Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence in Vocational Foreign Language Courses: Case Study of Japanese and Korean Learners

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Article Info	Abstract
	The 21st Century Skills Framework identifies foreign language proficiency and intercultural communication as core competencies essential for individuals' future lives and careers. In response, higher education institutions have increasingly emphasized the development of graduates equipped with strong communication abilities and intercultural understanding to meet the demands of the global labor marker. Beyond linguistic competence, a deep understanding of the cultural contexts and communication patterns inherent in the target languages –such as Japanese and Korean—is critical. This study aims to explore and analyze the perspectives of university students learning Japanese and Korean regarding the communication styles and cultural backgrounds embedded in these languages. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study collected quantitative data through questionnaires distributed to students enrolled in "Introduction to Communication" (Japanese) and Korean language courses. Qualitative data were gathered through focus group discussions and student essays on intercultural communication, conducted as part of the classroom activities. The findings reveal that students develop intercultural communicative competence by integrating cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, fostered through reflective learning practices in both language courses.

INTRODUCTION

The World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project/NSFLEP, 2015) emphasize the importance of communication skills and intercultural understanding as one of the main competencies of an individual as part of the 21st century global community. According to NSFLEP, there are five foreign language objectives known as the 5Cs, namely Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. These five goals are designed to lead foreign language learners to actively participate and contribute in societies with diverse languages and cultures (Moeller and Nugent, 2014). The 21st century skills framework also states that the foreign language is one of the core subjects and the intercultural communication is one of the learning skills needed to support life and future careers for individuals (Fadel, 2008).

Globalization in all areas of life has increased the quality and quantity of international relations. Therefore, intercultural communicative competence is absolutely necessary today (Yousef, 2024). There are many multinational companies operating across international borders call for personnels with competencies in intercultural communication (Pop & Sim, 2022). Therefore, it is necessary for foreign language classes at higher educational institutions to develop language curriculum with necessary skills and knowledge to support students' intercultural communicative competence before entering the labor market.

Sinicrope, Norris, and Watanabe (2007) emphasize the importance of foreign language classes in preparing learners to have the intercultural communicative competence so that they are able to collaborate with people from different cultural backgrounds. Moeller and Nugent (2014) explain that a foreign language speaker is called competent in intercultural communication if they have foreign language proficiency competence as well as skills, attitudes, values and cultural knowledge related to the foreign language.

Byram (1997) also defines a foreign language speaker with such competence as someone who seeks to understand the culture of others while also contributing to others' understanding of their own culture.

Corbett (2003) defines intercultural communicative competence as the ability to understand the language and behavior of the target language community and explain it to his own community. Furthermore, Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) formulated five components that foreign language speakers with intercultural communicative competence have, namely:

1. Intercultural attitudes, containing curiosity and openness, as well as an open attitude towards other cultures and one's own culture

2. knowledge of one's own interactions with other people, social groups and their products and practices in one's own country and in the target language country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction

3. skills of interpreting and connecting information

4. skills of finding information and using it in interaction

5. critical cultural awareness, i.e. the ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of criteria, perspectives, practices, and products explicit in the cultures of one's own and other countries

Deardoff (2006) explains the ongoing process of shaping an individual's intercultural communicative competence, namely: attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, internal outcomes, and external outcomes related to intercultural interactions. López-Rocha (2016) states the importance of integrating intercultural communicative competence into language curriculum. A foreign language teacher needs to develop a method of learning foreign language and culture in the classroom that can shape learners into foreign language speakers with intercultural communicative competence. The focus of learning changes from preparing learners to be able to communicate in the target language like native speakers, to preparing learners to be able to communicate openly to build good

relationships so that they can live in a different cultural environment. Still, intercultural communicative competence is closely related to the development of students' linguistic skills. Lysiuchenko, et. al. (2021) found a strong interdependence between these variables.

There have been several studies related to intercultural communicative competence in the field of English, ranging from the development of international communicative competence scale for Academic English students (Ertay & Gilanlioglu, 2024), the use of telecollaboration to develop intercultural communicative competence of English learners (Toscu & Erten, 2020), to the individual differences that affect intercultural communicative competence on English learners (Munezane, 2019). The increase number of multilingual and multicultural English learners, along with the position of English as the lingua franca of the world, are some motivation factors (Bouchard, 2017).

