

A Practice Report: Student Responses to Active Learning in Communication Education for Dating and Marriage

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Abstract

This paper, a practice report for the course “Special Topics in Language and Communication II,” focuses on the experiences of fifteen Japanese students and four international students who actively engaged in an “All English” interactive learning environment. The course aimed to enable students to develop broader perspectives on dating and marriage. I discuss the impact of this course on expanding students’ viewpoints regarding romantic relationships, with particular emphasis on the significance of studying these relationships through a communication lens. Based on students’ responses, the course received positive feedback, highlighting the effectiveness of the methodology in fostering engaging discussions, credible information sharing, inclusion of guest speakers, and meaningful exploration of personal topics. Analysis of students’ responses also confirmed the limited spaces and opportunities for discussions on romantic relationships, thus emphasizing the necessity of open discussions for such topics.

Keyword

practice report, communication education, active learning, romantic relationships

Introduction

The course “Special Topics in Language and Communication II” was a compulsory elective subject offered in the Faculty of Global Communication at Aichi Shukutoku University during the academic year 2023. The department’s primary goal is to shape individuals into “global citizens,” fostering essential skills for thriving in an ever-evolving international society. This involves an inclusive educational approach focusing on cultivating an appreciation of diverse cultures, honing proficient English communication skills for effective global engagement, and cultivating the ability to think and collaborate in English within a global context.

Throughout the course, fifteen Japanese students and four international students engaged in an

exploration of Japanese dating cultures and customs while sharing their perspectives on dating and marriage. Operating under the department's "All English" policy, the course was conducted entirely in English.

This paper aims to analyze the impact of this course on broadening students' perspectives regarding dating and marriage. It places particular emphasis on the significance of studying these relationships through a communication lens.

The Significance of Communication Education in Relationships

Aside from fulfilling basic survival needs, nearly all significant aspects of human existence - such as acquiring language and cultural norms, forming and negotiating relationships, and finding meaning in our daily actions - depend entirely on the process of communication (Spitzberg, 2015). In other words, social and interpersonal skills serve as the tools by which all human relationships are initiated, negotiated, maintained, transformed, and dissolved (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2011). The central and integral role of communication can be summarized in a basic set of syllogistic axioms (Spitzberg, 2015, p. 238):

A1: Communication constitutes relationships.

A2: Relationships are vital to quality and quantity of life.

A3: Therefore, communication is vital to quality and quantity of life.

Furthermore:

A4: The greater the competence of communication, the greater the relationship quality.

A5: The greater the relationship quality, the greater the quality of life.

A6: Therefore, the greater the competence of communication, the greater the quality of life.

In light of this, a person's competence as a communicator could determine not only a relationship's endurance but also its flourishing (Afifi & Coveleski, 2015). While some believe communication's importance lies post-relationship formation, Duncan (1967) asserts, "we do not relate and talk, but relate in talk" (p. 249). Thus, understanding relationships through the lens of communication is crucial, highlighting the need for learning opportunities to cultivate healthy, thriving relationships.

Furthermore, Fujimaki and Miyazaki (2019) posit that studying communication allows individuals to compare their personal narratives and viewpoints with diverse perspectives, fostering moments of reflection, introspection, and questioning. This process triggers a critical examination of societal norms, conventions, and prevailing value judgments often seen as "common" or "normal" in society, thereby encouraging the development of critical thinking skills. With the ongoing globalization,

exploring one's communication experiences becomes essential, highlighting the necessity of embracing diverse perspectives. From these perspectives, communication education plays a pivotal role in providing platforms for students to engage in discussions about their perspectives with others.

The Necessity of Creating Spaces and Opportunities for Dialogue on Romantic Relationships

In today's rapidly evolving dating landscape, characterized by a multitude of avenues and changing societal attitudes, individuals worldwide face considerable challenges in forming romantic relationships. This situation is particularly pronounced in contemporary Japan, where many singles encounter significant hurdles in meeting potential partners (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2022).

Previously, the process of meeting someone was less complicated due to established practices such as arranged matches or workplace encounters (Iwasawa, 2010; Yamada, 2019). However, the shift away from these traditional matchmaking systems has created an open dating market, leading to uncertainty and confusion among individuals (Iwasawa, 2010).

Moreover, despite the accessibility of various dating avenues such as apps and events in today's landscape, fewer people actively participate in the dating scene (Nishimura, 2014). This shift, alongside the complexity of modern relationships, has created a more challenging dating environment (Tomoike, 2021). Consequently, many individuals are realizing their struggles, feeling inadequately equipped to navigate this new dating era, resulting in increased worries and uncertainties about initiating relationships or understanding romantic dynamics (Cabinet Office, 2015; Yamada & Shirakawa, 2008).

