3 Tackling international controversies in virtual exchange

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Abstract

Since 2000, I have been coordinating a web-based Virtual Exchange (VE) project, *Project Ibunka*. *Ibunka* means different cultures in Japanese. It aims to provide opportunities for authentic interaction among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners all over the world. By the end of our last project, *Project Ibunka 2018*, more than 6,600 students from 22 different countries had participated in this project. The Asia-Pacific countries, such as Japan, China, Taiwan, South Korea, Indonesia, the US, Argentina, and others, have always played an active role in *Project Ibunka*. Though not so often, participants had taken up international controversies, such as territorial disputes, wartime responsibility, compensation for war victims and survivors, and others. Fortunately, the messages posted did not result in fruitless debate among participants. These issues can sometimes be seen to be too sensitive to be taken up in VE. However, the study and discussion of such issues are inevitable if we are to promote mutual understanding especially in the Asia-Pacific region. In my article, I would like to show how VE language teachers and students can take an acceptable, open-minded stance in VE, free from any stereotypes and prejudices. Teachers should set a goal of multicultural understanding and encourage students to gain insights using conflict resolution approaches. They also should push students to reconsider their own values from the standpoint of basic human needs.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Episode 1

Japan has had a peace clause in its constitution since the end of World War II. Since then, citizens have formed various grass-root-level peace movements. Among them, those for the elimination of nuclear weapons are most widespread and persistent, since Japan is the only nation ever to experience atomic bombings. When the International Janusz Korczak Conference was held in Japan in 2010, a group of Japanese university students reported their experience of visiting India. They appealed for a nuclear-weapon-free world to the Indian audience there.

The dramatic recitation of an English translation of the poem, *Umashimenkana (Let us be midwives*, in English[2]), was the highlight of the event:

> Let us be midwives
> It was night time in the basement of a building, now in ruins.
> Victims of the atomic bomb crammed into the dark room.
> There wasn't even one single candle.
> The overwhelming smell of fresh blood, the stench of death,
> The nauseating odor of humanity, the moaning…
> And miraculously, out of all of this, came a voice: "the baby is coming"!
> In this hellish place, at this very moment
> A young woman had gone into labor!
> In the dark, without even one single match, what could be done?

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2. http://www.marieauxiliatrice.catholique.fr/Opening-the-door-to-new-life

Suddenly, a raised voice said: "I am a midwife, I will deliver".
It was the voice of a seriously injured woman, who was groaning with pain a minute before.
And so it was that in this hell a new life saw the day,
And so it was, that this midwife covered in blood died before the new day dawned.
I want to bring forth new life,
I want to bring forth new life,
Even if this means losing my own life.

At the end of the session, one of the Indian students in the audience raised his hand and asked, "Was Hiroshima-Nagasaki the right consequence of Pearl Harbor?". The Japanese university students on the stage remained silent. They were not able to reply to him. Why?

1.2. Episode 2

Since 2000, I have been carrying out a VE project every year. It is a web-based online discussion forum where English learners from different cultural backgrounds meet and discuss. In 2010, one of the South Korean students posted a message titled, "Two controversies between Korea and Japan". She referred to the territorial dispute between Korea and Japan, and the compensation for the sex slave survivor from World War II, and concluded, "I hope the controversy will be settled as fast as possible, so the relationship between both peoples will be better than now. I think that we, Korean and Japanese, can be good friends, can't we?".

I posted a message with the title, "Yes! We, Japanese and Korean, can be good friends" as a reply to her. Following me, many Japanese students replied to her with a favorable attitude toward Korea. She made the following reply to the Japanese students' postings: "Although both nations can be the best of partners in the global community, we blame each other. It's really time consuming and worthless. In an attempt to be good neighbors, we should try to understand each other. I really hope that we'll be good neighbors and partners".

Until the time of writing (2019), the relationship between Korea and Japan has deteriorated more than ever and it still does not show any signs of resolution. How can VE language teachers handle political controversies like this?

