

Inter-Cultural Experiences of Foreign Students in Their Daily Lives

— Proposal of Topics for Debates and Discussions —

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Abstract

This study investigated the inter-cultural experiences that 19 foreign exchange students from the U.S.A., New Zealand, and Korea had in their daily lives. The Japanese cultural aspects such as 'Formality,' 'Prejudice,' 'Gender,' 'Honorific expressions,' and 'Local color' were included as research items. Themes for debates and discussions were proposed as course topics for a better understanding of Japanese culture, including ceremony, clothing, bureaucracy, hierarchical social relations, prejudice, xenophobia, female and male language, gender, honorific expressions, dialect, cuisine, and legends and festivals.

Introduction

Foreign students usually experience an initial surprise when they encounter different customs and culture soon after arriving in Miyazaki to begin their exchange program. They gradually begin adjusting to this new environment, but sometimes the adjustment is strained. Students are given an introduction to various aspects of traditional Japanese culture such as the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, festivals, origami, and Japanese cuisine. They have opportunities to obtain a deeper understanding of these through discussions and debates. On the other hand, there are few opportunities for students to be given background knowledge or to have discussions and debates on the inter-cultural experiences of their daily lives.

Participating in the Mombusho plan of increasing the number of foreign students in Japan to one-hundred thousand⁽¹⁾, the Faculty of Education at Miyazaki University established a Student Exchange Committee and has carried its student exchange programs forward⁽²⁾⁽³⁾. The Faculty entered into student exchange agreements with The Evergreen State College(America) in 1986⁽⁴⁾, with Dunedin College of Education(New Zealand) in 1987⁽⁵⁾, with Sunchon University (Korea) in 1992⁽⁶⁾, with Qing Dao University (China) in 2000⁽⁷⁾, and with Soochow University(Taiwan) in 2004⁽⁸⁾. The Faculty of Education has been exchanging students with these institutes on a one academic year basis. In 1991 the Faculty started promoting the understanding of Japanese culture among foreign students with two courses of 'Japanese Culture' taught by a new teacher of Japanese language. In addition, in 2005, a new program in 'Japanese Language Teacher Education,' including substantial courses on inter-cultural understanding will begin accepting students.

This study first investigates concrete interests and questions that foreign exchange students had in

their daily life about the following inter-cultural aspects: 1) formality, 2) prejudice toward foreigners, 3) gender problems, 4) honorific expressions, 5) local color. Then, some topics that seem appropriate as a theme for debates and discussions with Japanese students will be picked up. This will contribute to the improvement of foreign student education at University of Miyazaki.

Method

The subjects are 19 exchange students who studied in the Faculty of Education (and Culture) of Miyazaki University from 1987 to 2004.(10 male students/9 female students)(10 from the U.S.A., 8 from New Zealand, and one from Korea). The question items in this study include: formality, gender, honorific expressions, and local color(see Table 1). The questions shown in Table 1 were sent to the subjects through e-mail in August, 2004. The subjects sent their answers through e-mail. The response rate was 59.4%.

Table 1: Question Items

1	Domestic things (food, clothing, housing)
2	Teacher-student relationships (e.g. support received in relation to your studies and living situation)
3	Relationship with Japanese people (making friends, participation in association)
4	Racist and prejudicial acts or attitudes directed upon you
5	Differences in value
6	Language (e.g. young people's language, dialects, etc.)

Results and Discussions

1. Formality

Table 2 gives comments by exchange students about 'Formality', which is considered to be important by the Japanese. It is true that there are many negative reactions to Japanese formality, such as 'it is rather rigid and formal,' or 'I feel frustrated because people regard formality very highly.' It may be because most of the respondents are Westerners who generally emphasize individuality and informality and live in much more relaxed circumstances. Not all respondents mentioned the negative aspects of formality. Some tried hard to understand the emphasis of formality in Japanese culture in order to adapt themselves to Japanese society. Furthermore, there are some who understand the meaning of formality in Japanese culture and think highly of it. When foreign students encounter something completely different from their own culture for the first time, they may experience surprise and a sense of disorientation. The measure seems to vary from person to person. The length of their stay in Miyazaki--one year--may be one of the main factors in determining their attitude. There are two groups of foreign students: those who try hard to understand and acquire this aspect of Japanese culture; and those who continue to have a sense of disorientation until the end of their stay. It is necessary to give lectures and a chance for discussion to foreign students, especially

those in the second group. This would serve to promote a deeper understanding of Japanese culture. Such themes as 'Ceremony,' 'Clothing,' 'Bureaucracy' and 'Hierarchical social relations' can be topics for debates and discussions.

