UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM GLOBALISATION: DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION AND UNDERSTANDING COURSES AT A JAPANESE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The presence of multinational, foreign affiliate and major Japanese companies in which globalisation means working in culturally-diverse work environments is steadily increasing. Naturally, Japanese university students seeking employment in this type of work environment need to be prepared for the linguistic and cultural challenges that await. Currently, there is an ocean of material from ESP textbooks available that answer the need to some extent. However, can such sources provide knowledge of specific situations? Would the introduction of 'real life' situations (observations and audio-video interviews) with a focus on workplace communication strategies help them more? This paper introduces a challenging research project that has been developed to further contribute with such material. It begins with an outline of where the project is situated within the realm of intercultural communication education necessity. It then discusses the significance of such a project and how it is being developed with the aim of producing material for the classroom as well as online. It concludes with a summary of the challenging nature of the project and how it may contribute to further enhancing intercultural business communication studies at tertiary level in Japan.

1 Introduction: Situating the research project

This paper explicates the structure and design of a three-year research project which aims to develop intercultural business communication and understanding courses at a Japanese university. As the business world becomes ever-more borderless and transnational (Butcher, 2004), most developed nations, including Japan, are experiencing an increase in the emergence of linguistically- and culturally-diverse workplace dynamics. Needless to say, people working in such multicultural contexts will require heightened intercultural awareness and communication skills. In the case of Japan, there is now an increasing call to equip Japanese university students with the appropriate language skills and cultural intelligence so that they can be function effectively and be more competitive in the globalized job market (The Japan Times, 2013). In short, the critical-thinking and analytical skills acquisition made possible by linking language and cultural intelligence in the specific context of multicultural workplace dynamics are now in high demand.

To date, some research has been conducted on the link between language competency and cultural intelligence in culturally-diverse workplace contexts (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996, 1998, 1999; O'Connell 2006, 2011). However, research on clear strategies of how to nurture

and intertwine these two competencies through university programs in Japan for optimal use is still relatively scarce. Moreover, the Japanese government is now pushing for more of its future generation of workers to be equipped with effective and usable intercultural workplace communication skills. Recently, G30 (The Japan Times, 2013) and other basic intercultural related courses at national and private universities (e.g. Ritsumeikan University, Sophia University, Keio University, Doshisha University, International Christian University, Nanzan University etc.) are increasing. In addition, faculties dedicated to intercultural related studies within Japanese universities are also slowly beginning to appear (Rikkyo University, Kobe University, Shoin University, Ryugoku University), although these too are still limited in numbers.

This trend to offer a combination of skill and content-based courses strongly suggests the perfect opportunity to create specific courses and learning materials to answer this demand and improve the intercultural business communications skills of Japanese university students. To this end, the current research project, which is funded by the Japanese government's *Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research Grant (26580119)* under the category of *Challenging and Exploratory Research (2014-2016)* is located within this context to respond to the above-mentioned demands and needs.

2 Research project significance & aims: Expanding on past research

In 2011, the author completed a PhD (O'Connell, 2011) in the field of intercultural business communication. It was an empirical study that created richer description and deeper understanding of intercultural workplace communication than that elaborated in expatriate-local staff literature and intercultural communication discourse. Exploring the specific context of Australian-Japanese intercultural workplace communication in Japan, the study examined the use and interaction of high second-language (L2) (Japanese) competency and cultural intelligence in workplace communication between expatriates and Japanese co-workers.

The research design allowed for the extraction of multiple perspectives (Japanese workers, Australian expatriate, author as a bilingual researcher) on communication strategies through an array of workplace communication themes emerging from observation, recording and interviewing of participants conducted at the research site. The research design purposely steered away from anecdote-laden approaches so often seen in intercultural communication research. Rather, the focus on the 'real-life' world of communicative practice in intercultural workplace communication was instructive. The overall aim was to elucidate the ways in which effective workplace communication between expatriates and local Japanese staff is achieved. The results showed proficient linguistic competency is not the only way that a productive harmonious workplace is achieved, but also through the 'cultural intelligence' of the L2 speaker. This was based on the theory that cultural intelligence is a key that often is a disregarded element of language competency. Although limited to a single case-study, the empirical findings have provided scope for future research in the specific intercultural communication context of foreigners and Japanese working together in culturally diverse environments in Japan, including how the elements of these contexts and cultural diversity impact on the competence.

