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Development of Exchange Activities with the International Students for Nurturing Global Human Resources

—Focusing on Communication Skills, Cooperativity and Flexibility—

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Abstract: This research project developed and practiced some exchange activities with international university students to nurture global human resources at the kindergarten level. The project was constructed with four strategic approaches to focus on developing communication skills, cooperativity and flexibility in children. The studies concluded that children's amical feeling toward international students have acted as a springboard to seek active interaction and to provide support when needed. Developmental level of children should also be considered to promote communication and flexibility. Further research on flexibility is necessary both in literature and in practice.

1. Purpose of the Study

Young generations are expected to become “global human resource” for today's globalized economy and society. According to the Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development, this notion of GHR can be classified as follows:

Factors I: Linguistic and communication skills

Factor II: Self-direction and positiveness, a spirit for challenge,
cooperativeness and flexibility, a sense of responsibility and mission

Factor III: Understanding of other cultures and a sense of identity as a Japanese

(The Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development, 2012)

Our kindergarten has facilitated the exchange activities between our toddlers and international students studying at Hiroshima University. The previous research projects focused on “self-direction and positive attitude” as well as “spirit for challenge” (Kimioka et al., 2016) or “Understanding different cultures, Self-identity as Japanese” (Kimioka et al., 2017) in their

development and practices of the exchange activities. Both attempts were quite fruitful; however, the team recognized the following challenges in reflection.

<Challenges regarding to the Communication Skills>

1. Some children shy away and easily give up active communication with the international students despite they feel amical or interested.
2. Some children feel too shy or embarrassed to actively get involved with the international students. In such cases, they failed to have much communication through verbalizing their thoughts to the international students or listening to them to understand.

<Challenges regarding to Cooperativity and Flexibility>

1. The developed activities were successful in promoting the children to feel friendly and interested toward the international students; however, active and flexible involvements were not yet recognized from the side of the children.
2. Those activities included planned situations where the international students did not receive clear instruction and showed their confusion in communication with the children. It was observed that the children themselves also felt perplexed and hesitated to help.

Based on the backgrounds shown in the previous researches, the authors developed another set of exchange activities with international students. This research aimed to develop and implement various exchange activities to help children with negative attitudes to enjoy communicating with international students while exercising their cooperativity and flexibility. This paper also intends to report the outcome of these activities and the way forward.

2. About Communication Skills, Cooperativity and Flexibility with the Children's Profile

In this research on the exchange activities between children and international students, the team has defined “communication skills” and “cooperativity and flexibility” as follows:

<Communication Skills>

- Children can execute various methods to transmit their feeling and thoughts to international students.
- Children can listen to, understand and respect international students' feelings and thoughts

According to the Japanese Daijirin dictionary 3rd edition, *communication* is defined as “mutual transmission of idea, emotion and thoughts via spoken and written words as well as gestures, expression or voices that appeals to visual or auditory senses.” *Communication skills*, therefore, shall mean the ability to properly execute those means. Saito (2004) also described that “*communication* plays important roles in both transmitting information and sharing emotions,” while defining *communication skills* as “the abilities that grasp meanings properly and mutually

understand emotions.” The team hypothesized that by understanding others’ feelings children may develop to communicate their own thoughts and beyond. The early childhood experiences that help nurture communication skills in children should include two aspects: one is transmitting their feelings and thoughts to others, and the other is listening to others’ stories for awareness and respect of others’ emotions.

<Cooperativity and Flexibility>

- Children can display positive attitude for collaboration via helping and playing with the international students.
- Children can display positive attitude for interacting with the international students in accordance with the situation.

Another Japanese dictionary Kojien the 6th edition defines *cooperation* as “the act of harmonizing by giving ways to each other beyond the difference in nature and opinions,” while defining *cooperativity* as “the characteristics that can cooperate with others.” In early childhood, this may imply the positive attitudes to spend time playing and living with various others. This may relate to the Revised Course of Study for Kindergarten’s learners’ profile for the early childhood, as it refers to “sharing thoughts with friends and understanding what friends are thinking,” or “identifying common purposes, coming up with creative approaches, and cooperating while engaging in enjoyable activities with friends.”

