Opening Up: Intercultural Communication Training for Senior High Schools in Japan

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Introduction

The Olympic Games will be held in Tokyo this year. It is thought that the number of foreigners in Japan will further increase in the future. According to Kinoshita (2019), the number of tourists visiting Japan has reached around 70 times more than in 1964. Although that situation has been changing in recent years because of the spread of COVID-19, relationships with people in various fields such as education and business are still necessary regardless of nationality, race and religion. Therefore, Japanese people should know about cultural differences and how to communicate with foreigners who have different backgrounds and values. In the same way, there is a growing body of literature that recognizes the importance of intercultural communication all over the world.

Japanese educational institutions also pay attention to teaching methods which can enable students to acquire cultural awareness and positive attitudes for communication with others who are from different countries. In addition, it is considered that the acceptance of foreign people who are globalized human resources is important to internationalize not only schools but also companies in Japan. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) announced that all elementary, junior high and senior high schools need to enhance adapted education to globalization and educate competitive leaders in foreign countries with a view to holding the Olympics and Paralympics in Tokyo. However, teachers who do not have

opportunities to get sufficient experience or knowledge have difficulties with teaching students cross-cultural communication. If people do not acquire adequate knowledge and recognition of different cultures, various problems can occur. As a result, the teachers who work at places where students do not have the experience to communicate with foreigners and learn about different cultures have greater responsibilities. Intercultural training would play an important role in addressing those issues. The purpose of this study is to explore how teachers can prepare students for intercultural interaction in Japanese secondary schools. Specifically, I intend to focus on effective Intercultural Communication Training. The study has been organized in the following way. The first chapter of this paper will analyze the context and issues of intercultural learning in Japan. The next chapter is concerned with the potential of Intercultural Communication Training. Chapter three deals with practices of intercultural approach.

Contextualization of Intercultural Learning

In the following pages, I will present the contextualization of the educational situation for intercultural learning in Japan. Firstly, the literature related to intercultural learning in Japan emphasizes that English education tends to focus on the aspect of language learning rather than cultural learning. Although MEXT declares the importance of developing cultural awareness of students, there are still fewer opportunities to deepen students' cultural awareness in schools. In my case, I worked in a private senior high school in Japan. Basically, there are two kinds of compulsory English lessons in each grade known as 'Communication English' focusing on reading skills, vocabulary and grammar and 'English Expression' regarding practicing grammar. Only third year students can take a lesson for 50 minutes related to intercultural training once a week. Therefore, the English curriculum in Japanese secondary schools is dominated by language acquisition based on

the understanding of grammar and vocabulary. In addition, some schools do not provide students with enough opportunities to enhance cultural interaction. For example, my school accepts only one international student once every two years. Although one international student who is staying in Japan for 10 months, she does not relate much to other students except her classmates or members of the club to which she belongs.

With regard to lessons by native English language teachers who have the possibility to teach authentic cultures, not all students can take their lessons because of the lack of native teachers. MEXT (2020) reported that among the number of Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) who work in public elementary, junior high and senior high schools in Japan. Senior high schools had the fewest number of ALTs. This result indicates that English teachers must take a sole responsibility for intercultural learning.

Conceptualization of Appropriate Methods in Intercultural Learning

With respect to the difficulties of teaching culture, Kinoshita (2019) argues that teachers are required to think of appropriate methods to teach about cultures by themselves and acquire general knowledge about cultures but also detailed studies of specific cultures. Similarly, Chlopek (2008) states that culture is a term covering very wide-ranging concepts and teachers must have high levels of knowledge and skills of understanding culture. What is more, teachers must be extremely careful that students do not have any prejudice and stereotyped views against people who have different cultures. Bennett (1998, p. 4) identifies that 'stereotypes arise when we act as if all members of a culture or group share the same characteristics'. He points out that there are two kinds of stereotypes that are positive or negative and it is not necessarily all are correct. In addition, both stereotypes bring about a point of view that is of limited scope to make sure of their prejudices. Chlopek (2008) notes that developing intercultural competence will be prevented if students have

stereotypes and prejudices. She says that young learners tend to adhere to fixed ideas because they do not have sufficient knowledge and experience of intercultural communication. They should understand different cultures and values without being bound by a fixed idea of people who have different backgrounds. For this reason, teachers must observe the attitudes of students with care and pay close attention to intercultural learning in order to develop students' cultural awareness.

