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Towards Improving Our Understanding of Stereotyping

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Introduction

Many language teachers attempt to promote and improve intercultural communication by raising their learners' awareness of the negative stereotypes they may have of people from other cultures and encouraging them to leave those stereotypes behind. As valuable a goal as this may be, there is reason to doubt that we understand as much about the processes involved in stereotyping as we should. Among the most important issues that language teachers need to understand more about are the existence of various kinds of stereotypes, the functions that stereotypes perform, and the amenability of stereotypes to change.

This paper explores these issues by first offering an overview of what recent research in social psychology has to say about them. The second half of the paper discusses the implications for classroom practice, beginning with a general discussion of some of the adjustments that we may need to make to the way we typically deal with the issue of stereotyping in the language classroom. The paper concludes with specific examples of activities designed to deal more effectively with this important and complicated issue.

1. Stereotypes : The Social Psychology Perspective

> "Stereotypes are an example of a very useful and important aspect of intelligent and efficient thinking : the formation of categories" (Brislin, 1986 : 78).

For most language teachers, calling stereotypes "useful" or an "aspect of intelligent thinking" is likely to sound strange in the extreme. ELT professionals are far more likely to view stereotyping as a bad habit that needs to be changed, and efforts to deal with the topic are typically geared towards raising student awareness of the stereotypes they may have of people from other cultures or countries and encouraging them to leave those stereotypes behind.

The urge to overcome the reliance on stereotyping is summarized nicely by Hinds and Iwasaki (1995 : 63), who state, "If we wish to communicate across cultures effectively, the first thing we must do is to eliminate any stereotype *(sic)* thinking. We must not hold such views as 'All Klingons are evil.' It prevents us from receiving the message the person wants to send."

This section of the paper argues that we need to get beyond viewing stereotyping as a problem that can be 'eliminated' and consider the process in more depth and detail. What follows is a brief summary of the evidence that research in social psychology has amassed that will lend some of the necessary depth and detail to our understanding.

1.1 Three suggestions for improving our understanding of stereotyping

The social psychology literature on the topic of stereotyping is immense, and a thorough review of the research is far beyond scope of this paper. I will limit myself to a brief summary (based on Bochner, 1982 ; Brislin, 1981, 1986 ; Hewstone and Giles, 1986 ; Jaspars and Giles, 1986, and Smith, Bond, and Harris, 1993) of three areas that will be of most use in improving our own theorizing and practice on the issue.

1.1.1 Broadening our focus

The first step towards dealing more effectively with stereotypes is to be sure that we do not have an overly narrow conception of the term itself. Although language teachers typically limit themselves to the treatment of negative, out-group stereotypes, the term as it is defined in social psychology is significantly broader : "A stereotype is a belief or image in which a few attributes are exaggerated or simplified, and the group is described or evaluated in terms of those attributes" (Levinson, 1998 : 224). Notice that the definition does not restrict itself to *negative* beliefs or images of *other* groups, but implicitly states that stereotypes can be both positive and negative and are applied to both in groups and out groups.

Notice also that nowhere in the definition is the word 'individual' mentioned. That is, stereotypes are viewed as being applied not to individual representatives of a group, but to the group as a whole. As I will discuss later, evidence suggests that, contrary to what many of us believe, people are more willing to admit individual exceptions to their stereotypes than we often assume. By emphasizing that negative out-group stereotypes are not the only variety of stereotype, as well as by casting doubt on the extent to which we apply the stereotypes we have of groups to individual members of that group, the above definition helps us realize that stereotyping is a more complex process than we

often assume.

The following two sections, dealing respectively with the functions of stereotyping and their resistance to change, will take us deeper into a number of these complexities.

1.1.2 Understanding the functions of stereotypes: Fulfilling cognitive, psychological and social needs.

Closely related to our tendency to restrict our attention to negative, out-group stereotypes is the faith that stereotyping is fundamentally remediable. Believing in a stereotype is viewed to stem from faulty logic, insufficient knowledge, or intolerance, and many language teachers assume that pointing out the weaknesses in reasoning, increasing knowledge about other cultures, or raising awareness of their own narrow-mindedness will be sufficient in helping students overcome their stereotypes. Unfortunately, stereotyping seems to satisfy deep-seated cognitive, psychological, and social needs, and our reliance on them is not likely to diminish by simply pointing out how 'illogical' they are or adding to our knowledge base about other cultures.

