

Fostering Critical Thinking Skills through Cross-border Collaborative Discussions

Marian WANG

Abstract

大学生が世界市民 (*global citizen*) として多様な観点から問題を考察し、解決する能力を持つことを求められるようになるにしたがって、高等教育において外国語としての英語 (*EFL*) を教えるうえで批判的思考力を養成することが必要になってきている。しかしながら、アジアの学生は集団志向の文化や機械的な暗記を重んじる学習環境のために批判的思考力が欠如していると批判されることがしばしばある。本研究の目的は、批判的思考力に基づいて進められることを意図した越境的共同ディスカッションプロジェクトに参加したことについて、アジア人学生がどのような感想を持ったかを精査することである。日本人、中国人、タイ人、台湾人の学生が2018年の10月にオンライン上で始まり、2019年の3月に台湾で二日間の対面型のプロジェクトでもって終了したプロジェクトについての省察をおこなった。この振り返りにより、文化的・教育的価値観に関する基本的な前提は異なっているにもかかわらず、アジア人学生の間で批判的思考力を養成することが可能であることが示された。

Fostering critical thinking skills has become a necessity when teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in higher education settings as university students are expected to possess problem-solving skills and think of issues from various perspectives as global citizens. However, Asian students are often criticized for lacking in critical thinking skills due to their group-oriented culture and learning environments that emphasize rote memorization. The aim of this study was to investigate how Asian students felt about engaging in a cross-border collaborative discussion project that was intended to build on their critical thinking skills. Japanese, Chinese, Thai, and Taiwanese students reflected on the project that began online in October of 2018 and culminated in a face-to-face project in Taiwan for two days in March of 2019. Their reflections demonstrate that critical thinking skills can be fostered among Asian students despite the underlying assumptions about their culture and educational values.

Key words: critical thinking skills, group discussions, problem-solving, higher education

Literature Review

Japanese higher education institutions have begun to promote active learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings where student-centered learning is seen as essential for Japanese university students to become competent users of English (Waniek & Nae, 2017). Active learning requires students to research, think, reflect, and solve a variety of problems (Waniek & Nae, 2017), which contrasts with the predominant form of foreign language instruction in Japan—the grammar-translation method of drilling students in grammar structures and providing them with vocabulary with direct translations (Hosoki, 2011). Although mastery of the grammar-translation method is necessary for passing university entrance exams in Japan, it does not fulfill the communicative and sociolinguistic purposes of second language acquisition (Watanabe, 1996) and as such is depriving Japanese students of the opportunities to become competent users of English.

Active learning helps students develop their critical thinking skills so that they can become problem solvers who will thrive in global industries (Waniek & Nae, 2017). Asian students are often stereotyped as being reticent and lacking in critical thinking skills when studying abroad in Western higher education institutions because they do not appear to have an individual voice. In addition to the cultural explanation that Asian cultures emphasize group thinking instead of the individual voice needed for critical thinking, Okada (2016) insists that teacher-centered educational settings in Asia have deprived Asian students of opportunities to hone their critical thinking skills. Cheng (2000) and Rear (2017) argue that the aforementioned negative stereotypes of Asian students in Western universities are unjustified as Asian students have demonstrated that they can develop their critical thinking skills in certain situations if they have adequate proficiency in the target language.

Given that Asian students have often been labeled as having limited critical thinking skills, it is not surprising that Japanese students are also said to have a paucity of higher order reasoning skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and logical thinking in their native language (Mehring, 2014). Thus, expecting Japanese students to apply these skills from Japanese to a foreign language may be unrealistic. There is hope though that Japanese students may be able to develop their critical thinking skills when using English because “in the specific case of the Japanese with English, it could be argued the second language is more of a facilitator than an obstacle to critical thinking as the English language can offer

the Japanese an opportunity to be more direct and critical both linguistically and culturally than they might otherwise be able to in their native tongue” (Laskar, 2007, p. 4). In short, English may give Japanese students a critical voice in a learning context that encourages freedom of expression, directness, debate, and independent thinking (Laskar, 2007).

If English gives Japanese students the platform for students to exercise their critical thinking skills, how can EFL teachers guide their students to master these skills? Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) highlights six levels of reasoning skills—knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation—each requiring a higher level of abstraction from the student. When teachers organize and create lessons, they can scaffold lessons accordingly so that students will gradually reach the apex of evaluation that builds on their critical thinking skills. In EFL settings in Japan, rote memorization and the grammar-translation method of learning a second language places students at the first level of knowledge about language rather than knowing how to actually use the language for thinking about, discussing, and debating various issues. In higher education institutions in Japan, as students no longer have the pressure of passing high-stakes university entrance examinations, EFL teachers can create lessons so that their students will be able to practice using higher levels of reasoning that can be applied in educational contexts and beyond (Okada, 2016).