Presently, the authentic data gained from this research is used as part of the content material in two intercultural communication related courses as well as Japanese-English Interpreting workshops at Nanzan University. The exposure to authentic data has allowed students taking these courses to analyse and model 'real-life' intercultural workplace communication. Additionally, it has stimulated critical-thinking when students analyse the link between language competency and cultural intelligence. As such, reactions to limited exposure to authentic content has led to the drive to further research and expand material creation by focusing on the interaction of L2 language proficiency and cultural intelligence in different intercultural workplace contexts.

3 Research project aims: Linking language skills and cultural intelligence

The ultimate aim of this project is to create intercultural business communication programs that integrate language and cultural learning through classroom and online programs. Specifically, it has three main development aims as illustrated and explained below:

AIM 1	AIM 2	AIM 3
Understanding the current level of Intercultural-related education	Collecting authentic Intercultural workplace data	Creating 'real life' Intercultural-related material

Fig. 1. Research project: Three development aims

Each of these three aims have been established to achieve the following:

1) to investigate the content of current intercultural business communication and understanding programs at leading universities overseas and Japan.

2) to collect intercultural workplace related data in Japan from companies with a Japanese and English-speaking foreign worker dynamic.

3) to create authentic 'real-life' intercultural business communication material as classroom and online programs that provide Japanese students with an array of skills to navigate the work processes and dynamics of intercultural workplaces.
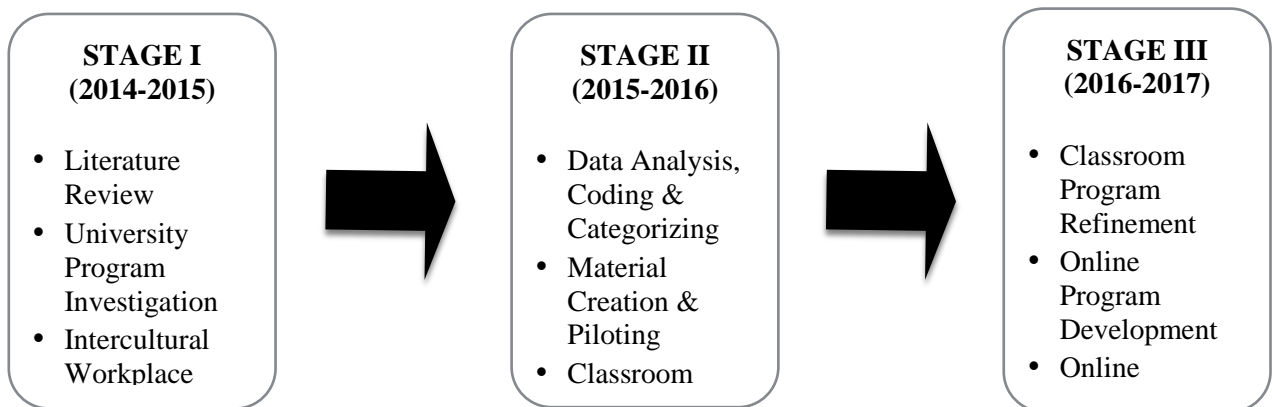
4 Research project design and implementation: Deciding the methods and approach

Using the success of Cripps' (2011) research and creation of an `Online Study Abroad Center' as a guideline, authentic data will be collected through questionnaires, on-site observations, recordings and interviews from intercultural workplaces in Japan to develop the above-mentioned programs. Students will be able to receive guided instruction in the classroom as well as to access an array of online material extracted from the research to

motivate their independent learning and help prepare them to be able to work in future possible intercultural workplaces. The use of up-to-date technology coupled with the language-culture competency skill training will seek to provide students the opportunity to enhance their value as effective intercultural-competent workers. In short, this project aims to fill the gap missing in linking language and cultural competency for the specific purpose of future employment.

