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CONNECTING CULTURE AND LANGUAGE:

AN ANALYSIS OF THE FUTURE OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN

JAPANESE HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION[1]

ABSTRACT. English education has long been firmly embedded within the Japanese high school curriculum. However, behind every foreign language learning experience lies the deep phenomena of culture. Nevertheless, research into the need for intercultural education within the current English education at Japanese high schools is still sporadic. Accordingly, this paper begins with an examination of the current state of intercultural education in this context, including an investigation into the Japanese teachers of English and native English teacher intercultural dynamic. After providing a canvas of the current situation, this paper will then provide an outline of the current research project that aims at providing pedagogical support through teacher training. Specifically, the author aims to show how Japanese teachers of English will be provided opportunities to enhance their level of intercultural communication competence and understanding for use in English class content as well as interpersonal relations with native English teachers.

Keywords: Intercultural education, Japanese teachers of English, Pedagogical support, Teacher training, Team-teaching.

1. Introduction: Reviewing the landscape

This paper begins by examining the current state of two aspects related to English education at Japanese high schools in Japan. Firstly, it reviews the efforts being made to promote intercultural education at high school level. Next, it analyzes the increasing common Japanese teacher of English and native English

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teacher (hereafter referred to as JTEs and NETs) intercultural dynamic. After identifying the current issues related to these two aspects, this paper introduces the current research project undertaken by the author and his research colleagues, in particular the portion which focuses on ways for JTEs to establish effective interpersonal communication with NETs and to incorporate intercultural learning into their English classes. As explained later in the paper, the current research project will offer JTEs the opportunity to enhance these areas through teacher-training workshops. Finally, an analysis of data collected thus far will be discussed from the viewpoint of how pedagogical training will be developed and conducted.

The landscape of English education in Japan continues to change as the Japanese government tries to equip its citizens with more opportunities of exposure to foreign language education from an earlier age. Over the last decade or more, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Culture (hereafter referred to as MEXT) has attempted to implement changes to its *Courses of Study* guidelines to include a required foreign language course, *Gaigokugokatsudo* (Foreign Language Activities), for students as early as fifth- and sixth-grade elementary school through to the end of high school. The overall objectives of these activities are:

> To form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures

through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages (MEXT 2011, p. 1).

As will be explained in the following section, an increasing number of high schools have incorporated a team-teaching dynamic into their English curriculum which sees JTEs and NETs teaching high school students. Brown (2013) points out that cultural misunderstandings can arise from this specific teacher dynamic due to differing cultural and sociological expectations of teacher roles. However, as Brown's research suggests, with the proper cultural-diversity training, not only can intercultural communication in team-teaching be improved, but the training content can also be filtered into and act as a catalyst for instruction in intercultural communication and understanding to high school students.

Accordingly, this paper will explain part of the current research project undertaken by the author and two other research colleagues. Within the project, one particular section seeks to fill the gap in intercultural communication and understanding training that provides a framework for JTEs to be able to:

1. construct ways to establish effective and successful interpersonal communication with NETs in team-teaching.
2. incorporate intercultural learning into their English teaching in order to foster an understanding of how language proficiency and cultural competence connect.

2. Background: Investigating the intercultural state of affairs

For over 30 years, MEXT has attempted to introduce a cultural element to Japanese high school English education through its JET (Japanese Exchange and Teaching) program. The emergence of this government-supported program has stimulated changes in sociological and pragmatic perspectives through the recruitment of NETs to assist in English language teaching in junior and senior high schools in Japan. To some extent, it can be seen as an attempt at micro-level globalisation in two main areas. Firstly, the English teaching and coordination duties in local city offices taken on by NETs lead to the creation of more culturally diverse work groups in Japanese high schools. As Ota (2001) notes, NETs give Japanese high school students effective exposure to native English and a diverse range of cultural differences. The fact that the NETs participating in the JET program come from diverse English-speaking backgrounds can be seen in the total number of 4,786 participants from 43 countries recorded in 2015 (CLAIR, 2016).

