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Author(s)	Mehran SABET
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Developing International Understanding through Intercultural Competence

Mehran SABET

Abstract

The Global 30 Project introduced by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology aims to attract more international students to certain Japanese universities. The goal is to create an atmosphere where exchanges of ideas contribute to a healthy and stimulating environment. This in turn could result in fostering global minded young Japanese who can play active roles in the international affairs. This writer believes that the Global 30 Project should include all Japanese universities. The writer examines elements that contribute to development of international understanding and cultural competence among students.

Key words; Communication, diversity, culture, identity, intercultural competence

Introduction

With the declining number of Japanese students going overseas to study in the past few years (Institute of International Education, 2013) and the inability of Japan to attract more international students to its university campuses (Japan Student Services Organization, 2013), there can be some doubts about the government's goal of "fostering young Japanese adults who can play active roles in the international affairs in the future and create an atmosphere where exchanges of ideas can contribute to a healthy and stimulating environment at universities" (Global 30, 2011). The Global 30 Project introduced in 2011 by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology aims to address this issue. The project aims to encourage thirty universities to offer a curriculum entirely in English so that it would attract students from overseas to study in Japan. Although only thirteen universities have participated in the program so far, the program has potential to bring international and Japanese students together and nurture individuals who

would become responsible local and international citizens.

Obviously, the project is a step in the right direction, but fostering global-minded students should not be limited to only certain universities. Preparing young adults for the twenty-first century and empowering them with skills that would make them responsible individuals must be the goal of all educators. To accomplish this task and as stated in the Melbourne Declaration* (2008), “We should nurture individuals who can manage their own wellbeing, relate to others, make informed decisions about their lives, become citizens who behave with ethical integrity, relate to and communicate across cultures, work for the common good, and act responsibly at local, regional, and global levels.”

In order to communicate across cultures and act responsibly at any level, individuals should see themselves as global citizens. “To be effective global citizens, students need to be flexible, creative, and proactive. They need to be able to solve problems, make decisions, think critically, communicate ideas effectively, and work within teams and groups.” (Oxfam, 2008).

However, according to Maheshwari (Maheshwari, n.d.), developing communication skills requires in-depth study of own culture, history, geography, economics, and political science. It also means demonstrating the willingness to show interest, respect, and empathy toward other people and their cultures. The acquisition of skills and development of a positive attitude toward other cultures are foundations for gaining intercultural competence, which would in turn enable people to become open-minded and think and act globally. This paper investigates factors affecting communication skills, as well as elements that contribute to development of intercultural competence in an educational setting.

Communication

Communication is a dynamic process in which people attempt to share their thoughts with other people through the use of symbols in a particular setting (Samovar, L., Porter, R., McDaniel, E., Roy, C. 2013). Samovar et al. also state that “our behavior and ability to communicate is influenced by our genetic makeup, social group experiences, gender, language, age, individual and family history, political affiliation, educational level, perceptions of others, current circumstances, the region and neighborhood where we grew up, our religious experiences, and many other aspects of our lives.”

As described, communication is a very complex act and can bring misunderstanding even among people of the same culture, depending on a variety of factors such as their background.

Therefore, when we consider interaction between individuals from two different cultures or countries, it should not be surprising to experience anxiety, conflict, miscommunication, or misunderstanding.

Communication becomes more complex when the cultural dimensions are included. Smiling in one culture may indicate friendliness, while in another culture it can mean embarrassment. "People commonly misconstrue or misconceive the behaviors of individuals from other cultures because they view these behaviors within the framework of their values, beliefs, and norms of their own culture. The reasons these problems arise are that cultures differ in the ways in which they construct and respond to social reality." (Walter, G. S., Cookie White, S., 2003).

Barna, L. M. (1997) has developed a list of six barriers to intercultural communication :

- Anxiety
- Assuming similarity instead of difference
- Ethnocentrism
- Stereotypes and prejudice
- Nonverbal misinterpretations
- Language

All of the six barriers are inter-related and problems in one area may lead to misunderstanding or miscommunication in other areas. For example, lack of language ability can contribute to a higher level of anxiety, while ethnocentrism could lead to prejudice and discrimination.