Flexibility is also defined by the Daijirin Japanese dictionary¹ as “the ability to make appropriate judgement and reaction according to the situation.” For children, such skills may take form of making various judgement and getting involved in different scenes.

Based on the above discussion, the team agreed on the children’s profile that this research project aspired to as follows;

<Children’s Profile>

- Children can employ various methods to transmit their own feelings and thoughts to international students.
- Children can actively interact with international students while listening to them, taking notice and respecting the feelings of international students.

3. Approaches to realize aspiration for the Children’s Profile

In order to achieve such profile, the team designed the exchange activities with the four strategic approaches.

- ◇ **Approach 1:** Assign the same group many times over so that the children will have a continuous exchange with the same international student.
- ◇ **Approach 2:** Display the photos of the international students with some information (i.e.

their favourite food, etc.) on the wall of the Nurse's Room so that the children may use them for natural conversation with the students.

- ✧ **Approach 3:** Share the comments of the international students (i.e. "She's looking forward to visiting again," "She said she was very happy when you ...," etc.) while looking at the photos in display.
- ✧ **Approach 4:** Design some scenes of exchange between children and international students where they need to communicate.

4. Methods

This research project has spanned over two years, and it consists of two practical studies. The team focused on "communication skills" in the first year and on "cooperativity and flexibility" in the second year.

1) Participants

In the Year 1 research focusing on "communication skills," a five-year-old child A (male) was selected for the subject of this research. Child A was identified to have communication challenges listed above.

In the Year 2 research focusing on "cooperativity and flexibility," a four-year-old child B (male) was selected for the subject of the research. Child B was also identified to have issues concerning cooperativity and flexibility listed above.

2) Duration and Settings

The Year-1 research focusing on "communication skills" occurred between September 2017 to February 2018. Five exchange activities were held with nine international students visiting classrooms to attend free-play, class gathering and lunchtime for communicating with the children.

The Year-2 research focusing on "cooperativity and flexibility" held three exchange activities between May to July of 2018. Eleven international students visited classrooms to attend free-play, class gathering and lunchtime for communicating with the children.

3) Procedures

As for the Year-1 "communication skills" research, the team recorded the episodes where A and the international student A' (from Vietnam) interacted in the exchange activities. The record was transcribed and analyzed for the outcome, challenges and required interventions.

For the Year-2 "Cooperativity & Flexibility" research, the team recorded the episodes between B and the international student B' (from Myanmar) during the exchange activities. The record was transcribed and analyzed for the research outcome, challenges and the next steps. Both international students A' and B' can understand a basic level of Japanese. They are capable of carrying on conversations, but they may benefit from some interpretive help when the dialogue becomes complicated.

5. Findings

1) The Research focusing on “Communication Skills”

Case 1: Utilizing various methods to transmit

<Background>

It was the third exchange with the international student A' visiting the class. On the eve of the visit, the class discussed which activity they would play with A'. The children were happily excited with their decision to play with then-popular spinning tops. The subject of the research, A, was among them.

Tops-Spinning-in-the-Air

Many children surrounded the international student A' to talk about their spin tops techniques and challenges. The child A is present at the scene, but seemed intimidated by many others talking to A'. Eventually, those children began to focus on spinning. A and A' are left alone to spin their tops, but with no words. A appeared tense toward A', so the teacher posed a question to relieve some tension.

T: Hey A, tell me, which spin tops technique are you practicing in the kindergarten?

A: Spinning in the Air!

A': (Interested) How do you do that?

A: (Mumbling, seemed nervous)

A': Sorry, can you speak in a big voice?

A: (Little louder) I throw my top from high up, and spin it on the floor.

A' was able to hear A then but seemed to have a difficulty understanding what A meant. Wanting A' to understand what he intended, A showed the movement to throw his tops high in the air or came close to A's face for explanation repeatedly(Figure 1).