The argument that stereotypes serve a cognitive function simply means that it is impossible for us to deal with the various stimuli we are exposed to as discrete, unique phenomenon, and that we need to categorize in order to establish both order and predictability in our environment. This, of course, is the argument being made by Brislin (1986: 78) in the quotation at the beginning of this section in which stereotypes are viewed as "an example of very useful and efficient thinking: the formation of categories". Perhaps Brislin's argument sounds less jarring if we replace the word "stereotype" with a less loaded term such as "schema" or "social category." Regardless of the labels we use, one of the main reasons we rely on stereotypes is because they help us handle large amounts of incoming information by reducing its complexity, let us identify a large number of stimuli quickly, and allow us to make predictions about the behavior of others while guiding our own behavior in relation to those 'others.'

In addition to this cognitive function, stereotypes also help satisfy psychological and social identity needs. That is, our sense of who we are, both as individuals and as members of various groups, is dependent on making clear distinctions between both "me" and "you" and "us" and "them." The distinction between individual and group identity is of course overlapping: establishing out-group stereotypes helps clarify our sense of individual identity at the same time it establishes a clear distinction between that group and the group or groups which we consider ourselves to be members of.

This very brief discussion of the cognitive, psychological, and social functions of stereotypes is intended simply to suggest that there is more behind our urge to stereotype than ignorance, illogic, and intolerance. These functions should become clearer in the next section when specific examples of behavioral patterns that reflect these three functions are explored.

1.1.3 Appreciating our limitations : Factors in the resistance of stereotypes to change

Empirical research in social psychology has documented a number of behavior patterns that illustrate the cognitive, psychological, and social basis of stereotyping. The various behaviors all conspire, through selective attention, biased interpretation, or selective memory, to support and strengthen the stereotypes we hold. Teachers who attempt to 'educate away' stereotypes must understand more about the following tendencies.

a. The 'ultimate attribution error'

This term refers to our strong tendency to maintain positive in-group stereotypes and negative out-group stereotypes and form part of the psychological and social identity needs mentioned above. Briefly put, numerous studies have shown that when we are asked to attribute reasons for people's behavior, responses fall into one of two basic types : personal attributions and situational attributions. That is, we explain other people's behavior in terms of inherent character traits or circumstances in the situation surrounding that behavior. Significantly, research shows great consistency regarding which of the explanations we tend to rely on, and, not surprisingly, responses heavily favor the in group and penalize the out group. First, let's look at how we attribute the behavior of in-group members.

For illustrative purposes, I will choose two fairly non-controversial groups that often hold stereotypical views of the other : communicative language teachers (CLTs) and 'grammar translators' (GTs). Further, for the sake of argument, I will consider myself to be a member of the former group and begin the example by discussing how I am likely to attribute the behavior of people I consider to be members of my in group.

In a nutshell, positive in-group behavior is explained in terms of inherent character traits, while negative in-group behavior is explained away in terms of the surrounding situation. For example, let's say that a fellow CLT is known for donating money to charities and doing volunteer work. If asked to explain what I attribute such positive behavior to, I am very likely to focus on personal attributes such as 'kindness,' 'generosity,' 'empathy,' or the like. Conversely, if a CLT colleague is known for coming late to important meetings, missing deadlines, or snapping at staff members and students, I am just as likely to

blame those failings on the situation my colleague is in, e.g., being overworked, underpaid, under-appreciated, and so on.

On the other hand, if a GT that I know also has the admirable habit of donating to charities or doing volunteer work, I am likely to explain his behavior away by saying something like, 'Well, of course he gets a tax break for those donations, you know,' or, 'He only volunteers because he's obsessed about what other people think of him.' If we think for a minute about what these examples suggest, the news isn't very good.

