WRITING CULTURE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This study analyzes the cultural understanding of students after a two-week international fieldwork in Hawaii based on their notes regarding their experiences. Japanese college students visited museums, schools, and shops, as well as listened to presentations by local people. They took notes during the fieldwork, and then after returning to Japan, they wrote two sets of fieldnotes, analyzed them, and then wrote a paper on a topic of their choice in English. The author arranged the international fieldwork and accompanied the students in Hawaii, and then examined their fieldnotes. This report contains interpretations of how the students understood their experience. The students tended to show more interest in the familiar, particularly items or concepts that remind them of their home country. As they endeavored to understand their experience in a foreign language, they obtained a deeper understanding of culture while also drawing on what they already knew.

Key words: *culture, English language, Hawaii, Japanese college students, qualitative research, international fieldwork*

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture is difficult to understand. Apart from being difficult to define, culture and what it represents cannot be easily visualized. Ethnographic writing is one of the ways through which a researcher understands culture. As a qualitative researcher trained in the United States, I have acquired a deep understanding of U.S. culture after visiting a variety of places, including educational institutions, and then writing fieldnotes in English, my second language. A primary difficulty I faced was in describing observations in English because I was not sure which aspect of reality I faced should be in the texts. Furthermore, I could not describe what I had experienced as I wished owing to the limits of my English proficiency when I was a graduate student. Regardless of the difficulties I experienced in writing fieldnotes, I am convinced that ethnographic writing is one of the best ways to understand culture. In this research, I will analyze how Japanese college students understand culture in Hawaii based on their fieldnotes, written in English, from two weeks of fieldwork. The findings here may contribute to the ways in which college students understand a foreign culture in a foreign language.

2. FIELDWORK IN HAWAII: UNDERSTANDING CULTURE AND WRITING ABOUT IT

At Aichi University where I teach, I handle two courses in which students study culture in Hawaii. In particular, I focus on the history of Japanese immigrants, tourism, and education in Hawaii. In the fall semester of 2014, students studied these topics in English and watched films that depicted some aspects of life in Hawaii.

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of this international fieldwork is for the students to learn more about the history of Japanese Americans, tourism, and education in Hawaii. The students studied these topics for one semester in English before visiting Hawaii. They were required to read two chapters in the book *Issei: Japanese Immigrants in Hawaii* and one chapter from the book *The Nisei Generation in Hawaii*. Moreover, one chapter on tourism and the commodification of cultural identity in Hawaii was taken up in class. The goal was to give them a much better grasp of these subjects by facilitating actual experience. Culture, in

a sense, is not scientific object to be studied; culture is socially constructed by the interpretation of texts that describe social phenomena (Maanen 1988).

Prior to the fieldwork, the students learned how to take fieldnotes on site using readings from *Qualitative Research for Education*. The two-week fieldwork required communicating with many people in English. As such, they brushed up on their English skills as well. After returning to Japan, the students took another of my classes in spring 2016, in which I asked them to write two sets of fieldnotes in English and a six-page paper in English.

2.2 Itinerary

During the spring vacation of 2015, I accompanied 13 second-year college students to Hawaii. On March 5, 2015, we arrived at Hilo in Hawaii Island. We stayed there for nine days, and our itinerary included visiting the Lyman House Memorial Museum, Hilo Hawaiian Hotel, Hilo Reeds Bay Hotel, KTA Superstore, the University of Hawaii at Hilo, Hawaii Community College, Waiakea High School, and a number of other places. In each place, the students listen to a person or persons discuss specific topics. For instance, two guides talked about the Lymans who were Christian missionaries from New England assigned in Hilo. In Hilo Hawaiian Hotel, hotel manager Linda Nako talked about the hotel business and marketing strategies. Hilo Reeds Bay Hotel owner Don Inoue spoke about the history of Banyan Drive in which the hotel is located. In the KTA Superstore, manager Derek Kurisu took us to many sections of the store, ultimately seating us in a conference room to discuss marketing strategies. In the University of Hawaii at Hilo, Japanese professor Honda Masafumi, who has been in Hilo for over 20 years, gave the students a two-hour lecture on the history of Japanese Americans in Hawaii in English. At Hawaii Community College, my students took a Ukulele lesson and talked to the students there during lunchtime. At Waiakea High School, my students observed a number of classes and interacted with high school students.

