

# Learning cultures with international students

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## Reference data:

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This paper introduces an EFL university classroom where 31 Japanese students and five international students (three Germans, a Slovakian, and a Korean) learned intercultural communication together for the whole semester. Because of the enormous gap of the English ability between the groups, they had some communication problems. In order to alleviate the problems, some classroom activities were designed with the cultural differences of the Japanese and international students and the drastically different levels of language ability in mind. As a result, questionnaire results show that the majority of the students considered this class to be helpful in learning about different cultures. Based on students' reactions to this class, the author finds that the benefits of having international students enrolled in EFL classes outweigh the problems.

本稿では、異文化理解を学ぶ英語のクラスで、31人の日本人学生と5人の留学生（ドイツ3人、スロバキア1人、韓国1人）が一学期間学んだ例を紹介している。両者の英語力に非常に大きな差があったために、コミュニケーションをするうえで問題が生じた。その問題を緩和するために、日本と留学生の国々の文化の違いや大きく異なる英語能力を考慮したアクティビティが考案された。学期末のアンケートの結果、ほとんどの学生が「このクラスは異文化を理解するために役立ったと思った。」とわかった。著者は学生の反応から、日本人同様に留学生が履修して一緒に学ぶことは、問題点をはるかに上回る恩恵があると気づいた。

**T**HERE IS broad and varied literature concerning intercultural communication and English education in Japan. Brown (2000) attaches importance to learning both a second language and culture. However, it is difficult for Japanese students to get exposure to other cultures. As Quinn (2006, p. 74) points out, “students often do not have direct contact with the target culture...with few chances with authentic interaction.” Some approaches have been suggested to solve the problem. Tateyama (2002) finds that a summer English homestay program at a university in Australia motivated more Japanese students to learn English and Australian culture. Komisarof and Komisarof (1999) introduce principles and some activities that synergistically develop both English and intercultural communication skills for Japanese EFL classes. Kadota (2003) discusses one example of intercultural communication utilizing videoconferencing because of the difficulties Japanese students have in traveling overseas. Mita, Shirao, Martin, Hatagaki, and Dendo (2006) conclude that inviting Asian students to Japanese university EFL classes was effective for Japanese students to enhance their motiva-



tion and performance and was a good way to teach English as an international language. In this paper, the author shares another example of increasing Japanese English students' exposure to other cultures through having foreign exchange students study along with Japanese students for a whole semester. The discussion here centers around how their participation was useful in an Intercultural Communication class.

### Background of the class

Shizuoka University has many international students because the university has established relationships with sister universities in 17 countries and has made an effort to promote international exchange. As Tan and Goh (2006) have observed, "as the world becomes increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse, the internationalization of education has become a major goal of many universities" (p. 651).

The author thought that students should take advantage of the situation and get as many benefits from it as they could and so decided to make use of this class to create opportunities for Japanese students to improve their English skills through learning intercultural communication with students from different countries. Introducing foreign exchange students into a class primarily designed for Japanese students required the approval of the university's international center and it was with their support and assistance that the class began to take shape. One of the requirements of the center was production of Japanese and English syllabi (included as Appendix 1).

Table 1 describes the goals of the class.

Table 1. Goals of the class



After the international students were informed about the class, three Germans, one Slovakian, and one Korean registered.

Table 2. Backgrounds of the international students

Nationality	English ability	Japanese ability	Major
German 1	Near-native	Intermediate	Philosophy
German 2	Near-native	Intermediate	Japanese and Japanese studies
German 3	Near-native	Intermediate	Japanese and Sociology
Slovakian	Very advanced	Very advanced	Japanese and Intercultural Communication
Korean	Advanced	Very advanced	Psychology

Table 2 shows the backgrounds of the international students. Their English ability was not formally measured but at the beginning of the course the author interacted with them in class and concluded all the students were very proficient speakers of English, with the Germans being near-native. Their Japanese ability is based on the Japanese language classes they were taking at the university. Two of them had never studied, traveled, or lived in any other foreign countries.



