Encouraging Critical Thinking in International Exchange
－ Introducing Japanese Culture and Society to International Students －

Adriana Hidding

Institute for International Relations, Ehime University

1. Introduction

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 is a strong reminder of the need for positive international exchange to foster a more peaceful world. Making friendships across borders and learning to see the world from different perspectives gives a positive impulse, but that alone is not enough. We are more and more living in our online cocoons, and political movements requiring blind faith have gotten mainstream again. To try to counter this tide, we need to encourage critical thinking even more by giving students the opportunity to not just exchange but to dig deeper into culture.

The Institute for International Relations (IIR) organized between December 2020 and December 2021 a number of online exchanges with a partner institution in Russia, the invasion thus raised the question if these exchanges should be continued and if so in what manner? With all kinds of restrictions in place, Russians schools becoming active agents in promoting the war (Shcherbakova 2022), and taking into account the possible risk a subverted message could have on persons involved at the other side, meaningful academic exchange between institutions is in the authors opinion at present not possible.

Looking back at past exchanges most of the general content was of an introductory nature, not covering any critical or "difficult" subjects. When introducing famous work of Ehime's haiku poet Masaoka Shiki, should there also be attention for more confronting work, such as Homefront (銃後, 1939), a haiku collection by former Matsuyama resident Taneda Santoka, with free haiku depicting such horrors as a soldier coming back from the front without limbs. Or an allegorical warning against the invasion of foreign land based on empty propaganda, such as Akutagawa Ryunosuke version of the Japanese folktale Momotarō (1923). Or rather than focusing on content should the methodologies in use be reviewed?

Although a suitable exchange project with Russia does not seem feasible in the near future, the current events are a trigger to review existing programs for international and short-term exchange students. Can programs on Japanese Culture, and online exchanges be improved by incorporating more elements to foster critical thinking, and if so what kind of elements would be both useful and appropriate?

2. Japanese Culture and Society Education

At Ehime University education of Japanese Culture and Society for international students can be subdivided into three groups. 1) Undergraduates enrolled in regular courses taught in Japanese on the subject *Nihon Jijō* ("Japanese state of things") as part of the general education program. 2) Studies on Japanese Culture for exchange students and students enrolled in English Language programs. 3) Courses as part of short term and or online exchanges.

In 1962 *Nihon Jijō* was set up at universities throughout Japan. The subject has not been clearly defined, but it aims to give international students support in gaining knowledge and skills to be able to give meaning to cultural phenomena and events（渡辺，2008）. A very broad range of subjects, topics and approaches can be seen, ranging from geography, climate, history, economy and culture（大川，2008）.

That the subject has not been clearly defined is an asset as it permits educators to introduce students not just to Japan, but more specifically to the region where their university is located and to adjust the content to current affairs and specific needs of students, such as a class on the Shikoku Pilgrimage or a class on disaster prevention with a focus on the local risks and history of natural disasters. Adjusting the subject to current needs,

includes updating the approach and methodology.

Studies on Japanese Culture uses many of the same themes as *Nihon Jijō*. With the important difference that most students are new to Japan and do not have a similarly high command of the Japanese Language. There is thus a stronger focus on familiarizing the students with Japan and class content is of a more introductory level supplemented with field trips.

The main aim of the Japanese Culture and Society education for international students at Ehime University has been to deepen an understanding of Japan, and facilitate support in overcoming cultural differences. Students are furthermore encouraged to make comparisons between Japan and their region of origin, and to be independent thinkers.

During courses a wide difference in the style of education which students have followed so far can be noticed. There are students who are at ease with giving an well founded opinion, or talking about topics from their personal view. Others have little experience with active learning, peer to peer activities, or even are surprised when asked to sit in a U-shape to facilitate better communication. This forms yet another reason to pay extra attention to foundational concepts such as critical thinking, as not all students are familiar with having to practice it.

2.1 Online Programs

Most short term and online exchange programs are of an introductory nature, to give students a first try at international exchange, gain confidence and improve communication skills.

The last program organized with participants from Russia was in December 2021, the three-day Ehime University Online Winter School. The program with a total of 120 participants from 10 different countries was a combination of specialist lectures by members of the respective faculties, general cultural workshops organized by the IIR and presentations and exchange activities organized for and by students.

