

The Semantic Analysis of Media Influence in Moodle-based Self-reflective Entries of Intercultural Encounters of Children and University Students

Kahoko Matsumoto
International Education Center
Tokai University
Japan
kahokom@yahoo.co.jp

Abstract: This study looks into the influence of mass media in the self-reflective entries of intercultural encounters made by 35 elementary school students and 41 university students. Detailed text analysis was done to spontaneous entries in the Council of Europe's "Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters" (AIE), a self-reflective learning tool widely used in Europe after collecting subjects' responses using the Moodle. Both adult and young learners' versions of the AIE were used with university students and children respectively, to ascertain the influence of mass media's depictions of foreigners and others who are different from the typical Japanese. The data analysis showed different perceptions of "otherness" that children and university students have in intercultural encounters as well as how mass media's depictions affect their perceptions. It is especially interesting how various media depictions help strengthen the stereotypical images of people different from themselves.

Introduction

In Europe, the Council of Europe has been promoting the use of a self-reflective tool called "Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters" (hereafter referred to as AIE) for students to analyze and learn from their own experience dealing with people who have ethnic/cultural backgrounds very different from themselves (Koyama, 2011). This tool was developed by Michael Byram based on his Intercultural Communicative Competence Model (1997 and 2017). As many as 53 questions were posed in order to have students self-evaluate their experiences from multiple points of view and help them do a deep reflection upon themselves. In the previous study, an attempt was made to find the tendencies and characteristics of Japanese university students in handling various intercultural encounters and solving problems by collecting their detailed responses written in the AIE mounted on Moodle (Matsumoto & Koyama, 2014). The study was done as a part of a public grant project*¹ which aims to create teaching models for intercultural competence that can allow Japanese university students to become able to solve problems in various intercultural situations.

With almost 3 million foreigners living in Japan and having 20 million tourists annually, on top of an increasing number of students having study-abroad or home-stay experience, the students had a number of different types of intercultural encounters

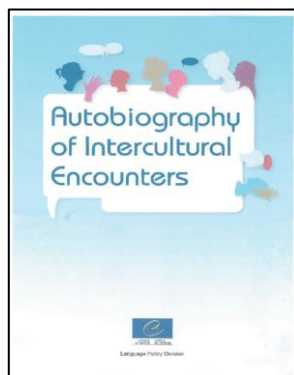


Figure 1. AIE

and wrote about their experiences. Both the quantitative and qualitative analyses of various entries made by 80 students clearly showed what specific problems they faced and how they tackled with, and tried to solve, them in various situations of intercultural communication. The most noteworthy finding was their strong dichotomous mindset, namely, the tendency to view the situation in the "us vs. others" manner, which was manifested in their own explanation of the experiences, even in the cases where cultural difference was not a salient factor. Actually, the perceptions expressed by those who have successfully dealt with culturally-foreign situations or problems showed the conflicting two aspects, sometimes simultaneously; they had developed a new open-minded attitude toward "the foreign other" while strengthening the parochial view of their Japanese identity. It is true that such a polarization is commonly seen around the world, but the Japanese university students' sense of being Japanese was very strong;

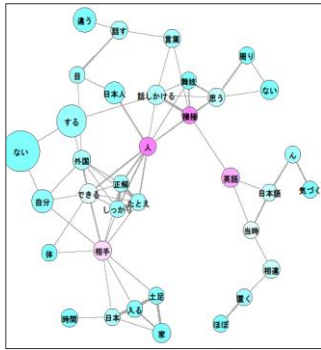


Figure 2. KH Coder Analysis

they often used expressions like “We, Japanese are different in that ...,” “Unlike us, Japanese ...,” and “Japanese special characteristic are” This is could be the result of their tendency of focusing on differences even though there share many similarities with the foreigner people they have encountered.

In the further semantic analysis using a typical text-mining software and KH Coder (Higuchi, 2013), it seemed that these tendencies and mindsets often were derived from the depictions of foreigners in different types of media, which are stereotypical and based on the simplistic comparison between the Japanese and other groups with different ethnicities and/or nationalities. At the same time, the children’s version of AIE was launched by the Council of Europe, so a new experiment was designed by introducing the tool to Japanese elementary school

children, hoping that the comparison of university students’ and elementary school children’s responses may elucidate when and how the dichotomous way of looking at non-Japanese or people with different ethnic/cultural backgrounds is formed and what kinds of media influence seen in children’s responses may lead to creating stereotypical images of these people. This new line of inquiry has been done as a part of another public grant project^{*2} aimed at constructing teaching models for intercultural competence for children which are closely tied to the secondary and tertiary models previously established.

