A Dialectical Discourse in Intercultural Communication Classroom —A Trial Study in Japan

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The present study aimed to deepen intercultural communication through a trial of a dialectical discourse with the participants of "Intercultural Communication" course. Important issues common in daily life such as identity, popular cultures were discussed in class between the teacher and students, students and students; meanwhile, more questions of personal levels were asked each time in written forms and answered in the next class. The whole process was a 15-week length of period with 19 female participants, all sophomores. Results indicated that simply by lecturing about intercultural communication might help the students deepen the understanding; however, actually conversing with them on a more personal level revealed a higher motivation of the students with more interest in their intercultural counterparts, as well as more interactions positively and open-mindedly.

I. Introduction

To begin with, I would like to introduce the following two situations.

No. 1, on June 24, 2018, Yee twitted about Japan and Senegal fans helped clean up the stadium after their first games of World Cup by saying "the stadium after Japan vs. Senegal may be cleaner at the end than at the start!!" The Japanese fans undoubtedly impressed the whole world with their amazing teamwork.

No. 2, a few years ago, one Japanese high school visited another American school as part of the school trip. There was one opportunity for American students and Japanese students to communicate with each other for the purpose of cultural exchange. Some other students from China also joined the event. When it was time for questions, one after another, Chinese students raised their hands and asked questions without any hesitation; in contrast, Japanese students were sitting there quietly and remained silent. Seeing this, the Japanese teacher who chaperoned couldn't take it anymore and asked the Chinese students if they could give some

chances to Japanese students to ask questions thinking that this was supposed to be between Japanese students and American students. To his very astonishment, the Chinese students replied right away, "if they want to ask, then ask!" From the eyes of Chinese students and possibly American students' as well, the Japanese students just didn't seem to have any interest in getting to know more about their counterparts and didn't even bother to ask questions.

If you have the experiences of living in Japan, or communicated with Japanese people, it is not a rare phenomenon to observe or experience similar situations like the above mentioned. Rather, it can be understood as a social norm that after using public facilities, it is everyone's responsibility to clean up and make sure the facilities look exactly the same as before. At school students are also required to clean the classrooms, gym, or even toilet. Nobody complains, the students show great conformity to what they are told or asked. Similar scenes were also reported after the 2011 Tsunami in Japan, there was no stealing, no violence - people patiently waited for their turn for blankets, food and water. This conformity impressed the readers especially those who don't share the same cultural backgrounds.

On the other hand, there is a big concern in today's Japan when it comes to advocate one's own opinion. It is often spotted that in class it is usually the teacher talking and the students listening, no one would raise hand to answer questions even if the teacher asks. It doesn't necessarily mean that the students don't have any questions or hold their own opinions, it implies that "the nail that sticks out shall be hammered down".

1. Japanese Culture

Japanese culture has been examined in various contexts. As a collectivistic culture in the East, different from individualistic cultures in the West such as the U.S. culture, Japanese share more concern for the feelings, needs, and wants of one's in-groups, in short, a relatively greater concern for the face of in-group members (Ting-Toomey, 1988). Japan has also been categorized as one of the high-context cultures (Hall, 1976 & 1983) where people communicate their meanings in implicit and indirect ways. Self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) is another dimension that cannot be ignored when discussing Japanese culture. Japanese with an interdependent self view themselves as more closely intertwined with others, are more sensitive to the wants and needs of others. Being able to

"read" the other's mind and to know what the other is feeling or thinking is important (Holtgraves, 1997).

Nakane (2006) examined speech and silence in seminar interactions in an Australian university, and found that verbal strategies were more common among Australian students, whereas Japanese students tended to use silence to save face. Most of the Japanese students explained that "they would not speak unless they are nominated". This suggests that "silence is often used as a strategy to avoid loss of face" when students have to "speak up without well prepared or having an adequate grasp of the subject matter". However, "silence as a face-saving strategy does not seem to be common among Australian students", and it is "negatively perceived in the Australian university seminar setting, and at the same time seems to be a threat to face which lecturers want to avoid." Therefore, the researcher concerned that "as a consequence, academic achievement seems to be sacrificed to some degree by Japanese students for the sake of face-saving", and suggested "Japanese students need to be made aware that their silence may be interpreted negatively in both social and academic terms and that it may even be regarded as impolite behavior".

