

Communication and Culture: Intercultural Communication Training in Japanese Education

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I. Introduction

The world is getting smaller than the past because of the influence of globalization. This is a worldwide phenomenon and Japan is no exception. According to Japan National Tourism Organization, the number of visitors from the outside of Japan was 352,832 in 1964. The number has swollen in 52 years, and it was 24,039,700 in 2016, which is about 70 times larger than in 1964. Japan National Tourism Organization's chart also shows not only the visitors to Japan but also the number of Japanese overseas travelers has improved exponentially. The number was about 133 times larger in 2016 compared with 1964 (Japan National Tourism Organization). In addition, according to Ministry of Justice, the number of foreign people who live in Japan was 495,403 more in 2017 than in 2013. Compared to countries like the United States, Canada, and Australia, Japan is still behind in international acceptance. However, these data indicate

that Japan can no longer be passive in interacting with other cultures. In other words, Japanese people should try to understand other cultures when they communicate with people who have different background.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology revealed a plan of English education in elementary school to high school in 2014 ("Kongo no Eigo Kyoiku no Kaizen Juzitsu Housaku ni tsuite: Gurobaruka ni Taio Shita Eigo Kyoiku Kaikaku no Itsutsu no Teigen"). In this proposal, it acknowledges the significance of cross-cultural understanding and cross-cultural communication because of the influence of globalization. However, it emphasizes much on English language education. For instance, in 2008, the curriculum has changed and English education now starts in elementary school (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, "Shogakko Gakushushidou," 5). Although English education has changed, there is no important change to intercultural communication education. For cross-cultural understanding and cross-cultural communication, not only language but also cultural education is important. As one way that Japanese students learn a positive attitude for communication with foreigners and accept their cultures, there is intercultural communication training. Based on the analysis of interviews, this essay will consider the role of culture for better cross-cultural communication, and introduce a way called intercultural communication training for school education in Japan. Japanese education, from elementary school to high school, should include some cultural focus in order to foster

better cross-cultural understanding and cross-cultural communication, and intercultural communication training is one possible way to achieve it.

II. Background

Intercultural communication is "exchange of information between people of different cultural backgrounds" (Matsumoto, 357). Well-known anthropologist Edward T. Hall used the term "intercultural communication" for the first time in his book *The Silent Language* (Rogers, Hart, Miike, 3, quoted in Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990; Rogers and Steinfatt 1999). This was the beginning of the field of intercultural communication. Since then, because of the influence of globalization, the significance of intercultural communication has increased.

People communicate by using language in order to deliver messages to other people, and it is an ability which only human beings have. When we think about how we communicate, we tend to imagine only language. However, there are two aspects of communication: verbal communication and nonverbal communication. Verbal communication is the way of communication which conveys messages by language. On the other hand, when we send a message, receive it and understand the meaning, we also use cues other than words. This is nonverbal communication (Jones, 165). There are various types of nonverbal communication such as eye contact, touch, gestures, physical space, facial expressions, posture, and paralanguage (Bernstein). In

addition, as a nonverbal medium, context also plays a very important role when people communicate and try to understand the meaning. Context means, "the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood" (Oxford Dictionary). As language conveys messages, context also "carries varying proportions of the meaning" (Hall, 86). Communication is conducted by using both verbal and nonverbal cues, and the way people use these cues and its meaning are different in each culture. Edward B. Tylor defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" in his book *Primitive Culture* for the first time (1). Literature, architecture, festivals are the typical examples of culture which we can easily conceive of and use to distinguish one culture from another. However, according to Tylor, culture includes the inside of ourselves which includes knowledge and beliefs for instance. The next section will describe the relation between communication and culture more deeply.

III. Communication and Culture

Edward T. Hall says "Culture is communication and communication is culture" (186). Hall argues that culture and communication are closely related. How do culture and communication connect to each other? This section will analyze some cross-cultural communication experiences from interviews, and clarify

the relation between difference of communication style which interviewees experienced and the hidden cultural impact. I conducted interviews with three Japanese students and three American exchange students at Chukyo University. I decided to interview university students because it was easy to find the people who had experienced intercultural communication. All Japanese students had stayed in the United States to study there. Also, all American students are currently staying in Japan to study. I asked them to talk about experiences in which they felt the differences of communication style between Japan and the United States.

