A comparison of Japanese and Taiwanese students’ attitudes toward cross-cultural English-learning activities

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Background

Multinational enterprise, trade liberalization, and global competition characterize today’s environment in many respects (Kupka et al., 2009). In order to prepare college students to meet the demands of the global market, teachers need to take an international perspective to address the current English language and cultural learning environment. In fact, cross-cultural research has supported the importance of intercultural competence in both global and domestic contexts. To reflect this need, in conjunction with advanced technologies, abundant cross-national collaborative English learning projects have emerged, which incorporate communication and information technologies for enhanced cultural exchange and language learning (Levy, 2009). These collaborative projects serve to raise students’ intercultural awareness, broaden students’ horizons, strengthen students’ intercultural communicative competence, and prepare students to work internationally as part of the global market (Kupka et al., 2009).

The purpose of the study is to examine factors that influence college students’ attitude toward an online, cross-cultural English learning project implemented in both Taiwan and Japan, as well as to compare and discover the difference between students from the two countries. Mixed methods, triangular research included a quantitative method factor analysis and correlation analysis using SPSS, qualitative interviews, content analysis of online interaction, frequency of message interactions per student, and classroom discussion. Factors extracted in this study are discussed and compared with those that appear in prior intercultural English learning assessing models.

Brief Literature Review

There are many assessment tools being developed to evaluate student motivation toward cross-cultural English and cultural learning projects. Among these assessment tools, the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES) was created as a means of measuring the behavioral aspect of intercultural communication competence. The concept of intercultural effectiveness is used to describe communication skills, including both verbal and nonverbal
behaviors, which enable people to reach their communication goals in intercultural interaction through appropriate and effective means (Chen & Starosta, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000).

The Intercultural Willingness to Communicate Scale (IWCS) was designed from the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) scale and has been used to measure an individual’s willingness to start communication with people of another culture, while free from any obligation to do so (Kassing, 1997). McCroskey (1991) developed the WTC model by applying the model to L2 communication. MacIntyre (1996) added L2 acquisition and communication into this revised model, creating the IWCS. The IWCS measures L2 students' anxiety, desire to learn English, communication skills, and willingness to communicate in an L2 context.

The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) is used to evaluate a person’s ability to sense and experience relevant cultural differences, and also to think and act in intercultural appropriate ways. Intercultural sensitivity is the dimension of intercultural communication competence that refers to the emotional desire of a person to acknowledge, appreciate, and accept cultural differences. Intercultural Communication Motivation (ICM) is a model developed to assess an individual’s motivation to pursue intercultural communication. Motivation has been recognized as a central factor of intercultural communication competence in communicative interactions. Intercultural communication motivation measures three dimensions: intercultural anxiety, intercultural trust, and intercultural self-efficacy.

**Research Design**

English is recognized as a lingua franca, rather than a privileged language restricted in use to certain groups, such as cultural insiders. In fact, non-native speakers have outnumbered native speakers for some time (Power, 2005; Smith, 1992), which has resulted in the development of English learning on a foundation of multiculturalism, suggesting that regionalized English and cross-cultural issues are influencing factors in English language learning. The English learning purpose reflects this global trend and moves toward a communication-aimed, culture-based goal.

Accordingly, the researchers of this study designed and implemented a method of content collaboration, uploading three projects for collaboration between Japanese and Taiwanese students. The content of the projects included global and/or cross-cultural issues. The online discussion questions were as follows:

1. You are both ESL students in the summer intensive program of New York University. You are in the same class and became friends. You decided to take a trip to the Miami and on the way there, your wallets were stolen. You have no money, no credit cards, and no cell phones. You both got your bags (you have your wallet and your cell phone in your bag) stolen and you are stranded on the
streets.

2. You are both on the committee of the United Nations for the poor. Someone gave your organization a donation for one million dollars. The only requirement is to donate this money to one country on a particular group. Please research and propose where the money should go. Each student should propose one project and convince each other to select his/her choice. This conversation should have 20 entries, 10 entries each.

3. You are both foreign students at Harvard. You are both in the same class. Now, you are both assigned to host a party for the American students at the university. The purpose is for the American students to know more about East Asian cultures. Please discuss the food you will serve, the program (prepare six shows or performances of your culture) and other entertainments for this party. After discussion, please make a program of your party.