2.3 Students' Language and Communication Skills

Of the 13 students, Mina Takagi has the highest English language proficiency. She spent several years of her childhood in the U.S., and thus, she does not have any difficulty understanding people talking in English. She eagerly asked questions after listening to a person talk. Four students have upper intermediate English language skills. They understand more than 60% of spoken English. At first, they were shy to ask questions even though they comprehended the content of a talk, but as they spent more time in Hawaii, they started to adjust themselves to their English-speaking environment and felt comfortable asking questions. Four students have intermediate English proficiency. They could roughly comprehend half of what people say but have difficulty understanding specific details. Consequently, they could not ask questions after listening to a person talk. The capability to ask questions is a major difference between the upper intermediate and intermediate groups. Meanwhile, four students are in the lower intermediate level of English language learning, and they hardly understand conversational English; their reading comprehension in English is high.

2.4 Students' Fieldnotes

It is commonly understood that "thick description" leads a researcher to have a better understanding of culture (Geertz 1973, pp. 3–30). Thick description is a detailed description of the physical space and people's interactions. It also includes what people say, verbatim. Mina Takagi wrote fieldnotes similar to those prepared in academic research. She understood most of what she heard and took notes on site in English. After returning to Japan, she also listened to a recording of a talk and a lecture as well as transcribed Professor Honda's lecture and Mr. Don Inoue's talk on the history of Banyan Drive.

The students with upper intermediate English proficiency wrote decent fieldnotes, but these lacked detailed descriptions of what they observed. In ethnographic literature, it is often assumed that a researcher holds a superior position to describe other culture (Kouritzin 2002). The researcher is a

trained scholar who specializes in anthropology, sociology, or related fields, and he or she writes fieldnotes in his or her native language although the place of study is not part of a place where his or her native language is spoken. By contrast, all of the Japanese students were asked to write fieldnotes in English, and such a "handicap" may give them a sense of inferiority. English is a powerful and the most common language people are supposed to study (Sheidlhofer 2011). Many of the students were overwhelmed by having to write in English, pressured to produce quality writing. Indeed, many of them struggled with figuring out what they listened to exactly. With their limited language proficiency, they relied on what they saw, not on what they heard, and the students with intermediate and lower intermediate levels of English proficiency tended to write fieldnotes based on information that came from their eyes, not from their ears.

The students with lower intermediate English proficiency had difficulty understanding what they listened to, so they tried to write down what they saw in Japanese initially. It was easier for them to write down in their native language what they instantly recognized. In certain cases, they merely copied what they saw. For instance, the director of Big Island Visitors Bureau in Hilo used PowerPoint slides to complement his talk on tourism in Hawaii, and the students copied the words on the screen. However, the students with good language skills could take notes while listening to his talk. In another case, when the owner of Hilo Reeds Bay Hotel talked about two ways of running a hotel in Hawaii, most of the students had no idea about what was talked about partly because the owner used special terms for real estate and partly because he did not use any comprehensible visual aids.

2.4.1 Comparing Hawaii with Home

A researcher describes phenomena with a certain value because fieldnotes are interpretations that follow the researcher's assumptions (Kouritzin 2002). An interesting finding in my analysis of the students' fieldnotes is their tendency to compare what they experienced in Hawaii with what they are familiar with in Japan, even noting different points in their fieldnotes. For instance, when they visited a KTA superstore in Hilo, a store manager greeted us and took us to many sections of the store. A number of the students wrote a fieldnote about this visit, and a common description was that "everything was so big in Hawaii" compared with Japan. They were also surprised that such a high-ranking manager was friendly; a person of a higher position is supposed to be more serious and less friendly in Japan.