2. Backgrounds of intercultural communication in Japan
2. 1 Globalization and increase of intercultural contact

Globalization and technology development have made intercultural contact much easier than ever before, interdependency among countries has become stronger, Japan is no exception. Zhang and Steele (2012) suggested that although "Japanese have regarded their islands as a homogeneous country", "the population of ethnic minorities in Japan was increasing rapidly". The reasons for this increase can be accounted for the demographics of modern Japan with a high percentage of senior citizens over 65 years old and its very low birthrate. Meanwhile, the bubble boom from December, 1986 to February, 1991 caused severe lack of labor. In order to solve this problem, in 1990 Japanese government issued the Revised Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Law in order to absorb more labors from abroad. By simplifying the procedures of entry, this revision made it easier for visa application and had attracted more foreigners to enter Japan.

2. 2 "*Hanayome*" in Japan

"As a result of increased interaction among people from different countries, romantic relationships and marriages between culturally diverse

individuals are becoming more common" (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005; Frame, 2004). Intercultural marriage (*Kokusai Kekkon*) has played a significant role in the increase of ethnic minority.

Suzuki (2003) examined administratively mediated international marriages (*kokusai kekkon*) between Filipina *hanayome* (brides) and local Japanese since late 1980s. As Suzuki suggested, in order to solve that problem of "*yome kikin*" (bride famine) rural Japan had faced in the last quarter of the twentieth century, which caused severe depopulation, "'compliant' (*sunao*) women from 'poor, backward Asia'" were recruited. In 1997, the number of Chinese *hanayome* overpassed Filipina and became the top on the list as a result of "many Chinese women viewed marriage with foreigners as a way of improving life quality and realizing personal value and freedom" (Ge, 1999).

2. 3 Increase of foreign students coming to Japan

Another increase is the number of foreign students who have chosen Japan as a destination to study. As a result of the Japanese Government's Plans for 100,000 exchange students by 2000 (NAFSA, 2008) and 300,000 by 2020 (NAFSA, 2008), JASSO (Japan Student Services Organization, 2019) reported that the number of foreign students registered by May 1st, 2018 was 298,980, Asian students from countries such as China, Vietnam or Nepal has constituted the majority of 93.4%.

3. Intercultural challenges in Japan

Apart from the above backgrounds that have brought impact to the Japanese society, the descendants of foreign residents in Japan have also been facing the challenging reality. Maher (1997) reported on residents of Korea and Chinese descendants in Japan as "[they] were abandoned and ignored after the conclusion of the Second World War. The only real option they had was to assimilate without much attention given to their ethnic features." To echo this, Zhang and Steele (2012) explained the Japanese culture as the follows:

Generally speaking, Japanese society is organized around principles of coexistence and accordance with the collective environment. Therefore, individual desires are expected to be subordinate to the common good. Until recently, the approach taken to different ethnic groups in Japan has been, essentially, to assimilate them as quickly and thoroughly as possible in order not to cause any cultural clashes.

Although "*cultural clashes*" are not favorable and expected in the

Japanese society, they cannot be avoided. Regardless of the reasons, the status of temporary visitors or permanent residence, the number of foreigners has been increasing. Recently Japan has won its great popularity as a tourism option. According to the latest report on thirty-five member countries by OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015), with regard to the number of foreign residents who hold "valid visa and plan to remain in the country for more than 90 days", Japan had about 391,000, which ranked as no. 4 on the list after Germany, the U. S., the U. K.

On top of that, Tokyo will be hosting the 2020 Olympic Games the second time, government's target of 20 million foreign visitors has already been achieved. According to the statistics of JNTO (Japan National Tourism Organization, 2018), the number has already been more than 31 million. Given this large number comparing to the Japanese estimated population of 126 million in 2018, the influences cannot be overlooked. Expecting foreign visitor to assimilate completely won't sound realistic and effective; instead, how to cope with new intercultural situations, many unpredictable, at the same time maintain the essence of Japanese culture has become important and urgent. Chen (2007) suggested that "to be successful in intercultural interactions, we must first show the ability of intercultural awareness by learning the similarities and differences of each other's culture".