1. Directness

In the interview, both Japanese and American students, talked about the difference of directness in their communication. Japanese interviewees think that American people can say their own opinion openly even if it is a political topic. For instance, a Japanese interviewee says that Japanese people tend to place emphasis on the sense of the atmosphere. For example, she thinks that American people say anything what they want to say.¹ On the other hand, Japanese people tend to understand without verbal context. American students also feel the difference of directness. One American interviewee feels that Japanese communication style is politer because of the indirectness. He says "Japanese people try to say things nicer. In the United States, people are more direct and it sometimes sounds like mean".² Another American student also feels the indirectness of Japa-

nese communication. When he made a plan with Japanese friends and the date was not available for them, they said "It is difficult because I have work." or "Maybe it is better to change the date to...". According to him, in the United States, people just say "I have work".³ It became clear from the interviews that the directness of communication is different in the United States and in Japan.

In order to think about the directness of communication, Edward T. Hall's "high-context communication" and "low-context communication" is helpful. Edward T. Hall says that the level of context is different from one culture to another. Hall describes that each culture varies by how much people rely on context when they communicate. He defines it with the terms "high-context communication" and "low-context communication as follows":

A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. (Beyond Culture, 91)

Whether people tend to use high-context communication or low-context communication has relevance with their cultural features. One cultural feature that affects how much people depend on context is collectivism and individualism. According to Nishimura, Nevgi, and Tella, "LC cultures typically value indivi-

dualism over collectivism and group harmony" (785). The definition of collectivism is "The practice or principle of giving a group priority over each individual in it" (Oxford Dictionary). The definition of individualism is "1. The habit or principle of being independent and self-reliant" and "2. A social theory favouring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control" (Oxford Dictionary). Based on Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov's research of the index of individualism in 76 countries, the United States ranked 1st while Japan ranked 34th through 37th (shared rankings with Argentina and Morocco) (95-97). It is indicated that Japan is more collectivistic country than the United States. As a collectivist culture, Japanese people tend to cherish harmony and collective achievement. Because of this, people should favor indirect communication to sustain harmony. Moreover, in the collectivist culture, cultural norms and traditions are shared widely and rooted deeply in the people. It allows Japanese to communicate to communicate with each other mostly by context. In contrast, American culture, an individualistic culture, cherishes individual goals and does not place much value on group harmony. In this kind of culture, it is more effective to communicate directly with clear language.

2. Private Face and Public Face

Another difference of communication style between Japan and the United States that the U.S. students mention is private face and public face. American interviewees say that Japanese peo-

ple's private face and public face are very different, and the difference is greater than it is among American people. An American interviewee talks about what he experienced. In Japan, when people talk to close friends, they tell their friends what they really think. However, if they are not quite close friends, they do not talk like close friends. He says that American people also change the way of communication depending on intimacy, but the difference is bigger in Japan than in the United States. In the United States, it is even common to talk about politics with people one does not well.⁴ This communication style difference seems to be related to cultural difference.

From his own experience in Japan, Hall remarks that Japanese people have two sides when they communicate (*Beyond Culture*, 68). He analyzes this feature as below:

The Japanese are pulled in two directions. The first is a very high-context, deeply involved, enveloping intimacy that begins at home in childhood but is extended far beyond the home. There is a deep need to be close, and it is only when they are close that they are comfortable. The other is as far away as one can get. In public and during ceremonial occasions (and there are ceremonies of a sort everyday, even when people meet), there is great emphasis on self-control, distance, and hiding inner feelings. (66-67)

According to Hall, the reason that Japanese people do not express their feelings very much is influenced by the history of samurai. In the era, it was very important to control their own behavior to survive (*Beyond Culture*, 67). This historical custom

still remains now. Because of this, it is important for Japanese to keep their distance and control their behavior in front of people who are not close. However, Japanese people actually value making deep relationships with others more than American people. Japanese people change their face depending on the relation with the people to keep harmony. On the other hand, in the United States, people attach a high value to achieving their own goal than making close relationship with people (Hall, *Beyond Culture*, 68). This is another strong indication of individualism.

