

Stimulating Students' Awareness of Intercultural Communication Issues within the Context of Local Tourism in Yamaguchi Prefecture

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山口の地域観光を題材とした異文化間コミュニケーション意識の育成

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本論文は、観光地における英語表記を題材として、学生の異文化間コミュニケーション意識を向上させる学習法を筆者の授業実践から検証した。本授業では、山口県美祢市秋芳洞をケーススタディとして活用し、学習者に外国人旅行者の立場になって現地情報の英語表記を見直させ、その課題を発見させ、自ら翻訳作業を行わせた。その結果、当該の学習法は、学習者の意識を促すことに有効であることを示した。

Introduction

Akiyoshidai is one of the foremost tourist attractions in Yamaguchi Prefecture. When visitors come to Yamaguchi from other areas of Japan they typically want to visit the cities of Shimonoseki and Hagi, the Kintaikyo bridge at Iwakuni, and the road bridge leading to Tsunoshima. In recent years, Motonosumi Shrine near Nagato has become a very popular destination. However, in addition to these attractions, Akiyoshidai, located in Mine City, with its dramatic karst landscape and limestone cave system, is frequently visited by inbound tourists.

The authors of this paper set out to investigate issues facing tourism in Akiyoshidai in the aftermath of the period of restricted tourist activity caused by the coronavirus pandemic. One factor which became evident following a field trip to Akiyoshidai in October 2020 was the inadequate nature of English language signage. This paper describes how the issue of English language signage which was identified from fieldwork at the Akiyoshidō Cave was adapted for use as a class taught to second year students in the Faculty of Education at Yamaguchi University.

1. Inbound Tourism to Mine City in the Post-corona

Age: A Consideration of Tourism in Mine City from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication

The global coronavirus pandemic resulted in a significant contraction in demand for tourism in general, and in the case of Japan, for inbound tourism in particular. Although demand for inbound tourism is expected to increase once more when the Covid-19 situation calms down, it is likely that tourism in the post-corona world will emphasise 'quality' or 'alternative' tourism rather than the mass tourism focused on 'quantity' which has contributed to problems of over-tourism in the past. Such 'quality' or 'alternative' tourism can be driven by tourists as consumers, and also by providers in the tourism industry and local communities. To understand the new dynamics of tourism it will be necessary for the tourism industry and local providers to understand the needs of inbound tourists and discover attractive local idiosyncrasies which will entice people to visit a destination.

Mine City in Yamaguchi Prefecture possesses the advantages of latent natural beauty and cultural heritage, both of which are expected to be in demand from tourists in the post-corona age. For example, there is the beauty of the Akiyoshidai karst landscape as it changes with

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the seasons; the caves at Akiyoshidai and the Benten Pond offer the potential for ecotourism or geotourism; and as a cultural event there is the burning of heathland in February each year. However, compared with other prefectures, tourism in Yamaguchi Prefecture, including Akiyoshidai, has a tendency towards attracting domestic Japanese tourists, rather than inbound tourists from overseas; this could mean that a gap is developing between the needs of inbound tourists and the tourism resources of Mine City. To prevent this mismatch between resources and needs from becoming more pronounced, there is a need to consider tourism from the point of view of people with a different culture.

The authors of this paper therefore proposed to harness the ideas of international students studying at Yamaguchi University to evaluate the tourism resources and tourist strategy of Mine City. It was planned to invite international students to join a field trip to Mine and to assess, from the point of view of non-Japanese visitors, the attractions of Mine as a destination for tourists. Looking at Mine City from the point of view of people with a different culture, would lead to a re-evaluation of the city's tourist offerings and it could lead to the discovery of new resources and barriers to tourism that Japanese people have heretofore not noticed.

Furthermore, in addition to international students, the authors also planned to involve students from the Tourism Department of the Faculty of Economics and students from the Faculty of Education. It was hoped that the opportunity for intercultural communication between international and Japanese students would lead to effective educational outcomes for all the students and would prepare students to contribute to facilitating international tourism in Yamaguchi Prefecture.

