllis felt this was irrelevant because he had the authority to control the budget and to make decisions without depending on subordinates. When Phyllis asked him if he would accept her proposal, he said,

"I'll think about it." Then he changed the subject. Later Phyllis heard from a colleague that the section chief had turned down her proposal. She wondered why the section chief had not told her directly that the plan would not be implemented.

Why do you think the section chief was so noncommittal during their initial conversation?

After the discussion was finished, the teacher gave students the following solution, which is the proposed answer by the authors.

Most Japanese people tend to avoid a direct no to a request, proposal, or invitation. A direct no indicates a strong refusal in Japanese culture, which is rude and is apt to hurt the other's feelings. In Japan, people prefer to make refusals indirectly (as seen in the section chief's noncommittal attitude), and they are also expected to understand what this sort of behavior signals.

Appendix III

Student Evaluation of Participating Cross-cultural Group Discussion Using English
Hokkaido Tokai University

* Name _____
* Age _____
* Name of University _____
* Major _____
* Job Obtained or Job Goal _____

At what age did you start learning English? _____

Was this the first time you had a discussion with other non-native English speakers in English? _____

Please answer questions *a through j* using this rating system. Strongly Agree-5 Very Much Agree-4 Agree-3 Disagree-2 Strongly Disagree-1

a. The discussions helped me to understand my own culture and the other students' culture.
b. The goal of these discussions was to reach conclusions about the cultural differences in communication between Scandinavians and Japanese. Do you feel satisfied with the conclusions that were reached?
c. I like the way the group was set up.
d. It was difficult to structure and organize my thoughts in a second language, considering the time limits on the small group discussions.
e. The teacher should have played a more active role in giving the discussion direction.

f. I had a chance to use my English skills for a higher level of interaction beyond day-to-day conversation.
g. I am satisfied with my performance using English during the discussion.
h. Speaking English with non-native English speakers is just as effective for learning English as speaking with native English speakers.
i. Having such different English proficiency levels in the groups was frustrating.
j. Despite the frustration I felt regarding proficiency levels, I still felt that the two different cultures were able to communicate satisfactorily with each other.

1. During the discussion, how did you feel about your performance using English in this group? _____
2. After watching the video of the group discussion, how did you feel about your performance using English in this group? _____
3. Was the material discussed too difficult for you in English? _____
4. What topics would have been more appropriate for your level of English? __
5. What are the benefits for you (if any) in terms of using English in a cross-cultural setting? If there were no benefits please say so. _____
6. What could be done to improve the group discussion between Swedish and Japanese students? _____
7. If you had the time, would you like to continue with these discussions? you said yes, why would you like to continue these discussions? _____
8. If you said no, why would you not like to continue these discussions? _____