Other online cultural exchanges by the IIR with universities in the US and India consisted only of one to three synchronous meetings with options for asynchronous activities. Programs mostly consisted of student presentations followed by discussions and activities such as translating haiku and word games.

Student feedback through post-event questionnaires and direct contact with organizers indicates participants especially appreciated a large variety in the presentation topics, countries of fellow participants, and being introduced to unfamiliar cultures. One example was an introduction to Japanese onsen culture, during which American students were surprised to hear about varying and changing views on tattoos in Japan. A virtual tour of a Sikh place of worship was an eyeopener to Japanese students who saw similarities in the hospitality there with customs to welcome pilgrims on Shikoku island.

Others appreciated the ability to easily interact with presenters and other participants. In the questionnaire of the 2021 Winter School 96% of 49 respondents indicated they would recommend the program to others. Finally students indicated they had increased interest in the regions of origin of other participants.

It is interesting to notice that participants were not only introducing parts of their cultural backgrounds to each other but seemed to easily find pieces of shared identity, such as the subject of study, a love for K-pop, anime or literature.

The online programs give an opportunity to meet students all over the world, and have a positive impact on students. However most student presentations were of a superficial nature, such as a list of touristic attractions in Matsuyama. This was partly due to the short nature of these exchanges, and partly because of the challenge of needing to use English. By means of Q&A sessions some depth was gained, however there is room for further improvement on this front.

3. Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is thought of as an important skill, but there is no common agreement on what it exactly is, there are numerous definitions. Consequently there is not a common consensus of how to implement it in education (Snider, 2017). So what is it that we actually try to promote?

Some of the frequently named keywords, and subskills for critical thinking are: field- specific expertise, reasoning (Huber & Kuncel, 2016), inferential connections (Mulnix, 2012), observation, synthesizing information, and reflection (Beaumont, 2010).

In light of the recent propaganda wars, and with a society which is more and more influenced by social networking services that unfortunately seem to be more polarizing than a means to break down borders (Tett, 2016) an awareness of the influence of

this compartmentalisation is vital to critical thinking. Furthermore we should be aware of conscious and unconscious biases that come with our bubbles, be willing to reflect and value counter arguments for their merits.

In this light a good workable concept of critical thinking is given by Mulnix: "To be a proficient critical thinker, then, is to see clearly the relationship between evidence and conclusion, and to be proficient at providing reasons in support of one's beliefs" (Mulnix, 2012, p. 473). She furthermore argues that "the fundamental skill to be acquired by a critical thinker is the ability to recognize inferential connections holding between statements, where this would include the ability to understand the possibility that what we believe might be false and the ability to identify the sorts of evidence that would undermine our beliefs" (Mulnix, 2012, p. 473).

University education greatly contributes to critical thinking skills. However despite a rise in education levels, a resurgence of political movements that require blind trust, accompanied with regular updates of what is "true" and what is "fake" can be seen worldwide.

3.1 Implementing Critical Thinking

With a wide range of opinions a critical debate on the merits and the way to implement critical thinking is very much possible.

Huber and Kuncel (2016) argue that college education without explicit instruction of critical thinking already has a positive effect on the critical thinking skills of students, it thus needs to be considered if giving more time for this skill is worthwhile if it comes at the expense of other skills. Since critical thinking is not as easily measured as, for example, vocabulary knowledge, whether the explicit instruction and separate courses in critical thinking are beneficial for students is indeed up to debate. However, when it comes to education in general the question of whether or not the content and methodology used in courses is encouraging critical thinking is important.

Snider (2017) argues that a complete overhaul of educational programs is not necessary to instill stronger critical thinking skills, and as a big bonus can increase motivation among students. By integrating critical thinking in existing curricula and adjusting common teaching techniques it will be easier to implement and sustain these elements within educational practices. The kind of cognitive activities that stimulate critical thinking such as making comparisons between class content and the experiences of students are also associated with higher motivation. An investment to improve programs from this perspective would thus be an overall win.

Mulnix a philosophy professor argues critical thinking should be taught as it protects from "sloppy and conformist thinking and insulates us against empty dogmatism", it is thus a pillar for autonomy, as it lets us decide for ourselves what we believe (2012, p. 473).

