3 Unlocking transcultural understanding with key indigenous concepts "liberated" by English as a lingua franca

A decade of virtual intercultural exchanges

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3.1 Introduction

Culture, likened to the "air we breathe," is defined in many ways in various social science disciplines, which has led to confusion and disagreement about how it may be defined, conceptualized, operationalized, and empirically researched. One anthropological definition of culture generally refers to "the corpus of shared knowledge, attitudes, and learned behaviors of a given population" (Launay, 2018, p. 1). In anthropology, culture has been the source of numerous debates and has even been proposed as theory (Boggs, 2004). Richard Shweder (1991) pushed the boundaries of anthropology by emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between mind and culture (loosely defined as above). This pioneering effort gave birth to contemporary cultural psychology at about the same time as the (arguably) overly researched cultural psychology constructs of independent and interdependent self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In 1995, a seminal book was published by Harry Triandis that introduced the sociological constructs of individualism and collectivism, and hundreds of studies have adopted these constructs in cross-cultural comparative psychology investigations, mostly between or among nations, using nationality as a proxy for culture.

   Among these, cross-cultural psychology is perhaps the most problematic because 1) most theories, methods, constructs, and concepts are WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich, 2020) and 2) nationality is usually used as a proxy for culture, while within a nation there exist numerous sub-cultures of people in various geographical regions that are ignored. However, another branch of psychology addresses this issue: indigenous psychology, which contextualizes the study of the mind and behavior of people in societies that may not be considered WEIRD (Kim & Berry, 1993).

This approach is a "reaction against the colonization/hegemony of Western psychology" that addresses several needs:

1 the need for non-Western cultures to solve their local problems through indigenous practices and applications,
2 the need for a non-Western culture to recognize itself in the constructs and practices of psychology, and
3 the need to use indigenous philosophies and concepts to generate theories of global discourse.

(Task Force on Indigenous Psychology, n.d.)

This chapter addresses the third need as we trace our steps of ten years of online intercultural exchanges, focusing on indigenous concepts in Balinese, Japanese, Javanese, and Mandarin Chinese. As an example of indigenous concepts, we present the reader one such important Asian concept (with no direct translation in English) in Japanese, *amae* (甘え) ("presumed indulgence"), and concepts similar in meaning indigenous to Balinese (*manying*), Javanese (*manja*), and Mandarin Chinese (*sajiao*; 撒娇). (We report a virtual intercultural exchange (Su et al., 2021) about these concepts later on.)

A common language is needed to "generate theories of global discourse." Here, we consider English as a lingua franca (ELF), a language between people who do not share a common first language. This language is "typically learned in the family in early childhood as part of one's fundamental social, emotional, and intellectual development" (Risager, 2006, p. 7) and is used for communication. ELF can be considered a double-edged sword: One edge permits worldwide communication (Lee & Kim, 2023; Ou et al., 2023), including members of the academic discourse community, while the other edge carves concepts, theories, research questions, and methods in the social sciences and education out of (sometimes) WEIRD cultural contexts. When this edge of ELF's sword is used, we argue that it can "imprison" (Wierzbicka, 2014) our understanding of populations of the world that are not WEIRD.

In this chapter, our position is that ELF can "liberate" our understanding of non-WEIRD populations through our "Indigenous Concept Model of Transcultural Understanding," developed and applied over the ten years of practicing our virtual intercultural exchanges. By "liberate," we figuratively refer to Wierzbicka (2014), who argues that English can "imprison" (non-WEIRD) people when it does not capture the nuances of other languages and cultures. In our model, we begin intercultural dialogue with indigenous concepts (i.e., concepts that originate in a particular cultural context). *Intercultural* in this chapter refers to what is understood between/among individuals whose accessibility or internalization to certain psychological constructs differ, beginning with indigenous concepts that are formed, perceived, and used differently in different cultural contexts (Wierzbicka, 1997). More precisely, intercultural, in our view, is expressed through the process of how indigenous

concepts are understood (as evidenced by students' reflections about their experiences during intercultural exchanges) through the challenging task of attempting to explain them using ELF to others with different – and sometimes various – first languages. Through this task, we argue that indigenous concepts are "liberated" by being understood transculturally (to be explained in detail later).

We also describe how, through ELF, the students and sometimes practitioner-researchers (Miller et al., 2021) struggled to translate indigenous concepts into English. This task sometimes resulted in many hours of discussion. It led to frustration and failures in communication because of the difficulties involved with using English as a foreign, second, or third language (Iwasaki, 2022; Naicker et al., 2022). Some of this was due to limitations involving virtual communication tools and applications (e.g., Skype, LINE, WhatsApp, and Zoom), which have been found to inhibit the expression and interpretation of non-verbal behaviors. Such tools and applications have also been found to evoke negative affect (Park & Whiting, 2020), perhaps because of a lack of visual contact (Al Mahadin & Hallak, 2021), which could be related to delays in responding to inquiries that reduce work efficiency (Hajar & Manan, 2023). Additionally, they can lead to a lack of connection, lowering participants' satisfaction, especially in high-context cultures where body language is important (Waight et al., 2022). Such experiences have been reported in many studies involving virtual intercultural exchanges (e.g., Amaral et al., 2023; Bali et al., 2021; Favale et al., 2020; Hong-Seng, 2022; Søndergaard et al., 2023; Vasquez & Ramos, 2022).