Moving on now to consider how teachers can teach cultural awareness and enable students to be positive attitudes toward different cultures, let us start with the definition of cultural awareness as 'ability and willingness to objectively examine values, beliefs, traditions, and perceptions within our own and other cultures' (O'Brien, 2017 cited in Grave, 2017, p. 2). It would be the basis for international communication. Both teachers and students should view the culture from various aspects. This view is supported by Fedderholdt (2001) who writes that students should go beyond the similarities and differences by facing various aspects of another culture. Just comparing different cultures and acquiring knowledge in intercultural learning is not enough. Furthermore, Chlopek (2008) suggests that intensive intercultural education is effective in developing a capacity for patience, recognition, acknowledgment, and deference. It would be essential to provide activities of intensive intercultural education for a long period in order to deepen their understanding of cultural awareness. A different culture is not necessarily different according to the country. Students should notice that they also have different subcultures relating to different elements such as school, club activities, and family. Teachers would be able to encourage students to be proud of their individuality and to respect each other's differences in intercultural learning.

As explained earlier, teachers must not allow students to have negative attitudes towards different cultures and values. If students have a group

activity to introduce other cultures each other, they should not be allowed to ridicule it (Chlopek, 2008). On the other hand, a little bit of a change results in positive contribution and crossing over the border between cultures (Holliday, 2014 cited in Tabata, 2019). Therefore, teachers should promote students' positive attitudes and reverence for other cultures.

In the case of the contents of intercultural education, textbooks including various cultures based on not only English language regions but also other countries which use different languages should be chosen. Chlopek (2008) points out that it is necessary for learners to use a variety of cultures not only the culture which focuses on English language regions. Students can compare their culture to different cultures by evaluating critically and interpreting the results of comparisons because learning different cultures results in the acquisition of much knowledge. English textbooks in Japan have a tendency to introduce the culture of English speaking countries. Students need to study a wide range of cultures without giving too much weight to particular fields. A further important point is that students need to acquire knowledge of their own culture. Bennett (1998) indicates that interaction presupposes students having skillful knowledge regarding their native culture. Because of this, teachers should start from the native cultural background which students have a direct connection with and grow their cultural awareness from this.

Bennett (1998) suggests Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) divided into six stages that are denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. In his major study, he identifies that 'the DMIS links changes in cognitive structure to an evolution in attitudes and behavior toward cultural difference in general' (Bennett, 1998, p. 15). Students move through these stages depending on their changes in their recognition and acceptance toward different cultures. He classified DMIS into two types: The first three stages are Ethnocentric Stages and the last three stages are Ethnorelative Stages. The definition of Ethnocentric is 'using one's

own set of standards and customs to judge all people, often unconsciously' (Bennett, 1998, p. 26). The meaning of Ethnorelative is to 'being comfortable with many standards and customs and to have an ability to adapt behavior and judgments to a variety of interpersonal settings'(Bennett, 1998, p. 26). Teachers need to provide intercultural learning in accordance with the students' stage of DMIS and encourage students to move into Ethnorelative stages. This leads to the recognition of students' stages and promotion of their changes taking account into features of each stage by understanding DMIS. For example, if learners can notice which stage the degree of learning and accepting cultures has reached at present, they would understand the meaning of their negative feelings or superficial recognitions against different cultures in Ethnocentric Stages.

