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Intercultural Communication in English Communication Courses

Brett R. Walter and Micky A. Babalola
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Abstract: The drive for globalization of universities in Japan has affected the focus of many programs and courses at these universities. English courses in particular have seen their focus be moved more towards a communicative approach, often to the point where the title of the course itself is changed to reflect this. However, this shift in approach does not always align with what it means to communicate in an international or intercultural setting. This paper will share data collected from an English communication course utilizing participant developed mind maps to analyze student knowledge of intercultural communication. This analysis will show the effectiveness and alignment of one such course in enhancing student knowledge of communication. This data will be shared and suggestions for future research and course development are given.

Key words: Intercultural Communication, Global Education, English Communication

1. Introduction

The term “globalization” has become a leading focus for the development of new programs and departments in many Japanese universities. This is in large part due to the introduction of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Technology’s (MEXT) “Super Global University Initiative.” For many universities, the promotion of globalization often translates to the development of English language programs. The current study looks at how these English classes are conducted at one specific university in the Hiroshima prefecture, and specifically whether students in a course curriculum focused on improving communicative skills have an idea of what it means to communicate in an international or intercultural setting. The following review will briefly discuss the effects of globalization on English programs in universities and then discuss studies focused on intercultural communication that have driven the development of the current study.

Globalization and the English Classroom

With the introduction of the Super Global University Initiative, many universities in Japan developed the goal of becoming one of the world’s top universities, often striving to attain a ranking within the top 100 universities. To do this, universities tried to figure out how they could enhance their educational systems to provide their students with as many international opportunities as possible. One such university in the Hiroshima prefecture developed a plan focusing on not only bringing international talent into the university, but also on providing students with a way to leave the country and broaden their global experiences. The plan stated that they largely targeted three points: increasing student study abroad opportunities, providing students with opportunities to interact

with exchange students, and giving their students the option of taking a class in a multicultural or multilingual setting. Although these points sound impressive and appear to have a focus on increasing student experiences, what this meant for the university educational system was that English language education was emphasized. For example, even though there was an increase in study abroad programs, the deciding factor for the success for such a program became whether student English assessment scores increased. Further, the language classes themselves were adjusted to better represent a more global approach, such as by changing course titles from Introductory English to *Communication I*. Although using communication as a driving force for language education can be a useful tool and can also be a way to introduce intercultural communication instruction to the university, it is uncertain if this was being accomplished.

Intercultural Communication

One difficulty that many programs experience when developing language classes that take more of a communicative approach is the idea of “communication” itself. Defining the term communication is difficult as many people have their own interpretations of the word, and even research in the field has varying definitions for the term. For example, Lee and VanPatten (2003) state that communication includes the expression, interpretation, and, most vitally, the negotiation of meaning within a specific context. However, in an earlier study Lee (2000) has a different definition, stating that “the purpose of language use is to accomplish some task, rather than to practice any particular language forms” (p. 9). Although these definitions are different there are some key similarities, specifically focusing on the idea that communication requires context for practice and the act of using the language to accomplish a goal comes before simple practicing of forms and drills.

To add to this difficulty of defining communication, the fact that these courses are set in a global setting moves this discussion into the realm of intercultural communication. Like communication itself, intercultural communication has a variety of similar definitions, but the current study focused on the defining skills developed by Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov (2010) and which have been used in other research based on intercultural communication (i.e. Delgado, 2015). These skills are identified as: cultural awareness and expectations, nonverbal communication, eye contact, individualism vs. collectivism & expressing opinions, weak-strong uncertainty avoidance value, giving feedback, direct and indirect communication, improvement for the purpose of international understanding, open-mindedness, and flexibility.

To clarify on these skills, *cultural awareness and expectations* refers to the ability for an individual to perceive a culture from the perspective of that culture and to realize that not all people of a same culture necessarily behave the same; *nonverbal communication* refers to the aspects of communication that are expressed without words (facial expressions, gestures, body language, etc.); *eye contact* represents a degree of communicative fluency more common to Western cultures that shows when there is mutual engagement in a conversation; *individualism vs. collectivism & expressing opinions* suggests that individuals understand that different cultures approach expressing of their opinions in different ways. Further, *weak-strong uncertainty avoidance value* involves awareness in an intercultural setting that some cultures are more direct in their communicative encounters while others prefer more conflict-avoiding behaviors; *giving feedback* refers to the methods of a culture used when providing constructive feedback or praise; *direct and indirect communication* is a difference in communication style where the individuals either prefer making a point clear and giving reasons or they remain silent and hope the collective group can come to some solution. Finally, *improvement for the purpose of international understanding* refers to learning for the purpose of improving an individual’s language communication skills (specifically in a real-world setting); *open-mindedness* refers to an individual’s ability to understand a different perspective; and *flexibility* refers to how an individual is able to cope with a changing

environment.

