

Japanese Students' Developmental Changes in Intercultural Competence

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Abstract

This study compares the degrees of intercultural awareness and competence of elementary school, junior high school, and university students based on the analysis of retrospective entries of intercultural encounters made into the European self-reflective tool, *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (AIE). By comparing the tendencies and characteristics of how each group perceive “otherness” or “foreignness” in their respective intercultural encounters, the type and method of intercultural education appropriate for each level have been considered, with the creation of maturity-based instructional models in mind. Data analysis by 2 types of text analysis software have identified diverse ways perceptions of “otherness” were expressed and functioned in intercultural encounters that the 3 groups experienced. The entries of university students exhibited quite dichotomous (we vs. others) and stereotypical perceptions and attitudes. On the other hand, younger subjects' responses were more idiosyncratic, though often very simplistic; more natural, intuitive reactions and interpretations of the intercultural events appeared compared to university student entries. Since it is apparent that the proclivity for stereotyping gradually emerges and seems to strengthen during younger ages, effective intervention or scaffolding in the elementary and junior high school level will be beneficial to raise intercultural awareness and facilitate the avoidance of simplistic overgeneralizations.

Keywords

intercultural competence, intercultural awareness raising, *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (AIE), perception of otherness, stereotype, overgeneralization, text analysis, instructional models

1 Introduction

In Europe, the Council of Europe has been promoting the use of a self-reflective tool called “Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters” (Figure 1 and hereafter referred to as AIE) for students to analyze and learn from their experiences dealing with people with very different ethnic/cultural backgrounds (Koyama, 2011). The tool is described as “a complementary teaching tool to help students exercise independent critical faculties in solving problems in intercultural encounters, by making them reflect critically on their own responses and attitudes to experiences of other cultures (White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue, 2008, p.43). The person(s) involved in the intercultural encounter that respondents choose to answer questions posed in AIE doesn't/don't have to be a foreigner, but any person who is “foreign” to them or whom they consider the “other” who is very different from them. As many as about 50 questions are posed (# of questions varies because some are elective) in order to make students self-evaluate their experiences from multiple points of view and help them gain deep reflection on their experiences, which activity usually takes about an hour to complete. After the first question of defining the respondent oneself, AIE asks about the intercultural encounter

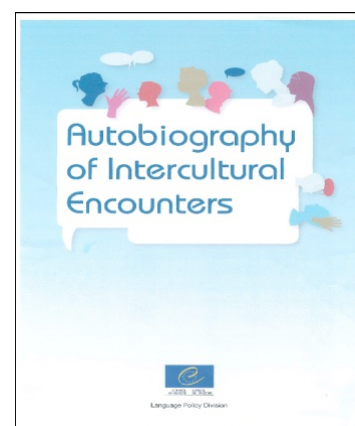


Figure 1: AIE

most memorable to each of them, soliciting first impression of the person foreign to them, changes in interactions and feelings with reasons, and what they have learned from the experience in a multiple ways. Sometimes, similar questions are posed by different wording in different sections; actually, in our past studies (Matsumoto & Koyama, 2014; Matsumoto, 2017), quite many university students changed their attitudes and views as they moved on, guided to reflect their intercultural encounters from various perspectives.

In the first previous study, an attempt was made to find the tendencies and characteristics of 80 Japanese university students in handling various intercultural encounters by collecting their detailed responses written in the AIE translated into Japanese and mounted on the Moodle site (Matsumoto & Koyama, 2014). The study was done as a part of a public grant project (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science Grant: Project #2232011) which aimed to create teaching models for intercultural competence that allow Japanese youths to become able to solve misunderstandings in various intercultural situations. With almost 3 million foreigners living in Japan and over 20 million tourists visiting annually, students have many different types of intercultural encounters. Both the quantitative and qualitative analyses of various entries made by these 80 students clearly showed what specific problems they faced and how they tackled them in various situations of intercultural communication. The most noteworthy finding was their strong dichotomous mindset, namely, the tendency to view the interaction in the “us vs. others” manner, which was manifested in their own explanation of the experiences, even in the cases where cultural difference was not so salient. This mindset is also related to having stereotypes about people from different areas and cultures, seen in various types of overgeneralized remarks made about them. Interestingly, the perceptions expressed by those who have successfully dealt with culturally-foreign situations showed the two conflicting aspects, sometimes simultaneously; though having developed a new open-minded attitude toward “the foreign other”, they left the comments which reflected a strengthened parochial view of their being Japanese.