Additionally, these challenges in relationship formation are exacerbated by evolving attitudes toward romantic relationships. Notably, Japan, along with other countries, has seen a shift from perceiving relationships as essential, with an increasing number of individuals choosing to remain single (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2022). Similarly, Generation Z in the U.K. emphasizes self-focus and individual growth before pursuing partnerships (Klein, 2022).

These changing attitudes and the challenges they pose underscore the critical necessity for open discussions on concepts such as "love," "dating," and "marriage." The limited spaces for such discussions inhibit individuals' abilities to explore the fluid meanings of these concepts and hinder the evolution of their ideas through interactions with others (Omori, 2019). Encouraging these conversations, as suggested by Tanaka (2011), is crucial not only to address the struggles in forming

relationships but also to tackle the broader social implications, such as the declining birth rate.

The Faculty's Commitment to Active Learning

The Faculty of Global Communication is committed to nurturing “global citizens” capable of collaborating across diverse cultures and values to address various global challenges. This mission is reflected in three Diploma Policies (DPs):

DP1: Equipping students with the knowledge necessary to comprehend both domestic and international cultures and social contexts, enabling them to effectively convey compelling messages to a global audience.

DP2: Developing essential English language proficiency, communication skills, and problem-solving capabilities required to navigate diverse scenarios in the global society.

DP3: Cultivating an open-minded approach that acknowledges differences among individuals from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. Through experiences in societies with varied cultures and values, students develop the mindset needed to coexist harmoniously as “global citizens.”

In an era marked by rapid globalization, aging populations, and concerns about resource scarcity, societal structures are undergoing fundamental reassessment. This necessitates individuals to cultivate problem-solving skills, an enduring appetite for learning, and active critical thinking (Central Council for Education, 2012). As discussed in the Central Council for Education's report (2012), Japan's education system, traditionally centered on passive knowledge transmission, contrasts with the demand for interactive, discussion-based learning environments that foster student-teacher interaction, intellectual growth, and proactive problem-solving abilities.

The faculty's objectives strongly resonate with the principles of active learning. By fostering “global citizens” through collaborative problem-solving across diverse cultural settings, the faculty's aims mirror the core ethos of active learning - engaging students in interactive, experiential, and culturally immersive educational experiences. These practices effectively prepare students to navigate and contribute meaningfully to our globalized world.

Course Overview and Schedule

With the DPs shown above, the course adopted the active learning approach to enable students to explore diverse opinions through discussions and other activities.

In the syllabus, the course “Special Topics in Language and Communication II” is described as “an exploration of the communication within close human relationships, specifically focusing on intimate (i.e. romantic) relationships.” The topics covered include the impact of media on dating culture, online dating, global romantic relationships, and communication about sex as shown in the course schedule (table 1).

Table 1. Course schedule

1	Introduction to the class: Exploring the meaning of <i>ren'ai</i>
2	<i>Ren'ai-banare</i> : Decline of real love and rise of virtual love
3	Media: The impact of media on our perspectives toward dating and marriage
4	Dating script: The gendered roles we play
5	Relationship communication: The transition from friendship to romantic relationships
6	Relationship maintenance: Infidelity, cheating, and jealousy
7	Mid-term presentations
8	Marriage: Late marriage and less marriage in Japan / The changing meaning of marriage
9	<i>Konkatsu</i> (marriage hunting): Matching agency and matchmaking party (Guest speaker)
10	Sexual communication: Sexual consent and negotiating safe sex
11	Online dating: Relationshopping
12	Global relationships: Conflict management in intercultural couples (Guest speaker)
13	Final presentations (1)
14	Final presentations (2)
15	Final presentations (3)

Teaching Methodology

My teaching objective through this course was to enable students to develop broader perspectives on dating and marriage in interactive learning environment. This involved teaching various communication models and theories related to romantic relationships while exploring dating cultures and customs in contemporary Japan. To achieve this goal, the following teaching methods were applied:

- **Reading Assignments:** For each lesson, I provided students with reading materials beforehand to prepare them for the upcoming topics. For instance, in lesson two, where we discussed the disinterest of younger Japanese generations in dating, I assigned a journal article titled “Decline of real love and rise of virtual love: Love in Asia” (Yamada, 2017). This article elaborates on contemporary Japanese society’s decreased interest in marriage or dating, the emergence of

various forms of virtual love, and their prevalence in East Asian countries at large.

To assess their understanding, I had students submit their thoughts and questions on the articles. This allowed me to gauge their comprehension and provide clarifications during class. Furthermore, I encouraged students to include reflections from their own experiences in their comments, enabling them to relate their real-life situations to the articles' content.