When it comes to implementation she argues that, as critical thinking is a skill for improvement, active and repeated practice is needed. This can be done by using techniques that help focus on inferential connections such as argument mapping.

Questioning is another method that can be easily implemented in existing curricula. The amount of questioning and the level of questioning is directly related to the amount and level of student thinking (Savage, 1997).

Online learning environments such as Zoom with a chat function have the benefit that you can ask a question to all participants at the same time. Immediately a whole array of answers can be seen. Allowing for students to see multiple perspectives and feel less pressured to give the "correct" answer to an open question.

For in person classes students can fill in an online form with open yes or no questions before class, during class the reasoning behind the answers can be analyzed. This approach is of great benefit to students who otherwise are a bit too shy to give their opinion during class. It furthermore makes it easier to find a diversity of opinions and reasoning within one class.

Critical thinking skills ideally do not come at the cost of other skills, furthermore requiring a big overhaul of programs could have a negative impact on implementation. In this sense the most effective methods are thus those that are easily introduced and sustained.

3.2 Teaching Culture and Critical Thinking

Although seen as a means to enhance critical thinking, teaching culture and foreign languages is not without pitfalls. Kubota (2003) describes, in a piece on Japanese culture as part of Japanese language education in the US, how by pointing out the uniqueness of Japanese culture or by emphasising differences educators can inadvertently strengthen 'us versus them' thinking and othering. Very much similar to the process as described by Edward Saïd in *Orientalism* (1978), there is a risk of creating stereotypes. Such teaching approaches can despite the best of intentions be detrimental to critical

thinking.

To deal with this problem Kubota suggests four Ds to reconceptualize approaches to teaching culture. Firstly, rather than relying on prescriptive knowledge there should be a *descriptive* understanding of culture. Secondly, there needs to be a focus on how culture and perspectives vary depending on numerous factors, such as location, gender age etc. and thus show the diversity within culture. Thirdly, culture should be seen as *dynamic*, changing and taking on new forms over time. Finally, a notion of the *discursive* construction of culture to provide understanding on how knowledge is used for political and or ideological purposes is needed.

For language and culture textbooks that do not fit this four D mold Kubota suggest to add basic questions such as: Does this apply to all Japanese? Can you think of something contradicting it? Is there something similar in other countries?

3.3 Momotarō as Example

If we were to look for an example where the D's of Kubota can be easily applied, Japan's most famous folktale Momotarō or Peach Boy would be a good one. Folktales are still widely used in Japanese language and culture textbooks and they can be used to give a *descriptive* rather than a prescriptive understanding of culture. As a piece of oral literature there are various versions of Momotarō around, and new ones still appear. The most common form tells of a boy born from a peach, welcomed by an elderly couple, he grows to be strong and goes on an expedition to ogre island. With the help of three animals he defeats the ogres and comes back as a hero with many treasures.

While it is most common to depict Momotarō as a hero, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) in a piece that he wrote for his own children, *Hibi no oshie* (Day-to-day Teachings, 1871), condemned Peach Boy as a thief because the motivation for the expedition was in Fukuzawa's eyes no other than greed for the treasures of the ogres. Kuramochi for a school project read numerous versions to find out if Momotarō was a thief or not. She found out older versions most of the time do not give a reason, but more recent versions indicate the ogres were causing trouble（倉持，2019）.

During the Pacific War Momotarō was readily used for propaganda, and turned into a nationalistic hero who suppresses English and American demons (Dower, 1986). More recent examples see the emergence of Momoko, or Peach Girl, in which the hero switches sex and the gender roles of other characters are reversed（奥山，2011）. The 2014 pop song *Momotarō* by Wednesday Campanella from the album *Watashi wo onigashima ni turetette* (Take me to Ogre Island) features a Peach Boy who is mainly interested in gaming and does not want to go to ogre island, but is pushed into it by his grandparents. A 2021 picture book, *Futari no Momotarō* (Two Peach Boys) by Kido and Kitahara starts out just like the most common version of the tale, a peach is taken by the river to be found by and grow up with the old man and lady. The book can be turned around, and the story of a second peach appears. This peach washes ashore on ogre island and the baby born on the beach is being fondly taken care of by the ogres, the islands grows out to become "rainbow island" welcoming a diversity of inhabitants, the story ends with the arrival of the human raised peach boy and the question how both peach boys can become friends. The book clearly tries to promote a more inclusive society.

