

LEARNING IN ONLINE CASE-BASED LEARNING BETWEEN JAPANESE AND MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: FOSTERING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN WORKPLACE CONTEXTS

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Abstract: This study investigates online case-based learning for Japanese business communication between universities in Japan and Malaysia. By engaging with authentic cases of workplace conflict in Japanese-speaking contexts, the practice aims to strengthen students' problem-solving skills, interpersonal communication, and intercultural competence. Through qualitative content analysis of student reflections, the study explores how participants interpreted workplace scenarios and how their perspectives shifted through intercultural dialogue. The findings demonstrate students' enhanced understanding of workplace interactions, encompassing language practices, cultural conventions, and relationship dynamics. For example: (1) Students exchanged sociocultural backgrounds and knowledge, identifying potential workplace communication challenges. (2) While exploring solutions, they referenced their own cultures and viewpoints and interpreted situations by integrating multiple perspectives. (3) When recommending solutions, students posed new questions and generated ideas based on insights from the discussion. Finally, the study discusses the educational significance and potential of this pedagogical approach in preparing students for diverse professional contexts.

Keywords: Workplace diversity, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Online Case-based learning for Japanese business communication, Japanese and Malaysian university students

INTRODUCTION

With the advance of globalization, discussions have emerged among industry, academia, and government in Japan regarding the cultivation of globally competent human resources. According to the Council for the Promotion of Global Human Resource Development (2011a, p.20), globally competent human resources are individuals who maintain their Japanese identity, have a broad perspective, and cultivate both general and specialized expertise. They develop communication skills and cooperative attitudes to build relationships across languages, cultures, and values, create new values, and are conscious of their responsibility to society and future

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generations. In light of Japan's accelerated acceptance of highly skilled foreign professionals and the increasing diversity within companies, universities are now required to develop educational methods that enable international and Japanese students to learn together.

In relation to cultivating global human resources and the role of higher education, efforts in the post-COVID-19 era have focused on reviving drastically reduced student exchanges. The objectives include promoting the further internationalization of universities and fostering international collaboration among universities with a focus on quality assurance in education. Additional goals include enhancing the acceptance of talented international students by providing Japanese language and career education (inbound) and fostering an environment that encourages Japanese students to study abroad and develop as global human resources (outbound) (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2024).

Concrete approaches to university internationalization include Intercultural Collaborative Learning (ICL) and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL). ICL focuses on face-to-face interaction among students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds within the same classroom at domestic universities, specifically emphasizing in-person intercultural engagement. COIL, by contrast, connects students with peers at overseas institutions through online platforms, enabling remote intercultural experiences. Suematsu (2019, p. iii) defines ICL as "a learning experience in which learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds share, understand, and accept diverse perspectives through meaningful interaction, reinterpret themselves, and thereby create new values." She adds that ICL is more than just being in the same classroom or activity space; it involves mutual learning through activities such as exchanging opinions, group work, and projects. Metacognitive reflection on these exchanges broadens perspectives, enhances intercultural understanding, builds critical thinking skills, and increases self-efficacy, both in and beyond the classroom (Suematsu, 2019, p. iii). COIL, as 'international collaborative learning in virtual spaces using ICT,' provides online courses with overseas universities, allowing students to participate internationally without going abroad. This has accelerated the internationalization of Japanese higher education (Murata, 2022).

Meanwhile, Nagai (2023) notes the blurring boundary between ICL at domestic universities and COIL with overseas institutions, prompting a reassessment of both in higher education. Instead of focusing solely on the mode of delivery—face-to-face or online, domestic or international, the essential element for the internationalization of universities is students' engagement in meaningful intercultural learning. Whether through ICL or COIL, what ultimately matters is fostering student growth and intercultural understanding in multicultural environments.

