

Cultural awareness through task-based orientation for homestay programs

Eiko Nakamura

Okayama University

Yuri Okunishi

Okayama University

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The promotion of cross-cultural understanding is one of the most popular topics in English textbooks or curriculums at junior/senior high schools. To enhance understanding of different cultures, more and more high schools and colleges in Japan are engaging in exchange programs for foreign and domestic students. Contrary to their fruitful opportunity, students, host families, and teachers often struggle to manage this new experience in exchange programs. A task-based orientation including tasks for cross-cultural awareness is a useful way to prepare both Japanese students and foreign students on exchange programs. Being aware of gaps commonly encountered in cross-cultural situations is a starting point for understanding each other. Three types of gaps will be introduced: (a) understanding gaps, (b) expectation gaps, and (c) communication gaps. Novices might benefit from understanding basic culture differences. Noticing expectation gaps might help participants adjust their aspirations. A roleplay about how communication gaps occur in daily interaction is explored for study. Through a problem-solving task, participants will become more aware of how culture differences are involved in communication gaps and how experiential learning in roleplays can help understand such problems.

異文化理解教育は中学、高校の英語教科書やカリキュラムで最も人気のある題材である。異文化理解を高めようと内外学生の交換プログラムに携わる高校や大学も増えている。この実りある機会とは裏腹に、学生、ホストファミリー、教師たちは慣れない経験にしばしば業を煮やしている。異文化理解タスクを用いるタスクベースのオリエンテーションが、海外留学をする日本人学生や日本に来る留学生のために役立っている。異文化状況下で通常出会うギャップに気付くことがお互いを理解するスタートである。三種類のギャップ、アンダースタンディングギャップ、エクスペクテーションギャップ、コミュニケーションギャップを紹介する。初心者の方の基本的な異文化理解を助け、留学生とホストファミリー双方が互いの思いに気付く機会を与える。また、ロールプレイを通して日常の会話でどのようにコミュニケーションギャップが起きるかを、問題解決タスクを通して、参加者たちはコミュニケーションギャップに関わってくる異文化要因に気づき、この体験学習から問題解決の糸口を掴む。

Cross-cultural understanding is one of the most popular topics in English textbooks or curriculums at junior/senior high schools. To address the need for international relationships more and more schools from junior high schools to colleges have introduced exchange programs. To get along with people in a new culture we need to notice and understand new values. The problem is that our own values are not always compatible with the new values we are going to encounter. While conducting the programs is not easy, the number of students who want to go on a homestay program is increasing. Contrary to the popularity of exchange programs for student participants, another difficulty is to find host families for exchange students, especially in Japan.

Here is a story about a Japanese high school student who stayed in the USA for one year as an exchange student. She was a shy, nervous type of girl who hid behind her mother before going to America. Since she demanded that the house she would stay at be tidy and neat, it was very difficult to find a host family to accept her. Finally, she was able to get one in Kansas. She was very surprised to find her host family was a young couple: Mother 19 and Father 25. She herself was 18 at that time. Her expectation for a host family was a typical one including parents and kids of a certain age. As is often the case in the States, she had to take care of herself including getting her own breakfast, something her mother had always done for her in Japan. She thought all of these inconveniences for her were caused by her host parents being very young. She cried for help to her parents in Japan. Her parents demanded that American Field Service (AFS) find a more suitable family for their daughter. Then AFS

America sent a staff member to see her. This person must have given her good advice. She decided to stop complaining about her condition and instead, started thinking about what she could do during the remainder of her stay. After that she was able to enjoy the rest of her stay and time flew by very quickly. At the airport on the last day in the USA, she finally understood completely that her young host family had desperately struggled to help her all year round while she was complaining about them. Needless to say, she looked like a totally different person when she came back to Japan. She had grown up.