If we accept Samovar's statement that communication behavior is connected to the norms and standards acquired in the environment we were born and raised in, it becomes easier to understand why people have difficulty accepting values and opinions different from theirs. For example, the manner in which Japanese students interact with their teachers is entirely different from their American counterparts. Japanese students are initially taken aback at the level of involvement and discussion taking place at American universities, while American teachers get frustrated at lack of participation by Japanese students in their classes. But in fact, each group is behaving normally according to the norms and standards established in their respective cultures. That is why culture plays a vital role in communication.

Culture

When examined closely, culture and communication seem inseparable. Jandt (2013) states

that “culture is a group’s thought, experiences, and patterns of behavior and its concepts, values, and assumptions about life that guide behavior.” Hall (1976) says that “communication is culture and culture is communication.” We learn about culture through communication, while at the same time communication is a reflection of our culture. For example, in the Middle East males greet each other by hugging and kissing, while greeting is done through handshakes in the U.S. and in Japan people bow. When we consider other aspects of the above-mentioned cultures, we can see that the varied forms of greetings are a reflection of values and social norms in the respective countries. It is normal to observe in some Arab countries for male or female friends to hold hands while walking, while in Japan married couples (mostly older generations) hesitate to do so in public. Some may wonder why there is such a huge gap among cultures. Why is one form of behavior accepted in one country, but totally rejected in another one? What factors are influential? Hofstede (1994) classifies elements of culture into four categories :

Symbols, referring to verbal and nonverbal language.

Rituals, the socially essential collective activities within a culture.

Values, feelings not open for discussion within a culture about what is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, normal or abnormal, etc.

Heroes, the real or imaginary people who serve as behavior models within a culture.

At the same time, some experts believe that most cultures have the following five elements in them and that these elements usually separate one culture from another (Samovar, L., Porter, R., McDaniel, E., Roy, C. 2013)

1. Religion
2. History
3. Values
4. Social organizations (families, government, schools, tribes, etc.)
5. Language

It is important to keep in mind that having some elements in common don’t guarantee effective communication. Although two countries may share a common religion or language, other elements such as history, values, social organizations, etc. could be so different that it would be difficult for people from these two countries to communicate without some degree of misunderstanding. For example, Australians and Americans share the same language, but in business settings, each side should be aware of certain etiquette and practices that have shaped their

written and unwritten rules. The majority of Iranians and Iraqis are Muslims, but differences between their values and history is such that Islam in each country is interpreted differently. Even within a country, values and behaviors differ. For example, New Yorkers are generally known to be more direct and less discreet than people from other parts of the United States. And Japanese living in Kansai are known, as a rule, to be friendlier and more approachable than their Kanto counterparts.

Jandt (2013) describes culture by saying that “to begin to understand a culture, you need to understand all experiences that guide its individual members through life. That includes language and gestures; personal appearance and social relationships; religion, philosophy, and values; courtship, marriage, and family customs; food and recreation; work and government; education and communication systems; health, government, and transportation systems; and economics system. All these cultural elements are learned through direct or indirect human interaction. None of these elements people are born with and they are not traits instilled from the birth.” Considering how an individual’s personality is formed, it is then that we realize that every person has his or her own identity and as a result communicates differently. Therefore, communication becomes a delicate and complicated matter that requires careful attention to people’s background and identity.

Identity

If we look at our own past, we realize how people and environment have shaped our personalities. Our sense of identity, belonging, and loyalty changes as we move from one place to another, get married, establish our own family, start a career, or join a sports club or professional association. We are all born with some genetic traits but, during the course of our lives, we develop our own personalities and character, depending on the environments we live in. “Personality consists of the traits that are unique to an individual human being. It is partly genetic and partly learned. Because much of personality is acquired, it is strongly influenced by culture (Samovar, L., Porter, R., McDaniel, E., Roy, C. 2013)

Since every person’s identity differs, communicating effectively is not as easy as it may seem on the surface. Misunderstanding and miscommunication occur all the time, even among close associates and family members. Obviously, with common background and familiarity, there is usually less friction; for example, more among friends than among people whom we barely know. That is why it is easier to relate to people who share the same culture than to individuals from a different

background than ours. Nevertheless, communication problems will persist unless common ground has been established. Imahori and Cupach (2005) consider cultural identity to be a focal point in intercultural communication.

