

**A CASE STUDY OF A HIGH INTERCULTURAL  
AWARENESS (ICA) SETTING IN SABAH,  
MALAYSIA: A WAY OF PROMOTING THE CONCEPT  
OF ICA IN THE EFL CURRICULUM IN JAPAN**



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**FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH  
2014**

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UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH  
2014**

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the materials in this dissertation are my own except for quotations, excerpts, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged.

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VIVA DATE : **03 April 2014**



**DECLARED BY;**

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## ABSTRACT

Recently, culture has taken an important role in language education in Japan, particularly the notion that creating a global cultural consciousness in the EFL classroom can eventually yield solutions to Japan's communication weaknesses. This dissertation reports on an exploration of the language-culture connection and its consequences for Japan in a globalizing world, and argues for a need to create a context in which Japanese students are imbued with the awareness of global culture in order to facilitate the transformation of the Japanese cultural identity into a more globally conscious one. It was postulated that creating a global cultural consciousness among Japanese second language (L2) learners can help bridge the gap between linguistic ability and functional intercultural communication. Due to the absence of such an authentic situation in Japan, where a low level of intercultural awareness (ICA) is evident, the study was conducted in an idealized setting where a high level intercultural awareness (ICA) is evident despite a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population. Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia was thus selected as the research site. In order to explore the language-culture connection, the study focused on a popular Sabah religious-cultural celebration known as Kaamatan. The relationship between the ICA and the language was examined, focusing on two main lines of enquiry; namely, (1) how Kaamatan was perceived; and (2) what cultural elements of language contribute to a context of high level of intercultural awareness in Sabah. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, two main data elicitation instruments were used; (1) observations via field notes and video-camera; and (2) interviews via semi-structured interview protocol. A total of 34 participants celebrating Kaamatan in the Kadazandusun Cultural Association (KDCA) in Penampang, Kota Kinabalu took part in the study. Interviews took place over a period of nine days; two days at KDCA and seven days in Keningau. The field notes, interview transcripts and linguistic and cultural artefacts were analysed for contents, based on a self-developed analytical framework which I termed "Sacredness-Visibility –Consciousness Matrix (SVCM). Findings obtained show that there was no significant difference between Kadazandusun and other ethnic groups, although the former appeared to respond with deeper feeling, as they felt a greater sense of ownership toward the Kaamatan. It was also found that the condition of

sharing beliefs of culturally important words in the common language used amongst Sabahans from different cultural backgrounds was instrumental in maintaining a society of high tolerance and high intercultural awareness. The findings were then meta-analysed and applied to the situation of ICA and the global language in Japan. Based on the extrapolated findings, further discussion on the Japanese English education system was made. The study concludes with a discussion of the formation of a new cultural identity for Japanese EFL students and its implications. In general, the link between intercultural awareness and language was established and recommendations for Japanese English education were formulated.



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## ABSTRAK

### **KAJIAN KES AMALAN TAHAP KESEDARAN ANTARA BUDAYA TINGGI DI NEGERI SABAH, MALAYSIA: SUATU CARA PENYEDARAN KONSEP KESEDARAN ANTARA BUDAYA DALAM KURIKULUM EFL DI JEPUN**

*Kebelakangan ini, konsep budaya memainkan peranan penting dalam pendidikan bahasa di Jepun terutamanya dalam keadaan kewujudan kesedaran budaya secara global dalam persekitaran pembelajaran kelas Bahasa Inggeris (EFL) yang dijangka dapat mengatasi kelemahan kemahiran berkomunikasi di Jepun. Disertasi ini melaporkan hasil penyiasatan hubungan antara bahasa dan budaya serta impaknya kepada globalisasi dunia oleh negara Jepun ke arah mewujudkan konteks pelajar Jepun yang mempunyai kesedaran budaya dunia untuk membolehkan transformasi identiti budaya Jepun ke tahap kesedaran antara budaya (ICA) di peringkat global. Adalah dijangka bahawa dengan mewujudkan kesedaran budaya bersifat global di kalangan pelajar bahasa kedua Jepun ini, maka ia dapat meningkatkan kemahiran linguistik dan kefungsi komunikasi antara budaya. Dengan dapatan yang menunjukkan bahawa kesedaran antara budaya (ICA) yang rendah di Jepun pada masa kini, maka Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia telah dipilih sebagai pusat kajian memandangkan kesesuaiannya dengan pelbagai kaum dan budaya. Pesta Kaamatan yang diraikan di Sabah dipilih untuk kajian hubungan bahasa-budaya. Hubungan antara bahasa dan budaya ditinjau melalui, (1) bagaimana Kaamatan dilihat sebagai persepsi; dan (2) apakah komponen bahasa dan/atau budaya yang menyumbang ke arah tahap kesedaran antara budaya (ICA) yang tinggi di Sabah. Kajian ini bersifat kualitatif dengan penggunaan instrumen dan alat seperti (1) pemerhatian melalui nota kerja lapangan dan kamera video; dan (2) protokol temu bual semi-struktur. Seramai 34 orang peserta yang menyertai Pesta Kaamatan di Persatuan Budaya Kadazandusun (KDCA) di Penampang, Kota Kinabalu telah mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini. Analisis isi kandungan dan dokumen yang berasaskan kepada rangka analitikal yang dibangunkan telah digunakan untuk mendapat data daripada nota kerja lapangan, transkrip temu bual dan artifak budaya yang diperolehi. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa tidak terdapat perbezaan signifikan skor ICA antara kaum Kadazandusun dan kaum-kaum lain*

