Intercultural Communica-tion: Filling the Gaps

David James Townsend
Shujitsu University

Many language students take courses to prepare them for study abroad or homestays, but they often return from these homestays perplexed at the types of questions posed to them while travelling as well as their own inability to answer these questions. This paper details a course designed to tap into the students' collective knowledge of their own country while presenting the parallel information of a common travel destination, Canada.

留学や海外ホームステイを目指す学生たちが、現地の人に、答えに困るような質問をされて戸惑う事がよくある。この論文は、カナダへ留学やホームスティを考えている学生たちが、現地の人々に聞かれても困らない様に自国である日本についてより知識を深め、同時にカナダについても勉強する為に作ったコースについて述べたものである。

EVEN THOUGH "travel English" courses often focus on helping students navigate airports, go shopping, or order in a restaurant, many returning students have noted that they felt ill equipped to answer many questions posed to them while travelling in foreign countries. They were surprised at both the enthusiasm people had for learning about Japan as well as their own inability to adequately answer the queries.

This paper outlines the process that led to the development of a course that is aimed at more fully preparing students in areas that traditional travel English courses do not. Important findings from the literature will be cited to support the decisions made. The intended readers of this paper are teachers who will prepare students to work or study abroad.

The Importance of Intercultural Communication

Japan is one of the most industrialized nations in the world. Due to its influential position in the world economy, Japan has much to gain from its ability to penetrate the international market. As English is now the lingua franca of the international community, Japan's ability to gain access to this market depends much on the ability to communicate effectively in English.

Recent trends have shown a rather large increase in the number of foreign nationals coming to live in Japan. According to Morita (2014), in the past two decades the number of foreign residents has doubled to 2.2 million. With this increase have come other significant shifts, such as a growing

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number of international marriages as well as more foreign nationals gaining permanent residency. Although it is safe to assume that many of these immigrants will eventually become proficient to some degree in Japanese, they are still bringing their own unique sociocultural identities with them.

Despite this relatively high uptick in immigration, there are some very serious forces at play in Japan that might make even more immigration necessary. Due to Japan's declining birthrate and aging population, the ability to maintain its place as a world economic leader could well rest on increased immigration to fill the growing demands of the workforce. Although the increases in immigration mentioned above are a good start, they surely will not be enough. In fact, according to the United Nations, immigration would need to rise to a staggering 650,000 a year if Japan hopes to stave off the impending crisis of a declining and aging population (Kingston, 2013, May 5).

Some may think Japanese authorities have been a little too conservative in opening the spigot to foreign nationals, and the fact has not gone completely unnoticed by the Japanese government. In some sectors facing a shortage of skilled workers such as information technology, the government has initiated a new fast-track permanent residency program that targets qualified foreign nationals who possess the relevant and in-demand skills (Kingston, 2013, April 21). All of this will inevitably result in an increasing need for communication between people with very different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The Current State of English Language Education in Japan

Unfortunately, there exists a general consensus that English-language education in Japan has failed to provide its students with the language skills necessary for international communication (Martin, 2004). One common indicator often cited is Japan's TOEFL scores, which consistently rank near the bottom of the pack among Asian

nations (Mie, 2013). Seeroi (2012) lamented the fact that despite a great amount of time, energy, and money being spent on English teaching in Japan, the majority of students finishing high school after 6 years of English education cannot use English effectively for communication.

One of the best ways for Japanese students to learn to be able to communicate with people from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds is to engage in homestays or study abroad programs. Many university programs are now offering such opportunities in partnership with overseas universities as well as providing classes to better prepare their students for the linguistic demands they will face once they head overseas.

The university where I have been teaching for the past 10 years currently has ties with six different foreign universities where students can take courses that range in length from 2 weeks all the way up to a year. Prior to beginning their overseas studies, students are also being offered study abroad preparation classes. Although these courses are very effective in helping students prepare for many of the day-to-day situations they will encounter during their study abroad or homestays, many returning students have commented that they felt ill equipped to handle more nuanced situations. As well, they were surprised at both the enthusiasm their foreign hosts had to learn about Japan as well as their own inability to adequately answer the queries.