1.3.   Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) discussed in EFL/ESL

Byram (1997) outlined two attitudes we take when we encounter groups with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds: the 'tourist' and the 'sojourner'. The 'tourist' can travel around scenic areas for sightseeing. Although the experience might enrich him/her, it will never change him/her fundamentally. On the other hand, the 'sojourner' moves to a foreign region and leads a life temporarily there. According to Byram (1997), "although tourism has had major economic consequences, it is the sojourner who produces effects on society which challenge its unquestioned and unconscious beliefs, behaviors and meaning, and whose own beliefs, behaviors and meanings are in turn challenged and expected to change" (p. 1). Byram (1997) referred to this internalized knowledge of the sojourner as ICC. Newton (2016, p. 5) suggested the following five strategies for language teachers so they can cultivate learners' ICC:

- situate language in real communicative events/genre/tasks;

- start with self;

- encourage experiential learning and encourage learners to put learning into practice beyond the classroom;

- provide opportunities for learners to compare experiences and reflect on what the experiences felt like, what judgments arise, and for both feelings and thinking, why they feel/think in this way; and

- guide learners to construct understandings: Replace transmission of cultural facts with discovery learning.

Mainly based on Byram (1997), Newton's (2016) suggestions above show how teachers can "prepare students for becoming competent intercultural communicators" (p. 1) in existing EFL courses. The Japanese university students of Episode 1, absorbed in the mission of telling the tragedy of a-bomb victims to people outside Japan, did not study much about how foreigners think of nuclear weapons and react to their appeal. Although they had known the fact that the Japanese had been criticized for ignoring their responsibility as aggressors during World War II by the Asia-Pacific countries, the Indian gentleman's inquiry was completely out of their expectation. In short, they lacked something in their ICC.

Language teachers often shelve international controversies like the ones we saw in Episode 2. Political decisions and cultures are inseparable. The fact that they cannot maintain a healthy atmosphere without shelving political matters also suggests that their students can only be travelers, not sojourners. What should VE language teachers do to bring our learners to the level of sojourners? How can they have learners challenge their own "beliefs, behaviors, and meanings" as Byram (1997, p. 1) said? One of the main purposes of second or foreign language learning is the development of understanding of the cultural diversity that exists in the modern world. However, how can we achieve this goal? Few proposals have been made in VE research to create a coherent roadmap for bridging the political and cultural gaps among the participants although VE has been promoted as an international interaction among students. In this article, I would like to propose that VE language teachers should set a goal of multicultural understanding based on conflict resolution theorizing. It will enrich the current notion of ICC both for students and teachers. Teachers also should push students to reflect on their own values from the standpoint of basic human needs.

2.   Multiculturalism

On September 13, 2007, the general assembly of the United Nations (UN) adopted the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Although UN Declarations do not have any legal binding force under international law, "they

represent the dynamic development of international legal norms and reflect the commitment of states to move in certain directions, abiding by certain principles". The declaration bears significant meaning as the UN acknowledges explicitly that indigenous peoples' are different, specifically that they have ownership rights to their culture, identity, language, labor, health, education, and others. Kymlicka (2007) referred to this global trend toward "the (re-) internationalization of state-minority relations" as "multiculturalism" (p. 1) .

We should note Kymlicka (2007) used the word, '(re-)internationalization', not *internationalization*. The prefix '(re-)' implies that there was another internationalization movement and it was not so successful. During the early decades of the twentieth century, European empires that encompassed many ethnocultural communities fell apart resulting in several smaller countries with newly defined borders. Some of the same ethnic communities were divided up into several countries. We found, for example, Germans living in Poland and Polish living in Germany, Hungarians living in Romania and Romanians living in Hungary, and others. They were called 'irredentist minorities'. The states at that time made treaties to protect the rights of minor fellow citizens left outside of their borders. We can define this as *the first* internationalization of state-minority relations.

The issues of irredentist minorities gave some states reasons to wage war, i.e. World War II. The Holocaust in Europe was a form of ethnic cleansing and resulted in a tremendous number of casualties. After WWII, the first internationalization of state-minority relations was replaced with the granting of universal human rights, irrespective of any ethnic backgrounds. Since all citizens have equal human rights, the states considered they did not have to respect specific minority rights anymore. This idea was called assimilation. The UN and most of the post-WWII states seemed to approve it since "there were no references to minority rights in either the Charter of the United Nations, or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948". (Kymlicka, 2007, p. 30)

Attitudes toward indigenous peoples and minorities started to change in the 1980's. The UN began to revise its assimilation policies into new ones that

officially acknowledge specific minority rights, including land ownership, language policy, and customary laws and others. In the 1990's, the emergence of new political issues brought by the end of the Cold War, such as regional conflicts, increased mobility of people, the vast number of refugees, and others, furthered the tendency. Thus, state-minority relations, which had once left the political arena, were *re*-internationalized. Multiculturalism is "understood as a concept that is both guided and constrained by a foundational commitment to principles of individual freedom and equality" (Kymlicka, 2007, p. 7). Thus, we can see multiculturalism as being an outgrowth of post-war universal human rights.

