

K.Y.: A Step Towards Intercultural Competence.

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Abstract

Amplly equipped with the skills they have learned in the classroom, students arrive in the country of their target language. Linguistically, they navigate their new world smoothly. Socially however, they feel inept and excluded from their peer group. In a word, they are unable to "read the atmosphere" ("K.Y."). These anxieties begin to abate as they slowly unravel the implicit cultural codes of their friends. Therefore, can we consider K.Y. to be an obligatory stepping-stone from mere linguistic competence to complete intercultural understanding?

Is it absolutely necessary for language students to travel to an English speaking country in order to understand and savour this atmosphere? Gathering the collective imagination of the students we vicariously 'travelled' to different parts of Ireland to participate in realistic cultural activities. Perplexed (K.Y.) by these globally simulated situations the students were required to participate both emotionally and intellectually. They discovered that they could "read the atmosphere", pinpoint the cultural conundrum and find a solution.

key words:K.Y., Intercultural Competence, Implicit Cultural Codes, Ireland, Global Simulation.

"They shout and fight all the time", my daughter's panic stricken voice echoed down the phone line. It was September and Erin, an Italian major, had just arrived in Italy to spend a year in the land of her chosen language. In measured tones, we, her equally panic-stricken parents advised her to 'stick it out' until Christmas! Thankfully, even before 'Jingle Bells' and 'Silent Night' had invaded the airwaves, she called again to thank us for sending her to the 'best place on earth'. Bologna is indeed a gracious and welcoming city but the 'best place on earth' she had yet to prove! What had happened in the space of 2 months?

Simply put, she had been a victim of K.Y. Italian style! Her language skills looked good

on paper and she could rattle off vocabulary with the speed of summer lightening but K.Y. was causing her to doubt her decision to fulfill her dream and spend a year studying in Italy. The romance of Puccini's Tosca had touched our 14 year old as she played the trumpet in her school Brass Band. She loved to watch Italian old films and devoured pasta in all shapes and sauces. When it came time to choose a language to study at University, Italian was an obvious choice. Now, here she was, stranded in Bologna, unable to find the Italy of her dreams. The delicious taste of pasta had kept its promise but Tosca seemed to scream and the fun of Fellini films was nowhere to be found. K.Y. was indeed hovering overhead.

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"K.Y.", an abbreviation of the Japanese expression "Kuuki ga Yomenai Hito" refers to a person who has misunderstood an implicit understanding within his or her peer group. Loosely translated into English, it refers to someone who is unable to 'read the atmosphere' around them. We may all know and recognize that hapless person who systematically misreads people and their needs. A certain Mr. Tanaka is a good example of a K.Y. person, a Japanese friend told me. She explained that with University lectures winding down and Mr. Tanaka's classmates' thoughts drifting towards lunch, he would regularly ask detailed questions requiring long answers from the Professor and earning him frustrated glances from his fellow students! However, this same Mr. Tanaka, the Chemist went on to win a Nobel Prize in 2002.

K.Y. is not just a Japanese sensibility but an intangible concept that can be transplanted to any culture. The brilliant and very talkative Irish novelist and storyteller Maeve Binchy tells how, while living in London in the 1970's, she regularly inflicted her brand of K.Y. on surprised Londoners while queuing for a bus. Irish people tend to have a great view, however wrong, on a great many subjects, and a silent Dublin bus queue is such a rarity that when Maeve briefly moved to London and commuted by bus, she would try to engage her fellow bus queuers in conversation. They would look askance as she announced to them "The number 10 bus has just left which means that the number 15 will be here shortly, don't you think so?" They would move quickly away, perhaps thinking she might want to invite herself into their homes for dinner! Maeve's K.Y. was at work. Similarly,

the shouting and gesticulation that Erin had witnessed from a Japanese perspective conveyed anger and discontent, emotions not openly displayed in Japan. She was at a loss about how to deal with them. The land of her dreams was proving to be a minefield requiring stealth and caution to navigate. Could this innocent K.Y. victim learn to 'read the atmosphere' in Bologna?

