<Research Notes>

A Case Study on Intercultural Literacy of Newcomer Children in Kobe

Tomoko OCHIAI

ABSTRACT
This paper sheds light on the process of intercultural literacy acquisition of newcomer children (NCC) in a youth program organized for them by an NPO which is working to create a multicultural society. Based on the observations done with an NPO in Kobe, the learning process in the initial stage of intercultural literacy development was closely examined. Intercultural literacy includes the ability of NCC to recognize and express their own opinions and perspectives as ethnic minorities in their host society. By having dialogue with other participants in the youth program, the newcomer children gain approval of their own ethnicity, knowledge about the situation of foreign people in Japan, etc. Upon participating in the program, the newcomer children advanced from being participants and settlers, to expressionists as they subsequently acquired intercultural literacy.

KEYWORDS: Intercultural literacy, Communities of practice, KJ method, Newcomer children, NPO working for multicultural society

JEL CLASSIFICATION: I29

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose and Background of the Research

The purpose of this paper is to reveal how newcomer children (NCC) can develop intercultural literacy (Intercultural Education Society of Japan, 1997; Ochiai, 2012), and the kind of preparedness and support necessary for its development. For this purpose, participatory observation was conducted with a youth program called Re:C that was set up by Takatori Community Center (TCC), a community development NPO. The Re:C program aims to support NCC, offering weekly activities, occasional workshops, and opportunities for them to be able to express their opinions or perspectives through media such as video and radio.

Initially, NCC tends to hide their own language abilities and cultural practices at classrooms in Japanese schools. This is called “suppression of self-exposure.” However, through earning a comfortable place for themselves at many NCC gatherings and by having dialogues with volunteers at Re:C, they learn to accept their own character and identity, and recognize their own unique perspectives. After gaining some readiness and support at Re:C, they start to share their perspectives and ideas as NCC to their host society through the media. The process of how NCC begins their self-exposure and conveys their ideas openly is assumed as the initial stage of intercultural literacy. In this paper, I reveal the process of developing the initial stage of intercultural literacy, which is the ability of NCC to express their own opinions as ethnic minorities. Through their participation and membership with an NPO which serves as a community of practice for them, they can complete the first stage of intercultural literacy.

Tomoko Ochiai is a research fellow at Kobe University, the Graduate School of International Cooperation Studies. Her research interests are in educational support for newcomer children and intercultural literacy.
1.2 Intercultural Literacy

Intercultural literacy is an ability required in a multicultural society (Sato, 1999). Yamagishi (1997) explains that the concept of intercultural literacy is formed by two streams of intercultural competence (Kealey and Ruben, 1983) and multicultural literacy (Banks, 1991, 1993).

Multicultural literacy, which is one of the bases of intercultural literacy is described as “...the ability to open a dialogue with people who have different cultural backgrounds. It is the foundation of sympathy and humanity, it helps people to know, to care, and to act in ways that develop and cultivate a just society” (Yamagishi, 1997, p.47). I use the term "intercultural literacy" to connote three abilities: (1) to recognize and express one’s own opinions and perspectives as an ethnic minority to a host society; (2) self-improvement through dialogue with others who have diverse cultural backgrounds; (3) to contribute in the creation of a multicultural society (Ochiai 2012).

These three abilities are assumed to develop in sequence from the first to the third.

In this paper, I will focus on the ability of the NCC “to recognize and express one’s own opinions and perspectives as an ethnic minority to a host society,” that is, the initial stage of developing intercultural literacy.

1.3 Assimilation Pressure and Suppression of Self-Exposure at School

The tendency of NCC to hide their ethnic backgrounds at school was very obvious in my observation (Ochiai, 2012). This denial of their ethnicity prevents them from developing their intercultural literacy at the initial stage.

Why is NCC trying to hide their character? In Japanese schools, positive feelings associated with acceptance of the cultural differences NCC brings are limited. As NCC extends their stay in Japan, they begin to speak Japanese and acquire BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills)\(^1\). When NCC demonstrates BICS, the teachers deal with them as though they are Japanese students.

Shimizu (2003) calls the teachers’ attitude “irresponsible universalism.” In addition, there are strong assimilation pressures in Japanese schools. Ota (2000) calls such schools “deculturation institutions,” and Tsuneyoshi (1996) describes the assimilation pressure as “simultaneous communitarianism” in classrooms.