This study examines the practice of online case-based learning for Japanese business communication, conducted between universities in Japan and Malaysia. It qualitatively explores the learning experiences of participating in students, discussing the significance and potential of such practices. The implementation of case-based learning aims to cultivate communicative competence necessary for working collaboratively with others who possess different linguistic, cultural, and value-based backgrounds. In the following review of previous studies, I will first summarize the essential qualities and competencies required for global human resources, and then discuss "case-based learning" as an educational approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW

REQUIRED QUALITIES AND COMPETENCIES OF HUMAN RESOURCES

The concept of "global human resources" in Japan is defined by three main components: (I)

language proficiency and communication skills; (II) independence, proactiveness, a spirit of challenge, cooperativeness, flexibility, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of mission; and (III) intercultural understanding together with a Japanese identity. Additionally, it encompasses qualities such as a broad general education and deep expertise, problem identification and problem-solving skills, teamwork, leadership (particularly the ability to organize diverse groups), public-mindedness, ethical awareness, and media literacy (Council for the Promotion of Global Human Resource Development, 2011b, p.7).

Suzuki (2018), on the other hand, argues that the concept of global human resources has often been reduced to a narrow focus on language proficiency (mainly English ability). He highlights the importance of interpersonal communication competence, describing it in terms of empathy and motivation in human relationships, and stresses the need for curricula based on collaborative learning between international and Japanese students.

Regarding career education for Japanese language learners, both within and outside Japan, common challenges have been identified. Kim (2022) identifies problems in Japanese language communication and interpersonal relationships as significant barriers to securing employment in Japan among Japanese language majors at universities in Korea. Koga and Kimura (2022) note that in Malaysia's Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF, 2017), communication and interpersonal skills are explicitly included as learning outcomes at the higher education level, with ongoing discussions on enhancing youth employability. In Japan, while the strengthening of business Japanese and career education for international students at universities has progressed to provide better post-graduation opportunities and environments (Sato, 2021), there are still insufficient opportunities for Japanese language learners, both inside and outside Japan, and Japanese students to cultivate international awareness and acquire intercultural communicative competence.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

International collaboration between universities, accompanied by quality assurance in education, is closely related to the evaluation of learning outcomes. I focus on the examples of universities in Japan and Malaysia, which constitute the context of this study. In relation to quality assurance and international collaboration in higher education, the National Institution for Academic Degrees and Quality Enhancement of Higher Education in Japan has summarized basic information on these issues. In Japan, the concept of "*gakushiryoku* [Graduate Capabilities]" has been established as the learning outcomes to be cultivated across disciplines in higher education (Central Council for Education, 2008, pp.12-14). These competencies are categorized as follows: (1) knowledge and understanding; (2) generic skills; (3) attitudes and orientation; and (4) integrated learning experiences and creative thinking.

Within "(2) generic skills," which are necessary not only for intellectual activities but also for professional and social life, the following are included: (a) communication skills; (b) quantitative skills; (c) information literacy; (d) logical thinking skills; and (e) problem-solving skills. Within "(3) attitudes and orientation," the following elements are emphasized: (a) self-management ability; (b) teamwork and leadership; (c) ethical awareness; (d) social responsibility as citizens; and (e) lifelong learning ability.

Regarding quality assurance in Malaysian higher education, the Ministry of Education provides guidelines through the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA). The Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) sets out the framework for degree contents (standards and learning outcomes) after secondary education. The five domains of learning outcomes in MQF (2017, pp.16-19) are: (1) knowledge and understanding; (2) cognitive skills; (3) functional work skills; (4) personal and entrepreneurial skills; and (5) ethics and professionalism. Under

(3) functional work skills, the following subcategories are included: (a) practical skills; (b) interpersonal skills; (c) communication skills; (d) digital skills; (e) numeracy skills; and (f) leadership, autonomy, and responsibility.

In both contexts, the cultivation of generic competencies—such as interpersonal and communication skills, problem-solving abilities, leadership, autonomous learning, and ethical awareness—is emphasized. These generic competencies overlap with those required of global human resources. Furthermore, they align with the “Key Competencies” identified by the OECD (Rychen & Salganik, 2003), specifically “using language interactively,” “interacting in heterogeneous groups,” and “acting autonomously.” These competencies refer to the ability to communicate and engage with others who are different from oneself, utilizing language, knowledge, and ICT as tools, as well as the ability to reflect on one’s own intentions and way of life and make independent decisions.