In addition to the international students, 31 Japanese students enrolled in the class. All were education majors taking courses such as Japanese, social studies, mathematics, art, general science, industrial arts, physical education, and pre-school education. Their TOEIC IP scores ranged from 350 to 600. More specifically, one student had a TOEIC score of 600 and the majority of the other students had scores around 400, making most of them less proficient in English than the international students. Twenty-four of the Japanese students had never studied, traveled, or lived in foreign countries.

### Problems of the class

The author faced difficulties conducting the class because of several problems. First, there was an enormous gap in English ability between the Japanese and international students. Second, the communication and education styles of the international and Japanese students were completely different. Wolf (1992) states that Japanese are not willing to express themselves and hesitate to show differences in their opinions since they greatly value group harmony. Mita, et al. (2006, p. 3), citing Hadley and Evans (2001) and King (2005), have also underlined the fact that in classrooms Japanese students are sometimes characterized as passive, introverted, unmotivated, inactive, and unresponsive. In the author's class too, the international students always dominated the discourse. Since they were fluent in English, and the German students were particularly expressive, they spoke fast and tended to provide long comments when they were asked questions or for opinions. However, the Japanese students had difficulty understanding them and felt overwhelmed since they did not have enough ability to express their opinions freely in English. Also they were not used to speaking up in class, even in Japanese. This is because "traditionally, the method of teaching in Japan is teacher-fronted; unlike western style classrooms, little (if any) input is solicited from the student" (Cu-

trone 2009, p. 58). Coming from such a background caused the Japanese students to be very quiet, and this became a source of frustration for their international counterparts. There were thus two factors at play: a gap in English ability, and differences in education and communication styles. These two factors greatly influenced the attitudes of the Japanese students.

### Solutions to the problems

In order to solve the problems, the author sought to rethink the students' needs for the class. The Japanese students needed to improve their English skills by learning intercultural communication. On the other hand, the international students did not need to learn English, but were interested in other cultures, including Japanese culture. The author decided therefore to re-organize the class in such a way as to satisfy both groups of students, taking into consideration their needs as well as their cultural differences by creating interactive activities that met students' needs and trying to create more opportunities for the Japanese students to talk in small groups. She also used e-mail to give special support to the Japanese students.

### The interactive activities

Normally when the international students spoke to the whole class, they looked at the instructor and could not see their classmates' faces. It caused the Japanese students to have a hard time understanding what the international students were saying. My hope in having students form groups was that if the international and Japanese students worked in groups facing each other and talking in a small group environment, they would be able to understand one another better. If this worked, then even when the international students talked to the Japanese students at a natural speed, the Japanese students could follow the conversation easier. As Briguglio (2007) observes, "while some may find



speaking out in class a daunting prospect, the multinational student groups case study showed that students are more than willing to discuss such issues in pairs or in small groups” (p. 17).

In the first type of activity, therefore, the author made handouts based on textbook essays (a sample is included in Appendix 2). From question one through question seven, students could refer to the essay to answer the questions. Question 8 is related to the theme of the essay, but the answers were written in the Japanese article. Though international students spoke fluent Japanese, it was not easy for them to read and understand the article well. They wanted to know its content and needed to ask the Japanese students for assistance. The author had each Japanese student read the article aloud in each group and explain the contents in English, with the help of other Japanese students in their group. In this activity, the Japanese students felt more responsibility to participate because the article was written in Japanese and they understood the contents very well, so they were responsible for communicating those contents to the international students. Even though they were at a disadvantage in English, they were at an advantage in Japanese and could thus play an important role in the activity. On the other hand, the international students listened to the Japanese students’ explanations carefully even though the Japanese students’ English was often not so good and were helpful in English when Japanese students made English sentences to answer each question. The international students played a major role here. In question 9, the students were able to use their cultural backgrounds and learn about different cultures by comparing their respective cultures.

This activity was successful because both the Japanese and international students were able to use their strengths and because the Japanese students had more chances to speak and could contribute to the class. Briguglio (2007), citing Crosling

and Martin (2005), suggests “utilizing student diversity fully for collaborative learning in which students become active participants in the teaching and learning process rather than just passive recipients” (p. 16). The activity worked well when the Japanese students helped the international students with their Japanese and their understanding of Japanese culture and the international students helped the Japanese students with their English and their understanding of foreign cultures.