Being exposed to assimilation pressures at school, most NCC show the tendency to hide their own character as newcomer children such as their native language ability, lifestyle, and their own perspectives on various matters which are different from those of the Japanese children. In order for them to have the capability to express their own perspectives, they need to have some preparations and assistance in advance. NPOs for NCC can provide them with the necessary support outside of the pressure of assimilation and a space where they can develop intercultural literacy.

1.4 Community of Practice

According to Wenger (2006), the community of practice is a group of people who share a common concern and learn how to deal with situations better as they interact regularly. While newcomers in the community are learning appropriate behavior from veteran participants, they develop their own identities as members of the community. In the process, they learn how they should behave in the community. In this study, I will investigate how the Re:C functions as the community of practice for

\(^1\) BICS includes non-verbal language (gestures, facial expressions and actions). Children can usually acquire BICS after a few years (Ota, 2000, p.172).
NCC to learn various skills and attitudes leading to the attainment of intercultural literacy.

1.5 Overview of TCC and the Re:C Program

TCC is an NPO working to build a multicultural society. It was established in 1995 after the Great Hanshin Earthquake. A number of subsidiary organizations, such as a Vietnamese self-help-group, a community radio station, a multi-language translation center, and so on, operate under TCC. Re:C program is one activity under TCC. It consists of the following three units:

1) Re:C salon: Every Saturday afternoon, NCC is invited to talk and play games with Volunteers. This activity is called “Re: C Salon.”
2) Workshop: Some workshops, such as producing video products, rap music, or radio programs for the community and FM broadcast at TCC, are held several times per year.
3) Media production: Some NCC volunteers to produce radio or video programs. Volunteers assist the NCC to produce their media products.

The children who participated in the Re:C program include: Vietnamese (45), Peruvian (10), Brazilian (2), Bolivian (1), Australian (1), and Japanese (50). In total, 109 children came to Re:C from April 2004 to March 2007.

1.6 Research Method

This research was conducted using participatory observation by volunteering at the Re:C Salon once or twice per month. I maintained notes of the dialogues among the participants such as the NCC and the volunteers. The dialogue records of the participants (59 NCC plus volunteers) from 2004 to 2007 are grouped using the KJ method, a brainstorming method developed by Professor Kawakita Jiro (Kawakita, 1967, 1996).

The dialogue records have been discussed elsewhere (Ochiai, 2012) however, I re-analyze them in detail in this paper to examine the effects of the kind of opportunities and acquired abilities the NCC received from participating in Re:C on intercultural literacy development.

2. LEARNING OPPORTUNITY FOR NCC AT THE RE:C PROGRAM

2.1 Analysis of Dialogue Records

The NCC who come only to play computer games and enjoy idle talk with volunteers are categorized as participants, while those who are deeply involved and regularly participate in various activities developing relationships with the volunteers and other NCC in the Re:C Salon. Their regular appearance in the Re:C Salon has afforded them learning opportunities through dialogues with the participants; I categorize these NCC as settlers. Table 1 shows the categories of learning opportunities and the dialogue content with the volunteers, based on the analysis of selected dialogues of thirteen NCC settlers using the KJ method. The groups of dialogues are divided into three general categories each of which are further subdivided into two specific categories of NCC’s learning opportunities acquired through the dialogues.

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2 Volunteers are mainly Japanese university students who are studying multicultural issues. To work as volunteers at Re:C program, they need to attend lectures about NCC and multicultural issues such as Vietnamese refugees in Japan, public access to media, etc. There were eight volunteers (six were women) at Re:C program in 2004.
Table 1: Learning opportunities and dialogue contents of the 13 NCC settlers at the Re:C program

| Categories of learning opportunities | Some examples of dialogue content |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Development of relationships among Re:C participants | 
| General | Specific |
| Opening up and expression of feelings (13 groups of dialogues are included) | a. Feelings when they speak native language 
| Praise and approval (8 groups) | b. Hardship in learning Japanese when they first arrived in Japan 
| Information on Japanese society and norms (7 groups) | c. Severe parenting (ex. by the mother) 
| Education-related support (12 groups) | a. Fluency in native language 
| Access to active participation (3 groups) | b. Fluency in Japanese 
| Public expression (3 groups) | c. Stylish expression in animation products |

2.2 From Participants to Settlers

NCC received some learning opportunities at the Re:C program. However, such opportunities were not uniform. There are several hierarchies delineated by participation.