In 2013, the young learners’ version of AIE was launched by the Council of Europe, so a new experiment was designed based on it with Japanese elementary school children, the hope being that the comparison with university students may elucidate when and how the dichotomous and stereotypical way of looking at foreigners or people with different ethnic/cultural backgrounds is formed. The young learners’ version of AIE has both interview and written versions and is much simpler than the original version; it tries to bring out natural responses from children about either an imaginary intercultural encounter (by showing pictures) or the one most memorable to them in real life. Both versions were translated into Japanese and used interchangeably depending on the ages of children. In the study with 41 university students and 35 elementary school students, the text analysis using an IBM text-mining software and the semantic-network analysis by KH Coder (Higuchi, 2013) revealed that the children’s responses were much more idiosyncratic and intuitive, though often simplistic, and they showed much less dichotomous, stereotypical mindset compared to the university students. It seems that stereotypical views of people from other areas and cultures derive from the depictions of foreigners in different types of media, which tend to be overgeneralized as well as the simplistic comparisons between the Japanese and groups with different ethnicities and/or nationalities (Matsumoto, 2017). This new line of inquiry has been done as a part of another public grant project (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science Grant: Project #16H03456), aiming at constructing teaching models for intercultural competence for children which are closely tied to the secondary and tertiary models previously established.

2 Purpose of the study

The aim of this study is twofold; first, to confirm the tendencies or characteristics of Japanese university and elementary school students in dealing of culturally-foreign people by replicating the previous studies with a larger number of subjects from different schools, and secondly, by adding junior high school students as subjects, to find the developmental changes in their attitudes and views going through various intercultural encounters and solving problems, which appear in their answers to the questions posed in a well-accepted self-reflective tool (AIE). By doing a systematic text and semantic-network analysis of the data together with basic quantitative analysis, an attempt was made to find the developmental process of Japanese youth generation to form the above-mentioned dichotomous perspective, which often involve stereotypes. Then, the type and method of intercultural education appropriate for each

level will be proposed, which, hopefully, will lead to the creation of maturity-based instructional models.

3. The study

3.1. Subjects

Three hundred twenty-six students in 9 different English classes at four private universities were asked to make an entry of the intercultural encounter that is most influential to them in response to various questions included in AIE. Concurrently, the responses of 166 junior high school students and 192 elementary school students were collected using the written type of young learners' version of AIE.

3.2. Experimental method

The original version of AIE translated into Japanese was prepared for online use so that the responses would be automatically collected and tabulated for analysis. Whereas university students were able to respond to AIE without much introduction because the purpose and questions of the tool are quite self-explanatory. On the other hand, an introductory lesson had to be prepared and conducted to the elementary school children and junior high school students to explain the meaning of intercultural encounters as well as the definition of people with different ethnic/cultural backgrounds. Since most elementary and junior high school students cannot use the computer keyboard, they were asked to write their responses on the paper-based version, which were typed by research assistants later. In case of very young children, namely, first, second and third graders of elementary school, recorded personal interviews were conducted using the same questions and prompts.

3.2. Data analysis

First, a qualitative, holistic analysis was done to obtain overall tendencies, followed by the statistical text analysis by an IBM software and the semantic-network analysis by KH Coder. The statistical analysis includes tabulation of words in terms of frequency as well as evaluation of collocational relationships of important words that indicate agency in, and attitudes and mental states of, students' managing intercultural communication both at the time of the encounters and in hindsight. Then, the comparison was made to the tabulated and categorized/coded data of 3 groups.

3.3. Results and discussion

3.3.1. University Students' Responses

University students' responses were different partly because they used the longer, original version of AIE and more importantly, the "foreign" people they encountered were very diverse, which was, in fact, a pleasant surprise to the author herself. Compared to a variety of experiences university students had, the worlds of elementary and junior high school students is limited, so quite a few of them wrote about the English teacher from other countries who visited their schools once a week. The following is the list of the areas that the people university students wrote about came from:

1. The types of 326 encounters
 - Encounters in Japan: 225
 - Encounters outside Japan: 101
2. Areas of the people they wrote about are from
 - Asia (10 different countries): 115
 - North America: 50
 - Europe (6 different countries): 42
 - Middle East: 29
 - Oceania (incl. Micronesia): 27
 - Latin America: 21
 - Russia: 18
 - Africa: 14
 - and Japanese with different ethnic/cultural backgrounds: 10
3. Ages
 - University Students: 145

overgeneralize people from various areas as a homogenous group without diversity and juxtapose Japanese (as “we”) and people with different ethnic/cultural backgrounds as a bulk. Incidentally, many uses of expressions that denote inclusiveness and generality were used such as “all, most and typical (adjectives)” and “usually, generally, most of the time and as always (adverbs and adverbial phrases).

3.3.2. Responses of elementary and junior high school students

The main purpose of this study is to compare different ways perceptions of “otherness” were formed and functioned in the intercultural encounters that children, junior high school students, and university students had experienced. Most importantly, it was the first time that junior high school students were included as subjects in order to find developmental changes that may take place between elementary school and tertiary education. Thus, the inquiry into university students’ responses and those of children was replicated, first to confirm their characteristics in a larger scale, and then to find developmental changes in junior high school students’ responses in a single experiment with the same conditions applied to 3 groups. The hypothesis arising from the 2 previous studies is that the tendencies and characteristics found in university students’ responses in previous studies emerge in childhood and are strengthened as they grow.

