

Everybody in a Circle Now: Intercultural Competence through Japanese College Club Activities

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Abstract

This presentation reports on a unique attempt to develop students' intercultural competence in a JSL environment, and its outcome. Furthermore, the presentation discusses the limitations of learning in a JFL environment and possible ways to achieve a situation similar to a JSL environment to help students develop better intercultural competence in the United States. Mastery of Japanese socio-linguistic competence requires the acquisition not only of linguistic features, but also of pragmatic competence. This competence is notoriously difficult to acquire in the classroom, and even in study abroad contexts, where students receive a massive amount of input (Hashimoto 1993, Marriott 1995, Siegal 1995, Siegal 1996, Cook 2001, Tateyama 2001).

During the present study, beginning and intermediate-level Japanese learners participated in a 6-week summer intensive course in Japan and had an opportunity to attend various college club activities as part of the curriculum. It is common in Japan for college students to spend after-school hours participating in extra-curricular activities, or club-activities (*kurabu-katudoo*). One is tempted to draw parallels with U.S. college sports clubs, however, the social systems underlying club activities are different from those in the U.S. The collected data were analyzed using the theoretical work of intercultural competence; attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Byram 1997). The data reveal that an approach focusing on linguistic features and cultural competence within a larger cultural frame, though challenging, would be beneficial for students'

communication strategies. The participants reported that they acquired not only the language, but also intercultural knowledge, and grew aware of speech act differences between Japanese in senior-junior (*senpai-koochai*) relationships.

Keywords: Study abroad, intercultural competence

Introduction

Mastery of Japanese language requires the acquisition not only of linguistic features, but also of intercultural competence. This competence is notoriously difficult to acquire in the classroom, and even in study abroad contexts, where students receive a massive amount of input (Hashimoto 1993, Marriott 1995, Siegal 1995, Siegal 1996, Cook 2001, Tateyama 2001). The Monitor Hypothesis (Krashen and Terrell, 1983) claims language learners acquire second language knowledge unconsciously, as children do. However, Schmidt (1990) argues that all language learning needs attention and the learners' awareness is necessary to acquire new language features. How can learners of Japanese acquire this socio-cultural and socio-linguistic competence? Consequently, this also raises the present research question: How can the acquisition of intercultural competence and performance be developed more effectively?

Participation in college club activities is commonplace in Japan. Although, in the U.S. students also have opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities, the social systems underlying club activities are different from those in Japan. In other words,

for Japanese language learners, participation in such activities would necessitate exposure to such systems, and perhaps aid in the acquisition of intercultural competence. Beginning and intermediate-level Japanese learners participated in a six-week summer intensive course in Japan and had an opportunity to attend various college club activities (*kurabu-katudoo*) as part of the curriculum. Questionnaires, students' self reports, and classroom discussion were used as data and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

This paper reports on a unique attempt to develop students' intercultural competence in a JSL environment and its outcome. In addition, it discusses the limitations of learning in a JFL environment and possible ways to achieve a situation similar to a JSL environment to help students develop better intercultural competence in the United States.

2. Extra-curricular activities

Japanese college students commonly spend after-school hours participating in extra-curricular activities, the so-called club-activities (*kurabu-katudoo*). Some are sports clubs, as is the case in many American universities, and they compete against teams from other colleges. There are also non-sports clubs consisting of students who share similar interests, such as the *manga* club. The social systems supporting these club activities differ from sports clubs and non-sport organizations found in the U.S. For instance, a sophomore student would normally use a casual-style speech when talking to freshman or sophomore students, but would use polite-style speech when addressing an older student or a teacher in Japan. Sometimes these differences are not taught effectively in classroom settings due to the challenge of creating an authentic context to demonstrate these dynamics. However, in organizations such as sports or

martial arts clubs at school, distinctions in rank between older students (*senpai*) and younger students (*koohai*) are rigidly observed. Thus, it stands to reason that participation in club activities has the potential to promote intercultural competence of Japanese learners.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants in this case study were 22 students enrolled in the summer Japanese program at the Kanazawa Institute of Technology, Kanazawa, Japan. Seven were females, fifteen were males. Their native language was English, with the exception of one female student whose native language was Chinese. They were enrolled in three different American universities. The participants had formal Japanese language instruction before they came to Japan. They were divided into two levels of Japanese classes based on the placement test they took on the first day of the program. Class 2 was the beginner level and included eight of the participants. Class 3 was intermediate to advanced, and included 14 participants.

