

# Building Intercultural Communicative Competence: Analyzing the Language Exchange Program

Ayana INOBUCHI (Rikkyo University)

Keywords : Intercultural Communicative Competence, language exchange program,  
language teaching, culture learning

## 概要

本研究では、日本語と英語のエクステンジプログラムにおける学生間のコミュニケーションを異文化理解能力の観点から分析する。学生のコメントからどのような学びと発見があったのかを掘り下げ、文化的気づきへの影響についても言及する。また、言語、文化、社会の関係性や文化の定義なども議論する。

## 1. Introduction

For a long time, the language teaching community has discussed the importance of considering the cultural impact of a linguistic activity and the social influence on learning outcome. But language classes deal with “culture” as only knowledge or information in order to evaluate if learners learn “culture” correctly. In addition, Ware and Kramsch (2005) refer to the risk of misunderstanding that learners automatically improve their cultural competence by themselves from communication with others. Teachers need to realize that the social and cultural elements of language learning are not simple knowledge but those aspects tremendously influence learners’ mindsets to decide their behaviors. Individual learning development cannot be understood without reference to the social and cultural context within which it is embedded.

In order to inspire the cultural and social impacts in language learning, this paper discusses the language exchange program that was conducted in the University in the US. The goal of the discussion is to help build a culture-inspired learning opportunity in a language teaching classroom by analyzing the students’ comments on a questionnaire about the exchange program. While examining the program to understand better what was happening to the students during the communication, the paper also discusses the relationship between language and culture, culture definitions, and the socio-cultural viewpoint toward language teaching and learning.

## 2. The Exchange Program Outline

The goal of the program is to encourage students to be aware of their own cultures alongside someone's different culture through reflecting on their experiences of interacting with their partners. It aims for students to be able to realize which cultural criteria they use when they make a decision about their behaviors and attitudes. Below is the list of the goals:

1. to understand that one's cultural criteria toward different culture is not always right
2. to understand that self-culture will be recognized in a different way by someone in a different culture
3. to enforce cultural awareness to recognize one's cultural criteria objectively

The exchange program was language exchange communication through Skype between Japanese college students who were studying English in Japan and American college students who were taking an elementary Japanese class in the US. It was a five week program and the students had a weekly session with their partners. In each session students conversed and exchanged ideas on the following four topics, 1. Getting to know each other, 2. College life, 3. Hometown and home country, and 4. Weekends and holidays. Students submitted a report sharing their experiences with a teacher after each session and they also did an initial questionnaire before the program as well as a final wrap-up questionnaire after the program. The outline is below.

Table 1. The outline

	Contents
Pre-session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial Questionnaire</li> <li>• Pre-reading: session 1 task sheet</li> </ul>
Session 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Getting to know each other</li> <li>• Weekly report: session 1</li> <li>• Pre-reading: session 2 task sheet</li> </ul>
Session 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• College life</li> <li>• Weekly report: session 2</li> <li>• Pre-reading: session 3 task sheet</li> </ul>
Session 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hometown and home country</li> <li>• Weekly report: session 3</li> <li>• Pre-reading: session 4 task sheet</li> </ul>
Session 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weekends and holidays</li> <li>• Weekly report: session 4</li> <li>• Final questionnaire</li> </ul>

### 3. Motivation

#### 3.1 Linguaculture

Motivation of the program is a concern that language teaching environment tends not to deal with when it comes to assessing cultural impact on language appropriately. Language and culture are firmly intertwined and the connection is referred as “linguaculture” by Fanitini (1997). Linguaculture explains that cultural contexts influence language so strongly that language produces various meanings besides semantics. Thus, understanding grammar is insufficient for appropriate communication with others who have different cultural backgrounds and experience. Grammatically correct vocabularies and expressions would often cause misunderstandings if the context that the language is used in is not relevant. Krampsch (1998:26) refers to that, *“One had to understand why they said what they said and how they said it to whom in a specific context of situation.”* A variety of cultural contexts should support linguistic meaning to explain why people take a specific action in a specific situation.

Although it is obvious that the idea of linguaculture should be introduced to the language classroom, practical application of this principle has proven difficult. In many cases, culture is presented to learners as simple knowledge or a single technique separated from language interaction and vice versa. Cultural influence on language tends to be overlooked and learning is only focused either on language organization or explicit cultural items as a tool. This concern motivated the decision to start the program, which explores a way of inspiring culture learning in teaching language settings.