2. Research Question

The current study had two overarching goals: first, to gather information on how a university student defines the word communication in order to assess how these definitions align with current definitions in the research field and, second, to assess whether or not the concept behind the current system of teaching communication would fully be understood on an intercultural level by students taking these communication courses. To focus on these goals, the following research question was developed:

When students from a Japanese university are asked to provide their idea of what the key themes of communication are, how do these themes align with a determined set of themes based in research on intercultural communication?

3. Methods

This study was designed to utilize an 8-week course on English communication. The course goal was to improve English language proficiency, but also to develop student knowledge of some of the aspects of intercultural communication that were discussed in the Introduction. As a way of gauging initial student knowledge of intercultural communication, students were placed into groups to discuss and create a mind map of words to describe or define the components of communication. The use of a mind map was chosen as the method of data collection as it was the most straightforward and simplest way to see how participants perceived the target word. The grouping of participants had two purposes: to support participant English language abilities, and to keep participant minds flowing. Since these mind maps were the driving force of the current study and is representative of the participants' perceptions of what communication is, the maps were not altered by the researchers or professors of the course, nor were any suggestions given to the participants by these individuals.

During the first lesson of the course, the instructor began the mind map activity by providing an example of how mind maps are created. As a class, the instructor wrote a word on the board and took student suggestions for what words may describe that word. Once it was apparent that the participants understood the activity, they were put into small groups and were told that any word they could think of to define the word was acceptable and then given the word "communication" to create a new mind map in their groups. All mind maps were written in English (see Appendix for examples of participant mind maps). The participants were given 20-30 minutes to develop their mind maps before submitting them to the instructor.

Participants

Participants were composed of undergraduate students enrolled in a university in Japan. There were two limitations based around the participants of this study. The first limitation was based on enrollment in the course used for this study, as only a limited number of students could register for the course. The second limitation was based on the field of study of each student. As the university tries to group students from the same field into the same English classes, many of the participants were from the same major or Department. As mentioned above, these mind maps were done during class time, so the response rate for the study was 100% ($n = 84$).

Of the 84 participants, 53 (63%) were male and 31 (37%) were female. The participants were in their second semester of either their third ($n = 80$), or fourth year ($n = 4$) of schooling in their respective undergraduate programs. Although many students came from similar departments (Education, Law,

Letters), their respective majors varied across each field (i.e. philosophy, mechanical engineering, special needs teacher education, life-long education, elementary education). Acceptance to the course required no special English proficiency requirement, so English proficiency levels were varied by participant.

4. Results

Item Categorization

After submission of the participant mind maps, each node (item) of the mind map was analyzed and categorized for comparison to the 10 intercultural communication skills listed above. As mentioned above, examples of the submitted mind maps can be found in the Appendix. The analysis was performed by the two authors individually and these were then compared with each other to further validate the categorization. Participant groups submitted a total of 373 items, each of which was included in the data analysis. The analysis of these items resulted in general categories for similar nodes, including: Social Networking Services (SNS); Talk (Speak); Body Language; Gesture; Language; English; Email, phone, letter; Eye contact; Friend; Fun; Feeling, connect, conversation; Smile; Global; and Listen.

Item Category Comparison

Although a good summary of participant definitions of communication can be found in the general categories above, the aim of the study was to see how these definitions aligned with the ten skills of intercultural communication recognized in the research, as listed above. In order to make this comparison, the categories developed by the two researchers, each containing a certain number of items, were then classified into those skills of intercultural communication which they were most related with. For example, it was determined by the researchers that all mentions by the participants of “Body Language” ($n = 4$) would be considered an aspect of the skill *Nonverbal Communication*. The result of this comparison between the developed categories and the ten skills resulted in the following data (see Figure 1). The skill *cultural awareness and expectations* had a total of 26 related nodes; *nonverbal communication* had a total of 29 related nodes; *eye contact* was mentioned in 5 nodes; *individualism vs. collectivism & expressing opinions* was represented in 3 nodes; *weak-strong uncertainty avoidance value* had a total of 3 related nodes; *giving feedback* was mentioned in 2 nodes; *direct and indirect communication* was represented in 47 nodes; *improvement for the purpose of international understanding* was not mentioned at all (a total of 0 nodes); *open-mindedness* was found in 9 nodes; and *flexibility* was also not mentioned at all (with 0 nodes).