*walaupun kaum Kadazandusun terbukti menunjuk perasaan lebih mendalam terhadap Kaamatan. Dapatan juga menunjukkan bahawa perkataan-perkataan bahasa mengenai kepercayaan kaum dan budaya yang biasa digunakan di kalangan suku kaum di Sabah telah dibuktikan telah memupuk tahap toleransi dan ICA yang tinggi. Analisis secara meta dijalankan ke atas dapatan-dapatan kajian dan diaplikasikan dalam situasi ICA dan Bahasa Inggeris di Jepun dalam konteks global. Berasaskan kepada dapatan ekstrapolasi ini, satu formasi identiti budaya baru untuk pelajar EFL Jepun telah dijalankan dan implikasinya dibincangkan dalam disertasi ini.*



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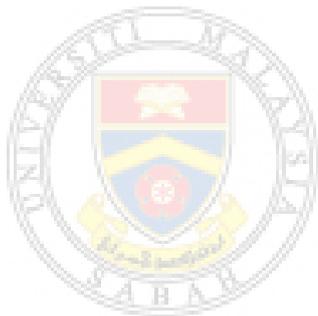
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Preamble: My Intercultural Awareness

A craving to go out of Japan has been in my mind since when I was a child. This is because I have often felt constrained and stifled by the Japanese monolingual and monocultural society, especially the traditional Japanese school culture which prefers uniformity to individuality and regards divergent thinking as a risk. Nevertheless, I did my best to blend in among my school mates, often subduing my innermost desire to be different. Learning English was key to my emerging sense of curiosity. I felt liberated and free when I was learning the English language. It provided a chance to release my constrained mind from the often too rigid and monotonous Japanese way of doing things.

My desire to go abroad finally came to fruition during my university days in 1988. I had my first cultural awakening when I visited a foreign country for the first time - Malaysia. The chance was brought to me through "The Southeast Asian Youth Ship Program" provided by the Japanese Government in association with the member-countries of ASEAN. Its purpose was "to promote mutual understanding and friendship between youths as well as to broaden their global view, to cultivate a spirit of international cooperation, and to foster the rising generation with international awareness". (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 1989).

I boarded the ship in Tokyo after undergoing induction training in Japanese culture as well as a grounding in other countries' cultures. The program is still running, and its purpose has not changed, and still remains what it was 25 years ago, which may imply the Japanese government is trying to address the issue of cultural understanding in its region. The program annually brings together more than 300 youths from ASEAN countries and Japan, providing them with the unique opportunity to live together on board an ocean liner and exchange their opinions

and cultures during the cruise around the participating countries, along with visits and homestays in each country over a total period of two months.

One of my most lasting impressions of my cultural awakening was when I had my first homestay experience with a Muslim host family in Kuantan, Malaysia. We were able to interact as common human beings despite the differences. At the beginning of the homestay, I was bewildered by numerous differences of habit and culture. Moreover, we could not make ourselves understood to each other in English. However, at dinner time, we made a breakthrough. My host father had caught an impressively large fish for me, which was later being served for dinner with a spicy sauce. My host family looked at me with trepidation and anxiety, worried whether or not I could eat it. I took a gastronomic leap of faith, took the first bite and exclaimed "Sedap!" Everybody was relieved when they heard it. It also reassured me to have finally cracked the code! Although this authentic Malay dish was truly too spicy for me, I eagerly ate as much as I could while the host mother smilingly kept serving more and more helpings. In the midst of so many differences, I felt elated that I was able to express myself and understand their feelings.

