

# 異文化理解を促進するための教師の質問 —英語の謝罪に関する振り返りの事例研究— Teachers' Questions to Promote Intercultural Understanding: A Case Study of Students' Reflections on English Apologies

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## ABSTRACT

多くの大学では留学など学生の海外派遣を含む国際交流が盛んに行われており、発前の学生を対象に講座を開設して留学準備に対応している。講座はいずれも異文化でコミュニケーションを取ることを前提に構成されている。本稿では教師の質問に対する、学習者の振り返りに現れる異文化理解の事例研究を報告する。調査が行われた私立大学の留学準備講座では、日本語とアメリカ英語における謝罪の文化的差異の理解を促すことを目的とし、教師が受講生に質問をした。二週間にわたり行った謝罪の授業の終了後、教師の質問に対し、受講生が日本語で書いた振り返りを山本（2014）の日本版の感受性発達モデルに基づいて分析した。その結果、教師が尋ねる質問の内容により、受講生の異文化理解に関する記述内容に相違があることが判明した。思考を促す授業の実践を求められる教員も、指導内容に基づき、質問を使い分けることで、学習者の深い思考のみならず異文化理解を高める指導に繋がる可能性を示唆する。

In recent years, a growing number of Japanese universities are engaged in cultural exchange, by having their students participate in a variety of study-abroad programs, both short- and long-term. To prepare the participants before their departure, institutions offer courses designed to help them become successful when they communicate with people in the host culture. This article deals with a case study, which focuses on students' intercultural understanding which was revealed in their reflective writing in response to a teacher's

questions. In a study-abroad preparation course taught at a private Japanese university, two weeks were spent on teaching apologies in American English. After students wrote their post-instruction reflections in Japanese regarding the difference between the two apologies, their responses were analyzed based on Yamamoto's (2014) adaptation of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. The results indicated that students' writing varied, ranging from ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages, depending on the types of questions the teacher asked. Implications of this study include the need for teachers to be selective of the kinds of questions to ask in order to deepen, not only the students' thinking, but also their intercultural understanding.

## 1. Introduction

It has been almost a decade since the Japanese government established the Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development in 2011. Factors which the Council identified as necessary for developing global human resources were language and communication skills. While these skills "cannot be measured with a single yardstick," (The Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development, 2011, p. 7), the perception of them as tools seems to undermine the importance of the complexity that involves the social, emotional and cognitive dimensions during interactions in foreign languages. In response to the Council's report, many organizations have boosted language and cultural training, resulting in attempts by higher institutions to increase their overseas program participants. However, experts alert that staying in another country does not guarantee higher proficiency in the language of the host country or even global-mindedness (Jackson, 2018). Furthermore, an element which is not addressed is pragmatics, which concerns what speakers mean by interpreting the intended communicative message of the speaker, depending on the relative distance between speaker and hearer (LoCastro, 2012). In other words, no matter how fluent and proficient one becomes in *speaking* (emphasis added) in a foreign language, this cannot make up for the lack of pragmatics, which is critical when *communicating* (emphasis added) with native speakers.

What is further difficult to measure is one's level of interculturality. There are models which have been

created to understand intercultural competence, one of which is Bennett's (1986, 2011) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). Since this model was originally based on Americans as research subjects, Yamamoto (2014) who argues that it cannot be applied to Japanese subjects, came up with a Japanese adaptation of Bennett's model. Although Bennett (2013) warns that stages in intercultural development does not occur in a linear fashion, he advocates that intercultural development ranges from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. In his model, ethnocentric stages include denial, defense and minimization, in which one's reality is based on their own culture, hence denying those of others. However, the stages comprising ethnorelativism, which are acceptance, adaptation and integration, represent how individuals can go through stages of accepting and even integrating other cultures into their own.

