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Barriers to English Communication in Confucian Culture Heritage Countries: A Focus on Japan

Scott AUBREY
Bradley COLPITTS
Andrew NOWLAN

The premise of this paper is to examine the barriers English teachers from individualist societies in the West may encounter while teaching in Japan and other Confucian culture heritage countries (CHCs), as well as the methods that might be employed to overcome said barriers. Additionally, the authors aim to explain why the spoken communicative ability of students in CHC countries lags behind their other English language skills. To help determine this, willingness to communicate (WTC) in the language classrooms of these societies will be evaluated while gauging how culture, rooted in Confucian and collectivist thought, may change the dynamic of the classroom and the effectiveness of Western teaching methodologies. Finally, the authors identify potential areas of ambiguity in the research that warrant further investigation.

How students engage in learning, and learning languages in particular, is greatly affected by their culture and preconceptions regarding the learning process. Phong-Mai, Terlouw and Pilot et al. (2005) define Confucian culture heritage countries (CHCs) as those nations with collectivist cultures in East Asia and cultural roots in Confucian thought. These include, most notably, Japan, China, Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam. Many teachers from Western countries come to teach English in Japan, employing approaches such as communicative language teaching (CLT) that may conflict with local learning customs. It is the purpose of this paper to identify some of the underlying contradictory cultural paradigms and how they might emerge as barriers in foreign language (FL) classrooms. In particular, the paper delves into why communicative ability in English among students of these nations is so poor, despite the fact that "English as a commercial, political, intellectual and cultural resource is increasingly appropriated by countries and universities throughout Asia" (Phan, 2013, p. 160). In this regard, this paper will explore how Japan's roots in Confucianism may impact the dynamic of the language classroom and the effectiveness of communication English classes.

The next section of this paper will provide some background on Confucianism and its influence on Japanese education. To conclude, we will draw on previous literature and our own experiences to suggest ways in which these barriers can be overcome.

BACKGROUND: CONFUCIANISM IN THE CLASSROOM

Confucianism was introduced to Japan around the year 285 via Korea (Littrell, 2006), meaning it has been ingrained in both the culture and thought processes of the Japanese people for nearly 1800 years. Before discussing the barriers that exist in CHCs, it is important to briefly examine the foundations of Confucianism in order to relate them to second language (L2) education in Japan. Hofstede (2003) identified four key principles of Confucianism:

1. The stability of society is based on unequal relationships between people. The *wu lun* (five basic relationships) are…based on mutual and complementary obligations.
2. The family is the prototype of all social organizations. Harmony and consensus are ultimate goals.
3. Virtuous behaviour towards others consists of not treating others as one would not like to be treated.
4. Virtue with regard to one's tasks in life consists of trying to acquire skills and education, working hard, not spending more than necessary, being patient and persevering (as cited in Phong-Mai et al., 2005, p. 404-405).

While Wen and Clement (2003) note that collectivist values are gradually declining in the wake of globalization, in CHC countries, they still "contribute significantly to the shaping of the…self and to one's perception of the relationship between self and others" (p. 20). Stapleton (1995) takes this a step further, arguing that Confucianism is "arguably the single biggest influence on Japanese education" (p. 13). A strict moral code of behaviour, dictated by the principles of Confucianism, has permeated its way into Japanese education.

Cave (2004) noted in a study of the Japanese school sports club system that "[h]eadmasters and other educators often stressed the need to cultivate an elite of high moral character, an ideal that could be expressed in terms borrowed from Confucianism" (p. 388). Moral education is formally and informally taught in Japanese schools, and is a primary goal of education here. The Ministry of Education, Sports, Culture Science and Technology (MEXT) specifies four areas of moral education in the elementary school curriculum: self-awareness, relations to other people, relations with groups and with society, and finally, relations with nature (MEXT, 1989).

Arguably, the most noticeable social trait cultivated by the Japanese education system is the need to regulate one's behavior in relation to the group. MEXT describes assimilation of this behavior:

> "…through desirable group activities, to promote harmonious development of mind and body and develop the individuality, to

> foster an independent and practical attitude in order to build a better life as a member of a group, to deepen the self awareness regarding life as a human being, and to nurture the ability to fulfill oneself" (MEXT, 1989, p. 121).