People with few cross-cultural experiences tend to assume things should be the same as in their own culture. Despite a marked increase of interest in “visible” cultural differences, such as food, clothes, art, or music, it is not easy to recognize and accept the “hidden” features of cultures such as values, attitudes, and common understandings (Hall, 1976). Some may be thinking that people of the same culture have similar problems, but it seems that culture is often used to conveniently pre-judge, label, and stereotype all members of one culture in the same way. Or some think many of the problems in intercultural situations might be the same as those in their culture, but they are missing one crucial point: The starting point is different. One occurs within the same culture, while the other occurs in different cultures. From our experience of many years of involvement in international organizations, we have observed that most troubles are caused from applying one’s own set of cultural values in judging people from around the world and assuming them to have the same *common understanding*.

Now let’s look closely at the Japanese girl’s story

above. What was involved in her change? What helped her understand herself and the environment that she found herself in? We could think that some possible misunderstandings were caused by gaps in expectations. First of all, she did not recognize that her demand “that the house she would stay at be tidy and neat” would make host family candidates hesitate to host her. After all, this was a volunteer program run by host families, host schools, and local staff. Secondly, because of her expectation of a host family to be “a typical one that includes parents and kids of a certain age”, she was disappointed with her host family, who were a young couple. Also, she failed to recognize this program as a learning experience for all participants. Thirdly, she was unaware of certain differences in lifestyle. She assumed that mothers should take care of family members in daily life, just as her mother had always done for her in Japan. In addition, her parents justified her misunderstandings. In the USA it is quite common that kids take care of themselves including breakfast when parents are busy.

The important point here is how the staff member helped the girl understand or change her point of view. As the girl in the story, those misunderstandings caused by culture differences would be less if participants get some kind of help to understand them. Therefore, if we can give exchange students, host families, and host schools some ideas to help them overcome such cross-cultural situations, the burden of the program will become much lighter for all those involved and the programs would be more fruitful and enjoyable for participants from both overseas and of the host country.

Task-based orientation

To overcome those misunderstandings caused by culture differences, the first step should be to become aware of them. How can we improve people’s awareness of these culture differences? How can we unite people with different basic understandings on an equal basis? We often hear that human beings are the same all over the world. The concept of *the same*, however, is a kind of a trap, where little recognition of differences is allowed to rise. We believe that noticing gaps between cultures is a key to break down the cultural barrier. Levy (1995) suggests two basic approaches to developing cultural awareness in training participants: “inside-out” and “outside-in”. The former means that participants are led from cultural self-awareness to other-culture awareness, while the latter approaches from other-culture awareness to self-awareness.

This paper shows a type of orientation for exchange students and host families to help them become aware of gaps commonly encountered, which is the starting point for understanding each other. Nakamura (2000) established these task-based methods after struggling with several problems between students and families, and between students and schools. This task-based orientation based on workshops with tasks to be completed was composed from past examples of misunderstandings caused by participants’ expectations or cultural backgrounds. It has been used for local orientations in AFS exchange programs for several years. Awareness of gaps is seen here as the starting point for developing broader understanding between the participants and stakeholders. This orientation is composed of three tasks: (a) *understanding gaps*, (b) *expectation gaps*, and (c)

communication gaps.

Task 1: Understanding gaps

The first part of the orientation is to recognize understanding gaps through multiple-choice questions about the differences of basic life style between Japan and other countries, which are mainly drawn from aspects of visible culture (i.e., things we can readily notice). This task gives participants several questions about daily life such as meals, bath, bathroom, communication, customs, and so on. Such questions are examples of inexperienced host families' common anxieties. Participants discuss those questions and choose one of three or four possible answers. Take the first question, as an example. "What kind of meals should we offer to exchange students?" Host family groups choose one item out of four: (a) offer usual meals, (b) adjust meals specific to the student's preference, (c) serve gorgeous meals for a guest, or (d) don't prepare gorgeous meals but make some adjustments. Student groups also choose one out of four items: (a) eat everything the host family (HF) serves, (b) need the same meals I had in my country, (c) buy food I can eat so HF doesn't have to work hard, or (d) try all the food, even though I don't feel like it. Host families find their anxiety is unfounded in light of the students' answers and students gained some understanding about what to expect and what is expected of them.

