

How Foreign Muslim Students Changed Their Attitude toward Japanese Academic Environment after a Culture Assimilator

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The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2018
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The number of Muslim students from abroad is increasing after Japanese Government's plan launched in 2008 to accept around 300,000 international students in Japan. In this research, we aim to create "a culture assimilator", a kind of cross-cultural training consisting of questions, answers and commentaries, which is instructive for helping their religious practice and supporting their study in Japan. We conducted our culture assimilator for Malaysian Muslim students who had already started their study in Japan. We report the results of the analysis based on the survey. According to their answers, at most 30 % students did not know coping strategies in critical incidents suggested in our culture assimilator. This meant our culture assimilator was instructive enough to support them. We also found from their comments they did not compromise their study for their religious practice, on the contrary, coped with difficulties flexibly within the limits of their faith. Though they got high marks in our culture assimilator as a whole, they selected wrong answers concerning "obligation" to some questions. To investigate how our culture assimilator influenced their attitude toward Japanese academic environment, we executed the same questionnaires before and after conducting our culture assimilator. By comparing their responses, we found a new response category "About Religion" in the latter answers, which included negative remarks about Japanese people's attitude toward religion. They also learned to prefer easy communication like greetings to get along with Japanese people, and the ratio of "Apology" decreased dramatically in a category "Self-help" after our culture assimilator.

Keywords: Islam, foreign Muslim students, culture assimilator, coping strategies, difficulties, religious practice, flexibility, obligation, easy communication, apology

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Introduction

Because of the Japanese Government policy called "300,000 International Student Program", the number of international students studying in Japan has been increasing, and their countries of origin and culture background are diversifying. In particular, the number of international students from Islamic countries has continued to increase from 2013, and it exceeded 13,000 in 2017.

(https://www.jasso.go.jp/about/statistics/intl_student_e/index/html)

Nakano, Okunishi and Tanaka (2015, pp. 137-151) pointed out that some Muslim international students felt difficulties in their social lives in Japan when they tried to adjust themselves to Japanese lifestyle and culture. In the adjustment, though there is a report (Tanaka and Straum, 2013, pp. 1-9) which shows Muslim international students can respond flexibly without pushing religious needs forcibly, another research

(<http://www.jaise.org/nj-dl.cgi?file=2016%92S%93%96%95%AA%89%C8%89%EF%95%F1%8D%90%8F%91.pdf>) reports the ability of their assimilation and cooperation toward host societies has decreased than before.

Using critical incidents, which are cases caused by cultural differences, we developed and improved an intercultural training material "culture assimilator" (Fiedler et al., 1971, pp. 95-102) for Malaysian Muslim students. Today Malaysia is the second largest international student supplier for Japan in Islamic countries. In culture assimilator, critical incidents between different cultures are presented as episodes and appropriate interpretation for critical incidents are chosen from the prepared choices by answerers. The cause of misunderstanding and friction are examined by reading commentaries, and that deepens the understanding of both of the target culture and the self-culture. We let Malaysian Muslim students answer our culture assimilator and hope they make good use of our culture assimilator for helping their religious practice and supporting their study in Japan.

We are aware of one previous study by Nakano and Tanaka (2015, pp. 83-92), in which the authors developed a culture assimilator for Japanese students who accepted Muslim international students. Though the target of training "accepting and accepted" is opposite, the essential aim of their study and ours are the same. That is mature understanding and assimilation of Japanese university students and Muslim international students. Our culture assimilator seems to be the first study that helps Muslim international students studying in Japan.

Our research consists of five segments, the first phase is in which the prototype of our culture assimilator was made, the second phase is the implementation of the prototype of our culture assimilator, the third phase is in which our modified culture assimilator was made, the fourth phase is the implementation of our modified culture assimilator and the fifth phase is the evaluation of the investigation. In the present paper, only the last three phases are reported.

Method of Our Culture Assimilator

We had already conducted the prototype of our culture assimilator, e.g. trial culture assimilator, for Malaysian Muslim students in our previous work.