However, still little is known about intercultural communicative competence addressing Japanese and Korean learners more specifically. The topic of intercultural communication, especially in the field of vocational purposes, has not been deeply explored. Meanwhile, based on data from the Investment Coordinating Board (Ministry of Investment and Downstream Industry/BKPM, 2024), South Korea and Japan are among top five list of foreign investment in Indonesia during fiscal year 2024. To support their investment, both countries are in high demands of many professionals with Korean and Japanese language qualifications from Indonesia.

Moreover, Indonesia is also the country with the second largest number of Japanese language learners in the world after China (The Japan Foundation, 2023). Among several reasons for learning Japanese language, pursuing a career or job related to Japan or Japanese language is one of the significant motivating force. Similar to Japanese, the number of Korean learners has increased significantly in recent years, both offline (KBS World, 2024) and online courses (Sulistyawaty, 2023), due to the popularity of Korean pop culture. The existence of such a

supply and demand match is the main driving factor for higher educational institutions to create learning innovations in foreign language learning, especially for vocational purposes, in order to cultivate human resources with good competency in intercultural communication and language skills.

Previous studies show that intercultural communicative competence in Japanese companies (Astartia, 2021; Sitepu, Herniwati &Widianti, 2021; Dwiwardani & Wahidati, 2019; Setiana, Setiawati & Mustakim, 2019) and Korean companies (Stella & Mani, 2020; Mochklas, Panggayudi & Soenarto, 2019) in Indonesia is highly required, but still is lacking in many graduates of Japanese and Korean language programs. Therefore, the present study will focus on the analysis of the development of students' intercultural communicative competence in vocational Japanese and Korean classes. The result of this study might be used as a basis for curriculum design and learning innovations that focus on improving intercultural communicative competence in the field of Japanese and Korean language communication.

METHOD

This study utilizes mix method for data collection. The questionnaire was adapted from the Intercultural Communicative Competence Assessment Tools (Telecollaboration for Intercultural Language Acquisition/TILA, 2015) which consists of three parts. Section A includes four open-ended questions about the respondents' intercultural background. Section B contains 10 items on a 5-point Likert scale regarding respondents' experiences interacting with Japanese culture in their home country. Section C contains three statement items with 5-point Likert scale about experiences interacting with Japanese and Korean cultures in each respective country.

Data collection was also conducted through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and reflection essay. The FGD question materials adapted from the Intercultural Communicative Competence Assessment Tools (Telecollaboration for Intercultural Language

Acquisition/TILA, 2015) which includes two parts, namely part A for knowledge measurement and part B for attitudes measurement. Meanwhile, reflection essay was written at the end of the course. It contains participants' insights on intercultural communication in Japanese and Korean language.

There are 65 participants in total, consist of 30 males and 35 females with various cultural background. For Japanese language, participants are students who attending Introduction to Communication course conducted in collaboration with practitioner from Japanese company. The collaboration course with practitioner in Japanese communication was divided into two parts. The first part was conducted by Japanese lecturer during the first half of the course, covering materials of communication in general, types of communication, as well as verbal and non-verbal communication.

The second part was taught by practitioner with sufficient working experience in Japanese company. During the second half of the course, the practitioner gave more more insights into Japanese way of communication from several study cases in Japanese companies. With this kind of collaboration, Japanese learners have more comprehensive knowledge and understanding on Japanese communication, both from theories and practical perspectives. Meanwhile for Korean class, participants are students who attending Korean language course with introduction to Korean culture and communication.

Explanation regarding the purpose, the method of the study and the right of participants was given before the study was conducted. Participants signed the consent form if they agree to participate in the study. The participation would not affect the grades, including when they chose to withdraw, during or after the study has being conducted.

Data from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS statistics, meanwhile data from FGD and essay were analyzed using thematic analysis. This study was expected to answer the research question, namely how Japanese and Korean learners perceive intercultural communication in both languages and cultures. Furthermore, the results of this study were expected to provide insight into the development of intercultural communicative competence in Japanese and Korean language courses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Questions in Section A of the questionnaire relate to intercultural background of the respondents. 80% of the respondents have more than one culture present in their family, while the other 20% came from one culture. In Indonesia, marriage between people from different cultural background is common. It was caused by high mobility of the people due to work, education, or family reasons. This condition provides bigger exposure to other cultures and thus conformity to cultural differences. In addition to this, only a small number of respondents have experience of living in Japan/Korea or having first-hand experience of Japanese culture.