In courses designed to help potential study-abroad students to become successful when communicating in the host culture, a topic which warrants attention is pragmatics, which is not covered in intercultural communication textbooks written in English for Japanese university students (i.e., Vincent, 2017). This is not surprising as pragmatics is not a topic covered in TESOL masters' programs even in the United States (Vásquez & Sharpless, 2012). A practical reason why teaching pragmatics is crucial is because without it, the inability to use pragmatically appropriate language may cause one to appear impolite, rude or offensive (Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, Mahan-Taylor, Morgan, & Reynolds, 1991).

To explore how teaching pragmatics, especially the

differences in Japanese and American English apologies, can help Japanese students enhance their intercultural understanding, a case study was conducted. This article attempts to shed light on students' intercultural understanding that was revealed in their reflective responses to a teacher's questions. In a study-abroad preparation course, which is taught in Japanese at a private Japanese university, two weeks were spent on instructing apologies in American English. Students enrolled in the course represent four different academic faculties and some of them are interested in studying in non-English-speaking countries; therefore, it was decided that instruction would not focus on the production of apologies in English. Rather, the objective was to promote the students' intercultural understanding by raising their pragmatic awareness of apologies in Japanese and American English by performing a skit and engaging in reflective writing tasks. The study addressed following research questions, which are:

RQ1: What kinds of written reflections did the teacher's questions generate?

RQ2: Which types of teachers' questions promote participants' intercultural understanding?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Apologies in Japanese and American English

Speech acts, which are one of the most researched areas in pragmatics, are ways in which people perform specific functions when speaking (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Seven widely researched speech acts include apologies, complaints, compliments, responses to compliments, requests, refusals, and thanks (Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, n.d.).

Apologies serve the purpose of acknowledging and expressing "regret for a fault of offence" (Coulmas, 1981, p. 79). Although apologies appear to be universal, there are cultural differences between languages; hence, it is important to know what the norms are when apologizing in another language. In

American English, people use apologies for saying that they are sorry, explaining the offense, and repairing and maintaining mutual relations (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Besides expressing an apology, there are other strategies, such as acknowledging responsibility, and promising not to repeat the offense. In Japanese apologies, there is reparation of the indebtedness inflicted on others, which are expressed in four categories: performatives (e.g., *ayamaru* or "I apologize"), commands (e.g., *oyurushi kudasai* or "Please forgive me"), descriptions (e.g., *watashi ga warui* or "I am at fault"), and expressives (e.g., *moushiwake nai* or "I have no excuse") (Yamaoka, Makihara, & Ono, 2010).

Studies comparing apologies in the two languages highlight differences in how they are expressed. Findings indicate that Japanese apologies are more elaborate when expressing remorse, as seen in repetitions, such as "Sorry, sorry, I'm very sorry" (Sugimoto, 1997, p. 360) while American use more unelaborated apologies, such as "Sorry about that" (p. 360). This is consistent with Barnlund and Yoshioka's (1990) findings that Japanese prefer more direct and extreme forms of apologies, while their American counterparts' apologies do not. Furthermore, while the Japanese do not explain their actions but adapt more to their interlocutors to whom they apologize, Americans justify their actions and do not adapt their apologies as much as their Japanese counterparts do so (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990).

However, when members of the two cultures apologize to each other, they may become aware of the differences. There could even be misunderstandings because the speakers may not be familiar with the style of communication, which may even lead to judging their interlocutor (Yamada, 1997). For example, when Americans do not offer an apology that the Japanese expect, the Japanese think of Americans as ungrateful. On the other hand, Americans say that the Japanese apologize too much, even when they do not have anything to apologize for (Condon, 1984).

Furthermore, expressions of apologies by Japanese and gratitude by Americans have been found to be used when seeking favors (Lee, Park, Imai & Dolan, 2012).

Although language learners may assume that fluency in a foreign language is sufficient when communicating with speakers of the target language, without the pragmatic knowledge, one may not be able to develop intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1986). Furthermore, when speaking in another language, one may be faced with the decision of which norms to follow (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). In this way, intercultural experience and sensitivity are necessary in order to become a good user of speech acts, including apologies.

