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Course: SPEE 203 – Intercultural Communication

Lesson: Language & Culture

Activity Generated in Support of Active Learning: Understanding Language, Culture, and Perception: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

Rationale: The justification for this activity stems from 1) the importance of active learning in student comprehension and retention of information; and 2) the results of my teaching goal inventory, which indicates that I stress “Liberal Arts & Academic Values” and “Personal Development” the most in my intercultural communication courses. As I examined my teaching inventory, I found the list of goals generated by the survey useful since it allows me to identify what I value the most as an instructor. With these goals in mind, I can create and hone class activities that seek to fulfill these goals. Of the 12 goals that I rated “essential” in the inventory, I have chosen the following six goals as the most important for my students to achieve:

1. Develop the ability to apply principles and generalizations already learned to new problems and situations;
2. Develop the ability to draw reasonable inferences from observations;
3. Develop an informed appreciation of other cultures;
4. Learn to understand perspectives and values of this subject;
5. Develop an openness to new ideas;
6. Develop the capacity to think for oneself.

With these six goals in mind, I developed a way to incorporate active learning into my intercultural communication lesson on language and culture by creating an activity that encourages students to apply the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. In previous semesters when I have taught the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, students seemed a bit confused by it because it is a complicated theory that is frequently perceived as “out there” unless students are provided with specific, clear examples. While I have provided examples in the past during my lecture, I hoped that developing an activity that students could complete in small groups would encourage students’ independent, critical thinking about the theory (goals 6 and 2); allow them to apply the theory to examples of language use in culture (goal 1); encourage them to remain open to and appreciative of cultural differences in perception or values that are shaped by (or reflected in) language variations (goals 3 and 5); and ultimately assist them in understanding the importance of this theory in the study of intercultural communication (goal 4). I used this activity for the first time in two sections of my intercultural communication course during spring semester 2008 and have since further developed it based on the results I observed.

Lesson Objective & Plan: The “Language & Culture” lesson for which this activity was developed occurs later in the semester, after the students have begun to understand some of the cultural values differences and communication differences across cultures. The goal of the lesson is to relay to students the fact that “meanings are in people not in words” and that “language shapes our reality.” Put succinctly, words are merely symbols that mean nothing until cultural groups and/or individuals place meaning on them, and the words available or unavailable to a cultural group shape and reflect that culture’s perspectives and values. The lesson begins with an attention catcher/activity (5 minutes); proceeds to a brief lecture on language and culture, including an introduction to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (20 minutes); then the new activity takes place that asks students to apply the theory to real-world examples (20 minutes); the lesson continues with a discussion in which I ask students to come up with examples from their own languages that shape/limit/bias their perception in certain ways (10 minutes); and finally an interactive mini-lecture on examples of the ways English limits perception (with a focus on sexist and racist language and examples of each) (15 minutes).

Activity Description: “Understanding Language, Culture, and Perception: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.” Students were broken into five small groups (with about five students in each), and each group was given a different example of language use in a specific culture (see below for examples 1-5). Groups were told to decide 1) why they think the culture(s) represented in their example possess (or do not possess) certain terms; and 2) what impact these terms (or lack of terms) has on people’s perception in the culture? In other words, students must together generate reasonable explanations for why a culture would or would not have certain words and then generate reasonable inferences about how this language use impacts how people in that culture view the world. This is the essence of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis – that language is *shaped by* what is important to a culture (what words are necessary and what words are not) while it also *shapes and limits* what people notice about the world around them and what they do not notice. After the students generate answers to both questions, they share their assertions with the entire class one at a time. Then, a larger group discussion ensues in which the class discusses the similarities (and differences) in their examples and their implications. I then encourage students to be introspective about their own language and how that privileges or constrains their perception in certain ways. Then, I introduce examples of sexist and racist language to introduce how power is also expressed through language.

Reflection & Results: While this activity is a difficult one (the examples are not easy), the fact that students work in groups allow them to brainstorm a number of plausible explanations for each assigned example. In fact, I was impressed by the depth with which students were able to “explain” their examples by building off of one another’s ideas. I was pleased that they were able to put the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis to work in an effective way, and that the activity produced a fruitful discussion about language and culture, as well as language and power. In fact, it was particularly important to me to begin with more general examples (in the activity) in order to lead into a discussion of language and power. Due to this activity, I found that the students grasped the connection between language and thought well enough to understand the implications of the existence of sexist and racist language. After all, if one accepts that language shapes thought, speaking racist or sexist language also must shape thought, causing one to become prejudiced or racist toward others. The students drew this connection on their

own when I introduced it to them, I believe, because of the activity. Finally, I believe the activity was a memorable one, as several students mentioned it in short essays on their exams, and several more referred to it during later class discussions. Incorporating active learning, then, allowed me to achieve the teaching goals I described above, and I plan to use it again in future semesters.

Intercultural Communication Class Activity

Understanding Language, Culture, and Perception: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

Example 1

The people of northern Pakistan who speak Balti have many different words for “rock,” including:

Brak-lep – flat rock

Khrok – wedge-shaped rock

Khodos – small, round rocks

1) Why do you think these particular terms exist (or why other terms do not exist) in this language? 2) What impact do these labels have on people’s perceptions in this culture?

Example 2

Consider the impact on perception of the following examples:

English people and bulls have *legs*; Spanish people have *piernas* and bulls have *patas*.

English people and horses *eat*; German people *essen* while horses *fressen*.

English has a word for *ant*; the Garo of Assam, India, have many words for different types of ant but no single-word equivalent to *ant*.

1) Why do you think these particular terms exist (or why other terms do not exist) in each language? 2) What impact do these labels have on people’s perceptions in these cultures?

Example 3

Maori kinship terminology distinguishes between siblings in different ways from English.

Teina – younger sister of a female, younger brother of a male

Tuakana – older sister of a female, older brother of a male

Tuahine – sister of a male

Tungane – brother of a male

Based on the semantic distinctions (meanings) of these words, 1) Why do you think these particular terms exist (or why other terms do not exist) in this language? 2) What impact do these labels have on people’s perceptions in this culture?

Example 4

Look at the chart below. It lists the terms used to describe basic/primary colors in English, Shona (a Bantu language spoken in Zimbabwe and parts of Mozambique), and Bassa (a Niger-Congo language). 1) Why do you think these particular color terms exist (or do not exist) in each language? 2) What impact do these labels have on people's perceptions in each of these cultures?

Basic Color Terms in English, Shona and Bassa						
English	purple	blue	green	yellow	orange	red
Shona	cipswuka	citema		cicena		cipswuka
Bassa		hui			zɔza	

Example 5

In English, every finite verb must be marked for tense (“ran” “run” “is running” etc.), but standard modern Chinese has no tense system. It *is* capable of specifying when an event takes place, but it is not required every time a verb is used. So, as an example, the very same phrase can be used to describe some who “ran”/”run”/ “will run” and so on, with the *when* only being described if the speaker wishes to.

Based on these language rules, 1) Why do you think these particular rules regarding tense exist (or why other terms do not exist) in these languages? 2) What impact does the recognition of tense (or non-recognition of tense) have on people's perceptions in these cultures?