

Importance of Teaching Cross-Cultural and Interpersonal Communication in Foreign Language Classrooms

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Abstract

People's actions are influenced by the attitudes of the culture and customs of the country they grew up in. To broaden one's horizons and improve cross-cultural communication flexibility, foreign language education should aim to help students learn another country's culture and language that is sometimes completely different from their home country. To explore this idea we asked the following questions to university students: How does foreign language education affect students' perceptions of their ability to function in the target culture? What areas of cross-cultural competency can be enhanced by study abroad that would not be found in the foreign language classroom? In what way does cultural bias affect student's perception of appropriate interpersonal communication? We administered a survey to Japanese and American students. The results of our research are as follows. Foreign language education largely affected the students' perceptions of how they were able to function in a foreign country, as well as providing evidence that they learned more about cultural aspects of language and behavior through trial and error while abroad, instead of in the classroom. We also demonstrated that cultural bias was diminished overall by study abroad. The findings in the context of foreign language classrooms in one's host and home country disprove Hofstede's (1991) research. The results were that the students' home cultures did not necessarily affect how they deemed communications appropriate or inappropriate when using their target language.

Introduction

The country and culture that you grew up in affects how you see the world and foreign language education is meant to broaden that worldview. We wanted to explore how foreign language classrooms in one's home and host country affect their cross-cultural and interpersonal communication. In general we asked questions concerning perceptions of foreign language education, how study abroad can enhance cross-cultural competency and what influence does cultural bias have on students' perceptions of appropriate communication. We administered a survey to Japanese and American university students to try and answer these topics using the foreign language classes in one's home and host country as our cross-cultural settings.

1. Research Questions

1. How does foreign language education affect students' perceptions of their ability to function in the target culture?
2. What areas of cross cultural competency can be enhanced by study abroad that would not be found in the foreign language classroom?
3. In what way does cultural bias affect students' perception of appropriate interpersonal communication?

2. Significance of The Study

Karina took an intercultural communication and psychology class while studying abroad at Ritsumeikan University in Japan and learned about cross-cultural communication.

Abaigael studied interpersonal communication techniques in dramatic arts and speech communication classes earlier in her academic career. Both of us want to know more about how people communicate cross-culturally because it is essential to the modern workplace as countries become more globalized and increasingly more diverse culturally. With the help of this study we were able to get a peek at how people communicate in cross cultural situations like a foreign language classrooms and during study abroad.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Interpersonal Communication Definition

It is important to note what kind of interpersonal communication we tested in our survey. We will tested both verbal and non-verbal communication cross culturally between university students. Interpersonal communication is the process by which people exchange information,

feelings, and meaning through verbal and nonverbal messages (SkillsYouNeed, 2015). The importance of focusing on the interpersonal communication aspect is because, “Learners interact and negotiate meaning in spoken, signed, or written conversations to share information, reactions, feelings, and opinions.”(The 5 Cs : Standards , 2015). The key being when communicating interpersonally meaning is *negotiated* as in something could be negotiated and but understood incorrectly, this is the crux of mis-communications between cultures. Also how the foreign culture aids (in our case cultural immersion during study abroad) or creates disadvantages in terms of the negotiated meaning is essential to understanding fully the differences and similarities between cultures. Finally “the study of interpersonal communication (IPC) is gaining importance in this milieu of globalization.”(p.1 Ramaraju, S.). From this it can be seen that our focus on interpersonal communication has global ramifications in the modern day world because it is essential to everyday life.

3.2 Appropriate and Inappropriate Communication Connection

Shared or divergent communication styles influence whether a conversation proceeds smoothly or by fits and starts. Determining appropriate and inappropriate interpersonal communication between cultures is the key to telling us where communication styles of different cultures converge and diverge (Ramsey, 1979). If we can identify these aspects it will be easier to teach them in the foreign language classroom and to see where there are holes on foreign language curriculum. Also if we pin-point the differences we can see where conflicts may arise between cultures and teach smooth communication easily in the foreign language classroom.