3. Connections between culture and communication

The previous interviews show that the difference of communication style is influenced by hidden culture such as individualism and collectivism. The relation between culture and communication can be more clearly understood by looking at Hofstede's culture model (7-10). According to Hofstede (1991), culture is structured by four aspects: symbols, heros, rituals, and values. He shows the model of culture with the example of "the skins of an onion" (7). "Symbols are words, gestures, pictures, or objects that carry a particular meaning that is recognized as such only by those who share the culture" (Hofstede, 8). This aspect is the most surface layer of culture because symbols change easily by coping with the other cultures. "Heros are persons, alive or dead, real or imaginary, who possess characteristics that are highly prized in a culture and thus serve as models for behavior" (Hofstede, 8). "Rituals are collective activities that are technically superfluous to reach desired ends but that, within a cul-

ture, are considered socially essential" (Hofstede, 9). Rituals include ways to greet and to show respect, for instance. These three aspects can be connected by practices. Practices helps people from other cultures to see the culture. Yashiro says that practices can be changed to the word communication (165). Although practices make the culture visible, the cultural meaning is still invisible from other cultures. According to Hofstede, the most basic layer of culture is values (9): "Values are broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others" (Hofstede, 9). People evaluate, for example, good or bad on the basis of values. Based on his culture model, our lives are influenced by our values of our culture. Moreover, it is very difficult to be aware of these values because they are internalized when we are young (Hofstede 11). Practices, in other words, communication, are the only way that we can assume the values of some specific cultures.

In the two topics, "directness" and "private face and public face", I indicated some values and norms such as collectivism and individualism, and they established each culture's communication style. The interviewees, who experienced different cultures through communicating with others, noticed that people who have different cultures communicate in different ways. In addition, it became clear from interviews that some communication styles have not changed from what Hall experienced. It means that the culture is deeply rooted in people, and it is handed down from one generation to another. The influence of culture on communication is significant. The core elements of culture such as

values break to the surface in communication. However, we cannot truly understand other cultures by only seeing the differences of communication. People have to understand the underlying values which make the difference. Because of this, school education needs to focus not only on language but also on culture for cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural understanding.

IV. Intercultural Communication Training

In the former section, it was clarified that communication and culture are strongly related. Because of this, we cannot think about cross-cultural communication in isolation from cultural understanding. Based on this fact, it is necessary to learn about culture and how to communicate with foreign people. This section introduces a training in intercultural communication. Moreover, this section also considers some challenges that we might face when we actually conduct this training in school education in Japan.

According to Brislin and Yoshida (quoted in Carbaugh, 1990; Paige, 1992), "Intercultural communication training refers to formal efforts designed to prepare people for more effective interpersonal relations when they interact with individuals from cultures other than their own" (2-3). In this intercultural communication training, Brislin and Yoshida suggest that the training includes "a four-step approach": "(1) Awareness, (2) Knowledge, (3) Emotions (includes attitudes), and (4) Skills

(involving visible behaviors)" (26). Awareness is, for example, to be aware of the influence of our own culture on our lives (Brislin and Yoshida, 29-32). It is also important to be aware of "one's own values and biases and how they affect the way one interacts with culturally different people" because it can "help trainees monitor their ethnocentrism" (Brislin and Yoshida, 30). Knowledge includes "Immediate concerns, area-specific knowledge, culture-general knowledge, and culture-specific knowledge" (Brislin and Yoshida 32-33). Emotion training deals with trainees' emotions which they face in a different culture. It aims for reduction of stress, and helps improve their understanding of other cultures. Brislin and Yoshida say there are two types of skills that the training deals with. One is "culture-general skills," such as "the ability to tolerate ambiguity, manage stress, establish realistic expectations, and demonstrate flexibility and empathy" (Brislin and Yoshida, 89). The other is "culture-specific skills" (Brislin and Yoshida, 103). This is training which acquires some skills that make communication successful in a specific culture.