Table 2: Comments on Formality

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- * The teacher-student relationship in Japan seemed rather rigid and formal to me, and the respect that teachers require was something that I was unfamiliar with.
 - * I sometimes felt frustrated because people regard formality very highly (e.g. regulations, paperwork)
 - * I confess that it was a bit of a challenge to learn to interpret the Japanese formality, in terms of general manners and politeness, and in terms of dress and other behavior. Given that the American approach to formality is much more relaxed, it did take me a while to catch on.
 - * I find Japanese society rather formal. But the formality does have the merit of making everything go smoothly.
 - * I suppose the most obvious difference to strike me in Japan was the different levels of politeness. The elderly are respected more in Japan.
 - * Another interesting difference in values was the necessity to get official paperwork done so absolutely correctly and if a mistake was made, then you would have to start again.
 - * Evergreen in particular emphasizes individualism, informality, and creativity, which are typically 'American' traits but even more pronounced at Evergreen.
 - * Things like using chopsticks and taking shoes off are things that you learn over time. Learning aspects of Japanese formality has a lot to do with learning and using the Japanese language. Timing in exchanges, knowing your place in a group, reaching a consensus---each of these takes patience.
 - * The main problems were with the differences in language spoken to friends and to teachers.
 - * I want to learn 'keigo (honorific expressions)' because Japanese society is a hierarchical one.
 - * It helped that the campus was quite casual, similar to my campus in the U.S., so I did not need much formal attire.
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2. Prejudice

Table 3 gives comments by exchange students on prejudice toward foreigners based on their experiences in Japan (Miyazaki). The answers covered a wide range of prejudice, such as prejudice based on the foreigner's appearance, occupation, incidents by foreigners, and the language. There were many comments on prejudice based on appearance. Many children tend to look at foreigners with curiosity, but as some of them wrote, this was rather temporary. Concerning the comment on the young mothers who pulled their children across the road when they saw a foreigner coming or the occasional catcall from *bosozoku*, it is difficult to assert that these happened because the person was foreign.

Concerning the prejudicial attitude of the Japanese, students felt most offended by questions asking if they were 'a teacher of English conversation school' or 'a dancer.' Even the foreign students, especially Westerners, who came to Japan with the purpose of study are often thought to be English teachers. Questions arose as to whether foreign students from non-Western countries also experienced prejudice based on their 'occupations.' Prejudice based on 'occupation' can be seen among Japanese people. This topic can be a main theme of debates and discussions.

'Incidents' in Japan involving foreigners may have a considerable impact on the lives of foreign students here. As one comment shows, Japanese people tend to think badly of foreigners in general

because of incidents involving a small number of foreigners. When foreigners from a particular country caused a problem, students from the same country usually felt small.

This case seems to teach us that it is necessary to set up the place for debates and discussions, where we avoid one-way criticism and we try to understand each other's opinions. There were some comments on prejudice because of language.

Finally, mention about 'apartment searching and negotiation with a real estate agent' is necessary. Almost every foreigner who wants to live in Japan has experienced this trouble. There may be some reasons for not renting to exchange students: they make the room(house) dirty by walking with their shoes on; a strange smell. The strict rule that foreigners must have a Japanese guarantor living in Japan also makes it very difficult for foreigners to rent a house or an apartment. This problem can be solved if we share information about the Japanese real estate system. A place for exchanging such information and knowledge must be established. Such themes as 'Prejudice' and 'Xenophobia' can be used as topics for debates and discussions.