(<http://www.jaise.org/nj-dl.cgi?file=2016%92S%93%96%95%AA%89%C8%89%EF%95%F1%8D%90%8F%91.pdf>). After the execution of the trial culture assimilator, 4 subjects were added as new critical incidents to our modified culture assimilator, e.g. "Taking a Bath", "Terrorism", "Liquor" and "Assemble", based on the evaluation and recommendation of Malaysian Muslim lecturers who had studied in Japan as international students. In addition, contexts of wrong choices were diversified in order to let Muslim students can choose the best answer among multiple choices from educational point of view. Similar choices in contexts are puzzling and not similar choices in contexts will show distinct differences in choices for answerers. The contexts of wrong choices were divided into 4 categories, and wrong choices were placed not to be overlapped to each other in terms of contexts if possible. Each category is shown at Table 1 below.

Table 1: 4 categories of wrong choices

Causal attribution toward mere personality
Causal attribution toward discrepancy between the actual religious practice and the knowledge on Japanese people, the culture of Japan or the culture of universities in Japan
Causal attribution toward discrepancy between the actual religious practice and the misjudging by Muslim international students on a situation
Causal attribution toward discrepancy between the actual religious practice and the Japanese ignorance of Islam which is understood mistakenly by Muslim international students

Albert (1983, pp. 186 - 217) pointed out that culture assimilator could cause misunderstanding because it described questions and commentaries only by words. Misumi (1997, pp. 75-95) thus generated her culture assimilator using videos for those who were not able to read Japanese well and to understand the situation of the questions clearly at words at a first glance. Answerers of the culture assimilator were shown episodes by videos. Misumi also intended to show the cause and the motivation of misunderstanding by videos in commentaries. Taken the above as reference, one piece of illustration was added to each question as well as to each commentary for better visualization of the scene condition in our modified culture assimilator. The illustrations were made in order not to induce answerers to the correct or wrong answers intentionally for fair experiment.

We reviewed all the expressions of questions and commentaries which were succeeded in our modified culture assimilator after the execution of our trial culture assimilator. We added more commentaries so that Muslim students can obtain as many coping strategies as they can for their religious practice and study in Japan.

In order to prevent generating stereotypes of new prejudice by answering assimilator, we did not limit only one absolute correct answer, but only showed one possibly correct answer and referred to other possible answers. However, we designated only one answer per each question to generate the model of thinking from the most probable correct answer.

In addition, two newly added Japanese language teachers supervised Japanese expressions for answerers' better understanding in our modified culture assimilator. Furthermore, in the process of making our modified culture assimilator, the level of Japanese grammar was restricted to below JLPT (Japanese-Language Proficiency

Test) N1 and N2 (N1 is the most difficult level and N5 is the easiest) and vocabularies with N3 level or below were used. Unknown vocabularies for students were attached with English translations.

Table 2 shows the subjects of each critical incident from Q1 to Q15, including the newly added Q12 to Q15 in our modified culture assimilator. The subjects from Q1 to Q11 remained the same as our trial culture assimilator. Each question was classified into either category A or B, those were "The occurrence of cultural friction due to the disharmony between Islamic religious practice and culture of Japanese and of universities in Japan" (Category A) and "The occurrence of cultural friction due to the Japanese ignorance of Islam" (Category B).

Table 2: Subjects of each critical incident from Q1 to 15 in our modified culture assimilators

Category A	Category B
Q1: Difference between Islamic-style toilet and Japanese-style toilet	Q7: Misunderstanding of fasting in Islam by Japanese
Q2: Correct method to clean oneself before praying	Q8: Celebrating the end of Ramadan (fasting month) ceremony
Q3: Time to pray and classes	Q9: Prohibition of body contact with unmarried women to men
Q4: When a seminar is set on Friday afternoon	Q10: Prohibited food consumed by Muslims
Q5: Opportunity to go on a pilgrimage in class days	Q11: Uploading casual dressing images of women through SNS apps
Q6: Attitude of Japanese university students toward religion conflict	Q12: Being naked in onsen (hot springs)
Q15: Relationship between Muslim assembly and local communities	Q13: Being called as a terrorist
	Q14: Unwilling to approach liquor

Besides our modified culture assimilator, the same free-comment questionnaires were conducted before and after our modified culture assimilator to compare how impressions and attitudes of Muslim international students toward Japanese university staffs and Japanese students changed by the execution of our modified culture assimilator.