Schedules of student interactions were planned and assigned by the two researchers for maintaining an ongoing communication in the asynchronous web communication platform. Students in one pair (one Taiwanese and one Japanese) had to complete tasks given in each project collaboratively and submit a written scenario as the result of the discussion.

Participants of this study included 181 college students from Taiwan and Japan. Among them, 60 students participated in the online cross-cultural English project, another 20 students were experienced in cross-cultural collaboration, and the rest did not have experience with regard to cross-cultural collaboration.

Methodology

The project employed a mixed-methodology using triangulation. The mixed-method study included the use of qualitative student interviews and content analysis of online exchange contents, as well as quantitative, factor analysis and correlation analysis. In the initial phase of the study, the researchers took statements made by students from interviews to form the questionnaire, which was designed to predict the attitudes of EFL students with regard to the English learning process through cross-cultural interactions. Factor analysis using SPSS® was used to extract factors that influenced students’ attitudes toward the cross-cultural English project. The factors were named and compared to prior literature in order to identify similarities in previous related studies. Data collected and analyzed also included students’ reactions as well as students’ behavior, including their online interaction, content, and number of times logging in for the online conversation over the course of the entire cross-cultural English learning project.

The web platform communication tool used in this study is an online classroom established by Nicenet organization (www.nicenet.org). The Nicenet is a formal internet location that provided space for the online classrooms used in this study, in asynchronous computer-mediated communication. Teachers registered and input necessary information in
a classroom, which created and provided access to their students for participation. Students also registered after obtaining the access information, such as the class key number for log in. This process enabled teachers to view and to manage all the students who registered and their associated interactions. One drawback was that the Nicenet is not rich in visual options in its utilities because this online classroom does not provide space for photo showing or for embedding video clips; therefore, the content is not as rich as other common networking utilities, such as Facebook or Twitter. However, this learning web-platform is user friendly and instructionally transparent.

The teacher can monitor as well as give instruction anytime when needed. The common language is English and suits the purpose of cross-cultural learning in this project for learners of English from Japan and Taiwan. The communications are threaded so that each time a member enters, all previous interactions are shown on the computer, enabling participants to track their previous interactions.

Results

Twenty three statements were drawn from interviews in phase one of the study. The researchers conducted a factor analysis using SPSS. KMO and Bartlett’s test of sphericity produces the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett’s test. The value of KMO should be greater than 0.5 to see if the sample is adequate, and the result showed that the KMO of this study was 0.902 (p = 0.000) as shown in Table 1. This result indicated that the 23 statements drawn were suitable for factor analysis.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.</td>
<td>.902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity</td>
<td>802.240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approx. Chi-Square</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Df</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig.(p)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Principal component analysis was used to extract factors. Extracted factors included those for which the Eigenvalues were over one. In total, four factors were extracted as shown in Table 2.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component (factor)</th>
<th>Eigenvalues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Exaction method: principal component analysis.

Naming of factors

Factor one. This factor had an eigenvalue of 41. Eight items were clustered in this factor. These items include variables expressed in belief in and expectation of the benefits that cross-cultural relationship bring to life regarding social relation, learning, broadening one’s horizon, and future work. This factor was designated as cross-cultural relationship expectation.

Factor two. This factor had an eigenvalue of 8. Seven items were included in this factor. These items included wish for friendship development in another culture, cultural sensitivity relationship management, and flexibility in one’s own behavior when interacting with a foreign friend. These expressions are similar to items mentioned in Yashima’s (2000) investigation of Japanese learners’ orientation and, therefore, the researchers adopted Yashima’s naming for this factor as intercultural friendship orientation.

Factor three. This factor had an eigenvalue of 7. Two items were clustered under this factor. These expressions reflect the importance of intercultural communicative competence in a global business and cross-cultural friendship. This category appears in many assessment tools for cross-culture ability and is, in fact, mentioned in the intercultural effectiveness and the CMC competence. This factor was therefore named importance of communication skills.

Factor four. The fourth factor identified had an eigenvalue of 43. Six items were included in which various expressions were evident suggesting that cross-cultural activity can contribute to English learning, and to cultural understanding for both the partner’s culture and the student’s home culture. These expressions were named under the factor contribution to English and cultural learning.

