

Perspective Taking in Language Learning and Teaching

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Introduction

Language is a means by which different minds communicate ideas to one another. It is also a means our minds use to understand ourselves, other people, the world around us, and the relationships among them. In language acquisition, we are basically developing a code that we will use to understand, formulate and communicate ideas. The acquisition of a child's native language is necessary for normal social functioning and is, for the most part, inevitable. The acquisition of a second language, however, may be neither necessary nor inevitable. Those for whom a second language may be necessary or highly desired for normal social functioning may benefit from practicing the strategies and skills developed by children learning their native language. One of these skills that children develop that coincides with the development of their language skills is the skill of perspective taking. How exactly these two skills relate is currently a matter of debate among researchers. However, the fact that there is a strong relationship between language acquisition and perspective taking is not in doubt. Examining this research and applying the knowledge gained to second language learning and teaching may help learners to gain a deeper linguistic and cultural understanding that will lead to higher social functioning skills in the target language.

Definitions

Since social functioning is considered a primary goal of language learning, we need to establish exactly what social functioning comprises. Two primary aspects of social functioning are the ability to perceive what others say and do accurately and the ability to respond appropriately. In order to function in any society, we need both to understand the signals that the members of that society are sending and to send appropriate signals back in order to convey our messages in an understandable and meaningful way. With these abilities, an individual could be considered as having acquired social functioning skills in a particular society. The signals that are sent back and forth between members of a society are in large part conveyed verbally. This is not to minimize the often dominant role of non-verbal communication, but our primary focus here is the linguistic code.

A second concept requiring definition is perspective taking. Perspective taking is the ability to see things from a point of view other than one's own. In describing perspective taking,

Moskowitz says: “We must be able to stand in the shoes of others, see the world through their eyes, empathize with what they are feeling, and attempt to think and react to the world in the same way that they think and react to the world.”¹ Perspective taking is often referred to as or considered a part of the “theory of mind,” a concept introduced in 1978 by researchers Premack and Woodruff who tested chimpanzees to see if they understood that others had a different mind and point of view.² Perspective taking, or theory of mind, is considered an important step in the cognitive development of children.

Research on Perspective Taking

The research on perspective taking covers a wide range of topics. In this brief overview of the research, we will look at the relation of perspective taking to social skills, empathy, ethics, conflict management, and ethnicity, culture and stereotypes.

Researchers have found a great deal of evidence supporting the benefits of developing perspective-taking skills and using them in our social interactions. Inherent in perspective taking are many significant interpersonal values, including respect for different realities, appreciation for individual differences, objectivity, flexibility, tolerance of ambiguity, and nonjudgmental attitudes.³ Characteristics commonly associated with perspective taking are “patience, reasonableness and sensitivity,” which lead to more accuracy in judging others.⁴ These qualities can be a great benefit in any social situation. Perspective taking is often seen as fundamental to social interaction.⁵ MacDonald indicates the social utility of perspective taking: “It is important

¹ Gordon B. Moskowitz, *Social Cognition* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2005), 277.

² John H. Flavell, “Theory-of-Mind Development: Retrospect and Prospect,” *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (July 2004): 275.

³ Kathie Laurence, “Piaget Meets the Great Pumpkin: A Lesson in Perspective Taking,” www.paly.net/~klaurenc/psychology/Piaget_Meets_The_Great_Pumpkin.doc (accessed December 9, 2005).

⁴ Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, “An Instructor’s Guide for Introducing Industrial-Organizational Psychology,” (2002) <http://siop.org/Instruct/LMXtheory/sld009.htm> (accessed December 29, 2005).

⁵ Nicholas Epley et al., “Perspective Taking as Egocentric Anchoring and Adjustment,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 87, no. 3 (2004): 336.

to be able to infer other people's thoughts in order to know, for example, how to join a group of peers, how to respond to ambiguous social cues, and how to provide informative social feedback to others."⁶ Even marriages benefit from high perspective-taking skills between partners.⁷ "Well-developed perspective-taking abilities allow us to overcome our usual egocentrism, tailor our behaviors to others' expectations and thus make satisfying interpersonal relations possible."⁸ Basic social functioning is enhanced by our perspective-taking abilities. In her research on using perspective taking to help people with social cognitive deficits, Winner says that "perspective taking plays a key role in our ability to relate to others not only for the purpose of socialization but also to interpret meaning that is critical for academic work and personal problem solving skills critical for living independently as an adult."⁹ As we can see, practice in perspective taking has the potential to greatly improve our social skills.