2. Fieldwork at Akiyoshidai

2-1 Inbound Perspectives

Akiyoshidai, Mine City, and Yamaguchi Prefecture do provide some information in English (and also in Chinese and Korean) for inbound tourists. Leaflets are available at various locations and amongst other websites, the website of the Yamaguchi Prefecture Tourism Promotion Division^[1] provides detailed English guidance for visitors to the prefecture. However, the main objective of the fieldwork was to experience a visit to Akiyoshidai from the point of view of someone unable to read Japanese. Initially it had been planned to take a group of

international students studying at Yamaguchi University on the fieldwork expedition. It was hoped that students from several different countries would take part and that it would lead to an insight into issues for inbound tourists from a variety of perspectives. Unfortunately, university regulations in response to the coronavirus pandemic meant that the planned fieldwork trip with international students was not possible. It is hoped that such a trip will take place at some point in the near future, but at the time the authors' initial plans were made it was only possible for the authors of this paper to go to Akiyoshidai.

2-2 Communication Problems

In the course of the fieldwork trip to Akiyoshidai, the authors of this paper took photographs of signage at the Akiyoshidō Cave. Many signs had no English written on them at all, and, from a critical perspective, in the cases where English was provided, the English wording was invariably either confusing, ambiguous, or inappropriate.

Having taken photographs of many of the signs at Akiyoshidō Cave, it was realized that the signs could be used to teach Japanese students about translating Japanese into English from the point of view of intercultural communication.

3. Class in Translation and Intercultural Communication

The communication problems identified during the fieldwork trip to Akiyoshidai were subsequently developed into a class which combined aspects of translation from Japanese to English, awareness of problems of intercultural communication, and stimulation of the students' awareness of issues in local tourism. This section will describe the process by which students were introduced to the subject matter and the issues involved, and how the students were guided towards making more appropriate English signage for improving the experience of inbound tourists visiting Akiyoshidō Cave.

The class was taught to second year students in the Faculty of Education at Yamaguchi University. The students were split into groups of three or four, but with there being at least one student in each group who had grown up living in Yamaguchi Prefecture. After the students had been split into groups, the teacher made a presentation to outline the issues to be discussed.

The presentation began by describing the attractions which are available to the tourist when visiting

Akiyoshidai. In addition to Akiyoshidō Cave, which is Japan's longest, Akiyoshidai also has the Safari Land safari park. Visitors can also go to Kagekiyodō Cave, a visit to which involves wading through a stream in the cave and is more of an adventure than the main cave at Akiyoshidō, and there is also the Akiyoshidai karst plateau which is free to visit and is popular with hikers, bikers, and cyclists. In each case, students from Yamaguchi or the neighbouring prefectures of Hiroshima, Fukuoka, or Shimane, were asked to comment about whether they had ever visited those places.

The presentation continued by explaining four factors which can make it difficult for Akiyoshidai to attract tourists. The first reason is the location of Akiyoshidai within Yamaguchi Prefecture. Located at the geographic heart of the prefecture, Akiyoshidai would seem to possess a natural advantage in this regard, however it is not close to the main population centres of the prefecture. Cities such as Shimonoseki, Ube, Hōfu, Shūnan, and Iwakuni are all on the southern coast of the prefecture and therefore a certain amount of travelling time is needed to travel from any of them to Akiyoshidai.

The second reason is strongly connected with the first. Located at some distance from the main population centres of Yamaguchi Prefecture, Akiyoshidai does not enjoy public transportation links which allow for convenient access. Akiyoshidai is not located near a railway and consequently does not have a railway station. Public transport services to Akiyoshidai are therefore restricted to buses. The practical consequence of the lack of public transportation links is that, unless a visitor comes to Akiyoshidai as part of an organized coach tour, it is most troublesome to get to Akiyoshidai unless you have your own car, motorcycle, or other means of independent transport.

A third area of difficulty for Akiyoshidai is that the Akiyoshidai micro-region of Yamaguchi Prefecture does not have a particular food strongly associated with it, to the exclusion of other places. Many tourists in the current age embark on sightseeing with culinary considerations at the forefront of their planning. However, while many Japanese tourists would associate Shimonoseki with blowfish sashimi, Iwakuni with sushi, Hagi with natsumikan, and the whole of Yamaguchi Prefecture with kawarasoba, Akiyoshidai has no particular speciality of its own.

