

An Analysis of an International Student's Background and Initial Intercultural Adjustment to Life at Kagoshima University

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Abstract

This paper explores the background and intercultural experiences of Kei Wakamatsu, a Chinese Malaysian student, during her first year and a half at Kagoshima University. To investigate these experiences, interviews were conducted in August of 2014 and September of 2015 and then the content of the interviews was compared to research in intercultural adaptation, second language acquisition and cultural differences. The analysis showed that Ms. Wakamatsu passed through some stages of intercultural adaptation, experiencing difficulty particularly during the crisis stage, due to insufficient Japanese language skills and cultural differences. Recently, however, Ms. Wakamatsu's Japanese language skills have improved and she has now become more adjusted to her life at Kagoshima University. Yet she still encounters communication barriers with Japanese students and does not feel completely accepted by them. While there is no doubt that Ms. Wakamatsu must continue to make an effort to learn the Japanese language and learn about cultural differences, Japanese universities as well as Japanese society as a whole must also change to become more accepting of people with different cultural backgrounds.

Key words: intercultural adaptation, cultural differences, misunderstandings, second language acquisition, relationship development, communication styles

Introduction

Kei Wakamatsu is a Chinese Malaysian student studying biochemistry at Kagoshima University. She was in my intercultural communication class during her first year (2014-2015) at this university. I had many interesting and thought-provoking conversations with Ms. Wakamatsu, an inquisitive and intelligent student. Through these conversations, I became interested in her life as an international student and so I decided to conduct some interviews to investigate and analyze her background and adjustment to life at Kagoshima University. The interviews were conducted in August of 2014 and September of 2015. An IC recorder was used to record the conversations and then these conversations were later transcribed. Kei Wakamatsu has given me full permission to use her real name. (Henceforth, she will be referred to as K.W.)

There are three main sections in this paper. The first section describes some key concepts in intercultural adaptation;

social aspects of second language learning; cultural differences between Japanese and Chinese Malaysians; and misunderstandings associated with communication styles. In the second section the main aspects of K.W.'s background and her school life during the first three semesters at Kagoshima University are introduced. Finally, her adjustment is analyzed using the concepts in the field of intercultural communication and second language acquisition.

Some Key Concepts of Intercultural Adaptation

The process of learning to adapt to a new culture has been called "intercultural adaptation," a major concept discussed in the field of intercultural communication¹⁾.

Culture shock, one of the most salient aspects of intercultural adaptation, refers to the difficulty and anxiety of coping with the people and situations in a new culture. Generally speaking, culture shock encompasses a myriad of negative emotions experienced in unfamiliar settings, for

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example, “anxiety, depression, helplessness and disorientation and isolation.” As well, culture shock can have positive or negative effects. Thus, some people can use this experience to learn and grow while other people may need more time to cope with cultural differences¹⁾.

Different types of culture shock have been identified. Two that are relevant to this paper are *Education Shock* and *Language Shock*. Education shock basically refers to the stress international students feel in a new academic environment, and language shock refers to the negative effects of not knowing the new language in a different culture¹⁾.

There are also various theories concerning the stages of intercultural adaptation. One is the “U-curve” pattern, which has four stages: “honeymoon, crisis, adjustment, and biculturalism.” The honeymoon stage is characterized by very positive feelings toward the host culture. In this period, attention is paid to similarities between cultures rather than differences. In the crisis stage, negative emotions are experienced as a result of “differences in values, beliefs, behaviors, and lifestyles.” Inability to adjust to the new environment may result in dire consequences such as “depression or withdrawal.” In the adjustment stage, one is better able to deal with differences in values and behavior, make the appropriate behavioral responses, and feel more positive about the host culture. The biculturalism stage is the final state where one has overcome most of the culture shock and has almost fully adapted to the new culture¹⁾.

However, intercultural adaptation can never be viewed as a perfect end-state but as “somewhere between failure and success,” and thus it involves a continual process of coping with the new environment¹⁾.