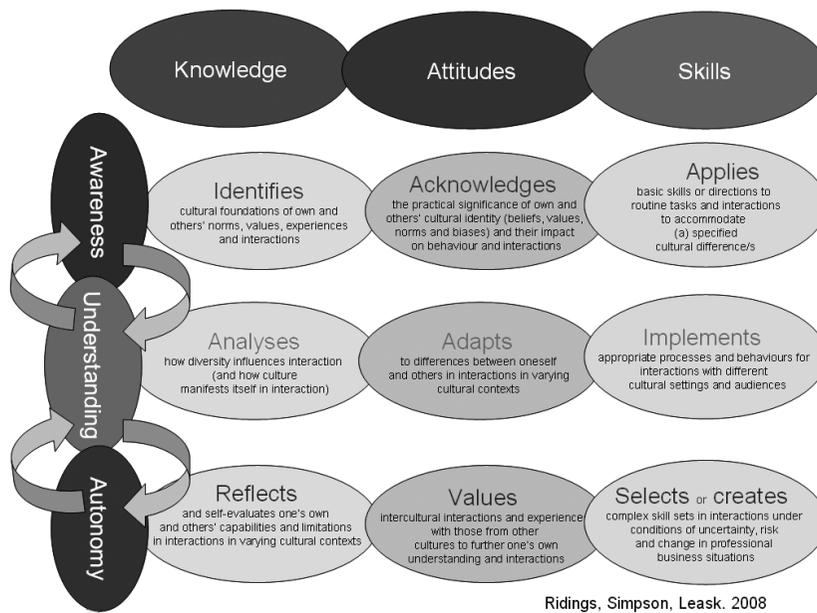
According to Collier (1988), “in order to communicate effectively in an intercultural situation, an individual’s cultural identity and communication style should match the identity and style of the other person.” But since communication styles are likely to be different, the participants have to search for common ground. This search will require flexibility and adaptability. Because everything in our past has shaped our identity, it is natural for us to feel a sense of attachment to where we come from. This sense of attachment can be the cause of friction if we do not show willingness to understand others better.

Our identity can change according to the environment we are in at the moment. We change our behavior, body language, logic, and anything else associated with communication, according to the norms and standards of the culture(s) we live in. For example, if an American has lived in Japan for a long time, he/she most likely uses communication styles associated with Japanese culture and character. But the same person may behave differently in the United States when interacting with friends and family members. This individual has utilized skills that enable him to communicate effectively with people of different cultures. Obviously, the reason for this ability is familiarity with cultures and social norms of both countries. Although it would be ideal to experience foreign cultures firsthand, it is impossible for most people to do this. Therefore, acquiring communication skills that will contribute to the development of international understanding and intercultural competence is something that educators should aim for. Once some or most of these skills are acquired, communicating with others can also induce curiosity, stimulation, and cooperation, instead of stress, anxiety, and misunderstanding.

Developing International Understanding

In order to develop international understanding, educators must provide their students with skills to acquire intercultural competence. This can be done through personal and interpersonal skills, in-depth knowledge and appreciation of one’s own culture, ability to evaluate one’s own culture objectively, respect for and study of other cultures, and the ability to delay a rush to judgment. Barker (2000) states that “knowledge of culture, geography, history, and language are important to acquire intercultural competence. Obviously, this refers to knowledge of one’s own, before the study of others.”

Developing International Understanding through Intercultural Competence



Embedding the Development of Intercultural Competence in Business Education Taxonomy

According to Hunter (2006), “the most critical step in becoming competent is to establish one’s awareness. This can be achieved by first having a keen understanding of one’s own cultural norms and expectations. The second step is then exploring cultural, social, and linguistic diversity whilst having an open attitude and non-judgmental reactions towards differences of others.” Freeman (2009) indicates that “the development of intercultural competence is a dynamic, ongoing, interactive self-reflective learning process that transforms attitudes, skills and knowledge for effective communication and interaction across cultures and contexts.” In a report titled “Embedding the Development of Intercultural Competence in Business Education”, he suggests the above taxonomy developed by Riding, Simpson, and Leask. Although the taxonomy was designed for the business world, it can be applied to other areas as well.