3.3 Communication styles of Japan and America

Japan's communication style is based around *wa* or harmony. The Japanese communication style is focused on harmonizing with friends colleagues and family i.e a search for belonging (Ramsey, 1979). The Japanese traditionally have oriented towards human relations or *ningen kankei* reality (Ramsey, 1979). Examples of communication style in Japan include; The less talkative person is preferred (Klopf, 1991) and inferred feelings and understandings based on the concept of *Ishin-deshin*: "What the mind thinks, the heart transmits" (Tsuji-mura, 1987). This means that Japan is a high context culture. Things do not need to be explicitly said to create meaning and understanding between people. Americans are the opposite they are a low-context culture. They are stimulated by argument so as to clear the air (Klopf, 1991) Thus, Americans typically have a very pragmatic communication style (Ramsey, 1979). Also, Americans are focused on the search for self (Ramsey, 1979). The group being no more important than the individual or one's self. This individuality also leads to communication that acknowledges differences of experience, ability, and opinion which separate individuals and highlight who they are as Americans (Ramsey, 1979). Another aspect of this is individuality is that it is drastically different to the group-centered communication common in Japanese culture and can lead to miscommunications between Americans and Japanese. While Ramsey may exemplify these differences between American and Japanese communication styles our research aimed to see if foreign language classrooms in the host and or home country are the bridge and lessen these differences.

3.4 Cross-Cultural Conflict Example

In order to see if students have acquired a culturally learned behavior one has to pick an example of cross-cultural communication to test a student's understanding or lack thereof. For

our research we chose the cross-cultural behavior in Japanese culture called *aizuchi*. This behavior was also part the nonverbal communication section of our research. The term *aizuchi* (or, to backchannel) is the listener's use of short utterances, such as "oh" or "uh huh" in English or "hai", "un", or "aa" in Japanese. In America, such behavior would be seen as rude or impatient, as the person talking would believe their conversation partner is not interested in the conversation. In Japan, this habit is seen as polite, as you are showing understanding of and interest in what the person is saying (Hanzawa, 2012). Whether or not a student can has learned this behavior and can use it in either their host or home countries respectively demonstrates an increase in intercultural competency, while the location indicates where the cross-cultural bridge was built to lessen communication style differences.

3.5 Cross-Cultural Settings

To refine our topic we chose one to define cross-cultural as "relating to or involving two or more different cultures or countries" (Merriam Webster, 2016) . Secondly, we chose two settings to focus on in terms of where to study interpersonal and cross-cultural communication between American and Japanese university students. Foreign language education in one's home country and host country are the cross cultural settings in which we looked at interpersonal and cross-cultural communication between American and Japanese university students. Through these two cross cultural settings we were able to see if interpersonal communication between Japanese and American University students has changed because of them.

3.6 Foreign Language Education Programs Laws and Curriculum

After the foreign language education programs have been developed, discrepancies between curriculum and laws are the next factor that may or may not create a cross cultural

communication difference in between Japan and America. The law or lack thereof in fact touches the curriculum produced in schools K-12. While Japan and America may have seemed similar in their desire to grow the foreign language programs in the past, today they could not be more opposite. In Japan today, foreign language is mandatory at the junior high and high school levels, and English is the main foreign language that is taught (Kashihara, 2011). While, in America, the foreign language education is not only spotty but there is no major curriculum that can be applied statewide (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). “Only 10 states require foreign language study for high school graduation” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). This current discrepancy in foreign language education did affect our results and limited our study to a certain extent.

3.7 Foreign Language Classroom Issues

Furthermore there are other issues that can affect a student's increase in cross-cultural competency such as the frequency and rigor of actual interpersonal communication that is taught in the foreign language classroom in either in their home. While schools teach the language such as dialog in foreign language classrooms, they fail to teach the *interpersonal* aspects of a conversation. In America, even though students practice conversation dialogues, and *communication* is an important standard, students still feel anxiety surrounding oral communication.(The 5 Cs : Standards , 2015; Koteková, 2013). In Japan, secondary school classrooms lack native English speakers, which makes it harder to learn casual conversation techniques (MEXT 2010). This lack of true interpersonal communication in the student's home country is where study abroad comes in.

3.8 Communication Competency and Study Abroad

Foreign language education in one's host country and culture translates as each country's respective study abroad program (America or Japan). Schnickel says that, "Study abroad helps students develop intercultural communication skills. Also students gained improved intercultural awareness." (2010). Pinpointing which aspect of study abroad improves cross-cultural communication skills that can not be found in the student's home country foreign language classrooms are essential to improving those home country foreign language classes. Also figuring out what is the difference between host and home countries will help shore up the holes in foreign language curriculum. Dwyer states that study abroad programs have historically increased one's intercultural competency and personal bias recognition as well as furthered their personal development (1999). How does personal bias or in our case the cultural bias or the cultural lens influence interpersonal communication and has it been diminished over time? This is exactly what our survey is attempted to test.