Task 2: Expectation gaps

The second task is to uncover expectation gaps. In an orientation activity, exchange students are asked what they

want to do and what they want their host family to do for them through this program. Host families are asked what they want to do and what they want their exchange student to do for them by answering questionnaires. The answers by both students and host families respectively are written on the board. After the matching items between students and host families are crossed out, the remaining items show their expectation gaps. Recognizing each other's expectations gives both exchange students and host families the opportunity to adjust their expectations.

These expectation gaps are not necessarily caused by cultural differences. Exchange students have a tendency to show their desire for trips or enjoyment among themselves. As for host families, on the other hand, sharing their life with the students is their priority. Through this task participants would come to understand the existence of expectation gaps even without creating further complications mixed with cultural backgrounds. Culture differences might be sometimes involved in the manner or style of expression or interpretations by the participants, but may not be an accurate reflection of their actual desire or intent.

Judging from past experiences, there also seems to be a close relation between satisfaction and expectations. In the year that participants' expectation gaps were huge in a local organization, conflicts and misunderstandings between students and their hosts occurred more frequently than usual. In the case of a long stay program, such as for one school year, with the results of this expectation gap workshop, some of the problems we might have in the future could be better anticipated and predicted. Therefore, we can also begin to make plans of how to manage them in advance.

Task 3: Communication gaps

The third part of this orientation is to notice communication gaps. These gaps are potentially present in every moment of daily life, not only in special occasions. However, this type of gap, which could come from hidden cultures, is not easy to recognize. To help participants understand these invisible gaps, a roleplay embedded with some communication gaps is shown. The following scene is a composite of actual cases.

Scene 1: At home in the morning

(A little irritated, Mother is working hard. Then Kathy comes into the kitchen.)

Kathy: Good morning, Mom.

Mother: You are a little late today. Is everything okay? Hurry up, or you'll be late for school.

Kathy: No problem! It's okay even if I am a little late.

Mother:

Kathy: Mom, I'm going out with Bob this Sunday. I promised him.

Mother: What?

Kathy: It's okay, isn't it?

Mother: Umm...but...

Participants are asked what they notice about this scene and what culture differences are hidden here. This conversation looks very ordinary, but it involves some hidden cultural traits. For example, Japanese, in an “emotionally neutral” culture, tend to keep their feelings

controlled, while people from countries with more “emotionally expressive cultures” show their feelings plainly (Trompenaars, 1997). Usually participants with few cross-cultural experiences hardly notice any culture differences in this task. Hess (1994) claims that “not only are people generally unaware of their own culture (they take it for granted), but they are also outsiders to the other's culture, naïve and innocent of what the natives take for granted” (p. 4). New participants say this conversation presents a very common occurrence in their own culture, not necessarily specific to a cross-cultural situation. Participants with some experiences gradually find some cultural differences hidden in this conversation, such as sense of time and clear expressions by Kathy, and ambiguous expressions and no explanations by the host mother in this scene.

Then the Scene 2 and 3 situations (see Appendix A) based on past experiences are shown. Participants observe and explore two different background stories behind Scene 1 through these roleplays. After clearly understanding the situation with these background stories, Scene 1 is again shown with inner voice (see Appendix B). The inner voice in this scene highlights the communication gaps in the host mother's hidden irritation concerning Kathy and the frustration caused by the conflict between Kathy's request and the host mother's plan, and Kathy's assumption, which comes from her culture background.

A problem-solving task is assigned to participants. Each group of four or five participants finds and performs a solution in a roleplay. According to Bennett (1995), there are five cross-cultural styles of conflict resolution: “denial or suppression,” “power or authority,” “third-person

intermediary,” “group consensus,” and “direct discussion.” Scene 1 shows denial or suppression: The mother tries to avoid the problem by ignoring its existence. Bennett points out that “if the issue is important, this style allows the problem to build into a more severe situation that is more difficult to resolve” (p. 150). This problem-solving task requires group consensus, whereby a group shares ideas about resolving the conflict by making a decision. Through this experiential learning by simulation, participants have problem-solving and decision-making experience to prepare them for future trouble.