Finally, it was suggested to the students that

Akiyoshidai is a secondary consideration when compared with other destinations in Yamaguchi Prefecture. The recent Instagram-led explosion in popularity of Motonosumi Shrine in Nagato has been well-documented^[2], and the students agreed that the attractions of Hagi Castle Town, Kintaikyō Bridge at Iwakuni, or eating fresh seafood at Shimonoseki would probably be more of a priority for many people visiting Yamaguchi Prefecture.

3.1 Translation Training

This being the case, the students taking part in the class were given the challenge of helping to improve the quality of the tourism experience at Akiyoshidai for visitors from other countries. The task was for students to suggest changes which could be made to the signs used around Akiyoshidō Cave which would make them more intelligible and meaningful for visitors who have no understanding of Japanese, but who can read and understand English.

However, to prepare students for this task, and, to provide a common framework for discussion and the evaluation of the students' suggestions, it was first necessary for the students to be provided with some basic training in translation. This training began by showing the students the following sign which is certainly ambiguous and potentially confusing.

GARBAGE ONLY
NO TRASH

Students were invited to discuss with the other members of their group what they considered to be the problems with this sign. It was explained to the students that their difficulty in understanding was commonly the result of them considering the meaning in Japanese and therefore translating both the word [GARBAGE] and the word [TRASH] as 「ゴミ」. The function of the sign is to remind people of the difference in meaning between [GARBAGE] and [TRASH] when used in American English. When asked to think of alternatives which would be easier to understand, the students, starting from their native language of Japanese, wanted to use expressions such as 「なまゴミ」 or 「粗大ゴミ」 and this resulted in suggestions such as, “Organic Waste only, No Recyclables” or, “Kitchen Waste only, No Bulky Trash”. All the students were able to agree that, having

studied this example, signs require a considerable amount of careful thought if they are to be effective.

The next step was to use actual examples of signs from Akiyoshidō Cave and to discuss with the students the aspects in which the signs failed to convey the desired message. The students were taught that direct translation of words from Japanese to English is often insufficient to allow English speakers to understand the intended message.

The first example studied is shown in figure 1.



Fig. 1: 洞内富士 (どうないふじ) Dōnaifuji / Mt. Fuji

This sign was chosen to illustrate the problems of intercultural communication through ill-considered use of English because of the relatively simple concepts of poor communication which it represents. The rock formation in front of which the sign appears, does bear a vague resemblance to the gently sloping sides of Mount Fuji. However, it is curious that the person responsible for the English translation did not consider it necessary to add the 「洞内」 section of the Japanese signage in the English version.

Although it is unlikely that non-Japanese visitors to Akiyoshidō Cave would suspend their belief to the extent that they would think that they were actually standing in front of Mount Fuji, it was explained to the students that the English translation fails because Mount Fuji is 3,776 metres high and is to be found in Shizuoka Prefecture. This over-exaggeration of the failure of the signage helped the students to consider the true meaning of the words on the sign from a hypercritical perspective as to the effect that the sign would have on a reader.

The next step was to provide the students with some strategies which would give some structure to their attempts to produce more helpful English signage. The students were introduced to three translation strategies

which would assist them in their discussions about more satisfactory English wordage.

The first strategy was called “Improved Literal Translation”. In the case of the 「洞内富士」 sign the implication for improved literal translation was that all of the elements of the Japanese wording would be used. It was explained that, in cases where this approach is appropriate, this strategy is likely to provide a result which not only English speakers would appreciate but which would also be to the satisfaction of Japanese speakers, who would naturally be aware of the original meaning of the sign. It was suggested to the students that a suitable improved literal translation for 「洞内富士」 would be, “Mount Fuji in the Cave”.