Moreover, Bennett (1998) proposes two aspects to the study of culture, one that involves an objective and a subjective perspective. He describes 'objective culture' that studying culture from an objective perspective investigates the historical, linguistic and political systems and structures of a particular society (Bennett, 1998, p. 2). Examples of such an approach are Area Studies and History. Although students can grasp the essence of a culture through an objective approach, he notes that it will not always result in intercultural competence. On the other hand, studying 'subjective culture' by sharing of ideas, actions and values by interacting with people will encourage such intercultural competence (Bennett, 1998, p.2). In view of this fact, it would be important for students to learn subjective culture.

Switching our attention to teaching methods in intercultural learning, Intercultural Communication Training is one of the methods to learn about different cultures and efficient communication. Chlopek (2008) states that the role of teachers is to tell students that intercultural learning is essential in modern teaching. De Frankrijker (1998) suggests the final goal of intercultural training is the success of adjustment to different cultures. Therefore, critical

incidents can become an effective mean for cultural training because this can help students share different cultures and values. Isemonger (2019) defines the critical incident as a short story or conversational dialog based on particular aspects of cultural misunderstanding. Critical incidents indicate why misinterpretation can happen and provide opportunities to sympathize with the feelings for others who have different cultures. Students can discuss the contents of critical incidents regarding intercultural communication and analyze the causes of misunderstandings implied in it. They can also experience various cultures and think about the mind of others through the activities of critical incidents. Additionally, teachers assist students by explaining why problems may be happening. The purpose of critical incidents technique is to learn possible methods for solving problems caused by intercultural incidents. What is significant is that the critical incident does not show cultural differences explicitly, but their causes and solutions are found by class activities.

Implications for Intercultural Communication Training

To sum up the main purpose and characteristics of intercultural learning, I would like to suggest a curriculum by taking into consideration Bennett's DMIS. I give a lesson referring to the literature of Chlopek (2008). Firstly, I conduct parts of the lessons in Japanese to enhance their understanding of the cultural contents. Secondly, I give students information about the necessary vocabulary or key concepts about each topic. Thirdly, I simplify texts or activities in order to enable students to deal with difficult contents. After that, I choose appropriate activities at the level of each students' stage in DMIS which consists of six stages. The aim of these lessons is that students move into the Ethnorelative stages throughout the year. They have to get out of the Ethnocentric stages. I present the contents of lessons in accordance with the students' stage of DMIS.

In the first stage of denial, students cannot recognize and accept other culture and they tend to regard others who come from different countries (Bennett, 1998). In the beginning, the lesson starts to study and analyze their native culture in order to expand the range of their knowledge. Not only English teachers but also other teachers of Japanese or social studies can teach this kind of lesson. In fact, this attempt has been carried as the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) which focuses on contents, communication, cognition, and culture. English teachers can expand their range of knowledge by cooperating with teachers who specialize in other subjects. After focusing on native culture, students study objective cultures such as history, politics, and economy. As previously stated, Bennett (1998) points out that learning objective culture does not necessarily lead to generating intercultural communication. However, it is essential for students to create knowledge because of a lack of experience, knowledge, and understanding about their own culture at this stage. For example, they study culture by watching movies and listening to music and general information such as food and national holidays. Next, the activities focus on learning subjective culture with the individual view. Taking an interest in the culture leads to the recognition of cultural awareness. They only recognize and understand the things which they already know at this time. Teachers should be careful that disrespect, prejudice, and stereotypes will prevent students from understanding and accepting other cultures.

Students at this second stage of defense tend to conceive that only they are right (Bennett, 1998). He claims that they think about other cultures with negative attitudes, describing a binomial confrontation between native culture and different cultures. Teachers need to point out their conditions and avoid injuring their conditions of being proud of their own culture. Students should notice diversity and different categories in their own culture. I would like to try activities in which students look up the cultural information and introduce

various cultures for each group in order to acquire as much knowledge as possible. They should study more intensively for the recognition of differences between cultures as well as similarities.