Martin and Nakayama (2014) discussed the backgrounds of why people come into intercultural contact in their book "Experiencing Intercultural Communication: An Introduction" (2014). "[World] economy change, changes in governmental systems, natural disasters, and the rising use of social media" are perceived to be the major elements that increase intercultural contact of people with various cultural backgrounds. They specifically discussed why learning intercultural communication is necessary and important, and what it means for students. Specifically, the six imperatives which include peace, economic, technological, demographic, self-awareness, and ethical were examined. Regarding the last ethical imperative, Martin and Nakayama (2014) emphasized the importance of learning about cultural values which "tell us what is 'good' and what 'ought' to be" in order to "make ethical judgments". Meanwhile, "part of learning about intercultural communication is learning about cultural patterns and identities - your own and those of others." As students of intercultural communication, "practicing self-reflexivity, learning about others, listening

to voices of others, and developing a sense of social justice" are required for them to become ethical students of culture.

This research study has focused on enhancing the students' intercultural awareness and improving their intercultural communication competence by communicating similarities and differences of both the teacher's and students' cultures. By doing so, the students were expected to reach the goal of this class by "practicing self-reflexivity, learning about others, listening to voices of others, and developing a sense of social justice" (Martin & Nakayama, 2014). Therefore, the research question is as follows: What can be done to help enhance the students' intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence?

II. Research Method

1. Research participants

The participants were 19 female Japanese students who took "Intercultural Communication" class as a selective course. All participants were sophomores at the time of the course and the average age was 19 years old.

2. Research method

The study was a 15-week semester in fall of 2017, from the end of September to the end of January of 2018; each class was 90 minutes long. The textbook "Experiencing intercultural communication: An introduction" by Martin and Nakayama (2014) had been used in this class. Ten chapters of the textbook were discussed in class with some very important topics in various intercultural communication contexts. Diverse topics such as history, identity, verbal and nonverbal issues, popular culture, conflict, intercultural relationships in everyday life were introduced and discussed with great depth.

Specifically, the students were asked to do the following:

First, at the beginning five minutes of each class, one or two of the students should prepare some activity beforehand to interact with other members. It was completely up to them to decide what to do and how to do it.

Second, foreign students who studied at a local high school were introduced to the students in class, both parties had spent time together exchanging their cultures.

Third, at the end of each class, the students were asked to write a summary report regarding the content they had learned and discussed in class.

Fourth, the students were "hinted" to write down any thoughts or questions on the back of their attendance cards at the end of each class. The questions would be answered at the beginning of the following class.

III. Results

As a result, all the students had at least one opportunity to interact with all others using the activities they prepared. The participants also had chances to talk to two foreign students from the U. S. and Portugal. By writing a summary report every time after class, they could review and reflect what they had learned and discussed in class.

I would especially focus on the fourth method which was: how to get the participants to show interest in others by "asking questions" and "speak out" their opinions in a way they felt comfortable with.

In total, fifty-seven questions were asked by participants during this 15-week semester. Among all the questions, seventeen were closed questions, but needed more explanations; the other forty were open questions that required specific answers.

Since the questions the students had written were very diverse, it was a challenge to categorize them. First, all the questions were carefully read through, then questions with same or similar key words were grouped under the same category. It should be noted that although some questions have been grouped differently, they are connected and intertwined. As a result, the following eleven categories with different key words have emerged: food, hobbies and interests, relationship, LGTB, experiences, language, cultural differences, conflict, identity, beliefs and attitudes, opinions. Specific questions are summarized as follows.

1. Food
    A) What kinds of meals/ cuisines do you usually have at home?
    B) What food/dishes would you recommend to me if I have a chance to go to China? If you have other food/dishes of other countries, please also let me know.
    C) What is your favorite Chinese cuisine?
    D) Does the sweet and sour pork in Japan taste the same as the ones in China?

