

Intercultural Communication and Self Image: A Classroom Experiment

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The purpose of this study is to look at the sense of self which certain university students have. I am privileged to teach a course called "Japan-US communication" to a group of students consisting of three different backgrounds: regular Japanese students, incoming short-term exchange students mainly from the US, and Chinese students who came from various backgrounds to study at the University of Tsukuba. This class provided me with a golden opportunity to observe various cultural differences such as the difference of values, and to listen to the students' opinions concerning intercultural communication. I have done a very brief survey with these students; "Write three short answers to the question 'What are you'." What follows is the result of the survey with some observations as a means to understanding international difference and similarity.

Theoretical considerations

In the human communication system, the sender of a message is greatly affected by their sense of the self, as well as the image of the receiver the sender has. For instance, when you say something outrageous, you may be often reproached by a comment such as "Who do you think you are?" The sense of self has many different phases, and often some particular self image is at work when one speaks. Roughly speaking, the self can be of two kinds: the individual self and the social self. The individual self is discussed by Borden (1991), while the social self or social identity is discussed in Gumperz (1982).

Borden enumerates the following factors concerning self: *The Bodily Self* is said to be the sense of self as a physical entity, which is obtained sometime in our first three years of life (p.11). *Self-identity* is the sense of self that is determined by the roles we take in our human communication systems (p.12). "Much of the self-identity is formed by the way we interpret the actions of others toward us", writes Borden. On the other hand, Gumperz (1982, p.7) talks about social identity, most commonly represented by ethnicity, although social identity can refer to various other group identities, such as the male identity, female identity, occupational identity, to name but a few.

Self-Extension is how we present ourselves to the public. "We may be reticent, shy, extroverted, false, or real"(Gumperz, 1982, p.12). *Self-Extension* is coterminous with *Self-Presentation* as applied by Ribeau, Baldwin and Hecht (in Samovar and Porter, 1997, p.151). *Self-esteem* is "the part of self that develops through the affirmation and recognition of others for the things we have done" (p.13). *Self-esteem* is discussed by other scholars as

well (McDaniel, in Samovar and Porter, 1997, p.257). Self-image "grows out of the history of our value-based images of the past. This is the comparison between one's ideal self and the concept of self one has at a certain moment. "Do I live up to what I want to be?" is the core of the self image according to Borden. Self-image is thus more like the accumulation of all other components concerning self listed above, and thus it could be used as a cover term for the concept of self. (See also Samovar and Porter, 1998).

As above, I will hereafter use the term 'self-image' in a broader sense than what Borden has used, in order to represent the concept of self as interpreted by the individual.

Survey questions

Prior to the survey, I had the following questions and/or basic assumptions. 1) Will the collective orientation of the Japanese group stand out as opposed to the non-Japanese supposedly individualistic orientation? I imagined yes. 2) Will the female students behave differently from the male students? Yes, I thought they would. 3) Will the Japanese returnee students behave differently from the rest of the Japanese students? Probably so. 4) Are Chinese students similar to the Japanese or Americans? Probably they are more similar to the Japanese students. 5) In what way does the individual orientation stand out in the mass of collective orientation? This can be probably seen if somebody has a particularly strong character.

Although the number of students, particularly the number of foreign students is so limited in the sea of the regular Japanese students, which makes it impossible to do any kind of truly statistical analysis, this class gave me a good opportunity to make a preliminary survey concerning these questions. The strong point of this class is that I could give exactly the same instruction, under exactly the same condition to members of the three different groups.

The relationship between culture and individual

To what extent can a phenomenon be attributed to the culture, and to what extent, to the individual? Yum (Samovar and Porter, 1997: p.78) cites Parsons, Shils and Olds (1951) as to this matter, and says self-orientation versus collectivity orientation is one of the five basic pattern variables that determine human action. Self-orientation occurs when a person gives "priority in a given situation to his own private interest independently of their bearings on the interests or values of a given collectivity" (Parsons, Shils, & Ods, 1951, p.81). The heart of the problem is that the two cannot be separated so easily, and an individual may have no idea on which principle he or she acts and/or evaluates other people's actions. A person's action is inevitably individually based at the same time as it is collectively based. Thus, in doing my small survey, one of the questions was: "Which of the factors comes to their mind first, the individual or the group?"