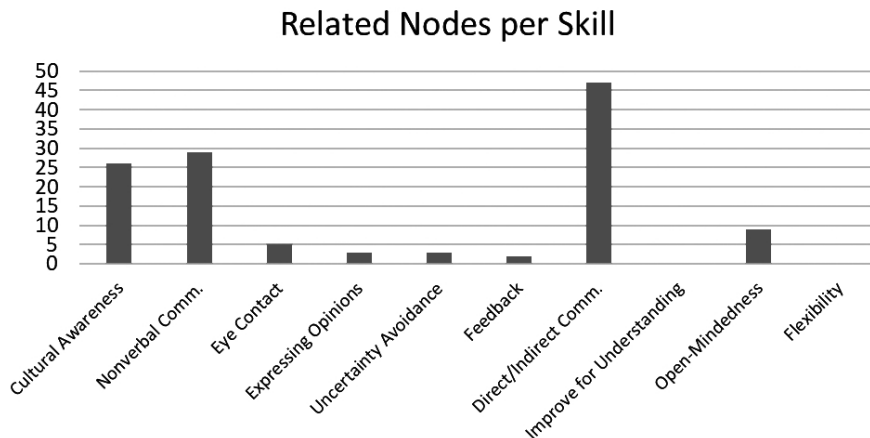


Figure 1 Related Mind Map Nodes as Compared to the Skills of Intercultural Communication

As listed above, the total number of nodes submitted by the participants that were related in any way to the ten skills of intercultural communication came to 124 nodes. When comparing this to the total number of nodes submitted by the participants overall ($n = 373$), it is seen that only 33% of the definitions provided by the participants are related to the recognized definitions of intercultural communication. Further, looking at the individual skills, *direct and indirect communication* (at 12 %), *nonverbal communication* (at 8%), and *cultural awareness and expectations* (at 7%) have the most mentions, while *improvement for the purpose of international understanding* and *flexibility* were not considered at all by the participants (both at 0%).

5. Impact of Data and Suggestions for Further Research

The results of the data above have the largest impact on two aspects of intercultural communication education: building student knowledge of communication and development of English language courses and curriculums. First, in terms of building student knowledge of communication, the data mainly shows that students' ideas of what communication is has a very small alignment with what the academic world considers intercultural communication to be defined as. Specifically, based off of the above defined skills needed for intercultural communication (from Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010) of cultural awareness and expectations, nonverbal communication, eye contact, individualism vs. collectivism and expressing opinions, weak-strong uncertainty avoidance value, giving feedback, direct and indirect communication, improvement for the purpose of international understanding, open-mindedness, and flexibility, only a small percentage (33%) of participant definitions of communication could be classified in any of the areas. This seems to imply that although participants did show a basic understanding of what communication is, they would likely benefit from more explicit instruction on intercultural understanding, especially if they are involved in a global education program. Further, students in these programs may benefit from a lesson where they must think critically about communicating in a real-world setting.

In terms of the second aspect of intercultural communication, the development of English language courses and curriculums, the goal of the program itself should be considered. If the goal of your curriculum is student development of intercultural communication, and especially if your English language courses are labelled as *Communication* courses, the lessons developed may benefit from considering and including all the intercultural communication skills mentioned above. Further, the use of practical lessons or activities may be more beneficial than simple communicative drills.

The current study, however, was not without its limitations and these should be considered in any future iterations of the current study as well. The first limitation involves the use of grouping for participant development of mind maps. Although the grouping does have its benefits, as mentioned above, there is also always the possibility that the use of grouping affected the data, mostly as some students in the group may not have needed to participate in the activity in order for the mind map to be developed. A second limitation is that the current study only used the activity as a pre-assessment of student knowledge of intercultural communication. There was no comparison made to student knowledge at the conclusion of the language course itself, and so there is no current study that considers the effect of explicit intercultural communication instruction on student understanding of communication itself. This is another option for future research. Finally, the current study and its participants were limited to a single university in Japan, therefore the data may not be representative of generalizations beyond the sample students and institution. Future research may consider a nationwide collection of data to strengthen the validity of the data collected in the current study.

6. Conclusions

The current study was developed with two overarching goals: to gather information on how a university student defines the word communication in order to assess how these definitions align with current definitions in the research field and to assess whether or not the concept behind the current system of teaching communication would fully be understood on an intercultural level by students taking these communication courses. To address these goals, the following research question was developed: "When students from a Japanese university are asked to provide their idea of what the key themes of communication are, how do these themes align with a determined set of themes based in research on intercultural communication?" The first goal was accomplished using mind maps which were done by the participants in groups in a course developed for English language instruction, and these maps were then used to help answer the research question and accomplish the second goal.

Analysis of the data showed that only 33 % of the terms defining communication developed by students in a course centered on intercultural communication aligned with the 10 skills associated with intercultural communication in research on the topic. The data collected for this study indicated two effects on future development of courses based on intercultural communication: students are not likely aware of what it means to communicate in an intercultural or international setting, and they may benefit from a course designed around more explicit instruction on what it means to be involved in intercultural communication using more practical, real-world based lessons or activities. Suggestions for future research included collecting individual participant mind maps for more specific data, developing a type of post-assessment to see the effects of a communication course developed as suggested above on participant understanding of intercultural communication, and collection of data on a nationwide level to strengthen the validity of the current data.

References

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Appendix

Sample Student Mind Maps