#### 3.2 Intercultural Communicative Competence

Considering the emphasis on linguaculture, the program sets the goal to improve students’ Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) through the interaction with their partners culturally and linguistically. ICC is currently a major approach for language and culture teaching settings after foreign language education had been passed through proficiency approach. ICC is the verbal and nonverbal interaction between people with different cultural backgrounds at any level such as individual, classroom, community and society. The ideal outcome of effective ICC learning is that learners should respect to others’ cultural concepts including ethnic, gender, tradition and/or personal values, and also be aware of one’s own culture.

Under the ICC approach, Byram proposed the Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (1997). He categorizes ICC qualities as four stages: 1. Attitude, 2. Knowledge, 3. Skills, 4. Awareness of Values. Dealing with ICC, cultural awareness through reflection was a key factor, and ICC learning should be designed to inspire learners to reflect on their ICC experience. In fact, the program attempted to encourage students to be aware what culture they have internalized and how they responded to their partners based on their internalized culture.

In addition, Kramersch (1993) proposed the idea of “The Third Place,” which focuses on cultural relativism. The Third Place means creating a new status between two cultural boundaries, self and others, and it enables learners to perceive different cultures relatively. ICC learning should introduce such an environment to be culturally relative and sensitive, and it should be reinforced by a solid culture framework like Byram’s model.

#### 4. Challenge for Intercultural Communicative Competence

##### 4.1 Culture Definition

Despite the strong influence on language, cultural elements of language tend to be overlooked in the classroom because of the complexity of cultural perspectives. “Culture” in this environment refers to cultural perspectives such as values, beliefs and assumptions, which are influenced by individual experience and personality. Those perspectives strongly influence language and communication because the “individuality” allows people to perceive events in their own ways and to behave uniquely regardless of their nationalities. Lusting (1993) says “A cultural pattern may be the preferred choice of most cultural members,” and “not all cultural members will necessarily share all of those preferred choices.” Thus, culture is not inherited by people in a particular society but it consists of various perspectives such as values, beliefs, and assumptions.

Cultural perspectives are difficult to observe as they are practiced through experiencing the patterns of behavior and personal interaction. On the other hand, there are concrete, explicit, and visible culture symbols, which are referred to as “Products” by Moran (2001). He identifies examples such as clothing, written documents, music, education, politics or religion. The language classroom tends to present and explain culture products instead of cultural perspectives as a target culture during ICC experience. This is a possible reason that culture is presented superficially in a language classroom. It also explains why the “culture” in cultural learning is treated as simple comparison or a technique for a communication tool, which is a challenge for exploring ICC.

##### 4.2 Socio-cultural Approach

Treating culture as simple knowledge and a communication tool risks leading learners to misunderstand that only knowledge needs to be acquired and it is the most important factor for ICC. Also, it risks introducing stereotypes to learners. Taking the risks into consideration, I would present a socio-cultural approach as a possible approach to understand how cultural understanding should be processed successfully in ICC practice.

When discussing risks in ICC learning, it would be helpful to examine transitioning the learning approach from a proficiency approach to a socio-cultural approach. The goal of the proficiency approach is to ensure that learners acquire knowledge and skills so that they can demonstrate outcomes they are expected to learn through their education. Learners’ progress is

evaluated by academic criteria that focus on achieving proficiency or meeting expected standards. However, because of the strong focus on outcome of knowledge and skills, the proficiency approach has been criticized for failing to consider social influence on learning. This critique prompted the socio-cultural approach to be applied to learning practice.

In the socio-cultural approach, learners advance their knowledge and skills through interactions with others. Vygotsky built a foundation of the theory that stresses social interaction in cognitive development (1978). According to Vygotsky, when an individual acquires knowledge it should be a result of interaction with others socially and culturally. Social connection and influence is essential for learners to construct their learning, and the approach is opposed to a theory of behaviorism that focuses on systematized information. Learning is a social process and the social contribution to one's knowledge should be emphasized in the process of cognitive development. Vygotsky's socio-cultural approach would give a new insight to ICC practice to understand better what is happening to learners during the interaction.

Following the principle of the socio-cultural approach, ICC practice should apply this approach instead of the proficiency approach. The goal of ICC is not to memorize knowledge and information nor is it to be proficient in specific culture skills for specific communication. Knowledge and skills cannot be packaged and systematized to provide to learners, but they are structured through social interaction. Thus, ICC, focusing on cultural perspectives instead of cultural products, should be introduced and encouraged through experiencing personal interaction in a community or a society. In the end, the socio-cultural approach should be applied to build ICC practice.

