

# The Use of Technology- Based Activities in Increasing Students'

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## THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY-BASED ACTIVITIES IN INCREASING STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS

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### Abstract

Two phenomena that characterize the 21st century are the rapid advancement of technology and the interconnectedness among countries. As an English teacher, we need to deal with those two issues. First, we cannot deny that technology permeates every aspect of our lives including our classroom. Some teachers may feel annoyed by the fact that almost all of their students bring and use or play with their gadgets in the classroom. Second, the world is going global which means that our students will interact with people from other cultural backgrounds. Without a proper awareness and understanding of other cultures, this interaction may cause embarrassment and uncomfortable situations. This paper aims at discussing some ideas on how to solve the problems by utilizing technology as part of intercultural education.

**Keywords:** technology, intercultural, awareness

### Introduction

In recent years, we have seen a very rapid advancement of technology. The things/activities that seem impossible to do in the past are now becoming a reality. For example, with the invention of internet, we can now watch what is happening in other parts of the world in real time. Internet provides any information that we need. Another fantastic thing is that technology enables us to contact our friends or family abroad using Skype or video call. In our daily life, technology starts playing very important roles; almost every one has ever done online shopping or ordered taxi using applications.

As English teachers, we also feel the impact of technology. It is not uncommon for us to find our students use or play with their smartphones in the class. Some teachers may feel annoyed and decide to make a rule that using smartphones in the class is strictly prohibited. This no-smartphone policy may cause some students feel restless, uncomfortable and find it difficult to focus or concentrate on the lesson. In fact, instead of banning the use smartphones in the class, we can ask our students to utilize their gadgets for educational purposes, for example to find information related to the topic of discussion that day.

Globalization is another phenomenon that characterizes the 21<sup>st</sup> century. No country can stand on its own; it must be directly or indirectly connected or influenced

by other countries. Traveling or working in other countries is becoming something usual these days. When we visit other countries, it is important to know the cultures of those places so that we can adapt and not accidentally hurt or insult other people. Without proper awareness or understanding of other cultures, our interactions with people from other culture may result in embarrassment or misunderstanding. Axtell (1998) warns us to be careful with our gestures. For example, in some parts of Bulgaria, nodding someone's head means "no"; on the other hand, in Indonesia that same gesture means "yes". In Greece and Nigeria, waving someone's hand is considered as an insult, while in Indonesia, that gesture is used to say "good bye" to friends and family. Imagine what will happen if we innocently wave our hands to Greeks or Nigerians. Similarly, a thumb up which is considered a good sign in Indonesia is a rude gesture in some parts of Australia.

Even seemingly simple gesture like greeting can cause confusion. The confusing situation happens when we do not know the rules of doing "proper" greeting in the place we visit. Blanchard (1996) illustrates how greeting is done differently all over the world. He states that:

Many European men and women say hello with two kisses, one on each cheek. But three kisses are polite in Belgium ,and young people in Paris often prefer four. You must start with the right cheek. Starting with the left would be as awkward as sticking out your left hand for a handshake. (p.4)

The rules for greeting if not observed carefully may cause an awkward situation. Imagine the embarrassing encounter when a Japanese businessman meets his new partner from Iran. Both want to show respect by greeting his partner using their own way. The Japanese bows his body, while his Iranian counterpart tries to hug him.

Cotton (2013) posits that "Awareness is always the first and important step" (p. 53) Considering the importance of intercultural awareness, this paper tries to present some ideas on how to use the technology to increase students' intercultural awareness.

### **Discussion**

In my opinion, the best way to understand other cultures is by living or immersing ourselves in the culture that we want to learn. For example, if we want to learn about Japanese culture, we can live with a Japanese family, watch a Japanese cultural festival and eat Japanese food. Similarly, when people from abroad want to learn about Javanese cultures and traditions, they might try to live with a Javanese family, probably in the village, and go together with their "host" to the paddy field, watched "wayang kulit/puppet leather performance" or even try to play gamelan or become a "sinden" (Javanese singer in puppet leather performance). By doing so, for a while, they become like a sponge and absorb the cultural values and experience that I believe will be forever etched in their heart and mind.

The ideal way of learning other cultures; however, is not easy to conduct. Visiting other countries and living there for a period of time will cost a lot of money, time and energy; only a few privileged people will be able to afford it. Thanks to technology, now we can learn other cultures without having to visit the real places.

Here I would like to share some ideas and experiences on how to use technology to bring the world and its cultures to our classrooms.

a. Browsing websites for cultural information

As mentioned before, internet provides any information that we need (culture included). One of the websites that I have visited and used a lot in my classes is [www.gaylecotton.com](http://www.gaylecotton.com). This website was created by Gayle Cotton who is an expert in cross cultural communication, a National Emmy Award winner and the author of best-selling book 'Say Anything to Anyone, Anywhere!' From this website and its links, we can get a lot of useful cultural information and tips.

Here are the examples of some activities that I conducted in my classes which incorporated the information from Cotton's website.

- I asked my students to answer this question: "If you could visit any country, which country would you like to visit and why?"
- After they answered the question, I divided them into groups of 3 or 4 and I asked them to imagine that they are going to have a vacation together as a class and that they have to convince and persuade other members to go to his/her chosen place. Upon reaching a decision, each group presented its decision as interestingly and lively as possible to the whole class. The class then voted where to go.
- I stated that "When we visit a country, we need to understand the culture of that country". Next, I asked them to find information about certain countries, for example: Japan and Italy.
- I asked the students to count 1,2,1,2... number 1 will be a Japanese and number 2 will be an Italian. I asked them to find some cultural tips from the Cotton's website. I gave them some time to read the information.
- The students worked in pairs. The Japanese explain his/her culture to the Italian and vice versa.
- I asked them to stand up. In turn, the Japanese retold the tips they got from the Italian and vice versa.