Gender and differences

As to the gender differences, there must be a relationship of marked versus unmarked characteristics. For instance, being a man is an unmarked characteristic. Until recently, and in some cases still at present, "man" is the cover term for both men and women; and women can be included in the category of 'man', but a man cannot be in the category of 'woman'. There are 'man-eater tiger' or 'man-made xxx', in which cases the word 'man' includes women. Somebody with a marked characteristic is more likely to be aware of it. Another example would be the case of blind versus non-blind. A blind person is much more likely to comment on it rather than those who are not.

Returnee versus regular Japanese

By returnee students, we usually mean students who have spent three years or longer in a foreign educational institution prior to entering college. At least this length of time allows high school students to take the university entrance examination for returnees in our university. But in real life, it is difficult to categorize these people as such, considering the different backgrounds; different countries they have been in, different length of time they have spent abroad, the difference between living with a Japanese family and living with a foreign host family, and the parents' educational orientation. Therefore, in this particular survey, I have enlarged the idea of "returnee" to include anybody who had the experience of living abroad for more than one academic year. However, with this alteration of the concept, it has now become doubtful whether this group might show some difference when compared with the group of Japanese students who have never lived abroad.

THE COURSE AND THE STUDENTS

I teach a bilingual course called "US-Japan Communication". I created this course for the purpose of increasing the communicative competence of the students, and to better integrate the in-bound short-term exchange students who spend one academic year at our university. The membership categories of the students is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
The number of students in different categories

	male	female	Total
Japanese	12	30	42
(Returnee)	(4)	(8)	(12)
(Regular)	(8)	(22)	(30)
Chinese	4	5	9
American	9	2	11
Total	24	37	62

For the Japanese students, this is a course for discussing with foreign students big and small subjects such as day-to-day eating habits, the entrance examination, the comparison of education in different countries, and also such heavy subjects as the atomic bomb and Pearl Harbor. For the incoming short-term exchange students, this is a course for mixing with the general public students, exchanging opinions both in English and Japanese, and hopefully, improving their Japanese.

Students in this course are, roughly speaking, of three kinds. Regular Japanese students, short-term exchange students coming from the US and Malaysia; and Chinese students. Chinese students have two different backgrounds: Some are regular University of Tsukuba international students coming directly from either mainland China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong. A few of them have come from universities in the US. For them, Japan is their second destination in studying abroad: They first went to the US from China, and they came to Japan as short-term exchange students for one year. Students from Malaysia were of Chinese origin, and thus counted as Chinese.

Classifying students into the three-part category was far from easy. There are cases of hyphenated citizens like Chinese American, Korean Chinese, Korean American. A Korean American and a Chinese American both born in the US. were classified as Americans, judging from their name, language and citizenship. Marginal cases like Japanese returnee students who have spent most of their lives outside Japan present some problems, and classifying them as Japanese was questionable, but for this survey they were all classed as Japanese. They may have affected the results of this survey, but only some obvious cases are mentioned below.

Of the 62 students, two students, both of them foreign, answered in an anomalous fashion: One said "ultra man" and "ultradiesel"; another foreign male student said "a lawyer" "a business man" and "a normal worker". There are three possibilities for this type of answers: 1) they were joking; 2) they did not understand the task; 3) they simply wrote what they want to be, or what really came to their mind first. Strange as the answers may be, I counted them also as normal answers.

SURVEY PROCEDURE

This small survey was conducted at the very beginning of the class in December 1998. The students were asked to write their three answers to the question "What are you?" Many students asked "What should we write?" But nothing was said except that "You write on the spot whatever comes to your mind, to the question "What are you?" I cannot say anything any further because whatever I say might affect what you are going to write. Please be very brief. For the benefit of the students who do not know a certain English word, you can write that particular word in Japanese, if you have to. This small slip is going to serve as your attendance sheet for today." Nothing was explained in Japanese, and all the students present turned in their answers since it was an attendance sheet as well as a small questionnaire.

Before I collected their papers, I asked the class to form small discussion groups and to discuss in each group by showing to one another whatever they had written, in order to make them be aware of whatever differences they might find.