Table 3: Comments on Prejudice

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- * My teacher helped me in looking for an apartment and in negotiating with the real estate agent.
 - * Once in a while people would stare or be surprised to see a foreigner(mostly children), but this did not bother me.
 - * All in all this was pretty good. Probably I couldn't understand any racist comments if they were saying them anyway.
 - * Other than small children pointing at me because I was white, there was no negative racism or prejudices directed at me during my stay in Miyazaki.
 - * At times I felt people thought that because I could not understand them, I was stupid and it was frustrating to be avoided because the task of communication may be judged too difficult by the person you wished to approach.
 - * I never felt threatened--most instances were things like young mothers pulling their children across the street away from me when they saw me coming, or the occasional catcall from *bosozoku*.
 - * In actuality, I had expected that the majority of negative feelings or displays towards me would come from older people, but this was not the case.
 - * I never experienced anything other than curiosity.
 - * While some other foreigners balked at the 'gaijin' that you would hear on the street, I did not feel any malice under the surface; it was merely an expression of naivety.
 - * I remember a man didn't want to be served a drink by me in a bar because he didn't like Americans because of the war.
 - * At first I felt like a movie star or some sort of celebrity. Mostly it was just annoying, but on bad days I felt like screaming at people to just leave me alone.
 - * A group of young Japanese girls at the next table in a restaurant gave a rude comment about the weight of my female friend who was with me.
 - * Most white people in Japan are usually considered to be an American.
 - * On the street I was sometimes asked if I was a teacher of English conversation school.
 - * I was asked if I was working as a dancer.
 - * After a foreign student from China committed a murder, it became difficult for Chinese students to obtain a student visa to Japan. I think it's prejudicial.
 - * The only time I remember feeling uncomfortable was during the Gulf War invasion, as I knew there was a population of students from the Middle East.
 - * ...and one mentioned that although she didn't think that it(international marriage) was wrong, she would be against her daughter marrying a foreigner. I can't think of a more pitiful thing than for a person to express such a simple-minded and prejudiced opinion in front of another person and expect that they not be offended.
 - * My dormitory floor manager once turned my electricity off because I hadn't followed his directions which were written in Japanese and taped on my door.
 - * ...but this is not something unique to foreign students in Japan. There are always elements of prejudice wherever one goes.
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3. Gender

Table 4 gives comments on gender. Many of these comments were on habits and male language vs. female language, which they felt in everyday life. The word *shujin* in the letter written in Japanese is worthy of note. This word is the one which expresses the separation of work by sex and master-and-servant relationship. It can be assumed that the writer of this letter used this word without understanding its background. With this expression, the deep root of the gender problem can be seen. Such themes as 'Female and male language,' 'Sexual discrimination' and 'Gender' can be topics for debates and discussions.

Table 4: Comments on Gender

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- * While female students greet well, male students don't.
 - * I didn't join any student associations, as I lived off-campus with my wife.
 - * Women serving tea in offices seems old-fashioned to me and being a feminist I would like to see women viewed as equals professionally in offices.
 - * It is quite common for two Korean girls to walk hand in hand, but in Japan it is not. People may think that they are lesbians.
 - * I found it very difficult to understand when two Japanese men are talking. The conversations in *yakuza* (Japanese gangster) movies are most difficult to understand.
 - * I'm now on maternity leave. I want to visit Japan same day with my *shujin* (husband) and child.
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4. Language

Table 5 includes comments on unique characteristics and challenging aspects of the Japanese that exchange students encountered while studying the language. Comments cover such topics as dialect, baby talk, Japanese used by young people, female and male language, vogue words, and honorific expressions. It is difficult to use these aspects of the Japanese language correctly without understanding the background and relations among them because they have their origin and the cultural background. Honorific expressions in particular seem the most difficult among these language usages. This is due to the necessity of users knowing the cultural background of the deference shown to individuals older in age than the speaker and the fine distinction of Japanese social hierarchy. Misuses of these expressions can cause serious offense to others. As even the Japanese people have difficulty in using honorific expressions correctly, students of Japanese must engage in a comprehensive study of the Japanese social relations. Opportunities for this study should be given. Topics such as 'Honorific expressions,' 'Female and male language,' and 'Dialects' can be used as themes for debates and discussions.