We asked Malaysian Muslim international students in Japan to answer our modified culture assimilator. Students categorised in Batch A spent more than 1.5 years in Japan and students in Batch B more than 0.5 years. A total of 54 answers were received and analysed.

First, we explained the purpose of our modified culture assimilator to Malaysian Muslim international students and asked them cooperation of answering it through the email. They were invited to a website (composed in Google Form) according to URL attached to the email. The purpose of the research was explained in the website again. Then the free-comment questionnaires were performed there to survey the impressions and attitudes for Japanese university staffs and Japanese students. Execution of our modified culture assimilator was similar to the execution of the previous questionnaires survey. On the website the purpose of our modified culture

assimilator and how to answer it were explained, and then total of 15 questions were shown. A piece of illustration was added below each question to visualize the situation of the scene. A piece of illustration was also added to the page of answers and commentaries appeared in the next page of questions. In the end of each commentary, the answerers were asked to select “yes” or “no” to confirm whether they completely knew or did not know the coping strategies indicated in commentaries. Furthermore, they were asked to answer optional free comments. The interface of website of our modified culture assimilator is shown in Figure 1. After the execution of our modified culture assimilators, the free-comment questionnaires were performed once again.

33 セクション中 3 個目のセクション

質問1

アイシャさん・アリさん・シディさん・ハフィスさんは、MJHEPでの勉強を頑張ったので、日本の大学で学ぶことになりました。勉強は楽しいですが、大学や日常生活では困ったことがいくつかありました。

アイシャさんは、日本のトイレにはホースがないので、ウォシュレット (bidet) のトイレを利用しています。ある日、トイレを使い終わって、外に出ると、掃除の人に怒られてしまいました。なぜでしょうか。

- ① トイレが掃除中だったから。
- ② 外国人が日本人と同じトイレを使うことはよくないから。
- ③ 座るところや壁 (wall) ・床 (floor) がぬれていたから。
- ④ 掃除の人はそのとき、気分が良くなかったから。

画像のタイトル



正解の可能性が高い：③ 座るところや壁 (wall) ・床 (floor) がぬれていたから。

解説：
日本のトイレを使った後は、水を流します。ウォシュレットのトイレでは、体を水で洗うことはありますが、そのとき床を水でぬらすのは、汚いと考えられています。ウォシュレットのトイレを上手に使えば、床をぬらすずに体を洗うことができます。もし床を水でぬらしてしまったら、トイレトペーパーでふきましょ。ウォシュレットのトイレではないときは、ペットボトルに水を入れて持って行き、体を洗うこともできます。便器 (toilet seat) や床をぬらしたときは、ふくことも忘れずにしましょう。ここではトイレトペーパーを使い、家に帰ってから体を水で洗うこともできます。ウォシュレットのトイレを使うときは気を付けましょ。

画像のタイトル



質問1の解説に、あなたの知らない対処方法 (coping strategy) はありますか。

- 知らないものがある
- 全部知っている

質問1に何かコメントがあれば、自由に書いてください (You can answer in English) .

記述式テキスト (短文回答)

Figure 1: Interface of our modified culture assimilator

Result and Analysis

Table 3 shows the correct answer rate for each question and the rate of whether there were any coping strategies not known to each commentary in our modified culture assimilator.

