

Analysing students' language to understand the depth of their commitment

What this research was about and why it is important

TESOL teacher educators may recognize that simple observation of interaction in workshop discussions does not show exactly which intercultural communication (IC) values student-teachers have taken on board and how committed they are to them. IC values are accepting other cultures, avoiding stereotypes, and critically evaluating one's own culture. It is important for educators to know how to analyse the depth of their students' understanding of IC values, as this can guide curriculum design. The study described here used a thematic linguistic framework of analysis of student journals aimed at revealing the extent of the students' commitment to IC values, as evidenced by their attitude to cultural differences and stereotyping. The students seemed able to question the values of their own culture and accept the values of the other culture, and some looked at the influence of social variables such as age on language, but a minority showed a negative attitude to other cultures and stereotyped differences.

What the researchers did

- Students were asked to write journals about how the theories of linguistic analysis taught in a linguistics course (e.g. Cooperative Principle, which examines how informative, truthful, relevant, and clear utterances are, and Politeness Theories, which study face-saving strategies) applied to a culture that they knew well.
- All the journal entries were put in one electronic database.
- Each entry was labelled thematically according to commitment to IC values. They were categorized as having an IC orientation, if they decentered, showing an appreciation of how their own culture might look to an outsider, if they critically evaluated their own culture and accepted another culture, or refused to see culture as a self-versus-other matter. The journal entries were categorized as not having an IC orientation if they contained polarization (exaggerating differences between cultures) and negative stereotyping.
- Each entry was coded linguistically according to stance (words that indicate attitude and how committed one is to the truth-value of one's words). This meant coding words that indicated a positive attitude e.g. "happily" or a negative one e.g. "unfortunately", and words that showed a clear commitment to the truth, softening it e.g. "perhaps" or boosting it e.g. "definitely".
- Percentages of entries with each theme or stance were calculated.
- Theme and stance were then analysed together, to find the attitude and commitment expressed within each theme.

What the researchers found

- Nearly all entries showed the students' ability to decenter, question the values of their own culture, and accept the values of the other culture.
- A minority refused to see culture as a self-versus-other matter, preferring to look at the influence of social variables such as age and status on language.
- A third of all entries contained polarization of overgeneralised cultural differences (e.g. Chinese v western culture), used negative words (e.g. 'dodgy and suspicious'), words boosting negative statements (e.g. 'In China, people will make very personal comments'), and repeated negative exaggeration (e.g. 'there is no need to keep saying thank you the whole time'), all unconvincingly accompanied by softening expressions ('Not sure that it really works').

Things to consider

- The article provides suggestions as to how teacher educators can carry out a similar study of their student-teachers' discourse to understand their beliefs
- It also describes classroom activities that might help students to become aware of how their attitudes can be revealed by their destructive culturalist language. Examples of such activities are discussions of the limitations of stereotypes, and tasks that raise awareness of lexico-grammatical choices that may risk implying a negative attitude.
- It suggests that results of such a study can guide curriculum design.