## 2.2 Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

Among the models which measure interculturality, Bennett's (1986, 2011) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) is one that has been adapted to measure the intercultural sensitivity of Japanese subjects (Yamamoto, 2014). Bennett (1986) posits that difference is a key concept with which one's intercultural sensitivity begins, and this difference "must be internalized for development to occur" (p. 181).

In DMIS, three stages represent ethnocentrism, which is defined as one's culture being central to reality (Bennett, 2013). They are denial, defense, and minimization. Denial of cultural differences could stem from intentionally isolating or separating oneself from others (Bennett, 2011), which could result in praising one's own culture and denigrating others. Minimization of difference assumes that people recognize superficial cultural differences but unconsciously impose one's cultural norms on others. This minimization is considered to be the midpoint that divides ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism.

Ethnorelativism, in which one's beliefs and behaviors as one way of organizing reality among

many others (Bennett, 2013), has three stages: acceptance, adaptation and integration (Bennett, 1986). Acceptance represents the transition from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism, where cultural differences become acknowledged and respected. In adaptation, one *consciously* (emphasis added) shifts their perspective and *intentionally* (emphasis added) changes their behavior. Integration, which is the ultimate goal in intercultural sensitivity, is said to occur when people have a broader "repertoire of cultural perspectives and behavior to draw on" (Bennett, 2011, p. 11).

While Bennett asserts that the DMIS can be applied to any culture, Yamamoto's (2014) findings revealed that Japanese subjects' patterns do not replicate Bennett's model. She identified other factors which overlap with the six stages in DMIS, which are presented in Figure 1. Yamamoto's stages, *kyozetsu* or refusal, and *touhi* or escape are on the ethnocentric end of the continuum. In refusal, one refuses to acknowledge the cultural differences and contact with the other culture is avoided, while in escape, there is indifference towards the cultural difference to the point where one distances him/herself from the other culture to reduce the discomfort. *Mukouka* or cancellation of difference, which also overlaps with defense, refers to a state of avoidance where one attempts to disregard the differences while being in contact with the other culture. *Aimaika* or blurring, and *sekkyokusei* or positive attitude, parallel minimization. Blurring occurs when one tries not to be aware of differences by blurring the boundaries between cultures. In positive attitude, one actively seeks cultural differences and becomes willing to accept them. Acceptance in DMIS overlaps with *joho* or compromise, where one tries to make compromises to accept differences that cannot be naturally accepted. In *soncho* or respect, the cultural differences are acknowledged and respected. Finally, *naimenka* or internalization, is at the ethnorelative stage where one's experiences prompt him/her to reframe the existing way of thinking.

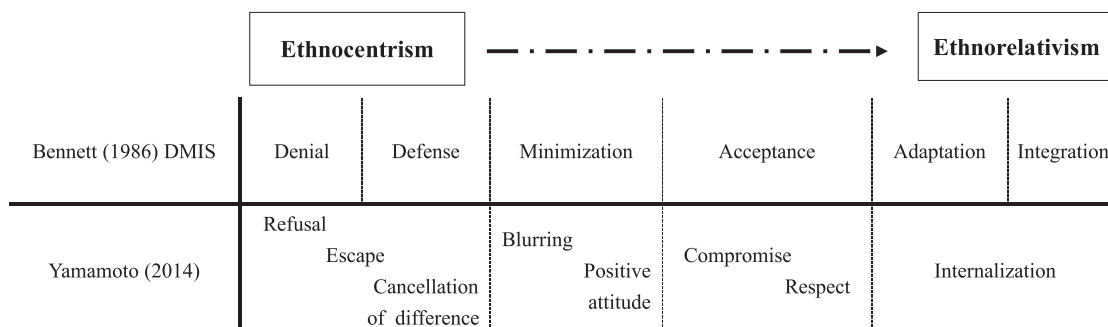


Figure 1. Stages of DMIS from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Adapted from “A developmental approach to training for intercultural sensitivity” by M.J. Bennett, 1986, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 10, p. 182. Copyright 1986 by Pergamon Journals, Ltd. and www. idrinstitute. org; and “Bunkateki sai no keiken no ninchi: Ibunka kanjusei hattatsu moderu ni motozuku nihon teki shiten karano kijutsu [Perception of experiencing cultural difference: A description from the Japanese perspective based on the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity]” by S. Yamamoto, 2014, *Multicultural Relations*, 11, p. 81. Copyright 2014 by Japan Society for Multicultural Relations.