In this chapter, we, the (bilingual or trilingual) authors, as practitioner-researchers, begin by introducing an interdisciplinary model for the exchanges and each component of the model. Then, we describe our experiences with five virtual intercultural exchanges over the past decade. Finally, we reflect on our collaborative teaching/learning experiences with students regarding English's "liberating" role as a lingua franca.

3.2   An Indigenous Concept Model of Transcultural Understanding

We now describe and explain an Indigenous Concept Model of Transcultural Understanding, which was induced through applications over ten years of virtual intercultural exchanges (Dalsky & Su, 2024).

In this model, participants from different countries or ethnic groups use ELF to discuss indigenous concepts through intercultural contact. These concepts (or keywords) are thought to be organized around entire (cultural) linguistic domains that have the potential to unlock significant insights into a particular (linguistic) culture (i.e., among people who share a language other than English; Wierzbicka, 1997). We argue that indigenous concepts can be explored using an interdisciplinary model of transcultural understanding (see Dalsky & Su, 2024).

3.2.1   *Indigenous Concepts: A Dynamic Constructivist Approach*

In our model, we adopt a dynamic constructivist approach to culture. This approach entails two premises (Hong et al., 2000, p. 710):

1 A culture is not internalized in the form of an integrated and highly general structure, such as an overall mentality, worldview, or value orientation. Rather, culture is internalized in the form of a loose network of domain-specific knowledge structures, such as categories and implicit theories (Bruner, 1990; D'Andrade, 1984; Shore, 1996; Strauss, 1992).
2 Individuals can acquire more than one such cultural meaning system, even if these systems contain conflicting theories.

In our sense, indigenous concepts refer to the constructs to which a group has the relatively highest accessibility (due to recent exposure). They are essentially cultural categories emerging through "enactive cognition" from social and linguistic interactions that vary by individual due to their community's cultural cognition, which is dynamically being negotiated and renegotiated across generations and through contact between speech communities (Sharifian, 2017).

Highly accessible constructs tend to be cognitively primed and drive behaviors. They have the potential to unlock the patterns of certain perceptions or behaviors of a cultural group, which is conventionally pictured by nationality but is defined as a dynamic group with high accessibility to shared constructs.

In terms of "accessibility" and "internalization" to an indigenous concept, we propose the following types of individuals:

1 Aware experiencer: Individuals who have life experiences that are the embodiment of the concepts and are aware of such connections.
2 Unaware experiencer: Individuals who have experienced the concepts but are not consciously unaware of the connection between their experience and the concept.
3 Aware observer: Individuals who have not been involved as experiencers but have only observed the embodiment of a concept are aware of such connections.
4 Unaware observer: Individuals who have observed a concept's embodiment but are unaware of the connection.
5 Unexposed outsider: Individuals who are neither experiencers nor observers of the embodiment of a particular concept – have the lowest degree of accessibility and awareness.

In our model, we intentionally focus on a particular category of indigenous concepts that originate in a specific cultural group, are expressed in the common language of the group, and are experienced by the group. By "originate," we mean the emergence of a concept in the language(s) shared by the group, and we do not deny the influence of intergroup interaction on such emergence.

We stress that the concept should be expressed in the language where the concept emerged to promote indigenous understanding of the concepts.

The first goal of our model is to promote understanding and awareness of indigenous concepts through intercultural communication for unexposed outsiders to "liberate" these concepts from lack of knowledge or ignorance. "Understanding" and "awareness" are qualitatively gauged from students' written reflections at the end of the intercultural exchanges. The second goal is to "liberate" these concepts from static and fixed understandings through ELF. Individuals who are both an aware experiencer and an aware observer of an indigenous concept value such concepts as an essential component of their social identity are considered typical "insiders" of the group, in contrast to unexposed outsiders. However, a caveat is that some "insiders" would overgeneralize their understanding of a concept to other members of the social identity group they defined; they question the possibility of observers and outsiders understanding a particular concept.

Similarly, an aware observer, for example, a scholar from a WEIRD context, could risk the misinterpretation of the emic concept through the lens of their familiar concepts or assume that other observers share the same interpretations as they have. Indigenous concepts can be "imprisoned" by the observers and experiencers of the concept to some extent. Thus, "intercultural contact" in our model is defined as the contact among individuals with different degrees of accessibility or exposure to certain concepts under examination.

3.2.2   Transcultural Understanding

As depicted in Dalsky and Su (2024), the goal of the model is to achieve (some degree of) transcultural understanding. We adopt Welsch's (1999) notion of "transculturality" (see also Skrefsrud, 2021) rather than "interculturality" because transculturality may be a more precise depiction of the current world's state of affairs resulting from a rapid influx in immigration and acculturation (Komisarof & Dalsky, 2024). Transculturality's notion of culture is entanglement, intermixing, and commonness (however, some scholars also recognize these features in the polysemic nature of *interculturality*; e.g., Dervin, 2022). Transculturality involves transcending different cultures and creating hybrid identities – the "self" is not "fixed" to another culture. The goal of "transcultural understanding" is the most suitable way to conceive of the results of intercultural exchanges in our paradigm because we apply the dynamic constructivist approach to culture and cognition, which posits that "culture" is fluid and dynamically constructed through situations and interactions.

