

Building Intracultural Knowledge through English Education: An Essential Quality for Global Human Resources

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【Abstract】 The necessity for cultivating human resources with international competitiveness has been highly publicized in Japan as globalization progressed. This paper first discusses requisite qualities for “global *jinzai*” (global human resources) as well as the English curriculum for nurturing such talents proposed by MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) and further considers possible teaching ways and materials for deepening students’ intra-cultural understanding specifically in tertiary English education.

【Keywords】 English education, global human resources, culture, MEXT, communication

1. A big missing part in developing *kokusaijin*

The advent of globalization pushed the Japanese society to make a long-term effort to develop young talents with the capacity to actively participate as key players in international fields. To attain the goal of nurturing *kokusaijin* (world citizens, cosmopolitans), the Japanese government and educational institutions faced the urgent need to enhance students’ English communication capabilities around the 1990s, and the society in the past 30 years has witnessed a big shift from a reading centric to a communicative centric curriculum. As many Japanese companies require practical English ability as one of the essential employment conditions today, in order to meet such corporate needs, especially tertiary education has endeavored to incorporate lessons which aimed to cultivate immediate practicality and equip students with qualifications including TOEIC/TOEFL scores.

“Global citizens”, however, are not synonymous with talents with mere English qualifications. A prerequisite for being truly global is to know about one’s own country or culture (*intracultural* understanding) that makes *intercultural* understanding possible. “Intercultural communicative competence” model proposed by Byram (1997) is comprised of 3 factors (attitudes, knowledge, and skills),

and “knowledge” here is defined as “knowledge of self and other; of interaction; individual and societal” (p.34). According to Byram, knowing about other countries and identities through interactions is usually “relational”, meaning that “it is knowledge acquired within socialization in one’s own social groups and often presented in contrast to the significant characteristics of one’s own national group and identity” (p.34). Accumulating knowledge about ‘self’ (forming national self-awareness) is quite necessary for understanding the ‘other’ as it enables one to identify the differences between the two through contrastive interactions.

English education in Japan, however, seems to have downplayed this basic requisite quality in its endeavor of nurturing global citizens and focused simply on English language acquisition for a long while. The trend was still pervasive around the 2000s when the new name “global *jinzai*” (global human resources) came about replacing the former *kokusaijin*. Through the research of the number of the keywords used in association with ‘global *jinzai*’ in the mass media, Ohnishi (2010) found that the use of the phrase ‘English skill’ was predominantly frequent and believes the mass media has possibly played a part in forming the simplistic view of ‘global human resources = people who can speak English’. Moreover, even when language learning was extended to cultural studies, national identity or self-awareness was put aside and students were led to learn about foreign cultures preferentially. Suzuki’s (2000) comparative study of English textbooks used in Japan and China revealed that prescribed textbooks for Japanese compulsory education contained a significant amount of cross-cultural materials and little of national culture whereas those used in China (where the national average TOEIC scores are higher) put much more emphasis on explaining about Chinese life and culture in conversations.

2. The definition of “global *jinzai*” (global human resources)

As mentioned above, Japan has long been behind in realizing the significance of and cultivating students’ intracultural understanding which is necessary for intercultural communications, but the government has recently begun to move towards a rethinking about the quality of “global *jinzai*”, filling in the intracultural understanding which had been missing. ‘The Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development’ established by MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) states “global *jinzai*” to be “human resources who can positively meet the challenges and succeed in the global field, as the basis for improving Japan’s global competitiveness and enhancing the ties between nations” (MEXT, 2012), and a report released by the Council on Promotion of Global Human Resources summarizes more concrete features as the following three factors:

Factor I: Linguistic and communication skills

Factor II: Self-direction and positiveness, a spirit for challenge,
cooperativeness and flexibility, a sense of responsibility and mission

Factor III: Understanding of other cultures and a sense of identity as a Japanese

In the above list of required abilities, students' spiritual development and inter/intracultural understanding as well as identity development are treated as equally important components of global human resources as foreign language capacity. It is noteworthy that, while the Japanese government stresses the indispensability of English skills for becoming a global citizen, it attaches value on building Japanese identity at the same time, which was less considered in the past. Moreover, "English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization" released by MEXT (2013), includes the following section:

"Enrich educational content in relation to nurturing individual's sense of Japanese identity (focus on traditional culture and history among other things. (p. 1) "

and further aims to

"enhance students' transmitting information on Japanese culture in English and participation in international exchange or volunteer activities (p. 3) "

It is reasonable that the government began to focus more on the intracultural aspects and transmitting Japanese culture, as globalization does not mean Westernization, only assimilating Western cultures, but should be more of a bidirectional movement: countries affecting each other. Suzuki (2006) has argued that post-war Japan has achieved high economic growth learning from the West and English education back then aimed at 'receiving' knowledge and techniques, but now the country has come to a stage where it should start to export Japanese culture and nurture human resources by veering towards English education for 'transmitting' national strengths.

