

# オンラインによる異文化交流を用いた異文化学習の評価

## Evaluating Intercultural Learning through an Online Intercultural Exchange

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### Abstract

大学は国際化を働きかけている。少数の学生しか海外で勉強できないが、オンライン異文化交流のようなカリキュラムに含まれた国際的な課題は全学生に国際化の影響を与えると考えられる。オンライン異文化交流とは、2か国の教員が指導するオンラインコミュニケーション課題である。本稿は、2か月間の日本人とアメリカ人学生のオンライン交流を評価するものである。オンライン交流課題が終わった後43人の日本人学生がアメリカ人のパートナーについての英作文を書き、交流についてのアンケートに答えた。このデータから学生がどのような交流を行ったのかが分析された。Byramの Intercultural Communication Competence Model (1997)を適用したところ、学生はアメリカ文化について知識を得たが、新しい情報を依頼したり発見したりする能力には欠けていることが明らかとなった。

### 1. Introduction

In the US, Europe and Japan, education administrators are pushing for internationalization of university education (Furstenberg, 2016; European Commission, 2013; MEXT, 2011). One way to develop international awareness and skills is to provide study abroad opportunities, however the majority of students will not study in another country, making 'internationalization at home' an important element of internationalization (De Wit, 2016). Internationalization at home refers to curriculum elements that help students gain attitudes, knowledge, and skills for interaction with people of different cultures during study at their own university. Online intercultural exchange (also called telecollaboration) is one way to make internationalization of higher education more inclusive.

Online intercultural exchange (OIE) is an educational activity in which teachers in different cultures facilitate online communication exchange between two or more classes of students (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). Exchange is often between students who are studying each other's native language, for instance, British students who study Spanish, communicating with students in Spain who study English. The communication activities

include asynchronous text (email), discussion forums, synchronic audio messages, and co-creation of documents (Carney, 2006; Ciftci, 2016). Although online exchange activities are not the same as face-to-face cross-cultural communication as Kern (2014) has shown, they do result in small steps of internationalization such as, awareness of other viewpoints and reflections on one's own culture (Ciftci, 2016).

Along with developing intercultural awareness, OIE has other educational benefits. The first is second language learning. Language learning classes commonly focus on accuracy. OIE can be used to cause students to focus on using the target language for communication of ideas, and building relationships. The authentic nature of communicating with another individual, usually a peer, has the potential to increase learner motivation for language study (Kirchoff 2012). Additionally, OIE tasks cause students to develop technical skills and communication skills needed in the workplace (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016).

The inclusion of online intercultural exchange in a curriculum may move students toward intercultural learning, however there are concerns among educators that the content of the exchange is often shallow or superficial (Carney, 2006; Helm, 2016; Kramsch, 2014). Helm notes from multiple studies that one of the greatest challenges of OIE

is “how teachers can get students to engage in deeper levels of interaction where they move beyond the ‘assumption of similarity’ and manage to take an intercultural stance (2016, p. 152).” Carney (2006) observes Japanese students’ selection of superficial topics for online communication, and raises the issue of cultural influences. O’Dowd (2016) acknowledges that OIE has often been characterized by exchanging facts on superficial topics due to the short time and temporary nature of the relationships, along with the limited ability of second language learners. He responds by emphasizing the importance of designing tasks that lead students to “go beyond simple exchanging information and to actually collaborate in the elaboration of projects or products (p. 278).”

This study looks at a two-month online intercultural exchange between Japanese and American university students. The students were in pairs, and asked each other about lifestyle and culture. They used their second language when asking the questions and their native language when answering their partner’s questions. For the Japanese students, the email exchange project culminated with writing a paper about their foreign partner. They also completed a post-project questionnaire about the exchange. These two sources of data were analyzed to find the kind of interaction the Japanese students were having with their partners, and how they felt about the online exchange. Thus, the research question was, What kind of intercultural learning occurred in the Japanese students as a result of this OIE task?