The second translation strategy proposed was given the name, “Explanation and Interaction”. This strategy required the students to consider what information would be necessary for foreign visitors to the cave in order to understand the meaning of the signs (and therefore make the effort involved in providing English language on the signs worthwhile). One constraint regarding this strategy is that it can seem pedantic if over-used, and in addition, any explanation almost always means that a larger number of words than a simple name is required, and therefore the size of the sign might need to be increased.

In addition to providing “explanation” the intention behind providing some “interaction” with the reader of the sign is that it can significantly increase the visitors’ enjoyment of a tourist attraction by sparking their interest and stimulating conversation with other members of their party. Providing a degree of interaction within the wording of signs can be particularly effective at enhancing the experience of children when visiting a location, and by extension, the level of satisfaction which their family will also experience.

As an example of the “Explanation and Interaction” strategy for the 「洞内富士」 sign, the students were offered the following example. “This rock reminds us of the shape of Mount Fuji. What do you think?” As can be seen, there is an explanation of the rock formation first, followed by a question which provides visitors with the stimulus to consider their personal feelings about what they are looking at.

The final translation strategy outlined to the students was given the title, “Radical Thinking, Original Ideas”. When applying this strategy, students were encouraged to ignore the Japanese wording completely and to think of

translations which would be more culturally appropriate for non-Japanese visitors to Akiyoshidō Cave. One of the most difficult aspects of intercultural communication is that of trying to put oneself in the position of someone who does not share your own culture. However, providing opportunities to practice doing this means that students can slowly improve their skills in this area.

Students were asked to discuss in their group their radical, or original, ideas for the rock formation called 「洞内富士」. Having discussed the students' suggestions, the teacher advised the students that when using the “Radical Thinking, Original Ideas” strategy it is most effective to produce three or more proposals from which the most popular can be selected. As ideas for the 「洞内富士」 sign, students were shown the following proposals; “Mini Mount Fuji”, “Mount Fuji Underground”, and “Akiyoshidai's Own Mount Fuji”.

For the further guidance and instruction of the students, the students were introduced to a second example for teacher-guided discussion. As before, the students were guided towards considering the three separate translation strategies outlined above. For this second example, the challenge was to prepare a more suitable English wording for the sign shown in figure 2.

In this case, the communication problem created by the English wording is more fundamental than that for the “Mt. Fuji” sign discussed earlier. In the case of the “Mt. Fuji” sign the communication difficulty would arise from visitors' knowledge that they are not standing in front of the real Mount Fuji.



Fig. 2: 縮緬岩 (ちりめんいわ) Chirimeniwa / Crepe Rock

In the case of the 「縮緬岩」 sign shown in figure 2, the problem is a semantic one. When native speakers of English are confronted with the word “crepe” they will probably create a mental picture of a French-style pancake, rather than imagining the silk material used

for making furoshiki in Japan and sometimes used for making dresses in English-speaking countries. The confusion created by the sign is further complicated because Japanese speakers, while understanding that “chirimen” is a kind of fabric material, may not know that the English for “chirimen” is “crepe”. Therefore, Japanese speakers could be even more confused than English-speaking visitors by trying to understand why a rock described as looking like a fabric in Japanese appears to be described in English as looking like a pancake. Should English-speaking visitors to Akiyoshidō Cave ask a Japanese visitor to explain the apparent anomaly in the translation, Japanese people may be as confused as non-Japanese visitors.

Having considered the communication problems outlined above, the students were once again, asked to consider how they might improve the English wording by using the three translation strategies at their disposal. The key to providing a helpful improved literal translation is the inclusion of the word “fabric” so that English speakers can understand that the name of the rock comes from its surface looking like the surface sheen of a piece of material rather than looking anything at all like a pancake. After discussion with the students the new proposal agreed in class was to change “Crepe Rock” to “Crepe Fabric Rock”.

The strategy of using explanation and interaction offered even greater opportunity for drawing attention to the special qualities of “chirimen” as a fabric. The students were shown how to use the explanation and interaction strategy by discussion of the following: “The surface of this rock looks like the crimped and shiny surface of crepe fabric. Can you see what we mean?”. By adopting this translation English-speaking visitors would not only understand that the rock is thought to look like crepe material, but also, by the addition of the adjectives “crimped” and “shiny” the English explanation would help English speakers unfamiliar with crepe fabric to picture what crepe material looks like. If a new sign were being prepared it would be useful to show a photographic image of “chirimen” raw silk crepe which would demonstrate its similarities to the surface of the rock.