3.2.3   Components of the Model

The components of this model were chosen to align with the dynamic constructivist approach we adopted in theory. To be specific, *folk psychology* (see Bruner, 1990) involves "commonsense" understandings of concepts, behaviors,

and emotions – not everyone can call themselves a "psychologist." Yet the tendency to make sense of human behavior (not as a systematic science) is essential for human animals to survive worldwide. Next, *team learning*, initially conceived in Japan by Tajino and Tajino (2000), involves teachers learning from each other and their students; students learning from each other and their teachers, which can be practiced universally. Finally, *Exploratory Practice* (EP; Allwright & Hanks, 2009) is a learning/teaching philosophy based on seven fundamental principles emphasizing understanding rather than problem-solving. What follows is an elaboration of each component's features.

3.2.3.1   *Folk Psychology*

Folk psychology refers to laypersons' understanding of psychological constructs (see Bruner, 1990). It is not a particular academic branch of psychology because folk psychology relies on "commonsense" definitions of concepts, explanations of behavior, and descriptions of emotions, for example, by non-psychologists. However, folk psychology can be a valuable means to collect empirical data. For example, Yamaguchi (1999, as cited in Yamaguchi & Ariizumi, 2006) used a folk psychology approach in their investigation of the Japanese indigenous concept of *amae* (甘え), where Japanese undergraduates were asked to select scenarios that depict *amae* (甘え) from their "common-sense" understanding of the concept. These choices informed Yamaguchi's (2004) definition (which we interpret as "presumed indulgence"), understanding, and further research related to *amae* (甘え), which he suggested to be a key (indigenous) concept for the Japanese, yet a universal phenomenon. Niiya et al. (2006) later addressed and supported this hypothesis in a study of US Americans/Japanese. Elsewhere, we have argued that *amae* (甘え) is crucial for understanding Japanese psychology (Dalsky & Su, 2020) in terms of how it has been defined in indigenous psychology by Yamaguchi and colleagues as opposed to its problematic initial conceptualization as "dependence," famously popularized by Takeo Doi in 1971. Following Yamaguchi (2004), *amae* (甘え) involves a person actively behaving in a way (e.g., cute or naive) to indulge in the care of a parent, friend, colleague, or lover.

3.2.3.2   *Team Learning*

In 1987, the Japanese Ministry of Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) launched the Japan Exchange Teaching (JET) program, where native English-speaking English teachers recruited from abroad (usually recent university graduates) pair with Japanese English teachers in childhood education (public primary and junior high schools). Tajino and Tajino (2000) published the results of a study that investigated the interactions in the classrooms of the JET program, emphasizing the importance of learning rather than teaching, especially the relationship between the two teachers. Later, a volume on team teaching and learning was published, and several

teacher-researchers (primarily based in Japan) documented their research, which informed their practice and vice versa (Tajino, Stewart & Dalsky, 2016). In this volume, Tajino and Smith (2016) diagramed a more sophisticated value-centered team learning model that depicts bi-directional learning arrows from teacher to teacher, teacher to student, student to student, and student to teacher. Dalsky and Garant (2016) describe and explain the only team learning-based virtual intercultural exchange in this volume, practiced about six years before virtual learning became in vogue due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We will describe this exchange in detail later in this chapter. Team learning was chosen as a component of our model because the line between "students" and "teachers" is blurred as "participants" from various cultural backgrounds (as explained above) who must work together as a team to learn and understand indigenous concepts.

3.2.3.3 Exploratory Practice

EP, first proposed by Dick Allwright (2003) and later refined by Allwright and Hanks (2009), is a type of "inclusive practitioner research," meaning that all participants are involved in the teaching/learning/researching endeavor. In this method, teachers and students act as co-researchers, investigating classroom life related to teaching and learning at the same time it is happening by freely and creatively applying the following seven principles (Allwright & Hanks, 2009) to "puzzle" (i.e., raise research questions) about classroom life:

The "what" issues:

1. Focus on *quality of life* as the fundamental issue.
2. Work to *understand* it before thinking about solving problems.

The "who" issues:

3. Involve *everybody* as practitioners developing their own understandings.
4. Work to bring people *together* in a common enterprise.
5. Work cooperatively for *mutual* development.

The "how" issues:

6. Make it a *continuous* enterprise.
7. *Minimize the burden* by integrating the work for understanding into normal pedagogic practice.

In our virtual exchange program, the EP principles, especially those related to understanding, drive the methodology because they allow us to adapt to various conditions such as ELF language proficiency, age, maturity, and participants' first language. Participants form international pairs or small international teams, begin by introducing themselves, and are asked to brainstorm what "culture" means to them. Then, they are asked to describe their country's "culture." Sometimes, islands and ethnicities must be explained (e.g., in Indonesia).

Participants are encouraged to describe and ask questions in detail about their cities (towns or villages) and "culture": local foods, drinks, rituals, spiritual beliefs, arts, values, relationships, etc. (These are commonly considered features of "culture," but participants often suggest others.) Then, participants are prompted to think of some unique words commonly used in their first language that are difficult, if not impossible, to translate into English, and introduce them to their partner(s).

In terms of EP, they "puzzle" about the indigenous concept after introducing it to one another using ELF and try to understand why they are difficult to translate the concept into one another's language or English. Participants are often observed enjoying laughter and fun conversations, showing interest in one another's culture (EP Principle 1). Wondering about the meaning of indigenous concepts naturally inspires understanding rather than a problem/solution approach to learning (EP Principle 2). The "teachers" act as facilitators and become active members of the discourse at times, encouraging the participation of reticent "students" (EP Principle 3). This naturally brings "teachers/students" together, enjoying sharing and understanding indigenous concepts as a team (EP Principle 4), who work together to develop their character and broaden their perspectives (EP Principle 5).

