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## **INCORPORATING A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: INTERCULTURAL LEARNING THROUGH WORK-EXPERIENCE PROJECTS.**

### **Abstract:**

This paper elucidates the on-going efforts being made at a Japanese university to develop an intercultural-learning based curriculum through work-experience projects. The main goal of the current project is to provide students with the opportunities to be able to utilize knowledge in a practical sense, such as through work-experience projects at foreign affiliate companies in Japan. Following a brief overview of the current project design and development, this paper discusses the progress achieved thus far second year of its trial implementation. Feedback gained through questionnaires, reflection papers and follow-up interviews of the participating students and companies in the first year (2015) will be discussed in an effort to provide one reference for global-skills focused curriculum development.

### **Keywords:**

Intercultural-learning, Curriculum development, Global-skills

**JEL Classification:** I21

## 1. Introduction: Defining Intercultural Learning

Located within the field of intercultural learning, this paper explains the structure, design and initial pilot-test results of the current research project undertaken by the authors. The current research project commenced in 2014 through a *Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research Grant* (26580119) under the category of *Challenging and Exploratory Research* (2014-2016) received from the Japanese Ministry of Education. From the outset, the fundamental aim has been to create ways by which to nurture intercultural communication competence among Japanese university students that are looking to work in global-settings such as foreign affiliate companies in Japan or Japanese multinationals overseas (see. O'Connell & Cripps, 2016 for more details). To do so, naturally not only is English or other foreign language competency necessary, but as the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2002) and other researchers point out (Oka et al., 2011; Tanaka, 2007), the ability to use such competency in a culturally intelligent way is paramount.

Accordingly, this paper aims to demonstrate how the current research project is working to answer the call to foster intercultural communication competency and awareness through the development of a curriculum that affords students the opportunity to gain valuable experience through in-class and outside-the-class intercultural learning. As such, the remainder of this section will provide a practical definition of 'intercultural learning' and clearly locate the current research. The sections to follow will then show how the current research project was designed and implemented before concluding with an analysis of the first set of data gathered from a pilot program implemented in the 2015 academic year at a Japanese university. By way of conclusion, the paper will end with a discussion how the project will be further developed so that can be included in the university curriculum as an accredited course. One definition of intercultural learning that fits well with the theme and aims of the current research project is one provided by Bennett (2009:2). It says:

*Acquiring increased awareness of subjective cultural context (world view), including one's own, and developing greater ability to interact sensitively and competently across cultural contexts as both an immediate and long-term effect of exchange.*

As Bennett (2009) further explicates, the term *context* should not be used nonchalantly, but rather it should include both objective and subjective meaning in order to clarify the relativism of the culture itself—i.e. a particular corporate, school or social culture in which certain objective and subjective rules and structures exist. Therefore, for the purpose of the current research project, we use this definition of *intercultural learning* to specifically mean the following:

*Gaining awareness of foreign affiliate corporate culture in Japan and developing the necessary intercultural competence to perform tasks in an appropriate way during the work experience term. As a result, the intercultural learner should be able to gain a high level of cultural intelligence for future employment possibilities in similar contexts.*

Considering the nature of this particular intercultural learning context—that is, guest lectures (in-class) and short-term (2-4 weeks) internships at English-speaking foreign affiliates—an important area to consider is motivation to use English. As Dörnyei and Csizér (2002) stress, English has long been a dominating language in terms of global business and as such has affected attitudes and motivation toward the learning English at a national level for many countries, including Japan. In Japan, this is not only evident by way of its inclusion as ‘the’ foreign language in primary high school through to university curricula, but also when looking at the recent increase in Japanese companies from a diverse range of industries making English an official business language within their workplaces in preparation for further global expansion. In view of these factors, it is safe to say that the ability to use the English language in socially and culturally appropriate ways, including the workplace, is becoming more important than ever before. Here, the key point is thinking about how to stimulate intercultural learning so that language and cultural competence can improve in tandem.

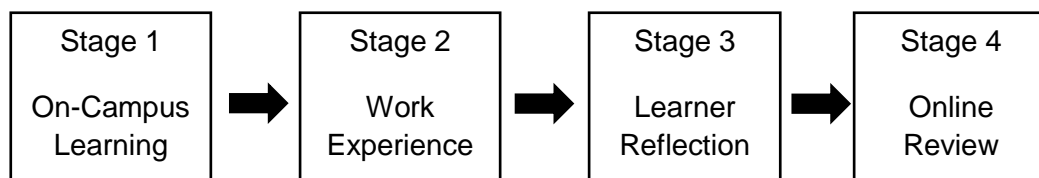
At this juncture, it is important to further clarify the context in which the current research project is located. This primary goal of the project is to provide learning opportunities for university students wanting to gain intercultural workplace knowledge and experience before they graduate. As such, it was designed based on the assumption that motivated students will take part, rather than being based on a mission to motivate students that do not see intercultural learning as a necessary path. Therefore, whilst limited in terms a target student participant population, the project does not follow the research debates of linguistic, social and psychological distances (Ellis, 1997; Kowner 2002) between English and Japanese as hindrances to motivation.