Weeks passed, filled with classes and days flying by, often ending in lively dinners with her Italian flatmates. More than any textbook or Professor's class, these evenings of cooking and eating together taught her how to 'read the atmosphere'. The 19th century American poet and essayist Emerson's quotation came to mind, "I pay the schoolmaster, but it is the other boys who educate my son". What Erin had experienced, as angry shouting and fighting, had slowly morphed into affectionate, excited and often humorous enthusiasm to discuss any subject under the sun. In Italy, conversation is constant and opinions are shared with varying degrees of intensity. Erin's early fears fell away and were replaced by admiration and a desire to emulate the people around her. Finally she began to relax and fall in love with Italy.

Erin's year abroad happily ended with a newfound culture, language and desire to learn more. This led me to question my job as an English teacher to Japanese learners of English. It saddened me to realize that many of these enthusiastic students of English may never enjoy a similar experience. Family ties, financial worries, age or travel anxiety may hinder students from venturing abroad to study. These lovers of the English language will continue to attend English classes, films

and whenever possible participate in English conferences. Their knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary will surely expand way beyond mine. Our conversations will be polite and formal but they may never relax into a 'High Five' situation, unless, the class hypothetically, boarded a plane and flew to Ireland, or any other country to which they can vicariously travel. They may experience a K.Y. situation and through it, learn to 'read the atmosphere' and gain an insight into the culture of their target language. Armed with permission from a local college, I set up a 10-week course aimed at giving Japanese students of English a chance to savour a taste of Ireland and its unique atmosphere.

America, England or Australia, countries about which they have a daily influx of news may have been a more culturally accessible choice for my adult Japanese students. Right or wrong, American culture has bestowed on Japanese students of English, Jazz, a concept of a country percolating with tolerance and acceptance, and wide-open spaces in which to feel free. By comparison, tiny England's traditions, funny food and ideal accent continue to delight them. The beautiful flora and fauna of Australia attract Japanese honeymooners yearly. They can refer to the shock of tasting Marmite for the first time and replying to an Aussie 'goodbye'. However, these lands are not my land. I have yet to meet a Japanese person who has honeymooned in Ireland or who has gone in search of the rare Alpine plants on the rocky moonscape of County Clare in the west of Ireland. Nonetheless, I have met a handful of Japanese people who have come to Ireland to learn music or enjoy the safety of a country imbued with the sense that there should be

a warm welcome for a stranger. So I hoped to give the students a sense of this particular Ireland.

These students, with varying experiences of foreign travel were all longtime learners of English, and the first class on Ireland began with a 'baptism' giving them a new identity. With a map of Ireland clearly showing each student's 'new hometown', they received Irish names and new occupations. The premise of the course was that we had all previously 'met and bonded' at an International Conference in Indonesia entitled 'Sustainable Farming'. Hailing from the four corners of Ireland, we all flew back to Dublin together. However, our return flight had been problematic and the airline had generously compensated us for the inconvenience caused. Wishing to continue our friendship, we decided to use this unexpected financial windfall from the airline, to travel each week to a different part of Ireland visiting and learning about each other's county. One student 'John O'Brien' was a 'Chef' in Kinsale, county Cork, the gourmet paradise of Ireland. Here, at John's restaurant 'The Vintage' we learned to make reservations and order from a menu. Then it was off to see 'Maggie Ryan' a 'Tour Guide' at Lissadel House in county Sligo where we made hotel reservations and learned how to check into a hotel. Maggie showed us of the beauties of Yeats-country and we listened to a Yeats poem while visiting the titular "Lake Isle of Inishfree", the poems inspiration. Over the course of 10 weeks we traveled the length and breadth of Ireland visiting each other's home counties.

At our seventh class, a surprising thing

happened. It seemed that the class had truly left Kofu, had transplanted to Ireland and was fluently 'reading the atmosphere'. This day's grammar point was time and distance questions: 'How long does it take to go to Kerry from Dublin?' How far is Belfast from Donegal? We practiced a variety of situations before 'visiting' the Hill of Tara in County Meath where the racing-horse trainer 'Maureen McNamara' explained the problem her county was facing. The Irish government, worried about an increase in traffic on the Dublin Belfast road wanted to build a spanking new Motorway. The problem lay in the fact that the road would go through the 'Hill Of Tara'. Steeped in ancient history, the site of the High Kings of Ireland, Tara also contained a 2000 year old passage-tomb. Closer to home, in Japan, Tara was even more famous as a character in a novel and film. For anyone who has read Margaret Mitchell's novel or seen the film 'Gone with the Wind', they will remember that 'Tara' was the name of the Atlanta house in which the heroine Scarlett O'Hara was born. Gerald O'Hara, her father had left his Irish home near the Hill of Tara to escape the wrath of the local British constabulary. He travelled to America where he built his stately home on his cotton plantation and called it Tara.