When students discussed their experiences upon returning to Japan, some general trends were noticed. Although they all had enjoyed their studies and learned a lot through their experiences, they felt that there were some gaps in their preparation that somewhat detracted from the overall experience.

Identification of Trouble Spots

An informal survey was conducted, wherein returning students were asked to identify the primary trouble spots they experienced

when communicating with members of the target population. This was done through an interview lasting from 10 minutes to an hour. After some initial questions regarding their overall experience abroad, the students were asked to identify any areas in which they felt they were ill prepared. Then they were asked specifically about their preparation with regard to language. This survey was conducted over approximately 4 years. The three main areas that students had difficulty with were identified as follows:

1. Culturally specific questions,
2. Mundane everyday questions, and
3. Unfamiliar topical information.

Culturally specific questions are those questions that are common in one cultural context, but less common or absent in another. An example of this is the Japanese interest in people's blood type. Many people coming to Japan for the first time are surprised when one of the first things Japanese ask them about is what type of blood they have. To many Japanese, a person's blood type is inextricably linked to his or her personality. This is taken so seriously by some Japanese, in fact, that it is not uncommon to find people expressing discomfort about dating someone whose blood type is considered incompatible with their own. On the other hand, many Japanese students who have travelled to North America have reported being confused by the number of questions they were asked concerning the distance between various Japanese cities as well as questions concerning the population of Japanese towns and cities. It seems that this type of information is not seen as important to many Japanese. Just like the people visiting Japan who have no idea what their own blood type is or why it is important, the Japanese students' lack of interest in the distance between cities or the population of them made answering difficult.

Mundane everyday questions are questions that seem rather easy to answer at first glance, but about which students lack the self-reflectiveness to answer adequately. A simple example of this supplied by students is what kind of clothes people wear in their home country. Perhaps what the foreign interlocutors were asking through such a question is what type of traditional clothes do Japanese people wear on special occasions, or how does the average Japanese person's clothes differ from that of the host country? Students expressed great difficulty answering such questions, despite their seemingly simple nature. They tended to answer by stating they wear normal clothes, which was an insufficient answer. These kinds of difficulties are not unique to Japanese students. It is often questions about the obvious everyday things that can be the most difficult to answer.

Finally, unfamiliar topical information refers to situations in which information that is common in one sociocultural context is not as familiar or is unknown in another. An example of this is when Japanese students travel abroad and experience what could be considered nontraditional family relations. Many Japanese students reported experiencing confusion when people in their host country talked about their family relations. They were unaware or confused with the concepts of stepsiblings and half-siblings, for example. Divorce and remarriage are of course not unheard of in Japan, but the necessity to define the relationships so precisely seems to be of far less importance in Japan.

Curriculum Design

Once the areas of difficulty were identified, a curriculum was devised that would provide the language necessary to help students more easily deal with intercultural communication. The class was designed for Japanese 2nd-year English majors. It comprised fifteen 90-minute lessons followed by a final assessment. The syllabus is in Figure 1.

This course takes a parallel approach, examining Japan as well as learning about a common travel destination, Canada. It effectively taps into the enthusiasm many language students have to learn about a foreign country while using the students' collective knowl-

Lessons:

1. Introduction / Video
2. Geography (navigating a map, proximity of major cities, describing locations)
3. Geography (introduction of Canadian provinces, cities, provincial capitals)
4. Places of interest (brainstorming on the different types of places people find interesting, identifying examples of such places in Japan and around the world)
5. Places of interest (introduction to a wide variety of interesting places throughout Canada)
6. Places of interest (Canada Travel Fair presentation on selected places)
7. People of interest (brainstorming on what makes people famous or culturally significant, identifying examples of such people in Japan and around the world, an introduction to some famous or important Canadians)
8. People of interest (describing famous Japanese people, review of famous Canadians and their contributions to the world)
9. Family (review of immediate family vocabulary, introduction of extended family vocabulary as well as less orthodox relationships)
10. Natural resources / Industry
11. Ethnic diversity
12. Canadian culture (food, holidays & traditions, music, art, entertainment)
13. Canadian culture (historical influences on language differences and national identity)
14. Symbols (international symbols, introduction to Canadian symbols, students begin designing an original flag of Canada)
15. Symbols (students present original flags of Canada)

Figure 1. Syllabus designed for a class in intercultural communication.

edge of their own country as a solid foundation for future learning. It demonstrates that although the specific information is different in the countries studied, the underlying language required to talk about the information is not different.

