

---

# Beyond Cultural Differences

Keumsil Kim Yoon, William Paterson College

---

## An Intercultural Experience Through Film

A hundred English as a second language teacher trainees viewed a Japanese film in one session of the International Film Program at William Paterson College. The objective of this program was to augment intercultural study elements of the academic curriculum and heighten students' awareness of cultures.

The ESL teacher trainees were very eager to know more about Japanese culture, partly due to the increasing population of Asian students in the New York metropolitan area where they were teaching. Many of them currently had Asian students, including Japanese, in their classes. They were looking forward to experiencing cultural differences through the Japanese film. They had read and been told about differences between American and Japanese cultures—differences in foods, housing, school systems and so forth.

The film they saw was "Ikiru" (to live) directed by Akira Kurosawa. In the film a petty municipal official learns that he is dying of cancer. For the first time in his life he realizes that he has accomplished nothing, has never enjoyed anything. He spends the money he has saved on a wild spree in a red light district, but this brings him no satisfaction. Later he looks for a clue for the meaning of life by trying to establish significant communication with his son, but also finds disappointment in this. Finally, he returns to the office and

uses all of his strength to bring to realization a petition which has been months on his desk and the desks of others—a request for a playground in a slum neighborhood. Despite opposition from almost every quarter, he pushes his project through. Finally it is complete, and that night, sitting on a swing in the park, with snow falling on him, he dies.

## Reaction

The ESL teachers' reactions to this film were very revealing. Some of them expressed their disappointment: "I didn't find anything significantly different from our American culture." "Red light districts exist regardless of geographic areas." "Even a Japanese father cannot establish a profound relationship with his son and daughter-in-law." "Their bureaucracy is just the same as ours." Others revealed their misconception of people from different cultures: "I thought that the emphasis on Asian culture and education was on controlling emotions...but that young girl from Watanabe's office giggles a lot and enjoys moments of life." "Since Japanese people look very serious, I thought the funeral scene in Japan would be serene, but they also get drunk." "How come the young people behind the scene sing a birthday song in English, not in Japanese?"

## The Outcome

The aforementioned reactions had been anticipated and were meant to be a challenge to the trainees' obsession with



experiencing and finding cultural differences. This was a hidden but main objective. It was hoped that their spontaneous reactions would make them reexamine their attitudes toward other cultures and search for the beauty in universal humanity.

### Intercultural Differences

It has been assumed that a teacher must be aware of sociocultural differences to operate effectively in the classroom. In this respect, Saville-Troike (1978 p. viii) states "we can never hope to be culture-free in teaching and evaluating our students, but we can at least attempt to be culture-fair by being sensitive to our own biases and by recognizing that cultural differences do not represent deficiencies."

ESL teachers have been pressured to augment their awareness of cultural differences of their students in order to understand them better. In this way they have been encouraged to look for cultural differences to the extent that, in their minds, the more they know about cultural differences the better they are in teaching. Their minds have been filled with the anxiety of finding differences.

Thus, many ESL classes concentrate on differences: "Tell us about your school?" "Tell us about how different the food is" "What was the most difficult habit to be broken due to the cultural differences?" All questions and topics focus on differences.

To go back to the Japanese film session, the ESL teacher trainees who had been obsessed with the idea of differences overlooked the message of the film. They were so anxious to find cultural differences that they missed perceiving the human

similarities which would allow them to establish deep relationships with people from other cultures. "Ikiru" is not an ethnic film which would satisfy the curiosity of people who look for surface cultural differences. It raises no barrier of culture or tradition to baffle the audience. The story is simple but universal; it tells us something about life which increases the measure of truth in the universe, it probes the heart and mind of an individual on a scale that transcends national boundaries.

### A Concern

Knowing and understanding cultural differences is certainly an asset in communicating effectively. However, conversations based only on differences create problems: when people thus trained approach anybody who is different, the sense of difference creates a "wall" and even a "fear." Later this difference creates a feeling of isolation and prevents people from developing deeply emotional and joyful relationships. My concern is not just for ESL teachers, but also for their students who are looking for and waiting for close contacts with their teachers and peers. (Fantini et al. 1984; see pedagogical suggestions on "Fears and Expectations")

### Intercultural Similarities

Beyond cultural differences there are universal humanistic similarities to be searched for, to be appreciated and to be enjoyed. Why shouldn't we then talk about things in common first? Why shouldn't we look for similarities beyond surface cultural differences? While recognition, appreciation, and maintenance of cultural differences is a worthwhile endeavor, pursuit of universal similarities is a



humanitarian task. This has been social workers' task (Aptekar 1967) and it should be ESL teachers' task too.

Language minority students, especially those with a different physiognomy, who are already experiencing a great number of difficulties—linguistic, cultural, and psychological—are very sensitive to their differences including their physical difference. When these are emphasized, they feel excluded. Why should we thus generate more stress to the painful situation?

### A Proposal

How about first talking about human similarities and building a "bridge" rather than a wall? The study of cultural differences could come afterward.

Furthermore, accepting Singer's (1987, p. 3) view that "the world is shrinking at an incredible rate," I suggest extending ESL programs to intercultural education (Dye & Frankfort 1983), which requires behavioral as well as theoretical learning including examination of our self-perception and our perception of other cultures. In this increasingly small planet, we may expect that the traditional focus on sharp national and East-West divisions will be erased, and a new, more enlightened focus on universal ideals and qualities will become prominent. To many enlightened people, it is no longer western history and ideals which matter entirely, but universal history and ideals. It is a question of integrating world education into the curriculum.

### References

- Aptekar, H. H. (1967). The values, functions, and methods of social work. In Council on Social Work Education, *An intercultural exploration: universals and differences in social work values, functions, and practice* (pp. 3-59). New York: Tutrone Printing Co.
- Dye, J. & Frankfort N. (1983). Teaching English to speakers of other languages: A model for education with a global perspective. In H. Sherman & B. Samalonis (Eds.), *Intercultural education* (pp. 24-32). New York: Hunter College of CUNY.
- Fantini, A., McCoy, M. V., Soquet, J., Tannenbaum E., & Wright, L. (1984). *Cross Cultural Orientation*. Brattleboro, Vermont: The Experiment in International Living.
- Saville Troike, M. (1978). *A Guide to Culture in the Classroom*. Washington, D.C.: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education.
- Singer, M. (1987). *Intercultural Communication*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

### About the Author

*Keumsil Kim Yoon is assistant professor of linguistics at William Paterson College, where she coordinates the Bilingual/ESL Teacher Training Program. She has done research in second language acquisition and bilingualism.*