Reflecting on my own language learning experience in Japan, I realized that the English I had learned had failed me when I tried interacting with my Asian counterparts. Using a variety of English where many Asian words didn't exist made communication and understanding difficult. Frequently, non-verbal communication proved more useful in variety of situations. I felt mainstream English somehow lacked abilities to communicate in nonmainstream cultures. Although I didn't realize what it was in those days, I have desired to explore it since then.

In my view, intercultural awareness allows one to notice and feel a common bond with other human beings, and overcome differences. The new bond that is created helps to broaden one's view and spread tolerance. I used to think intercultural awareness happened as a result of language, but now I wonder if it is possible that both language and culture are complementary to each other. My study has originally started on this point with my journey of intercultural awareness. I decided to study in the land where I first had my intercultural awakening: Malaysia.

Moreover, I decided to focus on Sabah as my case study as I had first-hand experience of its unique multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition, with an overriding understanding and tolerance between the multiple ethnic and religious groups. It is my hope that this study will help find ways to address the cultural deficiencies of English as it is taught in Japan.

## **1.2 Introduction**

Recently, culture has taken an important role in language education in Japan, particularly the notion that creating a global cultural consciousness in the EFL classroom can eventually yield solutions to Japan's communication weaknesses. It is acknowledged that studies which examined the EFL teaching scenario in Japanese high schools, showed a large number of students failing to achieve fluency even after many years of trying (Salzmann, 1993). This lack of success is due in part to the traditional forms of teaching EFL in Japan which have focused on grammar and translation techniques which have yielded little benefit to a student's communicative ability (Mantero & Iwai, 2005). As a way to ameliorate this long-standing problem drawing from my personal experience as a secondary school teacher and having lived abroad for more than 6 years in a number of foreign countries outside Japan, I would like to explore the language-culture connection and its consequences for Japan in a globalizing world, and argue for a need to create a context in which Japanese students are imbued with the awareness of culture in order to facilitate the transformation of the Japanese cultural identity into a more globally conscious one. In this view, it is postulated that creating a global cultural consciousness among Japanese second language (L2) learners can help bridge the gap between linguistic ability and functional intercultural communication.

However, such a scenario where a high level of intercultural awareness is operating at its optimum is hardly available in Japan. As stated in the preamble, I returned to study in the land where I first had my intercultural awakening, Malaysia. I decided to focus on Sabah as the locale of my case study I wanted to find out what made it so unique. Thus, I embarked on this journey of discovery, adopting an ethnographic approach, to document my exploration. The central aim of the exploratory study was to conduct a case study in Sabah in order to examine the

situation where a high level of intercultural awareness (ICA) is evident despite a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population. The relationship between the ICA and the language was examined, that is, how the ICA influences its common language (Sabah Malay) in the Sabah society. Subsequently, these findings were applied to the relationship of ICA globally, considering English as the global common language. Finally, the perspectives of the situation of ICA and the global language illustrated in the discussion are extrapolated to the Japanese English education system, where it is argued the current EFL model of English is deficient and partly to be blamed for the communication weaknesses therein. Instead, taking a leaf from this case study in Sabah where a high level of intercultural awareness prevails, it is theorized that EFL teaching in Japan should adopt a more global and inclusive cultural-conscious model in the Japanese EFL classroom.

In what follows, the background of the study was elucidated. Following that the problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, and conceptual framework were described. The chapter concludes by discussing the overall organization of the dissertation.

### **1.2.1 Situation in Sabah**

With its emphasis on constructing a uniquely Sabahan cultural, religious, and ethnic identity, cultural unity in diversity has been widely celebrated in Sabah. It is undoubtedly a unique multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multilingual region. Indigenous inhabitants of Sabah refer to themselves as "Sabahan," and point proudly to their social harmony in spite of cultural and religious diversity, which they are quick to contrast with other areas of Malaysia and the world.

Tamring (2008:150) states that international ethnic tolerance in Sabah is high due to extensive interactions in daily lives which lead to openness in relationships across religion and ethnicity. High ethnic tolerance is described through the readiness or willingness to have an inter-ethnic relationships and peoples' willingness to relate socially, economically and politically.

The report "Religious Tolerance in Malaysia: Problems and Challenge" (Nur & Khadijah, 2013) states that the practice of ethnic tolerance is the way of co-existence in Sabah society and that even with the complexity of Sabahan ethnic composition, we can see clearly the amicable relationship and harmonious environment, the tolerance and mutual respect between people, which they maintain as their way of life.