Practical activities in schools are undertaken with the purpose of teaching students the connection between the individual and the group. Group work in class, participation in school cleaning, involvement in club activities and organizing school club events are carried out with a ritualistic observance to a group social code. Within this unit, there is a well-defined hierarchy in which each student knows his or her place. The communication of ideas and the passing on of traditions are facilitated by the *senpai-kohai* (senior-junior) relationship, an important dynamic that extends from elementary school through to business life. Older students are responsible for guiding their less experienced counterparts, thereby developing a sense of social responsibility. At the top of the social hierarchy of the school unit is the teacher, whose position garners the unconditional obedience of students (Okano, 2009).

In addition to playing an important role in shaping the character of Japanese students, moral education has had profound implications on Japanese classroom culture. The emphasis of belonging to a group has led to sayings such as *deru kugi wa utareru* (the nail which sticks up will be hammered down) and *chinmoku wa kin* (silence is gold), which are often used as a warning to students not to become too individualistic or outspoken so as to draw attention to oneself and away from the group (Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000). Passive, reticent students who rarely express their opinions are a manifestation of this trait. This is facilitated by the student-teacher relationship, which traditionally sees the role of the teacher as one who imparts knowledge to the student who then receives it without question – a dynamic that has invariably led to teacher-centered classrooms and an emphasis on fact-based knowledge over creativity.

This concept of society as a hierarchal structure comprised of imbalanced relationships may also contribute to why the Japanese largely see the world as consisting of the insider "Japanese" and the external 'other'. Differences in how individuals in collectivist societies deal with *insider* and *outsider* groups were shown to exist in a number of studies highlighted by Ting-Toomey et al. (1991). The perception of insider and outsider groups is especially poignant if, as MacIntyre (1994) notes, "the major motivation to learn another language is to develop a communicative relationship with people from another cultural group" (as cited in Aubrey, 2011, p. 241). This is further compounded by the fact that the Japanese language contains several antonyms such as *kokunai* (in-country), *gaikoku* (out-country), *bokokugo* (the mother language) and *gaikokugo* (foreign languages), that clearly distinguish anything not Japanese as 'external'. Ryan (2008) notes that the "implication of this approach to cross-cultural understanding is that difficulty in communicating with foreigners is an important element of one's Japaneseness" (p. 41).

CHALLENGES IN CHC CONTEXTS

Various challenges for the language teacher in Japan arise as a result of the close relationship between Confucianism and educational objectives. In this section, barriers to successful learning and teaching will be outlined. This includes the issues of anxiety when communicating in English and its relation to face protection; students' relationship with the English language; and students' relationship with their teachers.

One topic that appears to be of particular relevance as a challenge in CHC L2 classrooms is that of willingness to communicate (WTC). Yashima (2002) describes WTC as "the tendency of an individual to initiate communication when free to do so" (p. 55). In her study involving Japanese high school students, Yashima provided empirical evidence to suggest that "WTC was a predictor of frequency of communication in a L2, whereas motivation was a predictor of WTC, frequency of communication in a L2, or both" (p. 55). WTC can be negatively affected by any anxiety felt in the classroom. This is of particular relevance in CHC countries due to the issue of *face protection*. Wen and Clement (2003) noted that Chinese students, for example, "can never separate themselves from obligation to others…When they grow older, they become sensitive to this social evaluation and care about their own self in relation to others" (p. 20). As a result of this, they are less willing to communicate in a foreign language in front of others where they risk making mistakes and 'losing face'. Similarly, Japanese students fear ridicule from their classmates and are often unwilling to draw attention to themselves by speaking up. This often leads teachers to call on students to communicate, but this practice may negatively impact the classroom atmosphere by heightening students' anxiety of negative evaluation in front of his or her peers (Kitano, 2001). This contradiction in culture and methodologies is clearly an impediment to creating a communicative language classroom. Some educators have criticized how CLT is applied in East Asia (Larsen-Freeman, 2012) and have suggested that it is less effective than traditional teaching methods, such as grammar translation (Chang, 2011).

In the case of Japan, Yashima (2002) notes that, "[f]or many learners, English symbolizes the world around Japan, something that connects them to foreign countries and foreigners or 'strangers'" (p. 57). Yashima goes on to argue that students' attitude towards what English symbolizes affects their *international posture*, which in turn affects their WTC. One might ask how educators in Japan – an isolated island nation – can positively affect students' international posture. This becomes an even more pertinent question considering the birth and growth of Japan's thriving economy despite little progress made on overall English ability. Taguchi, Magid and Papi (2009) noted that a weaker correlation between English proficiency and success with job hunting meant English may be even less valued by many learners in Japan as compared with its Asian neighbours. Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) argued that, "[w]hile the first language and subjectivities are an indisputable given, the new ones are arrived at by choice" (as cited in Duff, 2012, p. 16). When one considers students' lack of opportunities to actually engage someone in English outside of the classroom, it is difficult to illustrate to students the relevance of studying communicative English or the practical usage of English that might bridge the distance between classroom and real-world application.