## 5. Analysis

According to the discussion, ICC learning should recognize which aspect of culture is going to be introduced to the classroom and it should also consider the impact of social interaction on whole communication. Based on the realization, I would examine the Initial and the Final Questionnaires of the exchange program by using Byram's Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (1997): 1. Attitude, 2. Knowledge, 3. Skills, and 4. Awareness of Values. Analyzing students' comments by the framework would be helpful to grasp the gist of which cultural aspects influenced students, how students interacted with their partners, and how the learning process improved students' cultural self-awareness.

The following is the list of questions of the Initial and the Final Questionnaires and summarized students' comments. There are four question topics: 1. Goal, 2. Ideas of Japan, 3. Communication, and 4. Your thoughts for the present and the future. Question number four, your thoughts for the present and the future, is not included in the Initial Questionnaire but only in the Final Questionnaire. Also, depending on Byram's Model, question one's goal is related with "Attitude," question two, ideas of Japan, is "Knowledge," question three,

communication, is “Skills,” and question four is “Awareness”.

Table 2. Initial and the Final Questionnaires and comments

<b>1. Goal (Attitude)</b>	
<i>Initial Questionnaire</i>	<i>Final Questionnaire</i>
What is your motivation for joining the project? (ex: what do you expect from the project? What made you decide to be a part of the project?)	1. Were you satisfied with the project and the communication you had with your partner? Why did you think it was successful or unsuccessful?
	2. Did you complete your initial goal(s) during the sessions? What was your goal at the time you started the project, and how did it change over the course of the project?
<i>Final Questionnaire: Comments</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was fun to talk with my partner.</li> <li>• I'm satisfied with the experience.</li> <li>• I feel more comfortable with Japanese.</li> </ul>	
<b>2. Ideas of Japan (Knowledge)</b>	
<i>Initial Questions</i>	<i>Final Questions</i>
What do you currently know about Japan, Japanese people and Japanese culture? (ex: Do you have general ideas about the country, people and culture?) What have you heard about them (from internet, books, your friends, etc)? Do you have any first-hand impressions?	1. Were your initial ideas about Japan (country, people, and culture) correct? If your initial knowledge was incorrect, how was it different? Do those things make sense now that you have communicated with your partner?
	2. What did you learn from your partner during the sessions? What do you think was interesting?
<i>Final Questionnaire: Comments</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I thought Japanese would not like a foreigner, but it was wrong.</li> <li>• I was much shier than my partner.</li> <li>• I realized that we have a lot more in common that I thought we would.</li> </ul> <p>* 1. I found it interesting to learn that Japan and the US have very many things in common, but still are two very different countries.</p> <p>* 2. I was surprised that my partner didn't know that Americans love Japanese anime.</p>	

\* 3. I also found it very interesting to learn about American things which are popular in Japan – some things which I expected to be popular and were not, and others which were and I would never have thought so. On the flipside, it was also very interesting to learn the difference between what Japanese things are popular here and what is popular in Japan.

**3. Communication (Skills)**

<i>Initial Questions</i>	<i>Final Questions</i>
What do you think will happen when you are communicating with your partner (what do you think will go well and not so well)?	1. Did any interesting surprise happen? Did you find any difference between you and your partner in terms of gestures, ways of talking, decision-making processes, and methods of describing expressions/feelings? Please explain them in detail if you discovered any.
	2. Did you change your communication approach because of the difference with your partner's approach? If so, why did you decide to do so, and what did you change? What effect did the change have on your communication?

*Final Questionnaire: Comments*

•My communication and my partner's were very similar.

\* 4. I discovered that my partner would frequently nod or make a noise to show that she was still listening or grasping what I was saying. We do that in the US, but to a much lesser extent; it seemed that she did it very often, to the point where, in the US, it might even come off as someone is not listening and is being rude! I found it very interesting that in one culture, it is considered polite to let the speaker know you are listening frequently, while in the other culture, it could be considered rude in some situations. Very interesting.

**4. Your thoughts for the present and the future (Awareness)**

<i>Initial Questions</i>	<i>Final Questions</i>
	1. Did you find any change in your cultural perspectives after the project? (ex: your ideas about your own culture comparing to someone's culture that is different than yours)
	2. Do you think you will change your

	communication approach in the future? If so, how do you want to change?
<i>Final Questionnaire: Comments</i>	
<p>•I do not find any change.</p> <p>* 5. The parts of Japanese culture that we fixate on outside of Japan don't necessarily reflect the mainstream of Japan... I therefore want to try to do a better job not only in representing myself and my own culture against false misconceptions, but also in remembering that what I know about other countries is also only from the outside, and it may not always be reflective of the sentiment inside.</p>	

### 5.1 Overall View

There are many responses from students for question one, Goal (Attitude), question two, Ideas of Japan (Knowledge), and question three, Communication (Skills). In question one, many students were satisfied with the project and their performance. They became confident with their proficiencies by the end of the program. With questions two and three, Ideas of Japan (Knowledge) and Communication (Skills), they learned their pre-knowledge was not always right and they discovered new aspects of Japan and Japanese people. The important fact here is that the students made discoveries from the interaction with their partners, not from information in a lecture, which is one of the aims of the exchange program. On the other hand, as for question four, Your thoughts for the present and the future (Awareness), students' responses were not very active. Many of them didn't find any change in themselves.