3.8 Other Influences on Cross Cultural Communication

It is important to note that we are each given a cultural-lens or cultural bias through which to see the world to communicate with but that our survey will answer how said lens evolved or became moot in the context of cross-culture communication between university students (Ting-Toomey, 1999). This cultural-lens is also called cultural value orientation (Hofstede, 1991). While these value orientations are taken from the respective workplaces in America and Japan, they can be easily applied to a university setting. Through this bias of culture we as humans make connections and decisions on appropriate communication. Some of these culture value orientations are drastically different depending on the culture. In America, short term orientation and weak uncertainty avoidance is valued. Short term orientation means

personal respect and survival as well as face saving on the individual level are major facets in American culture and thus this affects communication style (Hofstede, 1991). Also in America weak uncertainty avoidance is valued so uncertainty is desired. For example career changes, and risk taking in general are encouraged in American culture. Also conflict can be positive in American culture. Refer back to the pragmatic communication style that Ramsey states that many Americans have (1979). This coincides with a pragmatic need to clear the air when talking about Americans communication style (Ramsey, 1979). Japan on the other hand is quite different.

In Japan long term orientation and strong uncertainty avoidance is valued. Long term orientation is the basic opposite of short term. So, uncertainty is a threat and thus career stability and expectations of clear procedures and conflict being negative must be met. Finally strong uncertainty avoidance is valued. In terms of keeping the status quo, social order and hierarchical respect. Lastly, collective “face saving” is the most common kind of face saving in Japan (Hofstede, 1991).

Our survey tested if home university foreign language classes and study abroad classes affect university students cross cultural communication skills and if these cultural differences stated above still apply today. Or if they have become more blended and less differentiated.

4. Research Method

We tested 59 university students in total (31 Japanese and 28 Americans). All of our participants were either American university students who study Japanese or Japanese university students who study English. In terms of our research method we used google forms to administer an online survey in English and in Japanese.

5.Results

5.1 Demographics

The majority of American's we tested are 4th years college. While the majority of Japanese we tested are 2nd years in college. The Japanese students on average have studied English longer than American's have studied Japanese on average 4 years (U.S) verse 9 years (Japan) . We think this is due to the schools being different. In Japan English is starts at the elementary school level as a foreign language while in the U.S. foreign language education is on the decline and spotty (U.S, Department of Education, 2010). In terms of time spent abroad, the high majority our students studied abroad in either America or Japan. The majority of the Japanese students who answered were currently studying abroad and the majority of the American students had already studied abroad in the past for at least one year. These demographics gave a window to peek at interpersonal and cross-cultural communication specifically with Japanese and American University students.

6. Survey Results

6.1 Research Question 1

How does foreign language education affect students perceptions of their ability to function in the target culture?

Three questions in particular stood out to answer this question. First, we asked the question "Which classes made you feel most comfortable and confident with your ability to communicate inter-culturally in your target language?" The majority of both American and Japanese students answered that their foreign language classes in their host country made them feel most confident in their ability to communicate. (*figure 1*)

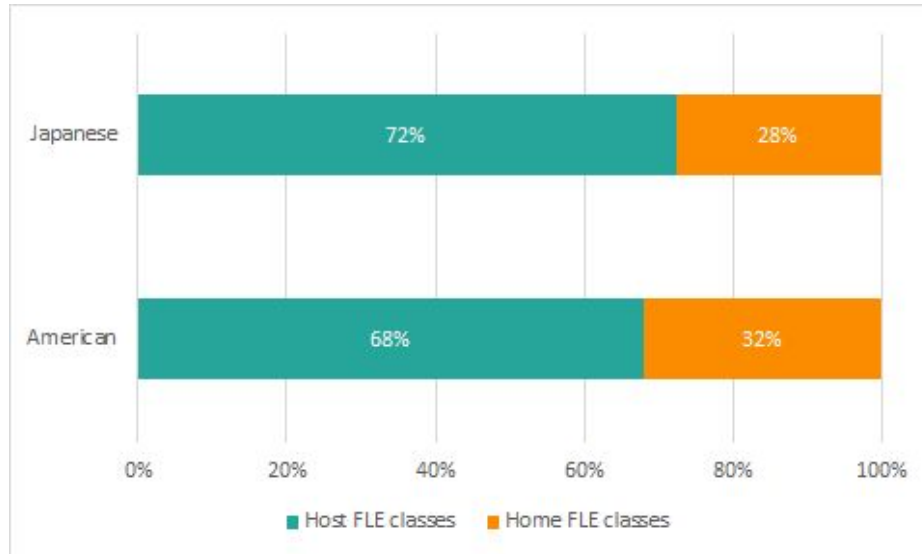


Figure 1: Which classes made you feel most comfortable and confident with your ability to communicate inter-culturally in your target language ?