Some Social Aspects of Second Language Learning Acculturation and Second Language Learning

Regarding the social aspects of second language acquisition, it is believed that learning a second language and a second culture go hand in hand and that second language learners go through some of the same stages of intercultural adaptation. Brown (1980) mentions various types of second “language learning contexts” and their relationship to acculturation. The level of acculturation will differ according to the language learning contexts. Thus, for example, learning a second language in a classroom will not lead to the same kind of acculturation as learning the second language in the host country. This last context in which a person is forced to communicate in a new language and adapt to a new culture leads to “the deepest form of acculturation”²⁾.

Second language learners can also experience different stages of culture shock. Feeling the need to use the native language may be a symptom of the adjustment phase, when the second language learner becomes more “proficient” in the second language, but has to cope with feelings of homelessness. But towards the end of this stage, the second language learner will become more adjusted. Brown (1980) states that second language learners should fully experience these stages “to become successful second culture and second language learners”²⁾.

Social distance is another concept mentioned in the field of second language acquisition. The basic theory is that the level of success in learning the second language will depend on the degree of social distance between the language learner’s culture and the host culture. Thus, according to Schumann’s theory on social distance, learning a second language will be easier if social distance is small but not if the social distance is large²⁾.

In terms of personality variables related to second language acquisition, there is no conclusive evidence that a certain personality variable leads one to be successful at acquiring a second language. Nonetheless, it may be said that there is a relationship between personality and “natural communicative language.”³⁾

Relationship Development of East Asians

Based on obligations and reciprocity, relationships in East Asia are influenced by various factors. One is the in-group and out-group relationship category. In-groups, the most important source of relationships, are formed in various circles, which include family and relatives, friends, classmates and co-workers. The mutual recognition and incorporation of contextual and non-verbal cues in communication as well as “gathering background information” are all considered vital in relationship development. These actions serve to maintain relationships without conflict and embarrassment¹⁾.

Relationship Development and the Japanese Communication Style

According to Nishida (1996), some aspects of the Japanese communication style can be explained as follows: Relationships are the focal point of Japanese’ lives (“similar to a religion”), and thus should never be damaged but maintained. The key characteristics of the Japanese communication style serve the purpose of maintaining good relationships between people. Thus the use of direct verbal communication is minimized (to avoid conflict), while indirect and non-verbal

communication is emphasized. Through these methods, Japanese can convey their intentions and feelings without offending others. Not only that, they are expected to be adept at interpreting others' true intentions. The Japanese communication style works well to solidify relationships within in-groups but not with out-groups⁴⁾.

(Non-Muslim) Malaysian Values and Communication Style

There are the three main ethnic groups living Malaysia, the Malays who are mostly Muslim, the Chinese and the Indians. The non-Muslim Chinese have many of the same values and communication style characteristics as other East Asians, such as the values of maintaining harmony and face, the importance of collectivism, avoidance of confrontation and indirect communication. On the other hand, Chinese Malaysians, who share some of the same communication style characteristics as mainland Chinese, may be considered more direct than Japanese. According to Lewis (2006), of all the East Asians, the Chinese tend to be most direct⁵⁾. This opinion is corroborated by other literature, which suggests that Chinese, especially those from the north, are more direct⁶⁾.

Misunderstandings and Communication Styles

The field of intercultural communication explains various factors that can lead to misunderstandings, such as differences in languages, cultural beliefs and values; thinking patterns, communication styles and cultural contexts. With regard to verbal communication styles, the differences between the indirect and direct styles may lead to misunderstandings and conflicts.

The purposes and characteristics of these styles are almost completely the opposite. In the direct style information is conveyed explicitly through words and thus great importance is placed on verbal skills and giving opinions while contextual cues are less of a concern. On the other hand, in the indirect style information and opinions are conveyed through ambiguous language and contextual cues in order to preserve group harmony and thus verbal skills are not highly valued. Thus, in situations where both styles of communication are used, misunderstandings are likely to occur⁷⁾.