Table 3: Result of our modified culture assimilator

	Batch	Choice 1	Choice 2	Choice 3	Choice 4	any coping strategies not known	no coping strategies not known
Q1	A	0%	0%	96%	4%	4%	96%
	B	3%	0%	97%	0%	10%	90%
Q2	A	96%	0%	0%	4%	17%	83%
	B	100%	0%	0%	0%	3%	97%
Q3	A	0%	0%	0%	100%	13%	88%
	B	0%	0%	0%	100%	7%	90%
Q4	A	4%	75%	8%	13%	8%	92%
	B	3%	93%	0%	3%	13%	83%
Q5	A	0%	0%	96%	4%	13%	88%
	B	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	97%
Q6	A	4%	75%	4%	13%	29%	67%
	B	0%	90%	3%	7%	13%	80%
Q7	A	0%	4%	88%	8%	8%	92%
	B	0%	0%	97%	3%	13%	83%
Q8	A	13%	83%	4%	0%	8%	92%
	B	3%	93%	0%	0%	0%	97%
Q9	A	54%	0%	0%	46%	25%	75%
	B	57%	0%	0%	43%	17%	80%
Q10	A	21%	63%	0%	17%	13%	88%
	B	13%	60%	0%	27%	17%	80%
Q11	A	4%	13%	79%	0%	8%	83%
	B	3%	17%	80%	0%	10%	87%
Q12	A	21%	67%	8%	0%	13%	83%
	B	3%	97%	0%	0%	10%	87%
Q13	A	4%	0%	96%	0%	13%	83%
	B	3%	0%	93%	0%	20%	70%
Q14	A	46%	8%	29%	17%	29%	71%
	B	60%	7%	23%	7%	30%	63%
Q15	A	0%	0%	0%	96%	17%	83%
	B	0%	0%	0%	97%	17%	77%

According to the results, the students got more than 80% correct answer rate in average for each batch except for Q9, 10 and 14. Therefore, it is likely that many of them understood appropriately the situations where critical incidents occurred and they can behave well in such situations as a whole. However, the correct answer rate for Q9 was not high. Wrong answers concentrated in Choice 4, "Because handshake is a normal way of greeting people in Japan.", as is the case in our trial culture assimilator. For Q10, both batches were not able to come to 80% in the correct answer rate, which was the same as in our trial culture assimilator. Wrong answers concentrated in Choice 4, "You have to receive presents in Japan.". For Q14, newly added to our modified culture assimilator, wrong answers concentrated in Choice 3, "You have to attend the party if you are invited." These three questions shared similarity with inducing answerers to wrong choices where they emphasized Japanese norm by mistake, in the way of expressing "You have to ... in Japan" and "... normal

... in Japan”. Even for Q11, wrong answers concentrated in Choice 2, “It is normal for Japanese to upload photos taken in any party on SNS.”, where Japanese norm was emphasized mistakenly. This tendency was also seen in our trial culture assimilator. It is worth noting that answerers were induced to such wrong choices. The students, who did not spend long days in Japan, may pay so much attention to Japanese norm that they believed they had to adjust themselves excessively to the Japanese norm. For Q6, however the correct answer rate was only 60 % or below for each batch in our trial culture assimilator, it was much better in our modified culture assimilator. It is likely that the students understood the critical incident in Q6 after they experienced such situation as “Students in Japanese universities are not willing to talk about ethnic problems, politics or religious”, or they learned such information without experiencing in Japan. It can be said that their experiences improved the correct answer rate.

In each commentary, some coping strategies were not known to answerers. The percentages of their existence ranged from 8% to 30%. This means there is a possibility that any commentary in our modified culture assimilator was instructive enough to support answerers. The rate, however, differed among each commentary, we should thus consider deleting questions and commentaries which had low rate for whether there were any coping strategies not known, and enriching commentaries which had high rate.

Looking at free-comment descriptions for each question, some students had already practiced the methods we proposed in our modified culture assimilator, e.g. Q1 commentary: Let’s use water in a plastic bottle if you want to wash your body in toilet., we thus confirmed they improved the way of using toilet and wudu (performing ritual cleaning before prayers) in Japanese universities environment. Our modified culture assimilator is probably a measure where they are able to confirm their own practice. For Q3 and 5, when it was difficult for them to balance their religious practice with their classes in Japanese universities, they did not compromise their study for their religious practice, on the contrary, coped with difficulties within the limits of faith, e.g. “Islam does not force us to follow the religious practice” and “Islam encourages us to study”. Q3 and 5 showed much higher correct answer rate than others, almost all Malaysian Muslim students in Japan may thus be able to resolve such unbalance in themselves cleverly. In addition, they were able to cope flexibly with difficulties when they faced conflicts between their religious practice and their study in Japanese universities, e.g. “If I trouble professors and my colleagues in going back to my country for Ramadan holidays, then I shall not go back to my country.” and “If I am given non-haral foods, then I receive them firstly and think about the event later”.