Through these tasks, participants learn the existence of gaps both in their understanding and expectations. They also experience the importance of explaining matters in cross-cultural situations and how to deal with communication gaps. The following is an example of the results of this task-based orientation.

A report of task-based orientation

Orientation was given to ten exchange students from the U.S. in the summer of 2004 and for another ten from Australia in the winter of 2004, and their host families at the X Association, the extra-government organization of X City (a city in Japan). Due to limited time, among the three types, two tasks for expectation gaps and communication gaps were used to focus on invisible and less resolvable issues.

The orientation was held one week after the students’ arrival to promote their smooth adjustment to Japanese life as well as to prevent any miscommunication or misunderstandings that may arise. The total period of stay for

the American students was three weeks and the Australian students one month. This short-term exchange program is a project in which participants such as exchange students, host families, and other related individuals including coordinators and volunteer staff work together toward shared goals. If the goals of the program as well as certain foreseeable challenges are presented to the participants at the early stage of their visit, implementation of the program becomes much easier. The tasks were designed to help participants become aware of different perspectives in cross-cultural situations and notice barriers created by their own beliefs.

Results of expectation gap task

At the first orientation conducted for the American students and their host families, in addition to matched expectations, the expectation gap task highlighted both *positive* and *negative* gaps between the participants. Among the matched ones, “visible” cultures (Hall, 1976), such as trying Japanese food, wearing a *Kimono*, and experiencing daily life are considered to be ones easily satisfied. In addition to these expectations of visible cultures, students and families appeared to have the same intentions about learning activities. For instance, some of the students showed their interest in learning Japanese language and host families showed their intention to teach Japanese. Also, some students were ready to provide opportunities for international exchange in local settings, which corresponded to the host families’ expectation of opportunities through such exchange.

Among the gaps drawn out of the expectation gap task, not all of them are negative. Some are considered positive

and sharing these positive gaps often led both sides, students and families, to better understanding of each other. These gaps are typically characterized by *one-way intention* where one side has no idea of the intention of the other side. For example, most of the host families were not aware of the fact that the exchange students wanted to help with household chores like cooking and cleaning, or wanted to learn Japanese. Also the families were relieved to know that some students did not expect much but were thankful simply that their host families let them stay with them. Without realizing these positive gaps, the families would treat the students as guests and try to speak only in English. Realizing that they could ask students to help around the house and speak to them in Japanese not only lightened their burden but also led to their meaningful introspection on their inclination to deal with students as a special guest, not as a part of their family.

Since negative expectation gaps are the potential sources of troubles or misunderstandings between families and students, the most meaningful aspect of the expectation gap task is detecting such gaps which are caused by mainly hidden culture. The most common negative gap seen in these programs is the one concerning how and with whom the students spend time and who makes the decisions about this. Exchange students usually have a desire to see different places and buildings, go shopping with their friends, or sing Karaoke. American students tend to take it for granted that they are able to decide these plans on their own, as is often the case with those in an individualistic culture. According to Schneider and Barsoux (1997, p.38), “in individualist societies people are supposed to take care of themselves and remain emotionally independent. Self-interest is the

dominant motivation.” Japanese host families, on the other hand, tend to expect their students to spend treasured and irreplaceable time with them following the family’s plan. Before the implementation of the expectation gap task, the students did not know that the families might feel unhappy if they often went out with their American friends. The value of individualism sometimes makes it difficult for American students to realize that making up their own plans or going out with their friends so often may hurt the family’s feelings especially in homestay situations. Once realizing the expectations of the hosts for their student to spend time with the host family (e.g., eating meals, going out, sightseeing, and visiting relatives), students noticed that asking permission before making final decisions for their own outings might be a tactful way to get along with Japanese host families. The Japanese host families also noticed they were apt to expect their students to follow their plan without considering the students’ desire for new experiences.