The basic purpose behind the JET program is to enhance mutual understanding between foreigners and Japanese within the Japanese community. As Leong (2007), a former JET program participant, states, whilst the main goal is to provide Japanese students with exposure to native speakers of English and their respective cultures, the system is reciprocal, as it also affords the foreign

coordinators and teachers opportunities to experience the culture, language and lifestyle of Japan for a period of three to five years.

3. Intercultural dynamics: Exploring the issues in cultural diverse team-teaching

As research to date suggests, there is still plenty of room for improvement in JTE-NET relationship building. In addition to differences such as professional status, language proficiency and cultural backgrounds, pedagogic, logistic and interpersonal features are seen as three fundamental areas that can hinder effective intercultural communication between this particular intercultural dynamic (Brown, 2013; Carless, 2006).

One shared claim regarding the JTE-NET dynamic (see Brown, 2013; Carless, 2006; Tajino, 2002) pertains to the lack of concrete methods and guidelines, often resulting in unclear teacher roles. The expected role of an NET is one of an assistant language teacher who can often be used merely as someone who interacts with the students to give them language practice, provides advice and answers on the English language. As a result, areas of conflict and misunderstanding arise due to expectation differences, including the impression left with JTEs regarding unwillingness to cooperate by NETs. On the NET side, a common critique of JTEs

points to an unwillingness to act as a mediator between NETs and students. Additionally, an apparent lack of instructions as to the role NETs should play in the English classrooms is another area of frustration (Brown, 2013).

In logistical and interpersonal terms, a number of issues are also apparent. Logistically, JTEs have pointed to insufficient time spared for preparation because NETs do not stay at the workplace long enough. JTEs see extra investment of time as essential to creating collaborative lessons that work (Brown, 2013). On the side of interpersonal issues in an intercultural context, the level of ability to communicate effectively can dramatically affect the outcome of the interaction. Here, intercultural sensitivity plays an important role. Intercultural sensitivity is complex in meaning to the extent that it not only requires one or both sides to have sufficient knowledge of cultural differences, but more so the willingness and motivation to compromise in instances of difference.

As Brown (2013) further illustrates, conflict can arise between JTEs and NETs due to a lack of mutual respect due to insufficient knowledge regarding differences in work qualifications, training and workplace communication styles. Therefore, in order to go beyond the superficial surface of language-dependent communication, it is vital that both sides of the dyad (i.e., JTEs and NETs) learn to form relationships that are intercultural in nature. In other words, by enhancing their cultural

intelligence (e.g. knowledge, behavior and motivation), the JTEs and NETs can obtain the intercultural competence necessary to establish a 'middle-ground', a place where they can meet halfway to create effective team-teaching strategies together.

4. Intercultural learning: Connecting language and cultural learning in Japan

At this juncture, the question arises as to the influence the JTE-NET dynamic has on intercultural education elements in English education. Additionally, as Japan boasts a number of 'international' focused curricula at the high school level, one would expect a large cultural influence to appear. However, to the best of the author's knowledge and analysis of current data, such research into these two points is still rather scarce. This is one gap in which the current research project will seek to fill.

An investigation into 'international' focused high schools, however, shows us that some Japanese high schools actually emphasize the use of NETs in the teacher profiles and explain how intensive language classes are the foundation of their English education programs. Kanagawa Prefectural Yokohama Senior High School

of International Studies (2015), for example, clearly defines its approach on its homepage as follows:

> Educational Goals
>
> We foster skills in foreign languages and information communication technology in our students so that they can play an active role in the future as leaders not only in Japanese society but also in international society.
>
> High-level English Education
>
> We offer small classes taught in English and highly-experienced native speakers are in charge of subjects such as "Communicative Skills", "International Communication" and "Discussion & Research." Our students acquire the ability to understand others and express themselves in English by actually using English and developing the comprehensive skills necessary to communicate effectively in English.