In our 10-year program of virtual intercultural exchanges, all but one of the teachers have remained in contact from the beginning of their exchange and continue to collaborate with different students – we call ourselves "friends" and are fortunate also to be colleagues. Also, some students exchanged WhatsApp, LINE, and Instagram and continue to keep in touch to this day (EP Principle 6). This entire procedure is an "inclusive practitioner research" as the "teachers" are collecting data from observable behaviors of the "students" and reflection reports at the end of the projects (some of which are presented below) to gain an understanding of the effectiveness of the Indigenous Concept Model of Transcultural Understanding. "Students" are researching the meaning of "culture" and the origin of their indigenous concepts. They also interview one another to gain insights into the intercultural understanding of the concepts as they struggle to understand the meaning and what that meaning means (EP Principle 7). Finally, all participants reflect on their experience in inclusive practitioner research in terms of transcultural understanding and produce academic essays and animations related to the indigenous concepts, which are uploaded to Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/intercultural_word_sensei) and a website (https://interculturalwordsensei.org/).

3.3 Summaries of the Virtual Intercultural Exchanges in the Ten-Year Program

3.3.1 *Virtual Intercultural Exchange 1: Dalsky and Garant (2016)*

Through eight weeks of one academic semester in 2014, 15 first-year Japanese students in an academic English writing class and 15 Finnish third- and

fourth-year students in an intercultural communication class worked in pairs with their teachers (Dalsky and Garant) (team learning) to establish a virtual intercultural exchange in which the students used folk psychology to understand Japanese indigenous concepts. This exchange was based on the principles of EP. It was our research team's first virtual intercultural exchange endeavor that occurred about ten years ago; therefore, the teachers experienced difficulty arranging the exchange regarding which platform to use for initial contact. Ultimately, we used a Google Document that listed students' names and emails and asked the Japanese to contact the Finns. The task was to write collaborative research papers based on Japanese indigenous concepts, and the Finns were more experienced than the Japanese. So, the Japanese students learned mainly about writing such papers from the Finns, whereas the Finns learned specific features of Japanese culture based on indigenous concepts.

In this initial exchange, we did not use audiovisual virtual telecommunication as it was nascent then (e.g., Skype was available, but the students lacked familiarity). Nevertheless, the two classes of students communicated via email and produced collaborative papers on shared Google Docs in pairs or teams of three students. Most students learned (at least something) from this experience (EP Principle 1), as evidenced by this Japanese student's comment (all of the students' comments reported in this chapter were written directly in English):

> This theme of paper is related to my major subject. So I can learn not only English but also about my major. Moreover, I was surprised to hear the story about this theme from my partner. I have already known about Finnish nature a little because of geography, but to listen to her story, I can know the details which we cannot learn by school study. Also I can realise again the beauty of Japanese seasons.
>
> (Japanese student)

Interestingly, this Japanese student reported reflecting on their understanding of their own culture's characteristics (as explained in Section 3.2.3.3) using ELF. We repeated this exchange in a subsequent semester (seven weeks, again), fine-tuning the methodology. Although much was to be learned regarding the methodological process, we enjoyed a mutually beneficial yet challenging learning experience.

3.3.2   *Virtual Intercultural Exchange 2: Aryanata and Dalsky (2024)*

Three Balinese Indonesian and six mainland Chinese students (based in Japan) and three teachers (Arayanata, Dalsky, and Su) worked together as inclusive practitioner researchers (EP) in a team (learning) through virtual intercultural exchanges using LINE and WhatsApp to discuss subtle nuances of the emic cultural concepts of *amae* 甘え (Japanese), *manying* (Balinese), and *sajiao* 撒娇 (Mandarin Chinese) using ELF. We narrowed the scope of discussions to this single set of analogous indigenous cultural concepts because there was enough

academic literature available related to them. The three Balinese students were selected from an undergraduate qualitative methods class in psychology at Bali International University based on their high English proficiency, whereas the six mainland Chinese students were enrolled in a master's course called "Intercultural Understanding Pedagogy" at Kyoto University. The exchange took place for about six weeks at the end of an academic term.

The unique aspect of this exchange was that participants initiated the discussion by exploring concepts with people from three nations, and it was based on the Japanese concept of *amae* (甘え) (see the sources related to this concept in Section 3.2.3.1 in this chapter, which were used in this exchange). Moreover, *amae* (甘え) is closely intertwined with everyday behaviors and interactions, facilitating participants' sharing of personal experiences and promoting self-disclosure. Through EP, team learning, and folk psychology, participants sought to explore related indigenous concepts using ELF: *manying*/*manja* in Balinese and *sajiao* (撒娇) in Chinese.