Through every step in the orientation, the exchange students and host families shared these expectation gaps and gradually came to understand that behaviors showing consideration for each other were crucial in building a good relationship.

Results of communication gap task

While the expectation gap task was conducted in one large group, the communication gap task was tackled in several small groups consisting of approximately five people. This workshop style was aimed at active exchange of opinions on what problems participants saw in the roleplays and how they could find a solution. The problem the participants

easily detected was miscommunication between Kathy and the host mother. They found that a solution for their double-booking problem might be communicating more frequently and letting each other know of plans beforehand. Once this type of miscommunication occurred, they found that negotiation could be one effective means to deal with it.

The most common complaint of host families during homestays relates to the sense of time. Kathy's lack of awareness of the mother's value of punctuality was pointed out. Although it has been observed in exchange programs that American and Australian students share common recognition about time, the sense of punctuality Japanese people usually have was beyond imagination for some of them.

In the roleplays, a crucial point that Japanese host families became aware of in communicating with their students was a Japanese tendency to communicate with each other nonverbally. In communication among Japanese in a "high context culture" (Hall, 1976), information needed is not always included in uttered messages but is embedded in context. Among Japanese, information is likely to be decoded through nonverbal expressions such as silence, hesitation, and intonation, but this approach is not effective in intercultural communication. The Japanese families became aware that they had a tendency not to express their thoughts and feelings openly. This might confuse students from a different cultural background. Hearing the inner voice of Kathy and the mother, the host families came to notice that it is a key issue to express their intentions orally and directly in communicating with exchange students. Host family members were able to practice this by verbalizing

their intentions to Kathy in their problem-solving roleplays. It is usually very difficult for exchange students to sense or realize the host family's unspoken feelings or expectations. Through this roleplay workshop, however, they noticed there might be unspoken messages embedded in their host family's conversation. The attitude of the exchange students could serve to assist their host family in more open, direct communication. If both sides make efforts to help each other to communicate more effectively, misunderstandings could be greatly reduced.

Summary of gap tasks

The orientation using expectation gap and communication gap tasks for the American and Australian students of 2004 was effective on the following points. First, it made students and host families aware that expectation and communication gaps can arise easily unless both sides make efforts in communicating with each other. Second, it allowed both students and host families to realize that the unique nature of their culture could possibly lead to a clash in cross-cultural settings. The students realized that independence and freedom to make their own decisions are highly encouraged in their culture, whereas showing respect to decisions by groups or by older people is a common practice in Japanese culture. The orientation suggested that the students follow a certain procedure for their decision making, such as asking for permission, to get along with their host families. They realized that this kind of effort is a key to build a good relationship in cross-cultural settings. Meanwhile, the host families were able to gain insight into their reserved tendency in a relatively closed society.

Cultural awareness was brought to the attention of participants through this task-based orientation. The results of the two tasks implemented for X Association, expectation gaps and communication gaps, seem to show that they work for short-term stays as effectively as long-term ones. It is true that gaps are difficult to notice, but this type of orientation is needed to help raise participants' awareness of each other's differences, and eventually to lead to better understanding of each other.

Conclusion

We believe one goal in the study of cross-cultural understanding is to establish a good relationship with the rest of the world and that it is important to develop understanding of various points of view held in different cultures. We also believe that we have to become aware of the differences and the gaps, to do so. Noticing gaps between cultures could be a key to breaking down the cultural barrier.

This task-based orientation might be feasible for various exchange programs in schools, and international organizations. The task of understanding gaps could be useful to prepare new host families with the help of experienced exchange students staying in the host country. The expectation gap task and the communication gap task might be helpful for both exchange students and host families, who just started the program. Both formats could be adapted into several versions between exchange students and host schools, or between foreign teachers including ALTs and Japanese teachers, or for some other settings. A communication gap task could be also used in the classroom for improved cross-cultural understanding.

Experiential learning by simulation in roleplays might be useful in orientation for exchange programs, in the classroom for intercultural understandings, and in other sessions such as international business training. Understanding culture differences and learning how to deal with them would be helpful for people working in a cross-cultural situation.