A Japanese sociologist who specialized in Sabah, Hiroyuki Yamamoto describes Sabah as "a society in which multiple cultures coexist well with pluralistic religions" (Yamamoto, 1993: 27).

Sabah's chief religions, namely Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, intermingled with traditional animist beliefs. As Samovar *et al.* explain "the spread of Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and Confucianism did not homogenize the societies they enveloped. It was usually the other way around: societies insisted on adapting the religions to their own cultural traditions" (Samovar, Porter & Mac Daniel, 2007: 29). Thus it is that you can have Sabahan Christians who have learned, and treasure, the rites of a Bobohizan and yet are aware of the conflict with their adopted religion, but nevertheless live with it. In individualistic western societies, such a situation would be indefensible, but as Robert Young explains – citing Peter Winch's research into the Azande tribe who believe in witch doctors – "religious thought and practice have their own set of rules, different from those of the language game of science ... it is possible to be illogical in religious thinking." As such, "a belief in witchcraft in Christian culture is irrational and cognitively unorthodox, whereas among the Azande it is rational and orthodox" (Young, 1996: 36).

Religious beliefs seem not an obstacle to business and community activities. Moreover, in Sabah streets and towns, Muslim restaurants coexist comfortably next to Chinese restaurants, despite the religious and cultural differences of their owners. More than fifty ethnicities, mainly Malays, Chinese and Kadazan-Dusun, coexist peacefully. People change religion relatively painlessly, although officially conversion to Islam is irrevocable. Mingling of religions is not an issue in Sabah, even individual

families may have children of different religions, usually as a result of the relatively frequent intermarriage. These changes seem to be accepted phlegmatically. The culture of tolerance seems to be resilient, despite being sorely tested by the Lahad Datu invasions prior to the Federal Election in May 2013 in which Suluks (and by extension all Filipinos in Sabah) became objects of suspicion for a time.

As a result, Sabah is a microcosm of an idealized world community imbued with enhanced intercultural awareness. English is the second official language of Malaysia though Bahasa Malaysia, as the first official language, is far more commonly spoken and proficiency in it is emphasized in the education system. Bahasa Malaysia is the common language for people from ethnic groups all over Sabah. My ethnographic exploration is based on the language environment and development studies in Sabah. Sabah Malay (a more casual version of Bahasa Malaysia) as the common language, coexists well with other languages in Sabah, in contrast to the situation in parts of America where Spanish speaking Latinos and English speaking blacks are in conflict.

There is much evidence that Sabah society displays an unusual degree of Cultural Awareness and that Sabah conforms to the final (Participatory Third) culture stage on the scale of Quappe & Cantatore (2005:2), in which the "final stage brings people from different cultural background together" which means the society functions smoothly.

Many academics have proposed strong connections between the language and culture of a society, but none have had such an impact as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Benjamin Whorf (1956) stated that, "The background linguistic system of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas" (Cited in Aubrey, 2011: 213). He then went further to conclude that "users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at views of the world" (op cit:221). According to Sapir (1958: 69), "the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group" .While the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been criticized

recently for overstating the link between language and culture, according to Fernando Saussure (cited in Kobayashi, 1972) the relationship between the society and words is that society is created by words. Saussure (cited in Kobayashi, 1972) adds that if the society coexists, languages should also coexist well.

That languages coexist well is indicated in this study, in which images and concepts of words, or more precisely beliefs in words are shared and understood by people of different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. This ethnographic research focuses on people's belief in the Sabah society about how people share the images of culturally loaded words.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

The Problem Statement is closely related to perceptions of English as a Second Language.

#### **1.3.1 Background**

English is being learned eagerly throughout the world, especially in the Expanding Circle of Countries (Kachru, 1992) and this includes much of the world's population, more than one billion people worldwide (British Council, 2012).

Even so, it seems to be a good time to step back. It is because the global language has been treated as just a tool "to be instrumental, a skill to use for communicating thought and information" (MLA, 2007: 2), but the cultural elements in the language –values such as greeting and leave-taking customs - have not been ascribed enough attention in spite of their significance. The cultural elements of a language are "an essential element of a human being's thought processes, perceptions, and self-expressions". (MLA, 2007: 2) The cultural elements in language inform thought processes.

The significance of cultural elements in language is described by the Modern Language Association (MLA) as critical to cultural understanding, "as recent world events have demonstrated, deep cultural knowledge and linguistic competence are equally necessary, if one wishes to understand people and their communities". (MLA,