In another interactive activity, the author made plans for the students to make presentations about their respective cultures. The theme was, “One part of our culture that I would like to introduce to people in other countries.” The author showed her presentation as an example, and the guidelines for this presentation assignment were as follows.

1. Two or three students make a five-minute presentation together.
2. Clearly and briefly explain the culture you would like to introduce.
3. Include the reason why you would like other people to know about the culture.
4. Use of visual materials is encouraged.
5. Try not to read from your draft and make eye contact with your listeners.
6. Submit the typed draft after your presentation.

The students had a month to prepare. The Japanese students presented their culture in pairs or groups, the German students presented in a pair and the Slovakian and the Korean students presented individually. The Japanese students were usually very poor at speaking on the spot, but they became very confident when they had time to prepare and practice their speeches. Since they were education majors, they looked comfortable in public speaking and were good at using the blackboard and



other visual materials such as photographs, tea ceremony tools, picture cards for a picture-story show, special clothes for festivals, a lucky long sushi roll, and so on. Some of them even made visual materials such as dumplings for moon viewing, cartoons to explain Japanese proverbs, and *Tanabata* (Star festival) trees (bamboo branches with some colorful strips of paper and ornaments). They used a variety of materials effectively and were finally able to come into their own. The international students were able to learn many things from the Japanese students' presentations because various topics such as tea ceremony, bonsai plants, Japanese festivals, greetings, moon viewing, New Year's Day customs, Japanese folk tales, hot springs, and so on were introduced. On the other hand, the international students introduced German fairy tales, Hungarian folk customs, and Korean TV dramas. In the assignment, all the students made the best use of their interests, creativity, and knowledge when they shared their topics with their classmates. The language problems of low-proficiency students could be minimized when they spent time writing their speeches, checking their English with other students, and getting advice from other students or their teacher before their presentations.

### ***E-mails to Japanese students***

The author sent email messages after every class to the Japanese students to inform and/or remind of the important points of their homework and encourage them to actively participate in the classes. The author knew that the contents of the whole class discussions were difficult for them and they were struggling with listening to international students and expressing their opinions. Some of them seemed to be reluctant to do their homework though some of them were eager to study. Therefore, the author did not want the Japanese students to give up.

### **The result of the students' questionnaire**

The author made a questionnaire about the class which was given to the students at the end of the semester in August 2009. All but one of the 35 students who took the class answered the questionnaire. A Japanese version was given to the Japanese students and an English version (Appendix 3) was given to the international students so that students could understand each question more easily and express their opinions freely. Table 3 shows the results to question seven "Was group work useful?"

**Table 3. Was group work useful? (N=35)**

	No.	%
Strongly agree	16	46%
Agree	13	37%
Neutral	5	14%
disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	1	3%

Most of the students, 29 in total, agreed or strongly agreed with the usefulness of group work, representing 83% of the total respondents. Positive opinions were collected and categorized into two main groups as follows:

#### ***1. Students learned different cultures and opinions together through group discussions***

##### ***Japanese students' opinions***

- We were able to have cross-cultural exchange because every group had an international student and we had opportunities to explain clearly the things which were difficult to understand. I think group work was very useful.



- Because of a lot of group work, I was able to work together with many students and international students. I was not passive and it was good for us to have communication in our own language.
- Group work with international students was very interesting. This was the first experience for me to have discussions with foreigners. So I was able to gain a very positive experience. I think it was great to do mainly group work and discussions, and not so much from the textbook.
- I very often found many different ways of thinking through group work and it was very interesting. Most of all, I was happy to make friends with international students.
- I learned that I could communicate not only with words but also with gestures.

### *International students' opinions*

- I got to know new people and could speak not only in English but in Japanese too. I was glad that I could listen to the opinion of Japanese students. The group work with them was helpful in understanding Japanese culture and way of thinking.
- Only in our group work did most Japanese students dare to talk so it was the only chance to hear more about their opinions.