Multiculturalism has a significant impact on ICC and VE. Language teachers often underestimate the diversities among partner students, shelve existing political issues, and pursue collaborative products based on the so-called, big 'C' cultures (European Union, 2017). The concept of multiculturalism may be one solution students can look at to understand and use to resolve current international conflicts within a VE context. If we can elevate VE to a multicultural level, learners may be able to progress more easily from the state of the tourist into that of the sojourner.

Kimmel (1994) proposed five levels of cultural awareness that characterize the subjective culture we have personally: (1) cultural chauvinism, (2) ethnocentrism, (3) tolerance, (4) minimization, and (5) understanding. They are sequentially arranged levels. As the levels rise, socialization and metacognition are augmented gradually.

For ease of explanation, I set up the following four features:

- [± comparison] whether the individual has compared his/her culture with others and is aware of other cultures, or not;

- [± non-C1[3] superiority] whether the individual favors the group he/she belongs to and judges different cultures undesirable, or not;

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3. C1: First culture, i.e. home country's culture, usually the culture of the country or the area where a person was born and spent a long time.

- [± real-life interaction] whether the individual has experienced much interaction with non-C1 cultures in his/her real-life, or not; and

- [± acknowledgment of non-C1 idiosyncrasies] whether the individual acknowledges the idiosyncrasies of non-C1, or not.

With these features, the following Table 1 shows how the five levels differ.

Table 1. Five levels of cultural awareness

	Comparison	Non-C1 superiority	Real-life interaction	Acknowledgment of non-C1 idiosyncrasies
(1) cultural chauvinism	—	—	—	—
(2) ethnocentrism	+	—	—	—
(3) tolerance	+	—	+	—
(4) minimization	+	+	+	—
(5) understanding	+	+	+	+

At the level of (1) cultural chauvinism, the individual, like a child, learns little about their C1 and non-C1, but has strong confidence in their own C1. At the level of (2) ethnocentrism, they can compare C1 and non-C1 through socialization – "a wider range of symbolic interactions" (Kimmel, 1994, pp. 189-190) – and formal education, but admire nothing other than their own C1. At level (3) tolerance, they have already accumulated some knowledge about their C1 and the non-C1, and experienced real-life interactions with non-C1 people, but still admire their C1 more than others. They often try "to educate, legislate, develop, or coerce" (Kimmel, 1994, pp. 189-190) non-C1 people into adopting the same ways of thinking and behavior as their own. At level (4) minimization, they consider the cultural differences among partners are negligible but underestimate the idiosyncrasies of each culture. Kimmel (1994) defined level (5) understanding as follows:

"[i]ndividuals at this level have discovered (usually through mediated intercultural experiences) that some of their own categories, plans, and

rules are cognitively and perceptually arbitrary and that 'appropriate' behavior and feelings and 'realistic' thinking in intercultural situations are not necessarily givens" (pp. 189-190).

This level is entirely compatible with ICC and multiculturalism.

Looking back at the Japanese university students and if they can be positioned at level (2) ethnocentrism, although they seldom show or insist on the superiority of their C1, they have little experience of real-life interaction with non-C1 people. My VE project honors the vast interaction among students with various cultural backgrounds. However, it still cannot provide a rational means to handle international political issues among partners. It can be judged to be in level (4) minimization, and falls short of level (5) understanding.

Multicultural understanding should be set up as a goal of VE, but how can we achieve it? Conflict resolution strategies will give us insights.

3.   Conflict resolution

Conflict resolution is the formal or informal process that seeks a peaceful resolution to a dispute among two or more opposing parties. Burton (1972) made the following statement about conflict:

"[c]onflict, like sex, is an essential creative element in human relationships. It is the means to change, the means by which our social values of welfare, security, justice and opportunities for personal development can be achieved. If suppressed, as is often the case in traditional societies where conflict is settled according to traditionally accepted norms, society becomes static. In highly industrialized communities, rates of technological change are rapid and acceleration, and consequently conflict is widespread and fundamental. There is conflict between the individual and society, between privileged and

> underprivileged, between managers and managed, and between those possessing different ideological values. But they are neither to be deprecated nor feared. The existence of a flow of conflict is the only guarantee that the aspiration of society will be attained. Indeed, conflict, like sex, is to be enjoyed" (pp. 137-138).