Notes:

1. A volunteer organization for exchange programs. This is one of the most well-known and oldest volunteer organizations promoting peace through international friendship. Over 10,000 high school students around the world participate in its exchange programs each year.
2. Host families provide three meals a day and a place to stay as a part of their family for exchange students. Exchange students from Japan pay about one million yen and those from the rest of the world around 6,000 dollars for a 1-year AFS program covering such basic expenses as overseas transportation, medical bills, communication expenses between countries, year-long student support, and international office overhead.
3. X City annually sends more than 60 junior and senior high school students to seven sister cities in different parts of the world for exchanges ranging from a week to 1 month and accepts an equivalent number of students throughout each year.

Eiko Nakamura recently finished the Master's program of English language education at Okayama University. She is currently teaching part-time at Okayama University

and Kawasaki University of Medical Welfare. She was in charge of a local chapter for nine years in her 17 years of contribution to exchange programs of AFS Japan. <eikon@urban.ne.jp>

Yuri Okunishi recently finished the Master's program of English language education at Okayama University. She is currently working at the International Student Exchange Division of Kobe University. She worked as a coordinator for exchange programs at Himeji International Association for several years. <gyfft146@ybb.ne.jp>

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Appendix A

Task-based workshop: Communication gaps (Roleplays)

Scene 2: At home, the day before

Mother: Mrs. Okada is inviting us to the Potluck Party this Sunday. Kathy is invited too.

Father: That's nice. She has a daughter who is a high school student. This is a good chance for Kathy to make friends.

Mother: I'm sure Kathy will be happy. She is such a nice girl. I want to help her to make many friends. The potluck party starts at 2:00 in the afternoon. So in the morning Kathy and I can cook a dish together to bring to the party.

Scene 3: At school, the day before

Bob: Hi, Kathy.

Kathy: Hi, Bob.

Bob: How are you doing, Kathy?

Kathy: Fine, but I'm a little bit tired of dealing with Japanese language all the time. Of course, this is the best way to

learn the language, I know. But I sometimes feel like being free from my stress.

Bob: Right! Why don't we go out this Sunday for fun? I heard there are a historical castle and a park in Okayama. We can even ask a volunteer guide in English.

Kathy: Wow, that's great! We should go. I'm sure my host parents will let me go, because an old castle tour is good for Japanese history study.

Bob: Let's meet at Okayama Station at 1:00 this Sunday afternoon, since I go to church in the morning.

Kathy: Fine. I'm sure I can come.

Appendix B

Task-based workshop: Communication gaps (Inner Voice)

Scene 1 with inner voice. At home, one morning

Mother: (Busy, busy!! It's really hard work to make lunch every day, but I shouldn't give up making lunch even though I'm busy. This is a special experience for Kathy. I need to think about a well-balanced diet for her and also the costs. By the way what is Kathy doing? She is very late today. I'm afraid she is going to be late for school.)

(A little irritated, Mother is working hard. Then Kathy comes into the kitchen.)

Kathy: Good morning, Mom. (Something is wrong with

Mother, why?)

Mother: You are a little late today. Is everything okay? Hurry up, or you'll be late for school. (You should be more punctual.)

Kathy: No problem! It's okay even though I am a little late. (Why is she so concerned about such a small matter? I am not a little kid.)

Mother: (What is she saying? It's out of the question to be late for school!)

Kathy: Mom, I'm going out with Bob this Sunday. I promised him. (Of course she will say okay.)

Mother: What? (Oh, no. What about my friend's party? I am in trouble. But it is hard to say no to Kathy because I want to keep a good relationship with her.)

Kathy: It's okay, isn't it? (I have to convince her of this. I have already promised Bob.)

Mother: Umm.....but....(Oh no, what can I do with this? I don't want to say okay, but I don't want to have any friction with Kathy either)

Kathy: (Oh, good. I can go to the castle because she hasn't said no, so she gave me her permission.)