## 2. Participants and Online Intercultural Exchange

This study analyzed a paper and a questionnaire written by 43 Japanese students enrolled in a junior college. The students were first year students in the English Language and British and American Literature major. Participating in the online exchange and the paper about the foreign partner were assignments for a class in English writing that is required for graduation. The participants were 18-20 year old

Japanese, 40 women and 3 men who had studied English for six and a half years. Several participants had short-term overseas experiences, however most did not have extensive experience communicating with foreigners.

The Japanese students were paired with a student at the University of Minnesota enrolled in a Japanese language class. Step 1 of the four-step exchange was the American students writing an introduction letter in Japanese to their partners in Japan. Along with basic introductory information such as field of study and interests, the letters also included 2-3 questions for the Japanese students to answer. Step 2 was the Japanese students responding in Japanese to their partner’s introduction and questions. Step 3 was the Japanese students writing an email to their partners in English, asking one or more questions. Step 4 was the American students responding in English to their partner’s questions. At the end of the exchange, the Americans wrote a thank you email to their partners. In sum, the first month of email communication was in Japanese, initiated by the American learners of Japanese, and the second month was communication in English initiated by the Japanese learners of English.

The emails sent in step 1~4 were required assignments that when sent were copied to the two instructors. The Japanese students were verbally encouraged to try to develop a friendship through additional email communication which would be private and not copied to the teachers. After the email exchange was completed, the Japanese students wrote a paper in English describing their partner. Before writing, they examined three model papers from the previous year’s students and reviewed how to compare and contrast two things. This paper was 5% of their final grade.

## 3. Method of Data Collection and Analysis

### 3.1. Paper

The participants’ papers about their American partner were approximately 200 words in length and described the partner, the topic that they inquired about, and comparisons between the

writer and the partner. The papers were analyzed for breadth of intercultural learning using Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence Model.

Byram's model has become the primary framework for analyzing intercultural learning, both offline and online, in the field of language education (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). The framework describes factors for intercultural communication, which he describes as the ability to exchange information effectively, and to establish and maintain relationships cross-culturally. The factors are labeled: *attitudes*, *knowledge*, *skill of discovery*, *skill of interpretation*, and *education*. The factors begin with attitudes toward people who are different; Is there an attitude of curiosity and openness toward other cultures that can lead to relativizing self and valuing others? The next factor is *knowledge*; Is there understanding of cultural groups in one's own country and the other culture? Is there understanding of the process of interaction? Building on knowledge of cultures is *skills of discovery and interpretation*; Is there an ability to recognize significant cultural elements in the other culture and find their meaning? The last factor called *education* can be evaluated by the following question, Is there critical cultural awareness that can evaluate and learn from other cultures?

The papers were read multiple times looking for statements that reflected attitudes, knowledge, skills and education factors of the Intercultural Communicative Competence model.

### 3.2. Questionnaire

The author administered the post-project questionnaire one month after the students submitted their papers. Because some Japanese students had mentioned being anxious about the email exchange, the questionnaire attempted to learn how participants initially felt about the email exchange, and what those feelings were based on. The questionnaire asked participants for their evaluation of the American student's response to their question(s). Then, the questionnaire asked participants if this communication had stirred up

more interest to ask more questions of their American partner. Lastly, wondering if the participants noticed any cross-cultural learning, they were asked if their ideas of American students changed due to this email exchange. The questions on the questionnaire are in Table 1.

**Table 1 Questionnaire Content**

1. How did you feel about the email exchange when you first heard about it at the beginning of the term? (example, excited, curious, afraid) Why did you feel this way?
2. You asked your partner one or more questions. How was their answer to your question(s)? (example, long, short, interesting, not so interesting)
3. Now, are there some questions that you wish you would have asked your partner?
4. Did this email exchange change your ideas of American university students? If yes, how did your ideas change?

The questionnaire was written in English and the students wrote their answers in English; the author tabulated the responses.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Paper

Analysis of the Japanese students' papers found abundant evidence of the multifaceted *attitude* of intercultural communicative competence. Because the email exchange assignment required the students to ask a question to their American partners, all the students displayed this attitude. Byram describes one facet of this attitude is a desire to take up opportunities to develop a relationship of equality with the other, rather than seek exotic experiences or profit from the other person (p. 91). He further explains, "The intercultural speaker is interested in the other's experience of daily life in contexts not usually presented to outsiders through the media . . ." (p.