Next, the students were again challenged to suggest original ideas as the result of their radical thinking, and to put themselves in the position of a non-Japanese visitor looking at the “Chirimeniwa”. The students agreed that

many people would be unlikely to make the connection between soft crepe fabric, and the hardness of the rock. Other suggestions were therefore proposed based on the sparkly and shiny nature of the rock's surface. Ideas which were considered in class were, "Stars in a Night Sky", "Golden Sprinkles Rock", and finally, "Gold Dust Rock". The intention of this brainstorming for original ideas was to show students that effective intercultural communication often requires thinking which reaches beyond the confines of simple word-to-word translation.

The students were now almost ready to make their own attempts, in their groups, to suggest appropriate translations for signs at Akiyoshidō Cave which would satisfy the goal of effective intercultural communication. However, before they did so they were given a final piece of instruction in the flexibility that translation frequently requires.

The students were confronted with the translator's dilemma, "When is an 犬, not a dog?". It was explained that whenever a translation situation requires the feelings of the target language user to be considered, a wide range of options are possible. If all that is required is a simple translation of the Japanese word 「犬」 then the English word "dog" will be appropriate. However, the students were introduced to other possibilities which could be suitable. For example, in cases where the breed of the dog is known to the translator, choices such as "terrier", "Dalmatian", or "poodle" could be used, in addition to, or instead of, only using the word "dog". Alternatively, students are reminded that in a situation where the name of the dog is known, the dog's name, such as "Hachiko" or "Jill" could be used. This activity was helpful for showing students how to broaden their viewpoint when considering radical thinking and original ideas for their translations.

3.2 Groupwork in Class

Now that the students had been thoroughly prepared as to what they would be expected to do, they were shown three signs, one at a time, to discuss in their group and make suggestions for improved translations.

The first sign was 「大松竹」 with the English translation of "Big Mushroom" as shown in Figure 3.

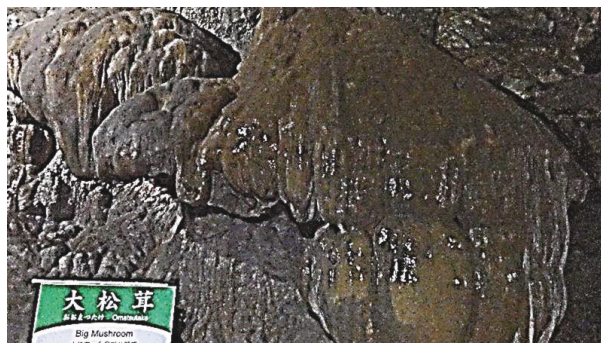


Fig. 3: 「大松竹」 Big Mushroom

The students decided that the communication problem involved with this translation is that the rock formation does not look like a traditional mushroom with a stem and a cap. This means that the rock formation is significantly at variance with the mental image that English-speakers would associate with a mushroom. On the other hand, the students agreed that foreign visitors to Akiyoshidō Cave might not know what a real matsutake looks like and, therefore, using the word "matsutake" in the translation would not be appropriate. The rock formation did remind the Japanese students of the cap of a matsutake mushroom, but the result of the discussion was that a foreigner-friendly new naming would probably be more satisfactory.

In terms of an improved literal translation of the sign, the class decided that "Giant Matsutake Mushroom Rock" would educate foreign visitors that the rock was believed to look like a kind of mushroom, even if the foreign visitors were unaware of the appearance of a matsutake mushroom. All the students felt that avoiding the word "big" was favourable, and after discussion of various synonyms such as "massive" or "huge", "giant" was considered the best fit for the context.

For new suggestions following the "Explanation and Interaction" strategy, the students proposed, "This rock resembles a giant matsutake mushroom. Would you like to eat it?" Finally, with the "Radical thinking, original ideas" strategy, the students found it challenging to break away from their first-language thinking after accepting that 「大松竹」 would probably satisfy Japanese responses to seeing the rock.