## **2. Japanese students learned a variety of English expressions**

- I was exposed to real English.
- Enjoyable. International students taught me English.
- I have enriched my English expressions.
- I was able to learn a variety of English expressions and enjoyed the class.

Table 4 shows the results to question nine “Do you think both international students and Japanese students should continue to study together in such intercultural communication classes as the one we have conducted?”

**Table 4. Do you think both international students and Japanese students should continue to study together in such intercultural communication classes as the one we have conducted? (N=35)**

	No.	%
Strongly agree	16	46%
Agree	16	46%
Neutral	1	3%
disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	1	3%
NA	1	3%

Most of the students, 32 in total, agreed or strongly agreed with continuing the class where Japanese and international students study together, representing 92% of the total respondents. Positive opinions were collected and classified into three main groups as follows:

### **1. The class provided good opportunities to communicate with each other**

#### *Japanese students' opinions*

- I have seen many international students on campus, but there are few opportunities to communicate with them. So I think we should continue to study together. I am sure that there are



many Japanese students who want to be friends with international students.

- We hardly have opportunities to be exposed to a variety of cultures.

### *International students' comments*

- I think that Japanese students don't have many opportunities to get to know foreign customs or cultures, because Japan is an island and students don't really travel to foreign countries. That's why I think that both international and Japanese students should continue to study together. It's a good opportunity for foreign students too.
- Getting together is a very good thing, I believe. Sometimes language problems made things difficult though.

## **2. Studying together is enjoyable and interesting**

### *Japanese students' opinions*

- The class was sometimes confusing because we couldn't always catch up with international students, but I think it was a positive experience.
- I can gain new knowledge and enjoyed the class. I think that studying together can never be a negative experience and international students would like to communicate with Japanese students.
- Discussions were very enjoyable.
- I feel I can improve my English and enjoyed the class.
- I enjoyed the class by studying together with them.

## **3. The best way to understand different cultures is to learn directly from real people**

### *Japanese students' opinions*

- I can learn not only English expressions but also the differences between Japan and other countries directly from people.
- There is a limit for Japanese students to understand different cultures in the class where students are only Japanese. However, we can learn many things we don't know from international students.
- I can discover very interesting things and things I didn't know by living in Japan.
- Listening to people from other countries is the best way to learn other cultures.
- We can know the facts that are not written in the textbook.
- To understand different cultures, having direct communication with people from those cultures is best.

Table 5 shows the results to question 10, "Overall, I have become more interested in different cultures through attending this class."

**Table 5. Overall, I have become more interested in different cultures through attending this class. (N=35)**

	No.	%
Strongly agree	16	46%
Agree	13	37%
Neutral	4	11%
disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	1	3%
NA	1	3%



Most of the students, 29 in total, agreed or strongly agreed with the increase of their interest in different cultures, representing 83% of the total respondents. Positive opinions were collected and divided into three main groups as follows:

### ***1. Students would like to know more about other countries and cultures***

#### *Japanese students' opinions*

- I want to learn about European culture such as individualism.
- Once I knew the differences between Japan and other countries, I would like to know more about them.
- I think I want to know more about other countries because I have made friends with international students.
- After I shed the negative image of the country, I have become more interested in it.
- I think that having international students in class made us turn our attention more to the outside world than if the class had only Japanese students.

### ***2. Students want to have more communication with people from other countries.***

#### *Japanese students' opinions*

- I would like to communicate with more people from other countries.

### ***3. Students are more interested in traveling abroad***

#### *Japanese students' opinions*

- I thought I want to go to other countries.

- I have a stronger feeling now that I want to travel to foreign countries. I want to talk with people in various countries.
- I want to travel abroad to get out of our small country Japan.

### **Merits of the class**

The following is the summary of the merits of the class as reflected in the students' responses to the questionnaire, mainly question 11.

First of all, as mentioned in the results of question seven, the Japanese students were exposed to various types of English.

- Though I was not able to understand international students well, I got good opportunities to improve my listening skills and know about various countries. It was a good experience.