Next, we asked where at their home university these students most interacted with exchange students that belonged to culture of their target language. Again both American and Japanese students largely agreed with each other, responding that they were most likely to meet on the school campus, but outside of the classroom, for instance, during club events or at school cafes (Figure 2). However, the first difference appeared in the follow-up question (Figure 3).

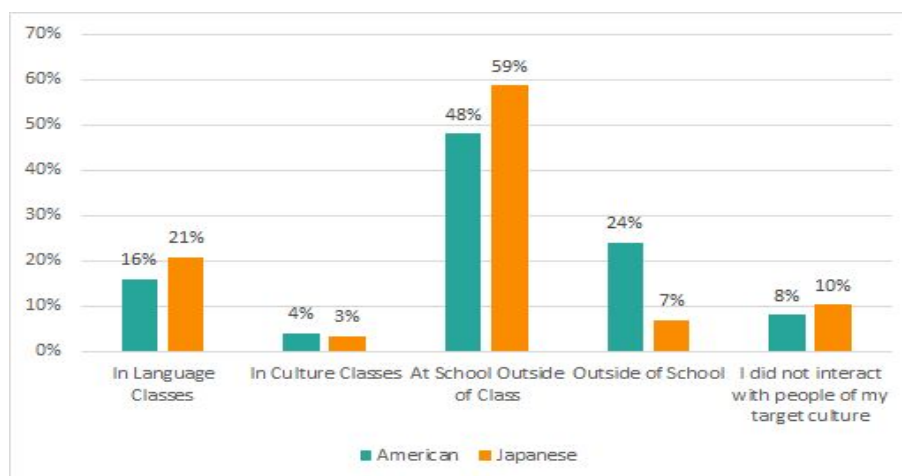


Figure 2: At your home university, where did you most interact with target culture students ?

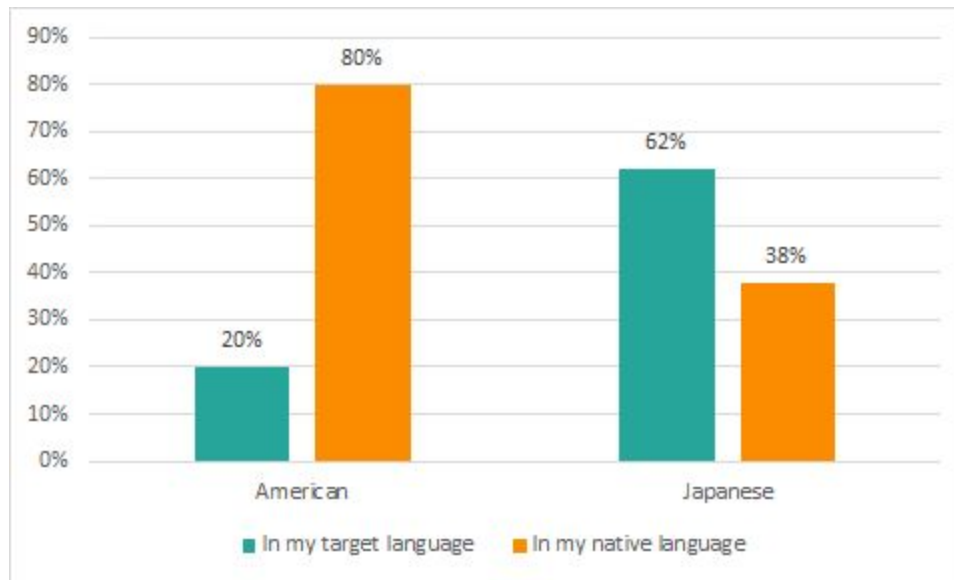


Figure 3: At your home university, what language did you speak with the target culture students?

As you can see from Figure 3, while American students predictably used their native language at their home university, Japanese students do the opposite. Instead, they were more likely to practice their target language with exchange students. This was the first instance in which we found a major difference in the answers between the two groups of students.

6.2 Summary of findings for research question 1

As discussed above, the language classes in the host country had a greater influence on the student's ability to function in their target culture. However, students interacted with people of the target culture most outside of their language classes. From this, we draw that the study abroad classes and not the home country foreign language classes have a strong influence on student personal development concerning confidence in their target language. The other interesting fact we pulled from this section was the evidence that Japanese students are more likely to make an effort to use English at their home university than American students.

6.3 Research Question 2

What areas of cross cultural competency can be enhanced by study abroad that would not be found in the foreign language classroom?

