

Teaching Cross-cultural Communication to Japanese College Students

Christopher Bozek*

Abstract

Research has shown that cross-cultural competence and communication skills are important for people when they live abroad or meet someone from another culture. Cultural studies focus on comparing and contrasting two different cultures, while cross-cultural communication focuses on effectively managing communication between people of different cultures. It is the goal of this paper to examine aspects of cross-cultural communication and to present strategies that can be used by English teachers in Japan.

Today's world is closely connected by the internet and the ease of international travel. A person can find out what is happening in another country thousands of miles away in real time by going online. Almost anyone can get on a plane and visit a foreign country for a quick visit or a long stay. Even with all this access, Japanese students in general are not known for their cross-cultural competence. It is the goal of this paper to examine certain aspects of cross-cultural communication and to suggest practical ways to increase cross-cultural communication in Japanese college students.

Cross-cultural communication is important because of today's increasing contact between people around the world due to new technology and information systems (Samovar, 1998, p. 3). It is important for Japanese students because many will enter multinational corporations or Japanese corporations with contacts throughout the world. Many students may enter a company not expecting to go overseas, but then find themselves in a different country or dealing with people from different cultures.

* 北見工業大学講師 Lecturer, Kitami Institute of Technology

There are some Japanese students who travel abroad during their college years and get experience communicating with people from other cultures. It is an experience they will never forget and long-lasting relationships may be formed (Seelye, 1997). There are also some college students who actively seek out and interact with international students. They are the ones who spend time in international centers of universities and volunteer to help out at international events. Those Japanese students, who are a minority, gain valuable skills which may benefit them throughout their lives, but what about the others? Even when provided opportunities for interaction with people from foreign cultures, Japanese students often avoid the uncertainty and risk (Vincent, 1994) involved with establishing friendships or relationships. The university is an excellent place for students to start learning skills which will help them interact with people from other cultures.

According to Shaules (1997), "...culture includes everything from language and customs to values and communication styles." (p. 2). Individuals acquire and develop their identities, their values, norms and styles of communication through interaction with others in their culture group (Ting-Toomey, 2005). We begin acquiring our native culture from the moment we are born, and most of it is learned unintentionally through simply living and interacting in the culture. Many people do not realize that one's culture is deeply imbedded into their beings and that humans all unconsciously act and react in certain ways because of it.

Some native English-speaking teachers in Japan have the luxury of teaching a cross-cultural communication content course, but native English speakers are primarily assigned to teach speaking/listening classes. With that in mind, in what ways do foreign English teachers bring culture into the classroom? They bring it into the classroom in a great number of ways. For example, because these foreign teachers are not Japanese, their teaching styles and interactions with students are often different. Some of the ways culture is expressed in the college classroom are intentional such as the explanation of holidays in the teacher's home country, while others are not intentional. The intentional teaching of culture in the classroom may bring up questions such as, "Which country's culture should they be teaching?" Instead of teaching just one group's culture, it is better to teach skills which can be applied to interacting with people from any culture. Then students will be better prepared and have the confidence to interact with people from different cultures whenever and wherever they meet them. Before suggesting strategies for college students, what kind of cross-cultural communication skills are younger Japanese learning?

According to one survey taken in Japan, over 98% of respondents indicated that they owned a television ("Television", n.d.). Many families keep their TVs on even if no one is watching any particular program. There are programs on Japanese TV that

contrast and compare life and culture in other countries. TV personalities are sent to different countries and they examine one part of the culture. These clips are edited and then shown on Japanese TV. People watch them and are entertained by them, but do they promote internationalization among Japanese people? Though they may peak people's interest in traveling to other countries, these TV programs do not help ordinary people to communicate more effectively with people from other cultures.