Difficulties Foreign Students Face at Japanese Universities

Generally, some researchers and writers have noted the difficulty international students have at "fitting in" and establishing friendships with Japanese students at Japanese universities. That this is a common feeling among international

students is worth noting. The researchers have suggested some possible causes for these difficulties, such as the lack of language skills of both the international students and the Japanese students; the Japanese communication style of indirectness and the general Japanese societal norms of not accepting foreigners due to the categorization of *uchi/soto* (in-group/out-group) groups^{8), 9), 10)}.

Background information (Kei Wakamatsu)

K.W. grew up in Chai Leng Park, a Chinese suburb of the city of Butterworth in northern Malaysia. Her father, who is Japanese, was formerly a vice president of a Japanese canning factory and is now a supervisor there. Her Chinese Malaysian mother works in the office at the factory and is in charge of quality control. K.W. has two siblings, an older brother and a younger sister who is also a student at Kagoshima University.

Multilingualism

K.W. is multilingual. In Malaysia, she grew up speaking Hokkien, a Chinese dialect, with her family and neighbors and Mandarin Chinese at the Chinese-medium schools that she attended. She also studied the Malay language, which is compulsory, from elementary through secondary school and then started learning English in kindergarten. In addition to the English courses she took at school, K.W. honed her English skills by watching American dramas and movies, reading books in English and practicing English with a home tutor once a week. She also started studying Japanese in Malaysia and continued to study it intensively in Japan until she entered Kagoshima University. Although Chinese is her dominant language, she is conversant in English and Japanese. Her overall level of competency in both of these languages would probably be considered fairly high since she can understand spoken English and Japanese most of the time.

Trips to Japan

During her childhood, K.W. and her family spent a number of winter vacations in Saga, Japan, where her father's family home is located. On these vacations K.W. was able to come into contact with the Japanese culture and language. During these stays, she and her family observed some traditional New Year's customs such as going to the temple and saying prayers and eating *omochi*, Japanese rice cakes. She also remembered taking a trip to Nagasaki with her father and visiting the Nagasaki Peace Park. Unfortunately, the visits were not long enough for her to become acquainted with

Japanese children or to learn the Japanese language. She did remember greeting Japanese children but was too shy to start a conversation with them. Overall, she seemed to have had pleasant memories of going to Japan.

Motivation to learn Japanese

Although her Japanese father tried to teach her and her sister the kana syllabaries and some Japanese vocabulary, she was not able to communicate with her father in Japanese until she became seriously interested in learning it in her teens.

Initially her main purpose for studying Japanese was to communicate with her father. First, she started watching anime to learn Japanese and then started to pay more attention to grammar and usage. Then when she was 16, she started learning the basics of Japanese and then took a Japanese language course to pass two Japanese proficiency tests, the N5 and the N4. She was then able to communicate with her father in simple Japanese sentences. (Having become more proficient in Japanese, K.W. is deeply satisfied that she can now converse with her father in Japanese.)

However, K.W.'s purpose for studying Japanese changed after she graduated from secondary school. Her new purpose was to enter a Japanese university. So after graduating from the secondary school, she took a 4-month intensive Japanese course to pass the N2 Japanese language proficiency exam and then she came to Japan and studied Japanese for one year in order to pass the N1 Japanese language proficiency exam and the EJU (Examination for Japanese University Admission for International Students).

Language school in Tokyo and initial "culture shock"

K.W. experienced some culture shock when she arrived in Tokyo to take an intensive Japanese language course for a year in 2013. Since the Japanese language course was so demanding, K.C. did not spend a lot of time socializing with others or going places in Tokyo. Even so, it took some time for her to get used to the sheer number of cars and people, tall buildings and the high cost of living. Having come from a small town in Malaysia, she was not accustomed to such a high-paced lifestyle. But after the initial shock, her transition to life in Tokyo went well on the whole. Studying Japanese took up most of her time and after a lot of hard work and dedication, she was able to pass the N1 and EJU to enter a Japanese university.