In a sense, these explanations suggest the goal of stimulating intercultural understanding is there. However, the method of instruction remains vague with a predominant focus on language instruction. There is no mention of how culture and language are connected in order for students to gain the skills required to be active in international society. Nevertheless, some schools are starting to create a dedicated part of their curriculum to intercultural communication and understanding, rather than leaving it as a hopeful by-product to emerge from English language classes.

Rikkyo Ikebukuro High School, in Tokyo, offers 'Intercultural Training' as an elective subject in its curriculum. According to Okubo (2013), the main objective

for introduction of this subject into the curriculum is for students to be able to communicate with foreigners whilst recognizing and adjusting to cultural differences that affect communication. As such, the course looks at areas such as communication theory, host and target culture analysis, Japanese culture, Japanese identity theory, as well as issues related to generational and gender differences and prejudice and stereotyping. Through an array of lesson plans that include discussions, pair and group work, foreigner guest lectures and role-plays, the students are able to navigate themselves through the theory of intercultural communication and understanding in an active way that helps them to enhance their overall cultural intelligence.

Another example representative of Japanese high schools that are investing in intercultural education is that of Sapporo Odori High School in Hokkaido. In 2010, this high school launched a project called *The Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Peace Project.* It is an interdisciplinary curriculum development and exchange project with Louisiana State University Laboratory School, U.S.A. The aim of the project, as Nishihara (2013) explains, is to increase intercultural understanding through a peer exchange program that facilitates mutual exchange. In total, 34 teachers from the two institutions collaborated to create an array of classes across 12 disciplines (e.g., Japanese and American History, World

History, Oral English Communication, English Reading and Writing, Japanese Calligraphy, Technology, Japanese as a Second Language, Basic Math, Food Design, Fine Arts, Basic Commerce and Economics, Daily English, and Cross-Cultural Understanding). This reciprocal approach, as a result, has allowed teachers and students to join in exchanges with each other, which in itself has stimulated authentic intercultural communication (Nishihara, 2013).

Here, it is important to recognize that the above-mentioned examples are from private high schools in Japan. As such, they enjoy more freedom in curriculum design than their public school counterparts in Japan. On the other hand, a general search of Japanese public high school curricula shows that a number of schools provide students study-abroad opportunities. Unfortunately, however, a review of their in-school curricula does not clearly show if they place an emphasis on intercultural learning opportunities in the classroom. Why is this the case? The current situation suggests that rarely are attempts made within Japanese English training to bring cultural competency into language teaching. It is not a simple matter of introducing foreign culture concepts into the class. To echo the claims made by Dogncay-Aktuna (2005), when including intercultural communication and understanding in English language teacher education, teachers should consider the sociocultural background of the language learner. They must also try not to over-

simplify the cultural content. As a result, the language learners have the opportunity for an enhanced learning experience that intertwines language and culture. However, as was found in previous research by the author (O'Connell, 2014), many researchers agree that a balance of developing language and intercultural skills together is often overlooked in Japan.

Another significant method by which intercultural competence can be fostered is through study-abroad program participation. However, this also proves to be of concern, especially when a steady decrease in participation in study-abroad programs by Japanese high school students is evident. Benesse Corporation (2015), a large education-support company that publishes a wide range of exam preparation materials in Japan, reports the number of public and private high schools promoting and implementing short-term study abroad trips and programs began to show significant signs of decline from 2008. Compared to a peak total of 39,310 high school (public and private) students per year taking part in study-abroad programs of varying lengths (one week through to more than three months) in 2000, the number had dropped to 27,025 students in just eight years. By way of excuse perhaps, Japan uses the economic recession as the main factor, but one cannot help suspect that in actual fact Japanese society has somehow lost its social drive to push such programs.