Presently, numerous intercultural communication and intercultural business communication courses are available throughout European, American and other Asian universities. Conversely, as mentioned above, the number of dedicated programs in Japanese universities is still significantly low and require more in-depth research and development. Most universities within Japan provide general English education as well as EAP and ESP courses, which in a sense aim to provide with opportunities to enhance their skills. For example, Nanzan University established its *International Course Category* in 2012 (Nanzan University, 2014) in which students can choose from over 40 elective courses ranging in theme from liberal studies through to specialist subjects such as operations research, politics and business conducted in English only. These courses are proved to be highly successful and have begun to answer the need to incorporate a global view regarding content. However, like many other ESP type courses, there is still insufficient focus on multicultural workplace dynamics. To that end, this research project aims to build on the current availability of such courses with a newly developed and much needed inclusion of skill-specific material development and authentic workplace content relative to the array intercultural skills that will be required of Japanese university graduates looking to work successfully and effectively in multicultural contexts.

The following illustrates the three stages through which the project will be developed:

STAGE I
(2014-2015)

- Literature Review
- University Program Investigation
- Intercultural Workplace

STAGE II
(2015-2016)

- Data Analysis, Coding & Categorizing
- Material Creation & Piloting
- Classroom

STAGE III
(2016-2017)

- Classroom Program Refinement
- Online Program Development
- Online

Fig. 2. Research project: Three stages of development

In Stage I, existing programs within the context of ESP, content-based English and dedicated intercultural communication and awareness programs both within Japan and overseas have been investigated to identify current trends and possible gaps. Furthermore, data collected through questionnaires, interviews and audio-visual recordings from companies with expatriate and Japanese staff dynamics is currently presently being analyzed.

In Stage II, after all data from Stage I has been sufficiently analyzed, coded and categorized into intercultural business communication and understanding sections, the next step will be to create and pilot learning material. The following table shows the main features of the authentic data being collected and how it will be used:

Table 1. Authentic data collection: Main features

Data Category	Description
Video Interviews	*Case-study material* Japanese and foreign employees of participant organizations talking about the linguistic skills and cultural intelligence needed to work in a culturally-diverse environment.
Sample Conversations	*Listening material* Selected segments of 'real-life' workplace communication between Japanese and foreign workers to be used as listening comprehension exercises.
Vocabulary	*Vocabulary-building material* Data extracted will be coded for use to create lists of frequently-used vocabulary and phrases in English in the context of intercultural business communication between Japanese and foreign workers.
Thematic Analysis	*Workshop material* Data will be sorted into themes related to intercultural business understanding. Accordingly, a series of workshop-style lessons will be created that focus on a balance of skills-based and comprehension-based approaches to enhancing cultural intelligence for the workplace.

At present, the author teaches two ESP-focused *International Category* classes (*An Introduction to the Multicultural Workplace* and *Workplace Communication:Basic Japanese-English Interpretation Skills*) at Nanzan University through which the new material can be piloted.

In Stage III, after obtaining evaluations from students in the pilot, the learning material will be further developed and refined, including the development of online material for access by students outside the classroom before expanding into the university curriculum by 2017.

5 Conclusion: Summarizing the challenging nature of the project

As the workplace becomes more culturally-diverse both within Japan and abroad, it is paramount for people working to have a functional level of cultural intelligence and linguistic ability. To prepare university students that actively seek employment in multicultural arenas, it is up to educators at university level to bring a sense of globalization to the classroom

through content and skills-based instruction that focuses on intercultural business communication and understanding.

This paper has attempted to describe the impetus, aims and design of the current research project which aims to respond to an expected further need for such instruction. The challenging nature of the project can be succinctly summarized as follows:

(1) the creation of clear strategies of how to intertwine language competency and cultural intelligence

(2) the construction of university programs for Japanese students−classroom and online− that fill the gap in skill acquisition specifically aimed at intercultural workplace communication

(3) the dissemination of results to introduce new theory and methods regarding the instruction of communication, critical-thinking and cultural analytical skills that still remain scarce in the field of intercultural business communication and understanding in Japan

(4) the enhancement of authentic English-only content-based courses outside to compliment and possibly add to development of intercultural business communication studies in Japan.

Through the approach explained in this paper, the author is confident that the project can successfully contribute to deepening understanding among Japanese university students, in particular with regards to what are defined as effective strategies in intercultural workplace communication in Japan. More importantly, by incorporating other English-speaking and Japanese workplace contexts, a wider variety of authentic communication data can be extracted. In turn, this means programs can be created that will offer a diverse range of learning materials and models related to 'real life' situations that Japanese university students may face in the working lives. Such materials will be able to be used both in the classroom or online and will be specifically tailored to equip Japanese university students with the skills and knowledge to work effectively in intercultural workplace environments.

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