Another useful website that we can use to increase students' intercultural awareness is [www.hobart.k12.in.us/hhs/academics/gt/ch6.html](http://www.hobart.k12.in.us/hhs/academics/gt/ch6.html). This website informs us about some gestures all around the world. The activities that I conducted in my classes are as follows:

- I divided the students into groups, each group was assigned to learn some gestures from the International Gesture Dictionary.
- Each group shared the gestures they learned to the whole class. One of the members mentioned the name and explained the meaning of the gestures, other members performed the gestures.
- After each group presented, I gave a short quiz based on the presentation.  
e.g.
  - You want to tell your friend in Netherland that he has a telephone call. Which gesture do you use?  
Answer: Head Circle
  - You are in Thailand. You want to give a formal greeting. Which gesture do you use?  
Answer: The Wai
  - You watch a football match in Brazil. You want to praise the player who scored the winning goal. Which gesture do you use?  
Answer: Fingertips Kiss
- To make the class more interesting, I played a game with them. I asked each group to send one of its members to come in front of the class. I then mentioned the names of the gestures, the first person to perform the gesture correctly can sit down.

There are a lot of other websites that we can use to increase students' intercultural awareness. One that I can mention is <https://geert-hofstede.com/countries.html>. One of the interesting activities that we can do based on the information from this website is comparing the scores of two or more countries across six models of cultural dimensions. The models used by Geert Hofstede (1997) are as follows: Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism vs Collectivism (IDV), Masculinity vs Femininity (MAS), Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), Long Term Orientation vs Short Term Orientation (LTO), and Indulgence vs Restraint (IND).

Each of the dimension will be discussed briefly below:

#### *Power Distance Index (PDI)*

The society with lower PDI index tends to question authority and expects that the power is distributed equally, while the higher degree of PDI index means that the lower level or the followers accept to obey the authority without questioning the unequal distribution of power.

#### *Individualism vs Collectivism (IDV)*

As the name suggests, the index measures whether a society tends to behave individually or prefers to do something collectively.

#### *Masculinity vs Feminism (MAS)*

Masculine society highly appreciates competition, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success while the feminine society tends to value cooperation, modesty and caring for the weak.

#### *Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)*

The lower the UAI Index, the higher the level of tolerance of a society towards ambiguity or unknown situation.

#### *Long Term vs Short Term Orientation (LTO)*

The short term orientation society holds strong to its tradition, while long-term orientation society is more adaptive and pragmatic, it is willing to change and more future-oriented.

#### *Indulgence vs Restraint (IDN)*

The indulgent society tends to enjoy life and have fun, while the restraint society restrict the fulfillment of desire. Using the Hofstede model, students will realize that each country is different and they need to adapt and adjust when they visit the country.

#### b. Watching YouTube videos

As we all know, YouTube contains a lot of videos that can be used for educational purposes. According to Romanowski (2014:35) “The students, who were exposed to the videos and participated in the postviewing activities, have become more aware of knowledge, skills and attitudes – essential elements of successful intercultural interaction”. Here are some videos that I have used in my classes to increase students’ intercultural awareness:

- Italian Hand Gestures

One distinctive characteristic of Italians is they used various gestures in their daily conversations. This video presents gestures that are commonly used by Italians. Among others are:

- “Belissimo” means “Wonderful”
- “Ho fame” means “I am hungry”
- “Ho paura” means “I am scared”

I asked the students to watch the video, then I ordered them all of the students to stand up. I pointed to them one by one, the student had to mention one gesture, explained what it means, and performed the gesture.

- Japanese Body Language and Gestures with Hiroko

As the opening of the lesson, Hiroko, the instructor showed a gesture, for example, in lesson 1, she put her hands (like in a praying

position) in front of her face. Then, she asked what the gesture means by giving 3 choices. In this case, the choices are:

- a. Thank you
- b. I'm sorry
- c. No way

(I usually stopped the video at this point, to give students an opportunity to guess the meaning of the gesture). Hiroko then gave the correct answer which is B. I'm sorry and explained that the gesture can also mean "Please do me a favor". She added that the gesture is called "Gomen or Onegai"

In addition to those videos, I also often asked my students to watch videos about cultural festival around the world. For example "Setsubun" festival from Japan, "The Day of the Dead" from Mexico, etc. To gauge the students' understanding, teachers may prepare some questions related to the festival such as:

- When is the festival held?
- What are the purposes of the festival?
- What do people usually do during the festival?

In this digital era, almost all people have Facebook accounts. Having social media accounts is very beneficial for culture learning since students can get acquainted with people from around the world and then learn about their cultures. This learning process is important for the sake of cross-checking the information we get from websites and videos.

The accuracy of the information needs to be double checked because sometimes the cultures have changed over time or the youngsters do not even know that such cultures exist. One important thing that we always need to remember is: "do not assume...ask". This is because our assumptions may be wrong.

### Conclusion

We live in the digital age where every aspect of our life is influenced by technology. In the field of education, it is important for the teachers to equip themselves and their students with the necessary skills to reap maximum benefits from the existence of technology. One of the benefits that we can get is technology enables our students to learn about other cultures. Moreover, technology makes it possible for students to befriend people from various cultural backgrounds and by doing so; enrich themselves with knowledge and cultural insights that will be useful for them when they have opportunities to study, work or live abroad.

Increasing students' intercultural awareness is of utmost importance in the era of globalization. As the global citizen, students will interact with people from all parts of the world and those people may have very different cultures from ours. The awareness is needed to build harmonious relationships among people from diverse cultural backgrounds. It is suggested that teachers use technology as an effective and efficient tool to enhance students' intercultural awareness.

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