Semantic Analysis of the Japanese Students' Self-reflective Entries of Intercultural Encounters to Find the Developmental Changes of Intercultural Competence

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Abstract

This study compares the degrees of intercultural awareness and competence of elementary school, junior high school, and university students based on the analysis of retrospective entries of intercultural encounters made into the European self-reflective tool, *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (AIE). By comparing the tendencies and characteristics of how each group perceive "otherness" or "foreignness" in intercultural encounters, the type and method of intercultural education appropriate for each level have been considered, which will lead to the creation of maturity-based instructional models. Since it is apparent that the proclivity for stereotyping gradually emerges and seems to strengthen during younger ages, effective intervention or scaffolding in the elementary and junior high school level will be beneficial to raise intercultural awareness and facilitate the avoidance of simplistic overgeneralizations.

Keywords

Intercultural competence, Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE), Developmental patterns

Introduction

In Europe, the Council of Europe has been promoting the use of a self-reflective tool called "Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters" (hereafter referred to as AIE) for students to analyze and learn from their own intercultural experiences (Koyama, 2011). As many as 53 questions were posed in order to make students self-evaluate their experiences from multiple points of view and help them exercise deep reflection. In a past study, an attempt was made to find the tendencies and characteristics of Japanese university students in handling various intercultural encounters by collecting their detailed responses written in the AIE mounted on the Moodle site (Matsumoto & Koyama, 2014). The study was done as a part of a grant-in-aid project[1] which aimed to create teaching models for intercultural competence that allow Japanese youths to become able to solve problems in various intercultural situations. In the quantitative and qualitative analyses of various entries made by 80 subjects, the most noteworthy finding was their strong dichotomous mindset, namely, the tendency to view the interaction in the "us vs. others" manner, without considering the great diversity among people they consider "foreign," thus "others."

In 2014, with the launch of young learners' version of AIE. a new experiment was designed for Japanese elementary school children, the hope being that the comparison with university students may elucidate when and how the dichotomous way of looking at people with different ethnic/cultural backgrounds is formed. It was discovered that these tendencies and mindsets often derive from the depictions of foreigners in different types of media, which tend to be stereotypical and based on the simplistic comparisons between the Japanese and groups with different ethnicities and/or nationalities (Matsumoto, 2017). This new line of inquiry has been done as a part of another grant-in-aid project[2], aiming at constructing teaching models for intercultural competence for children which are closely tied to the secondary and tertiary models previously established.

1   Purpose of this study

The aim of the study is to find the developmental process of Japanese young generation's forming the above-mentioned dichotomous perspective, which often involves stereotypes, by comparing the

responses of elementary school, junior high school and university students in dealing with various intercultural encounters and solving problems. Then, based on the results, the type and method of intercultural education appropriate for each level will be constructed, with an eye towards the creation of maturity-based instructional models.

2.   The Study

2.1   Moodle-based data collection

Two hundred eleven university students were asked to make an entry of the intercultural encounter that is most influential to them in response to various questions included in AIE mounted on the Moodle. Concurrently, the responses of 145 junior high school students and 158 elementary school students were collected using the young learners' version of AIE. For elementary and junior high school students for whom younger learners' version was used, an introductory lesson had to be prepared and conducted, and they wrote their responses on paper.

2.2   Data analysis

First, a qualitative, holistic analysis was done to obtain overall tendencies, followed by the detailed text analysis by an IBM software and KH Coder (Higuchi, 2013). The text analysis includes tabulation of words in terms of frequency as well as evaluation of collocational relationships of important words that indicate agency in, and attitudes and mental states of, students' managing intercultural communication both at the time of the encounters and in hindsight. Then, the comparison was made to the tabulated and categorized data of 3 groups.

3.   Results and Discussion

The data analysis showed different ways perceptions of "otherness" were formed and functioned in the intercultural encounters that elementary school, junior high school and university students had experienced. While the entries of university students exhibited the perceptions and attitudes similar to those found in the previous study, the elementary school students' responses were more idiosyncratic, though often very simplistic; the dichotomous perspectives seen in the university students' responses appeared sporadically, but the data analysis showed more natural, individualistic reactions and interpretations of the intercultural events. As hypothesized, the responses of junior high school students were somewhere in between, where the beginning of the tendency of overgeneralization was detected, but with many individualistic and/or intuitive perceptions also being exhibited. All groups, to varying degrees, have tendencies of making stereotypical, sweeping statements about people different from themselves, which is quite natural as they still live in a mostly homogeneous environment. Yet, children's entries did not reflect them as frequently as their university counterparts.

Naturally, the responses of university students were varied depending on their learning histories and experiences rather than original dispositions. However, about 40% of them were able to change their rather parochial views through a reflective process; on the contrary, similar change was only observed in the entries of very few elementary and junior high school students. Since the proclivity for stereotyping seems to emerge or be strengthened during elementary and junior high school days, presumably by the influence of media and people surrounding them, it seems that proper intervention or scaffolding in elementary and junior high school education to raise awareness of the risk of simplistic generalizations or stereotypes and to facilitate avoiding such tendencies would be highly beneficial.

4.   Future Directions

Our project team has constructed some maturity-based instructional materials to raise intercultural competence together with critical thinking abilities, reflecting the data accumulated so far. In general, we have been successful in fostering intercultural competence in elementary and junior high school students, which are shown in the comparison between their pre-lesson and post-lesson entries in AIE. Continuous efforts will be made to do more fine-tuning of the instructional models we have developed with modifications and adjustments. AIE will continue to be used, firstly to validate these teaching models and materials and secondly, for autonomous, reflective learning *per se*, which is its original function.
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