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Talking about Our and Other People's Proverbs for Intercultural Competence

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Note: The author suggests referring to this activity as T.o².p².i.c. (pronounced 'topic') after students gain familiarity with it.

Objectives

Students will be able to...

...present native language (L1) proverbs to peers who speak other languages (L2) and offer opinions on the components and histories of these proverbs.

...engage in dialogue about similarities and differences among proverbs.

...make positive inferences, not stereotypes, about the cultures of others, after encounters with their proverbs and scaffolded critical thinking.

...demonstrate increased fluency (or accuracy) in English as a lingua franca for intercultural exchange.

Level

Intermediate to Advanced

Materials

Paper and pens, Whiteboard and markers, Smartphones and/or in-class computers, Internet

Timing

Approximately three hours split over three or four class sessions – The time needed for each procedure will vary according to class needs and dynamics, but estimate beforehand. – As with any cultural activity, be prepared to allow for extra time (World Learning, 2018) and final feedback.

Student Interactions

T.o².p².i.c. allows for multiple moments of individual, pair/small group, large group, and whole class engagement.

Procedures

1) Ask students to sit in groups of two or three, according to their native language. Add any lone language speakers to the group of a related one, if possible.

2) In a class discussion, elicit information about proverbs from students. Possible questions: What purpose do they serve? Are they universal? Are they cultural, and if so, how? What do they have in common with other cultural artefacts? Mention that proverbs have existed long before schools (Onofrei & Iancu, 2015). Ask for a few volunteers to offer reasons for this. Encourage those with differing opinions to voice them. Then, tell students that they have just witnessed examples of critical thinking and that everyone will use it in this activity.

3) Tell students to speak with group mates about interesting L1 proverbs and jot them down. Conversing in L1 is fine at this point, but students should prepare to summarize their findings in English for other classmates and the instructor. Students may have difficulty recalling L1 proverbs under pressure, so allow them to check their entries or search for more using smartphones or in-class computers.

4) A jigsaw: Remix students into groups of up to five. Ideally, each member of the newly formed groups should have a different L1. Refer to 'Variations' below if this is not possible.

5) Model discussion about a proverb before letting students loose in their groups. Give an English translation (and original if you can) from a language unknown to all. An example from

Japanese is “Even monkeys fall from trees.” – “Saru mo ki kara ochiru.” Ask students to confer with new group mates about what the message in this proverb could be. Ask for one member of each group to report to the class. Allow students to interrupt each other with (dis)agreement or further comments. This point in the activity gives another boost to uninhibited critical thinking skills.

6) Direct students to do the same now with their L1 proverbs. They should take turns presenting them and allowing others to guess at the hidden messages before giving too many details. Assure them that it is perfectly acceptable not to know much about the components or history of a proverb, but that they should offer their own explanations. For example, “There are probably many wild monkeys in Japan; that's why that proverb is about them and not other tree-dwellers.” – “Falling signifies failing.”

7) Bring the class back together, perhaps by letting them sit where they usually do. Cold call one member of each preceding group to summarize any unexpected or surprising occurrences. Then, ask everyone what could be the dangers of encountering other people's proverbs without having deep discussion. Perhaps the biggest is the stereotyping of an entire group of people (Madumulla, 1998). Fairness is a major part of critical thinking (World Learning, 2018). Cite the proverb commonly used in English, “You can't judge a book by its cover.”, and ask students for their ideas on how it could be used to describe not only appearance, but culture. Further, ask if anyone had presented proverbs with special mnemonics, making them especially catchy (Onofrei & Iancu, 2015).

8) Give final feedback based on what you have observed throughout and anything else that you or students deem necessary.

Variations

1) In overly homogeneous classes, speakers of languages not in the majority may need extra encouragement from the instructor. Moreover, the instructor could chime in with English-language proverbs. Successful, proverb-led telecollaboration with faraway classrooms (Hirotani & Fujii, 2019) is very possible these days, given the proliferation of online platforms for this.

2) Adding individual essays or group presentations as a final procedure would incorporate more practice in written or oral paraphrasing to the activity.

3) Procedure #6 could be gamified, with the result of forging new friendships between students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In this case, each student should have prepared at least five L1 proverbs to share.

4) The main focus of *T.o².p².i.c.* is the use of critical thinking skills in intercultural dialogue. However, you may opt to give students additional time at the end in order for them to master and recite a few English or other L2 proverbs.

References

Hirotani, M. & Fujii, K. (2019). Learning proverbs through telecollaboration with Japanese native speakers: facilitating L2 learners' intercultural communicative competence. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, (4)5, 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-019-0067-5>

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