The students were then shown the sign which appears in Figure 4.



Fig. 4: 「立入禁止」KEEP OUT

When discussing the communication problems inherent in the sign shown in Figure 4, it was first explained to the students that the positioning of the sign is most unfortunate. The sign has been positioned adjacent to the main pathway at the entrance to Akiyoshidō Cave. Shortly after visitors have purchased their tickets, they encounter this sign on the left hand side of the pathway as they approach the entrance to the cave. No doubt it is obvious to visitors that the sign means that they should not stray from the paths, but the wording and the positioning of the sign probably lead some visitors to make jokes about not receiving a warm welcome. Were the sign to be rotated through ninety degrees the communication problem would be avoided.

It was explained to the students that expressions such as “Keep Out” or “No Entry” which are commonly-used translations for 「立入禁止」 are more appropriated when fixed to a physical barrier such as a gate, a fence, or at the least, a rope. Therefore, with no physical barrier, the improved literal translation would need to consider the real intention for placing the sign in that location. After discussion in groups, the students suggested that the translation of “Please Keep to the Paths” would be suitable because the desired result of having a sign positioned at that place was to ask people not to climb on the rocks or enter the forested areas around the cave entrance.

If following the “Explanation and interaction” strategy the students felt that the following might be used: “This area is off limits. Please do not leave the path.” Lastly, the students suggested that as an original idea and using radical thinking, a sign saying, “Danger! Snakes and Bears Live in this Area”, would also result in visitors keeping to the paths.

As a final in-class, groupwork exercise, the students were shown the sign displayed in Figure 5 and Figure 6.



Fig. 5: 「秋芳洞冒険コース（出口）」



Fig. 6: Detail of wording in Figure 5.

The students found the English message on this sign very confusing indeed. The original intention of the Japanese sign is to stimulate interest in the Adventure Course which is available as an optional attraction within the cave. For an additional payment of 300 yen, visitors can follow a course through some of the more inaccessible parts of the cave. The Japanese sign makes it clear that the sign marks the endpoint of the Adventure Course, explains that the Adventure Course operates on a one-way system, and includes the instruction to proceed to the entrance to the course near the Aotenjō Information Point located 50 metres from the sign. The confusion created by the, at first glance, nonsensical English is created firstly by the juxtaposition in close proximity of the words “exit” and “entrance”, and secondly by failure to translate the actual intended message of the Japanese sign by relying on insufficient English words.

In their groups, the students discussed how to improve the effectiveness of this sign and the outcome was that more words would be required. The final version proposed was, “This is the End Point of the Cave Adventure Course. If you would like to try the Cave Adventure Course, please go to the Cave Adventure Course Start Point”. This sign was an example in which detailed instructions were required and therefore the only

translation strategy which could be effective was that of “improved literal translation”. The “explanation and interaction” strategy and the “radical thinking, original ideas” strategy would not have been appropriate in this case.

3.3 Group Work Assigned as Homework

The activities outlined in sections 3.1 and 3.2 were designed to fill a university class lasting 90 minutes. As has been mentioned earlier, the students were split into three groups at the start of the class, and, at the conclusion of the class each group was assigned two signs from Akiyoshidō Cave as homework. The signs distributed to each group were all different, but each group had to tackle both a sign which showed the name of a rock formation in the cave, and also a sign which provided instruction or guidance. The signs showing the name of a rock formation gave the students the opportunity to try using all three of the translation strategies discussed during class time, because an English translation of the rock formation’s name was already provided. This allowed the students the chance to be constructively critical of the current English name for the rock formation, and thereby to consider the communication problems involved and how to make improvements. The signs providing instruction or guidance had not been previously translated into English which meant that the students could approach them with an open mind and the students were not influenced by whatever a previous translator had decided was acceptable.

Group 1 was provided with the signs shown in Figure 7 and Figure 8.



Fig. 7: 「龍の抜穴」 Secret Passage of the Cave Dragon



Fig. 8: 「左側通行：洞内全域禁煙」

Group 2 was assigned the signs shown in Figure 9 and Figure 10.



