Insertions, Interruptions: Strategies in Challenging Stereotypes in the Classroom

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Abstract
This paper proposes practical ways to confront stereotypes in the English language classroom. While the current trend in English language teaching is to recognize the central role of culture in the classroom, the dangers of doing so are real because the approaches so far have tended to homogenize groups of people and to focus only on national cultures. The strategies used here – (1) insert diversity into participants’ background, (2) avoid pronoun references to gender, (3) and diversify patterns of communication of each participant – do not require much work but have great potential in promoting a more genuine intercultural conversation in the English language classroom.

The question is: why are stereotypes so prevalent if they are false? If a stereotype is a false view of other people, why would we maintain them? One reason is motivational – stereotypes are a feature of prejudice. People may not be able to, or may not wish to, alter their stereotyped way of thinking, as it confirms their prejudiced opinions of others.

Hinton, 2000, p. 14

Introduction
Globalization, no matter how we define it, is present in the classroom. We see it in the diversity of ideas and cultures which our students bring along with them. We also see it in the various technologies we use to enable teaching and learning. Globalization, in other words, opens up various ways of teaching and learning because teachers and learners come from diverse backgrounds (Chong, 2007; Hurtado, 2001).

Diversity, however, can be a source of conflict because of different responses to it. In my experience as an English teacher of almost 18 years in the Philippines, the United States and
Singapore, there could be many consequences if diversity is not handled well by teachers and learners:

- teachers and students become intolerant towards other people’s ideas;
- some ideas become more powerful than others, and they remain so without question;
- stereotypes are formed or affirmed; or
- open or silent hatred and distrust between people are developed.

It is good to know that in recent years, more and more teachers have declared their appreciation of the critical role of culture in the classroom and thus have attempted to help solve the problem of stereotyping and cultural intolerance through changes in the syllabus or curriculum. In the English language classroom, this is variously referred to as “intercultural communication,” “cultural awareness,” “cross-cultural understanding” and “the language-culture connection.”

Nevertheless, the irony is that many scholars have shown that those of us who try to address the problem of culture in the classroom are easily vulnerable to stereotyping people as well (Kubota, 1997). Again, based on my own experience, there are at least two potentially negative consequences of an intercultural approach to English language and communication teaching:

- Learning to become interculturally competent tends to homogenize national cultures.

Students start stereotyping national cultures. For example, problematic statements start to emerge in the classroom: “The Japanese are...”, “The Americans are...”, “The Germans are...” and so on. Such statements blind teachers and students to the reality that within a particular national culture, there are immense differences among cultural groups as well.

- “Intercultural communication” means communication between national cultures only.

That is, the main and usually the only focus of discussion is how “the Japanese” and “the Americans” talk to one another, or how “the Chinese,” “the Indians,” and “the French” conduct a meeting together. Such understanding of intercultural communication is flawed
because people who come together to talk are not simply Japanese, or Chinese, or Indians. They also carry along with them religious, social, professional, ethnic, gender and other cultural identities which surely also help shape their communication practices. I believe that it is every teacher’s role to make sure that the classroom is a “safe” place where ideas and learning practices help transform students’ lives positively. In this paper, I shall describe some of the strategies I have used to combat stereotypes in the classroom.

Data
The strategies that follow come from the use of a communication analysis test and exercise on group meeting skills and intercultural communication skills. It includes a meeting excerpt where three business executives in a company discuss an issue. For students to analyse the dynamics of the meeting, the exercise also provides a general background about the participants. Here is a part of that background:

Konrad Paracuelles, who has studied and worked in the Philippines, Singapore and Germany, is the Assistant Director for research. Faiza, trained as a marketing strategist in multinational companies based in Malaysia and the United States, is the Head of the company’s corporate image management division. Laura Smith is the Managing Director of the entire company and is the most senior of the three. She has almost two decades of banking experience in several Asian countries.

Descriptions of the strategies will be accompanied by data from students’ online discussion forums conducted during the two semesters of the academic year 2008-2009. At the start of each semester, students were asked to participate in online discussion forums which required them to analyze the meeting excerpt mentioned above. All students were given access to the same excerpt, except that two versions of the background information were made available to two groups of students. The first version contained the information above, while the second version was a slightly modified one, as follows:

Konrad Paracuelles, who has studied and worked in the Philippines, is the Assistant Director for research. Faiza trained as a marketing strategist in multinational companies based in Malaysia. Laura Smith is the Managing Director of the entire company and is the
most senior of the three. She is from the United States.

The rationale behind the use of the two versions will be explored more in the next section. The point to make at this juncture is that the data from these discussion forums were initially used to find out which of these two versions should be used to ensure quality of responses concerning the role of culture in communication. The qualitative responses would then help in deciding how best to construct “characters” in our tests and exercises related to intercultural communication issues.