A: I'm practicing to throw my top up high, and spin on the floor.

If it spins well, then it's Spinning-in-the-Air.

A': (To A) OK, I understand.

(Turning to T in a little voice) Please, what does it mean?

A was watching A' asking T for help. T explained slowly to A' on behalf of A.

A': Ah, I understand it very well! (Tapping A on his back lightly)

A looked relieved as he understood that his message was communicated to A'.

A: I will practice Spinning-in-the-Air a lot!

A': OK, let's do it together!

A showed how to spin in the air.

Later, A went to A' to tell her that he succeeded the trick. A' gave A a high-five.



Figure 1: A approaching close to the face of A' so that his message would come through.

<Discussion >

In this case, A at first was hesitant to actively communicate with A' but later with the help of his teacher succeeded to share his plan using his language and gestures. Teacher acted as a communication bridge between two by asking A “which spin tops technique are you practicing in the kindergarten?” This intervention was significant for two reasons.

Firstly, the content of this question was the utmost interest of Child A. The act of communication is initiated by the interest toward the content, boosted by the desire to share. Adults may play along with the peers' interests, but for children it is more natural to communicate because they are motivated to transmit. With this, spinning tops was the utmost interest of A in those days so that A was naturally motivated to tell that he had been making effort.

Secondly, the conversation was around this play with tangible objects, ‘spin tops.’ In the senior year of kindergarten, five-year-olds start weaving their communication via conversation; however, they may not yet be fluent language users. In fact, A was unable to elaborate with his language alone. A, therefore, took another approach to communicate using his gestures of throwing the tops high in the air, etc.. This may have been only possible with some tangible objects, playing with the tops.

It was notable that A “felt happy when he learned that A' understood” what he meant. That helped to bring them closer. They practiced together. Finally, they exchanged a big high-five. The experience like that would lead to enjoy the time together, and bring him the motives for more communication. Simultaneously, less stressed A may feel, more positive attitudes A would also develop in communication.

Case 2: Taking notice and respecting others' feelings

<Background>

This episode took place during the fourth exchange activity. On the previous day, A was watching at the photos of the international students displayed on the wall. Teacher reflected on last exchange and told A, “Ms. A' said she was very happy that you taught her how to spin the tops.” A showed a modest smile and left.

“Thaaank you!”

It was the lunch time on the exchange activity day. Children started preparation to eat lunch with the international students. A child in charge of lunch preparation told the international student A, “if you say *itadakimas*, then I will pour you some tea into your cup.”

A: (To A) I don’t have a cup...

A: Everybody has one in his bag.

A: No, no, I don’t...

A took a pause to think a little, then went to his shelf and searched something in his bag. A’ was watching what A was doing. After a while, A came to A’.

A: (To A) There wasn’t a cup in the bag.

A: (Noticed that A went to look for another cup for her) Thaaank you!

A looked embarrassed but happy.

A couple days later, another exchange lunchtime came.

A: (To A) Did you bring your cup today?

A: Oooh, no I didn’t.

A: (To Teacher) Ms. A’ doesn’t have a cup. Can I offer her my cup from the water bottle?

T: If Ms. A’ wishes so, yes you may.

A: (Approached to A’ with his thermos’ cup in hand) You can use this.

A: Thaaank you! (Reaching A for a high-five)

---After lunch---

A: (To A, pointing at the thermos’ cup) What shall I do with this?

A approaching close to the face of A’ so that his message would come through.

A: This is how you do it. (Slowly showing A’ how to put a cup back on the thermos)

A: I got it. (Putting a cup back on the thermos as A showed her)

Yaay! (asking A for a high-five)

A smiled and returned a high-five to A’.

<Discussion>

Some children in the early childhood are fearless in actively communicating with foreigners, but some like Child A are not yet confident and too passive to initiate any approach. For the latter children, it may be helpful to create the settings in which they feel familiar to international students.