Another area where there has been a great deal of research on perspective taking is in its relationship to empathy. One definition describes empathy as "the ability to identify, experience and understand the emotions of others and act to reduce the negative emotions exhibited by others."¹⁰ Perspective taking is thought by many to lead to both empathy and helping behaviors.¹¹ In her research, Oswald separates perspective taking into two categories: cognitive—recognizing and understanding thoughts of others, and affective—identifying and understanding feelings of others. She found that the type of perspective taking that focused on

⁶ Christine D. MacDonald, "Overall Accuracy of Children's Awareness of Peer Perceptions" (paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Indianapolis, Indiana, March 1995), 4.

⁷ Edgar C. J. Long and David W. Andrews, "Perspective Taking as a Predictor of Marital Adjustment," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59, no. 1 (1990): 126–131.

⁸ Mark H. Davis et al., "Effect of Perspective Taking on the Cognitive Representation of Persons: A Merging of Self and Other," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no. 4 (1996): 713.

⁹ Michelle G. Winner, "Perspective Taking across the School and Adult Years for Persons with Social Cognitive Deficits," (2003) <http://www.socialthinking.com/philosophy.htm> (accessed December 29, 2005).

¹⁰ Wallace J. Kahn and Catherine V. Lawhorne, "Empathy: The Critical Factor in Conflict-Resolution and a Culture of Civility," ERIC Document # ED479344 (August 2003): 6.

¹¹ Jon K. Maner et al., "The Effects of Perspective Taking on Motivations for Helping: Still No Evidence for Altruism," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 28, no. 11 (November 2002): 1601–1610.

feelings leads to more helping behaviors and empathy.¹² Davis and Oathout found that higher perspective taking skills and greater empathy lead to deeper satisfaction in romantic relationships.¹³ In general, when people perceive a greater similarity between themselves and others, they are able to more easily understand the others' perspectives and, in turn, tend to be more empathic.¹⁴ This close connection between perspective taking and empathy can lead to stronger social ties and higher social functioning.

Another measure of our ability to function well socially is the ethicality of our decisions and actions. Perspective taking plays a role in moral judgments when we consider whether or not a person is to blame for their behavior. We often take the perspective of other people in order to determine whether they acted intentionally, and whether we believe they did or not gives us grounds for moral judgment.¹⁵ Several researchers at the Michigan Business School designed a computer program to help students learn corporate social responsibility. This multiplayer online simulation game requires students in groups of three to play the roles of governments, companies, or the media in trying to develop a group of islands. This role playing requires students to consider a variety of perspectives on matters such as social justice, environmental protection and cultural issues. They have to deal with the real ethical dilemmas that they may face as future decision makers. The desired result is that students have a more well-rounded view of ethics and social responsibility because of having to explore a variety of perspectives in this

¹² Patricia A. Oswald, "The Effects of Cognitive and Affective Perspective Taking on Empathic Concern and Altruistic Helping," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 136, no. 5 (1996): 613–623; Patricia A. Oswald, "The Interactive Effects of Affective Demeanor, Cognitive Processes, and Perspective-Taking Focus on Helping Behavior," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 142, no. 1 (2002): 120-132.

¹³ Mark H. Davis and H. Alan Oathout, "Maintenance of Satisfaction in Romantic Relationships: Empathy and Relational Competence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53, no. 2 (1987): 397–410.

¹⁴ Sheri R. Levy, Antonio L. Freitas, and Peter Salovy, "Construing Action Abstractly and Blurring Social Distinctions: Implications for Perceiving Homogeneity Among, but Also Empathizing With and Helping Others," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83, no. 5 (2002): 1224-1238.

¹⁵ Joshua Knobe, "Theory of Mind and Moral Cognition: Exploring the Connections," <http://www.princeton.edu/~jknobe/tics.pdf> (accessed January 11, 2006), forthcoming in *Trends in Cognitive Science*.

exercise.¹⁶ In another article describing an activity designed to promote ethics, Hastings mentions that perspective taking has been studied for “its potential contribution to creating moral citizens who are equipped to respond sensitively to critical social issues.”¹⁷ From her own work, she claims that “engaging students in a perspective taking exercise that is applicable to an applied and/or vocational context provides a motivation for student development of social awareness.”¹⁸ Encouraging perspective taking can lead to a greater awareness of the ethical implications of decisions affecting others, thereby increasing motivation to act in an ethical manner.