Clearly, indiscriminate attributions will often be wrong (hence the 'ultimate attribution *error*'). Just as clearly, it is very bad news for the out group, giving us a perfect illustration of the expression "damned if they do and damned if they don't." It also suggests that we have to rethink the way we typically deal with negative out-group stereotypes in our classrooms. Simply exposing our students to examples of 'positive' behavior by members of an out group in the materials we use in class may have little effect on how they are attributing that behavior. At the very least, we need to explore how students are attributing the behavior of the 'positive role models' that we may be exposing them to.

b. 'Exception to the rule'

This term refers to our ability to grant that specific individuals may be exceptions to the stereotypes we have of the group to which they belong. If, for example, I stereotype Japanese university students as being unmotivated, quiet, and non-participatory, but one day happen to come across a Japanese student who is driven, outspoken, and involved, I am likely to deal with the cognitive dissonance by saying, 'This is an unusual case; not at all typical of most Japanese university students.' That is, my stereotype of Japanese students remains in tact.

Notice, however, that I am willing to deal with this particular student as an individual, not merely as a representative of the group of which I have a stereotype. As I pointed out in Section 1 while discussing the definition of "stereotype," we need to keep in mind that the target of a stereotype is the group, not the individual. The assumption that people invariably deal with others as representatives of the group to which they belong is seriously flawed. Unfortunately, the preferred way of dealing with the kind of cognitive dissonance that arises when an individual does not live up (down ?) to our expectations is to grant that he or she is an exception to the rule, not to reframe our original stereotype.

c. Selective attention and memory

A number of experiments also show that the mechanisms of noticing and

our memory also conspire to reinforce the stereotypes that we already hold. Selective attention refers to our tendency to notice only that behavior that supports our stereotype. If, for example, I believe that high school girls overuse their cellular phones and are loud and disruptive, I will take note of that behavior each and every time I see it. Conversely, I am unlikely to register the other (and probably more numerous) instances of quiet, 'polite' members of the same group. Our memory also does its share to sustain negative out-group impressions. Using the same scenario just mentioned, months (or even years) later, I will be able recall and recount the behavior that supports my stereotype in great detail.

d. Self-fulfilling perception

Perhaps the most interesting (and troubling) tendency people have is to perceive behavior or personal characteristics that confirm our stereotypes even when they are absent. Numerous experiments have shown that we revise our perceptions of people (usually downward) if we come to find that they are members of an out group of which we have negative stereotypes. Initially neutral or positive evaluations are recast to include negative evaluations, as often expressed in such terms as, 'Well, now that you mention it, I did feel that that person was a little bit (insert a pejorative adjective).'

e. The limits of increased intercultural contact

Although not related to the cognitive, social, or psychological issues dealt with in the previous four points, it is important to note one more factor in the resistance of stereotypes to change : the limited use of increasing the amount of contact between people of different cultures. The faith that most language teachers place on increased contact is summed up nicely in the following quotation from a work previously cited :

> Stereotypes are usually formed and maintained by people who have little or no contact with members of the other group. Increased exposure to people from the other society allows one to realize that not everyone in the other group is alike, either in appearance or in thought and action (Hinds and Iwasaki, 1995 : 61).

Research suggests, however, that merely increasing the frequency with which people interact is not a sufficient condition for reducing our reliance on stereotypes. As summarized by Brislin (1986), any hope of achieving the goal of reducing reliance on stereotypes demands that the contact be of a very specific sort that meets the following four criteria :

1. *Equal Status :* Contact between groups will be counterproductive if a single group feels either superior or threatened or defensive. The groups must also share equally in access to both power and rewards.

2. *Intimate contact:* Contact that is limited to formal or institutionalized roles such as employer-employee or store keeper-customer seems to be of little benefit. Group members must be in a position to establish close friendships.
3. *Super-ordinate goals:* Group members should be in a situation in which they are working together to achieve a goal that could not be achieved with only one of the groups.
4. *Organizational support:* There must be organizational or administrative support behind the efforts to establish, maintain, and develop the contact between groups.

