

Verbal Aggressiveness and Hate Speech: New Considerations for Study Abroad Students

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Escalating political and racial tensions across the U.S. have led to increased incidents of what communication scholars call *verbal aggressiveness*, including hate speech. Instances of verbal aggressiveness can occur anywhere, including university and workplace contexts. For Japanese university students preparing for study and/or internship opportunities abroad, this raises the question: To what extent are these learners being prepared for such instances? This article offers suggestions for addressing this topic with students who plan to study and/or work abroad in the future. First, the article offers suggestions for curricular content, specifically drawing on a well-known model for de-escalation and bystander intervention training that is used in the U.S. Second, the article explains how focused communicative tasks are ideal for teaching the specific content material. It is hoped that the article will open a dialogue regarding the extent to which verbal aggressiveness and hate speech should be addressed with students preparing to study in the U.S.

アメリカ合衆国内での政治的、民族的緊張の高まりはヘイトスピーチを含む言語的攻撃による衝突を増加させている。例えば、言語的攻撃は大学や職場など、どのような場においても起こり得る。留学や海外インターンシップを控える日本人大学生が、このような場面に備えてどの程度まで対策ができるのか。この論文では、将来的に留学や海外インターンシップに臨む学生達が、言語的攻撃やヘイトスピーチに対処できるように提案をする。初めに、アメリカ合衆国で取り入れられている教育プログラムを紹介する。これは、学生達が問題に直面しても、感情的にならず、冷静に議論ができるようにするためのトレーニングである。その後、コミュニケーションの手法に重点を置く教材が、どれほど理想的であるかを説いていく。この論文が、アメリカ合衆国に飛び立つ学生達にとって、言語的攻撃やヘイトスピーチに負けないための指南書になることを願う。

Every autumn at my university in Japan, a group of faculty members interviews more than 100 first-year students applying for one of several study abroad internship programs in the field of tourism and hospitality in the U.S. The programs include both a study component at a university as well as an internship. Chosen students participate in the program during their second year, and, for some of the longer programs, into their third year at the university.

For the past two years, I have been asking the following question to candidates during these interviews: “What would you do if you encountered

an angry customer using abusive language with another customer?” In most cases, students reply that they would try to simply calm the customer down. Then, I follow up by asking students exactly what they would say. I ask what specific language they would use when first approaching the angry customer and then attempting to calm him or her down. Students often have trouble with the follow-up questions, unable to identify specific language or behaviors that would be useful in such situations. Furthermore, what if one of these hypothetical situations were to escalate? Do students have the communication skills to deal with such situations? Do they understand that sometimes they might need to immediately get away from a situation and call for help?

I have been asking these questions to students in interviews because of a developing concern with the escalating political and racial tensions across the U.S.—tensions that have led to increased incidents of what communication scholars call *verbal aggressiveness*. Verbal aggressiveness is a form of communication which attacks an individual’s self-concept, rather than a specific position on a topic in order to embarrass or inflict psychological pain. Hate speech, as a form of verbal aggression, expresses hatred, threats, or ridicule toward an individual or individuals. Instances of verbal aggressiveness, including hate speech, can occur anywhere. Some scholars have begun to document the prevalence of various forms of racism, including “verbal insults and direct confrontation” directed at international students at universities in the U.S. (Lee, 2015, p. 4). Indeed, a recent article in *Inside Higher Ed* describes “an epidemic of racist incidents” at campuses across the country (Jaschik, 2016).

In Japan, as the number of study and/or internship abroad opportunities for university students continues to grow (Kirchhoff, 2015; Menking, 2012), it might be time to address this issue with our students. In fact, there is no shortage of research that suggests the importance of training sessions and workshops for international students studying abroad. These workshops offer useful advice

about social and academic adjustments, such as advice on understanding bus schedules, talking to an academic advisor, or visiting a professor's office. For students who are also planning to work or pursue an internship abroad, training sessions and textbooks in many English for Special Purposes (ESP) disciplines do offer some useful language and communicative strategies for dealing with customer problems or complaints. However, in these situations, the customers complain or become upset about something particular to a service experience. Rarely, if ever, do materials or workshops offer advice or strategies for dealing with customers who become abusive with personal attacks and displays of verbal aggressiveness.

In the following sections, then, I first describe some content material—language items, strategies, and skills that might be a good starting point for preparing students. After that, I describe a specific teaching procedure—focused communicative tasks that can be used for practicing the content material with students. The following content material and teaching procedure can be adapted for any type of teaching context, from a short afternoon orientation to a component of a semester-long English course.

Content: Recognize and Act

Recognizing and understanding the idea of verbal aggressiveness itself, and how it differs from simple anger or frustration over a specific experience, is important. On or off campus, situations might include students witnessing verbal aggressiveness toward a stranger, a friend, or themselves. At an internship or workplace, situations might include a customer or co-worker's verbal aggressiveness toward another customer or toward the students themselves.