Nevertheless, more than 50% of the respondents answered that they have friends or contacts abroad. Some are online friends they met at game online, social application, or social media. 90% of respondents also shows a strong awareness of "people belonging to another culture". Respondents described "another culture" as "different language, tradition, values, habit, behaviours, way-of-thinking, norms, or beliefs" and "how they change over time and place".

When they encountered with Japanese or Korean people, respondents have several efforts to do. They tried to find out the customs and habits of the Japanese or Korean by observing their behaviours. They also did self-reflection when there was communication breakdown.

Several strategies employed by respondents to overcome communication breakdown are such as using artificial intelligence (AI)-generated tools, for examples online dictionaries, as well as books related to specific fields or languages, and so on. Asking for help from other people to bridge the communication is

also another attempted effort. Another strategy is by using gestures or body languages to explain about something. They also pay attention to Japanese or Korean body languages. Trying to avoid unclear or ambiguous words when talking to Japanese or Korean is another strategy to minimize the communication breakdown. Nevertheless, most respondents said that they felt comfortable with different customs when communicating with Japanese or Korean.

The development of students' intercultural communicative competence was reflected as well in their essays. They were able to compare the similarities and differences between Japanese communication styles and their own language, especially with Javanese. Several aspects of comparison include level of respect, types of communication and the use of non-verbal language.

> "Communication patterns between Japanese and Javanese show many similarities in terms of respect, indirect communication, and use of body language, all of which emphasize manners and etiquette, as well as respect for people who are older or have a higher social status. Both tend to use subtle methods in conveying messages and avoid direct confrontation. However, there are significant differences in language structure, with Japanese having a complex level of formality and the use of special particles, while Javanese has a level of language that conveys respect and social status. Apart from that, the way of expressing disagreement in Japan is more subtle and tends to be avoided to maintain group harmony, while among Javanese, disagreement can be expressed more freely in certain forums. Values related to individuality and collectivism also differ, with Japanese society placing greater emphasis on togetherness and unity in action, while among Javanese, there is greater appreciation for the role of the individual in the context of family and society. Understanding these similarities and differences is important for improving cultural interactions and more effective communication between the two groups." (IW, male, translated by Author)

The essay written by IW shows one of the traits of intercultural communicative competence, which is critical cultural awareness. This awareness comes from understanding the cultural background and patterns in Japanese communication discussed with practitioner during the course. The process of understanding Japanese way of communication was then internalized by reflecting to one's own culture, resulted in the comparison between both cultures without negativity.

Another essay shows that the trait of intercultural communicative competence appears in the form of the awareness of one's identity as a global citizen. Understanding and respecting different culture becomes the basis of effective communication.

> "To achieve effective communication and avoid obstacles and conflicts, it is important for individuals to understand and respect the culture of the other person and its social context. Thus, culture is not only a foundation in shaping ways of communication, but is also the key to achieving a deep understanding between individuals and between groups in global societies that are increasingly complex." (RD, female, translated by Author)

Intercultural communicative competence was also reflected in the use of technology for communication and information. How interaction between different cultures was transformed into different way of communication using digital technology was realized by Japanese learner as both overwhelming and challenging.

> "The development of information and communication technology has changed the way cross-cultural communication is carried out, both in Japan and Indonesia. The use of social media and digital platforms has facilitated interactions between individuals from various cultures in a way that was previously impossible. However, technology also carries new challenges in the interpretation of messages and expressions of cultural identity in a broader context."

(SF, female, translated by Author)

The result of this study shows that respondents have several traits of intercultural communicative competences due to the cultural varieties of their upbringing. Some of those traits are: adaptation (acculturation), tolerance, open-mindedness, and preservation. In regards to adaptation (acculturation), respondents have shown that they have gone through the process of acculturation during their respective childhoods. They have parents who come from different regions and culture, who then moved and live in a new place or several different places.