The Study

The first aim of the study is to compare the responses of university students and elementary school children in dealing with various intercultural encounters and solving problems in both successful and unsuccessful cases. By using a well-accepted self-reflective tool (AIE) and doing a systematic text and semantic analysis of the data, an attempt was made to find the process of Japanese young generation to form the above-mentioned dichotomous perspective of people, often based on stereotypes, with different ethnic/cultural backgrounds. The second aim is to search for the media influence in their responses to identify the roots of the stereotypical images that appear in the entries made by the two groups.

Forty-one students taking a sociolinguistic course at a private university were asked to make entry of the intercultural encounter that is most influential to them in response to various questions included in AIE. A new data of university students was collected after making 2 versions of AIE (adults’ version and children’s version) more parallel and adding some media-related questions in order to tease out media influence. Concurrently, 35 elementary school students’ responses were collected using the children’s version of AIE. Whereas university students can use AIE without much introduction because the purpose and questions of the tool are quite self-explanatory, an introductory 50-minute lesson had to be prepared and conducted to elementary school children to explain the meaning of intercultural encounter and giving the definition of people with different ethnic/cultural backgrounds.

First, a qualitative, holistic analysis was done to obtain overall tendencies, followed by the statistical analysis by an IBM text-mining software and KH Coder. The statistical analysis included tabulation of words in terms of frequency as well as an evaluation of collocational relationships of important words that indicate agency, attitudes and mental states in students’ managing intercultural communication both at the time of intercultural encounters and in hindsight. Then, a comparison was made to the tabulated and categorized data of 2 groups. The second phase of the analysis was geared toward finding the parts/elements where influence of media was reflected and detecting the connections between such elements in the university students’ data and those in the children’s data. This was done in order to ascertain when and how media facilitate forming stereotypes or having certain stereotypical perspectives.

Findings

The data analysis showed different ways perceptions of “otherness” were formed and function in the intercultural encounters that children and university students had experienced, as well as how mass media’s depictions affect their perceptions. While the entries of university students exhibited the perceptions and attitudes

similar to those found in the previous study, children's responses were more idiosyncratic; the dichotomous perspectives seen in the university students' responses appeared sporadically, but the data analysis showed more natural, individualistic reactions and interpretations of the intercultural events. It is especially intriguing how various mass media depictions help strengthen the stereotypical images of people different from themselves. Both groups have tendencies of making stereotypical, sweeping statements about people who are different from themselves and are often influenced by media depictions of foreign peoples, which is quite natural as Japanese youngsters still live in a mostly homogeneous environment where stereotypes can be quite easily formed. Yet, children's entries did not reflect them as often as the counterparts of university students. Also, some entries of university students reflected the stereotypical images being formed by the influence of social media interactions, the examples of which were seen in the comments such as "I saw them (=Indian people) bathing in the river in the Facebook account of my friend." and "Many people following his (=a famous athlete's) Tweets are afraid of being robbed in Rio." Quite a few entries showed that children appear to develop the dichotomous, parochial way of looking at things as they grow, being exposed to different types of media and interacting with people who have stereotypical views including their parents and friends.

As expected, the responses of university students were varied depending on their learning histories and experiences rather than their original dispositions. However, at least about a third of university students were able to change their rather ethnocentric views through a reflective process and/or input from a sociolinguistic course they were taking at the time when the data was collected. On the other hand, young children seemed to need more intervention or scaffolding to prevent resorting to simplistic generalizations or stereotypes.

Future Directions

Our project team will try to reflect the accumulated data of this kind in an effort to create teaching models/materials to nurture intercultural competence and critical thinking, while doing more fine-tuning with modifications and adjustments, with an eye toward arriving at more feasible, optimal models that are conducive to different types/levels of classes at elementary, secondary and tertiary education in Japan. AIE will continue to be used, firstly to validate these teaching models and materials, and secondly, for autonomous, reflective learning *per se*, which is this tool's original function. It is hoped that the collection of real intercultural experiences from different age groups of young generation will also help make the teaching models and methods more in tune with the actual needs of Japanese students.

Note :

*¹ Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) grant: Project B, #2232011

*² Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) grant: Project B, # 16H03456

References

- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Porto, M., and Byram, M. (2017). *New Perspectives on Intercultural Language Research and Teaching*. New York: Routledge
- Council of Europe. (2008). *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- European Center for Modern Languages (2010), *Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures*, ECML Research and Development report series. Graz, Austria.
- Koichi Higuchi (2013). His latest model of KH Coder retrieved from <http://khc.sourceforge.net/>.
- Koyama, Y. (2011). Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters: The Value of Self-reflective Learning in Language Teaching. JACET CT-SIG (ed.) *Critical Thinking and University English Education*, No.2. 28-40.

Matsumoto, K. (2014). An Attempt to Construct the Objectives of Intercultural Competence and its Instructional Models. *Bunmei (Civilization)*, No.18, 51-63.

Matsumoto, K. & Koyama, Y. (2014). Analysis of Descriptions in Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters Using KH Coder. *2014 SITE Conference Proceedings*, 1119-1124.