First, it might be helpful to define some of the terms related to verbal aggressiveness. For example, verbal aggressiveness might include character attacks or physical appearance attacks, both of which might exhibit examples of insults, mockery, and/or profanity. Sometimes, the meanings of these terms overlap, but discussing the definitions and providing examples for students is helpful.

Second, Japanese students studying or working abroad might not be familiar with many of the idiomatic words and phrases used by verbally aggressive individuals. In other words, they might be slower in identifying a potentially dangerous situation based on words alone. Therefore, recognizing the kind of body language and facial expressions that accompany verbal aggressiveness and hate speech is

important, too. Examples of verbal aggressiveness can be found on YouTube (a YouTube search with the terms “verbal aggressiveness” or “hate speech” plus “caught on camera” produces many examples). Together with students, the class can view selected videos with the sound off, paying attention to the body language and facial expressions of both the attackers and the victims.

In addition to recognizing verbal aggressiveness, students must then take the appropriate action in such situations. Students essentially have two choices if they encounter verbal aggressiveness: They will either need to try to de-escalate the situation (as a bystander or as an employee in an internship/workplace environment) or they will need to avoid, or get away from, the situation. In such instances, they might need to call a supervisor or law enforcement entity for help.

There are no easy answers to the question of whether one should intervene when witnessing acts of verbal aggression or racism. Many professionals have differing opinions on this, and that discussion is beyond the scope of this article. Culturally speaking, it is often said that Japanese people tend to prefer avoidance conflict management strategies to maintain positive relationships with others (Kaushal & Kwantes, 2006; Ohbuchi & Atsumi, 2010). Recent research has delved further into this, showing how contextual circumstances might affect the conflict management choices Japanese people make (Murayama, Ryan, Shimizu, Kurebayashi, & Miura, 2014). For example, an active conflict management strategy, as opposed to avoidance, might be preferred if the perception is that it would be more beneficial for group harmony in that particular situation. Murayama et al. note, “Japanese may indeed prefer active conflict management more than Americans—at least in some circumstances” (p. 98). Ultimately, students must use their own judgment, based on their own personality and the circumstances of the situation if such a scenario ever occurs. The following three options for action—delegate, distract, and direct—are useful for students in that they offer options from less to more direct. Students should be introduced to each approach, along with some relevant language and communicative strategies appropriate for the approach.

The three options for action come from a popular model of training for de-escalation and bystander intervention called the Green Dot program, originally developed at the University of Kentucky in 2006 (Alteristic, n. d.). Since then, the program has been adapted and adopted by schools, universities, community organizations, military branches, and

corporations around the world in order to “train individuals as potential bystanders to effectively and safely identify potentially violent situations and effectively intervene to prevent violence” (Cook-Craig et al., 2014, p. 1181). The core of the program are its three D’s: delegate, distract, and direct.

Delegate

The delegate approach might be the most useful for second language students. When witnessing or experiencing instances of verbal aggressiveness, students might need to delegate or call for help. They might need to talk to other bystanders or a supervisor, or they might need to call law enforcement. In such cases, the following two skills might be helpful.

First, students need practice explaining and reporting a dangerous/emergency situation. When calling 9-1-1 in the U.S., the first utterance from the operator handling is: “9-1-1, what is your emergency?” Students should be given practice answering this question quickly. A common structure for answering such a question is what is called an existential clause, which is a clause that states the existence of something. It begins with the word *there* and a form of the *be* verb followed by a noun phrase that includes an *-ing* post modifier. For example: “There is a man harassing a woman now” or “There are three young men screaming at a customer.”

After identifying a situation with an existential clause, emergency calls proceed with callers providing their name, phone number, and address. Students need practice in providing their address and phone number over the phone. For native speakers of English, saying an address and telephone number comes naturally, even under duress. However, Japanese university students might not be familiar with the accepted ways of communicating residential or workplace addresses. It might be worth spending time practicing this with students.

Distract

The distract approach involves addressing either the verbally aggressive person or, more often, the victim by changing the subject, commenting on something that is peripheral to the situation, or making an offer in order to try and de-escalate the situation. The goal here is to interrupt the verbal aggressiveness, not necessarily to confront it. Regarding the distract approach, some experts suggest the following: “If you are alone without support from others, move to join the person who is being mistreated. Ignore the attacker. Pick a topic and engage in a conversa-

tion to help the marginalized individual feel safe” (Ablow, 2016, para. 15).

In other words, practice by engaging in small talk might be useful for students here. Some students might have already practiced engaging in small talk in English in other secondary or university courses. Here, however, the practice of small talk with students should be framed in the context of a distract approach. In other words, if pairs were to practice small talk, one partner in the exchange should assume the role of the victim of verbal aggressiveness, being more reluctant to engage in the exchange. Thus, more responsibility needs to be put on the student intervening to keep the small talk exchange going. Students could practice an exchange of small talk about the weather, one of the most common topics for small talk, or with an initial utterance that begins with a compliment about something the victim is wearing. Again, the goal with the distract approach is to cheerfully engage with the victim until the verbally aggressive individual runs out of steam.