When decision making is lacking in ethicality, it may lead to conflict between individuals or groups. Perspective taking has also been proven an effective means for managing conflict. In her recommendations for training teachers to mediate conflict and create a “caring community of learners,” Lane-Garson writes: “When future teachers are taught mediation skills, they expand their own communication skills, self-regulation, perspective-taking, and facilitative language vocabularies.”¹⁹ Several reports of studies on peace education or conflict management training show that perspective taking plays a central role. During many years of research on training students to manage conflict and become “peacemakers,” Johnson and Johnson used perspective taking as a key component in their training program.²⁰ From an examination of research on peace education in a region of intense conflict, it is suggested that an indirect form of perspective taking may be useful in helping the members of conflicting sides better understand those on the

¹⁶ N. Sadat Shami et al., “Designing a Globalization Simulation to Teach Corporate Social Responsibility,” *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning* 31 (2004): 22-27.

¹⁷ Sally O. Hastings, “Motivating Perspective Taking through Oral Performance,” *Academic Exchange* (Winter 2003): 256.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Pamela S. Lane-Garon, “Classroom and Conflict Management: Rethinking Teacher Preparation for Ethical Practice,” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Teacher Educators, Denver, Colorado, February 2-6, 2002), 3.

²⁰ David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, “Teaching Students to be Peacemakers: Results of Twelve Years of Research,” (June 2000) <http://www.co-operation.org/pages/peace-meta.html> (accessed December 29, 2005).

other side of the conflict. Looking at both sides of a distant conflict can lead participants indirectly to a better understanding of their own local conflict.²¹ Perspective taking also has played a role in preventing and solving conflicts in business. It can be used to increase cooperation, enhance customer service, and improve leadership.²² “Within organizations, perspective taking and the cognitive-affective responses it gives rise to (i.e., empathy) have particular application in relation to promoting citizenship behaviors, reducing conflict, and the effective management of diversity.”²³ Perspective taking seems to have multiple benefits in managing conflicts. Galinsky, Ku, and Wang contend that “perspective-taking, having long been recognized as critical to proper social functioning, is a key ingredient in the reduction of interpersonal conflict and the construction, maintenance, and preservation of social bonds.”²⁴ In its ability to strengthen social ties and manage or prevent conflict, perspective taking again shows its importance to high social functioning.

Ethnic and cultural differences are well known to create conflict or tensions between groups and individuals. Wang et al. describe the characteristic needed to overcome these tensions as “ethnocultural empathy,” which they divide into three categories: intellectual, emotional and communicative. Each of these is based on perspective-taking ability. Intellectual empathy is when we understand the thinking of those culturally or ethnically different from us. Emotional empathy is when we are able to feel another’s emotions from the perspective of that person’s

²¹ Haggai Kupermintz and Gavriel Salomon, “Lessons to be Learned from Research on Peace Education in the Context of Intractable Conflict,” RedOrbit News (November 19, 2005) http://www.redorbit.com/news/health/308860/lessons_to_be_learned_from_research_on_peace_education_in/index.html (accessed December 9, 2005).

²² Carolyn Axtell and Sharon Parker, “Perspective Taking,” Institute of Work Psychology, <http://esrccoigroup.shef.ac.uk/pdf/whatis/perspective.pdf> (accessed December 9, 2005).

²³ S. Parker, “Enhancing Interpersonal Effectiveness and Lateral Integration: The Role of Perspective Taking,” Australian Graduate School of Management, <http://www2.agsm.edu.au/agsm/web.nsf/Content/ResearchCentres-CCC-ResearchProjects-EnhancingInterpersonalEffectiveness> (accessed December 29, 2005).