In the practice of online international collaborative learning between universities, it is therefore necessary to take into account the elements of “*gakushiryoku* [Graduate Capabilities]” in Japan and generic competencies in the MQF of Malaysia, while also aiming to foster understanding of one’s own and others’ cultures and identities, and to develop the skills required to engage with heterogeneous others—competencies that are essential for global human resources.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

From the perspective of personal growth in connection with language learning, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) can be regarded as a fundamental and transferable competence common across various fields. Byram (1997, 2021) distinguishes, in his comprehensive model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), between “intercultural communicative competence,” which directly involves language use, and “intercultural competence,” which refers to more general abilities not directly dependent on language. The former is defined as the ability to communicate with people of other cultures in a foreign language. At the same time, the latter is described as the ability to communicate with people of other cultures and languages using one’s own language. He emphasizes that both dimensions are integrally related.

In this model, “intercultural communicative competence” includes linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence. “Intercultural competence” consists of five dimensions: (a) knowledge (of one’s own and others’ cultures, and of the social and individual interactions required for communication between them); (b) two skills—skills of discovery and interaction, and skills of interpreting and relating; (c) attitudes (such as the ability to view one’s own culture objectively, to value others’ cultures, and to tolerate differences and ambiguity); and (d) critical cultural awareness. The latter refers to “the ability to evaluate, critically and based on explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries.”

The educational component of Byram’s model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) not only promotes harmonious communication and interaction but also fosters a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Instead, it involves enabling learners to clarify their own values and perspectives, consciously engage with others, and interpret and discover through contrasting their own culture with those of others. This presupposes advanced self-awareness through self-assessment and the ability to reflect on one’s own learning and achievements. One theoretical foundation for this is Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory, which emphasizes the cyclical process of experience and reflection. This process is expected

to deepen learners' understanding of the learning process, develop metacognitive skills, and foster autonomy and self-regulation of learning (Byram, 1997, 2021).

As international mobility and exchanges increase, the globalization of society is expected to accelerate further. The essence of university education for global human resource development lies in expanding students' personal growth and potential within international society and cultivating individuals who can actively engage with linguistically and culturally diverse groups both inside and outside Japan. The participants in this study are young people majoring in Japanese language, Japanese studies, international studies, and related fields. For these students, creating opportunities to reflect on and discuss working and interacting through Japanese is crucial for fostering "the ability to engage with others who have different values, languages, and cultural backgrounds" and "the communicative competence required for collaborative work."

Through the practice of online case-based learning on workplace diversity and communication, this study examines the types of learning that Japanese and Malaysian university students achieve and discusses the possibilities and challenges associated with such practice.

CASE-BASED LEARNING AS AN EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

In the field of Japanese language education, "case-based learning" has been proposed as a means to foster collaborative learning about workplace diversity. In this approach, participants work collaboratively to analyze and discuss fact-based cases (such as workplace conflicts) by following guided questions. Through this process, they simulate workplace situations, derive potential solutions, and ultimately reflect on the entire experience (Kondoh & Kim, 2010; Kondoh, Kim, & Ikeda, 2015).

Ikeda (2025) outlines the theoretical and practical positioning of case-based learning in Japanese language education, describing it as a practice grounded in the concept of collaborative learning. Collaborative learning in this context is characterized by five key concepts: "equality," "dialogue," "process," "creativity," and "reciprocity." Case-based learning is introduced as an example of collaborative learning in Japanese language education, which is often referred to as "peer learning" (Ikeda, 2025, p. 15). In this context, case-based learning is an adaptation of the case method from business education, explicitly developed for Japanese language learners. Its effectiveness has been demonstrated in various domains, such as business Japanese education (Kondoh & Kim, 2010; Kondoh, Kim, & Ikeda, 2015; Kim, 2018; Kim & Yamada, 2019) and career education for international students (Kim, 2023).

The underlying philosophy is the realization of "learning through dialogue." By engaging in problem-solving and reflecting on the entire learning process, learners develop the communication skills necessary for effective collaboration in diverse work environments. During discussions of case materials, participants observe their own and others' perceptions and attitudes toward real-life situations, identify and interpret problems, and ultimately reflect, which enables them to find value in their learning and discover new perspectives for future development.

From the perspective of workplace diversity, the learning environment encompasses individuals from diverse backgrounds—such as age, disability, gender, nationality, race, language, and beliefs—working together in a collaborative setting. At the foundation of global human resource development that takes such diversity into account are the expectations of organizational revitalization and creativity. In university education, fostering fundamental and transferable competencies that enable self-growth and the demonstration of creativity through dialogue with others becomes an important educational goal.