The purpose of this current study was to gain an understanding of Japanese and Taiwanese student attitudes toward English learning via an online cultural exchange program. Therefore, among the four factors identified, the researchers sought to determine the relationship between English learning and cross-cultural interaction. The researchers conducted a correlation analysis with the four identified factors. As shown in Table 3, the
elements of cross-cultural relationship expectation, intercultural friendship orientation, and
importance of communication skills demonstrated a medium level correlation (between
0.4-0.8) to the *contribution to English and cultural learning* factor.

Table 3
_Correlation among the Four Factors_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contribution to English &amp; Culture Learning</th>
<th>Cross-cultural relationship expectation</th>
<th>Intercultural friendship orientation</th>
<th>Importance of communication skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.562**</td>
<td>.658**</td>
<td>.357**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Note. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)_

Independent samples t test results revealed significant differences between Japanese and
Taiwanese participants with regard to the cross-cultural online English collaborative project
(Table 4). For factor one, the significant difference is shown in $t$ value = 5.265
(p = .000). For factor two, the significant difference is shown in $t$ value = 6.304 (p = .000).
For factor three, the significant difference is shown in $t$ value = 2.402 (p = 0.17). Finally,
for factor four, the significant value is shown in $t$ value = 5.722 (p = .000). Among the four
factors, Taiwanese and Japanese participants were significantly different in their attitudes
toward cross-cultural expectation, intercultural friendship orientation, and contribution to
English and culture learning. The participants from the two counties were slightly different
with regard to their attitudes toward the importance of communication skills. Among all the
factors, Taiwanese participants demonstrated more positive attitudes toward intercultural
English interactions compared to their Japanese counterparts.

Table 4
_Independent Samples t-test Results on Factors between Taiwanese and Japanese_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cross-cultural expectation</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>5.265</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural friendship</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>6.304</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>2.402</td>
<td>.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution to English &amp; Cultural Learning</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>5.722</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Note. Maximum score = 5_
Results shown in Table 5 revealed that there were no significant differences between students who had participated in the cross-cultural English collaborative project and those who had not. Among the 159 questionnaires, 48 were invalid and all these 48 invalid questionnaires were filled out by Japanese participants. In cross-cultural expectation, those who were experienced in cultural exchange activity were more positive than those who had no experience. However, whether participants joined the cross-cultural English project or not did not influence their attitudes with regard to factors of intercultural friendship orientation ($p = .015$) and importance of communication skills ($p = 0.199$).

In contrast, with regard to contribution to English and culture learning, there was a significant difference between participants experienced in cross-cultural collaboration and those not experienced. Overall, those who had intercultural experience demonstrated more positive attitudes related to the factors of cross-cultural expectation and contribution to English and culture learning; whereas, there was no significant difference between the two groups of participants with regard to intercultural friendship orientation and understanding the importance of communication skills.

Table 5

*Independent t-test Results on factors between students with intercultural experience and students without intercultural experience*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experienced (n=47)</td>
<td>Non (n=64)</td>
<td>Experienced (n=47)</td>
<td>Non (n=64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-cultural expectation</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural friendship</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution to Eng. &amp; culture learning</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Maximum score = 5, Invalid n=48 (Japanese participants)

In addition, data for the study included collection and examination of the online exchange contents between Japanese and Taiwanese participants. Although many of these online exchanges were eloquent, particularly in terms of self-introduction as well as introducing one’s own culture, most of the online conversations for the collaborative project
were interrupted by delayed response or meaningless statements such as: “We are doing project one now and what do you think?” The primary reason for the disruption of the online conversation seemed to be due to the participants’ lack of motivation in delivering an immediate response. Another reason for this disruption was likely the inconvenience brought by the asynchronous computer-mediated communication.

The following are examples of these types of interactions.

Nicenet interaction example one:

Hello, my name is Mayumi. I am a common student, too. Your hobbies are very nice. My hobbies are to draw the oil painting and to play the piano. But it is so good. Moreover, it is interesting also in foreign countries. Therefore, my dream is traveling around all over the world in the future. It is necessary to study English more.

Your country is Japan. My country is Taiwan. Japan is much closer for me. In my opinion, your hobbies are far more outstanding items. On the other hand, I walk in an elementary school in order to do exercise. By all means, the location is near my home. The elementary school playground is pretty useful for me. Therefore, I really love the elementary school playground a lot. On the other hand, I like my major subject, English, very much. I have various types of English course every semester, due to the fact that my major subject is English. Besides, English is my most splendid hobby.