### 2.3 Question-asking in the Classroom

While the commonly held assumption has been that questions are asked to acquire information (Fitneva, 2012), asking questions is an important part of classroom discourse. Teachers’ question, which account for over 90 percent of questions in the classroom (Graesser & Person, 1994), have different roles, such as guiding student learning and thinking, and reflecting on the effectiveness of their teaching as well as student learning. Furthermore, Whittaker (2012) proposes that teachers need to have appropriate question-asking skills.

Bloom’s Taxonomy (1956) has been adapted as a framework for question-asking (Ayudaray & Jacobs, 1997; Morgan & Saxton, 2006). The taxonomy, which is known as a hierarchy of cognitive processes, was originally a classification of educational objectives of what students were expected to learn. Based on the revised Bloom’s Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), according to Morgan and Saxton (2006) low cognitive processes have been adapted for asking the following question types: remembering questions (i.e., questions which start with the 5W + 1H question words that ask basic knowledge level questions); understanding questions (i.e., questions which ask for explanations or check for understanding), applying questions (i.e., questions which ask to apply concepts

to new situations). On the other hand, questions based on high cognitive processes promote deeper thinking (Vogler, 2005). Such questions types include analyzing questions (i.e., questions which break information into parts and find connections), evaluating questions (i.e., questions which ask about one’s opinions about an issue), and creating questions (i.e., questions which ask for alternatives to existing ways).

The conceptualization of Bloom’s Taxonomy is said to represent how cognitive processes progress by level of difficulty. In other words, lower cognitive processes need to be mastered to progress to the higher cognitive processes. However, Barnett and Francis (2012) suggest that high cognitive questions are preferred over low cognitive questions, as the former require students to engage in more complex levels of thinking.

### 3. Methods

This case study, which sheds light on students’ intercultural understanding in their reflective writing to the teacher’s questions, was conducted during two lessons at a private university in Tokyo. Case studies, through which qualitative data is studied, investigate a case “in depth and within its real-world context” (Yin, 2014, p. 16). After pilot lessons were taught in Spring 2018, the lessons were revised one year later, in Spring 2019.

### 3.1 Course Description and Participants

The objective of the course entitled *Study Abroad: Principles and Practice* is for students interested in studying abroad to have an understanding of basic concepts of intercultural communication. Taught in Japanese, the course also covers information aimed at helping students hone their problem-solving skills in what they may experience during their study abroad. Table 1 provides information on the 15-week course syllabus, adapted from a college-level textbook in English, *Speaking of Intercultural Communication* (Vincent, 2017).

The participants enrolled in the course comprised students representing four academic faculties (i.e., economics, arts and literature, law, social sciences) at a private university in Tokyo. In Spring 2018, 16 male and 21 female students agreed to participate in the pilot study. In Spring 2019, the participants consisted of 11 male and 25 female students from whom the researcher obtained consent to participate.

During the first week, selection of the students involved a two-fold screening process: (1) writing a short essay in English on studying abroad, and (2) submission of their CASEC scores. The CASEC, or *Computerized Assessment System for English Communication*, is a commercial norm-referenced test developed in Japan, and prospective first-year students at the university need to take this test prior to

matriculation. While the primary purpose of CASEC is for placement in English classes offered by the four academic faculties, students who wish to enroll in the course are required to get a minimum score of 600, which is roughly equivalent to CEFR B1.