91). Evidence of this interest in other's daily life was found in 36 papers. There were questions about the partner's eating habits, schoolwork, preferences in music, animation, and travel experiences among others. Examples of this interest in the other's daily life and person include the following.

"How do you spend a week day?"

"How do you refresh yourself when you are busy?"

"Where do you want to live, in the countryside or the city?"

"I was nervous at first. However, she is very friendly and kind, so I wanted to know more about her."

"Through exchanging email we could share each other's opinion and lifestyle. It was so interesting, so I wanted to keep doing it more and more."

Another facet of an attitude of intercultural communication competence is an interest in discovering the other's perspective on various things. Byram describes this as a person who, "does not assume that familiar phenomena - cultural practices or products common to themselves and the other - are understood in the same way . . ." (p. 92). Evidence of this facet was found in nine papers as students inquired about the Americans' ideas of Japanese culture or learning Japanese. This following quotes exemplified this attitude.

"What do American people think about Japanese anime or animation movies?"

"What is the difficult part of learning Japanese?"

"His answer of my question is very polite, and I could learn his perspective about Japanese culture from foreign people's side."

Even though the students were required to ask a question to fulfill their assignment, all the students wrote that the email exchange was a good experience, and 19 concluded their paper by saying that they wanted to continue email communication with their partner. This confirms a strong positive attitude for intercultural

learning.

The second factor of intercultural communicative competence, seeking *knowledge* of the other culture (not an individual), was found 18 times in the data. The cultural knowledge gained by students in this exchange was primarily about American holidays (Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day), university life (schedule and facilities), and the region where the American student lived. Examples of gaining knowledge of the other culture are as follows.

"After I exchanged emails with her, I could know not only the famous things in her city, but also the famous things in my city."

"I want to keep contact with him, and I want to know real English and real world that are not just study in school."

The next factors in Byram's intercultural communicative competence model are labeled: *skills of discovery and interpretation*, and education. There was no evidence of these factors in the students' papers. The *skills* that Byram is referring to involve the ability to acquire new knowledge and to analyze what is discovered. It was disappointing that the students in this study appear to have accepted information that they did not understand, and did not ask their American partner for explanation.

Examples of students showing a lack of ability to acquire information are in the following stories. A student wrote that her American partner told her that he had lived in the Philippines. She then wrote, "I wanted to know why he had lived in the Philippines, but I didn't know." Likewise, a student wrote that her partner mentioned eating chili and cornbread. Then this student wrote, "I didn't know what chili and cornbread are. They seem delicious, so someday I want to try them." These and other students lacked the skills to discover new cultural information.

#### 4.2. Questionnaire

The following tables display the results of the questionnaire. Table 2 shows the responses to the first question on the survey regarding participants' initial feelings about the email

exchange assignment. Over half of the responses were positive feelings of excitement (22), curiosity (2) or expectation (2), and the others were negative feelings of anxiety (9) or fear (8). Some of the responses explained having both positive and negative feelings, in which case the response was tallied under two feelings. An example of responses with two feelings are below,

“I was looking forward to communicate with my partner, but I also feel a little fear because my English skill is not enough.”

“I was afraid a little and excited mostly.”

The students attributed the feelings of excitement to one or more of the following reasons: desire to meet foreigners (8), Americans (6), or a native speaker (1); interest in American culture (3), and learning English (1). Representative comments recalling excitement about the email exchange are as follows,

“I was excited. Because I thought it will be good experience to bond with a foreigner.”

“I was excited because it was a chance to communicate with American students.”

The students who recalled feeling fear or anxiety about the email exchange were expressing a lack of confidence in their English ability. Fear was attributed to a lack of confidence in English (4), or more specifically writing English

email (5). Anxiety was attributed to doubts about being able to understand English emails (6), and to starting something new (2). Representative comments of fear and anxiety are as follows,

“I was afraid because I didn’t have any confidence in my English ability.”