This deliberate focus on a single set of analogous indigenous concepts served several purposes. First, it allowed for a comparative analysis of the outcomes between the two teams participating in the exchange. These supplemented discussions within each team enhanced the credibility of conclusions regarding intercultural differences or similarities and fostered understanding. Transcultural understanding recognizes that the perception of concepts is not solely determined by culture or nationality; instead, it is a fluid boundary shaped by life experiences and cultural interactions, which may lead to varying interpretations of these concepts, as suggested by the "transcultural understanding" component of the model in Dalsky and Su (2024), and evidenced in the collaborative papers as well as students' reflections resulting from this exchange, for example:

> I think I gained a lot from the process of communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. It's like a trip, where you broaden your horizons, get to know some different indigenous psychological phenomena, cultural traditions, and see opinions from different perspectives. And the experience also let me know the variety inside the culture. Our Balinese partners were two girls and they were totally different types. One of them was very talkative and enthusiastic, which was in line with my "stereotype" of Balinese's personality, but the other was much quieter and calmer.
> (Chinese student)

Additionally, the in-depth exploration of the Japanese concept of *amae* (甘え) guided by the teachers (facilitators) before the exchange offered the participants an example of how to explore indigenous concepts. In our case, Balinese and mainland Chinese students had limited knowledge of each other's "cultures" and languages, and scant research literature was available. Attempting direct discussions might have proved challenging without the foundational knowledge gained from studying *amae* (甘え) related research. Furthermore, due to their

experience studying in Japan and higher proficiency in Japanese, the Chinese students made *amae* (甘え) a suitable anchor point for stimulating discussions by forming research questions. Another difference between the teams was the educational level of each group. The Balinese students were undergraduate students, whereas the Chinese were master's students. The Chinese students had a deeper understanding of the methods, a richer vocabulary, and a deeper understanding of the EP philosophy driving the intercultural exchange.

In terms of the activities before and after the exchange, due to the different course requirements of Balinese and Chinese students, in this online exchange, the Balinese students specializing in psychology were supposed to learn how to conduct open-ended interviews. In contrast, Chinese students focused on applying exchange activities to teaching, and the instructors tailored the learning content accordingly. Apart from some shared activities, such as the discussion of *amae* (甘え), we designed the activities to meet the specific needs of the students. The Balinese students were taught to code and analyze the interview data, and the Chinese students learned about the pedagogical design and implementation of intercultural exchanges as inclusive practitioner-researchers. Having facilitators with experience with the concepts and methods is essential to consider, especially in assisting with the validity of information gathered from online sources. Facilitators with academic experiences may help seek and exchange information within academic corridors without being too direct and controlling.

After the project, we categorized the research questions discussed by participants to identify the dimensions that could be explored when discussing the indigenous concepts, including universal and national/regional-specific aspects, definitions, forms, linguistic and behavioral features, present observations, and evaluations. Regarding EP, Principle 6: "Make it a *continuous* enterprise," this intercultural exchange guided future exchanges. It blazed the way for us teacher-researchers to expand the dimensions of discussions for participants in future exchanges, especially for those concepts with limited research materials published in academic literature and challenges in forming research questions. (Exchange 3 is an example of this, which will be described and explained next.)

Furthermore, transmission of the context of the origin of an indigenous concept is an important aspect that should be considered. Any indigenous concept comes with its context, which can be understood by the recipient of the information as biased. The groups in collaboration would need to be open to encountering an intrinsic interest in exploring other cultures. Both groups must engage in a confirmatory communication process to attenuate bias. Methods and tools using digital technology need to transmit contexts through text, image, video message-sharing applications, and video conferencing applications (Aryanata & Dalsky, 2024). Indeed, conveying meanings and self-representation has interested many in developing virtual presence technology. Studies related to internet-mediated communications (computer-mediated communications) have explained its use's psychological and relational impacts, including when this tool allows for fluid self-representation in the virtual world (Brown et al., 2022).

3.3.3   *Virtual Intercultural Exchange 3: Dalsky et al. (2022)*

Undergraduate students from Sanata Dharma University in Indonesia (three Javanese) and 11 first-year master's students at Kyoto University in Japan (one Japanese, one Taiwanese, and nine mainland Chinese) engaged in a virtual intercultural exchange based on EP using LINE and WhatsApp for communication for about ten weeks during an academic semester. Dalsky, Widiyanto, and Harimurti were the teachers. They discussed a variety of Asian indigenous concepts (derived from the EP method explained previously), such as Javanese concepts: *nggondhog* (cranky, powerless, angry, and a bit of disappointment); *tembhe mburi* (future time after an action occurred, but it is not clear when referring to the result of an action taken); *klincutan* (combination of shame, helplessness, and guilt feelings); *nrimo* (an attitude between gratitude and helplessness), and Japanese concept, *amae* (甘え). Before the exchange, students read academic articles and book chapters to familiarize themselves with the indigenous concepts. Subsequently, students based in Japan and Indonesia were divided into four nationally/regionally heterogeneous teams of three students and one group of two students for an online intercultural exchange that occurred for eight weeks during an academic term.

These exchanges/interviews aimed to enhance transcultural understanding (i.e., through ELF-mediated discussions involving translations of analogous indigenous concepts in Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, and Javanese). During the interviews, students "puzzled," as described in EP, to facilitate their exploration of the concepts. The teachers (two Javanese and one American) and some students continue learning about Japanese and Javanese culture experientially with folk psychology through text messaging and on-site research presentations and meetings (e.g., Dalsky, 2022). International friendships were formed, and the students continue to keep in touch on LINE and WhatsApp, as noted by this Chinese student:

> I was so excited to join the project and expand the learning and understanding outside the classroom. I managed to use English authentically. Moreover, I have made new friends in real life! I didn't imagine that someday I would have a friend from Indonesia! Everything was amazing and refreshing, and most important, this project actually had an impact on my life and taught me that it's possible to do something and make a difference. I really enjoyed this project, and I will never forget this wonderful experience! I started to think if every student can have an opportunity to do intercultural exchange, there might be less misunderstandings, and the world might be a better place.