We started this section by asking two of the previous questions again, but this time in the context of the host university rather than the home university. Firstly, while at their host university, where did they most interact with students of the target culture, and secondly, what language did they use in those situations?

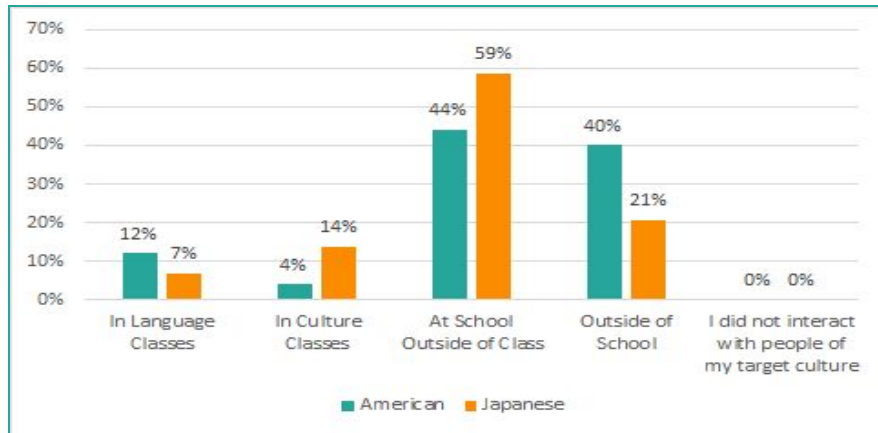


Figure 4: where did you most interact with those of your target culture at your host university?

Predictably, the students answered the first question similarly to how they answered for their home university, stating that they generally met up with target culture students on school campus but outside of the classroom (Figure 4).

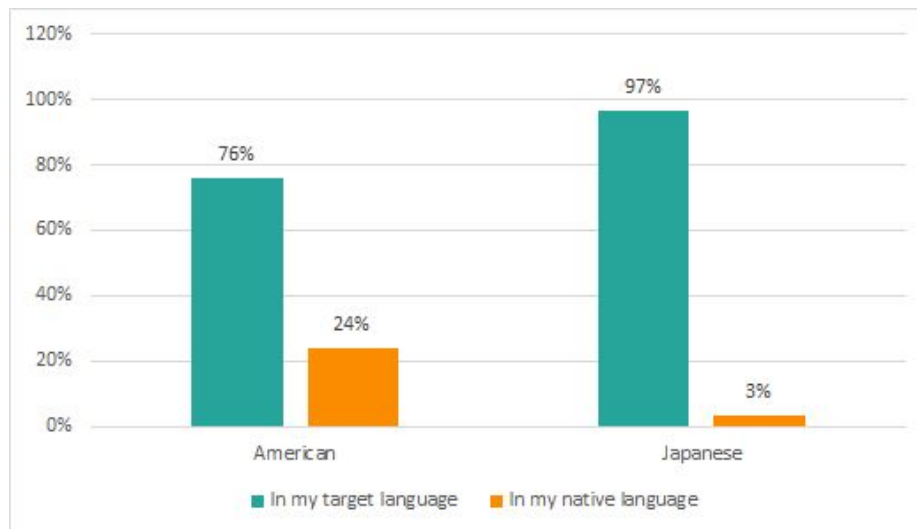


Figure 5: In the above situations, what language do you speak in?

Here we see a change from before, in that both groups of students spoke in the target language. However, we can also see that even in this situation, nearly all of the Japanese students spoke English, as opposed to the three-quarters of Americans who spoke Japanese.