The First Five Months at Kagoshima University

K.C. entered the Department of Chemistry and Bioscience in the Faculty of Science at Kagoshima University as a regular student.

K.C. stated that there were positive and negative aspects about her first 5 months at Kagoshima University. On the one hand, she was able to stay in contact with her sister who was in a language school in Tokyo at the time and she had a Chinese friend with whom she took most of her classes. These were two people with whom she could be completely comfortable and direct. On the other hand, while she liked the relaxed pace of life in Kagoshima, K.C. felt there were barriers between herself and the Japanese students and staff members at the university.

The orientation session for the 1st year students in her department

At the freshman orientation session, K.C. experienced feeling uncomfortable and left out. At the beginning of the session, the teacher told the whole class she was from Malaysia. This was disturbing since she would have preferred to stay anonymous. And since she is shy, it was difficult for K.C. to go up and talk to someone during the session although some of the Japanese students did come up and talk to her. She also noticed that her classmates immediately formed groups at the orientation session but she was not asked to join one or felt like she could not go up and join one. K.C. felt that missing the opportunity to be in a group at this session was crucial since she was always on her own in her science classes during the first 5 months at school.

Differences between the Japanese and Malaysian communication styles

K.W. felt that one of the biggest obstacles to forming relationships with Japanese classmates was the Japanese communication style. When she spoke to her Japanese peers, she tried to use their communication style by being very polite and using indirect language. She felt this was necessary in order not to offend them and because it was difficult to know why they were upset about something. She noticed that when her Japanese classmates seemed upset, they would not tell her what was wrong but would be in a bad mood. Then she would wait until they calmed down to talk to them. Consequently, she felt nervous when she was talking to them and did not feel like she could be herself with them or be too direct.

On the other hand, when she interacted with Malaysians or other foreigners, she used the Malaysian communication

style, which is much more direct. Her opinion was that if Malaysians got offended, one could apologize and the disagreement would be forgotten; they would not hold grudges. On the other hand, K.W. felt that Japanese did hold grudges, so she had to be careful when she was speaking to them. Also, in her opinion, Malaysians show their feelings and are more individualistic, so one generally knows when Malaysians are upset. So in her mind, these difficulties were caused by the significant differences between the two communication styles.

Other barriers to forming relationships with Japanese students

There were linguistic barriers as well. K.W. could not always understand what her Japanese classmates were saying nor could she always say what she wanted to say in Japanese. Furthermore, she and her Japanese classmates simply did not share the same interests and so therefore they often had nothing to talk about except for the classes and the teachers.

However, K.W. stated that she could not blame the Japanese students entirely for communication problems. She is shy and often does not have the courage to talk to Japanese students.

The incident at the student affairs office in the science department

One incident at the office deeply upset K.W. When she went to office at the science department to have a document signed by the dean, she gave the document to an office person who took the document to make copies of it. But K.W. wanted to make sure she had filled out the forms correctly, so she tried to go around the counter into the office but then three office people suddenly jumped up and told her not to come in, stating it was against the rules for students to enter their office. She was intimidated and frightened because these three people were talking loudly and angrily. She then backed away and said she was very sorry. However, they still seemed angry and so she stood there until the other person came back with the papers. She was upset by the fact that three people, not one, got extremely angry with her. K.W. interpreted it as an overreaction. After that incident, she became more withdrawn and wary of going to the office. She is now more careful not to cross “boundaries” with Japanese people.

Her academic work during the 1st semester

K.W. felt her academic work during the first 5 months

was satisfactory. Some of her Japanese professors were helpful in allowing her to write reports in English if she felt she could not write them in Japanese. Since all of her classes were conducted in Japanese, K.W. also had some Japanese students and a tutor to help her if she did not understand something in class or had a homework assignment.

