Students' Intercultural Communication Competence in Rural Areas of Japan

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Abstract
Local companies in Japan's rural areas are supplementing workforce shortages by employing students from overseas. Most Japanese students born and raised in those areas are expected to play important roles in local companies after graduation. To fulfil the necessity of designing an education programme to develop students' intercultural communication competence for working in rural areas, this study examines how Japanese and overseas students work with people from different countries. Results of a survey conducted in one rural area show that Japanese students have fewer opportunities of working with people from different countries. Furthermore, results also show that Japanese people do not necessarily use languages as expected by overseas students and that variables correlated with how students cope with communication gaps vary between Japanese and overseas students. Implications of the results are discussed in terms of designing an education programme.

Keywords: intercultural communication competence, rural areas of Japan, population decline

Introduction

Most local governments in Japan's rural areas have been suffering from population decline. According to the 2015 Population Census of Japan, compared with that in 2010, 39 of 47 Japanese prefectures and 1419 of 1719 municipalities have declined in population (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2016, October). Thus, local companies in rural areas are supplementing workforce shortages by employing students from overseas. Most Japanese students born and raised in these areas are expected to play important roles in local companies after graduation. From another viewpoint, intercultural communication competence necessary for those working in rural areas would most likely differ from that necessary for those working in large cities like Tokyo. However, little is known about characteristics of intercultural communication competence necessary for those working in rural areas.

This study was motivated by the necessity of designing an education programme to develop students' intercultural communication competence for working in rural areas. To fulfil this necessity by focusing on students' language use in the workplace and their communication skills used to cope with communication gaps, the study examined how Japanese and overseas students work with people from different countries in one rural area of Japan.

Before moving to the methodology section, what this study means by "intercultural communication competence" should be clarified. Here, intercultural communication competence refers to the competence needed to achieve smooth communication between people from different cultures. Thus, not only language proficiency, but also, for instance, the ability to understand and accept different values is included in intercultural communication competence.

Methodology

A questionnaire survey was administered to Japanese and overseas students in one rural area of Japan from May to July 2017. The questionnaire included: 1) characteristics of students, 2) students' language use in the workplace and 3) students' communication skills used to cope with communication gaps. The questionnaire was designed according to results of our pilot test conducted in December 2016. Three different language versions were developed for overseas students (i.e., Japanese, English and Chinese). The Japanese version was translated into English and Chinese. Then the English and Chinese versions were back-translated into Japanese to verify their equivalence to the Japanese version. For Japanese students, the Japanese language questionnaire was developed. Data from 32 Japanese students and 88 overseas students who fulfilled the survey's conditions were analysed.

Results

Characteristics of students

The following tables illustrate characteristics of students.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Overseas Students

Where are they from?	
China	56
Vietnam	9
Russia	4
Myanmar	2
Bangladesh	2
Malaysia	2
Sri Lanka	2
Germany	2
France	2
Others	5
Non-response	2
Gender	
Male	42
Female	44
Non-response	2
Age	
20–24 years old	34
25–29 years old	37
30 years old and over	15
Non-response	2
Length of stay in Japan	
2–12 months	20
13–24 months	21
25–36 months	15
37–48 months	12
49–60 months	10
61 months or longer than 61 months	10

Table 2
Characteristics of Overseas Students: Language Abilities and Study of Intercultural Communication

Language they know best	
Chinese	56
Vietnamese	9
English	6
Russian	4
German	2
French	2
Burmese	2
Bengali	2
Korean	2
Others	3
Language they know second best	
Japanese	58
English	25
Chinese	2
Other, non-response	3
Language they know third best	
Japanese	25
English	50
Others	3
Non-response	10
Studying subjects related to intercultural communication	
Before coming to Japan	
Yes	31
No	56
Non-response	1
After coming to Japan	
Yes	33
No	54
Non-response	1

Table 3

Characteristics of Overseas Students with Respect to Their Work Experience

Length of working with Japanese people in the surveyed area	
1–6 months	28
7–12 months	10
13–18 months	11
19–24 months	17
25–30 months	7
31 months or longer than 31 months	11
Non-response	4
Job(s) in the surveyed area (multiple answers allowed)	
Doing clerical work	5
Working at a restaurant, cafeteria, Japanese style pub (i.e. izakaya)	51
Working at a convenience store, supermarket, department store	25
Producing goods	9
Teaching, TA, RA	29
Translating, interpreting for someone (e.g. tourists)	16
Others	5
Working with people from other countries before coming to Japan	
Almost all the time	5
Often	11
Sometimes	22
Hardly ever	10
Never	40

