Intercultural Communication in the U.S. and Japan

Annelise Wilp
Demographics

18 participants
  - 10 American
  - 8 Japanese

10 female, 8 male

Average age: 23.1

All participants were undergraduate or graduate students who have studied abroad in Japan or are currently studying abroad in the United States.
Purpose

To find similarities between Japanese students who have studied at American universities, and Americans who have studied at Japanese universities. Finding this information will help American and Japanese universities understand the integration process of the international students from these groups and will be able to provide the resources to make future international students comfortable and successful during their experiences abroad.
Method

Prospective participants were recruited through email and Facebook.

All interviews were conducted at the Bernhard Center at WMU. Prospective participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the risks and benefits of the study, and their confidentiality. The researcher asked permission to audio record the interview. Upon agreement, prospective participants signed the informed consent forms before starting the interview.

Interviews were then transcribed onto the researcher’s computer for analysis, and all recordings were erased.
Results and Discussion
Stereotypes about the United States

-Heavy drinking

-Aggressiveness

-Loud/obnoxious

-Pop culture and economic imperative (Martin & Nakayama, 2013)

-Big

-Multicultural

-Politics
Stereotypes about Japan

- Strict
- Quiet/shy
- Collectivist
- Hardworking
- Polite
- Negative views influenced by history
- Advanced technology
Themes among Americans in Japan

- Sexism in groups
- Indirectness in Japan
- Stares and being avoided
- Foreigner classes in Japan
- Difficulty with kanji and learning pace
- Student and professor relationships
- Being treated differently as a foreigner
- Trouble expressing oneself
Indirectness

People can be very indirect with you to a shocking degree. My first job that I went to, when I came in and I saw everybody was wearing jeans, and so I thought, “oh, okay, on my first day I should come in and wear jeans.” When I got there, my boss said in Japanese, “oh, those jeans really suit you.” And maybe this is something more region-specific, in Kansai where they tend to be more indirect. What that really means is, “you are not supposed to wear jeans, don't do that again tomorrow.” So I kept it up for three days, and by the third day he took me aside and was like, “What the hell? Why are you still coming here in jeans?”

-American Male, Doshisha University and JCMU

This is an example of a high context culture (Martin & Nakayama, 2013)
Being stared at or avoided in Japan

“In public, it just depends on the person, one of the things is on trains, just for some reason a lot of Japanese people just won’t sit with you. You’ll have a whole bench all to yourself. A whole row. Everyone else will just stand, and they’ll see you’re a foreigner and are just like, no. Of course, there’s those annoyances every once and awhile it gets irritating, people staring at you. “

-American female, Rikkyo University
Learning pace and Kanji in Japan

“We go at a lot quicker pace in Japan versus studying here. Here we have a month per chapter or something, in Japan it was a new thing every week. You go really, really quick. So, as far as learning in Japan, it was hard to keep up with the vocab sometimes, because you just get this lesson and you don’t really get to utilize any of the vocabulary, so it doesn’t really stick, and then you’re onto the next. So, the pace could be a little difficult. The only real negative when it came to my studies was that my particular university didn’t teach us Kanji as the curriculum, so that hindered me a bit in comparison to students from other schools.”

-American female, Rikkyo University
Trouble expressing oneself in Japan

“In terms of communicating, it was mostly just trying to have a detailed conversation, because my Japanese level I would consider to be elementary. So, if I wanted to have an in-depth, meaningful conversation, I couldn’t do that. So, as far as communicating it would feel kind of shallow, you couldn’t take a friendship to the next level aside from “Oh, your outfit looks nice” or “How are you today?” You couldn’t really, really get to know someone. I got a lot closer to other students who were on exchange than I did with my Japanese student friends, especially with the language barrier and the social differences. I had a lot of times where I was like, “would people actually care?” kind of feeling.”

-American female, Rikkyo University
Minority Identity Development and the Similarity Principle (Martin & Nakayama, 2013)

The conformity stage of Minority Identity Development: desire for assimilation and questioning of the dominant culture’s attitudes

The Similarity Principle: individuals seem to be more attracted to people similar to themselves
Student and professor relationships

“The lines are a little different there, in terms of ways you can spend time with professors. For example, one of my professors over there every year has a giant Halloween party for all of the students at the school. So, everyone’s getting really drunk doing crazy things with the professors and the professors’ kids are there. It was a little weird, but it’s not frowned upon in the same way. It’s similar to how you get drunk with your boss.”

-American male, Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies
Being treated differently as a foreigner

“Sometimes people put on a face, and they treat you a certain way because you’re a foreigner. But once they get comfortable with you and they realize you can speak with them and you’re totally fine and capable of handling yourself, it feels like a new world, and they treat you like they treat their friends, and you see how they treat each other."  

-American female, Ritsumeikan University
Differences in foreigner classes

“But the classroom etiquette (in foreigner classes) was really westernized. In the Japanese classes, it was really formal like regular Japanese classes, where you had to ask to use the bathroom, or had a certain number of absences you couldn’t miss. So it was really formal, as opposed to here where we’re college students and adults, and we can get up and do what we want. It reminded me of high school because when we would ask our Japanese professors to use the bathroom, they would say, “Why didn’t use it you before/after class?”

-American female, Rikkyo University
Themes among Japanese students in the U.S.

- Difficulty with speaking and listening in English
- Housing situations
- Americans being social
- Meeting other foreigners in the U.S.
Difficulty with speaking and listening

“Japanese English education has reading and writing. So I didn't have opportunity to talk with English speakers in Japan, so everyday I can't say what I want to say.”