Since English was spoken by the Germans, the Slovakian, the Korean, and the Japanese in class, they could listen to English with different accents and intonations. Students were able to experience listening to global English.

Secondly, all students have realized the importance of understanding not only other cultures but also their own cultures.

#### *Japanese students' opinions*

- I was not interested in different cultures before, but I found the importance and enjoyment of cultural differences.
- Having international students as classmates broadened my knowledge of both my own country and theirs. I have learned something I could not have learned if I had not taken this class. Since I have become friends with them, I was happy to exchange greetings and have conversation with them outside the classroom.
- I found that even Japanese students had different views



through group discussions and it was also good to learn about many cultures.

### *International student's opinion*

- I was interested in different cultures already before coming to Japan. I think that this class has helped me improve my Intercultural communication skills.

Thirdly, Japanese students were inspired by the international students who are motivated and fluent in multiple languages.

- I was greatly inspired by international students because they have diligently learned their native language, English, and Japanese too. As a college student like them who comes to school to study, I found a big difference in their diligence and attitude toward learning compared to us. I would like to follow their example.
- I had never had opportunities to talk to foreigners and, when I did, I had difficulty talking with them because I had very little English ability. However, by attending this class I found that I was able to communicate in English if I had passion to send my message to someone rather than care about how well I spoke English. I think I will have the courage to talk with foreigners from now on.

### **Demerits of the class**

Based on the students' reactions in the questionnaire, mainly to question 12, the following are some demerits of the class.

First, the Japanese students had fewer opportunities to talk than the international students and could not understand the international students when they spoke fast.

### *Japanese students' opinions*

- International students had more opportunities to speak up than Japanese students. If Japanese students had had more opportunities to speak, it would have been better.
- When international students talked to the whole class, I could hardly understand them. I had difficulty listening to them because they spoke too fast.

Secondly, Japanese students hardly spoke up in class and often used Japanese in groups.

- There were few Japanese students who actively spoke up. They didn't express their opinions unless they were called on to do so by the teacher.
- Students often used Japanese in group work.

Finally, the international students felt that there were too many Japanese students in the class or in groups because the ratio of the international students to Japanese students was one to six.

### *International students' opinions*

- There were too many students in the class to have a nice discussion. Maybe there could be more discussion in the class. There were too many students in the class, so the group work was a bit difficult. (But if students are interested, the number shouldn't be restricted.) Maybe if more international students had come, it would have become easier.
- Too many students in this class. A disadvantage to both Japanese and international students.



## Conclusion

Recently it has been observed that young people in Japan have become inward-looking. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) observed in its December 2010 report that the number of Japanese students who studied abroad had decreased by 11% between 2007 and 2008 (The Nikkei, 2010). It was the biggest decrease ever. MEXT explains that one of the reasons is the inward-looking attitudes of young people, as well as the recession and the consequent early start of job hunting.

It can be argued from the students' own observations that this class has increased their interest in the world. It enabled them to establish close relationships with international students, and they would now like to have more international and intercultural interaction and exchanges. Even though the students faced some difficulties created by the big gap in English proficiency, the class became a meaningful and valuable experience when the instructor maximized the focus on the advantages of the cultural differences among the students. Tan and Goh (2006) claim, "in the world of today, the international success of many countries relies heavily on the ability to create and sustain excellent cross-cultural relationships" (p. 664). Furthermore, Briguglio (2007) suggests "the ability to communicate interculturally in English would seem to be a requirement for success in the future world of business" (p. 17). In light of this, EFL teachers should consider collaborating with international student centers to utilize the international human resources on their campuses to enrich their classes. Many universities have international students and similar centers, and should consider having them participate in their intercultural communication classes where appropriate. "Culture is really an integral part of the interaction between language and thought" (Brown 2000, p. 198), and it should be recommended that teaching English as a foreign language and intercultural communication be integrated as much as it is practically possible.

## Bio data

**Shizuno Seki** is a part-time instructor at Shizuoka University. She is currently interested in teaching intercultural communication classes where Japanese and international students study together. She can be contacted at <sekiNYA@live.jp>.