Table 4
Characteristics of Japanese Students

Gender	
Male	11
Female	20
Non-response	1
Age	
18–24 years old	31
25–29 years old	1
Foreign language they know the best	
English	31
Chinese	1
Studying subjects related to intercultural communication	
Yes	3
No	29
Experience of studying abroad for more than one year	
Yes	3
No	29
Length of working with people from different countries in the surveyed area	
1–6 months	19
7–12 months	7
13–18 months	2
19–24 months	3
25 months or longer than 25 months	1
Job(s) (multiple answers allowed)	
Working at a restaurant, cafeteria, Japanese style pub (i.e. izakaya)	23
	3
Working at a convenience store, supermarket, department store	5
Teaching, TA, RA	5
Others	
Where are their non-Japanese colleagues from?	
China	17
Vietnam	7
Nepal	2
Russia	1
Indonesia	1
Germany	1
Slovakia	1
Do not know	2

We asked approximately 400 Japanese students about working with people from different countries, but found only 32, indicating that Japanese students in the surveyed area have fewer opportunities of working with people from different countries. We return to this point later.

Students' language use in the workplace

Here, we focus on results of students' language use in the workplace. As shown in Table 5, both Japanese and overseas students used Japanese the most frequently.

Table 5
Language Used Most Frequently in the Workplace

	Japanese student	Overseas student
Japanese	30	69
English	1	15
Chinese	1	2
Non-response	0	2

Important here is that Japanese people do not necessarily use languages as expected by overseas students. We asked Japanese students how they thought their overseas colleagues expected them to speak in Japanese in the workplace. We also asked overseas students how they expected their Japanese colleagues to speak in Japanese in the workplace. Table 6 illustrates similarities and differences between the two groups.

Table 6
Students' Expectations About the Way of Speaking in Japanese

	Japanese student	Overseas student
Speaking slowly	16 (50.00%)	46 (52.27%)
Speaking with simple words	21 (65.63%)	45 (51.14%)
Speaking with the use of gestures	17 (53.13%)	21 (23.86%)
Making eye contact	7 (21.88%)	22 (25.00%)
Repeating what they said	11 (34.38%)	16 (18.18%)
Writing what they said	2 (6.25%)	9 (10.23%)
Speaking in standard Japanese (i.e. Japanese language that overseas students learnt at school)	12 (37.50%)	48 (54.55%)

Note: Students were required to check all that apply.

For instance, half the Japanese students thought that their overseas colleagues expected them to speak slowly in Japanese; half the overseas students expected their Japanese colleagues to do so. The same tendency was found for using simple words. However, Japanese and overseas students reflected a discrepancy in the use of gestures. Although 53.13% of Japanese students thought their overseas colleagues expected them to speak Japanese using gestures, only 23.86% of overseas students expected the same. This difference between the two groups achieved statistical significance (Fisher's exact test; $p < 0.01$).

Although Japanese was the language most frequently used by 69 overseas students in the workplace, this does not mean overseas students liked to use Japanese in every work scene. We asked overseas students what tasks they expected their Japanese colleagues to perform in English, rather than in Japanese, in the workplace. We also asked Japanese students what tasks they thought their overseas colleagues expected them to perform in English, rather in Japanese, in the workplace. Table 7 shows the results.

Table 7
Students' Expectations About Speaking in English

	Japanese student	Overseas student
Reading documents	2 (6.25%)	26 (29.55%)
Communicating with colleagues	5 (15.63%)	19 (21.59%)
Answering the phone	0 (0.00%)	10 (11.36%)
Writing reports	2 (6.25%)	14 (15.91%)
Exchanging idea at the meeting	2 (6.25%)	20 (22.73%)
Making a presentation	0 (0.00%)	16 (18.18%)
Communicating with customers	2 (6.25%)	20 (22.73%)

Note: Students were required to check all that apply.

As Table 7 shows, nearly one-third of overseas students expected their Japanese colleagues to read documents in English rather than in Japanese, whereas only two Japanese students thought that they were expected to do so. This difference between the two groups achieved statistical significance (Fisher's exact test; $p < 0.01$). The difference between the two groups in making a presentation also achieved statistical significance (Fisher's exact test; $p < 0.01$).