- **Lectures:** During the course sessions, I incorporated statistical data sourced from public institutions such as the Cabinet Office and the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, as well as information from journal articles, to provide insights into the current landscape of Japanese dating customs. For instance, in lesson eight, when discussing the contemporary marriage scenario in Japan, I referred to “The White Paper on Gender Equality 2022” (Cabinet Office, 2022), which highlights reasons why some individuals refrain from pursuing marriage, citing reasons such as “I don’t want to be tied down by marriage; I want to remain free” and “I haven’t met someone I love enough to marry” (p. 11).

Also, I introduced several communication theories and models related to romantic relationships, including Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), Investment Model (Rusbult, 1980), Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), Knapp’s Staircase Model (Knapp, 1978), and Relational Dialectics Theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). These theories and models offer frameworks to explain and comprehend complex dynamics within romantic relationships, helping students understand why certain behaviors, interactions, or patterns occur.

Furthermore, I incorporated Daily News articles from DMM as in-class reading materials, as these articles regularly cover current global events. For instance, when discussing the topic of online dating, I selected an article titled “Tinder to offer background checks in US” to help students explore the potential risks of using dating apps and how companies are striving to improve safety for online dating users.

- **Group Discussions:** Kino (2017) proposes a new paradigm in university education, advocating for active learning that transforms the classroom into a collaborative space. This change emphasizes a shared effort between teachers and students, departing from the traditional notion of a setting solely for one-way knowledge transfer. To create an interactive learning environment where students actively communicate with both their peers and myself to deepen their understanding, I incorporated discussions into every lesson.

During lesson seven, for instance, which centered on relationship maintenance with a focus on topics such as infidelity, cheating, and jealousy, I prompted students to discuss the acceptability of various actions performed by their romantic partners. This included scenarios such as hanging out with a mixed group of males and females, exchanging constant or excessive texts with another person, and engaging in kissing with someone else. Through these discussions, students had the opportunity to explore and grasp both personal and societal boundaries within relationships, enabling them to identify behaviors that they considered acceptable or unacceptable. Additionally, these conversations facilitated the development of empathy and a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives on relationship dynamics, encouraging a more empathetic approach to differing viewpoints.

Furthermore, when leading group discussions, I employed a method where students first jot down their opinions on in-class worksheets or mini whiteboards before sharing them with their group members. This approach assisted students in structuring their thoughts, as they often find it challenging to articulate their own perspectives on the spot.

- **Guest Speakers:** In addition to our regular lessons, we had two guest speakers during the semester.

In our ninth lesson, focusing on *konkatsu* (marriage-hunting), we had a guest speaker from a company specializing in *konkatsu* activities and casual wedding services. The speaker, a staff member from their Group Public Relations department, thoroughly discussed the reasons for the rising rate of never-marriage, the evolving perceptions of marriage in contemporary Japan, and the functioning of matchmaking agencies for singles seeking romantic relationships.

In our twelfth lesson, focused on global relationships, we welcomed another guest speaker - a teacher in the department. She is Japanese, married to an Irish spouse, and is raising three children in Japan. During her presentation, she discussed both the advantages and challenges of being in an intercultural relationship.

- **Presentations by Students:** At the end of the semester, each student delivered a presentation on the topic that resonated most with them, allowing for a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Analysis of Students' Responses

For their final assignment, I assigned students to write a course reflection essay addressing what

intrigued or surprised them the most, how this course deepened their understanding of dating and marriage, and their intentions to apply these new insights to future relationships. I'll highlight selected comments from their essays, presenting how the course influenced their perspectives on dating and marriage, focusing on three aspects: (a) their motivations for taking the course, (b) their key takeaways from the course, and (c) feedback on the teaching methodology.

- a. Motivations for Taking This Course:** In their essays, some students shared their intrigue with the course contents upon reading the syllabus, noting the rarity of a university offering a course that focuses on communication in romantic relationships. One student expressed, “I thought that a class centered on the theme of love would be enjoyable.”

Others highlighted their limited opportunities to discuss romantic relationships in their daily lives. One student stated, “Despite being in relationships previously, I had never deeply considered aspects such as why men cover expenses during dates or how expectations differ between men and women in relationships.”

A few students also sought to find answers to questions arising from their personal experiences. For example, one student reflected on facing relationship challenges during high school due to differing views on romantic relationships with his girlfriend. He mentioned, “I often wondered about the reasons behind our numerous differences, extending beyond daily situations to include our attitudes toward sexual intimacy.”

Overall, students expected to learn about communication in romantic relationships and hoped to broaden their perspectives on dating and marriage through this course.