RESULTS

In processing the answer sheets, I had to realize that some students wrote more than three features. Instead of writing "I am a Japanese", they might have written "I am a Japanese student" or "I am a 19 year-old girl" or "I am a good girl." These "double" answers were analyzed as having two factors. Thus, some students named more than three factors. Therefore, the "percentage" has a peculiar feature in that at times it may exceed 100%, if one student repeated the same feature twice.

In the table below, any factor that had more than two identical or very similar replies were listed. The rest will be explained later as particular cases.

Table 2.
Features the students named and the percentage

Answers to "What are you?"	Japanese	%	Chinese	%	American	%	Total
COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION							
Japanese/Chinese/American	21	50.0	5	55.6	2	18.2	27
Asian	2	4.8	0	0	0	0	2
hyphenated citizenship	–		1	11.1	1	9.1	2
PERSONAL ORIENTATION							
character description	19	45.2	3 ^{*1}	33.3	14	127.2	35
personal preference	11	26.1	0	0	4	36.4	15
being a person/human/creature	2	4.8	1	11	7	63.6	9
being an individual/ me /myself	3	7.0	1	11	4	36.4	5
GENDER							
man	3	25.0	1	11	3	27.2	7
woman/female/girl	17	53.1	5	100.0	0	0	22
CATEGORICAL ANSWERS							
foreigner/foreign student	–		2	22.2	0	0	2
Christian	1	2.3	0	0	2	18.2	3
job	1	2.3	3 ^{*2}	33.3	0	0	4
student	16	38.1	4	44.4	0	0	20
REFERENCE TO A FEATURE							
reference to sports: player/fan	6	14.3	0	0	1	9.1	7
reference to local areas	2	4.8	1	11	0	0	3
reference to family	4	9.5	0	0	0	0	0
reference to age	9 ^{*3}	30.0	0	0	0	0	9

Note 1 The three answers in this column all came from the Chinese students studying in the US.

Note 2 The three answers came from one Chinese student.

Note 3 All nine answers came from female Japanese students, and the percentage is calculated as 9 divided by 30, rather than 42.

Examples of the features

The example answers of the features listed above are as follows. Features that had two factors were counted as two answers, and thus some examples appear twice in the list.

Table 3.
List of examples of multiple answers

CATEGORIES	EXAMPLE ANSWERS
COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION	
Japanese/Chinese/American	"I am a Japanese" "I am a Chinese." "I am American"
Asian	"Asian"
hyphenated citizenship	"I am Korean-American" "I am Korean Chinese"
PERSONAL ORIENTATION	
character description	"cheerful" "independent" "curious" "honest" "vivacious"
personal preference	"interested in ethnicity" "like traveling"
being a person/human/creature	"person" "I am a creature" "I am just a human"
being an individual/ me /myself	"I am me" "an individual"
GENDER	
man	"man" "Taiwanese male" "male"
woman/female/girl	"girl" "woman" "female"
CATEGORICAL ANSWERS	
foreigner/foreign student	"foreigner" "foreign student"
Christian	"Christian"
profession	"lawyer" "businessman" "normal worker" "waitress at Coco's"
student	"student" "Chinese student"
REFERENCE TO A FEATURE	
sports player/ fan	"Chicago Cubs fan" "runner" "jump-roper"
reference to areas	"Tokushima person" "Taiwanese male" "Hakatamon"
reference to family	"son" "only daughter in family" "girl brought up with care"
reference to age	"20 year-old girl" "Under 20" "18 year-old girl"

Outstanding answers

Some students provide with us beautiful examples of being individualistic in the sea of collective drift. I mention a few students who answered in ways that were drastically different and impressive. One of them was a College of International Studies student who had just transferred to the College of Art. He was a singer-song-writer, and a fine arts student. His three answers were "I am what I am" "Me seen from you" "Me, a result of the past". He had spent one year in the US as a high school student. This is a classical case of the individual standing out compared to the collective self. Another example is a Japanese female student who had spent one year in Hong Kong. Her answers were "girl" "an Asian" and "a local wherever I am in Asia". Apparently

she came back from Hong Kong with a strong collective sense of being an Asian, and a realization that her identity is beyond the category of single citizenship. Speaking of Americans, a Chinese American student (who incidentally did not refer to his hyphenated citizenship) said "very witty person (but not in Japan)", "very stubborn person" and "very average person". One American female student wrote "vivacious" "I am strong" and "not afraid to be what I am". These are not so much "outstanding" as most of the American answers were like these anyway. The only truly different answer came from a Korean-American male student brought up in Japan who was a English-Japanese bilingual. He said "American" "so-called Japanese" "so-called Korean". For him, the question "what are you" seemed to bring up immediately his identity question, which is stronger than any other feature.