Like the case of university students, the tendencies found in elementary school students’ responses were similar to those found in the previous study. The elementary school students’ responses were more emotional and idiosyncratic, reflecting the feelings they had at the time of the intercultural encounter, though often simplistic or trite; the dichotomous perspectives seen in the university students’ responses appeared sporadically, but the data analysis showed more natural, individualistic reactions and interpretations of the intercultural events. It is partly because they are not cognitively mature enough to review the encounter objectively and integrate their thoughts, thus tend to express what they have thought and felt at the time. So many comments revolved around whether they liked or disliked the person they encountered, with the use of many simple adjectives describing both the person and the encounter (“nice”, “kind”, “happy”, “interesting”, “cold”, “mean”, “scary”, etc.).

As hypothesized, the responses of junior high school students were somewhere in between, where the stereotypical, overgeneralized comments increased compared to elementary school children, but with many individualistic and/or intuitive perceptions also being exhibited. All groups, to varying degrees, have tendencies of making stereotypical, sweeping statements about people different from themselves, which is quite natural as Japanese young people still live in a mostly homogeneous environment. Yet, we found such stereotypical remarks had increased as Japanese children proceeded from elementary school to junior high school. To show the change quantitatively, researchers and their assistants looked into all the comments and tried to find those which include stereotypes and unsupported overgeneralizations. Though such a manual counting cannot be very accurate, it, nonetheless, elucidated the developmental change. Of all the comments made by 3 groups, 29% of statements of university students reflected some stereotypes and unsupported overgeneralizations compared to 17% of those made by junior high school students and 11% of those made by elementary school students. During this time-consuming counting, it was also found that the comments reflecting media influence increased from elementary school students’ responses to those of university students. Actually, elementary school students’ responses sometimes showed the influence of parents and people close to them more; they answered, “My mother said that Americans are...” in response to the question “Why do you think so?” In these cases, adults could be feeding stereotypes in the media into the minds of children. On the other hand, the responses of junior high school often reflected media influence more often just like those of university students; their responses included comments such as “I saw many Arabic people act like that in movies,” and “Many TV programs show Chinese people in that way.”

Naturally, the responses of university students were more varied and complex thanks to their learning about other countries and cultures and exposure to various intercultural encounters, which can frequently happen on their campuses nowadays. Yet, such learning and exposure without sufficient intercultural competence may lead to inappropriate stereotypes and overgeneralized understanding of people from other areas and cultures, especially under omnipresent media influence. However, as previously mentioned, about one-third of them were able to change their rather parochial views through a reflective process of itself; on the contrary, such a change was only observed in the entries of 31 junior high school students. It is partly because the young learners’ version of AIE doesn’t ask as many questions as the original one which facilitates deeper reflection. Yet, the original version will be too long and included questions are too complicated for them. If another version of AIE for adolescents were developed that fits junior high school

students' cognitive developmental stage, we could have brought out more evidences for developmental changes. Still, in sum, it is apparent that the proclivity for stereotyping often emerges or is strengthened during elementary and junior high school days, presumably by the influence of media and people surrounding them. Therefore, it seems that proper intervention or scaffolding in elementary and junior high school education to raise intercultural awareness to facilitate avoiding simplistic generalizations and stereotypes would be highly beneficial.

3.3.3. Media influence

After stronger media influence was observed in university students' responses compared to those of elementary school children in the previous study (Matsumoto, 2017), an additional question was added after the last question of AIE, asking each subject to choose the kinds of media they frequently use daily from the given list; each student can select up to 3 kinds of media, but most of them chose either one or two of them. In the comparison of comments made by elementary school children and university students, it was noticeable that these 2 groups were dependent on different types of media and their use of and relationship with them were also different. Therefore, the responses to this added question seemed worthy of investigation and analysis. Table 1 shows the percentage of frequently used media by each group out of the total number of choices made.

Table 1: Types of Media Frequently Used

	Elementary School Students	Junior High School Students	University Students
TV	72%	53%	27%
Print Media	26%	17%	6%
Internet	29%	43%	69%
SNS	7%	17%	44%
Others	1%	2%	4%

Note: The percentage of each column does not add up to 100 because some subjects chose a multiple number of media.