When the students visited Two Ladies Kitchen, a store selling various rice cakes, they were intrigued by the different types of rice cakes. They already had an assumption that rice cakes could contain certain fruits, such as strawberries or a small orange. They did not expect rice cakes to have brownie or coconut fillings. According to an owner of the shop, young part-timers who were college students came up with the new types of rice cakes. The part-timers are amateur cooks, but the owner values their ideas. Many students were surprised at this approach. Moreover, they were flabbergasted by the colors of the rice cakes; they had never seen blue or yellow rice cakes in Japan and considered such colors unappealing to the taste.

Another noticeable theme in their fieldnotes is the gap between images of Hawaii and the reality they experienced. In Japan, Hawaii has an image of a resort where people have a good time and relax. In fact, Hawaii is one of the popular places where young people have a wedding. However, when students arrived at Hilo, they experienced cloudy skies and saw mountains and greenery. In their fieldnotes, a number of students wrote about the importance of brand image with respect to Hawaii. After listening to the presentation by the director of Big Island Visitors Bureau, the students agreed that Hawaii Island should promote brand image to attract more tourists. In Honolulu, Oahu Island, students saw what they expected, whereas in Hilo, Hawaii Island, they saw what they did not expect. All of the students who wrote fieldnotes on tourism mentioned that a brand image of people enjoying nature in Big Island, such as volcanoes, mountains, and various climates, is essential.

The students were impressed by a series of visits where they studied the history of Japanese Americans; they appreciated learning this topic firsthand. They had studied how hard it was for Japanese immigrants to live in Hawaii. They had read about immigrants making ends meet while working in sugar plantations. Their understanding of Japanese immigrants became deeper and more tangible after attending the

lecture of a Japanese professor at the University of Hawaii at Hilo on the harsh situations that early Japanese immigrants faced and their contribution to American society. The visit to the Japanese Cultural Center of Honolulu with a third-generation Japanese American further expanded their understanding. In elementary and secondary school education, Japanese Americans are rarely mentioned, and thus, the students marveled at the close relationship between Hawaii and Japan, which has existed for over a century.

Students showed interest in cultural differences during their visit to Waiakea High School in Hilo on March 10, 2015. Many students noticed differences between their high school in Japan and Waiakea High School, a local public school. Four students and a teacher welcomed us by giving us leis. The giving of leis is a typical way of welcoming in Hawaii. After the introductions, our group was divided into two. One observed a robotics class, and the other observed a science class. I joined the group that visited the science class. When we entered the room, two students were eating noodles although lunchtime was over. The students talked freely. Then, a teacher started to return exam papers, walking around the room to hand the papers to each student. One of my students observed that the teacher did not exercise authority in the classroom, as the teacher did not call the students by name to return the exam papers. It seemed to our group that the teacher had an equal status with the students. After returning the exam papers, the teacher explained the correct answers, using an overhead projector. While the teacher was talking, a number of students used their cell phone and two students were still eating. One student came to the room late. My student, Mina Takagi, noticed that the questions in the exam required students to show logical thinking although the exam was on chemistry. Her remark was interesting, as she was familiar with American education after she attended elementary and middle schools in the U.S. As Carspecken (1996) notes, the more familiar observers are with the culture they are observing, the more articulate they are in interpreting it. In Japan, chemistry exams only test students for their knowledge of chemistry.

My students observed the conversations between the teacher and the students in the class. The student with the highest score (92 points) is a boy with dyed hair, whereas the student with the lowest score (35 points) is a girl sitting on the corner in the classroom. One student said that the exam was “hard.” The teacher responded with smile, “What? You do not have to listen to me if you get a good score.” At this moment, one male latecomer entered the room. He was jokingly greeted by the female student with the lowest score, “Have you been smoking pot?” The male student shook his head. “You seem blasted, you [look like you] feel good,” said the female student. The male student shook his head again. The female student then went on to doodle on her notebook, not listening to the teacher. One of my students, Hikaru Murai observed, “It is like an elementary school in Japan.” What she meant was that although this chemistry class had a group of students who are excellent at science, the atmosphere was chaotic and the American students did not show respect for the teacher. This was the first time for most of my students to attend a class in the U.S., and they experienced culture shock to see how different the classroom atmosphere was between their high school and Waiakea High School.