The team presumes that A felt quite happy to hear from his teacher that A’ had appreciated his teaching spinning tops. A felt recognized for his role, and this delight might have gradually shifted to friendship to A’. Feeling familiar may bring the other closer with a sense of safety. It may

also facilitate conversation and give incentives to respect others' feelings. With this assumption, Child A's amity toward the international student A' led him to listen to her problems. He was prompted to mutually transmit the feelings, thoughts and things he knew via language and gestures. From there, he recognized how A' felt in her troubles so that he was determined to help her in his capability.

Practical realization of such settings may be the key for planning better exchange activities. It seemed also effective for teachers to share reflection with the children looking at the pictures of the international students.

2) The Research Project Focusing on Cooperativity and Flexibility

Case 3: Feeling lost, not knowing how to communicate

<Background>

It was the second exchange activity day for this class. Children with the international students sat in a circle singing and playing. Child B was seated next to the international student B', but B appeared so shy to interact with B' that B pulled his chair away from the circle alone. Student B' approached to and started interacting with B. By the end, B came to show a faint smile.

Frowned in the stern silence

After the circle time came the lunchtime. Children brought their own lunchbox and cups to be seated. Student B' chose to sit next to Child B. Student B' did not have a cup.

B': (Pointing at the cup of B) Where's the cup?

B: (Furrowing his brows) You bring your own.

Teacher intervened.

T: She doesn't know where to find it. Can you show her?

B: (Pointing at the cup holders for children) Don't you find one there?

Only children have brought cups to the class.

T: Ms. B' didn't bring hers. She might have forgotten.

B: (To B') Did you forget it?

T: Please tell her what to do, will you?

B' shrugged to show B her hands empty. B remained seated.

B: No cup there? (Frowned and fell silent)

Teacher saw no sign of communication from B and gave B an advice.

T: Why don't you go to the Teacher's Room?

B did not budge with his face frowned.

B': (Troubled, to B) Where is the cup?

B: Grrrrr...

Another child seated next to B told B' to go to the Teacher's Room.

B': Where's the Teacher's Room?

B: (Bluntly, pointing to the corridor) Go straight, and walk like that.

T: She doesn't get it. I don't think Ms. B understands unless you go with her.

After this intervention, B stood up from his seat and took the hand of B' to walk to the Teachers' Room.



Figure 2: Child B fell silent after failing to interact with Student B'

<Discussion>

Prior to the lunch, Child B felt hesitant to interact with B', and that brought him away from the scene of communication. However, with Student B' personally communicated, B showed a faint smile that may suggest his amical feeling toward her.

At the lunch, however, B found it still difficult to take initiative in communication with B'. He might have displayed his irritation to the situation where he did not have any clue how to solve the trouble B' was in. This may suggest that B felt tinkering to cooperate but found difficult to act upon. As often as the case had been with Child B, he might have focused more on his own troubled feeling rather than the others'. That would intimidate him from positively looking for solutions. Interacting with others with flexibility was still difficult for Child B.

On the other hand, after fetching a cup from the Teachers' Room, B managed to enjoy eating lunch with B'. It might be possible that B would use this experience as a lesson to interact with others for possible solutions despite of the difficulty.

Case 4: Realizing the other's needs and trying to give tips

<Background>

Two weeks after the Case 3 there came another exchange activity day. One day prior the teacher had reminded the class of another visit, showing the photos of the international students. When the teacher asked Child B if he remembered Student B', bashfully he replied, "yes, I remember her."

On the exchange day, after the outdoor play the group returned to the classroom and started arts & craft activity for then upcoming Star Festival. In small groups they sat, and each group received origami papers. Children brought glues and scissors to the table. After the teacher explained the details of the craft activity, children started to make origami decorations. Once again,

Child B was seated next to Student B.

“This is how you do it.”

Child B started cutting origami right after the explanation.

B: (To B', using scissors on origami paper) Like this...slowly, you know.

Student B followed suit.

B': (To B) Do I cut here?

B: The other side, there! Slowly. (With a smile, pointing where to cut)

B': Oh, I see! (Cutting further)

As B' tried to cut from one side, she asked B.