REFLECTION AS A MEDIATION OF LEARNING ASSESSMENT

In case-based learning, learning activities are not limited to problem-solving through discussion but also extend to reflection on the entire process. Kim (2008, pp.5-11), drawing on constructivist educational theory, emphasizes the importance of reflection in autonomous learning. Building on the educational theories of Dewey and Freire, he argues that autonomous learners, as active agents, construct knowledge through conscious experiences arising from interactions with others, the self, and the environment in a dialogical process. Reflection is positioned as a means of fostering such consciousness.

Citing Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), Kim (2008, p.12) introduces the process of reflection in adult education. According to it, the reflective process of deriving new perspectives from experience involves three stages: “returning to experience,” “attending to feelings,” and “re-evaluating the experience.” Re-evaluation, in turn, consists of four elements: “association,” “integration,” “validation,” and “appropriation.” In these models, reflection is the process of objectifying experiences and generating new meaning by re-evaluating what has occurred.

In Japanese language education, various forms of reflective activities are designed in case-based learning, taking into account learners’ levels of Japanese proficiency (Kondoh *et al.*, 2015). Kim (2023) analyzes learners’ reflective records and describes shifts in learners’ perspectives during case-based learning. She notes that learner reflections often reveal fragments of awareness about intercultural conflicts encountered in daily life and about approaches to problem-solving.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, I focus on the reflections of participants engaged in online case-based learning involving Japanese and Malaysian university students. By qualitatively examining students’ learning processes throughout the case-based learning cycle, I discuss the significance and potential of these practices.

OVERVIEW OF THE PRACTICE

This practice was conducted twice during the spring semesters of 2024 and 2025 at universities in Japan and Malaysia (two consecutive weeks, 100 minutes per session). The total number of participants from the Malaysian side was 25, while the total number of participants from the Japanese side was 19 (17 Japanese students and two international students).

Before the online case-based learning sessions, a free-talk session was held via Google Meet to build rapport among participants. In these sessions, groups of three to four students met at their preferred time to introduce themselves and discuss topics of their choice freely.

The design of the case-based learning practice was as follows. As a pre-task, students were instructed to read the selected case materials and prepare notes individually. These pre-tasks were incorporated into the regular curricula of both universities, where content comprehension and language learning support were provided. Subsequently, students gathered online via Zoom for case-based learning. The overall process of online case-based learning was:

1. Small-group discussion: Students were divided into small groups in breakout rooms (BORs). While reviewing the case content they had read in advance, they discussed the case based on guiding questions. During discussions, they used Padlet to share notes corresponding to each question, adding newly emerging opinions and perspectives.

2. Plenary discussion: Students then reconvened to share opinions and perspectives as a whole group, and a deeper plenary discussion was conducted.
3. Reflection: After the online discussions, students wrote and shared their reflections on Padlet's "Reflection" section, noting what they had felt and thought during the activity.

This activity was implemented across two consecutive sessions. The case materials used were as follows:

Case 10: "*Nominikeshon ni ikitainoni* [Going for drinks]" (Kim *et al.*, 2020), used in the first session. This case addresses workplace drinking culture and informal communication, depicted from the perspective of a Muslim employee.

[Questions]: 1. Draw a diagram of this case (e.g., relationship chart or flow of events). 2. Imagine the feelings (inner voices) of each person. 3. What do you think is the problem in this situation? 4. Discuss possible solutions to this problem.

Case 7: "*Kekkon shitemo hataraku no?* [Are you going to continue working after you get married?]" (Kondoh *et al.*, 2019), used in the second session. This case examines workplace communication with a supervisor regarding marriage and career choices, as viewed from the perspective of a female researcher from Turkey.

[Questions] 1. Consider the feelings of each person involved. 2. What do you think is the problem in this situation? 3. Have you had a similar experience? If so, how did you respond? 4. If you were Ms. Diviya or the male supervisors, how would you act in this situation?

Each case included specific discussion questions. Learners conducted discussions based on these guiding questions. They wrote notes prepared in advance on Padlet and shared them with the group, adding newly emerging perspectives as the discussion progressed. Students were instructed to write notes in both Japanese and English, which were commonly used languages. In most cases, translation tools were used to display content in both languages, and when writing in Japanese, furigana were added to kanji to accommodate participants' varying language proficiency levels.