The communication analysis using the meeting excerpt and its two versions of background information above was also used in group discussions in class. This has always been done in the course except that, this time around, I was on the lookout for useful responses from the students which I would then write down in a notebook in the form of observations. These informal observations would be incorporated into some parts of the discussion below.

This paper, therefore, first seeks to address the problem of stereotypes in the classroom through modest strategies to challenge them and, second, to find out whether these strategies do indeed make a difference in the way students respond to communication situations.

**Three strategies in combatting stereotypes in the classroom**

Three strategies will be described in this paper. These are:

1. Insert diversity into participants’ background;
2. Avoid pronoun references to gender; and
3. Diversify patterns of communication of each participant.

As will be shown below, the strategies are simple and easy. It does not require much time and effort to use them. In a sense, it follows a major claim of Graham Gibbs (2008), one of the most prominent scholars in the field of higher education research. According to him, transformations in education need not require massive changes in the curricula and assessment practices.
Strategy 1: Insert diversity into participants’ background

In reference to the text above, I was recently asked why it is necessary to make all individuals in the exercise very complex. Why not choose one country for each person only – *Konrad is from the Philippines, Faiza is from Malaysia* and *Laura is from the United States* – so that the concepts are easily understood? Indeed, why not?

In an online discussion forum, students who were asked to analyze the excerpt using the “complex” background of the participants tended to write more “complex” analyses as well. Here is an example of an analysis[1]:

> From the format of the meeting, employees are speaking their ideas freely and although Konrad and Faiza are junior to Laura, they are interrupting Laura freely without any signs of anger or surprise from Laura. As such, the organization must be one that supports open communication between employees and has a flat hierarchical system. On the least, the company’s culture is not a bureaucratic one. On the other hand, due to the different job nature and department that Faiza and Konrad belong to, they are exhibiting different sub-organizational culture through their concerns: Faiza cares a lot about corporate image, while Konrad are just looking at data and reports that they derived from those data without practical concerns such as potential impact that perception of corporate image will have on their revenue growth. On the other hand, as an experienced banker, Laura is also placing more emphasis on data. As such, this may be the potential cause of the debate in the meeting.

On the other hand, with students who were given the same excerpt except that each participant was described as coming from and/or working in one country only, their answers tended to draw on unhelpful stereotypes:

> Konrad is from the Philippines thus adapting more the Asian style of handling debates and discussions. Yes, he may be bit straightforward in language (which is not very Asian), but he delivers his argument in a circular way. He does not move forward in his content. He just goes around and around and around. On the other hand, we have Faiza who is based in the United States thus has more of a western grip of handling discussions.
He is fierce and not afraid to speak his mind. Laura has spent much time in Asia, that’s why even as a leader of the team she rarely put her foot down. She allowed herself to be interrupted by the two others in her team despite of the fact that she is from Western country (the way her name sounds).

The analysis draws on shaky assumptions about the homogeneity of the “Asian style of handling debates and discussion.” The analysis also assumes that if one is straightforward, then one is exhibiting a behavior that is not “very Asian.” Similarly, the Asian way of speaking is “circular” and just “goes around and around and around.” It is also interesting to note that Laura, who is from the United States, “allowed herself to be interrupted” by others in the team because, if we follow the logic of the stereotype, her experience in Asia sensitized her into that kind of communication. This analysis draws a dichotomy between Asia and the West, certainly a dangerous move, especially in the context of a globalized corporate world where people come from different regions and speak different languages.

Therefore, it seems that the person who suggested that Konrad, Faiza and Laura be made less complex probably could not make sense of the hybrid characters of the three executives (see Tupas, 2006). But as can be seen from the two contrasting analyses above, there is wisdom in “globalizing” the characters to avoid generating stereotypes. After all, the reality in the workplace today is that personnel come from many diverse cultures.

**Strategy 2: Avoid pronoun references to gender**

In the background information above, the name “Faiza” is intentionally used because it can be male or female. Additionally, s/he is not referred to as a he or she. The purpose of doing so is to raise awareness of the potential for gender stereotyping in the way we understand people’s behaviors.

During class discussion, it is interesting to note that most students refer to Faiza as male. Because Faiza interrupts other meeting participants and fights for “his” views, students describe “him” in many ways: brusque, straightforward, aggressive, hostile, antagonistic and/or powerful (depending on whether they think of him in positive or negative terms).
As soon as the class talks substantially about Faiza as male, I then come in and ask them a series of questions such as below:

I notice that most of you refer to Faiza as male. Why is this so? What information in the background and meeting excerpt has led you to believe that Faiza is male? What if I tell you the name is actually a female Muslim name? Why was it easy for us to refer to Faiza as male? Is it because Faiza’s communicative style is direct, aggressive and/or antagonistic? Is it because Faiza interrupts many times?

These questions are usually met with a long silence. There is what we may call a cultural interruption because some students’ cultural framework through which they see and understand gender roles and behaviors in society has just been punctured. In less than a minute, the questions have made the students think more deeply and critically about their own assumptions about gender stereotypes in communication.