As a whole, the students never described it was difficult for them to select correct answers in our modified culture assimilator, which may suggest that diversification of context in wrong choices should be effective. The description “Japanese in commentaries is difficult” or “Japanese in commentaries is hard to understand” vanished completely from optional free comments in our trial culture assimilator and the description “Questions are easy to understand” emerged in our modified culture assimilator, which may also suggest that visualization by illustrations and reexamining Japanese should be effective to some extent for the students.

Analysis of Free-Comment Questionnaires before and after Our Modified Culture Assimilator

In this section, we analyze answers of both of the free-comment questionnaires before and after our modified culture assimilator. In order to investigate the change of Malaysian Muslim international students' impressions and attitudes toward staffs and students in Japanese universities, we performed the same questionnaires for them before and after our modified culture assimilator. By comparing both answers of the questionnaires, we intended to confirm the change before and after the execution of our modified culture assimilator. We made our questionnaires in reference to those in Nakano and Tanaka (2015, pp. 83-92). We replaced the word "Muslim" in questionnaires of Nakano and Tanaka (2015, pp. 83-92) by "Japanese" in our questionnaires because they developed a culture assimilator for Japanese students who accepted Muslim international students and we wanted to develop a culture assimilator for Muslim international students who studied in Japan.

Using KJ method (Kawakita, 1967), we classified the answers of the questionnaires by some categories. If an answer included multiple descriptions to be classified into different categories, then we divided the descriptions into proper pieces and classified them into proper categories. For example, an answer "The Japanese are very serious, but they are also shy" was decomposed into a category "Positive" (former part of the answer) and another one "Negative" (latter part of the answer). Table 4 below shows the questionnaires, the categories of answers and the ratio to each category.

Table 4: Questionnaires, categories of answers and ratio to each category

Q1: What do you think about Japanese people?	
Categories of answers <u>before</u> our modified culture assimilator	Categories of answers <u>after</u> our modified culture assimilator
Positive : 51%, Negative : 44%, Neutral : 5%	Positive : 38%, Negative : 33%, About religion : 13% , Neutral : 11%, Other : 5%
Q2: What is the best way to make a good relation with Japanese teachers and students in Japanese universities?	
Categories of answers <u>before</u> our modified culture assimilator	Categories of answers <u>after</u> our modified culture assimilator
Approach from myself : 84% , To act together : 6%, Taking action before the problem occurs : 6%, Other : 4%	Approach from myself : 71% , To act together : 15%, Taking action before the problem occurs : 6%, Other : 9%
Q3: What is the most important approach for troubles with Japanese teachers or students at Japanese universities?	
Categories of answers <u>before</u> our modified culture assimilator	Categories of answers <u>after</u> our modified culture assimilator
Consultation for solution : 69%, Self-help effort : 25% , Other : 6%	Consultation for solution : 56%, Self-help effort : 33% , Other : 11%

In Q1, a new category "About religion" appeared after our modified culture assimilator. Answers classified into the category were all negative remarks, e.g. "Japanese people are ignorant of Islam". This is probably because Muslim students have clearly recognized Japanese's ignorance of Islam through our modified culture

assimilator. It can be said that our modified culture assimilator played a role of letting them be conscious of the religious side of Japanese. On the other hand, they also believed that if they explained Islamic customs correctly, then Japanese people would understand them well.

In Q2, the proportion of simple communication answers such as "Speak", "Greeting" and "Showing Smile", which was categorized in the category "Approach from myself", was increased from 49% to 71% in the category "Approach from myself" after implementing our modified culture assimilator. This result probably shows Muslim international students started to consider simple communications were more effective for Japanese faculty, staffs and students to get along well after the execution of our modified culture assimilator.