DATA AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS

This study examines the types of learning attained by Japanese and Malaysian university students through online case-based learning, with a focus on workplace diversity and communication. It also considers the potential and challenges of this practice. Specifically, the analysis examines participants' reflections to qualitatively assess student learning throughout the sequence of case-based learning activities.

The data for analysis consisted of reflective entries written individually by participants on Padlet after participating in discussion activities during the case-based learning sessions. Across 2024 and 2025, there were 33 entries related to Case 10 and 32 entries related to Case 7.

These data were then analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Flick, 2002). To begin, each reflective description was segmented into units of analysis by identifying shifts in thematic focus, based on the perspective of "what the reflection is about." Subsequently, codes were assigned to each unit of meaning, and codes with similar content were grouped to generate higher-order categories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the reflective data for Case 10 and Case 7 resulted in the generation of categories, as shown in Table 1. The following sections provide a detailed analysis of the reflective data

for each case.

Table1. Categories Generated from the Analysis of Reflective Data and Definitions

Category	Definition
Intercultural Understanding and Expansion of Perspectives	Reflections that describe learning and insights gained through exposure to other cultures and ways of thinking, as well as changes in understanding and perspectives on both other cultures and one's own culture.
Recognition of Issues and Challenges	Reflections that show awareness of real-life experiences and interest in related social systems or cultural issues.
Communication Strategies and Responses	Reflections that present viewpoints raised in group discussions related to the case content and the participant's own opinions in response to them.
Personal Growth and Reflection	Reflections that evaluate one's own learning and changes in perspective through the discussion activities.
Enjoyment and Significance of Interaction	Reflections that highlight the enjoyment and significance of the interaction itself through case-based learning.
Anxieties about Participation	Reflections that mention anxieties regarding participation in online activities, roles such as discussion facilitators, or the use of language.
Others	Expressions of gratitude for the support and understanding of group members, or for the opportunity to participate in the activity; also includes simple greetings or general comments.

ANALYSIS OF REFLECTION ON CASE 10

This section presents the analysis results of the reflective data on Case 10. The categories "Intercultural Understanding and Expansion of Perspectives," "Recognition of Issues and Challenges," "Communication Strategies and Responses," and "Personal Growth and Reflection" frequently appeared in relation to the case content, with multiple categories often associated within a single reflection. The following excerpt provides examples of reflective entries from the participants. "M" refers to Malaysian students, "J" to Japanese students, and the numbers indicate data entry identifiers.

The following reflections, written by Malaysian students, illustrate how group discussions introduced the students to aspects of Islamic culture and, through experiences in Japan, helped them understand the background of their Japanese colleagues' considerations. The student also suggested an alternative: participants with religious restrictions on alcohol or food at drinking parties or farewell gatherings could be allowed to bring their own items. These points illustrate the process of "intercultural understanding and perspective expansion" gained through experiences in Japan.

Reflection Example A (M-2)

Categories: Intercultural Understanding and Expansion of Perspectives

'This session was important because it allowed my friends from Japan to learn a little about Islam. In this case, some students were unfamiliar with halal or Islamic practices. After our discussion, they realized that Muslims like us cannot eat pork or drink alcohol due to our religion, and they showed respect for that. I also had a similar experience during my exchange program in Japan. My international and Japanese friends once invited me to go drinking, but I refused and explained that I could not drink. I simply let them go without wanting to disturb them. Later, however, some of them told me that they had found a halal restaurant, so I was able to join them and enjoy a conversation. Through experiences like this, I was able to explain what Islam is and why there are certain things we cannot do, as there are religious consequences.'

Reflection Example B (M-6)

Categories: Communication Strategies and Responses; Intercultural Understanding and Expansion of Perspectives

'I think today's topic is wonderful! I believe it is something new for Japanese people. I would like to add a few points about drinking parties. First, in Malaysia, there is no drinking culture associated with parties. For example, in such situations, Malaysian employees usually go out together for breakfast or lunch. They do not drink alcohol; they simply eat meals while chatting. Next, since I am Muslim, it is fine if I am not invited to drinking parties. I would be more grateful if people just understood me. However, if I want to join a drinking party, that is also okay. Alcohol can also be included. When I was in Japan, I sometimes attended university events. At those times, I brought my own food and drinks. I understand that Japan is not an Islamic country, so that is acceptable.'