Here, we should note the following two points: (1) current technological developments mean conflict can affect our life directly from many different angles, and (2) if we can utilize international controversies to attain 'the aspiration of society' (Burton, 1972), they can become the means to multicultural understanding.

Fisher (1994) suggested two "generic principles deemed effective for addressing protracted social conflicts between identity groups. [... They are] the value base of scientific humanism and the approach of planned social change" (p. 48). In what Fisher (1994) calls 'scientific humanism', two notions are significant: 'shared experience' and 'basic human needs'. If statements, responses, comments, criticisms, and others do not accompany any shared experience, they are not prospective. Substantial interaction and cooperative processes among groups involved are essential. It also finds value in basic human needs. The idea originates in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. The hierarchy takes the shape of a pyramid, and arranges five needs from bottom to top based on the degree of cognitive growth: (1) physiological needs, (2) safety needs, (3) belonging and love needs, (4) esteem needs, and (5) self-actualization needs. The approaches based on basic human needs are of a win-win (or, non-zero-sum) nature. They should pursue mutually beneficial endings, not win-lose (or, zero-sum) ones. Democracy, to improve human welfare through shared experience, and freedom, to ensure individuals' development both physically and spiritually, i.e. basic human needs, often form the base of conflict resolution theorizing.

'Planned social change' is a collaborative process where all parties involved feel it necessary to modify their social structure and agree to do this. When social

change is driven simply by market forces or undemocratic political authorities, they are considered unplanned. The planned ones should bring reformation of the fundamental arrangements of living, and reflect shared values, norms, roles, institutions, and others. Although it is collaborative, it requires individual consciousness for change.

> "Change occurs most effectively when individuals are involved in participative processes that apply knowledge to their situation, examine existing values and attitudes, and allow for the emergence of new norms and institutions" (Fisher, 1994, p. 49).

Conflict resolution approaches offer many practical insights for VE language teachers. They should implement the following four: (1) ensuring freedom of expression so that students can express any messages they wish without too much consideration of others, (2) democratizing the learning environment, allowing students to make decisions through discussion, (3) pushing students' win-win type of resolutions that satisfy basic human needs of all the participants, and (4) forming teachers' consensus about conflict resolution in advance.

Based on the four premises above, VE language teachers should promote the opportunities for students to talk frankly and constructively so that they can reach win-win types of resolutions. However, planned social change among students is hard to obtain in educational settings, although it is a part of multicultural understanding and conflict resolution. It requires professional skills of diplomacy and time for consensus-building on both sides.

VE language teachers should encourage students to acknowledge their individual consciousness for the need of change. This will serve as an intermediate step to the goal of the planned social change. However, this is not an easy task. Any time people make an overt criticism of political decisions or the C1 there are chances of conflict developing. Teachers need another educational strategy to facilitate students' reviewing of their own values. I would like to suggest nurturing students' naive sentiments for basic human needs.

4.   Nurturing naive sentiments
for basic human needs

History textbooks often have a long list of past wars and devote most of the pages to the detailed description of them. We tend to consider humans having genetic predispositions to violence and war. However, we can also find many scholastic works that try to deny this and give evidence of peaceable cultures and societies. According to these works, behind some of the major institutional changes, such as slavery abolition, empowerment of women, elimination of racism, and others, ordinary citizens' naive sentiments often assumed a crucial role. For example, Swanson (2013) made the following description about the naive sentiments in the slavery abolition movement of the nineteenth century:

> "[t]his was a movement that made ending the slave trade and slavery a moral cause, a cause to be sacrificed for on behalf of distant, unknown people very different from oneself. It was a movement of public pressure. It did not use violence and it did not use voting. Most people had no right to vote. Instead it used so-called naive sentiments and the active ignoring of the supposed mandates of our supposed human nature" (p. 21).

The naive sentiments of ordinary people, i.e. the belief that we should end slavery because slaves are so poor and in misery, were the driving force of the ending of slavery. Further, the beliefs were instinctively understandable and had the potential to appeal globally despite cultural differences.

Swanson (2013) and other peace study scholars elevate the idea of slavery abolition to war abolition. They consider war itself can be abolished as slavery was. Swanson (2013) denied the possibility of a *just war*. He even denied the two types of wars authorized by the UN Charter: defensive wars and UN-authorized wars. Since these two types of wars threaten our basic human needs, they cannot be exceptions.