Japanese college students assume that good academic ability corresponds to good manners and behavior; in the U.S., academic ability has nothing to do with manners in the classroom. Good students drink and eat in the classroom, and such behavior does not indicate any academic ability. By contrast, there are unwritten codes of conduct in Japanese classrooms, and good students are supposed to follow these codes. For instance, good students never eat food while listening to their professor’s lecture.

Meanwhile, in a robotics class in Waiakea High School, one American student explained a device for catching oysters in the sea. In the high school student’s report, science teachers go to the ocean research center in Hilo to get ideas about what the researchers there needed; these ideas are then discussed with the students in class. The students are encouraged to create a machine or a device with practical value to the science researchers. One of my students, Rina Iwaki, was impressed by American education. Below is an excerpt from her fieldnotes:

In Waiakea High School, I observed a robotics class. In this class students invented a helicopter having a camera, a catching oyster machine and a robot game machine. I controlled a robot game machine. It

was very difficult to control it but I was very excited. This robot showed wonderful performance. I didn't think a student invented it. This class has a 3D printer, so some parts were made by the 3D printer. This high school has many classrooms that specialized in technical knowledge such as a robotics room, a cooking room and a technical learning center. Students can study the Electrical Program and they learned about conserving our resources and how an electric vehicle can reduce oil consumption in technical learning center. The Electrical Program is designed to give students the hands-on experience in the world of electric vehicles. I know a 3D printer. However, I had not seen it and used it. I was impressed with a printer that makes parts of a machine. It is nice for a student who wants to be an inventor, because in this class students can use a lot of new types of a machine, so it does not seem a tiresome class. After this science class we went to the library. It has many kinds of books. Of course, it has comics. In Japan, people should study silently in the library because people cannot concentrate on studying and reading books. But this library was a little noisy. Almost all of the students were talking. I wonder why librarians warn the students of stop talking.

Rina was intrigued by the range of science rooms for students to use and envied this kind of academic learning environment. However, she was frustrated with the American students talking in the library. She has been taught not to chat in the library, and she is not tolerant of noise in the library. This indicates that she firmly interprets social interactions with a specific value, and she took the students' manner negatively although their talking was normal in that particular library.

The students were likely to notice cultural differences between Hawaii and Japan during the fieldwork, although they recognized similarities as well. Many students noted that hospitality in Hawaii, called "Aloha spirit," is similar Japan's "Omotenashi." Aloha spirit is friendliness and smiling. In business, customer satisfaction is important, and welcoming guests with a smiling face promotes feelings of comfort and relaxation. Friendly attitude is expected in a good hotel in Japan as well, and the students instantly recognized the similarity.

Here I would like to show how my students' understanding of what they experienced was different from what I experienced although we visited the same place at the same time. The following is my fieldnote on visiting the Lyman House Memorial Museum in Hilo on March 6, 2015:

We took a van to the Lyman House Memorial Museum from Uncle Billy's Hotel where we stayed in Hilo. When we arrived at the museum, our group was divided into two groups. My group tour guide was a woman of Filipino origin. When we visited the house, she started to explain about the house. The students took notes about what she explained. She told us that in 1810 a group of people from the U.K visited Hawaii to spread Christianity. The first missionary arrived in Hawaii in 1830. The house where the Lymans had lived has a New England and Hawaiian style, and the second floor of the house is Georgian style. The tour spoke clear English, so it was easy for me to understand her explanation. However, it was difficult for the Japanese students to understand it because she spoke fast for them. We went inside the house, and there were family pictures on the wall. The first top two pictures are David Lyman and Sarah Lyman. David was educated at Williams College in Massachusetts and he met Sarah over there, and they came to Hawaii. They had nine children but three children passed away when they were young. Seven children were home-schooled, and three lived in Chicago. One child became a doctor, and two became lawyers. Among the seven children, Emma was the most important child, because she stayed in Hawaii, and she married a missionary and had a family in Hawaii. The Lyman House where we were in was built in 1839. Education was considered very important in the Lymans. Reading a Bible, writing, and intellectual arithmetic were very important. David Lyman started Hilo Boarding School in 1839. The school was religious as well as secular, and the school was a middle school. The school was fired and destroyed in 1850, but the school restarted. In 1874, David retired as a principal, and his son, Levie, became a principal, and he emphasized vocational training. In 1925, the school ended because of financial problems. Sarah wanted to spread the New England way of wearing the clothe, because Hawaiian women just wear a kind of skirt, exposing their breast. Sarah thought that that way was uncivilized way of clothing. Kapa, a colon cloth, is a stiff material, and this was used for