²⁴ Adam D. Galinsky, Gillian Ku, and Cynthia S. Wang, “Perspective-Taking and Self-Other Overlap: Fostering Social Bonds and Facilitating Social Coordination,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 8, no. 2, (2005): 111.

ethnic or cultural group. Finally, communicative empathy is when our words and actions express our ethnoculturally empathic thoughts and feelings.²⁵ One way of achieving empathy between different ethnic or cultural groups is by encouraging each group to see the other group's actions and goals more abstractly. When we work towards common goals, depend on others to attain our goals, or share the same goals, we increase our connectedness, develop positive attitudes towards one another, and see greater similarities.²⁶ Seeing the forest as a whole helps us to notice the similarities among the trees. Cultural and ethnic tensions often go hand in hand with stereotyping. Several studies have been conducted on using perspective taking to reduce stereotyping. Galinsky and Moskowitz concluded from their research that perspective taking "is a successful strategy for debiasing social thought."²⁷ Perspective taking ability and its effect on prejudice has also been related to social competence and self-esteem. High self-esteem combined with perspective taking decreases prejudice considerably.²⁸ Taking time and being careful in taking others' perspectives are also helpful in effectively reducing stereotypes.²⁹ Using perspective taking to diminish stereotyping can increase social bonds among both groups and individuals, especially when coupled with greater ethnocultural understanding.

Perspective Taking and Language Development

The previous section explains the potential outcomes of practicing perspective taking, but we have yet to see how this relates to language. In his research on how grammar develops from

²⁵ Yu-Wei Wang et al., "The Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy: Development, Validation, and Reliability," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 50, no. 2 (2003): 222.

²⁶ Levy, "Construing Action Abstractly," 1224–1238.

²⁷ Adam D. Galinsky and Gordon B. Moskowitz, "Perspective-Taking: Decreasing Stereotype Expression, Stereotype Accessibility, and In-Group Favoritism," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78, no. 4 (2000): 720.

²⁸ Adam D. Galinsky and Gillian Ku, "The Effects of Perspective Taking on Prejudice: The Moderating Role of Self-Evaluation," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 30, no. 5 (May 2004): 594–604.

²⁹ Epley et al., "Perspective Taking," 338.

perspective, MacWhinney describes the relationship between language and perspective taking as such:

When language is rich in cues for perspective taking and perspective shifting, it awakens the imagination of the listener and leads to successful sharing of ideas, impressions, attitudes, and narratives. When the process of perspective sharing is disrupted by interruptions, monotony, excessive complexity, or lack of shared knowledge, communication can break down.³⁰

He also posits that perspective taking is “at the very core of language structure and higher level cognition.”³¹ Language development is closely related to the development of the mind. From Malle’s exploration of the evolution of the relationship between language and theory of mind (knowledge that others hold a different perspective), he concludes that they evolved together “serving one primary adaptive goal: social coordination.”³² In a similar vein, Origgi and Sperber conclude that language ability and the ability to “represent mental states of others” distinguish humans from other species on Earth and that the interaction between these abilities allowed human communication to develop.³³ In explaining why empathy might be an advantage in language acquisition, Baron-Cohen says that “language acquisition requires not just decoding heard words in a look-up table but identifying the speaker’s intended meanings (i.e., the speaker’s mental states).”³⁴ She also indicates that better language skills lead to better understanding of the words people use to describe their mental states. This leads to “an upward

³⁰ Brian MacWhinney, “The Emergence of Grammar from Perspective,” <http://psyling.psy.cmu.edu/papers/emergentism/perspectgram.pdf> (accessed September 9, 2005); 1, originally published in *The Grounding of Cognition: The Role of Perception and Action in Memory*, eds. Diane Pecher and Rolf A. Zwaan.

³¹ MacWhinney, “The Emergence of Grammar,” 1.

³² Bertram F. Malle, “The Relation Between Language and Theory of Mind in Development and Evolution,” http://cogprints.org/3317/01/Evol_of_language_&_ToM.pdf (accessed January 28, 2006): 11, published in *The Evolution of Language Out of Pre-Language*, eds. T. Givon and B. F. Malle, (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2002).

³³ Gloria Origgi and Dan Sperber, “A Pragmatic Perspective on the Evolution of Language and Languages,” trans. Marcel Lieberman, <http://www.interdisciplines.org/coevolution/papers/6> (accessed January 28, 2006).