Akutagawa's version of Momotarō (1923) is perhaps the most developed one, and it shows great wit. The story starts out with the peach tree which has its branches up in the skies, and its roots reaching into hell, the child born from this magnificent tree however turns out to be a brat. Too lazy to work the fields like the old man and lady who cared for him he decides to go to ogre island. The elderly couple is not sad to see him leave, but they do give him millet dumplings. When it is time to share the dumplings with the animals that help him on his journey he will only offer them half a dumpling.

Far more refined than the petty protagonist are the ogres, who live peacefully in the natural paradise of their island, enjoying dances, reciting classical poetry and lovingly take care of their children. They do warn their offspring for misbehavior or they might end up on the island of the humans.

After Momotarō and his companions brutally kill most of the unsuspecting ogres, the life of the leader is spared in exchange for all of the treasures they possess. With all of his loot it is not a happily ever after ending as some of the ogres try to take revenge by setting his house on fire and some young ogres set out to make coconut bombs and plan for independence.

The allegory of this story written during Japan's Imperialistic expansion can easily be noticed and is unfortunately still relevant today. The story ends with a stark warning, you never know when the next peach

might fall of the tree.

Students can compare different versions and interpretations of the story and will thus notice its *diversity*, and its *dynamic* over time. By detecting how different politics and ideologies reshaped the protagonist they can furthermore discover how *discourse* takes place. Finally, students can find parallels in the present day.

4. International Exchange and Critical Thinking

It can be argued that foreign language education and international exchange in itself promotes critical thinking. By meeting "the other" students are introduced to new viewpoints, and thus get a chance to deconstruct stereotypes and images they might have（池田，2020）.

For many students this will work out, but at the same time it can be noticed that when it comes to views on Japan, it is not uncommon for international students to uncritically use outdated or ill informed sources. Sometimes the results can be a bit funny, like images of the Japanese eating sushi every day. But more seriously questionable images such as the Japanese people to be belligerent, mono-ethnic or homogenous arise, for which stereotype smashing would be welcome.

Critical self-reflection is not a given when meeting "the other". As Edward Hall described in *Beyond Culture* when confronted with a problem in a different culture few will say "The trouble I have with him is me" (Hall, 1976 p. 240). Indicating that rather than reflecting on ingrained beliefs on how things should be done, most will find it easier to come to the conclusion that the other is just odd, looking beyond accomplishments or benefits of a "host culture" and idealizing the "home culture". The reason to promote critical thinking is to enable people be capable of self-reflection, making the conclusion "The trouble I have with him is me" a possible one.

5. Conclusion

Current global developments, such as the war in Ukraine, a possible conflict between China and Taiwan, a rise in political movements that require blind trust are worrisome. It reminds us that a global perspective and critical thinking should be part of educational programs whenever possible.

International exchange, both in person and online, short term and long term can greatly benefit students critical thinking skills. In an unfamiliar surrounding students are introduced to new perspectives, practice subskills necessary for critical thinking such as observation and interference, and are strongly triggered to reflect on their own background. However, we still need to ask what elements for growing a global perspective and critical thinking are most effective and in what situation.

There is not a one-size-fits-all solution, for different programs and different students. Moreover as critical thinking has a number of subskills, different methods should be in play. As for the acquirement of any skill there is a need for repetition, and it should not come too much at the expense of other skills. Useful and appropriate methods to encourage critical thinking should thus be easy to introduce and frequently applied.

When it comes to the education of Japanese culture to international students, an emphasis on looking at culture from different perspectives and self-reflection is already part of the program. This can be further improved by applying the four D's as proposed by Kubota, to avoid unintentionally creating stereotypes, and an active learning approach of letting students do the thinking with open questions followed with feedback

For online cultural exchanges one of the main things which can be done within existing programs is to coach students more in selecting topics and approaches that show the dynamic and diverse nature of culture. And when needed questions such as: Does this apply to all Japanese? Can you think of something contradicting it? Is there something similar in other countries? can be added.

Active and repeated practice is not just beneficial to students. As we move from buzzword to buzzword, we sometimes need time to reflect and go back to the foundation of higher education, by revisiting critical thinking.

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