Teaching Asian students to master higher levels of reasoning is easier said than done. First of all, Asian students and teachers may not be familiar with this new teaching style (Cheng, 2000) that encourages discussion and debate as well as investigation of biased reasoning. Moreover, even if active learning has been promoted in Asian higher education contexts like Japan, it tends to be restricted to the use of instructional methods instead of underscoring the deeper learning principles such as critical thinking (Ito, 2017). Secondly, it may be helpful to reconsider existing Western attitudes in Asian contexts of what should be done to develop critical thinking skills. Zhang, Peng, and Hung (2009) found that Taiwanese students shunned confrontation, criticism, and disagreement in order to maintain harmony with their peers in online collaborative projects. Ito (2017) claims that critical thinking is difficult to define in Japanese and has negative connotations of criticizing others aggressively in a culture that favors harmony over confrontational communication strategies.

It is beneficial in Asian contexts to alter individual critical thinking activities

towards more collaborative critical thinking activities that may encourage debate and deliberation while also incorporating empathy and face saving strategies to preserve harmony (Rear, 2017). Liu (2020) proposes collaborative group discussions as a means of improving Chinese learners' critical thinking skills. In collaborative group discussions, students begin with formulating and sharing their own thoughts, then evaluate others' ideas and weigh various opinions, and finally draw a group conclusion that considers the attitudes and opinions of the group (Liu, 2020). In this way, the group is able to synthesize the ideas discussed and preserve the harmony of the group. Wang and Kihara's (2017) case study of a Japanese university student illustrates the importance of willingness to communicate (WTC) in debate projects. In the study, the student's WTC helped him understand opinions, clarify his ideas, confirm others' ideas, and get his ideas across. Although the student's English proficiency was not as high as the other students who had participated in the debate project, his overall preparation beforehand and his active participation of listening and building on existing arguments to prepare counterarguments were instrumental in honing his critical thinking skills. Therefore, modifying existing critical thinking activities in ways that accommodate empathy and face saving strategies that make critical thinking more suitable and relevant to Asian EFL students' immediate learning context and culture may be necessary.

Research Design

This is a qualitative study of three Japanese, one Thai, one Chinese, and two Taiwanese undergraduate students, and two Japanese graduate students who participated in a cross-border collaborative discussion project. The Japanese, Thai, and Chinese students were students at a national university in the Kansai region of Japan, and the Taiwanese students were enrolled in a national university in Taipei. The students participated in six to eight online group discussions on a variety of topics. Later, the students residing in Japan flew to Taiwan to participate in face-to-face activities with the Taiwanese students. The students chose the topics for each discussion (e.g., gender, work-life balance, education, environment, euthanasia, politics, etc.) and nominated a group leader to facilitate the discussions so that everyone in the group could participate actively. The online discussions began in October of 2018 and ended with two days of face-to-face collaborative tasks at a national university in Taipei in March of 2019.

Upon completion of the project, the students were asked if they would participate in interviews in English or Japanese by the researcher who had observed the two-day collaborative activities in Taiwan. The face-to-face interviews were conducted from March to April of 2019 at the national university in Japan where the Chinese, Japanese, and Thai students were studying. Five students in Japan chose to be interviewed in Japanese, and two students chose English. Among the eight Taiwanese students who had participated in this project, two Taiwanese students—one male and one female—were interviewed online in English from April to May of 2019.

Each interview lasted approximately 50 to 60 minutes. Prior to the interview, the participants were asked to sign a consent form and were also given a copy of the questions that would be asked (see Appendix 1). At the end of the interview, the participants studying at the Japanese university were compensated with a 1000-yen gift card and were asked if they could be contacted to confirm and clarify information conveyed during the interviews. All of the interviews were recorded using a voice recorder or Skype's online services and later summarized. For the interviews that were conducted in Japanese, the summary was translated from Japanese into English and later back translated by one of the educators who is fluent in both Japanese and English. The summaries in English were sent to the participants who confirmed the contents for their accuracy. The results from the interviews were qualitatively analyzed using a thematic analysis methodology (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

The aim of this study was to investigate how Asian students felt about engaging in a cross-border collaborative discussion project that was intended to build on their critical thinking skills.

The following research questions were asked:

- (1) What were the primary motivations for the students to participate in this cross-border collaborative discussion project?
- (2) What did they learn from participating in this project?