Notably here, however, the number of overseas students who expected their Japanese colleagues to perform some task in English rather than in Japanese was limited. In our data, while 47 overseas students expected their Japanese colleagues to perform some task in English, rather than in Japanese, 41 overseas students did not expect their Japanese colleagues to perform any task in English.

Since Japanese was the language known second best by about two-thirds of overseas students (see Table 2), that more than two-thirds of them used Japanese most frequently in the workplace is not surprising. However, overseas students' frequency of using Japanese in different work scenes varied depending on their Japanese proficiency levels. To determine their proficiency levels, we asked them how well they used Japanese in eight daily scenes (e.g. watching news on television, explaining a condition to the doctor and nurse) and in eight work scenes (e.g. reading documents at the workplace, communicating with colleagues).[1] We asked students to rate each scene on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *not really*, 3 = *fair*, 4 = *good*, 5 = *excellent*). Of 69 overseas students, 65 answered the questions, so we divided them into three groups on the basis of their answers. We classified overseas students whose total scores were 24 to 52 into the 24–52 score group (n = 21); total scores of 53 to 63 into the 53–63 score group (n = 23); and 64 to 80 into the 64–80 score group (n = 21).

We also asked overseas students to rate how often they used Japanese in nine work scenes, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *not really*, 3 = *fair*, 4 = *good*, 5 = *excellent*). Among 65 overseas students, 61 answered the questions (i.e. 20 students in the 24–52 score group, 21 students in the 53–63 score group and 20 students in the 64–80 score group). Table 8 shows the mean score of the frequency of 61 overseas students' using Japanese.

Table 8
Mean Score of the Frequency of Using Japanese in the Workplace

	24–52 score group	53–63 score group	64–80 score group
Writing business e-mails	3.40	3.43	4.45
Reading documents	3.65	3.76	4.55
Communicating with colleagues	3.68	3.86	4.35
Answering the phone	2.84	2.95	4.19
Writing reports	3.15	3.24	4.19
Exchanging ideas at a meeting	2.95	3.38	4.45
Making a presentation	3.32	3.29	4.30
Telling colleagues that you will absent yourself from work, be late for work, or leave work early	3.80	4.00	4.71
Communicating with customers	3.50	3.71	4.19

Data analysed using a T-test showed significant differences between the 24–52 and the 64–80 score groups in communicating with colleagues and communicating with customers (t-test; $p < 0.05$) and with respect to other scenes (t-test; $p < 0.01$). Similarly, results showed significant differences between the 53–63 and the 64–80 score groups in communicating with colleagues (t-test; $p < 0.05$) and with respect to other scenes, except in communicating with customers (t-test; $p < 0.01$). On the other hand, the 24–52 and the 53–63 score groups showed no significant difference.

Students' communication skills for coping with communication gaps

Before turning to closer examination of skills for coping with communication gaps, we considered how students felt cultural differences in gestures, customs and interaction strategies. Cultural differences in gestures, for instance, cause communication gaps (see, for example, Matsumoto and Hwang 2014). We asked students to rate how often they felt differences in gestures, customs or interaction strategies on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *hardly ever*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *almost all the time*). Table 9 illustrates the two groups' results.

Table 9
Mean Scores of Frequencies that Japanese and Overseas Students Felt Cultural Differences

	Japanese student	Overseas student
Gestures	2.47	3.03
Customs	3.19	3.59
Interaction strategies	2.91	3.60

Let us return to examination of students' communication skills for coping with communication gaps. To examine gaps, we asked students three questions. The first question, which was open-ended, asked what students actually did in the workplace

when they experienced communication gaps caused by differences in gestures, customs and/or interaction strategies. Japanese and overseas students' answers were similar: for example, asking the addressee to explain again what the addressee meant, explaining the addressee, asking other colleagues' help, learning cultural difference or doing nothing.

In the second question, rated on a 5-point Likert scale, we asked Japanese students how they dealt with communication gaps caused by differences between their ways of thinking and their overseas colleagues' ways of thinking. Similarly, we asked overseas students how they dealt with communication gaps caused by differences between their ways of thinking and their Japanese colleagues' ways of thinking. We presented the following seven choices to students.