Japanese college students are in need of learning cross-cultural skills because, in my opinion, they are not learning them in elementary, junior high or high school. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) tries to impart internationalization through different means such as the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme. The JET Programme brings native speakers of English to Japan to teach in elementary, junior and senior high schools. These men and women have the title of Assistant English Teacher (AET). "The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme aims to promote grass roots internationalisation at the local level by inviting young overseas graduates to assist in international exchange and foreign language education in local governments, boards of education and elementary, junior and senior high schools throughout Japan" ("Jet Programme," n.d.). In theory this is an excellent chance for students to ask questions, to talk with people from another culture, and learn specific cross-cultural skills, but the program is not uniform in how the teachers are used or what specific tasks they are given to perform. For example, in one school district, the AET may be used only two times a day to say the English dialog with the Japanese teacher in front of the class. In another school district, the Assistant English teacher may participate each day in five or six classes modeling conversations, as well as talking about their culture in their home country. Are the teachers imparting specific skills for cross-cultural interaction? I do not think so.

Another example of not learning cross-cultural communication skills in schools was seen through the results of a questionnaire. In an informal survey of 1085 first-year students given in 2007 at Kitami Institute of Technology, one of the questions was, "What do you think your high school English classes were for?" (my translation). Only 3% of the students answered that their high school classes taught them how to be an international person. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents answered that their high school English classes prepared them for college entrance exams. In my opinion, the aim of many high school English curricula is to prepare students for college entrance examinations, so the results of the questionnaire was not a surprise. One can conjecture that high school English classes in Japan are not teaching cross-cultural communication skills.

One way to help Japanese college students raise cross-cultural awareness is by putting them into contact with international students. "Activities that place the

student in the position of having to interact with someone from another culture can be very powerful”(Seelye, 1997, p. 39). This can be accomplished by making friends with an international student, but that is not always so easy for Japanese people.

Because it is hard for Japanese people to talk to people they do not know, international students at Kitami Institute of Technology often have trouble getting to know Japanese students. They may not know that Japanese people generally make friends in one of three ways: being a classmate, being in the same club/activity or being a colleague. International students who want to interact with Japanese students often enroll in an English class or join a club at the college. In this way, the international students meet the Japanese cultural requirement of how to make friends and the Japanese students have a chance to try communicating cross-culturally.

Some Japanese students become tutors for international students. At all the former national universities in Japan, there is a tutoring program for new international students. Japanese students are recruited, given some training and then are assigned to a student from another country. This service is paid for by the college. This is a great way for a Japanese student to get to know a person from another country and to put some of the cross-cultural communication skills into use.

A teacher who wishes to raise cross-cultural awareness should teach the students the basics tenets of acquiring culture and the problems of miscommunication that can happen when people from different cultures interact. Teachers of English in Japan can also relate their own experiences to students. This usually happens naturally in the classroom, and it is a very effective way to introduce cross-cultural communication skills. The teacher can tell students their own reactions to living in a different country, their stories about miscommunication and making friends and how they eventually acclimated to the different culture.

Teachers can use international projects that promote language learning as well as cross-cultural competence. These projects often involve writing to students in a different country. In one writing project, (Morgan, 2001), students from France and England participated in her international project. They used self-made materials to explore a particular cultural focus in depth and also to learn with and from others.

It is beneficial to teach students to expect miscommunication. “The challenge is that even with all the good will in the world, miscommunication is likely to happen, especially when there are significant cultural differences between communicators.” (LeBaron, 2003, pp. 1). According to Seelye (1997), out-of-class reading is one good way to sensitize students to miscommunication that often accompanies interaction with people from another culture. Since miscommunication between people from different cultural backgrounds often exists, it is better to prepare students in advance through intentional instruction that it may likely happen and give

them ways to prevent it and not to let it discourage future encounters.

Cross-cultural communication is important in today's connected world to manage communication between different cultures. Though Japan is an affluent country with a great deal of influence in the world economy, Japanese students do not receive cross-cultural communication training or education from an early age. English teachers in Japanese colleges and universities have a unique opportunity to teach cross-cultural communication strategies to their students.

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