Findings

Motivation for Joining the Project

The students indicated that although they had been studying English abroad, online, on their own, or in English classes, they wanted more opportunities to use

English with students from diverse backgrounds. They mentioned that they were impressed that their group members differed in specialization, age, and country of origin. As the students were enrolled in agriculture, business administration, economics, engineering, geology, health science, mathematics, politics, and sociology faculties, they were able to share their expertise depending on the topic chosen for discussion. For example, when they had discussions about their career goals, some of the business administration students and a geology student who had participated in internships shared their experiences. With respect to age, the majority of the students were in their teens or 20s except for one male graduate student who was in his 60s. Even if the older student's English was lower in proficiency than the other students, he was able to contribute effectively and garner the respect of the younger students by sharing his ideas of raising a family and conducting academic research on the quality of life of senior citizens. Finally, the students represented various countries in Asia including China, Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand. The Chinese student who had come to Japan when she was young and was fluent in Chinese and Japanese acted as a translator during discussions when English was hindering their group's communication. Moreover, the Thai student who was fluent in Japanese and English could work seamlessly with the Japanese students and helped the Japanese students when they could not understand what was being said. All in all, the students felt that by participating in this project, they were able to work with students they would have never been able to work with had they not chosen to participate in this project. In other words, the students were able to expand their community from local to global Communities of Practice of English speakers (Wenger, 2000) while using English for authentic communicative purposes.

In addition to their motivation to improve their English, the students hoped to unearth their unique strengths and weaknesses by participating in this project. Many students strived to be responsible leaders and followers who were able to cooperate and collaborate with group members. Zhang et al. (2009) distinguish cooperation from collaboration in that cooperation is dividing up tasks whereas collaboration is working together throughout the entire project to ensure smooth completion of goals and objectives. Being a leader in this project required balancing cooperation—assigning roles and tasks prior to the discussions—while ensuring collaboration from start to finish. Being a follower meant fulfilling one's role and collaborating with other group members throughout the project.

The Chinese student said that she wanted to understand which position—leader or follower—fit her best. If she was the leader, she wanted to figure out if she wanted to be a leader or felt obliged to be a leader. Understanding how she felt as the group leader was important for her future career, especially if she were to take on leadership roles. A Japanese student commented that being a leader meant choosing topics, assigning roles, setting deadlines, and keeping track of time during the discussions. She was pleased that she was able to create a cooperative group that organized eight, instead of the minimum of six group discussions, that were required. Her group members said that having a responsible leader like her was indispensable for collaboration. Moreover, her group members said that it was easy to follow a leader who was willing to take charge, assign tasks, and encourage everyone to participate equally. For many students, after doing many cross-border group discussions online, they began to understand how important it was for them to be both a good leader and follower and to discern which position was most suitable for them in this project.

Preparing and Participating Effectively in Discussions

The students worked in groups of four (two Taiwanese, two students from Japan) and participated in at least six online discussions, each approximately 60 to 90 minutes long, before meeting each other in person in Taiwan for more collaborative tasks. As students took control over their own learning, a requisite for project-based learning (Zhang et al., 2009), each group differed in how they organized their discussions. Some groups wrote essays with their main opinion, two reasons, and a conclusion on the group topic and exchanged their essays using Google Forms before the discussions, whereas other groups dedicated more time to narrowing down discussion topics. One Taiwanese student stressed the importance of conducting research beforehand. He did 30 minutes of online research for each discussion because he realized that stating his own opinions without support was not persuasive nor effective for building his critical thinking skills. Several students indicated that their group decided that it was better to begin with discussing “soft” topics than “hard” topics such as euthanasia so that they all could get used to knowing how to prepare for and participate in online discussions. They also discovered that in addition to focusing on differences across cultures, it was crucial to identify similarities across cultures that would help bridge the gaps between group members who represented various cultures. Finally, several groups

experimented with many ways to discuss topics including casual discussions, organized or scripted discussions, and debates that necessitated more persuasive and argumentative skills. They learned that it was best to start with discussions and gradually move towards debates that required higher order skills of reasoning and more serious topics.

When participating in the discussions, some students felt that they were lacking their own voice. A Japanese graduate student confessed that sometimes she did not know what to say because she did not have any opinions on the topic. Expressing opinions is a higher order skill of analysis and synthesis of ideas, which is not commonplace in Japanese educational settings where a majority of students do not express their opinions verbally in class (Okada, 2016, p. 92). She was, however, able to ask questions, clarify, and confirm what was said in the discussions, skills which are higher order skills in Bloom's Taxonomy (1956). When her group got stuck, she tried to offer another approach by applying her motto of, "just say something" without being afraid of what others thought. Another Japanese undergraduate student echoed this student's motto of saying something regardless of the topic chosen. She decided to expand her knowledge and interest in a variety of topics in order to give her a stronger voice in all discussions. A Taiwanese student also said that with time their group discussions had fewer pregnant pauses because everybody grasped the rhythm of discussions and began to take and offer turns more smoothly. At first, a Japanese undergraduate student had difficulty expressing his opinions but then recognized that when he did muster the courage to say something, his group members would listen and would help him when he was unable to speak confidently. Finally, the Chinese student said that although she gradually became accustomed to expressing her opinions and using logic to support them, she also became more adept at asking other students' for their opinions and building on what they had to say. Thus, these students were able to find ways to become more inquisitive, knowledgeable, confident, and expressive over time by finding their critical voice while listening to their peers' voices in the discussions.