(1) (i) Asking your Japanese colleagues later
(ii) Asking your non-Japanese colleagues later
(iii) Thinking the reason why your way of thinking is different from their ways of thinking
(iv) Thinking whether only your way of thinking is right or not
(v) Trying to understand their ways of thinking
(vi) Accepting their ways of thinking
(vii) Following their ways of thinking

We asked students to rate the frequency of using (i)–(vii) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *hardly ever*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, 5 = *almost all the time*). Table 10 illustrates these results.

Table 10
Mean Score of Frequency of Students' Using (i)–(vii) When Experiencing Communication Gaps

	Japanese student	Overseas student
(i)	3.00	3.58
(ii)	1.93	3.06
(iii)	2.90	3.63
(iv)	2.43	2.63
(v)	3.68	4.06
(vi)	3.55	3.63
(vii)	3.13	3.60

Interestingly, results illustrated in Table 10 show that Japanese and overseas students' responses did not necessarily correlated with the same variables. We examined whether Japanese students' results correlated with a) cultural differences in gestures, customs and interaction strategies and/or b) length of working with people from different countries in the surveyed area. We also examined whether overseas students' results correlated with a) cultural differences in gestures, customs and interaction strategies, b) length of stay in Japan, c) length of working with Japanese people in the surveyed area and/or d) Japanese proficiency levels.

Results show that how overseas students cope with communication gaps caused by the difference between their ways of thinking and their Japanese colleagues' ways of thinking correlated with their Japanese proficiency levels and interaction strategies. 'Accepting their ways of thinking' weakly correlated with Japanese proficiency level

($r = 0.314$, Spearman rank, $p < 0.01$) and 'following their ways of thinking' weakly correlated with Japanese proficiency level ($r = 0.387$, Spearman rank, $p < 0.01$). 'Asking your non-Japanese colleagues later' weakly correlated with interaction strategies ($r = 0.225$, Spearman rank, $p < 0.05$). 'Thinking the reason why your way of thinking is different from their ways of thinking' weakly correlated with interaction strategies ($r = 0.261$, Spearman rank, $p < 0.01$). 'Accepting their ways of thinking' weakly correlated with interaction strategies ($r = -0.227$, Spearman rank, $p < 0.05$). However, overseas students' results did not correlate with their length of stay in Japan or of working with Japanese people in the area.

However, Japanese students' results did correlate with their length of working with people from different countries. For Japanese students, 'thinking the reason why your way of thinking is different from their ways of thinking' weakly correlated with length of working with people from different countries ($r = -0.363$, Spearman rank, $p < 0.05$), with gestures ($r = 0.452$, Spearman rank, $p < 0.05$) and with interaction strategies ($r = 0.459$, Spearman rank, $p < 0.01$).

In the first two questions, we asked students what they did in the workplace when experiencing communication gaps. In the third question, however, we asked students what they thought was important when communicating with their colleagues (Japanese or foreigners) in the workplace. By asking this open-ended question, we intended to gain insight into students' strategies to avoid communication gaps.

As Table 11 shows, students' descriptions were categorised into three: being careful about choosing topics, consideration of how they talk to their colleagues (e.g. talking slowly and talking with a smile) and respect for cultural differences.

Table 11
Strategies Used by Students to Avoid Communication Gaps

	Japanese student	Overseas student
Being careful about choosing topics	2 (6.25%)	13 (14.77%)
Consideration of the way they talk to colleagues	21 (65.63%)	49 (55.68%)
Respect for cultural differences	3 (9.38%)	29 (32.95%)

Note: Multiple descriptions were allowed.

Both Japanese and overseas students thought how they talked to their colleagues was important. However, the students differed significantly in respect to cultural differences (Fisher's exact test; $p < 0.01$).

Discussion

In this section, we examine characteristics of students' intercultural communication competence in the surveyed rural area according to three points. First, we consider their characteristics in terms of opportunities for students to develop their intercultural communication competence, second, in terms of students' language use in the workplace and finally, in terms of communication skills for coping with communication gaps.

Japanese students in the surveyed area had fewer opportunities to work with people from different countries. As previously mentioned, we asked about 400 Japanese students whether they worked with people from different countries or not, but located only 32. Two possible explanations are, first, Japanese students' fewer opportunities might be related to the small number of foreign workers in the surveyed area. According to Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2017, January), 30.7% of foreign workers in Japan were in Tokyo, whereas 0.6% were in the surveyed area. The second explanation is that Japanese students' fewer opportunities might be related to types of part-time jobs they held. Not a few Japanese students have part-time jobs at private preparatory schools, but overseas students usually do not.