### 3.2 Teaching Procedure and Analysis of Data

Before introducing speech acts, the teacher gave the following background information. First, she talked about her own experience of how she failed to communicate effectively as she was not familiar with speech acts. In addition, to give students an idea of how native speakers of English apologize, the teacher showed a video clip of an American commercial which features apologies (Cause Marketing, 2017). Furthermore, social status (S) and emotional distance (D) between interlocutors, and intensity of the infraction (I), which indicate the level of politeness when apologizing (Brown & Levinson, 1987) were introduced as how one apologizes can vary depending on whom one apologizes to and what the apology is for.

In week six, the participants made a skit in Japanese based on an English newspaper column, written by an American university professor in Japan. This story, in Figure 2, emphasized cultural differences between Japanese and American apologies.

Table 1  
Course Syllabus

Week	Content	Week	Content
1	Screening for student selection	9	Intercultural competence
2	Communication	10	Intercultural relationships
3	Culture	11	Former exchange student lecture
4	Nonverbal communication	12	Culture shock
5	Communicating clearly - speech acts (1)	13	English as a global language
6	Communicating clearly - speech acts (2)	14	Talking about Japan in English
7	Culture and cognition	15	Review
8	Exchange student guest lecture		

The title of a 1976 hit song by Elton John declares, "Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word." The tune came into my head recently as I was pondering the irritation of an American acquaintance I'll call Agnes. A long-term resident of Japan, Agnes is very happy here. It is rare to hear her express annoyance at anything for which cultural differences might be the source. And yet a few weeks ago she was well and truly fed up.

Agnes had planned to take a summer vacation and cleared it four months in advance with the supervisor. Another colleague, a Japanese man I'll call Mr. Kikuchi, had planned his own vacation similarly well ahead of time and also received approval. Their time away overlapped by a few days. During this period when both were unavailable, a small matter unexpectedly cropped up, which would normally be handled by one or both of them. Accordingly, another colleague handled it and the issue was resolved without much difficulty. Agnes and Mr. Kikuchi were notified about it in a matter-of-fact, rather than reproachful, manner.

Agnes's exasperation stemmed from Mr. Kikuchi's response to the situation. From his vacation destination, he wrote an e-mail of several paragraphs to several colleagues, CC'ing it to Agnes as well. It was an abject expression of remorse for his inability to deal with the matter due to his trip, and for therefore having to impose upon other colleagues. As Agnes read it, she felt that she must write a comparable apology.

But she couldn't do it. She felt that she had nothing to apologize for, having done nothing remiss or irresponsible. And yet Agnes felt pressure from Mr. Kikuchi's e-mail gnawing at her peace of mind so she finally composed an email of her own expressing gratitude for the assistance of her colleagues. Then she tacked on a minimal apology. Begrudgingly.

*Figure 2. Cultural Conundrums: The apology obstacle - Cultural differences in saying sorry. Reprinted from "The Japan News" by K. Elwood (2013, September 17). Copyright 2013 by The Japan News / Yomiuri Shimbun and K. Elwood. Reprinted with permission.*

The objective of the activity was to raise the students' level of understanding that people who are speakers of another language have different thoughts and values regarding apologies, through role playing. In intercultural communication training, role playing is an effective method as it resembles situations which are relevant to participants' daily lives (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994). The procedure for making the skit was as follows: After reading the column written in English, students worked in groups of three and wrote the skit in Japanese. Each student in the group played a role (i.e., a student each for the roles of Agnes, Kikuchi, and one student alternating between the narrator, supervisor and colleague) then performed their skit in Japanese, their mother tongue, as the activity was not focused on the production of apologies in English. After performing their skits, students wrote their reflection in Japanese based on two questions the teacher asked. The researcher translated the reflections into English, and analyzed them based on the themes using Yamamoto's (2014) framework. In this study, themes refer to an extended phrase which explain what the data mean (Saldaña, 2016).

#### 4. Results and Discussion (Spring 2018)

This section introduces the participants' written reflections in Japanese to the teachers' questions from Spring 2018, followed by a discussion on the results. The participants responded to the following two questions:

Q1: Why did Mr. Kikuchi apologize?

Q2: Why did Agnes feel it was not necessary to apologize?