Direct

A direct approach to confronting verbal aggressiveness means directly addressing the verbally aggressive individual about the situation. This may be necessary, for example, in an internship or workplace context if the student is the only employee present. Therefore, students may benefit from practicing initial utterances and active listening strategies.

Initial utterances are phrases that a student would use when directly opening an exchange with, for example, a verbally aggressive customer. Non-accusatory utterances are best. Examples include utterances such as “Hello, is there anything wrong?” or “Can I help you with anything?” These might seem overly simple, but the words, and the delivery of the utterance itself—with appropriate prosodic features—might not come so naturally to speakers without native-like proficiency. Therefore, practicing such initial utterances is important.

Active listening is important in de-escalating a situation, and most of the literature on de-escalation and bystander intervention training places a strong emphasis on it. Important aspects of active listening worth practicing with students include the frequent nodding of the head and using acknowledgment tokens such as “okay” and “I see.” Furthermore, in any attempt to de-escalate a situation, it is important to respect a person’s personal space, approximately 2-3 feet, in order to avoid escalating anxiety and to maintain a safe distance in the case of attempts at sudden physical contact.

Teaching Procedure: Focused Communicative Tasks

Communication tasks can be divided into focused or unfocused tasks. In an unfocused communicative task, students are not required to use any particular form or skill in their performance. On the other hand, in focused communicative tasks, students are required to use a particular form or skill in the task performance, although meaning is still given a prominent role in the task. As Ellis (2001) put it, focused tasks are “designed to elicit production of a specific target feature in the context of performing a communicative task” (p. 21). Indeed, many scholars have noted that communicative tasks that focus solely on message conveyance might not be enough to develop accurate language use. A focus on form, too, is both possible and necessary in communicative classrooms.

After introducing the above language and communication skills in a largely teacher-centered discussion, students can practice what are called “cued dialogues” (Brown, 2007, p. 186), which are a type of focused communicative task. Cued dialogues are a form of role play that begin with a certain, very minimal amount of cueing. In this case, examples of verbally aggressive utterances would be the initial cues, provided by the teacher, in the roleplays. Along with the initial one-to-three lines of cued dialogue, the teacher can provide any necessary contextual information (location, people involved, etc.) for students.

In groups of three to four, students must then finish writing the rest of the roleplay with the following requirements:

- There is an attempt to de-escalate the situation (using the distract or direct approach).
- De-escalation is unsuccessful and students must ask a bystander for help or call 9-1-1 for help (delegate approach).

While groups are working on their roleplays, the teacher can meet with each group to discuss the scenarios and how the group members have integrated the use of the strategies taught in class. These meetings are helpful as the teacher can offer suggestions on appropriate language and pragmatic conventions that might need addressing. Finally, students present their role play scenarios to the rest of the class, paying particular attention to those strategies that were taught in class.

After the roleplays, the performances are discussed by the whole class. Alternative courses that the dialogue could have taken, as well as possible responses to those alternatives, are considered. This

follow-up discussion is important for reinforcing the unpredictability of how verbally aggressive interactions play out.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, there are certainly cultural differences that will influence the decisions that Japanese students make if they experience or witness verbal aggressiveness. These cultural differences should be addressed when discussing options with students. Generally speaking, my Japanese students have reacted positively to all of the training in the classroom and have been eager to practice the approaches in roleplays. Of course, our class roleplays are very different from real-life instances of verbal aggressiveness. Thus, the next step is to design follow-up debriefings with students who return from study and/or internship abroad programs. It would be useful to ask students if they had witnessed and/or experienced instances of verbal aggressiveness on campus or at a place of internship, and if so, how they reacted.

Ultimately, the goals of addressing some or all of the strategies above with students, before they travel abroad, are to (a) make sure that students understand the concepts of verbal aggressiveness and hate speech, (b) provide a simple introduction to some de-escalation strategies if verbal aggressiveness is encountered on campus or in an internship/workplace situation, and (c) allow students to practice those strategies in hypothetical situations.

Hopefully, by taking up some of the suggestions offered here, at the very least a dialogue can be opened with students regarding the nature of verbal aggressiveness and hate speech and actions to take when witnessing verbal aggressiveness while studying or working abroad in the U.S.

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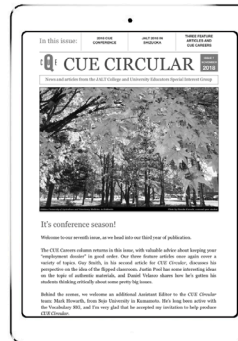
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