Taking heed of this situation, MEXT has slowly begun to shift its mindset toward promoting study-abroad opportunities. Its aim is to encourage more high school and university students to participate in study-abroad programs, emphasizing the chance for students to improve their foreign language skills and enhance their intercultural knowledge. As such, it began its *Second Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education* in 2013 (MEXT, 2013). One of the main policies adopted focuses on the development of workers who have a more diverse and adaptable outlook. To foster such talent, English course inclusion at elementary school level, global-focused high school establishment, and government-private sector collaboration to increase study abroad participation are among the activities planned. While somewhat ambitious, MEXT seeks to increase the number of high school students going overseas from 30,000 to 60,000 and the number of university students from 60,000 to 120,000 by the year 2020.

Interestingly, the inclusion of government-private sector collaboration in the overall plan has stimulated discussion between the business world and MEXT to clearly identify areas of focus. Between 2001 and 2012, the number of Japanese companies that have established overseas offices has increased from 11,826 to 22,489 (MEXT, 2013). Accordingly, the private sector requires new recruits to have some degree of global awareness either through foreign language

(predominantly English) proficiency or cultural competency. It therefore sees intercultural education as an important part of a new recruit's skill set. Furthermore, dialogue between the private sector and MEXT has seen the creation of a template for a collaborative private sector-university action plan, including a call for a push for better support structures within tertiary institutions that not only simulate and facilitate study-abroad programs, but also encourage more proficient students from overseas to choose Japan as a destination for study and employment.

If MEXT is truly serious about placing more emphasis on exposure to English language learning, an equally important amount of emphasis and pedagogical support in the area of intercultural communication and understanding needs to be established. In order to stimulate thought and implementation among JTEs, training courses that provide them with more tools to create intercultural learning experiences in the classroom should, therefore, be more actively introduced.

5. Pedagogical training for JTEs: Setting up the current research project

In April 2015, a research project proposal was accepted by MEXT and awarded a four-year Grant-in-Aid B grant (see Cripps, 2015; Cripps, Miles & O'Connell, 2015). The content and objectives of the project will be explained

below, with a particular focus on the 'intercultural communication skills' section of the project, which will be developed and conducted by the author.

Entitled *"Providing pedagogical support for English teachers in Japan",* this research project seeks to create a support structure that focuses on practical guidance and support for Japanese English teachers in Japan. In 2015, the first stage of the project included the implementation of a needs-analysis survey among high school teachers in charge of English within Aichi prefecture. Once responses have been fully analyzed, the second stage of the project in 2016 will focus on developing effective ways and content to support teachers using the following approaches:

1) Practical lectures and workshops that focus on the pedagogical needs of Japanese English teachers.

2) Online teacher support center creation that provides teaching videos, audio files and lesson worksheets based on a free-access structure.

3) Practical handbooks based on the lectures and workshops that focus on content-based areas such as CALL, intercultural communication and skills-based topics such as reading, writing, listening and speaking.

With regards to the intercultural communication and understanding component of the planned workshops, online resources and handbooks, the author and his research colleagues must be cognizant of the pedagogical support they aim to provide. As Omar (2014) reminds us, practicality and interpersonal rapport are

two of the many essential elements to the success of training and program development. This holds equally true with the current research project, including the intercultural communication and understanding element.

In a study of intercultural communication training for South Korean English teachers by Ngai and Janusch (2015), for example, the researchers asked the question whether intercultural communication training enhances the educational benefits of language learning. The shared argument among many intercultural researchers in this context pertains to the issue of pragmatic awareness, knowledge and competence, which in EFL terms refers to the communicative competence through the study of language in real-life contexts (Yule, 1996; Zhu, 2011). Using a four-week immersion format, 25 South Korean teachers of English were trained to enhance their intercultural sensitivity and identify practical ways to incorporate it into their English teaching. The participants were exposed to many areas of intercultural communication, including sociocultural influences on language use, cross-cultural comparisons of English use, real-life ethnographic analysis, self-evaluation and analysis, real-life applications, and learning and teaching reflection. As a result, the participants unanimously assessed the experience as something that gave them a solid working knowledge of intercultural communication and understanding, and more importantly, a clear idea of how to incorporate it into their

future English teaching. However, as Ngai and Janusch (2015) reveal, attention given to the influence of intercultural communication competence and understanding on language output through training of this kind is still too sporadic. Without an increase in similar training, opportunities to teach the sociocultural aspects of the language will continue to be hindered.