clothing. In particular, dark brown was the most popular because this color hides dirt. There is a room next to the entrance, and this room was used as a room for guests in the Lyman House. At that time there were no hotels in Hilo, and David and Sarah invited their guests to their house. There is a flute in the room. Sarah took a journal, and her journal was used for geology because she recorded earthquake in Hawaii precisely. We went to the second floor of the Lyman House, and the guide told us that the second floor was added in 1856. There was an attic in the house, and the attic was used for storage and a sleeping place. In 1884 David passed away. In 1972 the Lyman House Memorial Museum was built. There are desks and chairs in the left rooms on the first floor, and display of clothes is in the right room on the first floor. On the second floor, there is a bedroom, and the third floor is an attic where we saw a simple bed. The guide told us that she came to Hawaii in 1985, and she had a thick accent, and she had hard time studying English after coming to Hawaii.

These were my observations in the Lyman House Memorial Museum. All of the students took notes, but they seemed to focus on what they saw in the house, not what they heard. One student used an iPad to record the guide's speaking and entered certain notes on the iPad. Although all of them seemed interested in the first Americans in Hilo, Hawaii, only one student, Aya Endo, chose to write a fieldnote on this visit and talked about the Lymans in her final paper. The following is an excerpt from her paper:

David Lyman and Sarah Lyman were from New England. New England is in the northeastern part of the United States. They came to Hilo in order to spread the Christian religion after they graduated from a college in Massachusetts. David Lyman and Sarah Lyman weren't invited from Hawaiians. They didn't have persons whom they could rely on. I think they had trouble talking with Hawaiians because they would only spoke English. But they had to speak the language of Hawaii to spread the Christian religion because they had to have good communication in order to spread it. I wonder if they learned the Hawaii language. Now official language of Hawaii is English. But in the past, official language of Hawaii wasn't English. I think they didn't learn Hawaiian language but they taught English. I don't know how to teach English. But I think that someone came to Hawaii and taught English for Hawaiians before David Lyman and Sarah Lyman came to Hawaii. And David Lyman and Sarah Lyman had trouble living in Hawaii too because temperature of Hawaii is higher than that of New England. For that reason, the cloth which David Lyman and Sarah Lyman wore didn't match the climate of Hawaii. Then, they made a new cloth based on the cloth available in New England.

Aya's understanding of the Lymans is fragmented and incomplete. Her English proficiency is in the lower intermediate level, and she could not catch the details of the history of the Lymans. She basically understood the ways the Lymans lived in Hawaii and their relationship with local Hawaiians. However, she stated her personal opinion not based on what she observed. She could not fill in the gaps between what she learned and what she wondered. Her firsthand study of the Lymans led herself to have more questions.

3. CONCLUSION

My college students are not trained researchers. Although they studied how to take fieldnotes, they are not trained in data collection and data analysis in sociology and anthropology. Furthermore, English is their second language, and their proficiency in it certainly influenced the ways through which they wrote their fieldnotes and final paper. Mina Takagi may be the only student who made appropriate inferences from her fieldnotes and wrote an insightful final paper. Her fieldnotes contained rich descriptive data and good observer's comments. The four students with upper intermediate English proficiency could pay attention to the talks and presentations of the local people, and they properly organized their fieldnotes well. Their final paper revealed that they were very impressed by the historical connection between Hawaii and Japan. Those with intermediate English proficiency had difficulties describing their experiences; they relied heavily on what they saw, not what they heard, to write their fieldnotes and final

paper. Lastly, the students with lower intermediate proficiency failed to have a good grasp of what they experienced, and they tended to insert their personal opinions in their fieldnotes and final paper because their observations were limited by their limited language proficiency.

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