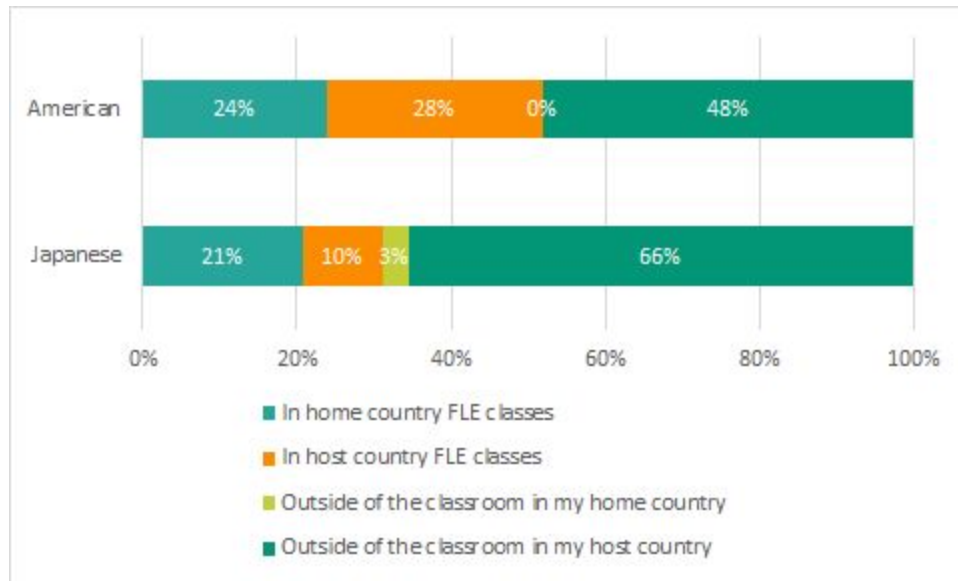
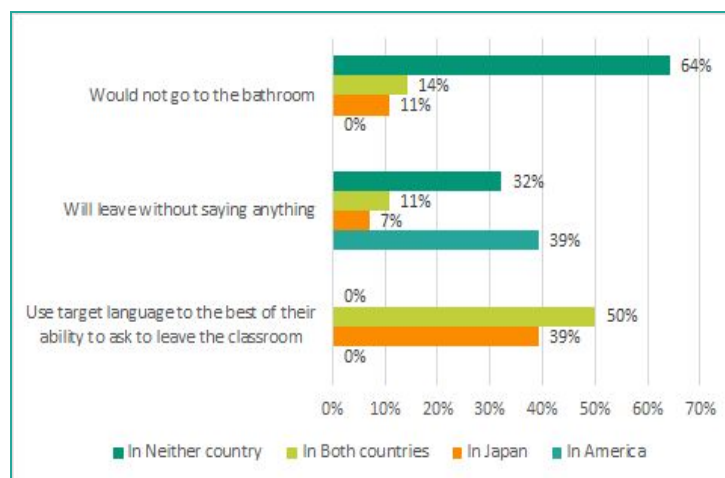
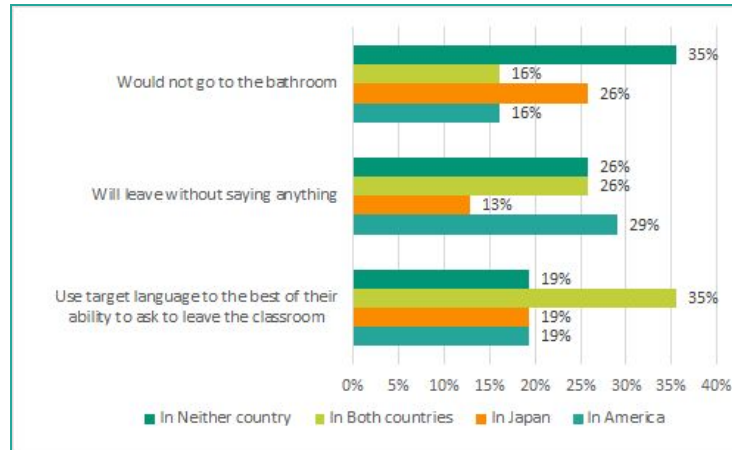


Figure 6: Where did you learn most about taboos?

The next question regarded where students felt they learned most about the cultural behaviors, specifically the taboos of the target culture. As Figure 6 shows, both students largely learned about taboos through trial and error while abroad. Neither countries' foreign language classes had nearly as strong of an effect on the student's cultural behavior education.





Upon having to go to the bathroom in class, what would you do?

Figure 7.1: American Responses

Figure 7.2: Japanese Responses

The final question in this section was a situational example: when students had to go to the bathroom during class time, what would they do? The majority of both students answered that they would most likely use their target language to ask to go to the bathroom. The intriguing difference in answers, however, appears to come from cultural differences. Americans demonstrated learned behaviors by largely only asking to go to the bathroom where the host culture was involved. Japanese students, on the other hand, seemed to have trouble letting go of these ingrained cultural behaviors by asking regardless.

6.4 Summary of findings for research question 2:

As demonstrated, study abroad improves cultural competency because students learn behaviors and taboos by practice. Even though students answered that host classes made them feel most comfortable with their language, other responses show that most of their learning was done outside of the classroom. Our survey suggests that a problem with Japanese language classrooms in Japan for American students is minimal opportunities interpersonal communication with native speakers. In cross-cultural situations Americans are less likely to use Japanese outside of Japan. On the other hand, Japanese students are more likely to use English in both America and Japan .

6.5 Research Question 3:

In what way does cultural bias affect student's perception of appropriate interpersonal communication?