In this project, we had the opportunity to practice fine-tuning the methods of the intercultural exchange program, which was developed in subsequent exchanges and finally introduced in Dalsky and Su's (2024) Virtual Transcultural Understanding Pedagogy.

3.3.4   *Virtual Intercultural Exchange 4: Dalsky and Mattig (2023)*

Pairs of Japanese students from two entire first-year undergraduate academic English writing classes (20 students in each class; total = 40 students) learned online via Skype, WhatsApp, and LINE with 20 German students in one qualitative methods graduate class for a complete 14-week academic semester. The Japanese students wrote academic reflection essays about their intercultural exchanges related to their commonsense (folk psychology) understanding of Japanese indigenous concept; for example: 甘え (*amae* presumed indulgence), いじめ (*ijime*, bullying), 先輩・後輩 (*senpai/kouhai*, senior/junior), 集団意識 (*shyudanishiki*, group consciousness), 和 (*wa*, harmony), 沈黙 (*chinmoku*, silence), 面子 (*mentsu*, face/honor), 本音・建前 (*honne/tatemae*, true feelings/ official stance), and 義理・恩 (*giri/on*, sense of duty/obligation). The German students took records of the exchanges, coded the data, and conducted qualitative analyses, with the guidance of their teacher (an educational anthropologist), of their "interviews" with Japanese students.

This virtual intercultural exchange was similar to Dalsky and Garant (2016) in that it involved entire classes of students in Europe and Japan, divided into pairs or teams of three. As such, it presented the obvious time zone challenge, and again, the differing levels of English proficiency for the two groups made virtual communication frustrating for the students. The German (graduate) students (enrolled in a qualitative methods course) were also more mature than the Japanese (first-year undergraduates) in the academic English writing course. Many German students expressed frustration communicating with the Japanese, who needed help with their spoken English production and listening comprehension, and differing accents accentuated this challenge. The online exchanges could not be held during class time because of the time zones and scheduling differences. Aside from these technicalities, the online exchange was not as fruitful as the exchanges described previously (1–3) because only Japanese indigenous concepts were researched (selected by the teachers as interesting concepts from their experiences in Japan and previous intercultural exchanges) as the goal of the German class was to engage in online interviews about them. In contrast, the primary aim of the Japanese class was to focus on improving English skills. Despite this, students reported many positive experiences in their reflections:

German students

I found it very exciting to get an insight into Japanese culture through the communication and the interview. By directly speaking to Japanese, cultural differences and particularities became much clearer than through just reading. Moreover, I think that by using this method actively what I have learned will stick better in my memory.

I learned about intercultural interaction, and the contact to one of my interview partners is still actual. We still communicate over LINE.

Japanese students

I was surprised at German's questions because they don't understand "*amae*" at all. I realized "*amae*" is a unique Japanese expression. It was interesting that there are a lot of differences between Japan and other countries.

I am so happy that I could learn a lot about Germany. I have never talked with foreign people, so this is a wonderful experience.

3.3.5   *Virtual Intercultural Exchange 5: Dalsky and Su (2024)*

The word count limitation of this chapter does not allow for a complete explanation of this exchange. For details, we refer readers to the (open access) article by Dalsky and Su (2024). This exchange was held during the COVID-19 pandemic, which involved virtual intercultural exchanges among first-year master's students enrolled in an "Intercultural Understanding Pedagogy" course at Kyoto University. The course enrolled two Japanese, one Malaysian, and four mainland Chinese. The project was guided by the principles of EP as described at the beginning of this chapter. Analyzing students' reflections on the intercultural exchanges confirmed theoretical support for the model proposed by Dalsky and Su (2024).

3.4   **Discussion**

3.4.1   *Precondition of Liberation: Indigenous Concepts*

Our proposed Indigenous Concept Model of Transcultural Understanding helps "unexposed outsiders" learn indigenous concepts and background knowledge of the target culture that is usually implicit to them. Through our model, these elusive emic concepts – some of which even experiencers may be unaware of – can be made explicit, transitioning from implicit to explicit understanding. This process, primarily facilitated by intercultural exchanges between "aware experiencers" and "unexposed outsiders," is mediated through ELF, which serves as a common language in these exchanges, creating a field for meaning negotiation and mutual comprehension among participants.

Over the years, we noticed that some students with insufficient English proficiency were having trouble explaining the concepts in synchronic communication, so we developed a template of Interview Guidelines[1] with prompt questions based on outcomes of former projects and provided adequate time for participants to complete it after the interview. To promote meaning negotiation using ELF, we arranged the teams based on English proficiency with the help of a teaching assistant to facilitate the discussion by translation when needed. The participants were encouraged to quote related expressions and concepts in their first language while explaining them. They were free to use dictionaries and translation tools during the exchange. The same precondition

of "liberation" could be met if a common language and sufficient support are available, but a certain level of proficiency is a prerequisite.