2. Hobbies and interests
   A) What other hobbies do you have apart from yoga?
   B) Who is your favorite artist? What music do you like recently? Please tell us about your favorite artist and songs.
   C) What kind of music do you listen to?
   D) What is your favorite type of male/man?
   E) Are there any Japanese actors or actresses that you like?
3. Relationship
   A) What is your husband's nationality?
   B) Where did you first meet your husband?
   C) What did you feel about Japanese or Japanese culture when you got married to your Japanese husband? Weren't your parents against your marriage?
   D) What kind of smell do you find most difficult to put up with?
   E) Some females say that they even like the body odors of the males if they feel that they match genetically, do you like your husband's body odor?
   F) What do you think about being different or doing different things from others?
4. LGTB
   A) You talked about your gay friends a few times. Why and how did you make so many gay friends?
   B) What kind of perception do people in China have towards gay people?
   C) Feel like that these days we talked quite a lot about gay people, and it was a good opportunity to think about this aspect of life. Would it be possible for a transgendered woman (previously male) to be employed by our university?
   D) Suppose one of your family members told you that he is gay, what would you do?
5. Experiences
   A) Which country would you recommend among all the countries you have visited so far?
   B) Among the places/ countries you have been to, have you ever had dangerous moments because you didn't understand the nonverbal languages well?
   C) Why did your son go to Papua New Guinea?
6. Language

A) What is/are your favorite Japanese word(s)?

B) How did you succeed in mastering Japanese and English?

C) My good friends and I call each other "*Omae*" because it is an expression that shows our intimacy comparing to calling each other by name. Do other people feel unpleasant if we call each other like that?

Note: *Omae* is a word that is often used between peers or from superior to subordinates.

D) It is difficult for Japanese to pronounce R, L or Th. Do you have any English sounds that you find hard to pronounce?

7. Cultural differences

A) Do students in international school learn the same/ similar things as students do in Japanese public primary/ secondary schools?

B) What was the most difficult to understand or the hardest situation for you in understanding Japanese culture?

C) Are there any unique gestures in China?

D) Were there any gestures in Japan that you couldn't understand when you first came to Japan?

E) What Japanese culture do you like? What Japanese culture don't you like?

F) Please explain about the Chinese national flag.

G) Please tell us about your family history and what you know about your ancestors.

8. Conflict

A) Have you even had any conflict due to the incapability of language?

B) Do you get upset/ angry very often?

C) Have you ever had conflict with someone?

D) What do you do when you are in a conflicting situation with someone?

E) Have you ever ended up with getting angry and quarreling with someone because you could not control your emotions?

9. Identity

A) Has your identity changed since you came to Japan?

B) For the first time I have started to realize the identity issues that I had never thought about before. Has the self you perceived to be ever been in conflict with the self that others perceived?

C) What kind of person do you think you are?

D) What is the best thing to have been born as a woman?

E) Through the class today I could have come to know myself better and deeper, also I have learned that we have multiple identities. When you were 19 or 20, did you have any images of yourself when you turn 30 or 40? Did you ever imagine what you would be like when you turn into your 30s or 40s?

F) I want to be reborn as a man. What would you like to be?

G) I was surprised to see that many of the classmates would like to be reincarnated into men in their next life. Would you also want to be reborn as a man?

10. Beliefs and attitudes

A) What do you spend money on? I spend quite an amount of money on clothing, different people have different priorities. Please tell me what is important to you? What is your priority?

B) I don't like lying or people who lie, if I lie, people can tell right away. Are you good at lying?

C) If you lie, can people tell right away?

D) There were people I know who told me that they couldn't get their parents or friends to buy any electronic devices or presents. Do you think that this kind of thing will have negative effects on education?

E) Please explain how you view the meaning of "friends".

11. Opinions

A) What have you learned from other people's experiences?

B) I have learned about the relationship between my own culture and other cultures as well as the racial issues in the U.S. It is now an era that people cannot live without smartphones. At what age do you think that people should start to have smartphone?

C) What is the happiest moment for you so far in your life?

D) My first impression to others is not good. How do you manage it if your first impression is not good?

E) How has the image of Japanese women changed compared to the time when you first came to Japan?

F) What kind of image do you have towards Japanese?

G) What is your image of Japanese women?