In order to answer this question, we put aspects of Hofstede's research to the test. Specifically, we asked students how they felt about taking risks or playing it safe when it came to discussing delicate subject matter in their foreign language.

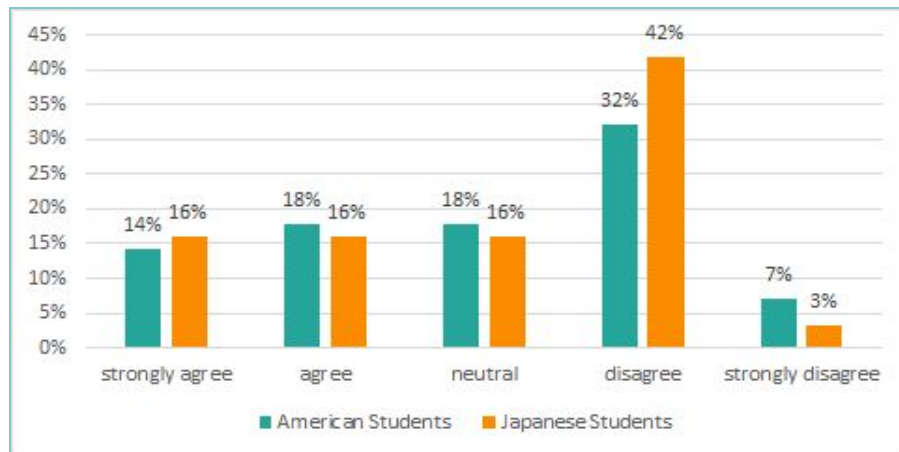


Figure 8: *When conversing in my foreign language I have a tendency to take risks on sensitive subject matter, grammar and new vocabulary*

As Figure 8 shows, when we asked students if they would rather take risks on such subject matter, both Japanese and American students disagreed with the notion. While this fits Hofstede's study for the Japanese students, the American responses go against his results. Similarly, when we asked the opposite, both American and Japanese students agreed that they would rather play it safe on delicate subject matter when speaking in their foreign language.

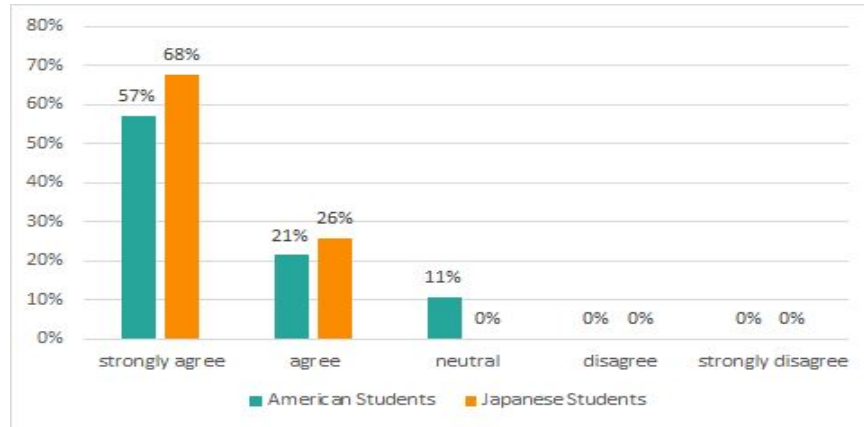


Figure 9: When speaking to people, it is important to make the conversation as harmonious as possible

The next situation we considered looked at the student’s likelihood of trying to encourage harmonious conversation. Again, Japanese students confirmed Hofstede’s theories while American students disproved them (Figure 9).