Our model operates on a cycle oriented around "puzzles" (in terms of EP), in which participants continually generate and explore puzzles during the exchange. While attempting to understand each other's puzzles and offering explanations, an indigenous concept that may have been nebulous and difficult to verbalize (even for aware experiencers) can/could become clarified and more concrete as participants ask different types of questions through the lens of various backgrounds (languages, ages, statuses, genders, life experience, etc.). Our model's mutual learning and cooperative orientation ensure that participants feel secure to propose "puzzles" freely. A concept that can be linguistically articulated can/could gain greater mobility than one that remains unarticulated, serving as a precondition for the "liberation" of indigenous concepts from being unaware to aware.

3.4.2   *Liberation of Indigenous Concepts*

3.4.2.1   *Transformation of Understandings*

In intercultural exchanges facilitated by ELF, we find that among people who identify with the same nation, there can be variations in the understanding of indigenous concepts due to different levels of accessibility and various kinds of exposure. For instance, in the intercultural exchanges regarding the Chinese indigenous concept of *sajiao* (撒娇) (presumed indulgence), there are regional differences in the frequency of the act and the perceptions of it that were observed and discussed. Initially, these concepts may have well-defined boundaries or criteria in the participants' minds. However, when they encounter divergent interpretations from others within the same language speech community (i.e., "a group of people who share a set of norms and expectations regarding the use of language"; Hymes, 1972, as cited in Yule, 2022), previously clear boundaries or standards may become disrupted, rendering the concepts more ambiguous. This represents a form of horizontal expansion characterized by integrating diverse understandings.

Additionally, another common form of transcultural understanding involves participants gaining new insights into emic cultural concepts through explanations provided by other members, as evidenced in another study where Japanese participants learned that Japanese indigenous concept 塞翁が馬 originated from the Chinese idiom 塞翁失马 *(whatever will be, will be)* through exchange, which supplied their shared historical knowledge about both Chinese and Japanese culture. This constitutes a form of vertical expansion, signifying a deepening of understanding. Both these directions of expansion transform an individual's perception of indigenous concepts from a static and fixed state to a dynamic and fluid one, which can be considered a form of "liberation" of indigenous concepts.

3.4.2.2   Synergistic Liberation of Indigenous Concepts

It is important to note that we did not strictly mandate participants to communicate solely in English. With folk psychology, participants are free to use their first languages to articulate indigenous concepts. Within a specific culture, some key indigenous concepts must form an interconnected and intertwined network that organizes the entire cultural system: understanding one concept often leads to understanding a series of related indigenous concepts. For instance, in discussing the Japanese concept of *aimai* (曖昧; "ambiguity"), the participants expanded the discussion to related concepts and mentioned that Japanese people might use *aimai* (曖昧) expressions to maintain *wa* (和; harmony) in the group. As a result, participants often gained an understanding of a specific cultural concept and insights into related concepts. Our model facilitates a radiating, domino-like synergistic liberation of indigenous concepts through discussion.

3.4.2.3   Transmission of Indigenous Concepts

In the intercultural exchanges based on our model, participants employed specific cases to elucidate the meanings of indigenous concepts, which can be considered "cultural scripts/schemes" (Wierzbicka, 1997). For example, in Exchange 5, a Japanese student gave an example of the indigenous concept, *enryo* (遠慮), that when one's friend asks the person to lend her some money, and she doesn't actually want to, Japanese people might use an indirect denial, so the other's feelings are not hurt, such as "I think it is a little difficult for me." Upon understanding these cultural scripts, participants who are unexposed outsiders can more effectively identify these concepts through the behavior and language of their counterparts when they encounter another culture; unaware observers could also become aware of the manifestation of a concept. While some behaviors and languages inherently embody indigenous concepts, they often appear invisible to outsiders unfamiliar with their specific manifestations. However, once they comprehend these specific forms through intercultural exchanges, they can conceptualize and understand these behaviors and language using the concepts, making these initially invisible concepts visible.

Moreover, unexposed outsiders may actively adopt the normative behavioral patterns or linguistic expressions found in these scripts during intercultural or intracultural contact, whether for assimilation or achieving specific objectives. Adopting these scripts expands the user base of indigenous concepts, thereby gaining their "liberation." For example, in Exchange 2, a Chinese student shared specific linguistic expressions and hand gestures used to convey the concept of *sajiao* (撒娇) in daily conversations, using the tilde symbol "~" in a request to stand for the lengthening of vowels or higher pitch in speech. Even though Balinese and Chinese students did not understand each other's first language, they were able to enhance their communication in English through the multiliteracies developed during this exchange. This allows concepts that

may have circulated initially only within a specific community to transcend language barriers and gain vitality in other communities, especially in English, which is often a lingua franca during communication. An individual could enrich their intercultural identity by applying these concepts in English during interaction.

3.4.2.4   *ELF's Liberation of the Indigenous Concepts Related to "Transculturality"*

English is perhaps practitioners' most commonly used language during intercultural communication (Crystal, 2008). It might be effective for people to communicate in English to explain and comprehend each other's culture, including indigenous concepts. From a functional perspective, English is a valuable tool for connecting people from various cultural communities (Seidlhofer, 2013). This is not to say that English-based intercultural exchange is different from other forms of intercultural communication using other languages as a way to communicate, nor does it tend to connect English with the Anglophone world. Here, ELF (and possibly also other languages) emphasize "the sharing of the value of communication" rather than "shared values," echoing the cosmopolitan view of culture proposed by Castells (2009, as cited in Kramsch, 2014), which correlates with a constructivist view where culture is continuously reconstructed in global interactions. Culture and language are complex, dynamic, and adaptive systems that constantly interact (e.g., Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006). This perspective suggests that language and culture are closely linked but not inseparable. Indeed, the worldwide use of ELF across diverse contexts has illustrated the impracticality of attaching a particular language, such as English, to any one cultural group (Baker, 2015).