IV. Result and Discussion

Eleven categories have emerged in the result. These categories are about food, hobbies and interest, relationship, LGTB, experiences, language,

cultural differences, conflict, identity, beliefs and attitudes, and opinions.

Regarding food, the participants not only asked about the differences of food in Japan and China, what cuisines (in China or other countries) the author would like to recommend, they also showed interest in what the researcher cooks at home as an intercultural family. Speaking of hobbies and interests, they were curious about the researcher's favorite singer, music and artist. They also asked about the preferable type of male that the researcher likes.

Relationship is one topic that that participants showed much interest in. Among the six questions three were asking about the researcher's husband and marriage, the other three were about preference of male's body odor and being different from others. The participants asked about LGTB in regards of societal and familial attitudes towards gay. They also showed curiosity in how gay friends were encountered and made. Questions of experiences asked for recommendations of countries for travelling, and dangerous moments experienced due to lack of understanding in nonverbal languages. In the category of language, questions focused on how Japanese is viewed and mastered, English as well, such as some of the sounds in English.

In cultural differences the participants questioned about cultural differences between Japan and China in terms of school system, gestures, national flag, and family backgrounds. Then followed by conflict where mostly the researcher's self - perception was asked, and what will be done to resolve the conflict. As for identity, there were questions of how the self is viewed, how identity has changed over the years, and gender identity was the focus.

Money, lying, friends were summarized in beliefs and attitudes. The participants asked questions on these in search of similarities and differences. The final category has questions that seek for suggestions or personal opinions. Questions with key words such as smartphones, happiness, first impression, images of Japanese men/ women were listed.

As it can be seen from the questions, most of the questions are rather private, it usually takes a long time for people to get to know each other before they develop a closer relationship to ask or answer this kind of questions. It would also be mostly impossible for the participants to talk about these freely in front of others in public such as classroom settings. In this sense, creating a comfortable atmosphere for them to express themselves or ask questions freely without worrying about losing face

seems very important. In this study, utilizing writing in communication appears to be more efficient than speaking which may cause the risk of losing face.

In general, whether having the chance to talk to foreigners, or initiating activities to interact with others, all students commented positively in their reports and feedback on the attendance cards. One said,

After taking this class, I think I have learned how to see myself and others in a more objective way. Apart from that, I have also come to realize the importance of identity. I think I can be aware of important elements of communication such as my own self and empathy.

Another participant talked about communicating with foreign students as "I was very happy that I could have the precious opportunity to talk to foreign students".

Some others expressed their feedback as follows:

"*In this class, there were many chances that we could express ourselves, it was so much fun communicating with everyone, even with people I had never talked before, we started to initiate conversations and now we have become friends! It has been a very fun learning process*!"

"*Through this class, I have learned not only about my own culture, but also about other cultures from a very wide view. I have the chance to think deeply about differences of cultures, value systems, conflict, identity, and many others.*"

"*After taking this class, I feel that there is also a risk in intercultural communication where you can get new information and skills. We should not only think about our own identities, but also show respect and understanding while communicating with people of other cultures. This may sound easy, but we may be judging the others unconsciously. So we have to be cautious when we have intercultural communication.*"

V. Conclusion and future implications

Although Japanese have been reported repeatedly to value harmony and don't take speech as an important attribute of individual competence, it is ethnocentric to judge from western perspective that Japanese are weak or incompetent in voicing their opinions. Instead of imposing on the participants and forcing them to speak out, getting them to provide feedback in written forms proves to be an effective way of efficient communication.

This study has experimented intercultural communication by mostly "conversing" with the students in written forms and suggested that this kind of dialectical discourse can be one effective tool to help deepen intercultural understanding and reflecting one's own culture and identity. By writing questions, and hearing the answers from others, they not only reflect themselves and their own culture framework, but also become more sensitive and interested in similarities and differences of other cultures. This positive experience has enhanced the participants' intercultural awareness and motivation to interact with others of different cultures.

Given that the number of participants is small, it can hardly generalize. However, as a trial study, the result did reveal that positive changes can be expected by trying methods such as writing to help Japanese students communicate in intercultural contexts. Future studies can focus more on intercultural communication in various contexts, explore more methods that can help with students' intercultural communication not only in classroom settings but also in daily life.

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