- b. Key Takeaways from the Course:** Through this course, students had the opportunity to reflect on various aspects of love and marriage. For example, some were taken by surprise due to unconventional narratives, such as a Japanese man marrying Hatsune Miku, a Vocaloid character. This led them to reassess the diverse forms of love. Reflecting on this, one student mentioned, “I was reminded that ‘love’ is incredibly complex because there is no definition that everyone can universally agree upon.”

Moreover, students shared transformative shifts in their views about dating and marriage. For example, some students experienced a change in perception, feeling less pressured to conform to traditional timelines for marriage. For instance, a student mentioned, “My perception of marriage has evolved. I no longer feel pressured to rush into it; this course encouraged me to

embrace experiences unique to my youth.”

The course also shed light on the challenges within the current Japanese dating scene, highlighting how external factors, such as economic circumstances and limited opportunities to meet potential partners, impact individuals’ romantic pursuits. As one student expressed surprise, “I learned that the decision to pursue relationships isn’t solely based on personal desire but heavily influenced by external circumstances.”

A central theme that emerged was the significance of effective communication and understanding gender dynamics in relationships. Students recognized the importance of dialogue in navigating complexities such as infidelity and jealousy. They also discussed gender roles and the importance of achieving equality within relationships. As one student highlighted, “Exploring gender roles in dating practices made me question societal expectations; achieving equality in relationships became a priority.”

Furthermore, for international students, this course provided invaluable insights into Japanese culture and dating norms. For instance, one student commented, “I was surprised by the prevalence of matchmaking agencies in Japan, a concept relatively uncommon in my country, which broadened my understanding of cultural differences.”

From these comments, the course succeeded in offering students a profound exploration of love, relationships, and societal norms, challenging preconceived notions and fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in romantic connections.

- c. **Feedback on the Teaching Methodology:** Overall, students provided positive feedback on the methodology I used in the course. Most notably, they expressed their enjoyment of the discussions held during classes, which helped broaden their perspectives on dating and marriage while exploring diverse opinions. One student stated, “It was a great opportunity for me because I don’t usually engage in in-depth discussions about topics such as love and marriage with those around me.”

Additionally, the presence of international students added an extra layer of interest to the course. One Japanese student remarked, “The perspectives of the international students were intriguing, highlighting both similarities and differences between our dating cultures.” An international student also shared their enjoyment, saying, “I will miss the debates with my fellow Japanese students. At times, I was able to influence their perspectives through my input, but I also

learned a great deal about their experiences and the Japanese mindset.”

Students also expressed satisfaction with the course, finding the information I shared during classes convincing. One student noted, “I liked the information provided by the teacher because it all seems logical.” Additionally, they were pleased to have had two guest speakers who shared their experiences.

Lastly, the comments revealed that the final presentations offered them an opportunity to deeply explore topics that resonated with them. One student mentioned, “I was happy with the learning opportunity provided by my final presentation.” Another student found other students’ presentations intriguing, noting, “I enjoyed the different project presentations during the last three courses. It allowed us to discover subjects from the students’ point of view.”

Reflective Insights and Future Enhancements

Based on students’ responses, the course received positive feedback, highlighting the effectiveness of the methodology in fostering engaging discussions, credible information sharing, the inclusion of guest speakers, and meaningful exploration of personal topics. This culminated in a rewarding learning experience for all involved.

Additionally, students’ comments confirmed the limited spaces and opportunities for discussions on romantic relationships. Open discussions enabled them to gain broader perspectives toward dating and marriage, helping them develop critical thinking skills to challenge commonly held dating and marriage norms to which they had been exposed.

However, reflecting on the course, several challenges emerged that highlight areas for improvement in future sessions. A primary obstacle encountered was the delicate nature of the topics discussed. Students often navigated personal boundaries while sharing experiences, necessitating a delicate balance between open dialogue and respect for individual comfort levels. Moving forward, it’s vital to establish clear guidelines from the course’s outset to foster an environment that respects personal boundaries while encouraging open discussions.

Another challenge surfaced in maintaining consistently engaging discussions throughout the course. To address this in future iterations, diverse teaching methodologies such as breakout sessions, interactive activities, and multimedia resources should be strategically employed. Additionally, one notable realization was the necessity for more varied interactions among students. Throughout the semester, I arranged their seating positions, inadvertently restricting their chances to engage with

different classmates during discussions. For forthcoming iterations, my intention is to devise more dynamic seating plans or introduce group rotations, fostering diverse interactions and encouraging students to exchange ideas with a broader range of peers.

Furthermore, while efforts were made to offer diverse perspectives, limitations arose in fully representing every cultural, religious, or identity background within our course materials. It's essential for subsequent sessions to focus on diversifying guest speakers and resources, actively seeking student input to ensure a more comprehensive and inclusive portrayal of dating and marriage cultures.

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