As previously noted, Confucian thought dictates that CHC students feel a necessity to be submissive listeners in a teacher-centred classroom. Wen and Clement (2003) described this as *submission to authority* and it is instilled into CHC students through the *wu lun*. In Japan, teachers often serve as parental figures, as well as educators. Phong-Mai et al. (2005) stated, "[t]he position of teachers in CHC countries is not only a teacher but a model of correct behavior" (p. 406). It is then more obvious why it is challenging to mold independent, self-directed learners when culture dictates that they should revere their teachers as central authority figures inside and outside of the classroom. Furthermore, in CHC countries, adopting a less authoritative style may also negatively impact students' perception of the teacher as 'the specialist'. In a study of Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China and America, Ting-Toomey et al. (1991) found that using an "obliging, placating conflict style would not be appropriate to the leadership role position especially in the context of collectivistic cultural systems" (p. 290). In a communicative, student-centered classroom, the teacher adopts the role of facilitator, instead of teacher. Facilitation obviously involves a lot of compromise and 'obliging', and may conflict with students' expectations of their teacher's responsibilities.

The authors have established that communication anxiety, the view of English as something foreign and not particularly relevant to students, and students' perceptions of the teacher's role in the classroom, are all barriers to teaching communicative English in CHCs. However, that does not mean that these barriers cannot be overcome.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS IN CHCs

One way to increase students' motivation to learn English, and therein their willingness to communicate, is to increase their sense of *imagined community* in relation to English. That is, by "imagining themselves bonded with their fellow human beings across space and time, learners can feel a sense of community with people they have not yet met" (Norton, 2010, p. 3). This can be accomplished by increasing the relevancy of lesson content as it relates to their actual opportunities to engage with English in the 'real world'. Aubrey (2011) notes that lesson topics can be made more interesting and personally relevant in two ways: *knowledge of student interests* and *giving students some content control*. Some suggestions offered in order to accomplish this feat include administering student questionnaires to gauge interests, having students choose content from a list of options, and assigning a class leader every week. These activities may very well be helpful in reducing the perception of English as something *foreign* or something that belongs to outsiders, and thereby decreasing students' hesitation to engage with it. Furthermore, this may narrow the gap between teacher and student perceptions and expectations, a significant problem that has been identified in cross-cultural studies by Schulz (1996, 2001). Acquainting oneself with local pop culture (movies, music and celebrities) relevant to the students can also be beneficial. Aubrey (2011) suggests that making use of international students and instilling global awareness are important in positively affecting students' international posture, which correlates strongly with WTC. Having Japanese students engage with foreign students and international issues can narrow the imagined distance between themselves and the target language. Another idea educators can employ to reduce student anxiety and thereby increase their willingness to engage in peer-based communication is to "limit the amount of forced exposure imparted on a student" (Aubrey, 2011, p. 240). Allowing students to communicate at their own pace can pay dividends in the long-term by improving L2 output.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, cultural differences and perceptions about how to teach vary from country to country, and from culture to culture. Rather than look at these differences as obstacles we should look at them as opportunities to adjust our teaching strategies to benefit students in CHC societies. Japan and other CHCs share some common cultural items that stand as barriers in communicative English classes. Students deal with a lot of anxiety when speaking in front of their peers due to the issue of face protection. Students may also not see the relevance of English to their daily lives, and find communicative language classes at odds with their perceptions of teacher and student roles. This paper suggests that by allowing students more time to engage in peer discussion, we may increase their willingness to communicate and their talking time. Having students engage in peer discussion may also reduce communication anxiety. This might also become an opportunity for the teacher to join in the discussions to help gradually change students' perceptions of the teacher-student relationship. By giving students greater control over course content and by utilizing international students in schools, students might find greater relevance in their English classes as they relate to their daily lives. While there exists a fairly robust body of research on this issue, further studies could provide alternative methods to overcome these barriers that are more effective and empirically verifiable.

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