Future Goals and the Role of English

Prior to meeting in Taiwan for two days, students had already participated in six to eight online discussions and felt relatively well acquainted with their group members. In Taiwan, they spent more time doing collaborative tasks and exploring

Taipei with the host students from Taiwan. Using English with World English speakers helped students realize the significance of English as a lingua franca.

For many students, English was a tool that gave them greater access to information as what is written in Japanese, Chinese, or Thai relative to English may be not as substantial in quantity and/or quality. The Thai student said that there is more information available in English than Thai because of the opportunity cost involved in translating text from English to Thai in her field of interest. Her goal was to become a professor at a university who could conduct, write, and present research in English at international conferences. The Japanese graduate student in his 60s also hoped that he could eventually read articles in English and present at international conferences. A Taiwanese student said that he found Chinese translations of texts to be poor and that it was better for him to read texts in English to widen his perspectives about many topics. The Chinese student said that English gave her a more balanced view of the world because she thought the media of each country projected a biased view of the world. By accessing media sources in English from various countries, she thought she would be able to understand issues from multiple perspectives.

This project also made students perceive English as more than a tool for passing exams. In the past, the students had studied English assiduously to pass high-stakes university entrance exams. Admittedly, some students were studying for standardized exams such as the TOEFL, TOEIC, or IELTS. However, many students claimed that English gave them opportunities to connect with people from around the world and make more friends online or in person. The Japanese graduate student in his 60s confessed that he was surprised at how active the Taiwanese students were about learning English and how they were so friendly, hospitable, and eager to connect with them. He admitted that the Taiwanese students differed from the typical attitude of Japanese students who tended to struggle throughout the process of learning English. In Japan, he thought that most people learned English to pass entrance exams and if they passed, they were happy and stopped studying English. If they failed, they were unhappy and their studies ended. Either way, they ended their English study after entering university. In contrast, the Taiwanese students were eager to continue their English learning journey even after entering university.

Although most of students from the university in Japan felt that two days were sufficient to work on collaborative projects with their Taiwanese hosts, they

wanted to stay connected with their group members even after the completion of the project by hosting the Taiwanese students to show the Japanese spirit of *omotenashi*, or selfless hospitality (Aoyama, 2015). In fact, such acts of reciprocation were noted in previous studies when Japanese students had worked on debate projects with a group of Taiwanese students in Hsinchu. Later, when the Taiwanese students came to Japan, some of the Japanese students acted as hosts and showed them around Japan, just as the Taiwanese students had done for them in Taiwan (Wang & Kihara, 2018). These global connections are helping students to expand their Communities of Practice (Wenger, 2000), to communities that expect individuals to have their own voice while taking into consideration multiple perspectives.

Discussion and Implications

Fostering critical thinking skills in Asian EFL learners is not an impossible task. As this study shows, when Asian students are given the opportunity to organize their own discussions, they choose suitable topics, participate actively, and reflect on their learning. The students enjoyed the intellectually stimulating discussions that required research and synthesis of their ideas as well as others' ideas. With time, they found that the key to having good discussions was having prepared and researched topics beforehand, saying something regardless of the topic chosen, and being supportive of others' opinions and ideas. Although some students were hesitant to express their ideas at first, they gradually developed their confidence in using English actively with a variety of English speakers from around the world.

The students hoped that this project would continue for students in both universities. In the future, they suggested that it might be better to alternate hosts when possible. In other words, the students at the national university in Japan could host the next collaborative event for Taiwanese students. All in all, the students felt that by participating in this project they were able to improve their communicative English skills, expand their Communities of Practice (Wenger, 2000) from local to global communities, and develop their ability to think in ways that would reflect higher order reasoning skills in Bloom's Taxonomy (1956).

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Appendix 1: Reflective Interview Consent Form and Questions

My name is _____ (first and last name) in my _____ year majoring in _____ at ABC University.

I agree to participate in this interview on _____ (date) that will last approximately 60 minutes. Questions will be asked in English but responses can be made in Japanese or English. I understand that my identity will not be revealed and that I have the right to refuse publication of any information. I understand that the information from this interview will be used to write academic journal articles.

1. How often do you use English in your daily life?
2. What is your primary purpose/motivation to use or study English?
3. What did you expect to gain from this project?
4. In your online discussions, what if anything did you learn from the experience?
5. How did you think the online discussions developed over time?
6. What do you think was your greatest contribution to the online discussions?
7. In Taiwan, what did you think you learned from the world cafe (day one)?
8. What did you think you learned from preparing a presentation on buying happiness in day two?
9. When working in groups in Taiwan, what was your greatest contribution?
10. If you could change anything about this program, what would it be and why?