³⁴ Simon Baron-Cohen, “Do Sex Differences in Empathy Account for Sex Differences in Language Acquisition?” <http://www.interdisciplines.org/coevolution/papers/7> (accessed January 28, 2006).

spiral in development, with empathy promoting language and vice versa.”³⁵ How well we develop and use our communication skills can depend on how well we understand other people’s minds. The way different people produce and interpret messages is influenced by the difference in perspectives, and for successful communication they must “create a shared communicative context through a process of reciprocal perspective taking.”³⁶ Understanding this shared context and developing the skills to use the primary language of communication are essential for successful social functioning.

Language Learning

The benefits of developing and using perspective taking skills are many, as are the reasons for using perspective taking in learning and teaching a language. As we have seen in the preceding section, perspective taking is closely related to language development. Most of the research regarding perspective taking has been done on children learning their native language; however, people learning a second language go through many of the same stages and have a similar goal: effective social interaction with people who use the target language. Social functioning is enhanced by all of the benefits of perspective taking mentioned above—social skills, empathy, ethics, conflict management, and ethnocultural understanding—in addition to language ability. The connection between language and mind is undeniable. “Language offers a window into cognitive function, providing insights into the nature, structure and organization of thoughts and ideas.”³⁷ Therefore, deep knowledge of a language requires familiarity with the minds that use the language. This familiarity can be gained through taking the perspectives of

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Susan R. Fussell, “Perspective Taking in Interpersonal Communication,” Human-Computer Interaction Institute, Carnegie Mellon University, <http://www.andrew.cmu.edu/user/sfussell/Perspective-Taking.html> (accessed December 29, 2005).

³⁷ Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green, “What Does it Mean to Know a Language?” (2006) <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Users/vyv/EvansGreenCh1.pdf> (accessed February 15, 2006).

those who speak it, which gives language learners the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the language, the culture and the ways of thinking of the native speakers. In addition, they can break down any stereotypes or prejudices previously held about the target language group. The various advantages to be gained add credence to the importance of using perspective taking exercises in language learning.

Applications in Teaching

Several researchers and educators have recommendations for activities in class or training that promote perspective taking. Three general advantages to using perspective taking exercises with students are: increased awareness and deeper intellectual understanding of others' situations, experiencing the same reactions and feelings as others, and developing the ability to analyze situations and put them in a more universal context.³⁸ Most of these activities and suggestions are not designed specifically for use in language teaching; however, many ways for adapting them are presented.

To begin with, Mertz and Lieber recommend using the "Believing Game" in class, which they claim "invites us to be more flexible, to recognize that everyone has 'a piece of truth.' Believing helps us move beyond 'black and white' absolutes to more tentative opinions, more original interpretations, and solutions that truly consider all points of view."³⁹ In the Believing Game, students are asked to listen to or read one person's point of view while keeping their minds open to believing and accepting those ideas as truth. They then discuss and ask questions in order to more fully understand and accept that point of view. Only after they summarize the main tenets of the position can they start doubting and critically analyzing the position. Several more perspectives can be presented after that and the same process can be followed. At the end

³⁸ Gayle Mertz and Carol Miller Lieber, "Suggestions for Using the Believing Game," *Educators for Social Responsibility*, <http://www.esrnational.org/believinggame.htm> (accessed December 29, 2005).

³⁹ *Ibid.*

of the activity, students can report what they learned, if they were surprised by any of the information presented, and whether they found certain values or concerns common to all perspectives.⁴⁰ This process includes many opportunities for language teaching and practicing. Initially, there are opportunities to have students read, listen to, or even present a point of view on a topic. During this process, teachers can introduce or explain unfamiliar vocabulary and expressions. The ensuing discussion gives students a chance to use new words and expressions, to practice various discussion skills, to learn ways of asking and expressing their ideas, and, perhaps most importantly, to deepen their understanding of a certain point of view and the way of thinking that led to that point of view. Teachers can assess students' understanding by having them write a summary of the arguments supporting that point of view and then allow them time to practice their critical thinking skills by analyzing the position. This can be done individually, in groups, with partners, orally or in writing. Other perspectives can also be presented. Finally, an individual reflection on the process can help students see what they learned, find commonalities among different perspectives and apply what they learned to the "bigger picture." Through the process of the Believing Game, students don't just develop a linguistic code and communication skills, but also learn more about different points of view and ways of thinking.