B': Look, how about this? Am I right?

B: (Pointing at the right side) This way.



Figure 3: B showing B' how he cut.

B: (Cutting his origami paper, to B') Try to copy me, watch how I do this.

B completed cutting his piece and said proudly, “I did it! Look at this!” After that, B continued with the new origami paper, occasionally paying attention to B' to check how she was doing.

<Discussion>

In this case, Child B took positive initiative to interact with Student B' unlike the other time. B was able to actively talk to B', showing cooperativity grown in him.

In comparison to the previous case, B knew what to do in Case 4. He was confident enough to give advice, and that enabled B's positive interaction. In the Case 3, B was unsure and had to rely on his words alone to manage. This time, origami papers were tangible tools that B could use to demonstrate in communication.

Presumably, B grew cooperative and kind because he had become accustomed to Student B through continuous interaction. Playing together, giving her a helping hand, or anticipating her visit might have gradually prepared him to actively interact.

On the contrary, it might be too premature to conclude that Child B also grew in his flexibility. As already mentioned, in the Case 4 B had clear understanding of the direction. If unsure as in the Case 3, B might have not been able to interact flexibly. We need to scrutinize if it is truly possible to nurture the characteristics like flexibility in a couple of exchange activities with international

students. It is also important to define how this flexibility manifests its surge in children's behaviours.

6. Results, Challenges and Way Forward

In this section, the authors reflect on all those four cases and project their outcomes and challenges onto the four strategic approaches mentioned earlier.

1) Positive Outcome

- ✧ **Approach 1: Assign the same group many times over so that the children will have a continuous exchange with the same international student.**

With this strategy, it was suggested that "familiarity" may help boosting communication and cooperativity among pupils. Children can anticipate the visit to "looking forward to" "playing again." Some children like Child A feel nervous or shy away from interacting with international students, while some like Child B feel amical yet hesitant to interact. Multiple visits of the same international students may help reducing the difficulties.

- ✧ **Approach 3: Share the comments of the international students (i.e. "She's looking forward to visiting again," "She said she was very happy when you ...," etc.) while looking at the photos in display.**

This approach seemed to evoke joy and excitement for children as they remembered how helpful they had been for the visitors. It is possible that children were motivated to communicate with international students with whom they are familiar. Eventually that may lead children to recognize the feelings of their visitors. The sense of accomplishment that a child feel in successful communication will bring joy and thoughtfulness for others.

- ✧ **Approach 4: Design some scenes of exchange between children and international students where they need to communicate.**

This approach was successful in creating situations where they were deemed to communicate. Student A' showed her interest in Child A's story, and that led A trying to interact with A' using various methods. Child B was quite passive at first, but with Student B' actively interacting with B he changed his course actively.

It should be noted that those scenes require some gimmicks for smooth entry to communication. The urge children feel to "transmit" or "share" with international students helped them to commit in communication. Friendly atmosphere may also boost the interaction.

2) Challenges and Way Forward

- ✧ **Approach 2: Display the photos of the international students with some information (i.e. their favourite food, etc.) on the wall so that the children may use them for natural conversation**

with the students.

Teachers use this approach to start conversations about the international students. However, the team did not observe children referring to those information in the conversation with the international students. The information alone did not seem to give motivation to children for communication, nor it provided no necessity for interaction. As mentioned earlier, tangible objects or physical play were successful medium for communication between children and international students. Intangible exchange of information is too advanced for children, and so was giving careful consideration to others.

Flexibility in Focus

How could we nurture flexibility in early childhood? At first, the team proposed to introduce some foreign games that international students bring, or to have children face some mild adversity to which they are required to flexibly react. However, even without interaction with international students these were challenging enough for the children at this age. The developmental level appropriateness was to be considered more closely.

The team concluded that cooperativity may be induced by children's feeling familiar to international students. However, it is premature to apply the same to the case of flexibility. Before we continue our practical research endeavours, closer examination of the previous study literatures may provide more understanding of the mental flexibility in children, such as its order of development and observable milestone behaviours.

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