## **2. Background: Designing Project Aims and Structure**

This section will provide a succinct introduction to the aims and structure of the current project. Firstly, the project aims focus on providing students with a opportunities to enhance their intercultural awareness through the learning experience available through both in-class and outside the classroom tasks. As Humphrey (2014) suggests, intercultural learning provides students with the prospect of being able to gain analytical skills and pragmatic understanding of how to communicate in intercultural contexts. The expected outcome is heightened cultural intelligence, or in other words, the ability to communicate and behave appropriately in situations that feature intercultural dynamics.

When considering the project structure, it was important to maintain simplicity so as to ensure smooth facilitation, particularly in the early stages. As shown below, the project has been split into four stages—Stage 1: On-Campus Learning, Stage 2: Work Experience, Stage 3: Learning Reflection and Stage 4: Online-Review. In the first stage, a series of guest lectures (three in 2015 and five in 2016) were scheduled. Stage 1 focuses on the delivery of lectures regarding the level of English language and intercultural understanding required by foreign affiliate companies in Japan. Guest lecturers from foreign affiliate companies are recruited and come out to the university campus to talk on these topics in Japanese. The reason for the selection of Japanese language as the lecture medium is to ensure that there is no room for confusion or misunderstanding among the students attending the lectures.

Stage 2 is the work-experience portion of the project. Students that have attended the lectures are invited to sign up for work-experience spots available at the foreign affiliate companies cooperating in the project. In this stage, the authors roles are to interview the students to confirm their motivations and goals toward the work-experience. This is done to ensure that students can be placed at companies that best match their goals. After completion of the work-experience, the students participate in a learning-reflection workshop on campus. Using a focus-group style of interview, the authors lead a discussion on the students' experiences with a particular look at four areas—1) type of work-experience, 2) self-evaluation of performance, 3) reflection on learning outcomes and 4) future utilization of the experience. The interviews are recorded and a summary of the discussion points are then put together in a report. This leads to Stage 4, which is the production of online materials that are uploaded to a dedicated homepage where students can access material such as the video recordings of each lecture, workplace communication lists (e.g. Business English expressions etc.) as well as a copy of each of the lectures conducted in Stage 1. As a result, students are able to review the entire experience to further deepen their understanding and enhance their consciousness regarding the type of intercultural learning they have achieved.



**Fig. 1 Four Intercultural Learning Stages**

As Reid (2009) stresses in his analysis collaborative program between British and Chinese trainee teachers to create e-learning materials, the way in which intercultural learning projects are structured can greatly affect the potential learning outcomes in both positive and negative ways. To ensure that the learning outcomes are positive, it is imperative that a logical balance is achieved in structure design. He calls for equal attention to be given to the acquisition of knowledge, development of awareness followed by the opportunity to embed or internalize the experience so that students can feel positive learning outcomes. By implementing frequent reflection opportunities, Reid (2009) showed that students were able to elaborate on how the two sides (British students and Chinese students) were able to reflect positively on their personal growth throughout the three phases—acquisition, development and embedment. In the same manner, each stage of the current project has been structured to compliment the previous stage so as to ensure that the learning outcomes of the participant students can be navigated in a way that allows them to not only feel motivated to take part, but also leads to the creation of valuable data that can be used by them to review their experience as well as becoming a base of knowledge for future student participants. As stated in the introduction, the current research project was first piloted in the 2015 academic year is now preparing for a second pilot test in the fall semester of 2016. Accordingly, the next section will focus an analysis of the results and feedback gained from the student and foreign affiliate companies that participated in 2015.

### **3. Project Implementation: First Pilot Test**

The first pilot-test of the project was completed in the 2015 academic year. The first three stages were completed as per the initial plan, and the last stage is in the final stages of completion at the time of publication. In Stage 1 (On-Campus Learning), three guest lectures were coordinated in the fall semester during the month of November. The guest lecturers—two Japanese nationals and one foreigner—were members of a foreign chamber of commerce in Japan and were all working within the vicinity of the university. Each lecture was 90 minutes long, which was broken into 60 minutes of lecture time and 30 minutes of Q&A. One common theme presented by all three lecturers was that of the skills expected of Japanese employees in foreign affiliate companies. The three lecturers all came from different industries—1) expatriate mobility services, 2) international business consultation and support and 3) US-Japan tax consultation—and they gave an account of how they came to be involved in their jobs as well as a brief explanation regarding the type of day-to-day work employees did. Attendance in the lectures ranged between 10 to 15 students each time and interest was evident by the amount of questions that were asked at the end of each lecture.