Some other suggestions for using perspective taking include having students watch a video or listen to a tape and report how the person in the video or on the audio tape feels.⁴¹ Students could also be asked to write about a typical day in the life of someone in a photograph, story or video.⁴² These activities give students practice with language and also practice in thinking about the way other people may feel or live their lives. Another type of activity

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Patricia A.Oswald, "The Interactive Effects of Affective Demeanor," 120–132; Galinsky et al., "Perspective-Taking and Self-Other Overlap," 114–115.

⁴² Galinsky et al., "Perspective-Taking and Self-Other Overlap," 114–115.

involving perspective taking is watching someone think aloud in order to observe the thought process.⁴³ This can be done by classmates from different ethnocultural backgrounds, by a visitor, or by the teacher, the latter of which may be most beneficial. In watching the teacher's thought process, students can see how the teacher uses reading, writing or other types of strategies to help in understanding or expressing ideas—a valuable lesson. Additional activities that can be done in class are role playing about a single topic from various points of view or analyzing news stories from different perspectives.⁴⁴ Either of these can be done orally or in writing and can give students the chance to see other sides of issues that may usually be presented from an accepted or mainstream point of view. Another suggestion for teaching is to ask students to pair up, designating one student as the “sender” and the other as the “listener.” The sender should think of a time when he or she felt a strong emotion, such as anger, fear, confusion, or embarrassment, and speak for a minute or two about it. The listener then needs to show accurate understanding of the sender's perspective by identifying main points and feelings that the sender is expressing. After that, the sender may proceed or correct any misinformation. At the end, the students can reflect on the process in a group.⁴⁵ Again, this activity provides multiple opportunities for language practice and teaching as well as practice in the important skill of being a good listener. All of the above mentioned activities and exercises can be adapted to fit the needs and levels of the particular language learning group being taught. They all require language and communication skills in their performance in addition to offering glimpses into the minds of others.

⁴³ Kathleen M. Galotti, “Valuing Connected Knowing in the Classroom,” *The Clearing House* 71, no. 5 (May/June 1998): 281-3.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ John W. Meyers, “Perspective-Taking,” <http://people.uncw.edu/myersj/Perspective-taking.pdf> (accessed December 29, 2005).

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In addition to classroom contexts, perspective taking exercises are often recommended for training people in business, especially as daily business requires increasingly more contact and cooperation with people from diverse backgrounds. These exercises give ample opportunity for language practice and instruction in addition to providing practice with skills necessary for students going into or people already working in diverse workplaces. One example of using perspective taking for people who provide training in workplace diversity is an international meeting activity designed by the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology to illustrate differences in cultural norms. The students are asked to use different types of greetings, maintain different amounts of personal space, use more or less eye contact, and display greater or fewer characteristics of individualistic or collectivistic cultures. The students are then given ten minutes to introduce themselves to people in different groups and learn one interesting fact about each person they meet.⁴⁶ This gives students a greater understanding of how people from different ethnocultural backgrounds feel when they are in such situations and also gives them practice in using typical introductory expressions and other types of language. Another example of using perspective taking in training, as described earlier, is the simulation computer program designed to teach corporate responsibility by requiring students to take the perspectives of various parties involved in developing a group of islands.⁴⁷ Since this is an online simulation game, it requires students to express themselves clearly through increasingly prevalent means of electronic communication, again offering various opportunities for language practice and teaching. An additional exercise that can be used in preparation for corporate or other occupational training is having students pick a “marginalized” group as the basis for designing a training module with both a written and oral component. This exercise requires students to take

⁴⁶ Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, “Workplace Diversity,” (2002) <http://siop.org/Instruct/Diversity/DivIntro.htm> (accessed December 29, 2005).

⁴⁷ Shami et al., “Designing a Globalization Simulation,” 22–27.

the perspectives of the group they represent, the people receiving training, the teacher, and their classmates.⁴⁸ Language students could be asked to represent their own ethnocultural group to a diverse class, using the target language and keeping the perspectives of the class members in mind, or to represent a sub-group within the target language community to explore different perspectives and present them to the class. Depending on circumstances and language levels, any of these exercises could be appropriate and useful in developing language skills and a deeper understanding of the way others think.