“Nervous, because it is hard to exchange email in English.”

Table 3 shows the second question, which asked the participants to evaluate the email responses from their American partner. Participants wrote that responses were, interesting (22), either long (21) or short (5), and polite (7). The instructor of Japanese at the University of Minnesota taught how to write an introduction letter, and corrected the students’ emails before they sent them to the Japanese partner. Examples of participants’ replies on the questionnaire are as follows,

“It was so long and polite that I was happy and satisfied with it.”

“It was not long, but very interesting and easy to understand.”

Due to the concern of shallowness in online intercultural exchange, I asked if the students wished they had asked more questions to deepen their communication. Twenty-four students responded that they did want to ask more questions. The topics that they wanted to ask

**Table 2 Participants’ Initial Feelings about the Email Exchange Assignment**

Feeling	Frequency	Reason for this feeling
Excited	22	want to meet foreigners (8), want to meet Americans (6), interest in American culture (3), a new experience (3), want to meet a native English speaker (1), want to learn English (1)
Afraid	8	lacked confidence in their own ability in English (4), lacked confidence in their ability to write English email (5), didn't know what to write about (1)
Anxious	9	may not be able to understand English emails (6), a first-time experience (2)
Curious	2	a new opportunity
Anticipation	2	first time to email a foreigner
Seemed fun	1	gain a new friend
Surprise	1	no experience emailing with a foreigner

**Table 3 Evaluation of Americans' Replies**

Evaluation	Frequency
Interesting	22
Long	21
Polite	7
Short	5
Easy to understand	4
Friendly	1
Difficult	1

their American partner were primarily personal lifestyle topics dealing with recreation, studies, and goals. Only one participant wished they had asked more about American culture. Sixteen participants wrote that they did not wish to ask more questions to their partner.

The final question, concerning if the email exchange had caused a change in their ideas about American students, is displayed in Table 4. Twenty-four of the participants wrote that their ideas of American students had changed due to the communication. They reported that they found the American students to be 'similar to themselves' (4). They also wrote that they learned that American students studied hard (3), were busy (3), were interested in Japanese culture (3), and friendly (3). Twelve participants wrote that the email exchange did not influence their ideas of Americans students.

## 5. Discussion

The research objective was to explore the kind of intercultural learning that occurred in the Japanese students because of this OIE task. Evaluation of the students' papers using Byram's Intercultural Communication Competence Model

showed all of the students had a positive attitude for intercultural communication with some gains in knowledge of American culture, yet the students showed no ability to inquire about and discover new cultural information.

### 5.1 Lack of Skill of Discovery

The lack of skills for discovering a new culture resulted in no visible effort to interpret cultural information (Byram's skill of interpreting and relating). Thus, the Intercultural Communicative Competence Model showed the students had an elementary level of intercultural communication skill that limited intercultural learning.

Skills of discovery include the ability to "recognize significant phenomena in a foreign environment and to elicit their meanings and connotations, and their relationship to other phenomenon" (1997, p. 38). Byram describes these skills as "pivotal" for developing intercultural communicative competence, because these skills are the means of eliciting new information, and involve interacting with people of the other culture (1997, p. 99). Skills of discovery rely on the ability to ask questions about things that the native speaker did not realize needed explanation. Thus, curiosity and the ability to ask questions are core skills for intercultural learning.

The lack of skills for discovery were seen in the Japanese students' papers when the writer appears misunderstand information that they received from their American partner. The Japanese students understandably did not understand names of local foods and places. For instance, one student reported that in their American partner's town, there is a "moll" (Mall of America), but the Japanese student did not seek clarification on this repeatedly misspelled word.

**Table 4 Change in Idea About Americans**

Response	Frequency	Comment
Yes	24	similar to me (4), study hard (3), busy (3), interested in Japanese culture (3), friendly (3), serious (1), polite (1)
No	12	

Another student wrote about this same mall, which they did not understand. However, instead of asking their partner for further explanation the Japanese student searched on-line for an explanation. No Japanese students mentioned asking the American partner for further explanation.