In order to develop these four stages, there are many methods. One method of intercultural communication training is called critical incidents. This is training in which trainees read some critical incidents that could happen in a different culture, and think about the factors in the problem and the way to deal with it. This method is helpful for the trainees' emotions because if people can know the reasons for the different ways of communication, it can assist in stress management (Brislin and Yoshida,

126-127). For instance, if Japanese people understand that American people value their own goals, they can also understand the direct communication style. Also, it can positively change their attitude toward the other culture (Brislin and Yoshida, 127). When we conduct this in classroom, for example, it is possible to think about critical incidents in groups, and share the idea with the other group members. Another method is intercultural simulation games. In one intercultural simulation game, Bafa Bafa, trainees act as members of fictional cultures A and B (Ishiguro 222). Trainees learn each cultures' attitudes, values, perspectives, and verbal and nonverbal communication patterns (Ishiguro, 222). Each fictional culture member experiences the other culture by interacting with them (Ishiguro 222). After the game, trainees discuss the experience (Ishiguro, 222).

Based on the analysis of interviews and the relation between culture and communication style, it is very clear that language learning is not enough for cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural understanding. In intercultural communication training, there are four steps and each of them are deeply related. For example, in order to be aware of one's own culture, it is quite important to know the other culture. According to Hall, "understanding oneself and understanding others are closely related process. To do one, you must start with the other, and vice versa" (Beyond Culture, 69). Our culture is deeply rooted in ourselves. It is difficult for us to be aware of the culture that shapes our way of thinking and behavior. However, cross-cultural communication training makes it possible because of the coverage of

four steps. This training should make Japanese students become more culturally understanding. Japanese education should introduce intercultural communication training throughout the compulsory education period. We can introduce this training, for instance, in integrated learning period.

Although intercultural communication training is an effective way to improve students' cross-cultural communication competence and cross-cultural understanding, there are some challenges that schools might face. First of all, intercultural communication training needs experienced trainers. Trainers should know how to conduct this training. Intercultural communication training must include all four steps by mixing some kinds of methods, so trainers have to think the best way to approach the all steps. Trainers also need knowledge about both culture in general and in detail. Because of this, the role of the trainee is significant for the success of the training. If we actually introduce intercultural communication training to school sites, we have to solve this problem. The second problem is that intercultural communication training has a danger of reinforcing stereotypes. When we deal with a specific culture, trainers can assume that people from the culture act like how trainees have learned. According to Yashiro, the cultural difference here in intercultural communication is not an absolute difference, but a relative difference (23). People, regardless of whether or not they are of the same culture, will have their own way of thinking. For example, Japan is a collectivistic culture, but the degree of collectivism is different from person to person. Some value

group harmony while some cherish achieving their own goal. However, when we see each culture as a whole, cultural differences exist, and it is a relative difference. If trainees can understand this, they will not have stereotypes. Because of this, it is very important for trainers to be careful about stereotypes and to design training activities which do not reinforce stereotypes. This is another reason why the role of trainer is important.

Communication and culture are deeply connected. The core of culture such as values makes each communication style unique. Moreover, through communication with people from different cultural backgrounds, people can think about culture. Because of this, understanding other cultures is very important for better intercultural communication. Intercultural communication training is the one way to learn about culture and way of effective communication. The training must include four steps: Awareness, Knowledge, Emotions (includes attitudes), and Skills. Conducting this training from elementary school to high school should help Japanese education to achieve the goal: good intercultural communication and intercultural understanding. However, there are two challenges before that can happen. First, good trainers are essential for the success of intercultural communication training. Because of this, it is necessary to cultivate human resources capable of designing and conducting the training effectively. Second, intercultural communication training has a possibility to foster stereotypes. Trainers need to be careful about it. Although there are difficulties, Japanese education must be aware of the importance of cultural focus for cross-

cultural communication and cross-cultural understanding. Intercultural communication training is a powerful method to achieve it.

Endnotes

- 1 Personal Interview, In-person meeting, 19 October 2018
- 2 Personal Interview, In-person meeting, 24 October 2018
- 3 Personal Interview, In-person meeting, 26 October 2018
- 4 Personal Interview, In-person meeting, 30 October 2018

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