Freeman states that the development of intercultural competence is an iterative process and people can move from one “bubble” to another, both vertically and horizontally, depending on their experiences and interactions with others.

The most important part of promoting international understanding among students is that it stimulates their interest in the lives of others. It goes beyond the false assumption of being able to learn about other cultures through superficial means such as short sightseeing trips, learning to speak a second language, or interacting with foreign students without genuine interest in their

cultures and histories. Tasks and discussion topics in the classroom must promote skills and attitudes that encourage critical thinking and ability to challenge preconceived conceptions. “Including a global dimension in teaching means that links can be made between local and global issues. It also means that young people are given opportunities to critically examine their own values and attitudes; appreciate similarities between people everywhere, and value diversity; understand the global context of their local lives; and develop skills that enable them to combat injustice, prejudice and discrimination (Royal Geographical Society, 2005).

Additionally, international understanding allows students to build a link between the world that they live in and the world of others. It enables learners to find common interests and, in some cases, solve or negotiate differences. When negotiating differences, learners should develop skills to analyze situations critically. This in turn can lead to re-evaluation of one’s own beliefs and attitudes.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2012) states that students develop intercultural understanding through :

- **Recognizing** : Students identifying, observing, analyzing, and describing increasingly sophisticated characteristics of their own cultural identities and those of others.
- **Interacting** : Students developing the skills to relate to a move between cultures through engagement with different cultural groups.
- **Reflecting** : Students using reflection to better understand the actions of individuals and groups in specific situations and how these are shaped by culture.
- **Empathy** : Students having feeling for others, caring, imagining, and what it might be like to walk in another’s shoes.
- **Respect** : Students recognizing that every person is important and must be treated with dignity.

Responsibility : Students reflecting on and taking responsibility for their own behaviors and their interactions with others within and across cultures.

It is imperative to realize that intercultural understanding is more than studying or gaining knowledge about the topic. It is rather being involved and taking action. Even with reading, watching videos/DVDs, or discussing certain issues in the classroom, we may be merely scratching the surface. Deeper understanding is gained through interaction and working with people who we wish to understand better.

Deardoff (2006) suggests the following framework for successful intercultural interactions :

Attitude : Openness and curiosity imply a willingness to risk and to move beyond one’s comfort

zone. In communicating respect to others, it is important to demonstrate that others are valued.

Knowledge : Cultural self-awareness, culture-specific knowledge, deep cultural knowledge, including understanding other worldviews and sociolinguistic awareness. The one element agreed upon by all the intercultural scholars cited in this article is the importance of understanding the world from others' perspectives.

Skills : Skills that address the acquisition and processing of knowledge : observation, listening, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, and relating.

Internal Outcomes : Attitudes, knowledge, and skills that ideally lead to an internal outcome that consists of flexibility, adaptability, ethno-relative perspectives, and empathy.

External Outcome : Summation of attitudes, knowledge, skills, and internal outcomes which are demonstrated through the behavior and communication of the individual and become the visible outcomes of intercultural competence experienced with others.