In contrast, the following reflection from Japanese students indicates that they gained knowledge about Muslims and realized that bringing a boxed meal (bento) could deepen interaction. The student also noted that a lack of knowledge about other cultures—such as religious or sociocultural backgrounds—can lead to misunderstandings in communication. While acquiring knowledge about Islamic culture, the student discovered new perspectives, connected them to communication issues, and considered this personal growth in the form of an expanded viewpoint.

Reflection Example C (J-8)

Categories: Communication Strategies and Responses; Intercultural Understanding and Expansion of Perspectives

'Among the people around me, there are no Muslims who are unable to drink alcohol or eat pork. By discussing opinions about "nominication [is a combination of two words which are Nomi and communication]" this time, I was able to understand the difficulties faced by such people and how we should respond. As a solution, I newly discovered the idea that interaction could be deepened through cultural events, or by holding gatherings like some Malaysian companies do, where people bring homemade lunch boxes to share and eat together.'

Reflection Example D (J-12)

Categories: Intercultural Understanding and Expansion of Perspectives; Personal Growth and Reflection

'Through the discussion on "nominication," I realized that being overly considerate of one another because of religious or cultural differences can also be a cause of such problems. In addition, during the discussion I encountered perspectives and opinions that I had not noticed

myself, which I found very interesting.'

In the group discussions, “lack of communication” was frequently identified as the cause of the problems in Case 10, and “promoting open communication” was often proposed as a solution. The written contributions showed that Malaysian students expressed empathy toward the feelings of the Muslim protagonist (such as loneliness and isolation) and highlighted the need to resolve insufficient information sharing among colleagues in the workplace.

Japanese students recognized that the practice of “anticipating and being overly considerate,” common in their own culture, can sometimes lead to communication gaps with people from different cultural backgrounds. This realization provided an opportunity for critical reflection on their own culture. To address communication gaps, students also considered alternative solutions, such as “Muslims themselves adopting a more proactive attitude toward participation” and “creating opportunities for interaction outside of drinking parties.”

ANALYSIS OF REFLECTION ON CASE 7

This section presents the analysis of reflective data on Case 7. As in Case 10, the categories “Intercultural Understanding and Expansion of Perspectives,” “Recognition of Issues and Challenges,” and “Communication Strategies and Responses” frequently emerged in relation to the case content, with many reflections displaying overlap across these categories. The following excerpts showcase reflective entries from participants. “M” refers to Malaysian students, “J” to Japanese students, and numbers are data entry identifiers.

In the following reflection, a Malaysian student interprets the protagonist’s experience as fundamentally rooted in male stereotypes about marriage and career, and further comments on possible ways of responding to such attitudes. The student also observes that stereotypes about women’s marriage and career are closely linked to broader social structures. Such perspectives were common among Malaysian participants, suggesting engagement with both their own culture and that of others.

In the following reflection, a Japanese student was influenced by Malaysian students, proposing different approaches to problem-solving during the group discussion. Drawing on discussions about gender and work, the student also related their insights to communication strategies, such as building relationships and selecting appropriate topics of conversation.

Reflection Example E (M-10)

Categories: Communication Strategies and Responses; Intercultural Understanding and Expansion of Perspectives

‘This session gave the same reaction between me and Japanese students, as we agreed that Diviya needs her space and the bosses need to respect her privacy. In Diviya's situation, she felt uncomfortable and unhappy because of the questions her boss asked about her personal privacy. The way she handled the situation was mature, and she did not throw any tantrums, as she knew it would affect her career. In my opinion, the differences in thinking between genders and cultures lead to this kind of conversation. Maybe from the boss's perspective, it is okay to ask that kind of question, but not for Diviya.’

Reflection Example F (M-14)

Categories: Intercultural Understanding and Expansion of Perspectives; Recognition of Issues and Challenges

‘I believe Diviya’s frustration mainly comes from the ignorance or unconscious bias of her

male boss. Her male supervisor assumes that women after marriage will naturally step back from their careers. Maybe he is unconsciously overlooking a woman's talents and her right to contribute both at work and at home. This is a common occurrence in society, and I believe it is a global phenomenon. Perhaps in Western countries, the bias is more subtle than in Asian countries, but it still exists. I presume this issue often arises as countries develop and modernize, while in underdeveloped countries, people tend to focus more on survival than on challenging such social expectations.'