The purpose of these questions was for participants to analyze the apologies between the Kikuchi and Agnes. Q1 was a low cognitive question, which checked the participants' understanding about Japanese apologies. Q2 was a high cognitive analyzing question which required students to first interpret Agnes's apology and compare it to Kikuchi's. The first question was related to Kikuchi's apologies which were perceived by participants as a reflection of his guilty feelings, that they could identify with. Student A's writing shows that Japanese people apologize for the inconveniences they have caused and not for their behavior (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994).

[Student A]

*“Even if Mr. Kikuchi had his vacation pre-approved, he sent a polite email to those who work closely with him because he felt responsible for the inconveniencing others.”*

On the other hand, there were longer responses to question two, which asked about Agnes’s apologies. The following responses, which explain why Agnes should have apologized, generated the theme of Agnes having to conform to Japanese norms in general and in the workplace. Although they do not criticize Agnes for not sending the email, they indirectly state why she should have sent one.

[Student B]

*“Because Agnes works in Japan, rather than insisting on her values, it is necessary to have the mentality of ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans.’”*

[Student C]

*“Because Agnes is the one who lives in Japan, it is necessary for her to internalize Japanese culture and thinking. The reason for apologizing may go against her thinking, but since this is the Japanese way of thinking, I believe it is common courtesy to apologize.”*

[Student D]

*“When working for a Japanese company, ‘workplace manners’ should have higher priority than ‘intercultural understanding.’”*

Since the DMIS and Yamamoto’s (2014) framework refer to developing sensitivity to cultural differences, a brief comment will be made regarding Kikuchi’s apology. As seen in Student A’s writing, participants seem to support him as they identified with his feelings (i.e., feeling guilty for inconveniencing his colleagues) and his behavior (i.e., not performing his duties while he was on vacation).

The second question prompted responses which interpreted Agnes’s intention behind her lack of apology, which led to condemning her, requiring her to adopt Japanese norms under the pretext of intercultural understanding. The participants’ writing is based on

their perception and interpretation of differences between the two apologies, through which they write how strongly they felt about Agnes violating the Japanese norms of apologies. The comments reflect Yamamoto’s (2014) stages of escape and cancellation of difference. Students B and C emphasize that Agnes’s country of residence (i.e., Japan) should dictate her norms of thoughts and behavior and do not take into consideration any cultural differences. Furthermore, Student D expands on this idea that the norms of the workplace, regardless of country, should take precedence regardless of where Agnes is coming from.

There were exceptions, however, like the following comments which supported Agnes’s idea on apologies. In hindsight, comments like that by Student E could have been what the teacher expected. Student F’s comment, which expresses empathy, seems to be the result of her playing Agnes, which could be a positive effect of the role playing.

[Student E]

*“Reading this article gave me a wider perspective by learning a way of thinking like Agnes’s. There is nothing wrong with what she did and how she thinks. Therefore, we can and should probably feel more positive by expressing gratitude like she did.”*

[Student F]

*“Before I played Agnes, I thought that she should have sent the email. But when I started thinking about her feelings and changed my thinking in order to be Agnes, it may not have been necessary to send the email.”*

However, when feeling a sense of violation, the participants’ writing reflects their “(subjective) perception of communication styles rather than by an objective examination of them” (Kowner, 2002, p. 357). Although their idea of trying to mold Agnes could be related to their willingness to conform to a host culture when they study abroad, the perceptions could be magnified since they may not have experienced any cultural conflict in a real-life situation



yet. Furthermore, it is questionable whether they could anticipate the discomfort Agnes felt as they may not have been in her shoes yet. Another factor leading to the results for the second question could be operational, regarding the timing since the students were asked to write their reflection during the last ten minutes of class. As they had less time to process their thinking, their comments may have become more reactive towards Agnes. By taking a closer look at the responses from Spring 2018, it became inevitable for the teacher to revisit the questions.