3.2. Procedures

At Kanazawa Institute of Technology, there are 5 sports and 4 non-sports clubs available to the students. The club-activity observation report was an assignment for "Japanese Communication II," a Japanese language course. First, the students had an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the club activities through observation and they were asked to indicate three preferences in writing. No more than 5 students were sent to the same club. Table 1 shows the clubs that the participants joined and the number of participants.

| Club name | Numbers of participants |
|--|-------------------------|
| Kendo | 1 |
| Kyudo (Japanese archery) | 3 |
| Judo | 3 |
| Nagao-ryu Goshinjutsu (art of defense) | 3 |
| Art | 4 |
| Igo-shogi (Japanese chess) | 2 |
| Tennis | 1 |
| Manga | 4 |
| Car | 1 |

Table 1: Club activities and number of participants

The participants were required to participate in club activities once a week. However, since each club had a different schedule, when to attend the club activity was left to the students' discretion. The participants were also required to submit an observation report which detailed "when and which club they participated in," "what they did," "what kind of Japanese expressions they learned," "their observations," and "the ratio of language usage (Japanese or English)."

3.3. Data collection

The data were collected through questionnaires after the class ended. Questionnaires were used to collect two kinds of information: their self-evaluation and program evaluation. The questions for the club activity assignment were the following: (a) enjoyment, (b) satisfaction, (c) interaction. Enjoyment and satisfaction were rated on a scale of 1 to 5: 1 indicating "disagree" and 5 indicating "agree." The participants were also asked to mark the Japanese student group with which they interacted most during the program.

The discussion during the culture class was also used as qualitative data. The participants were asked in English how they felt about the club-activity assignment. The

discussion carried on from how they felt, their suggestions for future students and the program organizer, and what they learned.

4. Analysis

The data (Table 2) indicate that participants enjoyed this assignment. In Class 2, the average was 4.5. In Class 3, the average was 3.79. However, the satisfaction rate failed to meet their enjoyment. The satisfaction average was 2.7 in Class 2, and 3.79 in Class 3. This discrepancy may be related to the participant's language proficiency. Class 3 participants' language proficiency levels were higher than of Class 2 participants. Therefore, Class 3 participants may have had more avenues for communication than Class 2 participants.

| | Enjoyed | Satisfied |
|----------------|---------|-----------|
| Class 2 | 4.50 | 2.7 |
| Class 3 | 3.79 | 3.79 |
| Average | 4.05 | 3.24 |

Table 2: Questionnaire Result 1

The data (Table 3) also indicate Class 3 participants had more interaction with Japanese club members than did Class 2 participants. These data support the idea that participants' language proficiency levels are directly related to their communication capacity and frequency of interaction with Japanese club members. It can be said that Class 2 participants' interaction is limited to SGE students who are more accustomed to communicating with American students with a better command of English than club members.

| | Club members | SGE | Others |
|----------------|--------------|--------|--------|
| Class 2 | 0% | 75% | 25% |
| Class 3 | 7.14% | 85.71% | 7.14% |
| Average | 4.55% | 81.82% | 13.64% |

Table 3: Questionnaire Result 2

According to the discussion in Japanese culture class, the participants who joined traditional martial arts clubs learned the social systems underlying Japanese club activities through engaging in these clubs. For example, they could observe the speech differences between *senpai* and *koochai*, which reflect a hierarchical relationship and are crucial to Japanese socio-linguistic competence. The participants also observed that sports clubs have a more distinct relationship between *senpai* and *koochai* than non-sports clubs.