In the case of indigenous concept-based intercultural exchange, we assume that a helpful communication mode is the basis for "liberating" indigenous concepts that are difficult to understand. Indeed, our experience was not unique; numerous virtual intercultural exchange projects have demonstrated the effectiveness of using ELF in enhancing participants' intercultural competence (Fan & Derivry-Plard, 2021; Hsieh et al., 2022; Prapinwong & Dosaka, 2022; Sahlane & Pritchard, 2023). These projects concluded that using ELF could "liberate" people with different cultural backgrounds so that they could communicate smoothly and understand each other. ELF also allows people to recognize the complexity of language and culture. For instance, ELF-based intercultural exchange allows learners to create their own version of English based on their cultural self-identity. This attempt aligns with the aim of English language teaching (ELT) to replace a normative and strict standard English orientation with an open "MY English" orientation (Kohn, 2022). In our exchanges, participants with different cultural backgrounds used various methods to emphasize the nuances of indigenous concepts in their culture. Meanwhile, we assume that using ELF in virtual intercultural exchange projects can successfully make participants recognize their stereotypes, helping

them to think critically about the similarities and differences between various cultures. For example, in Exchange 2, valuable insights into the subtle nuances and commonalities of Chinese, Japanese, and Balinese emic indigenous concepts through English exchange lead to transcultural understanding (see the students' reflections on cultural insights reported in this chapter).

Based on the results of our virtual intercultural exchanges, we have argued that using ELF as an intercultural medium offers a unique and valuable potential for intercultural learning, opening up an avenue for individuals to explore and express their cultural identities and interculturality in new ways, facilitating a potentially deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures.

3.4.2.5   Limitations of Virtual Intercultural Exchanges

Virtual intercultural exchanges offer the opportunity for remarkable global connections and intercultural learning opportunities. However, these exchanges have limitations, which we will discuss now as they relate to our experiences. One significant constraint is the need for synchronous communication. Due to the asynchronous nature of virtual interactions, participants may experience delays in receiving and responding to messages, inhibiting smooth interactions. In Exchange 1, for example, Finnish students expressed dissatisfaction with the Japanese students not replying to their emails. Even though the Japanese students were instructed to contact their Finnish counterparts before the next class, they could have done better without procrastinating. Unfortunately, some students reported they hadn't managed to establish any communication with their assigned partners. Also, the frequency of contact is another issue to consider. In Exchange 3, one participant shared this insight:

> The important key to building online relationships is being open to more frequent and intensive communication.

Nonetheless, high frequency and intensity might be acceptable for participants, as some mentioned that using the online app for chatting was enjoyable. Yet some also reported feeling the burden of constantly needing to respond.

Additionally, based on our experience in Exchange 4 (Dalsky & Mattig, 2023), finding a suitable time for real-time chat can be challenging because people are in different time zones, which constitutes a significant problem for real-time in-class online meetings. Different academic schedules across regions can create conflicts when finding mutually convenient times for virtual collaboration. In Study 1 (Dalsky & Garant, 2016), differing academic year schedules posed a challenge as the Finnish course ended at the end of December. In contrast, the Japanese semester concluded at the end of January. As a result, the Finnish deadline was extended until January 20, aligning with the Japanese students' final paper submission date. This confused and inconvenienced the Finnish students accustomed to completing their courses by mid-December.

3.5   Conclusion

In his *Critique of Violence*, Walter Benjamin (1921/1986) wrote that language is the proper sphere of understanding. In reality, language not only serves as a pathway to understanding but also holds the potential to create gaps that can marginalize labeled individuals, such as women, blacks, Jews, or communists (Žižek, 2008). While this may not be entirely accurate, people still use language. We strive to find and encounter words in the hope of communication and understanding.

The wall of language becomes more apparent when speakers come from different cultural backgrounds. These cultural backgrounds can be within the context of one country or region or even across countries and continents – WEIRD or non-WEIRD cultural contexts. Despite the potential for miscommunication, the communication that occurs can provide a sense of strangeness for the speakers. This strangeness needs to be continuously explored. Unusual experiences encountered in occasional encounters allow the participants to be in a moment that amplifies the desire to understand.

In the contemporary world, these encounters and the desire to understand are facilitated through technology that narrows the distance, space, and time between people from various parts of the world. People can learn about what is happening in Finland today, discover things about Japan, or delve into matters related to Indonesia without having to buy transportation tickets to visit those places. Virtual encounters through cultural products like digital newspapers, cable television, social media, and video telephony applications can now be done.

We have taken advantage of such opportunities to facilitate virtual meetings among university students in Finland, Germany, Indonesia, and Japan. Such spaces open up the idea that others may seem strange, and when we see them as odd, perhaps they also see us as strange. The sense of strangeness acquired doesn't distance us from each other; it is also followed by enchantment and curiosity about the possibilities of different ways of life from what we have been living.

In short, culture manifests through language, and indigenous concepts can play a significant role in unlocking doors to transcultural understanding. We propose that understanding indigenous concepts through intercultural dialogue using ELF as a "liberator" is one way to conceive "interculturality" that is not WEIRD.

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Note

1 These are freely available to download from https://interculturalwordsensei.org/.

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