## 5. Results and Discussion (Spring 2019)

After seeing that the analyzing question (Q2) from 2018 seemed to promote more ethnocentric thinking, it became necessary to review the questions carefully. Although high cognitive questions are closely connected with deep thinking (Matsushita, 2018), the teacher needed to understand how participants made sense between the two apologies, to ensure that the reflective writing activity does not reinforce stereotypes or biases of people from other backgrounds. Hence, the questions for the reflective writing were revised in Spring 2019.

Revised Q1: What is your understanding of how Mr. Kikuchi and Agnes perceive apologies?

Revised Q2: How would you explain to Agnes, the American, about Japanese apologies?

Revised Q1 was intended to be an understanding question, a low cognitive question which checked participants' understanding about the difference between apologies by Kikuchi and Agnes. However, as seen in the following comments, the writers' responses indicate their analyses and comparison of the two apologies.

[Student G]

*"I felt that Mr. Kikuchi valued outcomes, while Agnes could have felt that processes were important. Even if Mr. Kikuchi got advance permission for his vacation, it resulted in his apology caused by the*

*inconvenience inflicted on his colleagues. However, for Agnes, no matter what the results were, because she received approval and was thinking of the process, she probably did not understand his apology."*

[Student H]

*"Mr. Kikuchi may perceive apologies as the lubricant that makes personal relationships smoother, which is why he may apologize even when he is not at fault. In contrast, Agnes perceives that apologies are made when one is responsible and needs to ask for forgiveness. This, however, could be the reason why she was reluctant to apologize because she did not feel responsible. I don't think either one of them are wrong; it just depends on one's cultural background and the ability to put oneself in the position of the other person so that misunderstandings do not happen."*

Although expressed in different ways, the writers tried to make sense of the two apologies. The writing reflects Yamamoto's (2014) positive attitude and compromise, as they adjusted their thinking by trying to come to terms with accommodating cultural differences which they would not be able to accept naturally. For a few participants, the focus was on the difference in the level of responsibility the apologizer felt. Student H stated that in Japanese, the apologizer offers apologies to make relationships smoother even if he/she is not responsible for the infraction, but in American English, the apologizer would only apologize if s/he were the responsible party. On the other hand, Student G tried to make sense of the two apologies by chronologically analyzing how they manifested (i.e., Agnes does feel not responsible because she asked to take vacation before the incident happened, while Kikuchi feels responsible because the incident happened as a result of him taking his vacation). Consequently, Revised Q1 has led students to think that neither apology is better than the other, involving a deeper level of analysis, without judgment or criticism toward the other culture.

Revised Q2 dealt with explaining to Agnes about Japanese apologies. This was another high cognitive

question where participants had to create, or come up with a way to explain about Japanese apologies, instead of criticizing Agnes for not knowing about them. As seen in the Spring 2018 comments, participants touched on cultural differences, without specifically explaining what they referred to. Student G's brief comment which is a contrast to her detailed response to Revised Q1.

[Student G]

*"I feel it is natural for Agnes to wonder why she has to apologize, because of differences in cultures and values."*

This seems ironical because mentioning that there are cultural differences without giving details seems prevalent among high-context cultures, like Japan, in how people communicate (Hall, 1976). This involves sharing information which does not depend on explicit explanations using written or spoken language. If the cultural difference is not explained, however, Agnes may feel more confused.

The following comments explicitly mention apologies in the context of Japanese workplaces. To be able to provide an explanation about the differences, the writers seem to have reached Yamamoto's (2014) stages of respect and internalization, where the cultural differences are acknowledged, respected and accepted. While Student I focused on explaining to Agnes where Kikuchi was coming from, Student J expressed compassion towards Agnes's confusion.

