



Exploring manifestations of curiosity in study abroad as part of intercultural communicative competence



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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study that explores manifestations of curiosity in study abroad emerging in response to teaching materials designed to stimulate interest in it. Having reviewed definitions of curiosity, the rationale for investigating curiosity within the theme of study abroad will be presented before its psychological underpinnings are explored. The development of teaching materials will then be described that were implemented in an English course conducted at a university in Japan. The course aimed to develop intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Byram, 1997) within the Intercultural Dialogue Model (Houghton, 2012), and the study took the form of case study based on action research. Selected examples of qualitative data will be presented and discussed in relation to Loewenstein's (1994) information-gap perspective. Teachers are recommended to utilize information gaps to cause students to want to know more by encouraging them to clearly delineate information-gap boundaries and seek further information. Students need to develop meta-cognitive and meta-affective awareness and control to maintain open and inquiring minds as intrinsic aspects of criticality development. By foregrounding curiosity within the Intercultural Dialogue Model, this paper reveals active yet often missed connections between the attitudes, knowledge and critical cultural awareness components of Byram's model.

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1. Introduction

This paper reports on a study that explores manifestations of Japanese students' curiosity in study abroad that emerges in response to teaching materials specifically designed to stimulate interest in it. This introductory section will start by reviewing definitions of curiosity within the intercultural competence literature before presenting the rationale for investigating curiosity within the theme of study abroad. The psychological underpinnings of curiosity, and possible implications for education, will then be explored before an overview of the study is presented in Section 2.

1.1. Definitions of curiosity in the intercultural competence literature

In the intercultural competence literature, the concept of curiosity has been clustered with “suspension of judgment, cognitive flexibility, cultural humility and tolerance of ambiguity” (Bennett, 2009: p. 128), and respect (valuing other

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cultures), openness (withholding judgement) and discovery (tolerating ambiguity) (Deardorff, 2009), attitudes that form the base and starting point of Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence. Although curiosity is not specifically identified as a feature of intercultural awareness in the Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2001), it is explicitly recognized in the attitudes component of Byram's (1997) ICC model, an overview of which is presented in Appendix 1 (also see Byram, 2009). While the relativization of self and other are framed in terms of "curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (p. 91) in this component of Byram's model, the word 'curiosity' is not used in the description of the recommended learning objectives, which are framed instead in terms of willingness, interest and readiness (underlined in Appendix 1), so what does curiosity mean exactly?

Curiosity may be viewed negatively if associated with unwanted risk as the proverb 'curiosity killed the cat' suggests, or if it is considered an annoyance associated with inquisitiveness defined by Cambridge Dictionaries Online in terms of "wanting to discover as much as you can about things, sometimes in a way that annoys people" (inquisitiveness, n.d.). However, despite the possible negative nuances highlighted above, both curiosity and inquisitiveness tend to be viewed in positive terms in the academic intercultural arena with one sometimes being defined in terms of the other.

Mendenhall (2001) suggests that inquisitiveness is the critical factor [in intercultural competence], perhaps the keystone in developing intercultural effectiveness, a position supported by Deardorff's work as well (Bennett, 2009: p. 127). Gregerson, Morrison, and Black (1998) define curiosity as "unbridled inquisitiveness" noting that global leaders "stated repeatedly that inquisitiveness is the fuel for increasing global savvy, enhancing their ability to understand people and maintain integrity, and augmenting their capacity for dealing with uncertainty and managing tension" (p. 23) (Bennett, 2009: pp. 127–128.)

Bennett (2009) suggests that tolerance of ambiguity and the suspension of assumptions and judgements allow curiosity to thrive by opening up the mind to multiple possibilities, noting that levels of tolerance of ambiguity may vary culturally. This is reflected in Hofstede's concept of uncertainty avoidance defined as "the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity" (The Hofstede Centre, n.d., a) with Japan being characterized as "one of the most uncertainty avoiding countries on earth" (The Hofstede Centre, n.d., b).

Bennett (2009) claims that curiosity has been defined as a sense of wonder, defined by Opdal (2001) as "the state of mind that signals we have reached the limits of our present understanding, and that things may be different from how they look" (p. 128). Opdal (2001), however, claims that "curiosity seen as a motive to do exploration within definite and generally accepted frames is to be distinguished from wonder in which doubt about the frames themselves is the underlying factor" (p. 331), suggesting that both should be fostered through education.

Overall, then, there remains a lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the definition of the word curiosity, which potentially makes it difficult for teachers to identify expressions of it in student work, and to see how it functions in practice as an active component of ICC, which is problematic in itself. It has been over fifteen years since Byram's ICC model was first published in 1997, yet there is a dearth of published teaching materials prioritizing the development of ICC, which also undermines the development of ICC assessment. While ICC assessment is not the focus of this article, one of its priorities is to make the underlying ICC construct visible, so that it can be assessed well as it emerges in response to learning (Houghton, 2013a; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2010). Considering the development of the field as a whole, then, teacher-researchers working on the development of materials and methods should be aiming to make aspect(s) of the ICC construct visible to serve the development of the ICC field more generally, and this includes curiosity.

1.2. Contextual background: study abroad in the Japanese context

Study abroad is a suitable theme within which to investigate curiosity, and particularly in Japan where there has been a "precipitous decline" (Tanikawa, 2013) in the number of Japanese students studying abroad in recent years. Although "(g)lobalizing forces have accelerated the pace of internationalization in institutions of higher education both at home and on foreign soil" (Jackson, 2010: p. 21), which increases the need for global competency, effective intercultural communication skills, and linguistic ability in English, "(i)n 2010, only 58,000 Japanese students studied outside the country, a large decrease from the record high 83,000 during the 2004 academic year" (Torres, 2013).

Speculators comment that a lack of international experience and fluency in English language skills may harm Japanese students' employment prospects as English is introduced as the/an official language of the Japanese workplace in companies like Rakuten and Uniqlo (Matsutani, 2010; Tanikawa, 2013). Further, companies like Panasonic, Sony, Lawson, Yamato Transport and Fast Retailing, which operates the Uniqlo brand clothing stores, have actively been increasing the number of their foreign employees. While Uniqlo stepped up its hiring of non-Japanese to 30–80 percent of all new hires, Panasonic said that of 1390 new employees it planned to recruit in the forthcoming year, 1100 would not be Japanese (Tanikawa, 2011).

The reasons for the downturn in the number of Japanese students studying abroad are not clear, although there is speculation on this point. It may result from economic hardship (Tanikawa, 2011; Torres, 2013) or students' prioritization of job-hunting while at university. Professor of education at Hosei University in Tokyo, Naoki Ogi, suggests that students' lack of interest in study abroad may have deeper psychological roots as growing unease with the unknown causes young Japanese to become increasingly "introverted and risk-averse" and "unwilling and ill-prepared to take on new challenges" (Tanikawa, 2011). And although the downturn may currently be reversing, partly because of demands by major employers seeking to globalize by demanding solid foreign language skills and international experience of their employees, "it is not yet clear

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