The Second and Third Semesters at Kagoshima University

Improvement in Japanese language abilities

K.W. feels that her Japanese language ability has improved slowly by attending lectures, which are all conducted in Japanese, and by doing the homework. She has not really interacted a great deal with the group of Japanese students she calls her “course mates,” the students she takes most of the specialized courses with. She thinks she may interact more with them in her 3rd and 4th year when she has labs with them.

Communicating with Japanese students

K.W. feels more comfortable talking to the girls in her department, especially when they are taking classes together. She feels that the communication barriers she faced a year ago have crumbled somewhat and that some factors have led to this. During the first semester, when she was taking most of her classes with her Chinese friend, she spoke mostly Chinese and spent time with her but this year K.W. is taking more classes with her course mates and so she has been forced to use more Japanese and communicate with them. From her point of view, this has been a good development since she must use her Japanese language skills. She also had more opportunities to talk with them about her recent trip back to Malaysia.

Some negative issues she still must overcome

In terms of communicating with other Japanese girls, one issue has been the lack of common interests. She is interested in American and English dramas but they are not, so it is sometimes difficult to have a conversation with them. On the other hand, while she does share a common interest of watching Korean dramas with one classmate, K.W. has had trouble talking about the content in Japanese.

Another issue is talking to Japanese boys. She does not feel comfortable talking them, especially because she is required to use a term of endearment, *-kun*, after their first names. She feels extremely uncomfortable calling them *-kun*, but supposes she will have to talk to them at some point in the near future.

Her Japanese language skills are also a concern. Her Japanese classmates expect her to be good at Japanese because her father is Japanese but in reality she feels that her Japanese skills are insufficient. So she sometimes has trouble explaining things to them in Japanese. She feels somewhat pressured by their expectations and tries not to make simple grammatical mistakes and to use keigo, honorifics, properly. But she admits she needs to work on her Japanese language skills more.

K.W. also stated that it was possible to form casual friendships with her Japanese classmates but not long-term relationships. She still feels the pressure to speak more indirectly with Japanese classmates and worries about being too direct with them and hurting their feelings. When she thinks she might say something that will hurt their feelings, she does not speak. As was the case during her first semester here, she still feels that Japanese hide their feelings and act like they are not hurt when they actually are, so she becomes confused about whether she should say something or not. So when she is confused, she refrains from speaking.

Overall adjustment to life at Kagoshima University

Generally speaking, K.W. feels that she has adapted fairly well to life at Kagoshima University. She has more positive feelings about her life here and has become more comfortable interacting and communicating with her Japanese classmates. Also, now that her younger sister, who is also a Kagoshima University student, is living with her, she feels less lonely. Nevertheless, she still does have difficulties being indirect and being accepted by her Japanese peers.

Discussion

The social aspects of second language acquisition

The content of the interviews reveals that K.W. may have gone through stages of culture shock while learning Japanese. The anxiety produced from having to study Japanese intensively to pass proficiency exams in Tokyo may have caused her to go through a form of “language shock.” K.W. may also have experienced this form of shock during her first semester at Kagoshima University, by having to attend classes conducted entirely in Japanese as well as communicating with her Japanese classmates with insufficient language skills. Even though she is more adept at using Japanese now, K.W. still struggles with having to explain things and comprehending the spoken language. Furthermore, the expectations for her to speak Japanese well are high, so she feels pressured to speak it well. Thus, her

intercultural adaptation in terms of second language acquisition is still continuing.

On the other hand, K.W. is in the ideal language-learning context, learning the second language in the host country. Moreover, she is more or less “forced” to speak Japanese in her daily life and in her classes at the university. Viewing her language learning from this perspective, she may be moving toward a “deeper” level of language and culture learning.

General Intercultural adaptation

Negative aspects

K.W.’s experiences indicate that she may have gone through some general stages of intercultural adaptation. One stage seems to have been culture shock, where she experienced discomfort and anxiety due to misunderstandings caused by differences in cultural values and communication styles.