However, the participants pointed out that even though they observed the speech differences they did not necessarily feel that they needed to use polite language. This case study seems to indicate that participants are using other strategies to fill their limitations of linguistic usage, and these strategies are acceptable to Japanese students. It should be noted that they were aware of the differences in the speech styles, however, they did not see themselves as a major participant enough to use the polite language.

In addition, the participants who attended sports club activities reported that the communication with Japanese students was easier when they were engaged in physical activities as they could use gestures and what they were supposed to do was clearly observable.

5. Limitations of the case study and suggestions for future assignments

This case study indicates that the participants are aware of speech act differences between *senpai* and *koochai*. They are also aware of Japanese students' expectations and their linguistic limitations, which lead them to use other communication strategies. However, individual differences need to be considered. Motivation and learning strategies are different for each participant. Furthermore, it is also important

to take note of how sensitive or aware a particular learner may be.

Although there are a variety of sports and non-sports clubs available, the club activities that participants could attend were limited. Since this was the first attempt to incorporate club activities into the curriculum, there were some misunderstandings between the international office and school administrative offices. This should be improved for next year. Furthermore, the participants were not informed of this assignment when they were in the U.S. The participants pointed out that had they known about this assignment they could bring appropriate clothing and equipment, and presumably enjoy a fuller club experience. Not having the proper attire, or equipment, might have prevented them from being able to ingratiate themselves fully into the club. This oversight can also be addressed in the future.

Further, some Japanese students in a given club were not used to interacting with foreign students. As a result, some Japanese students would not talk to the participants unless the participants initiated the conversation. It was also likely that most of the Japanese club members were not well informed that their active cooperation would greatly affect the Japanese language learners' development of language skills or, more specifically, intercultural competence. To maximize the effectiveness of this activity, it may be useful for the program to conduct a prior orientation to clarify its purpose to the Japanese students.

Finally, the analysis is to a large extent based on participants' self-reports. Hence, to examine the genuine effectiveness of participation in club activities to develop socio-pragmatic competence, collecting the students' language samples before and after the program will become necessary.

6. Conclusion and pedagogical suggestion

This study explained a unique attempt to develop students' intercultural competence in a JSL environment through club activities. The results indicate that participating in club activities enhanced the participants' knowledge of the social systems, like hierarchical relationships, underlying Japanese clubs. In addition, they learned how these hierarchical relationships could change depending on the context by carefully observing the speech styles of the Japanese club members. Submission of the club activity report helped them become more aware of these social systems and different speech styles and reinforced their knowledge.

Interestingly, some participants did not feel it necessary to adjust their speech styles, regardless of their awareness of such expectations. This can be attributed to the limited period of time the students could participate in a given club activity, which may have prevented them from immersing themselves fully into the groups of Japanese students. Considering this obstacle, the students' awareness has improved, however, acquiring the performance level competence might require more time and further reinforcement.

Incorporating the club activity into the curriculum was possible in a JSL environment as implemented at the summer intensive program at Kanazawa Institute of Technology. However, in a JFL environment, there are not many club activities administered by native speakers of Japanese. It is challenging to find an opportunity for Japanese language learners to develop intercultural competence in and outside the classroom. Organizing the conversation table once a week and requiring the students to attend it outside the classroom can be one way to facilitate student interaction with native speakers of Japanese and enhance their intercultural

competence. Assigning a certain task or self-evaluation report is the key to help raise the learners' awareness of different speech styles and social systems that native speakers of Japanese are exhibiting. For further reinforcement, classroom discussion and practice, utilizing expressions the students picked up at the conversation table will be helpful. Acquisition of intercultural competence can be achieved successfully if given ample exposure and appropriate amount of reinforcement either in JSL or JFL environment, although the latter case can be more challenging.

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