-Japanese female from Musashino University

“When I learned in Japan, I'm learning English in Japan, just grammar and reading, and a little listening. Not speaking, it was not important.”

-Japanese female from Nanzan University
Housing situations

“They are not neat. When I live in the dorm, the bathroom is not clean and bad smell. And I hear loud sounds from the room. I live in the dorm by myself, so it’s okay, but if I have a noisy roommate, it’s not good. I have heard Japanese students change rooms at least once, because Japanese people are really sensitive, so they care about people.”

-Japanese female from Nanzan University

“I have a roommate, I put a carpet in my room. I never walk around on the carpet with my shoes, but she does. Whenever she comes into my room, she always walks around on my carpet with her shoes, I was so shocked. I think it’s American culture, so I don’t say anything to her.”

-Japanese female from Nihon University
Americans being social

“People here are so kind to me. Japanese men are also kind, but they don’t try to say “hello.” American people say hello frankly, and sometimes when I live in dorm, when I get on elevator, someone is there, and they say hello and we start talking. They are so friendly, so when I am talking with them, I have so nice time and they help you more, talking with them.”

-Japanese female from Nanzan University

“In Japan, almost all people don’t talk to strangers. But in the U.S., I walk the street, many people say, “how are you?” and “good morning!” So it was very surprising.”

-Japanese female from Keio University
Meeting other foreigners in the U.S.

“Compared to Japan, there are many cultures in the U.S. There are many foreigners and backgrounds, it’s very diverse. Actually, in Japan, our university has many foreign students, but they apply for classes for foreign students. So we have less opportunities to talk with them. I’m a little sad, but in the U.S., foreign students take classes with Western students, so I can communicate with American people and students from other countries. So, I can learn more about other cultures and many precious ideas. So I like this university’s environment.”

-Japanese female from Keio University
Themes among both American and Japanese students

- College being easy in Japan
- Differences in classroom etiquette
- Missing food from home
- Transportation
- Meeting people with experience before departure
- Self-teaching before departure
- Accepting another culture
- Conformity in Japan
College being easy in Japan

“In Japan, it’s extremely easy to pass classes. All you have to do is just attend a few classes, and they will give you a pass. You don’t have to study. I would say it’s a terrible system. It’s no good. The most difficult thing in Japan is entering the college. They give us kind of hard entrance exam, but once you pass and enter the university, you can automatically graduate, almost. It’s weird.”

-Japanese male, graduate student at WMU

“In Japan, the way it’s structured, as soon as the students enter university, they really don’t care. Because the test is really hard to get into university, and once you get in, that’s supposed to be the time of your life before you start working. So they literally do not take university seriously at all. People show up if they feel like it.”

-American male, Keio University
Difference in classroom etiquette

“In the U.S., almost all classes I’ve taken this semester have discussion. You have to say opinion, and I have to share my ideas. In Japan, in many classes the professor just talks, and we sit in the chair and listen to what he says. In U.S., I have to think about the theme in the class, and I have to choose what I say, so it’s very tough, but it’s very interesting.”

-Japanese female from Keio University
Transportation

“Well, I don’t have a car, so sometimes it’s difficult to go somewhere I want to go.”

-Japanese male, graduate student at WMU

“I missed my car. Having the freedom to go wherever I wanted to go. Even though the train systems in Japan are amazing and so convenient, just being able to go wherever I wanted to go.”

-American male, Keio University
Meeting people with experience before departure

- Study abroad alumni
- Teachers
- Japanese employees at WMU

Uncertainty reduction theory (Martin & Nakayama, 2013): lessening uncertainty about entering a new culture by seeking information.
Self-teaching

“Basically I studied English by myself. Well, they teach basic things, which is helpful, but if you want to be more advanced, I think it’s better to do by ourselves, in my opinion.”

- Japanese male, graduate student at WMU

“I think if they could offer a class that was more of what to expect, because no amount of language in a classroom setting is really going to prepare you to speak with natives. It’s all about the effort you put in outside of class.”

- American female, Doshisha University
Accepting another culture

“There wasn’t any issue, there wasn't anything I disliked, because I knew it wasn’t my culture. I knew I wasn’t going to live in the same way I lived here over there. Knowing that going in can be really helpful.”

-American male, Nagasaki University of Foreign Studies

Flexible intercultural communicators integrate knowledge and an open-minded attitude and put them into practice (Chung and Ting-Toomey, 2012)
Conformity in Japan

“In Japan there were a lot of times that I felt like I had to conform more in order to make friends, not make people feel uncomfortable, things like that. The very little things from what you say to how you dress.”

-American female, Rikkyo University

“In Japan you’re supposed to be able to know the general opinion about something. So, that means that academics follow a whole different path over there sometimes. You can’t have your own opinion, but you have to know what everyone else thinks about the subject.”

-American male, Doshisha University and JCMU
Conclusion
Shortcomings

- Small sample size
- Limited to one university
- Internal bias
- American students were able to express themselves further in their native language.
Suggestions for universities in the U.S.

- Offer a pace similar to the Japanese pace so that American students are accustomed to the fast curriculum in Japan

- Intercultural communication training for students in the residence halls

- Offer opportunities for prospective study abroad students to communicate with Japanese people
Suggestions for universities in Japan

- Emphasize speaking in English courses
- Practice discussion in class
- Integrate foreigners with domestic students
Thank you! ありがとうございます。

Dr. Annette Hamel - Thesis chair

Mr. Robert Dlouhy - Committee member

Lee Honors College

All of the participants