Considering such demand for thorough development of intercultural-related content, the author plans to approach the design of the workshops and creation of authentic materials covering a range of perspectives. For example, analysis of questionnaire data should provide one perspective regarding the demand by Japanese English teachers for intercultural training, specifically in which areas and for what reasons they want to increase their knowledge and cultural intelligence. Another perspective that will add objectivity to workshop and handbook content development is that of past and current NETs from the JET program. Finally, input with also be sought from intercultural communication and understanding experts, including the author, that have experience teaching and training English teachers in Japan.

In terms of initial progress made in current research project, during the 2015 academic year, a total of 11 key educator interviews chosen from a list of predominant experts in the field of EFL and ESL within Japan and overseas (New

Zealand, Canada, and U.S.A.) have already been conducted. The majority of these interviews were recorded on video. The purpose of these interviews was mainly to assess the attitudes toward teaching training and content-based learning. Each interview began by asking about the interviewee's teaching background and approach. It then moved on to gathering opinions on skills-based teaching for EFL, including examples of activities for speaking/listening and reading/writing. The third part of the interview then shifted to a focus on content-based teaching and sought to gain insights into difficulties facing EFL teachers regarding content-based teaching and examples of activities used by the interviewee. The next shift in topic looked at interviewee experience in teaching Japanese students and also asked the respondent to elaborate on what they noticed about Japanese learners of English. The final part of the interview finished with a look at the incorporation of technology into curricula and classes.

6. Intercultural content development: Analyzing the data

The second stage of the current research project seeks to use the findings from the data analysis as the main instrument for selection of content creation for the two proposed workshops in August 2016 and March 2017. Accordingly, this section will focus on the author's area of responsibility—Intercultural Communication and

Understanding Workshops. Specifically, it will clarify what has been discovered from current data analysis regarding teaching intercultural-related skills and content to Japanese English teachers.

The data collected throughout the first year of the project came from two main sources—1) review of the current literature and 2) interview transcripts of key figures taking part in the research project. The research is qualitative, and as Hammersley (1990) and Creswell (2007) explain, qualitative research seeks to investigate social phenomena by way of discovery. In terms of the current research project, this means that data is collected and analyzed mainly through actual observations and participation in what Hammersley refers to as "natural settings" (p. 598). The objective of this approach is to seek an understanding and interpretation of the phenomena being examined from the perspectives of participants and the researcher.

Thematic analysis of data collected from the literature review and interview transcriptions provided a number of noteworthy themes that will be useful in the development of workshop and handbook content creation. The following table shows the main themes and definitions extracted from the data with the overlying theme that the content and method differs from culture to culture.

Table 1. Intercultural Learning Themes Data

THEMES	DEFINITION
1. Values	A set of ideas or ways of thinking which people place importance on and use as guidelines in their daily lives.
2. Communication	The way in which people exchange messages—verbal, non-verbal and para-verbal.
3. Behaviour	The way in which people act in their daily lives.
4. Culture Shock	The feeling of difference to the extent that people may question or react negatively to a foreign situation.
5. Motivation	The reasons for which we act, communicate and think in certain ways.