'Maureen' from Tara, emotionally declared that this proposed Motorway must not be built and the class should organize a protest against it. The other students agreed and set about writing a questionnaire to elicit people's opinions on the proposed Motorway. The class turned into a lively discussion on what could be done to stop the road being constructed. Students remembered similar situations in Japan. Luckily the

class was only 90 minutes or I might have had to organize a protest delegation to the Irish embassy! After the class 'Maureen' actually did ask me for the name of the Irish Ambassador. I don't know if she ever contacted him but I was impressed by her enthusiasm and desire to see beyond the classroom.

It would be wonderful to say that this had happened every year, but it didn't, at least not in quite the same way. 'Maureen's' ability to slip into her role and forget the dull grey classroom was rare and her infectious energy encouraged the other students to try on their roles for size. Nevertheless, students from other years continue to meet and some have travelled to Ireland. Six members even started a music group. Strangely enough they chose a French name for their group and although I did wonder why they hadn't chosen an Irish name, I didn't ask. After all, Ireland has always been a nation of emigrants and perhaps this little group of students had decided to 'visit' France for a while! Happily, they return to my class every year to spend 10 weeks 'reading the atmosphere' of Ireland.

Language learners abroad face many daunting days. We are reduced to a feeling of babyhood as we struggle to care for our most basic needs. Buying a stamp or trying to read the label on the milk carton may require as much preparation as writing an essay. We may find ourselves sitting on a bus going in the wrong direction or eating *prosciutto* instead of drinking the *prosecco* wine that we tried to order. Life flashes by, noisier and more colorful than it ever was at home. Until one day, we are happily joining in the banter at a Dublin bus stop. We find

ourselves gracefully bowing to a neighbour on a Tokyo street. We discover that we can expertly catch the waiter's eye at an early morning Parisian café and order 'un express et deux croissants s'il vous plait'. After years of hard study at home and the recent weeks of nervous decisions over word choices, we suddenly realize that we can 'read the atmosphere'. This is the moment when the frenetic pace of life slows down and we can begin to enjoy our chosen language and the culture that envelops it.

We can of course, learn a language while sitting at a desk. We will learn the grammar and perfect our accent with the help of a language lab. Our comprehension will be complete with the aid of online listening exercises. For some people, this may be all they need, but it's a pity. They will never discover that the noisy and excitable Italians can wait patiently for an hour for a train that may never come. They will never witness the elegant and slightly arrogant Parisian lady melting at the sight of a baby in its pram. Or listen to the Irish supermarket cashier asking her unknown customer for advice on how to ask her boss for her summer holidays. We learn so much when our stereotypes prove to be false. Thankfully, after a year, Erin returned safely to Japan but she continues to harbor a deep longing to return to Italy with its romance and excitement, to discover answers to the secrets which Italian culture is still hiding from her! So take your language skills abroad, experience cultural empathy and see how long it takes you to 'read the atmosphere'. If you can't do that, try the next best thing - a 10-week course vicariously 'visiting' Ireland or any country you like. If you choose Ireland you will receive 'Cead Mile

Failte' - a Hundred Thousand Welcomes!

References

- 1) "Global Simulations" in MIIS wiki (http://mediawiki.middlebury.edu/wiki/MIIS/Global_Simulations). Three key components of a Global Simulation numerated in this article are 1) reality of function - students suspend their disbelief and act as though the simulation was real, 2) simulated environment - students function realistically, but in an unreal environment and 3) structure - students have a series of tasks that become increasingly demanding
- 2) Maeve Binchy, "Love of Ireland", interview consulted on Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDTcq3i0uWI>)