Respondents dealt with new language, new customs and habits. This situation has helped create the trait of high adaptability to different culture, as well as acculturation to the new culture. Not to mention other traits as well, such as tolerance and open-mindedness to the uniqueness of different culture. Even though they are still comparing between their own and other cultures, they learnt not to give judgment merely from the perspective of good-or-bad and right-or-wrong. They are open to the new ideas and different perspectives offered by other cultures as well and willing to understand the differences.

Furthermore, it is not just about the acceptance of other culture, but also about the preservation of one's own culture. Having the opportunity to look closely at other culture has given them chance to see and reflect on their own culture in reverse. The process brought the awareness of the importance of preserving one's own culture. They not just respect the uniqueness of other cultures, but also their own culture's uniqueness.

In the context of vocational Japanese and Korean language classes, discussions on culture that underlies Japanese and Korean language gave respondents opportunity to see both languages from different perspectives. Before, knowledge of Japanese culture was limited to *anime* (Japanese animation) and *manga* (Japanese comics), and K-pop or K-drama in Korean culture. By in-depth discussion on Japanese culture underlies Japanese and Korean languages, respondents became aware on the

foreign languages and embedded culture, and reflected back on their own language and culture.

For example, the use of *keigo* (formal Japanese) and its cultural background was compared to the use of *krama inggil* (formal Javanese). Furthermore, respondents also became aware of how language and culture influences people's behaviour. For example, when using Japanese, respondents tend to speak more polite and using gesture or body language, such as bowing. When they switch into English, the behaviour also changed.

Chen (2014) proposed the triangular model of intercultural communicative competence which consists of three aspects, namely cognitive, affective and behaviour. The cognitive aspect is presented in the intercultural awareness, the affective aspect is in the intercultural sensitivity, and the behavioural aspect is in the intercultural adroitness (effectiveness).

Chen explains that an interculturally competent individual has capability of knowing their own and other cultures, respecting and accepting cultural differences, as well as behaving appropriately in intercultural interactions. The intercultural sensitivity helps to decrease cultural distance between people of different culture (Moradi and Ghabanchi, 2019). Therefore, developing intercultural sensitivity will help language learners improve their intercultural communicative competence (Vu, 2022). Improving intercultural sensitivity might be conducted through globalization and exposure to different cultures (Wang and Zhou, 2016).

Chen and Starosta (2000) also explain how intercultural awareness, sensitivity and adroitness are intertwined. The intercultural awareness shows how individual describe the similarities and differences between cultures by using his/her cognitive. Meanwhile, intercultural sensitivity shows affective aspect by respecting and acknowledging the difference in other cultures.

The awareness and sensitivity are reflected as intercultural adroitness in individual's behaviour during interaction with people from other cultures. Babao and Adiatma (2023) also

suggest that cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects have significant influences on intercultural communicative competence, even though they might not be considered as the exclusive determinants for intercultural communicative competence. Lack of cognitive and affective abilities, as well as intercultural sensitivity are some factors that will undermine intercultural communication among people from different cultures (Sarwari, et al., 2024).

Furthermore, there are external factors that also improve intercultural communicative competence of an individual. Among those factors are the experience of study abroad, multicultural environment, interactions with other people, as well as the availability and engagement in online materials (Jackson, 2015; Luo and Chan, 2022; Hang and Zhang, 2023; Huang, et.al., 2023; Vu and Tran 2023). Understanding and improving the particular aspects and factors of intercultural communicative competence will help individuals to engage and connect with people in the globalized world.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, in-depth discussion and elaboration on how culture and language affect communication in the vocational foreign language classes is significance to develop the intercultural communicative competence of learners. Introducing the cultural background of the language will give students a new perspective and understanding on the language. First-hand experience with the culture and interaction with people who are using the language in the real world help learners form a new perspective of intercultural communication. Cognitive, affective and behaviour are three aspects that affect intercultural communicative competence significantly and are needed to put into consideration when conducting foreign language course.

These three aspects incorporate into intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness, and intercultural adroitness which becomes the foundation of intercultural communicative competence. In a globalized world, intercultural communication has become essentials. Therefore, to be able to create an effective intercultural communication, competencies of intercultural sensitivity, awareness and adroitness are needed to be taken into consideration when designing language learning curriculum.

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