A rough description of the table

Looking at the table, we arrive at the most likely picture, or a collective picture of the three kinds of students; Japanese, Chinese and American. A typical student from each category will look like this:

Japanese male	Japanese student, having a certain character
Japanese female	A female Japanese student of a certain age with a certain character
Japanese male and female	A Japanese student of either sex
Chinese male	Answers varied and a typical picture could not be established.
Chinese female	A female Chinese student
Chinese male and female	A Chinese student of either sex
American male	An individual/person with a certain character trait, having a certain personal preference
American female	Answers varied and a typical picture could not be established, due to insufficient number of subjects.
American male and female	An individual/person with a certain character trait, having a certain personal preference

Here, the similarity between the Japanese and Chinese students is outstanding. There must have been a linguistic factor at work here. American students could write whatever they really felt. If the Chinese and Japanese students had written in their native languages, they might well have written something else. Having to write in English, they may have just resorted to listing things that came easily to mind. A very few Japanese students wrote a few answers in Japanese, such as "Hakatomon" (a person from the Hakata area of Fukuoka Prefecture), and "mame" (pronounced mah-

meh), meaning a person who is willing to do little things for others and for oneself, or "youryouga ii" (able to get optimal results with minimal efforts / somebody who knows how to do things efficiently, with minimal efforts). The Chinese students could not resort to writing in Chinese, so this may have had some effect on their answers.

Japanese (and probably Chinese students as well) have been taught in their junior high school English classrooms to answer in the following way to the "Who" and "What" questions like this:

"Who are you?" "I am so and so." (Give your name.)

"What are you?" "I have a certain status/profession." (I am a teacher/ student.)

Therefore, being a student was probably the first automatic answer that many Asian students came up with. However, it is so interesting that no American students answered that they were students. This could probably mean that the way we are taught in junior high schools as to how to reply when asked "What are you?" is not as correct as we tend to believe.

As for citizenship, it is striking that both Japanese and Chinese students showed very high percentages of saying they are Japanese or Chinese, whereas only two Americans out of eleven answered they were Americans. It is hard to explain this phenomenon in terms of the markedness condition, since being a Japanese is being the majority, and it is an unmarked feature which is likely not to be stressed, and yet many Japanese students chose to write this. Probably this can be explained only in terms of "collective orientation" versus "personal orientation"; thus, it appears that both Japanese and Chinese students identify themselves more in terms of collective features than individual features, and American students think of themselves more in terms of individual features. Even before the survey, these particular results could have been predicted, but it came as a surprise that the difference was so strong.

Returnee-Non-returnee question of the Japanese students

Of the 12 Japanese males, four were returnees, and of the 30 females, eight were returnees. They had spent one year abroad either in high school or as a sophomore in college. One female student had spent a year in Hong Kong, the effect of which can be clearly seen in her answers. To recap, these are the results of the survey, with a spotlight on the returnee students. Those who are not specified as males are females.

A year in Australia, male
A year in England, male
A year in England, male
A year in the US, male
A year in Hong Kong
A year in the US
A year in the US

Several years in the US

sophisticated fool, hakatamon, happy optimist
dreamer, runner, fighter
man, student, Japanese
I am what I am, me seen from you, me, a result of the past
a girl, an Asian, a local wherever I am in Asia
creature/human being, Japanese, person
girl who loves to sing, like winter than summer, always want
to be busy
Japanese, an theist, student

Several years in the US
 Several years in the US
 Several years in the US
 Several years in the US

Tsukuba student, hockey fan, Ibaraki resident
 talkative girl, 19 year-old student, mother of a kitten
 18 year-old student,
 Japanese, returnee, I love entertainment