These themes provide a variety of possibilities in terms of content development. As a starting point in the workshop portion of this research project, the author intends to create two main areas of focus for the workshop, teaching materials and training handbooks. The first area will focus on intercultural communication skills for JTEs so that they can better navigate their team-teaching communication. The ability to establish smooth intercultural communication and understanding within this dynamic is paramount to producing an effective team-teaching environment. Accordingly, the participants will be asked to explore their own definitions of the above themes as part of their training. Specifically, they will be asked to provide not only their own definition, but also provided with concrete examples that illustrate their own cultural backgrounds. For example, *wa*

(harmony) often appears as a value in Japanese culture. As Mori (1994) describes, the emphasis on harmony in Japanese communication and culture is as a way of facilitating relational communication with others in a group. In simple terms, the interaction and interdependence by members of society are linked together by a common shared consciousness of maintaining good personal relations. If this concept is offered as one example by the Japanese participants, they will be asked to provide concrete examples in their workplace, including the classroom. Following this, the JTEs will than move onto exploring specific traits, values and differences that connect to the constructed view of teaching among NETs.

The second area of concentration will look at how to bring intercultural learning into the English classroom at high schools. The main emphasis will be exploring ways to connect English language with cultural learning. First, a shared definition of *'language as one tool of communication'* will be established and shared among the participants. Using it as a base, the next step will involve exploring the cultural characteristics of English-speaking countries—i.e., U.S.A., Canada, Australia, United Kingdom and New Zealand. In particular, the JTEs will be asked to focus on the dynamic side of each culture. This will be done through activities that include learning to identify and teach intercultural communication and understanding as follows:

1) non-verbal communication traits such as gestures from English speaking countries. The aim here is to give the participants a box of practical tools and materials to take back to their classrooms and students.

2) discussion tasks that identify how values, communication styles, and behaviors are influenced by cultural backgrounds. The main aim here will be to show JTEs how to construct models and frameworks that can be used in the classroom to enhance intercultural understanding among their students.

7. Conclusion: Future developments

No matter what the subject area, all teachers require on-going training to allow them the opportunity to polish and improve their teaching skills. This paper has explored one area — intercultural education at high school level in Japan — to determine areas in which pedagogical support may assist JTEs. As shown in this paper, current literature strongly suggests that there is a need for intercultural communication and understanding to enhance efficacy when teaching English at high school in Japan.

Firstly, in order to answer the need for a heightened awareness of cultural diversity in the JTE-NET dynamic, the planned workshops in the current project will lead to opportunities for JTEs to explore their own experiences. From there, the workshops will provide the participants with new knowledge and skills to

enhance the relationship, and arguably allow for more creative and effective class design and delivery through better JTE-NET interaction.

Furthermore, as introduced in this paper, the second part of the intercultural communication and understanding workshops will focus on methods and approaches to connecting language and cultural content into high school English curricula. If the learning experience is to be meaningful, an effective model for content design is paramount. As proposed in the current research project, pedagogical training for JTEs that includes a focus on intercultural competence and education training can contribute to equipping teachers with skills not only to help themselves but also to positively influence the learning experience of their students. Needless to say, an increased intercultural awareness by JTEs should help in curriculum design to include intercultural competence and understanding elements. As a result, the dilemma of a language-only focus in high school English education can be avoided. This not only provides strategies that complement MEXT's aim of stimulating more global-minded students, but it also answers the calls from past research (Duranti, 1997; Liddicoat, 2002) to show language learners how culture is embedded in language so that they can gain foreign language proficiency and cultural intelligence in tandem. In short, Japanese English teachers will become

able to show students the pragmatic and culture-specific knowledge required to become intercultural communicators.

The current research project has its own limitations in terms of scale. The workshops will be designed, created and administered by the three researchers and assisted by five to six guest lecturers and trainers worldwide. The target audience will initially be a pilot-test group of Nanzan University graduates who currently work as JTEs at junior or high school level in the Tokai region. However, the pilot-test series of workshops will provide vital feedback from all concerned that will be used to improve and add to the content of future scheduled workshops.

While many researchers offer in-depth views of the impact of intercultural communication competence and understanding in English education in Japan, current research on pedagogical training and its efficacy in Japan, at best, is sporadic. The framework described in this paper represents an effort to provide JTEs with regular opportunities to polish and foster more skills and understanding that hopefully will lead to enhanced quality and diversity of English education in Japanese high schools.

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