Fig. 9: 「百枚皿」 The One Hundred Plates



Fig. 10: 「エレベーター使用停止」

Finally, group 3 was shown the signs displayed here as Figure 11 and Figure 12.



Fig. 11: 「猿すべり」 Slippery Way Monkey

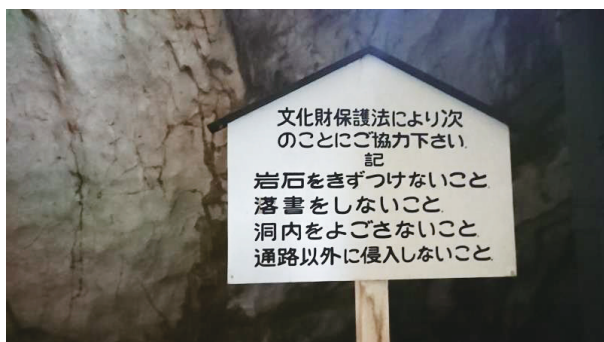


Fig. 12: 「岩石をきずつけないこと
落書をしないこと
洞内をよごさないこと
通路以外に侵入しないこと」

One week after the first class the students presented their ideas for improving the signs to their classmates. The first 45 minutes of class time was used by the students to compare the ideas they had individually prepared as homework. Following individual presentations by each student within the group, each group discussed which suggestion it would present to the rest of the class as their recommended solution to the translation problems posed. The students presented some innovative translations which, to a greater, or lesser degree, would make an improvement to the visitor experience for non-Japanese visitors to Akiyoshidō Cave.

4. Conclusion

Rogers et al. (2002)^[3] comment that prior to the mid-1960s the Japanese public believed that ‘once an individual learned *eikaiwa*, that person would be an effective international communicator’, and to a certain extent, such an attitude is still prevalent in the 21st century. Although there are numerous intercultural communication EFL (English as a Foreign Language) textbooks available to Japanese students which provide opportunities for learning more about the rest of the world and learning how the rest of the world sees Japan and the Japanese, Senneck (2021)^[4] has argued that such textbooks often fail to stimulate students to give practical consideration towards intercultural communication.

Kawakami (2009)^[5] provides a list of the first series of academic intercultural communication textbooks to be published in Japanese. Kawakami’s list begins with the publication in 1987 of *Ibunka Komyunikeishon: Shin Kokusajjin e no Jōken* [Intercultural Communication: Conditions for an Internationally-Minded Person] by

Satoshi Ishii, and includes six other publications up to 2007. However, despite the publication of those six academic textbooks in Japanese over a period of 20 years, O’Connell (2015)^[6], in his outline of the development of intercultural communication studies in tertiary education in Japan, writes that, as of 2015, there were only four universities in Japan which had ‘dedicated faculty and/or graduate programs in the field of intercultural communication’.

This means that skills of intercultural communication are often overlooked as students try to improve their English ability. One aspect of English which can provide an opportunity for focusing on intercultural communication is the English translation of signs. English-speaking visitors to Japan often get the impression that Japanese businesses adopt the attitude that if there is something written in English on a sign, then that will be adequate for communication purposes.

While it is true that English-speaking visitors to Japan would certainly prefer to have some English signage, however imperfect, than none at all, the results of the fieldwork trip to Akiyoshidō Cave show that direct translations from Japanese to English are often confusing, ambiguous, or inappropriate for intercultural communication. Using real world examples to demonstrate problems in intercultural communication to university students is an effective method for encouraging them to consider the effectiveness of the English language signs they encounter in their daily lives.

If the hoped-for resurgence of international travel materializes in the years following the coronavirus pandemic, tourist attractions such as Akiyoshidō Cave can improve the experience for inbound tourists by providing more signage in English, and through a deeper consideration of how the world looks through the eyes of someone who is not Japanese. One of the key ideas impressed upon students during this English class was that direct translation of Japanese content frequently results in poor intercultural communication. For successful intercultural communication to take place consideration must be given to how non-Japanese people think, behave, and interpret the world around them.

(All the photographs used in this paper were taken by the authors.)

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