In Q3, the most frequent answers in the category "Self-help efforts" before our modified culture assimilator were "apologize". After our modified culture assimilator, however, the answers were decreased to less than half of the same category "Self-help effort" though the proportion of "Self-help effort" increased from 25% to 33% slightly. Regarding this point, each explanation in our modified culture assimilator recommended "explain and talk" rather than "apologize" as a way to cope with trouble. It seems that the students were influenced by this fact. The same tendency was also seen in Q1 remarks.

Questionnaires for Japanese Lecturers

In the studies by Nakano, Okunishi and Tanaka (2015, pp. 137-151) and Nakano and Tanaka (2015, pp. 83-92), they summarized the results of their culture assimilator conducted for Japanese university students who had intercultural contact with Muslim international students. Their culture assimilator was generated from the past studies based on interviews with Muslim international students in Japan. In short, the Muslim students were informants. They gathered informants' difficult experiences and confusion faced in their daily lives so that the collected evidences were illustrative of the contents validity in their culture assimilator. Following their studies, we conducted free-comment questionnaires for Japanese lecturers who involved in education for Malaysian Muslim students both in Japan and Malaysia in order to get to know how they thought about difficult experiences and confusion caused by Muslim students. Using the results as a base, we examined the contents validity in our modified culture assimilator. Table 5 shows the details of questionnaires.

Table 5: Questionnaires for Japanese lecturers

Q1	Have you ever had any feeling of surprise, stress, discomfort, strangeness or difficulties with Islamic culture and behavior of Muslim students?
Q2	Have you ever faced any interpersonal difficulty with Muslim students? If you have, how did you cope with it?
Q3	Are you making any efforts to repress yourself against any difficulty with Muslim students or trying to adjust yourself to them?
Q4	Considering all the facts, are you satisfied with your relationship with Muslim students?

We obtained responses from 7 Japanese lecturers. Some of their responses showed similarity to some critical incidents in our modified culture assimilator as follows. For

Q1, “Mecca pilgrimage takes priority over school duty among Malaysian Muslim lecturers.” and “Toilet is wet all the time.” For Q3, “We avoid shaking hands with Muslim women.”, “We avoid religious topics including mentioning Islam itself and comparing Islam with other religions” and “We avoid topics of foods and drinks during the fasting period.” These references were also seen as critical incidents in our modified culture assimilator, we can thus say that our modified culture assimilator contains Japanese lecturers’ realistic difficulties and confusion in Malaysian Muslim environment. In this respect, it seems that our modified culture assimilator shows a valid approach to select critical incidents.

On the other hand, some responses included references which were not seen in critical incidents in our modified culture assimilator. For Q1, it was remarkable that lecturers were surprised at simple Muslim customs and traditions, e.g. “Muslim students are all very devout.” and “They have a custom of eating with hands.” For Q2, a lecturer introduced his shocking story, “A student excused himself from his cheating because of his God’s instruction.” For Q3, there was a lecturer who believed it was natural that we should adjust to other customs on intercultural communication. For Q4, “I set a boundary naturally between Malaysian Muslim students and us Japanese because there are great differences in customs.” and “I feel thankful to Muslim students because they know very well about Japan and they do not take the taboo serious when I speak of it.” These actual experiences and opinions received from Japanese lecturers can be the grounds for new modified culture assimilator and further discussion. We consider incorporating more appropriate critical incidents, questions and choices from the references.

Conclusion

In this research, we developed and improved our culture assimilator for Malaysian Muslim international students who studied at Japanese universities. We can say that the modification of our culture assimilator ensured the validity of the contents according to the results of our modified culture assimilator and of the questionnaires for Japanese lecturers. Free-comment questionnaires before and after our modified culture assimilator also revealed psychological changes in the students and how our culture assimilator affected the changes.

Our culture assimilator was designed only for Malaysian Muslim international students in Japan. Taking it into consideration that increasing and diversifying of Muslim international students in Japan are now on going, developing and improving culture assimilator for other Muslim international students will be useful for both Muslim students and Japanese academic staffs and students. In addition, students who got higher marks in a culture assimilator does not necessarily behave well in the actual situation. We will keep a follow-up survey for the students who answered our culture assimilator. Through this research and practice, we would like to contribute to mature understanding of Malaysian Muslim international students and Japanese university students with respect to Japanese university environment.

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