3. Agenda for educators

While MEXT's new move of valuing national identity and setting an ambitious goal of transmitting the cultural knowledge to the world using English should be welcomed, one concern remains in the proposition that "forming national identity" (studying about Japanese culture) and 'studying English language' seem to be planned as separate learning processes. What is not considered here is the difficulty of communicating about Japanese indigenous culture or philosophy in another language. Horibe (2012) explains the extreme difficulty of expressing unique Japanese culture in English which is deeply related with Anglo-Saxon culture stating that the challenge is almost "an acrobatic act" (p.35). Increasing Japanese language and history classes, putting more emphasis on studying traditional literary materials, making compulsory abacus, art, and martial art classes, given in 'English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization' (MEXT, 2013), might be effective for nurturing Japanese identity, but transmitting the learnt knowledge or information on

those subjects in English is a completely different skill and thus needs training. MEXT, however, does not specify what or how to teach students to enable them to do such a challenging act.

Today, as Japan attracts more than 20 million foreign visitors every year and the number is expected to swell as the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games approach, the opportunities to convey information about Japan in English will undoubtedly increase. What English language educators should do, therefore, is to somehow bridge the gap between the two separate things, knowledge about Japan and expressing it in English.

4. Suggested teaching materials

With no clear guideline for this new type of training provided by the government, what should English teachers begin with? As the first step is building or confirming knowledge about Japanese culture in English, the first challenge that educators face is selecting appropriate materials for effective input. There is also the difficulty of adjusting the content of lessons to students' different major fields as it can sometimes be a challenge for teachers to include cultural topics in some faculties where they might not be directly related to their study areas (such as law, economics, science etc.)

The following are some ideas to incorporate Japanese culture in English lessons. The suggested activities were used in English reading classes for economics students taught by the researcher.

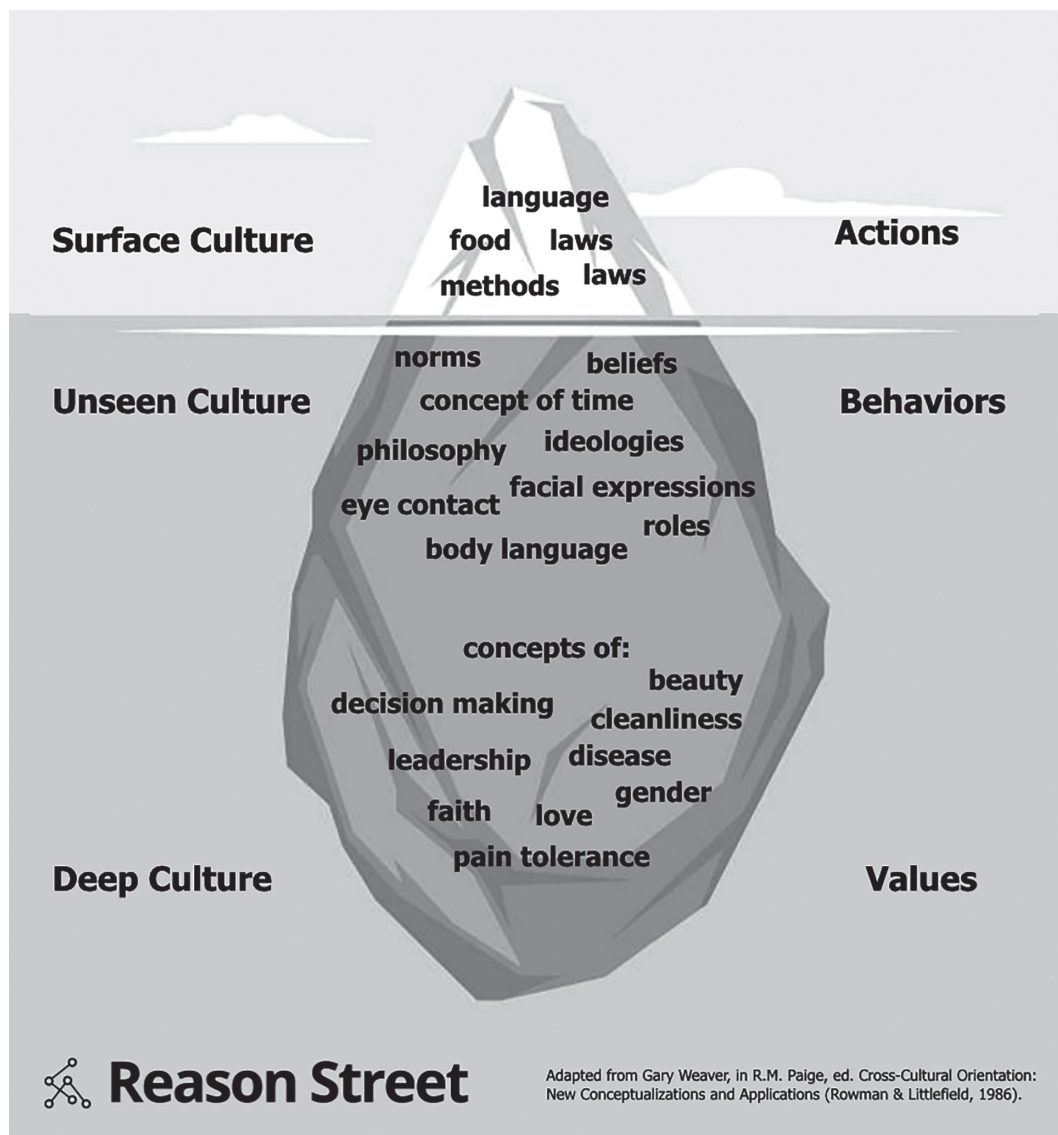
● Defining 'culture'