Fifty-nine NCC participated in the Re:C Salon, of which forty-six participants talked with volunteers only about amusement such as computer games or how to use the computer. Thirteen settlers went next stage and received learning opportunities described in Table 1 through dialogue with volunteers.

2.3 The Effects on NCC of the Dialogues

Most settlers came to Re:C together for amusement at first. As they became accustomed to the place, they developed relationships with other participants. Having settled in the Re:C community, they became more exposed to learning opportunities as follows.

Firstly, it was observed that NCC began to accept their own ethnicity through the learning opportunities to develop relationships with participants of Re:C, as shown in Table 1.

The Re:C program was conceived as a place for NCC to be able to function in a multicultural society. Most of the staff and volunteers came from TCC’s subsidiary organizations. Thus, the volunteers had a chance to obtain basic knowledge and were conscious of NCC’s backgrounds. Within this environment, it was conducive for NCC to express their voice and opinions. Some examples of topics NCC were encouraged to talk about ranged from “hardship in Japanese learning,” “feelings evoked by speaking one’s native language,” “experiences or memories of one’s mother country or place of birth,” to simple “questions about Japanese society.”

In Japanese schools, NCC tried to hide their knowledge about their country and language abilities

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3 TCC’s subsidiary organizations employ activists and other professionals working to create a multicultural society.
and pretend to be Japanese. However, at Re:C, NCC was encouraged to express such knowledge and language ability in order to develop their self-esteem. As a consequence, NCC got validation of their ethnicity. When NCC demonstrated their native language ability or relatively quick success in learning Japanese, they were praised by members of the Re:C community. It was also observed that NCC was specifically praised because they explained about their country, or had their own unique perspectives of Japanese society.

Secondly, NCC acquired information that could develop their view of their future in Japan through the learning opportunities to support daily and school life, as shown in the second category listed in Table 1. NCC often asked questions about career development. “What should I do if I would like to be a cartoon artist in Japan?” “Is it possible for me to be a farmer in Japan?” “What is it like in a university? Have you ever been there?” “What is a part-time worker?” When the volunteers were asked such questions, they responded: “Why would you like to do this work?” “Which subjects are useful for that profession?” When volunteers could not answer, they searched the Internet, or asked the TCC staff. Then they were able to provide advice to NCC for their career plan in Japan and develop a vision of the future.

As a result, NCC developed self-esteem and self-assurance as valued members of the community. These make NCC free from “suppression of self-exposure,” and they could start to develop their unique perspectives and opinions reflecting both their native and host cultures.

2.4 From Settlers to Expressionists and Their Message to Host Society

Table 2 specifies the opportunities received by the thirteen settlers. According to Table 2, these NCC (B1~V11) enjoyed a number of learning opportunities with the Re:C program and nine took the opportunity to express their message to the public, utilizing various media. These nine NCC could be called expressionists (Table 2).

The NCC who took the opportunity to express their message attended the Re:C Salon most frequently. Some NCC (B1, V1, V2, V3) requested to participate in the community radio broadcast at TCC and with video production. The other NCC were invited to participate by the volunteers (V4, V5, V6, V7). V8 and V10 did not have a chance to produce videos and radio programs during my research, however, they started to participate in radio and video production since 2009. V9 and V11 stopped attending Re:C program before they started to express their own message because they graduated from Junior high school already.

It was obvious that once NCC had developed self-confidence, they started to express their own unique opinion and message. The following is a case study of V3 (Vietnamese junior high school student, female).

At the end of 2006, V3 made a request to produce a radio program entitled “The Grievances of Junior High School Students.” She produced a special radio program at the end of the year. As a result, she became a radio personality for a monthly 30-minute radio program from the following April.