Table 5: Comments on Language

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- * Main problems were with the differences in language spoken to friends and that to teachers.
 - * I recognized Miyazaki dialect when I traveled outside Miyazaki.
 - * I want to learn 'keigo (honorific expressions)' because Japanese society is a hierarchical one.
 - * I do remember not being able to understand a student from Okinawa. I think Miyazaki dialect is much more clear in terms of pronunciation and is easier to understand than many other Japanese dialects.
 - * I currently reside in Osaka, and I have much more difficulty deciphering the local dialect here than I did in Miyazaki.
 - * We did pick up a few slang terms and Japanese people were amused when we would use them.
 - * I found the children's language difficult to understand.
 - * I found it very difficult to understand when two Japanese men are talking. The conversations in *yakuza* (Japanese gangster) movies are most difficult to understand.
 - * While some of Miyazaki-*ben* was fun, I did not go out of my way to adopt the local dialect or trendy ways of speaking, as I thought adopting a more formal language would serve me better and reduce my chances of offending the kind people.
 - * The younger people spoke a lot of Miyazaki-*ben* and lots of slang that I didn't know was inappropriate at times.
 - * Japanese language learning gave me two kinds of 'sense of value.'
 - * Language learning outside classes is also important.
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5. Local color

Table 6 gives some comments by exchange students on the locality of Miyazaki. The Student Exchange Committee usually sends various kinds of pamphlets about Miyazaki before students come. They, therefore, already have some geographical and tourist information about Miyazaki when they arrive. Some of them have already heard something about Miyazaki or the University from the former exchange students or the staff of their home institute. It may be the case, however, that it is sometimes different from what they have heard. Most of the comments here relate to Miyazaki dialects---seeing Miyazaki culture through the local dialect. When exchange students arrive in Miyazaki, their Japanese language ability is still at the beginner's level. They cannot tell whether people are speaking 'standard' Japanese or Miyazaki dialect. As they improve their Japanese, some students become interested in acquiring a dialect, others do not. On this level they have their hands rather full acquiring 'standard' Japanese. Even when they have learned some dialect, they are sometimes reluctant to use it considering the feelings of others. In order to adapt themselves into Miyazaki society, it is certainly helpful for them to acquire Miyazaki dialect. But it may be better for them to learn 'standard' Japanese first and if and when they have the time and energy, they can attempt to learn the dialect. It is interesting to know that they considered the locality of Miyazaki

Table 6: Comments on Local color

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- * As I did not care for sweetened food I was alarmed by the fact that the Kyushu region favors the use of sugar even in dishes such as scrambled eggs!
 - * After traveling a little bit in Japan, and talking to other people, I discovered that people in Miyazaki have a dialect that lacks the tonal variation which people from other prefectures have.
 - * I enjoyed the challenge of the Miyazaki dialect and enjoyed its uniqueness, but at the same time saw the importance of learning the 'standard' Japanese.
 - * I do remember not being able to understand a student from Okinawa...Actually, once I got more experience with Japanese, I began to realize that the Miyazaki dialect is much more clear in terms of pronunciation and is easier to understand than many other Japanese dialects.
 - * I currently reside in Osaka, and I have much more difficulty deciphering the local dialect here than I did in Miyazaki.
 - * While some of Miyazaki-*ben* was fun, I did not go out of my way to adopt the local dialect or trendy ways of speaking, as I thought adopting a more formal language would serve me better and reduce my chances of offending the kind people.
 - * ...but regional dialects offer variety to language learning and a part of the cultural landscape of Japan. In fact, because I spend so much time working on my formal Japanese, I often didn't give as much time to the local dialects, which in hindsight I wish I had.
 - * Miyazaki is full of natural beauty; I very much miss the open spaces, the mountains, the ocean, the trees, and the people.
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consciously when they visited other places. They often mention many good things about Miyazaki, but it may be after they leave Miyazaki that they really know the good points of Miyazaki.

Giving them systematic information on various aspects of Miyazaki---culture, economy, geography, politics and education--- and creating debates and discussions on these matters among exchange students can also stimulate Japanese people to consider these matters. Such themes as 'Cuisine,' 'Dialect,' and 'Legends and Festivals' can be topics for debates and discussions.

Summary

The following 12 themes were extracted from the result of the analysis above as topics for debates and discussions:

1. Ceremony
2. Clothing
3. Bureaucracy
4. Hierarchical social relations
5. Prejudice
6. Xenophobia
7. Female and male language
8. Gender
9. Honorific expressions
10. Dialect
11. Cuisine
12. Legends and festivals

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