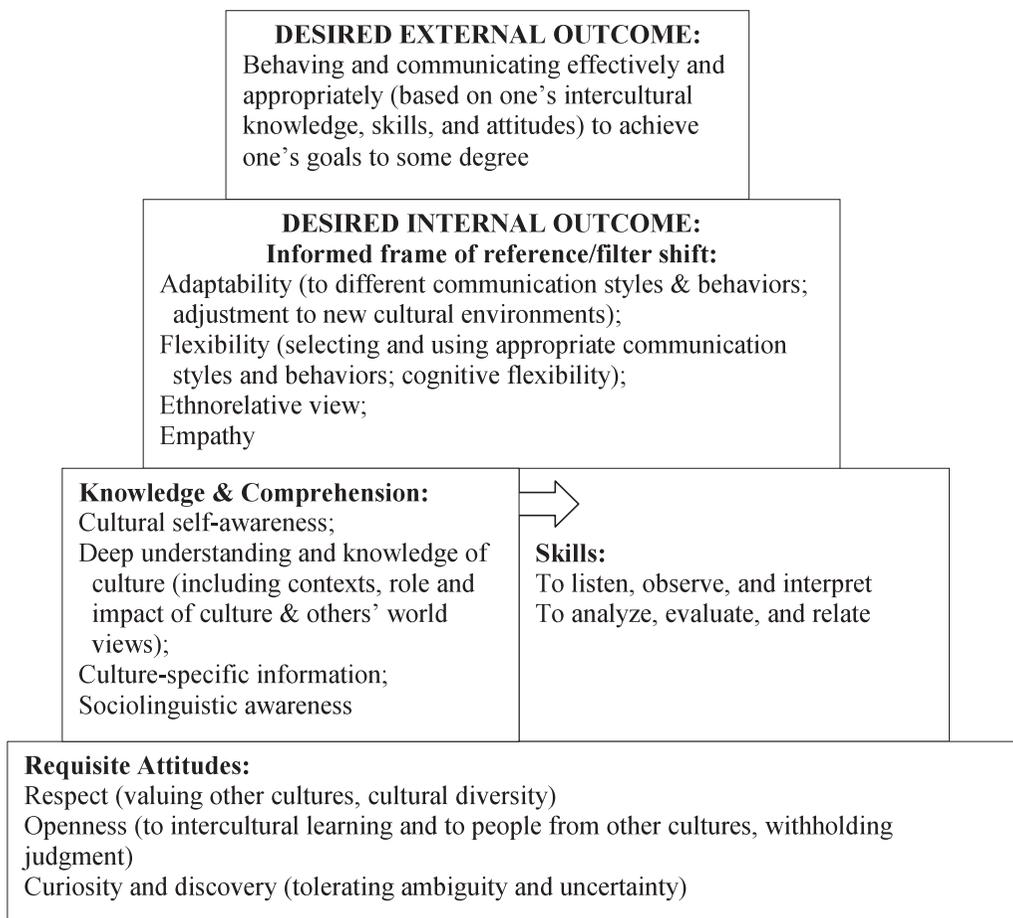
As stated earlier, developing intercultural understanding doesn't necessitate traveling overseas or speaking a foreign language. Obviously, speaking a second language facilitates communication, but this is not the only skill individuals need to acquire for intercultural competence. As people change, so do their cultures. Therefore, if we agree that cultures are in constant change, then individuals should obtain certain qualities that enable them to be open, flexible, and respectful toward others. "A key factor in intercultural competence is, ultimately, when any uncertainties arise, that participants remain open to unknown situations and that they continually reflect past experiences ... Since comprehensive cultural knowledge cannot be definitely known, process oriented skills grow in importance, skills that make it possible to acquire and process knowledge about one's own as well as foreign cultures." (Deakin University, 2013).

Another important factor in gaining intercultural competence is having the ability to deal with the unknown and the ambiguous. It is more critical to develop skills that deal with uncertain or new situations than it is to memorize facts and figures about certain countries.

In the thesis by Bertlesmann (2006) and in Deardoff's (2006) Policy Paper on Intercultural Competence, qualities associated with developing intercultural competence can be summarized as in the following :

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE MODEL

Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence



NOTES:

- *Move from personal level (attitude) to interpersonal/interactive level (outcomes)*
- *Degree of intercultural competence depends on acquired degree of underlying elements*

Deardorff, D. K. 2006

Application of International Understanding in the Classroom

When designing a curriculum or syllabus that focuses on international understanding, introduction of tasks and activities that promote critical thinking, communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution are highly critical. Heyward (2002) argues that international competence must be learned in a cross-cultural environment, and that a “crisis of engagement” is necessary to stimulate the development of intercultural competence. However, since Japan is largely a homogeneous society and Japanese students do not have enough opportunities to interact with people of other nationalities, the emphasis on teaching should not be on “what”, but on “how.” For example, although it is important to teach that in many cultures lack of eye contact with the person you are talking can be taken as a sign of mistrust, it is more important to discuss gesture and body language in a wider context. Once students have acquired some analytical skills, they should be able to deal better with any cultural topics or issues, regardless of their nature and complexity.