At the beginning of each lecture, the students were asked to complete a simple entry questionnaire if it was their first time to attend. The questionnaire asked them questions related to their motivation and reason to attend the lectures, and their desire to take part in Stage 2 (Work Experience). The data collected from the responses was showed that the students were all highly motivated to gain first-hand knowledge of what skills are expected when working in a foreign affiliate company in Japan as well as to participate in the second stage of the project—actual work experience. Data received from the student response showed a common motivational factor regarding participation—that is, all students wanted to increase their knowledge regarding foreign affiliates and the type of work available. In terms of reasons for attending, they also clearly stated they wanted to gain insights the types of skills expected. In other words, they wanted to hear first-hand what it meant to work in an intercultural environment.

The next step in the pilot-test was setting up the second stage (work-experience). This began by first confirming the total available slots at foreign affiliates in the Nagoya region. This was done by placing a call for cooperation to such companies through the local foreign chamber of commerce office membership. As a result, a total of five companies agreed to participate, each offering 2 two-week slots in the spring vacation (mid-February to mid-March 2016) for a total of 10 students. The companies ranged in industry-type from international business support, expatriate mobility support, foreigner and Japanese human resource dispatch services through to communication training services and event management. Using the database created from the student attendance in the lecture series, the authors conducted a call for applications on a first-in first-served basis among the students. As a result, the ten spots available were quickly filled. Students were then interviewed and briefed on the type of company and what their work-experience duties would involve based on information provided by the participating companies. Additionally, each company provided a point of contact for the students so that they could begin the task of coordinating their upcoming schedules directly. Once the work-experience stage began in mid-February, the author conducted weekly follow-ups via telephone and email with the companies and the students to monitor the progress. By mid-March the second stage was successfully completed.

Soon after the completion, an exit survey was sent to each student asking them to answer questions related to their experience in their own words, including a self-evaluation of task performance, as well as what they found challenging during the two weeks. At the same time, a performance evaluation sheet was sent to the participating companies. It asked them to evaluate the students in terms of communicative skills, attitude and performance of tasks given. Both sets of data proved valuable in the set-up of Stage 3 (Learner Reflection). In the last week of the spring vacation, the students were asked to gather for a follow-up focus group interview. The main discussion was based on the data gained from the students' exit survey responses and company performance evaluations in order to confirm the students' own reflections and to allow them to add any further comments on the experience. Additionally, this interview gave the authors a chance to share the evaluations received from the participating companies. With regards to Stage 4 (Online Review), the authors are currently putting together the materials in an edited version to include videos and PowerPoint files used in the guest lecture portion as well as a set of online reference materials and task sheets based on the data findings related to intercultural workplace communication and understanding. Once completed, students will have open access to all files through an on-campus dedicated homepage.

#### **4. Pilot Test Results: Analyzing Participant Voices**

This section focuses on the analysis of the data collected during the first three stages of the project pilot test. It begins by looking at Stage 1 (Guest Lectures) in which students attended guest lectures conducted by representatives of foreign affiliates in the Nagoya region. As mentioned above, in this stage, students were asked to complete an entry survey. Over the three-lecture period, a total of 20 students attended and completed the simple entry survey. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify and analyze the data. As a result, the following three main themes were derived: 1) new knowledge, 2) job hunting preparation and 3) work experience. In terms of motivation, the most common factor mentioned was students' desires to gain knowledge about foreign affiliate companies in Japan. In particular, many of the students stated that they wanted to clearly understand what foreign affiliate companies did and what kind of skills they expected of their employees as is shown in the following response extracted from one of the entry questionnaires: *"My main motivation is to get a clear picture of what foreign companies do. I also hope to understand what skills they want their new employees to have"* (Student #8).

With regards to the job-hunting preparation and work experience themes, 13 of the 20 students surveyed said that their main reason for taking the lectures was to use the new knowledge to either help them get an insight into the 'real' world of working and hopefully to be able to gain some work experience in the second stage of the project. This was of particular significance because those students were either in the second or third year of university which suggests that their consciousness of future career plans was high. Conversely, the remaining seven students were in the first year, suggesting that early-stage stimulus toward career planning could help them prepare for future job hunting with a clearer view of employer expectations. One noteworthy response seen in 80% (16 out of 20) of the survey responses was the goal of testing their own English communication skills and intercultural awareness because they wanted to include foreign affiliates in the list of company types that plan to approach in their job-hunting.