In the following reflection, a Japanese student was influenced by Malaysian students who proposed different responses to problem-solving during the group discussion. Drawing on the discussion of gender and work, the student also interpreted the issue in relation to communication strategies, such as building relationships and selecting appropriate topics of conversation.

Reflection Example G (J-14)

Categories: Communication Strategies and Responses; Intercultural Understanding and Expansion of Perspectives

'What left the strongest impression on me in this class was when we discussed question (4): "What would you do if you were in Diviya's position?" If those words were spoken to me directly, I would feel as if I were being attacked, and if someone asked, "Why don't you quit?" I would assume they wanted me to quit. However, two Malaysian students clearly stated, "That is private, so I cannot answer." Hearing that, I felt that solving the issue by clearly expressing such a stance was also a good approach.'

Reflection Example H (J-5)

Categories: Intercultural Understanding and Expansion of Perspectives; Recognition of Issues and Challenges

'I thought this discussion was about problems caused by differences in the positions of men and women in the workplace. In the case of women, men automatically assume that once they get married, they will take time off from work due to pregnancy or childcare, and this taken-for-granted assumption leads to misunderstandings. I also realized that while women may feel uncomfortable when private matters are raised in the workplace, sharing personal stories can sometimes help deepen relationships. Therefore, I felt it was difficult to determine where to draw the line regarding how far one should go when discussing private matters.'

During group discussions on Case 7, many groups identified "gender-based stereotypes" as the root cause of the problem and proposed solutions such as "avoiding private questions" and "clarifying the intention behind questions." In their written contributions, students offered concrete communication strategies by considering each role and its associated responsibilities. For example, if in the protagonist's position, they suggested responding with questions like, "What about you, senpai[meaning senior]?" or "In this situation, what would you do, Mr./Ms. XX?" to encourage mutual exchange. Male supervisors emphasized the importance of clearly stating the reasons for their questions to prevent misunderstandings. Additionally, when discussing private matters, students noted that one should first share personal information, using phrases like "In my case..." These reflections suggest that students developed deeper perspectives through group discussions.

CONCLUSION

This study examined online case-based learning involving Japanese and Malaysian university students, focusing on their reflections to explore learning throughout the process qualitatively. The analysis revealed that participants became more aware of issues such as problem-solving and language use in the workplace, cultural norms (including home culture, other cultures, and institutional contexts), building human relationships, and the nature of intercultural understanding and communication.

Drawing on the concept of Intercultural Competence (IC) in Byram's model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), which comprises knowledge, two types of skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness, I would like to interpret the students' learning observed here. First, within the case-based learning sessions, students shared their own and others' sociocultural backgrounds and knowledge, and identified communication issues that might arise in the workplace. In the process of exploring solutions to these problems, they often focused on their own culture and perspectives, and were seen interpreting phenomena by connecting multiple viewpoints. When proposing solutions, students posed new questions and generated ideas based on new perspectives gained through discussion.

Malaysian students, drawing on intercultural understandings and values acquired through their prior study abroad experiences, further deepened their critical cultural awareness. Japanese students, meanwhile, not only gained new knowledge and perspectives from their Malaysian counterparts but also had the opportunity to re-examine the behavioral patterns of their own culture, which they normally take for granted.

In case-based learning, learners engage in collaborative dialogue for problem-solving using real workplace conflicts as the subject matter, and subsequently reflect on the entire process. Based on the analysis of students' reflections, case-based learning for Japanese business communication can be considered to contribute to the development of understanding of self and others' cultures and identities, as well as to the cultivation of skills for engaging with heterogeneous others in workplace contexts—competencies that are essential for globally competent human resources.

Ultimately, future research should provide a more in-depth examination of language use in online case-based learning. In this practice, Japanese and Malaysian students used multiple languages and modes of expression. They did not always share a common language, but participated by using English and Japanese as lingua francas and actively using translation tools. Additionally, Japanese students consciously used “plain Japanese” (*yasashii nihongo*) as a means of communication. Further studies should focus on language use in communication to clarify the actual learning processes involved.

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