Answers to "What are you?"	Non-returnee	%	Male returnee	%	Female returnee	%	Total returnee	%
COLLECTIVE ORIENTATION								
Japanese/Chinese/American	18	60.0	1	25.0	2	25.0	3	25.0
Asian	1	3.3		0	1	12.5	1	8.3
PERSONAL ORIENTATION								
character description	12	40.0	5	125.0	2	25.0	7	58.3
personal preference	7	23.3			5	77.5	5	41.7
being a person/human/creature	0	0			2	25.0	2	16.7
being an individual/ me /myself	0	0	3				3	35.0
GENDER								
man	2	6.7	1				1	8.3
woman/female/girl	15	68.2			2	25.0	2	16.7
CATEGORICAL ANSWERS								
returnee/foreign student	-				1	12.5	1	8.3
Christian	1	3.3						
sports player/ fan	5	16.7			1	12.5	1	8.3
job	1	3.3						
student	12	40.0	1		3	25.0	4	33.3
		0						
REFERENCE TO A FEATURE								
reference to local areas	0	0	1		2	25.0	2	16.7
reference to family	4	13.3						
reference to age	7	31.8			2	25.0	2	16.7

As above, there were some striking differences between the non-returnee students and returnee students, although the number of subjects is tragically small. It may not be right to put them into a table like the above, but still, this has shown some clear differences between the two groups of students, non-returnees or regular students, and returnee students (total of males and females). The greatest differences were found in the fact that returnee students had a much more individualistic orientation, as well as a much less categorical and gender orientation. The percentage, 125.0, means that a single student gave two of the same type of answers.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE TASKS

First and foremost, the number of students were so small that the small survey cannot be considered a rigorous statistical study. However, from the above simple comparisons, differences can be clearly seen.

Now, it is time to answer my own questions posed at the beginning of my paper. I gave my intuitive views at the end of each question. Were they correct?

1) Will the collective orientation of the Japanese group stand out as opposed to the non-Japanese supposedly individualistic orientation? I imagined yes.

Outcome: My guess was only half right, since part of the non-Japanese, i.e., Chinese students, had as much collective orientation as the Japanese students. Therefore, the opposition was between Americans vs Japanese and Chinese students, rather than Japanese vs non-Japanese.

2) Will the female students behave differently from the male students? Yes, I thought they would.

Outcome: The difference between males and females was very large among the Japanese and Chinese students, but not so much among American students. Japanese and Chinese female students were very conscious of their gender, while it was not much a concern among other groups. This phenomenon can be considered as a result of the maked-unmaked difference, but this principle fails to explain the "I am a student" reply among the Japanese.

3) Will the Japanese returnee students behave differently from the rest of the Japanese students? Probably so.

Outcome: Yes, they definitely behave differently when compared to the general Japanese students. Their answers are more individualistic than collective and categorical. The returnee students fall somewhere between the American students and the general Japanese students.

4) Are Chinese students similar to the Japanese or Americans? Probably they are more similar to the Japanese students.

Outcome: They were much more similar to Japanese students than to American students, although the number of Chinese subjects, particularly males was so small that no effective comparison was possible.

5) In what way does the individual orientation stand out in the mass of cultural orientation? This can be probably seen if somebody has a particularly strong character.

Outcome: American students do not seem to have had any influence from the collective orientation of the Japanese students. It is noteworthy that Japanese students should get the influence from as short as one year's stay abroad, while at the end of almost a year's stay, Americans are not at all affected by the Japanese collective orientation. Is there any

correspondence between the imbalance of the affecting power of collective-individual orientation (in that individual orientation has a powerful effect on individuals, whereas collective orientation does not) and the trend we always see among ourselves concerning local language acquisition? That is to say, Japanese local inhabitants who move to Tokyo, except for Kansai natives, acquire very quickly the so-called standard Japanese spoken in Tokyo, while it is almost impossible for grown-up Tokyo natives to acquire local Japanese dialects, except when they move to the Kansai. In Kansai, particularly in Osaka, the local dialect of Japanese has the same kind of linguistic affecting power as the Tokyo dialect has. Thus, those who are confident of what they are are not affected by the environment around them.

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