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## Appendix I. The English version of the syllabus

Course	応用英語A (Applied English Skills A)			
Instructor	関 静乃 (SEKI Shizuno)	Office	Part-time instructor	
Date	① Wednesday 1・2 ② Wednesday 3・4 ③ Thursday 1・2 ④ Thursday 3・4			
Major	① Humanities ② Education ③ Agriculture ④ Science majors Shizuoka Univ. students	Semester	First semester	Required
Year	Sophomores	Credit	2	
Keyword	intercultural communication, discussion, international exchange			

Goal	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. You will understand the true meaning and importance of culture and gain a better understanding of your own culture while learning about other cultures.</li> <li>2. You will improve your basic English skills, especially reading, listening, and speaking.</li> <li>3. You will develop greater tolerance towards other peoples and their cultures.</li> <li>4. You will build up good relationships between international students and Shizuoka Univ. students and enjoy communicating with each other.</li> </ol>
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read a short informative essay about cultural issues and increase your knowledge of culture and critical thinking skills.</li> <li>• Discuss a variety of issues related to culture in pairs or groups.</li> <li>• International students and Japanese students learn from each other.</li> </ul>
Course outline	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Introduction</li> <li>2. What Does "Culture" Mean?</li> <li>3. Cultural Rules for Acceptable Behavior</li> <li>4. Stereotyping</li> <li>5. Media and Culture</li> <li>6. Nonverbal Communication: Gestures and Body Language</li> <li>7. Cultural Perspectives of Time</li> <li>8. Touch and Space</li> <li>9. Verbal Communication Norms</li> <li>10. The Individual and the Group</li> <li>11. Subcultures</li> <li>12. Status</li> <li>13. What Is a Family?</li> <li>14. Gender as Culture</li> <li>15. Review</li> </ol>
Requirements	Bring a dictionary.





## Appendix 3. The English version of the questionnaire

### 2009 first semester 応用英語A The final questionnaire

Please choose one of the five choices A~E that is most appropriate. Your detailed comments are welcome. I would like to take your ideas into consideration for the next academic year. Thank you. Instructor: Shizuno Seki

1. Was the presentation assignment, "Introducing one part of your culture", useful in understanding your own culture?
- A. Strongly agree    B. Agree    C. 50:50  
D. disagree    E. Strongly disagree

Please explain what was useful or why you thought it was not so useful:

2. Was listening to your classmates' presentations useful in understanding different cultures?
- A. Strongly agree    B. Agree    C. 50:50  
D. disagree    E. Strongly disagree

Reasons:

3. What was the most difficult part of your presentation?
- A. grammar & sentence structure  
B. words & expressions  
C. organization  
D. lack of choice of topic  
E. public speaking

- F. pronunciation  
G. eye contact  
H. Try not to read your draft.  
I. the use of visual materials  
J. other

4. Write your reactions to comments from your classmates about your presentation:
5. Was the instructor's evaluation on your presentation reasonable?
- A. Strongly agree    B. Agree    C. 50:50  
D. disagree    E. Strongly disagree

Reasons:

6. Write your reactions to the instructor's comments and evaluation:
7. Was group work with Japanese students useful?
- A. Strongly agree    B. Agree    C. 50:50  
D. disagree    E. Strongly disagree

Reasons:

8. Do you think it was a good opportunity for you to make a presentation about your country's flag and teaching Japanese students about your culture in another class (Thursday's class).
- A. Strongly agree    B. Agree    C. 50:50  
D. disagree    E. Strongly disagree

Reasons:



9. Do you think both international students and Japanese students should continue to study together in such intercultural communication classes as the one we have conducted?
- A. Strongly agree      B. Agree      C. 50:50  
D. disagree      E. Strongly disagree

Reasons:

10. Overall, I have become more interested in different cultures through attending this class.
- A. Strongly agree      B. Agree      C. 50:50  
D. disagree      E. Strongly disagree

Reasons:

11. Write some good points about this class: Any useful suggestions for further improvement?
12. Write some bad points about this class: Any constructive criticism?
13. Please feel free to write any other suggestions, comments, and opinions.

Thank you for your cooperation.