Nicenet interaction example two:

(The Japanese student did not show up after the third time of response. The Taiwanese student wrote down his ideas alone.)

I will purchase a huge amount of wheat in order to have them have enough element to produce toast, common breads, and noodles to eat. In addition, I will use the rest part of the money in order to let them have a huge amount of rice to taste and buy a huge amount of petroleum to make them ride the scooters. If they get a huge amount of petroleum, they may choose to drive airplanes, deluxe ships, and automobiles. In fact, this is a huge amount of money. I ought to take full advantage of the money to help the people.

To better understand the motivation of participants of the two culture groups, the researchers recorded frequencies of each participant logging in to Nicenet to deliver an online response. The results in Table 6 show that Taiwanese participants logged in twice as often as their Japanese counterparts. The results correspond to the results in Table 4, where
Taiwanese participants were more active and positive about the online cross-cultural collaboration program.

Table 6

*Comparison of Average of Nicenet log-ins / per student*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Taiwanese participants</th>
<th>Japanese participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean Number of Log ins</td>
<td>8.27</td>
<td>4.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following chart is based on collections of participant responses from the two cultural groups during the period of the experiment. In Taiwan, many students were excited about, and strongly expected, an international collaborative partnership at the beginning of the program. However, some participants were either preoccupied with their own life or careless about checking up on online responses from their Japanese participants. Those who were positive and active came to make a complaint about the absence of their Japanese participants. On the other hand, the Taiwanese researcher had to devote time to checking on the online interactions to ensure communication included fluent and nonstop conversation. A similar situation occurred with the Japanese group of participants, with some expecting the international friendship and English collaborative learning, yet ultimately only seeing very late responses made by their Taiwanese participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In Taiwan</th>
<th>In Japan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students were excited about the intercultural interaction.</td>
<td>Please enter your students’ response here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students complained that their Japanese partners did not reply.</td>
<td>Students complained that the Taiwanese partners did not show up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some students were lazy checking their online messages.</td>
<td>Students complained that the project is an overload to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some students were confused about how to use Nicenet.</td>
<td>One student was startled when he found that his partner was actually 20 years older than he is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsatisfying feeling grew among students who did not see any feedback from their partner.</td>
<td>Students did not check and reply in the proper time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. Teachers’ observations*
**Discussion and Suggestions**

The purpose of this study was to search for factors influencing college students’ attitudes toward online cultural English learning and to make a comparison between the results of the two cultural groups of participants as well as those with and without cross-cultural experience. The factor analysis yielded a 23-item factor withdrawal from interviews, with four factors extracted using SPSS. Among the four factors extracted, three belonged to the same component in ICC related assessment tools of Intercultural Willingness to Communicate (IWC) and Intercultural Effective Scale (IES). Intercultural relationship orientation was labeled for a special orientation for all international participants to take place during the period of cross-cultural activity. Intercultural relationship orientation captures the concept of English learning as a tool for interactions with people of another culture.

The second factor, communication skills, is an important component influencing the success of interaction using computer-mediated communication. This factor refers to the ability to deliver messages, to express ideas concisely, to organize messages and make them understood, and to effectively ask and answer questions. Contribution to English and culture learning is a component similar to the factor first described as “Desire to learn English” by Gardner and Lambert (1972). This factor refers to a strong motivation for learning English, and gaining the benefits from the cross-culture collaboration within both language and cultural aspects. Cross-cultural relationship expectation was a newly extracted factor. This refers to a prospective attitude toward cross-cultural interaction, and a desire to have reciprocal benefits for each participating cultural party. This factor also predicts motivational intensity for cross-cultural English learning.

The results show that Japanese students were not as active as Taiwanese students in the cross-cultural activity. In addition, the results demonstrate that those who were experienced in cross-cultural interaction tended to be more positive in their attitudes only regarding the factors of cross-cultural expectation and contribution to English and culture learning. In students’ online discussions, the contents varied according to the commitment of different participants. In terms of the disconnected online interaction, there are many reasons for students opting to decline the potential benefits of cross-cultural activities. One of these reasons might be failure to maintain a continuous online discussion, another might be anxiety and fear of discussion, and yet another might be lack of motivation. Use of an in-depth qualitative research method is needed in order to discover the many reasons for participants’ attitudes in this regard.
Reference