At the minimization stage, Bennett (1998) indicates that students can understand and accept superficial differences and similarities of cultures other than their own. Furthermore, 'they assume that deep down all people are essentially the same' (Bennett, 1998, p.16). This stage is still ethnocentric and they need to find the differences behind the actions, beliefs, and values. This idea that we are all the same brings about misunderstanding and problems derived from different cultural values. Positive attitudes which can make students understand differences without labeling things are required to be ethnorelative. Therefore, I suggest activities to interact with foreign people in order to go beyond their superficial knowledge. For example, Fedderholdt (2001) conducted an email exchange project between Japanese and Danish students. This activity can promote students' motivation because this can provide them with purposes for using English and learning other cultures. Students would have experiences of interaction with foreign people and it is clear that exchanging e-mails is convenient and effective under different time zones. The topics for e-mails are chosen freely by students and it would help them introduce their native cultures such as the explanation of lifestyle habits, national holidays and food. Email exchange can contribute to developing their writing and reading skills as well as deepening their understandings of culture.

With regards to the acceptance which is the Ethnorelative stages, people at this stage can accept the differences of values and beliefs from each culture (Bennett, 1998). In his analysis of this stage, they can recognize that there is not just one appropriate solution and accept this ambiguity. It would be valid for students to study various values by using case studies such as critical incidents based on different nations. Analyzing contextual factors

considering each situation is important to develop their cultural awareness. Teachers need to emphasize that people should respect and recognize others who have different cultures. Students do not have to agree with everything regarding different elements of cultures. Teachers can use critical incidents in intercultural learning not only sentences but also videos and roleplays as training tools to further attract the interests of students. For instance, critical incidents focus on differences in the way of communication and cultural values. Nakagawa and Fujihara (2015) conducted intercultural learning by using roleplays and videos. They found that using videos can make it easier to understand problems and risks related to various behaviors and manners from different cultures. Additionally, students can learn authentic English expressions due to scripts of roleplays which teachers use to develop reading skills and vocabulary.

In the adaptation stage, Bennett (1998) argues that people can collaborate or cooperate with others who have different backgrounds. 'They can apply skills of empathy and adaptation of behavior to any cultural context' (Bennett, 1998, p. 17). It is necessary to practice seeing other points of view. The success of case studies lies in the ability to get the other person's point of view and see things from other angles as well as from their own. This can help students face a situation, take action, and be flexible and persistent in solving problems. Students should continue thinking about various situations by using critical incidents. If a school has an abundance of school activities such as studying abroad during a long vacation, students can take advantage of their knowledge and experiences based on intercultural learning. They would communicate with local students by traveling abroad on school trips. If previous learning can be performed before going on school trips, the students' motivations to learn about other countries can be stimulated and improved.

People at the Integration stage can see themselves as 'interculturalists' or

'multiculturalists' as well as their native and ethnic backgrounds (Bennett, 1998, p. 17). To move into this stage calls for a length of time and amount of experiences based on living overseas. Therefore, it would be difficult for students to achieve this stage through only intercultural learning in schools.

Conclusion

There are a variety of practical methods to enhance students' intercultural awareness. Teachers can provide students with opportunities to learn cultural awareness in addition to a foreign language by using appropriate teaching activities such as critical incidents and e-mail exchange. Critical incidents can give students experiences to recognize and accept various values and beliefs derived from different cultures without interaction with foreigners in the real world. What is more, teachers are required to emphasize that people should respect differences regardless of being from different countries. They must not allow students to have any prejudice, disrespect, and stereotypes. The long term continuation of Intercultural Communication Training can contribute to the improvement of their relationships with others who have different cultures. On the other hand, it is necessary for teachers to be equipped with a range of knowledge of culture. They also need to change the contents of intercultural learning and educational goals depending on the students' stage of DMIS in order to enhance their progress to the Ethnorelative stages. Further studies, which take these variables into account, will need to be undertaken. It is certain that there will be increasing the importance of recognizing cultural awareness and intercultural communication in the future. In regards to the contents of English textbooks for senior high schools about cultural awareness, there would be a need to discuss and modify them. The misunderstandings and problems related to the culture cannot be solved by only English language learning. Being aware of cultural background and invisible features such as values as well as accepting

and respecting differences is essential for cross-cultural communication to
open up Japan.

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