### 5.2 Awareness

To analyze the comments, I would focus on "Awareness" and categorize the comments by Byram's Model, not by the questions of the questionnaire. For instance, although some comments are the answers for questions two, Ideas of Japan (Knowledge), or question three, Communication (Skills), they are actually responsive to the question about "Awareness" depending on the facts of the answers. It is because some comments are related with students' cultural awareness even in the criteria of "Knowledge" and "Skills". Those comments are a sign that students started to reflect on their learning experience using their cultural perspectives.

In the list of responses, there are five comments marked with an asterisk that should be discussed as "Awareness". First, comments one, two, three under question two, Ideas of Japan (Knowledge), should be examined. It is a starting point for ICC program to realize what students have believed so far and how it was different than the reality. In comment one, a student started to be sensitive to both differences and similarities. In comments two and three, students realized their expectations were not necessarily right and there are two points of

views even in one culture. The student who gave comment three continued to state that, *“I guess it’s just interesting to see that such things can originate in one country and then take on a life of their own in other countries without the first country even realizing it in some cases.”*

Next, comment four under question three, Communication (Skills), mentions not only cultural viewpoints but also culture influenced communication. The student realized that a manner of listening is not universal and she was aware that there would be a chance the cultural difference could cause a conflict.

Finally, in the comment five, under question four, Your thoughts for the present and the future (Awareness), a student commented about his insightful idea related with a conversation about a Japanese movie “Battle Royale” with his partner. When he heard his partner call the movie “grotesque,” he was very surprised because he had been thinking most Japanese movies were violent and he expected that to be considered the norm. He was also surprised what he believed was not right. And he wondered which parts of American culture are popular outside of the US and how this shapes people’s opinions of the US from abroad. He finally mentioned in his comment that people tend to assume that foreigners have exposure to the same aspects of your culture that you do, but what kind of things they are actually seeing would be varied depends on one’s cultural perspectives and experience.

According to his comment, it is clear that he discovered that “culture” would be defined in a variety of ways depending on individual perspectives. Through his discovery he learns that, what he believes about a specific Japanese culture is not the same as his partner’s culture despite the fact that his partner is Japanese. He was aware that it would happen to his own culture, too. Thus, what he views toward American culture would be viewed in a different way from others. He realized one’s cultural understanding is not always right since culture is not a solid thing but a fluid thing that changes shape depending on one’s experience and perception. The realization makes him aware of his cultural expectation and gives him an insight of cultural perspectives such as values, beliefs and assumptions. He learned this from the interaction with his partner.

Through all the comments related to awareness, it is apparent that students experienced a variety of cultural incidences, reflected the experience, and discovered new types of cultural perspectives that they had not realized so far. In addition to understanding culture as knowledge or information, the real experience by mutual interaction with their partners influenced the students’ learning of cultural perspectives. The students were aware of their own cultural values, beliefs, and assumptions to a certain degree.

## 6. Conclusion

The program was accepted by the students positively. Some students could even expand their cultural competence which enables them to be aware of their own cultural perspectives. They learned a way of observing another side of culture that they did not expect. The program became a chance

for them to take a different approach in future experiences with intercultural communication. On the other hand, there were students who could not reach the level of understanding their cultural perspectives, but only enjoyed studying cultural products. Those students apparently need a careful facilitation by a teacher in order to reach cultural realization. The facilitation is the challenge for the exchange program. In addition to giving questionnaires to students, careful and timely consultation is necessarily for facilitating students' learning. Teachers will be required to have appropriate skill and experience and creating the method will be a topic for future discussion.

References:

- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Fantini, A. E. (ed.). (1997). *New ways in teaching culture*. Alexandria: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc.
- Kramsch, C. (1998). *Language and culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lusting, M.W. and Jolene, K. (1993). *Intercultural competence: Interpersonal Communication Across Cultures*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Moran, P. (2001). *Teaching culture: Perspectives in practice*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ware, P. D., & Kramsch, C. (2005). Toward an intercultural stance: Teaching German and English through telecollaboration. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89.2, 190-205.