[Student I]

*"Regarding Japanese apologies, I would explain to Agnes that she was not being rude. If anything, she had nothing to do with the incident, so there was no need for her to apologize or express her gratitude. However, in Japan, there is the sense of how wrong it is for one to enjoy him/herself, or how great you are if you work all the time. Because Mr. Kikuchi took his vacation, I believe he probably felt guilty for putting others through the trouble on his behalf."*

[Student J]

*"In Japan, even though one may not be at fault, it*

*seems common for a company staff to express words of apology when something goes wrong. For us Japanese, apologies come quite naturally, but those from other countries may wonder why we go out of our way to apologize when we haven't done anything wrong. While you are in Japan, you may find difficulty with some things, but I hope you understand that there are different values!"*

The Spring 2019 responses indicate that participants' writing reflected Yamamoto's (2014) stages which are more ethnorelative, such as positive attitude, compromise, respect and internalization. Although the degrees to which participants expressed their intercultural understanding varied, as some have struggled in their writing more than others, it appears that they felt that acceptance of cultural differences was crucial because they were potential study abroad students.

Instead of wording Revised Q2 in a way that would ask participants for their value judgment, the teacher attempted to encourage students to internalize the two apologies. For that reason, the teacher decided to have the participants reflect on the role-playing, regardless of whose role they played, and assume the position of the hypothetical expert in the Japanese culture. Although they may not have the experience of working with a non-Japanese co-worker, the activity gave them an opportunity to hypothetically think of and come up with an explanation about apologies in the workplace. In addition, the writing on Revised Q2 seems to ask Agnes to respect the Japanese culture in an unimposing and non-threatening way.

In summary, responses to both Revised Q1 and Q2 indicate that written reflections show how the participants and their intercultural understanding made progress on the DMIS continuum. The results show that the teacher's questions can have a positive effect on students' intercultural understanding, as seen in the Spring 2019 comments. An added benefit that the 2019 participants had time to process their thinking, as they were to complete the reflective writing for homework

and submit it a week later.

## 6. Conclusion

This article introduced a case study on university students' intercultural understanding, which was seen in their reflective writing. It features how questions a teacher of a study-abroad preparation course asked have an effect on students' understanding of Japanese and American English apologies.

In terms of Research Question 1, which pertains to the kinds of written reflections generated by the teacher's questions, the participants' writing indicated that the responses varied, depending on the way the teacher worded the questions. From Spring 2018, Question 1 prompted the participants to identify with Kikuchi's apologies. Regarding Question 2, Agnes's lack of apology which prompted her to conform to Japanese norms reflects Yamamoto's (2014) ethnocentric stages of escape and cancellation of difference. In Spring 2019, however, for Revised Q1 and Q2, participants wrote their reflections which indicate that their intercultural sensitivity has progressed through the ethnorelative stages on Yamamoto's framework. The reflective writing from 2019 appears unimposing, non-threatening, and less judgmental than those from 2018.

As for Research Question 2, it became apparent that the teacher's high cognitive questions do promote participants' intercultural understanding more than low cognitive questions do so. However, that also depends on how the teacher words the questions. Question 2 from 2018 was intended to be an evaluating question, which was originally meant to elicit responses with the hope that participants would understand where Agnes was coming from. However, it turned out that the question had the opposite effect, of participants criticizing Agnes. In 2019, Revised Q1 and Q2, which were both high cognitive questions, generated responses which promoted the participants' intercultural understanding as intended.

A pedagogical implication of this study is for teachers to have basic question-asking skills, regardless of what they teach. This is especially crucial for a study abroad preparation course, as seen in this case study, because courses of this nature strongly reflect the instructors' values. Question-asking should be part of their teacher training as well as their ongoing professional development. Thompson (1997) warns that the importance of question-asking skills may be underestimated by teachers, as there could be the assumption that the skill that can only be picked up by trial and error. He also emphasizes the importance for teachers to be aware of the purposes their questions serve and how they could also do a disservice. The comment deserves attention by teachers, especially those responsible for study-abroad preparation courses and intercultural communication. This is because random questions without deep thinking could reinforce stereotypes or biases towards people of other cultures, which is not the intended objective of such courses. Finally, as we live in a time where social media exposes us to posts promoting negative ideas which target people of other cultures, education has the responsibility of discouraging students from posting messages which may not be conducive to intercultural understanding and this could start in the classroom by having teachers ask appropriate questions.

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