One possible way to start is raising students' awareness of the complexity of 'culture' itself. It is common that most students do not realize how several different dimensions, visible or invisible, the notion can include. For them to acknowledge this, Hall (1976)'s 'cultural iceberg model' can be an effective material (Figure 1 is one of the many visual samples of the model.). It is the iceberg analogy of culture showing that the external or visible parts such as actions or behaviors are like a tip of iceberg accounting for only 10 % of the whole, and internal or subconscious parts of culture such as beliefs or values underlying behaviors are often invisible hence difficult to perceive. Once students recognize the layers of culture, they can apply the knowledge to analyzing or confirming their perception of their own culture using this model. For example, a teacher can ask them to pick an item from a dimension (ex. pick 'concept of time' from 'behaviors') and let them give examples from Japanese culture (ex. 'Punctuality is important in Japanese society.'). Through this task, students will have an opportunity to confirm their own view of Japanese culture in different contexts.

● Traditional literary texts

After students have grasped the whole image of culture, a teacher can then move on to providing reading texts for a deeper understanding and analysis. What contents can be dealt with in the materials? What types of cultures do Japanese people want to transmit to the world? Figure 2 is the result of public opinion poll conducted by the Cabinet Office (2010) which shows that 'traditional arts' are the culture the respondents are most proud of, followed by 'historical buildings or sites', 'food cul-