There are overlaps in between media categories as print media can be read or TV programs seen on the Internet. Yet, present-day Japanese students rely on so-called e-media (the Internet and SNS) more and more as ages proceed, the influence of which were detected both explicitly and implicitly in their responses to AIE. The reason why print media is still used by elementary school and junior high school students is probably because the use of newspaper and magazine articles at school has been promoted and often connected with their class activities and homework. Also, elementary schools usually prohibit or limit the use of smart phones at school, so elementary school students' responses included many references to popular TV programs rather than the information obtained from e-media. However, the influence of beliefs and attitudes of their parents and relatives related to foreigners appeared in their responses occasionally, which could reflect the stereotypical views that these adults have formed due to the influence of some media. On the other hand, university students' responses often reflected the information and images they received or exchanged via e-media, especially the Internet. What made their responses different from the other 2 groups was the reliance of rather individual, personal information exchanged by the Internet and SNS; they often referred to the real experiences of themselves and their friends that had been shared by the Internet service like You Tube and SNS to support the particular reactions exhibited toward and opinions expressed about people with different ethnic/cultural backgrounds. A positive side of this phenomenon is their attempt to grasp and treat cultural differences individualistically based on real experiences, but if they depend on the information provided by their friends through SNS, the information itself may be colored or tainted by the influence of other types of media that these people had been exposed to in the past.

4. Conclusions

The following are the conclusions of this experiment.

1. The most important finding was that it appears that the proclivity for stereotyping often emerge and is strengthened as children grow, being exposed to different types of media and interacting with people who have stereotypical views including their parents and friends. The tendencies and characteristics of university and elementary school students found in the previous 2 studies were mostly replicated and confirmed with a larger number of subjects. When junior high school students' responses were added to the comparison, the developmental pattern of the dichotomous, "we, Japanese vs. others" mindset was clearly revealed, namely, positing themselves (Japanese) as opposed to other people from different areas and cultures while neglecting the diversity among them. This could be a common tendency of people without sufficient exposure to and experience with those with different ethnic/cultural backgrounds, but it was alarmingly too strong for Japanese youths to become global citizens in future who will be able to form fruitful relationships with people around the world. The same stereotypical view was even applied to themselves in the manner they failed to see the diversity among the Japanese having different subcultures. Junior high school students, compared to elementary school children are more cognitively mature; thus, as their world expands with increased exposure to different types of media, they become more prone to stereotypical, overgeneralized conceptualization of people foreign to them than elementary school children.
2. As easily expected, the responses of university students were varied depending on their learning histories and experiences rather than their original dispositions, compared to the counterparts of elementary school and junior high school students. However, at least about a third of them were able to change their ethnocentric views, though to different degrees, through the reflective process that AIE prompted and facilitated. Quite a few of them arrived at positive learning by reviewing the intercultural encounters that they had described negatively in the beginning. It means that the original version of AIE partially served its purpose of autonomous learning and could be an effective learning tool to post-adolescents. Still, from a larger picture of educational perspective, it is evident that the introduction of intercultural awareness raising at earlier ages is necessary and the use of young learners' version of AIE has a lot of possibility to nurture intercultural competence if efforts are made for proper intervention and scaffolding.

5. Future directions

Our project team is in the process of constructing a series of maturity-based instructional models of intercultural competence and critical thinking, which reflect accumulated data from both the past and on-going studies. They consist of the types and methods of intercultural education appropriate for each level, which have been tested at various schools of different characteristics in different educational environments; some are progressive private schools while others are traditional local public ones. As expected, we had to make changes in the instructional models after each trial lesson, but in general, have been successful in fostering intercultural competence in elementary school and junior high school students, which are shown in the comparison between their pre-lesson and post-lesson entries in AIE. Likewise, first, second and third graders of elementary school showed more interest in and less bias toward people with different ethnic/cultural backgrounds in the follow-up interviews after the small-group introductory lesson.

One big difficulty we have been facing is Japanese people's excessive attention to English education and the centralized educational system which control teaching contents of elementary and secondary education, which prevents new lessons on intercultural competence from being tested or introduced easily. Japanese Ministry Education has been keen on the development of English education methods and new criteria, so Common European Framework of Reference (2001) has been adopted in language education, especially English teaching and assessment from its early stages. Sometimes, this almost exclusive emphasis placed on English education runs counter to more pluralistic approaches to language and culture prevalent in Europe (2006). Hopefully, our attempt to create programs and curriculums to raise intercultural consciousness and nurture intercultural competence will attract more researchers' interests, including educators of languages other than English, and help change the beliefs of policy makers as well as general public so that the importance of this type of education will receive more attention.

Continuous efforts will be made to do more fine-tuning of the instructional models we have developed with modifications and adjustments, with an eye toward arriving at more feasible, optimal and consistent

intercultural education instructional models that are conducive to different types/levels of classes at elementary, secondary, and tertiary education in Japan. AIE will continue to be used, firstly to validate these teaching models and materials and secondly, for autonomous, reflective learning *per se*, which is its original function. It is hoped that the further collection of real intercultural experiences from different age groups of younger generations will also help make the teaching models and methods more sophisticated and attenuated to different developmental stages and actual needs of Japanese students.

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