> "We must not oppose one war on the grounds that it isn't being run well or isn't as proper as some other war. We must not focus entirely on the

harm wars do to the aggressors. We must acknowledge the victims. We must see one-sided slaughters for what they are and grow appropriately outraged. A 'good war' must sound to all of us, like it sounds to me, as no more possible than a benevolent rape or philanthropic slavery or virtuous child abuse" (Swanson, 2013, pp. 156-157).

Even a few military superpowers cannot guarantee their citizens' perfect physical security by themselves. The bankruptcy of one private company in NY caused a chain of economic crises around the globe. Environmental issues such as global warming, deforestation, desertification, extreme weather, and others, extend across borders. We need cooperation, not competition among us. From these ideas comes the notion of common security, "[n]o one is safe until all are safe" (Shifferd, Swanson, & Hiller, 2018, p. 6). It also reflects our naive sentiments for basic human needs.

The idea of basic human needs has a global appeal. VE language teachers should give sufficient learning materials and information from the past and the present that can nurture students' naive sentiments for acknowledging basic human needs. When students confront international controversies in VE, their naive sentiments will give them opportunities to challenge their fixed beliefs and behaviors. This might give them some courage to take a step toward planned social change in the long run.

5.   Conclusion

In this chapter, the need for enriching the concept of ICC is shown for students and VE language teachers. Multiculturalism that leads to an understanding among people is the key to this endeavor. We should acknowledge the idiosyncrasies of minorities, not minimize them. Since political resolutions of each state are closely related to the culture therein, it is inevitable to see clashes on political matters. We should not shelve political issues from our students' online discussions but rather offer recourse to conflict resolution theorizing if we see clashes, and have students seek solutions among themselves democratically. Although their final

solutions might not reflect each participant's state policies, we should encourage them to arrive at what sincerely reflects their naive sentiments considering basic human needs. Naive sentiments have the potential to give way to planned social change in our students.

Since students from different cultural backgrounds can meet in VE projects, they offer good opportunities to see cultural diversity. However, VE language teachers should also organize a learning environment where students can notice that some values, specifically, basic human needs, are global, and, based on this understanding, offer opportunities for them to reconsider their own values. These values have the potential to go beyond cultural differences. To this end, teachers cannot shelve international controversies, where different value systems clash.

In my VE project, *Project Ibunka*, there are three main discussion themes, i.e. (1) school life, (2) cultures, and (3) social issues – world peace. This sequence facilitates students to proceed from big 'C' to small 'c' cultures gradually. During the project, I provide examples of successful international collaboration that might help our students tackle controversies and picture a peaceable world. They are given for the purpose of nurturing students' naive sentiment. In fact, the amount of input is still not sufficient for multicultural understanding. VE language teachers need to collaboratively accumulate and organize both the information and their expertise for this.

I would like to conclude my chapter by offering the following reply to the Indian inquirer in Episode 1 above, *is Hiroshima-Nagasaki the right consequence of Pearl Harbor?*

> "We, of course, do not admire the fact that the Japanese Navy once attacked Pearl Harbor which resulted in the death of a lot of American citizens. The victims were sure to be thinking why did they have to die due to the sudden military attack of Japan".

> "You can say, 'Hiroshima-Nagasaki was the right consequence of Pearl Harbor'. It might be correct as a description of historical facts.

However, none of the victims of Hiroshima-Nagasaki would have died, considering they should not have attacked Pearl Harbor. They died thinking why did they have to die due to the unusual bombing. The victims of Pearl Harbor and those of Hiroshima-Nagasaki are the same in this respect".

"We, Japanese, (should) refuse to resort to any type of violence or war to solve problems. Children and adults alike, men and women alike, irrespective of the difference in race, culture, religion, thought, and others, all of the people on the globe have the right to live in safety and enjoy life, that is, basic human rights. We, Japanese, regret that we had pursued our own happiness while neglecting the human rights of the people other than us, and even developed hatred toward non-Japanese".

"When unreasonable hatred toward some people remains deeply in your mind, it might cause another catastrophe comparable with Hiroshima-Nagasaki or the Holocaust of World War II. You cannot isolate yourself from these historical tragedies".

"We cannot win our happiness from others. One hostility produces another. No one can win. We should cooperate with others to bring happiness for all. No one is safe until all are safe. Can you love people who share little with you? Can you love people who live in a foreign country and whose religion, language, lifestyle, and values are different from yours? You can love them. We were born to love each other despite differences. We can believe in our morality. We are all good by nature".

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