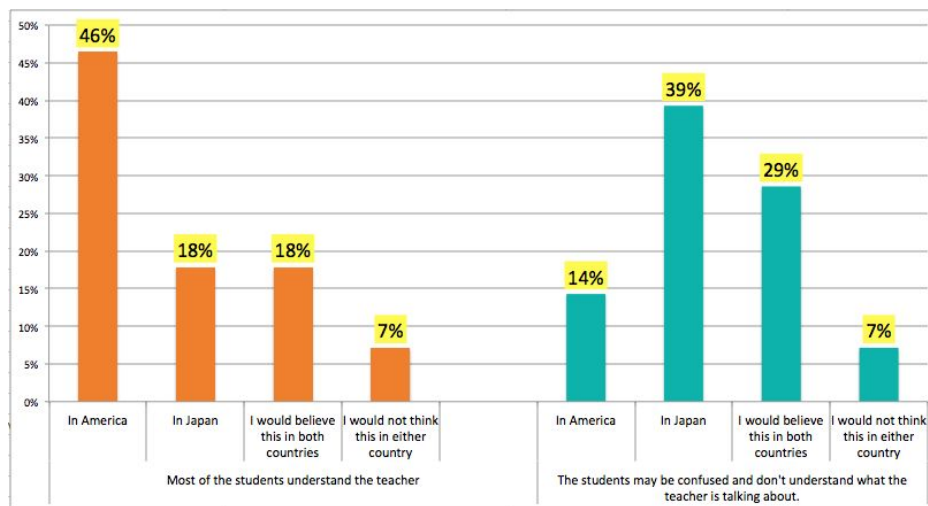


Figure 10: You are in foreign language class and your teacher is explaining a concept and many people are 'grinning and nodding'. Do they understand? American Responses

The final situation we considered re-examined the concept of *aizuchi* again. In this case, the students in the classroom are all nodding and grinning at the teacher’s explanation of a concept. The responses from the American students suggested that they understood the differences in behaviors between America and Japan (Figure 10).

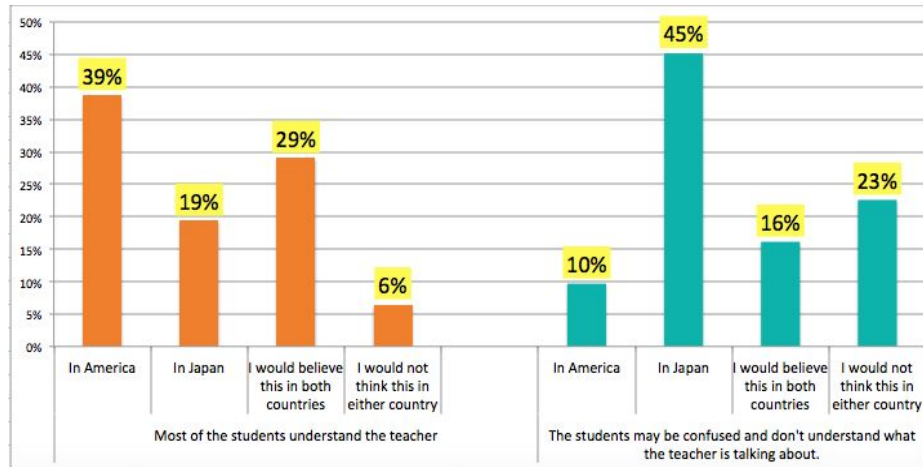


Figure 11: You are in foreign language class and your teacher is explaining a concept and many people are 'grinning and nodding'. Do they understand? Japanese responses

Likewise, Japanese students (Figure 11) also showed that they understood the differences in *aizuchi* between the two cultures.

6.6 Summary of findings of research question 3:

Most of our data disproves Hofstede's research concerning playing it safe and risk taking cultural differences. Namely: Japanese do not care as much as Americans in regards making mistakes with sensitive subject matter; and, Americans are more likely to play it safe in regards to language learning overall. Also, both sets of students understand the concept of *aizuchi* (grinning and nodding) in the context of Japanese or American cultures. In America, when one grins and nods, the content is transferred, but in Japan, this is not necessarily the case. Neither American students' nor Japanese students' cultural bias affected their communication styles.

7. Conclusion

Our study found that foreign language classes in one's home country lack language immersion, which we think makes practicing a target culture's appropriate behaviors, such as taboos, more difficult. The students are more confident in their language ability because of their study abroad classes, where they learn how to discuss delicate subject matter, cultural behaviors and taboos more easily. However, they are not interacting with people of their target culture within the foreign language classroom, instead finding conversational partners outside of the classroom. Japanese students were more likely to practice conversational English when they felt inferior in their target language. Americans, on the other hand, were less likely to practice conversational Japanese when they felt inferior in their target language. Surprisingly the differences in communication style between Japanese and Americans that we anticipated did not come about in our research. We believe that home country foreign language classrooms are missing interpersonal and cross-cultural aspects in communication. Ideally, there should be more interaction between language learners and native speakers in home country classrooms.

8. Limitations of the study

The Japanese students studied English longer than the American students studied Japanese, with American students having an average of three to four years compared to the Japanese seven years of study. This may be why Japanese students showed more confidence and willingness to use English. Also, our survey had specific requirements for the students; therefore our results do not apply to all students and classrooms. We need to find updated research on cultural biases and

communication styles because Hofstede's and Ramsey's research is not from this decade. Which would influence other survey questions we would like to ask.

Ideally, any future continuations of this study would allow us to expand to other cultures to make this research more helpful to educators.

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