As explained in the previous section, the second stage was the work-experience portion of the project. Ten students who has attended the guest lectures applied for this part of the project which meant that all slots on offer were able to be filled. During the work-experience, students were required simple day-to-day office tasks under the supervision of office staff allocated by the companies to oversee the students. The authors regularly followed up during both weeks via telephone and email with the companies and students to make sure there were no issues. As previously mentioned, the students were required to keep a daily journal of their experiences during the work experience period. Once it finished, the students were gathered together for a follow-up focus group session. Before the session was run, the authors collected the students' journals to analyze their overall experience so that a more in-depth discussion could be done.

The third-stage focus group proved fruitful shedding light on the students' experiences and how they felt about it. An initial analysis of the journals shed light on the high level of stimulation all ten students had received. After keywords were identified from the journals, questions were formed related to their experience and performance, in particular what they had learned concerning intercultural workplace communication—knowledge, understanding and skills. The positive stimulation apparent from the journals led the authors to also probe into how their experience would be used to help shape their future study and career planning. Firstly, the students were asked to describe their work experience overall. All students evaluated the experience highly and were thankful for the opportunity provided to them. They were all glad that they had seized this opportunity. One common theme in their response to this question was that they had all been woken up to the 'real' world of working in an intercultural workplace. English language proficiency was labelled as an expected skill with two of the ten students stating that it came down not having perfect English but more so practical communication skills in the English language. In other words, they were expected to communicate in an efficient and clear manner.

All students remarked that the guest lectures had given them initial insight into foreign affiliate companies, but the real learning happened in the workplaces. They pointed to the necessity to be able to navigate different cultural backgrounds as one of the main areas of learning. Cultural backgrounds were diverse among the five companies, including American, Canadian, New Zealand, as well as Japanese. As one student commented, "*the more culturally diverse, the more you realize that one size does not fit all. You have to learn to meet halfway and expect the unexpected*" (Student #4). This statement is significant as it describes the goal of intercultural learning in the way that students should be exposed to differences so as to allow them to deepen their intercultural awareness and learn how to adapt to difference. In terms of specific new knowledge, understanding and skills, the focus-group provided a number of astute examples that they had observed or gained, including intercultural business meeting protocol, telephone manner, bilingual office memorandum creation, and client communication. All students said that the entire experience had given them a clear view of company expectations regarding employee skills and knowledge. They added that the experience would be used to confidently approach job-hunting. On hearing these reflections, the authors asked the students if there was anything they would wanted added to the preparation if they were to take part again. All students agreed that it would be good to have some simulated work experience task-based classes. This is something both authors will look to include in the second pilot test of the program scheduled for the fall semester in 2016.

As explained in the previous section, the final stage of the project—Online Review—is currently being developed. A dedicated homepage has been created where the students that attended the lectures can access an array of materials for the purpose of review. Each of the lectures was recorded on video and then analyzed for key points which were put together as a list of workplace communication vocabulary list. In addition to this, the focus-group interview participants were asked to write down a list of business English expressions that had learnt during the work experience. These expressions have also been added to the vocabulary list. Finally, a copy of the PowerPoint slides used in each lecture have also been uploaded with the permission of each lecturer.

## **5. Conclusions: Going Beyond the Pilot Testing**

When designing and implementing an intercultural learning program, it is important to provide a sense of 'real-world' experience to students. This paper has described one area—the incorporation of a global perspective to curriculum development—to allow students with the opportunity to gain intercultural knowledge and skills through a work-experience project. As shown in this paper, the current project aims to provide students with four stages of intercultural learning to enhance efficacy when placed in an intercultural environment such as a foreign affiliate workplace in Japan.

Firstly, the four-stage design seeks to offer a step by step process in intercultural learning for the students. In Stage 1, the students are able to hear first-hand what foreign affiliate companies in Japan do as well as the skills they expect their employees to have. As the high evaluation of this stage in student reflections from the first pilot test have shown, the importance of acquiring a clear picture of company expectations as well as learning what the companies do was paramount in motivating students to take part in the second stage. Secondly, the initial pilot test of the current project has confirmed that students can be motivated to challenge themselves to develop their intercultural communication skills and awareness. Whilst small in participant numbers, with 10 of the 20 students were quick to throw themselves into the second and third stages. This positive response shows that students see the value in developing their intercultural awareness. As a result, the third stage proved to be an excellent way for them to learn how to articulate their reflections and being to internalize the overall experience of intercultural learning.

Naturally, the current research project has its limitations due to the small-scale. Consequently, the results thus far cannot be used to generalize on the thoughts and reflections of all Japanese university students at the university. Nevertheless, with the launch of the second pilot-test in the fall semester of 2016, it does offer the authors another opportunity to further develop the curriculum in order to achieve two major overall goals of the current research project—1) establishing the project as a fully-accredited course from 2017 onward at the university and 2) providing a solid intercultural learning model for other universities within Japan to use as a reference for intercultural business communication and understanding curriculum design.

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