Following this experience at Re:C, she was motivated to express her personal opinions over the community radio:

1. V3 visited Re:C regularly from the summer of 2006 and she conducted a wood craft workshop and organized a Christmas party with success.
2. In the summer of 2006, she wrote an “essay about human rights” as homework. She initially wrote the essay based on her personal experience in that she was teased because of her Vietnamese name. However, she also wanted to write about other Vietnamese experiences, so she went to a Vietnamese self-help group in TCC to interview some people there about
discrimination against Vietnamese youth. After she started her research, various other members, such as a Korean Radio producer and a Brazilian high school student, came and wanted to share their stories. V3 then wrote the essay, reflecting her own experiences, and those of many others. During the interviewing and writing, she exchanged ideas with older participants and got a better understanding of foreign residents’ situations in Japan.

**Table 2: Learning opportunities gained by settlers (July 2004 to March 2007)**

| Number of times attended | A. Opening up and expression of feelings | B. Praise and approval | C. Information on Japanese society and norms | D. Education-related support | E. Access to active participation | F. Public expression |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|
|                          | B1                                     | ○                      | ○                                           | ○                           | ○                               | 69                 |
|                          | B2a                                    |                         | ○                                           | ○                           | ○                               | 2                  |
|                          | V1                                     | ○                      | ○                                           | ○                           | ○                               | 59                 |
|                          | V2                                     | ○                      | ○                                           | ○                           | ○                               | 43                 |
|                          | V3                                     | ○                      | ○                                           | ○                           | ○                               | 53                 |
|                          | V4                                     | ○                      | ○                                           | ○                           | ○                               | 24                 |
|                          | V5                                     | ○                      | ○                                           | ○                           | ○                               | 42                 |
|                          | V6                                     | ○                      | ○                                           | ○                           | ○                               | 42                 |
|                          | V7                                     | ○                      | ○                                           | ○                           | ○                               | 18                 |
|                          | V8                                     | ○                      | ○                                           | ○                           | ○                               | 29                 |
|                          | V9                                     | ○                      | ○                                           | ○                           | ○                               | 39                 |
|                          | V10                                    | ○                      | ○                                           | ○                           | ○                               | 7                  |
|                          | V11                                    | ○                      | ○                                           | ○                           | ○                               | 9                  |

The case study of V3 reveals the process and preparedness V3 went through to be able to express her ideas through the community radio. V3 received learning opportunities at Re:C (At this stage, she is a settler). While she was conducting some events at the Re:C program, gaining success as a leader, she acquired self-confidence. At the same time, while writing the essay about prejudice toward foreigners, she obtained knowledge from volunteers and staff in TCC and realized she had a message to convey to her host society. In the process, she deepened her position at Re:C from settler to expressionist.

### 3. CONCLUSION: FORMATION OF INTERCULTURAL LITERACY OF NCC

Figure 1 below, portrays the change of stages and attitudes of NCC at Re:C that marked a watershed of the stages.

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4 B2 was heavily involved in the video production at Re:C, following the example of an elder sibling who had previously produced a video program. This resulted in intensive dialogues between B2 and volunteers who helped produce the video.
Three stages of participation of NCC were observed at Re:C. One is the participant, who came for amusement. The next stage is the settler, who developed relationships with other members, and acquired various opportunities such as “approval of their ethnicity” and “formation of a vision for their future in Japan.” These activities brought them self-esteem and self-assurance as members of the community. Moreover, these experiences made NCC feel free from “suppression of self-exposure.” The last stage is the expressionist. They delivered messages to their host society through community radio and video production.

Lave and Wenger (1991) pointed out that learning is best accomplished in the process of establishing membership in a group. NCC participated in the Re:C which functions as a community of practice contributing to the formation of multicultural society. Additionally, they learned from various participants such as volunteers, staff, and other NCC from a variety of generations and nationalities arranged like a web. When NCC noticed and tried to express their own perspectives which were different from those of the mainstream society, a number of veteran participants of the group would pop up to assist and encourage them. Therefore, they were able to show success in their progress from participants and settlers to expressionists while they were developing their identity as members of the Re:C.

In conclusion, the learning opportunities given to the NCC at Re:C have proven to be effective in nurturing the initial stage of acquiring intercultural literacy of the NCC which is to recognize and express their own opinions and perspectives as ethnic minorities to a host society. These NCC who are able to develop intercultural literacy further at various places with more learning opportunities are expected to be precious resource persons in consolidating a multicultural society in the future.

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