Of course, it is too presumptuous to assume that all, even most, of the students have become more gender sensitive after this session. But one student’s email can perhaps help put everything in perspective. He wrote: “When you ask us why we think Faiza is male after I spoke, I didn’t know what to say. Perhaps because my experience is most males are really like Faiza and females tend to be less aggressive. But you’re right. Why should Faiza be male? And in many corporations nowadays, women speak like “her.”

Interestingly, there are also students who think Faiza is female but usually because they read her as possessing “feminine” traits. In other words, those who think she is female base it on their own stereotypes as well. Here is a sample analysis from a student in the discussion forum online:

Anyone thinks that sex role stereotypes are being played out here? I am assuming Faiza is a female who is being dominated by Konrad *The Male.*

This strategy of withholding information about the gender of a meeting participant has helped me ask questions about the highly problematic gender stereotypes prevalent among the students. These stereotypes in general draw on the dangerous dichotomy between
communicative behaviours associated with being male and those patterns associated with being female. This dichotomy is simplistic and ignores substantial research which has found that “there are no linguistic behaviors, styles, or practices that can be universally associated with a particular gender group” (Pavlenko, 2001, p. 126).

**Strategy 3: Diversify patterns of communication of each participant**

Another tendency when we write materials for classroom use is to treat each individual as if they are capable only of one particular pattern of communication. But the reality is that we as individuals do not just possess one style of speaking (or writing); that is, there is “plurality, complexity, and hybridity of rhetorical patterns” (Kubota & Lehner, 2004, p. 10) within individuals themselves. We are capable of being direct and indirect, polite and impolite, brief and longwinded, and so on, depending on the people we are communicating with or the contexts in which we do so (Kubota, 1997). We can also extend this to national cultures. A Filipino who is deemed to be indirect in his speech and writing also has in his repertoire other rhetorical moves such as being “brutally frank” if the situation calls for it. In reference to Japanese discourse, Kubota (1997) calls this “multiplicity of rhetoric” because of the inherent tendency of any group discourse or rhetoric to demonstrate and accommodate a wide variety of styles and patterns.

In the few lines from the excerpt below, Laura is interrupted by, and also interrupts, Faiza.

Laura: …and we must vigorously strategize how to maintain our niche, in fact how to expand it. But…

Faiza: Precisely.

Laura: But how does image cut directly into revenue growth, Faiza?

Faiza: Simple. Bad image, no growth. I am not saying…

Laura: …that we have bad image?
Students characterize Laura as both assertive and deferential who “sometimes” interrupts to keep the conversation going. It is therefore not her being assertive and deferential but her being both that has, according to some students, made her become an effective meeting facilitator:

From what I see Laura did not interrupt frequently because she wanted Konrad and Faiza to express all their arguments first. After all being a MD (Managing Director) who had a twenty year experience in corporate world she should be more than capable of handling a discussion during a meeting. If she interrupted Konrad and Faiza all the time would there have a free flow of ideas? If she did not interrupt all the time would she put some order into the meeting? Laura managed to balance the meeting by balancing her own styles of meeting skills too.

Not only does the analysis above draw up a complex understanding of Laura, it actually demonstrates how a “complex” set of patterns of communication associated with one individual forces students to pause and think more about the individual they are about to evaluate or analyze. This simple strategy is congruent with one of the major recommendations given to combat stereotypes in general: “[E]ncouraging people to think carefully about others before passing judgment forces them to focus on individual level attributes rather than category-level information. This approach encourages people to look beyond group memberships and instead to see people as unique individuals” (Hamilton & Crump, 2004, p. 484).

**Conclusion**

Many English teachers reject the idea of bringing “politics” into the classroom. For them, the role of the English teacher is to teach English. Diversity issues are also deemed “volatile” (McKee & Schore, 1994, p. 447); that is why teachers avoid teaching them. Unfortunately, avoiding “politics” in the classroom is nothing but political. Whether we like it or not, “politics” is present in our classrooms (Benesch, 2009).

This short article has argued that stereotypes abound in most classrooms in schools and colleges (Sunderland, 1992). It has shown that it does not take a lot of work and effort to deal with this problem squarely. Small (really minimal) insertions or interruptions in our lessons
and activities could help our students appreciate diversity more critically and challenge their deep-seated beliefs about themselves and others.

[1] All quotes from student responses are quoted verbatim in this paper.

References


About the Author
Ruanni is Senior Lecturer at the Centre for English Language Communication, NUS, and the 2009 Andrew Gonzalez Distinguished Professorial Chair holder in Linguistics and Language Education in the Philippines. His forthcoming publications include invited papers in the *Handbook of World Englishes* (Routledge), the *AILA Review* (John Benjamins) and *English Language in Education and Societies across Greater China* (Multilingual Matters).