During her first two semesters at Kagoshima University, K.W. indicated that besides having to use polite language, she could not enter her Japanese classmates’ in-groups”; could not understand their ambiguity and could not be direct with them for fear of hurting their feelings. The misunderstandings and frustration caused by these issues can be explained by the differences in relationship development, communication style and cultural differences in general.

In Japan in-groups and indirect communication are given high priority. And since maintaining harmony in relationships, especially in in-groups, is so important, a communication style has evolved to keep negative emotions and opinions from surfacing. Thus, one must learn to be skillful at interpreting contextual cues and using ambiguous (indirect) language.

Although it is true that in Malaysia maintaining relationships and indirect communication are also important, there seem to be some major differences between the two cultures. One is the use of a more direct style of communication among Chinese Malaysians, which includes expressing feelings and being more individualistic. K.W. was simply more accustomed to using a direct style and expressing her feelings in front of others.

Another difference is that Malaysia is a multi-cultural and multi-lingual society while Japan is not. Having come into contact with other ethnic groups and languages, K.W. may have a much broader worldview and a looser interpretation of in-groups and out-groups than many of her Japanese peers. Since Japan is considered to be monolingual and mono-cultural, with more narrow interpretations of in-groups,

out-groups and communication styles, it is not difficult to understand why K.W. had trouble communicating with her Japanese peers.

Unfortunately, she still does not feel entirely comfortable with her Japanese classmates even though she has gotten used to their communication style and values. Whether this situation will change remains to be seen.

Regarding the incident at the science office, K.W.'s action was most likely interpreted as aggressive behavior. Moreover, as a student and as a foreigner, K.W. was most likely seen as an out-group member and thus yelling and getting angry may not have been seen as an unusual response. Another possible interpretation is that the office personnel were highly stressed at that particular time and reacted in this way. Yet this incident left an emotional residue of fear and anxiety in K.W. If the Japanese office workers had had more understanding of foreign cultures and communication styles, they might have handled the situation differently. Unfortunately, this "incident" turned into a major mental block for K.W., preventing her from communicating with Japanese staff members.

Positive aspects

Although some aspects of the culture shock phase are still ongoing, K.W. has shown some positive signs of adaptation to life at Kagoshima University. Her Japanese language skills have improved due to the fact that she has had to use the Japanese language more frequently to communicate with her course mates in the majority of her classes. She also feels generally more comfortable with her Japanese peers and in the university environment. So it may be generally safe to say that she is moving toward the "adjustment period" of intercultural adaptation.

Conclusion

During her first year in Tokyo and the first five months at Kagoshima University, K.W. may have gone through some intercultural adaptation stages both in terms of the development of her Japanese language skills and the understanding of the Japanese communication style and culture. Misunderstandings occurred during the crisis stage because of insufficient language skills and cultural differences. Nevertheless, her experiences in the second and third semesters at Kagoshima University show that her overall adjustment seems to be going well as she learns to communicate more smoothly in the Japanese language and interact more with Japanese students.

Yet even though K.W. is making progress in her adjustment to life at Kagoshima University, she still feels she cannot fit in and communicate directly with Japanese peers, a sentiment shared by other international students at Japanese universities. Overcoming these difficulties remains a concern for K.W.

Additional Comments

As was indicated above, K.W., as an international student attending a Japanese university, is not alone in feeling alienated from her Japanese peers. Of course, language barriers are a big issue as well. To learn the Japanese language, especially its writing system, in order to attend classes, is a big undertaking for most international students. Yet international students must make an effort to learn the Japanese language, values and communication style to survive at a Japanese university. On the other hand, Japanese students must also learn how to communicate more directly with foreign students. Efforts are being made at Japanese universities to accommodate foreign students, but K.W.'s experience and that of other foreign students seem to indicate that not enough is being done.

Furthermore, the difficulties international students face at Japanese universities must be viewed more broadly to encompass Japanese society. Japanese society as a whole must become more accepting of diverse people, values and communication styles. It must learn to widen its circle of in-groups and be tolerant of more direct communication styles. If the Japanese universities and society move in this direction, then international students may feel less marginalized.

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