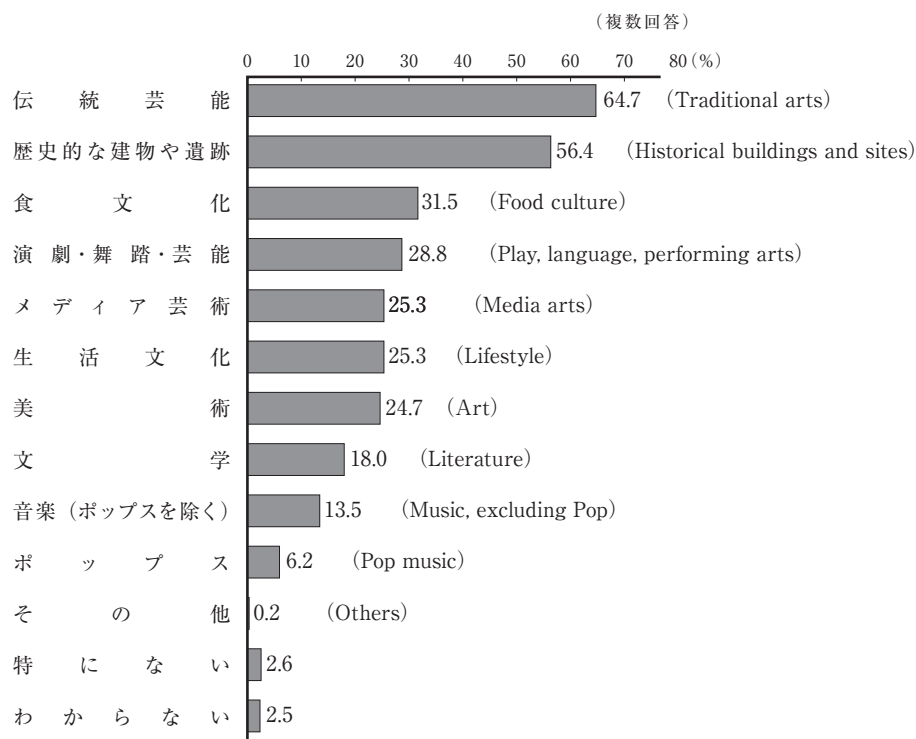
Figure 1 . The Culture Map



ture', 'play, dance, performing arts', and 'media arts' in the top 5.

Among traditional arts, for example, *waka* or *tanka* poems (short traditional Japanese poems comprised of 5-7-5 or 5-7-5-7-7 'on's, syllables) might be easier to study as language texts in a reading class compared to other kinds of arts which involve active dance or music performances. In an English class, one intriguing activity is to translate *waka* or *tanka* poems (originally written in Japanese) presented in English back to Japanese. The process can give students an opportunity to view the threads of words woven in their own language (which sometimes date back centuries ago) from a distinctly different perspective (in another language) and discuss the differences they might find in the message or nuance conveyed. Students will also realize the difficulty and limitation of

Figure 2. Public opinion poll on culture (Q: “What Japanese cultures are you proud of?”)



translating words which express delicate essences in that culture in a unique, indigenous style and might appreciate the importance of reading in the original language instead of translations when they read a foreign text.

● Pop culture contents

When dealing with contemporary Japanese culture including animations, characters, or games, the overseas popularity of which many students are aware of, focusing on its economic impact as soft power can be informative for students of economics. As most of them do not know the concept of soft power, a good place to start exploring it may be ‘The Soft Power 30’, a global ranking of soft power published every year by USC Center of Public Diplomacy. It is a report which ranks countries with the polling data evaluated in 6 categories: digital, culture, enterprise, engagement, education and government. This year, Japan ranked fifth among a total of 30 countries in 2018 (USC Center of Public Diplomacy, 2018). Students can read the analysis sections of Japan and compare the data with other countries.

They can also study the ‘Cool Japan Strategy’ introduced by the Intellectual Property Headquarters of the Cabinet Office in 2010 to promote Japanese pop culture and think about how and what contents they would promote or transmit to the world. For example, in the researcher’s class, students read an article on how the Tokyo Show at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio Janeiro was re-

ceived with applause in which Japanese characters were successfully leveraged by the private sector. Students were then asked to outline their original plan for the opening ceremony of the coming 2020 Tokyo Olympics specifying what kind of contents, visuals, music and musicians they would include if they were in charge with reasons for using them. The point they had to keep in mind was that the show was going to be an important opportunity to transmit the appeal of Japanese culture, traditional or modern.

● Culture in business settings

Becoming conscious about the differences in behaviors and communication styles between Japanese and Western cultures can be an effective lesson for avoiding miscommunications. In the researcher's class, the economics students read an essay written by an American writer explaining the high- and low-context differences and what to keep in mind when Western businessmen communicate or do business in Japanese settings. It included practical advice on how to interpret Japanese people's body language, facial expressions, gestures, manners, or certain expressions in conversations. Looking at their own cultural features from a perspective of someone from a very different cultural background can give students an eye-opening realization of their own behaviors and possibly lead to make an effort to fill in the gap with more considerations when in such situations.

5. Conclusion

Knowing about self is indispensable for knowing about others. In order to increase human resources with global mind and skills, education must first provide students with opportunities to study the culture of the society that has nurtured them and form Japanese identity. Since there is no official guideline for such lessons presented so far, English teachers need to keep on groping for the way to foster students' knowledge of Japanese culture and enable them to accurately transmit them in international communications.

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