Discussion

What is to be gained from implementing perspective-taking activities and exercises into classrooms and curricula? Besides the psychological and social benefits of perspective taking discussed earlier, students, teachers and administrators have a great deal to gain. In considering a variety of circumstances, we will take the perspectives of language learners, teachers and administrators in two contexts: that in which students are learning the target language in their own country and that in which they are learning the target language in the target country.

First and foremost, we need to consider the language learner. The language learner in his or her home country has the disadvantage of not living among speakers of the target language, who would give them regular exposure to and practice with the language outside of the classroom. In this case, learners can benefit greatly from exercises in which they learn about the speakers of the target language and practice seeing the world and daily life from their point of view. This may give students a better idea of what it means to live using the target language. Language learners with the advantage of living in a country where the target language is spoken can deepen their understanding of the people around them, better appreciate their way of thinking and living, and become more comfortable interacting with them. Learning about

⁴⁸ Hastings, "Motivating Perspective Taking through Oral Performance," 256-260.

different perspectives may decrease the tendency for students to isolate themselves and stick to groups of speakers of their native language. A major obstacle to the integration of diverse students is the natural human fear of the unknown. Once students begin to learn and become familiar with the way others think and feel, they may feel more comfortable interacting with, and even be more eager to communicate with, people of different backgrounds. Practice in perspective taking has the potential to break down barriers, destroy stereotypes, and dispel fear of others, allowing for much greater opportunities to learn language.

Teachers can also benefit from implementing perspective-taking exercises and activities in their classrooms. As a native speaker of the target language teaching a homogenous group of students in their home country, the teacher can introduce students to his or her own perspective on a variety of issues and use his or her familiarity with other target language speakers to give the students a glimpse into the mental world of native speakers of the target language. The teacher can increase interest and dispel stereotypes, while also teaching useful language, expressions and concepts. If the teacher shares the native language of the students and is teaching in their native country, the teacher could use authentic materials, internet sources, and electronic communication with native speakers to expose her students to the perspectives of people who speak the target language. Analysis of materials and sources and reflections on communications could introduce a wealth of language, expressions and concepts into the classroom to improve students' language skills. Finally, teachers who have the advantage of teaching a diverse group of students in the country of the target language can tap the vast resources in the community around them to introduce students to different perspectives and points of view. Perspective taking exercises will inevitably produce linguistic material for teaching as well as produce opportunities for language assessment. In addition, teachers can increase their students

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understanding of the target language and people who speak it, which may in turn lead to more meaningful communication and interaction in the target language.

Last, but certainly not least, administrators and others in charge of designing curricula and implementing programs at the institutional level can gain advantage from encouraging teachers to use perspective taking activities in their classrooms, designing curricula that include perspective taking objectives, and implementing programs that stress the importance of exposing students to different perspectives. Again, we will make the distinction between institutions in the country of the language learners and those in the target country. By endorsing perspective taking in courses that teach a foreign language, institutions are promoting respect and tolerance for those with different points of view, thereby opening doors to students of diverse backgrounds. They are also graduating students who are better prepared for an increasingly international workplace. In institutions teaching the native language of the country they are situated in, the benefits are even greater, but so are the responsibilities. A primary goal of language programs in these institutions is to prepare their students to use the language to study, work, and/or live in their own community. Therefore, perspective taking is of even greater importance. In addition to the advantages of creating more successful students and a more highly educated workforce, these institutions directly benefit their communities by better preparing these students, workers, and/or immigrants for life in those communities. Encouraging language learners to consider and understand the perspectives of others in the community decreases the likelihood of conflict and increases the likelihood of cooperation in working towards bettering the community. As shown in the research above, perspective taking can help to create a society that is more empathic, more likely to consider ethics in making decisions, better able to manage conflict, and more accepting

of those who come from different ethnocultural backgrounds. These goals seem worthy of any institution involved in language teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Learning to communicate meaningfully and successfully in a language other than our own is not an easy task. As learners, we need to try to understand the way people who use the target language think and see the world. As teachers, we need to give our students encouragement and opportunities to explore other perspectives. As administrators, we need to espouse the benefits of perspective taking and implement programs that include such goals and activities.

Ultimately, being able to see the world through someone else's eyes provides advantages ranging from better social functioning to better corporate decision making. If all people practiced seeing themselves, other people, the world around them and the relationships among these from a variety of perspectives, perhaps we would find a more tolerant, respectful, compassionate, and peaceful society.

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