However, when introducing discussion topics, teachers need to focus on being facilitators. They must be careful not to tell their students what to think, say, or even attempt to guide them towards a pre-determined conclusion. Students must be presented with some facts and then allowed to develop their own critical thinking skills. But neither teachers nor students need to know every fact, figure, or aspect of a cultural background in order to evaluate a situation analytically. Instead, they need to know how to engage in discussion and communicate effectively.

Since the ultimate goal of a teacher is to instill intercultural competence among students, it is perhaps helpful to learn what types of tasks and activities can bring us closer to this goal. Oxfam (Oxfam GB, 2008) recommends the following knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes people need in order to develop global citizenship :

1. Show interest in or awareness of some global issues by asking questions.
2. Understand that we are all interconnected and our lives can be affected by changes taking place in far away places.
3. Realize that any small step one takes will have some positive or negative consequences.
4. Empathize with others and resist injustice.
5. Embrace opportunities to interact with others who are different.
6. Realize that no culture is superior to another.
7. Recognize that people’s opinions and reactions can be completely different from those of others.

8. Try to look at the world through other people's eyes.
9. Withhold judgment until one has considered and evaluated all the facts involved.
10. Realize the differences between facts, opinions, and assumptions.
11. Think critically and argue effectively.
12. Challenge injustice and inequalities and believe that one can make a difference.

Freeman (2002) also suggests the following activities for developing intercultural understanding:

- Mini-case studies/scenarios/critical incidents
- Self-reflective activities
- Self and group reflection
- Self-reflective journals and experimental learning
- Pair work and group work
- Simple role plays and appropriate simulations
- In-depth case studies
- Case studies for group discussion
- Team-based learning
- Interactive games
- Student diversity profiles

Keeping in mind that the most important condition for accomplishing the goal of raising cultural awareness in Japan is through interaction between Japanese and non-Japanese students, it can be helpful to look at some numbers. In 1996, there were more than 46,000 Japanese students in the U.S. However, this number has been declining and it stood at less than 20,000 in 2012 (Institute of International Education, 2013). This means fewer young Japanese have been exposed to the culture of a heterogeneous country such as the United States. On the other hand, there were almost 53,000 international students in Japan in 1996, while the number increased to about 140,000 in 2012 (Japan Student Services Organization, 2013). This is a positive sign, since Japanese university students have more opportunities to interact with their international counterparts. However, according to the Japan Student Services Organization (2013), there has been very little increase in the number of international students in Japan in the past few years and, in fact, the number has decreased in the past two years. Furthermore, higher numbers do not mean an automatic increase in communication and interaction between different groups. This is why educators play a critical role in designing a curriculum/syllabus that creates opportunities for students to immerse themselves in intercultural tasks and activities.

Conclusion

Fostering international understanding in our students requires a framework or guidelines that institutions can work with. This entails establishing administrative policies and establishing goals through curriculum design and courses offered. Such a program should not focus only on Japanese students, but also on international students. Naturally, people involved in such efforts must be individuals who have had hands-on experience or at least are flexible enough to adjust. Educating open-minded young adults who can look beyond their immediate needs and surroundings means creating opportunities for them to become interested in global issues and to discuss these issues through interactions with people of other cultures. Through these interactions and meaningful discussions, students can develop skills and knowledge that allow them to act as world citizens. Finally, establishing standards that measure progress, or lack of it, in regard to stated goals are also highly critical.

*Note : On 5 December 2008, State, Territory and Commonwealth Ministers of Education meeting as the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, released the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians which sets the direction for Australian schooling for the next 10 years.

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異文化理解能力を通じて国際理解を深める

サベット メヘラン

抄 録

文部科学省が導入したグローバル30プロジェクトは、より多くの留学生が日本の大学に興味を持ち、学生同士の意見交換が刺激的な環境を作りだすことを目的としている。このことは、結果的には国際的に活躍できるグローバル志向の日本人学生を育成することにも貢献することになる。著者は、このプロジェクトが日本の全大学に導入されるべきであると考えている。本論文では、このようなプロジェクトを通して、学生同士がどのように国際理解や異文化理解の力をつけていくかを考察する。

キーワード； コミュニケーション, 多様性, 文化, 独自性, 異文化理解能力