Since they have little experience interacting with people from different countries, possibly, Japanese students in the surveyed area might not feel much interest in intercultural communication, thus resulting in few opportunities to expand their knowledge about it (see Table 4). Based on the discussion so far, Japanese students in the surveyed area have fewer opportunities to develop their intercultural communication competence.

For overseas students, however, their staying and studying in the surveyed area of Japan means they are surrounded by a new cultural environment. However, just being in a new cultural environment does not automatically develop people's intercultural communication competence (see, for example, Shaules 2007). Therefore, overseas students having many opportunities to interact with people from different cultures on campus and in workplaces and learning how to cope with cultural differences they face are important.

Let us turn our attention to the second point, consideration of students' characteristics of intercultural communication competence in their language use in the workplace. As previously mentioned, Japanese people do not necessarily use languages in ways that overseas students expect. As Table 6 shows, Japanese students regard speaking slowly, speaking with simple words and speaking with gestures in Japanese as what their overseas colleagues expect. As far as speaking slowly and speaking with simple words are concerned, the same tendency was found in overseas students' results.

However, a discrepancy emerged between Japanese and overseas students on the use of gestures. While 53.13% of Japanese students thought that their overseas colleagues expected them to speak Japanese with gestures, only 23.86% of overseas students actually expected their Japanese colleagues to speak Japanese with gestures. This discrepancy has two possible explanations. One is that overseas students may associate using gestures with low Japanese proficiency levels. According to Yanagimachi's (2000) data, Japanese people regarded gestures used by Japanese learners as a supplement to their low proficiency level. Overseas students in this survey might recognise the use of gestures in the same way and regard it as something they should avoid. Another explanation is that Japanese people's use of gestures might not help overseas students because of cultural differences (see Table 9). The discrepancy between Japanese and overseas students with respect to language use in the workplace suggests that Japanese students should modify their communication style to meet their overseas colleagues' expectations.

One other point is worth mentioning—that eye contact is one of the main non-verbal tools with which we communicate (see, for example, Goodwin 1981). However, this does not apply to students' usage of Japanese in our data. As Table 6 shows, both Japanese and overseas students did not expect much eye contact.

As for language proficiency, Japanese students should develop their English proficiency, particularly their ability to read reports in English. As Table 7 shows, among work scenes examined, reading reports in English was the most expected task by the surveyed overseas students. As for overseas students' language proficiency, the frequency of using Japanese at various work scenes differs depending on their proficiency levels (see Table 8). The importance of developing overseas students' Japanese proficiency is reinforced by our results of students' communication skills for copying with communication gaps. As mentioned, how overseas students cope with communication gaps weakly correlated with their Japanese proficiency level.

One point emerges from examination of characteristics of students' intercultural communication competence in their skills for copying with communication gaps. As Table 11 shows, both Japanese and overseas students in our survey thought that considering how they talk to their colleagues (e.g. talking slowly, talking with a smile) is important when communicating with colleagues (Japanese or foreigners) at the workplace. However, the significant difference between Japanese and overseas students in cultural difference suggests the necessity of developing students' positive attitudes, particularly Japanese students' attitudes, towards cultural differences.

Conclusion

To design a necessary education programme for developing students' intercultural communication competence for working in Japan's rural areas, this study examined how Japanese and overseas students worked with people from different countries. Based on data from a questionnaire survey, the study examined characteristics of students' intercultural communication competence according to three points: opportunities for students to develop their intercultural communication competence, students' language use in the workplace and students' communication skills for copying with communication gaps. One of the most noteworthy implications from this study's examination is the necessity of creating more opportunities for students, particularly Japanese students, to develop their intercultural communication competence.

In this study's surveyed area, the workforce has been declining, according to Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2017, April; 2012, April) but the number of foreign workers and that of companies that employ foreigners have been growing (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2017, January; 2016, January; 2015, January; 2014, January; 2013, January). Considering these circumstances, the necessity of developing students' intercultural communication competence is rapidly increasing. To deepen our understanding of characteristics of the intercultural communication competence necessary for those working in rural areas, examining how Japanese and foreign employees work together at local rural companies is important. However, this question should be addressed in further research.

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Footnote

1. We chose eight daily scenes and eight work scenes on the basis of National Institute for Japanese Language (2009, May).

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