Such an approach helps provide learners with the language skills necessary to answer a broad range of questions as well as learn about another country. This is useful for the students because it starts with what they understand or can easily relate to before introducing information about the target country. Although the course is designed for Japanese students examining my home country, Canada, it could be easily modified to accommodate other countries. For example, a country with a more distinct culinary tradition might have a unit devoted to food.

Research has shown that learning about another culture can greatly improve the motivation of language learners. Gardner and Lambert (1972) studied the motivational orientation—the reason or purpose—of Canadian English-speaking students studying French. They found that a student's desire to learn a language that stemmed from a positive affect toward a community of its speakers (integrative orientation) was more strongly linked to success than was a desire to learn a language in order to attain career, educational, or financial goals (instrumental orientation).

There is a small problem, however, in relating these findings to Japanese English-language learners. Gardner and Lambert were studying the motivational orientation of second language learners in Canada, but the English-language students in Japan are learning a foreign language. The primary difference is that second language learners are immersed in the target language each and every day, but foreign language students generally only have exposure to the target language during their lessons. This distinction has important pedagogic implications when designing a course of instruction.

An important question can be asked about Gardner and Lambert's integrative versus instrumental motivational orientation dichotomy: How can a group of learners with little or no direct

contact with members of the target language community feel any affinity with that group? Bonny Norton attempted to bridge this dichotomy with her compelling concept of *imagined community* (cited in Dörnyei, 2005), in which "she conceptualizes 'communities of imagination' as being constructed by a combination of personal experiences and factual knowledge with imagined elements related to the future" (p. 98).

Dörnyei (2005) took this concept a step further when he related it more specifically to language learners. He saw this notion of imagined community lending itself nicely to the concepts of various international or World English identities, as these identities concern membership in a virtual language community. Students might not have had direct contact with the target language community, but through the media, Internet, and popular culture they can develop a fuzzy or vague notion of a language community that would motivate them to learn more about the community or even eventually join it.

The other half of the parallel approach is to use what the students are familiar with before proceeding to the unknown. This is referred to as experiential learning. Its benefits were summed up nicely by American educational theorist Kolb (1984) when he contended that in experiential learning, immediate personal experience is seen as the focal point for learning, giving "life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts and at the same time providing a concrete, publicly shared reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process" (p. 21).

This is why when we are presented with new things we always try to categorize them and compare them with things we already know. For example, the Japanese *okonomiyaki* is often described as a kind of Japanese pizza. Anyone who has had the pleasure of eating this staple of Japanese cuisine can attest that *okonomiyaki* and pizza are quite different. Nonetheless, the comparison can be a useful tool to begin to explain a concept that is initially completely foreign to the listener. Occasionally situations arise in which there is no use-ful basis for comparison, and another technique must be used. For example, many Japanese have a very hard time describing *konnyaku* (an edible rubbery substance used in Japanese cuisine) to non-Japanese. These examples highlight how important comparisons can be as a springboard to aid learning.

The course is task based, and I have tried to maximize student involvement by having them engage in meaningful and enjoyable activities in which negotiation between students is necessary for successful task completion. Furthermore, language retention is enhanced through the inclusion of tasks that maximize the recycling of target vocabulary. Tasks are varied to allow one-on-one activities as well as group work. There are fill-in-the-gap exercises, crosswords, brainstorming sessions, and poster sessions as well as individual and group presentations.

The benefits of such an approach are twofold. On the one hand, student speaking time is maximized. The same information could be spoon-fed to the students by the teacher as students sit passively, but having students engage in activities in which they must communicate to complete the task forces the students to expand their linguistic repertoires.

In his investigation into learner-learner interaction, Long (1981) found that two-way tasks (in which all students in a group task had unique information to contribute) stimulated significantly more modified interactions than one-way tasks (in which one member of the group possessed all the relevant information). It is easy to see how a curriculum based on such an approach would be more beneficial to the learners than a predominantly teacher-fronted class.