Perhaps the Japanese students did not have the language skills to ask for clarification, or the confidence to pursue answers to their doubts. The written explanation of the email exchange that the students received did not include a suggestion to ask questions or pursue a friendship outside the assignments. Another reason for the lack of pursuing further explanation from their partners may be that it was not required, and students did not want to put in any additional time and effort. Furthermore, compared to Westerners, Japanese in general are less likely to ask questions when they have doubts.

In the future, the written explanation of the email exchange should include a suggestion to have additional communication with the American student. The lack of seeking answers could be addressed by showing how to ask questions about information that they did not understand, and by explaining that in American culture it is not rude to ask clarifying questions, but viewed positively as a sign of interest.

## 5.2 Fear and Anxiety

The findings in the questionnaire showed that a significant number of the students (17) felt fear or anxiety when they first heard about the online exchange assignment. These feelings were due to a lack of confidence in their English ability. Although some anxiety can motivate people to invest effort in a task, responding to the students' initial fear and anxiety could improve their eagerness to communicate with their partner from the start. Showing students a model of a typical email exchange and a list of topics former students wrote about might alleviate some of the fear of the unknown in this assignment.

## 5.3 Changing Ideas of the Other

The questionnaire asked if the email exchange

had changed participants' ideas of American students. Online intercultural exchange has shown that as students relate to individuals in a foreign country, they meet people who may not align with their stereotypes of people from that country. These new relationships have the potential to broaden descriptions of other cultures, and to give a glimpse of differences within a culture. In this study, 24 of the students reported ideas of American students changing, while 12 students wrote that their ideas did not change.

The role of online intercultural exchange and changing ideas of a cultural group has been examined in a study by Itakura (2004). She analyzed email communication of Hong Kong students with Japanese students and found that email exchange modified some stereotypes Hong Kong students had of Japanese people, however, other stereotypes, particularly those based on classroom teaching, were not modified.

A weakness in the design of the present assignment was that each Japanese student only learned about one American student. Information from one American student cannot change a stereotype. In the future, it may be beneficial for the Japanese students to have a way to learn what their classmates were observing about the partners in the U.S. If there were a time to learn from classmates about more of the Americans, the greater amount of information would broaden their information base, and may influence stereotypes.

## 5.4 Learning about self and own culture

As observed by Ciftci (2016), one common result of online exchange activities is deeper understanding of one's own culture. Some of the students commented on learning not only about American culture, but also about their own culture. The email exchange assignment evaluated in this paper asked the students to ask a question of their American partners along with answering the question themselves. They were shown a model, "Why did you choose to attend the University of Minnesota? I choose to come to my college because . . ." In this way they were giving more information about themselves in

English before asking their partner for more information. Examples of students writing about learning about their own culture are as follows,

“I heard Jeff’s opinion and I am proud of my country. I want to know not only various countries but also my own country. Thanks to my emailing partner, I could consider about many things.”

“Through the email exchange I could get to know the difference between America and Japan. However, not only it, also I took a look at myself again.”

## 6. Conclusion

This paper set out to evaluate the intercultural learning of an email exchange assignment incorporated into an English writing course. The Intercultural Communicative Competence Model that was used to analyze student papers highlighted the students’ attitude of interest in people of other cultures, learning foreigner’s views of Japan, and knowledge of the other’s country. However, when the Japanese student received information from the foreign partner that they did not understand, they did not seem to pursue explanation. This lack of skill of discovery limited their intercultural learning. In the future, adding a written suggestion to pursue communication outside of assignments, along with language support and cultural information concerning asking questions, could lead to deeper learning.

One third of the Japanese students were fearful and anxious when the email exchange assignment was introduced because of a lack of confidence in English. However, after the exchange was finished and the participants completed the questionnaire about the emails from their American partner, only one student said the emails were “difficult.” This shows that the students were able to handle the communication with their partners. Because of personal communication with one American student, the Japanese students’ knowledge of America broadened and for 24 students, their image of Americans was broadened. While this email exchange did provide intercultural learning, the

analysis in this study showed ways in which to improve instruction in the future.

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