Furthermore, task-based learning has been shown to be very motivating to students. The value of tasks, according to Richards, Platt, and Webber (1985), is that they "provide a purpose for the activity that goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake" (p. 289). Long (1990) suggested that when learners engage in a task that has been designed to have one or a small set of possible correct outcomes, they are more likely to engage in negotiation of meaning

with other group members. This search for the correct answer can be very useful in stimulating interaction.

An Example Task in Action

David Nunan's (1991) four-step process to develop a pedagogic task can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Four-Step Process to Develop a Task

Procedure	Rationale
1. Identify target task	To give learners the opportunity to develop language skills relevant to their real world needs
2. Provide model	To provide learners the chance to listen to and analyze ways in which native speakers or users of the target language carry out the target task
3. Identify enabling skill	To provide learners with explicit instruction and guided practice in those language elements needed to perform the target task
4. Devise pedagogic task	To provide learners the opportunity to mobilize their emerging language skills through rehearsal

Note. Adapted from Nunan (1991).

In the last unit of the course, spanning two 90-minute lessons, the students practice the language necessary to talk about and understand symbols. Symbolism is a large and integral part of many cultures around the world, and Japan is no exception. Both being able to explain the symbols that appear in one's own culture to people from other countries as well as learning about the impor-tant symbols of the target country are important for intercultural communication. This is also a topic about which students returning from homestays and study abroad programs expressed great difficulty. This therefore became the overall target task for this unit.

So that students start with a model, they first watch a short video of some people explaining common symbols found throughout Japan in English. For example, they see explanations of such things as the Japanese flag, cherry blossoms, and traffic lights as well as some lucky numbers (7) and unlucky numbers (4 and 9). Following this, the students are shown another short video of some people discussing various symbols from their home countries in English, including national flags, national animals, and currency.

Next, the students are put into small groups and asked to discuss how they would define a symbol. After the students have had a chance to talk about this, the teacher writes their answers on the board for the entire class to see. After this exercise the students understand that symbols can be numbers, colors, animals, and so on that represent a meaning through association, resemblance, or convention. As well, they have identified the language needed to explain symbols.

Finally, the students design a new and original flag for Canada that incorporates appropriate symbolism representing all they have learned from the course. In the following lesson the students must present their flag to the class, explaining all the symbols they chose to incorporate into their design and what the symbols represent, as well as why they chose the symbols. The teacher and students assess each presentation based on the language used, clarity of expression, and overall design.

Conclusion

It is hoped through continued advances in research and more effective training the level of English-language education will continue to rise in Japan. However, there are areas that need to be improved.

Through my discussions with students returning from homestays and study abroad programs, some areas of difficulty were identified. A course was then developed that would provide students with the language to effectively overcome these difficulties and allow for more useful intercultural communication in the future.

As more foreign nationals come to live and work in Japan, and as more Japanese nationals study and work abroad, the need for Japanese to describe their culture to others becomes more and more important. This course has proven effective in giving the students the ability to do just that. Follow-up interviews with students who completed this course and then travelled abroad were conducted. Many of those students noted that as a result of this course they felt much more comfortable navigating the sociocultural differences that had arisen while overseas. As a result, they could more fully enjoy and take advantage of the opportunity to study abroad. They could more fully explain Japan to their hosts and could also learn a great deal about the country they were visiting.

This course is open to students who wish to travel to countries other than Canada and will certainly help prepare them for their journey. However, this presents some challenges. Every country has its own unique culture and societal norms. Quite often there even exist regional variations within a single country. This course cannot, nor does it purport to, cover all the myriad of situations that might arise. If a student is intending to travel to a county other than Canada, they are advised to get additional information from other sources specific to their intended destination.

Finally, a more comprehensive review of students' experiences upon returning to Japan from abroad would be beneficial in making this course more effective. Through such a review it could be established what areas the students felt the course helped them and in what areas the course did not meet their needs. Then, tweaks could be made to the curriculum to even more fully fill in the gaps.

Bio Data

David James Townsend has an MA in political science from Acadia University as well as an MA in applied linguistics (TESOL) from Macquarie University. He lives in Okayama where he is teaching at Shujitsu University. His research interests include the study of the effectiveness of various classroom activities to promote language acquisition as well as peer-assessment of oral presentations.

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