Clearly these criteria are problematic for EFL teachers practicing in Japan, and our ability to satisfy the four conditions is severely limited. We should pay special attention to the first two categories: equal status and intimate contact. As several researchers (see, e.g., Kubota, 1999 and Susser, 1998), have pointed out, there is reason to worry that language teachers may be using materials that present simplistic and stereotyped characterizations of Japanese practices or ignore, devalue, or marginalize Japanese perspectives, thereby contributing to inequalities in regard to power, status, and prestige. The issue of intimate contact is perhaps even more troubling since we have so little control over it. Although many teachers go to great lengths to use 'authentic' materials to expose their students to other cultures, we should realize that it may be a poor substitute for the kind of truly intimate contact that seems to be necessary to bring about any kind of realignment in the stereotypes we hold.

2. Adjusting classroom approaches: General guidelines

Up until this point, I have been exploring the ways in which we need to improve our understanding of the mechanisms involved in stereotyping if we are to deal with the issue more successfully in our language classrooms. The effort has been to clarify some of the obstacles that stand in our way, while deepening our understanding of the very complex processes involved in stereotyping. In this section, I will pull together some of the observations made so far and offer three suggestions to serve as a framework for improving on our classroom practice. Following this general discussion, I will conclude the paper with examples of original activities that have been designed with this framework in mind.

2.1 Acknowledge the complexities of stereotyping

The most fundamental improvement that language teachers need to make when dealing with stereotyping is to be sure that we appreciate the complexities involved in the issue and to try to move beyond an oversimplified conceptualization of the processes involved in it. We can start by bringing balance to a one-sided emphasis on negative, out-group stereotypes by addressing stereotypes in all their forms (i.e. positive and negative and in-group and out-group examples). We must also acknowledge that approaches based on the assumption that stereotyping is a bad habit indulged in by ignorant or lazy minds is overly simple and therefore counterproductive. As I hope to have shown, the complex cognitive, psychological and social functions that stereotypes fulfill suggest that we rely on them for reasons that run far deeper than we are usually willing to grant. As well-intentioned as attempts to rid our students of their stereotypes may be, an overwhelming amount of empirical evidence suggests that we may be attempting the impossible.

2.2 Changing our goals

If, as it seems, trying to completely rid our students of their stereotypes is doomed to failure, it is time for a thoroughgoing readjustment of our pedagogical goals. For starters, we should keep in mind the advice of two prominent social scientists who urge members of their profession to recognize "the insatiable need for categorization and simplification" that we all seem to have and realize that "it is simply time social scientists acknowledged the importance of group images for the healthy functioning of many individuals" (Hewstone and Giles, 1986: 20). Instead of trying to rid students of stereotypes altogether, our time and energy is better spent making sure that they are not exposed to relentlessly negative stereotypes of any given group (including their own). When dealing with the stereotypes students may have, we also need to steer the discussion away from such impossibly large groups such as 'the Japanese' or 'Westerners' to avoid dealing with cultural groups as monolithic, homogeneous units. Effort has to be made to bring the perspectives of smaller groups 'defined' by such criteria as race, class, age, gender, sexual and political orientation, region, and religion into the dialogue on stereotyping.

2.3 Explore the processes involved in stereotyping in the classroom

Finally, perhaps the most important adjustment we can make to the way we cover stereotypes in the language classroom is to raise our students' awareness of two of the major points covered in this paper: the functions of stereotypes

and their resistance to change.

That is, broadening our perspective so it includes the full variety of stereotypes or making sure that large groups are broken down into subgroups is a good start, but it's not enough. Students will benefit most from taking part in a consideration of why we rely so much on stereotypes and why we are so loathe to part with them. Instead of focusing on the manifestations of stereotyping, we need to turn our students' attention to the cognitive, social, and psychological functions they fulfill.

3. Adjusting our classroom approaches : Sample activities

In this final section I will present two activities that I have designed for university-level language classes. They are based on the attempt to avoid the weaknesses in the traditional approaches to stereotyping that focus solely on raising student awareness of their stereotypes of certain out groups and urging them to leave those stereotypes behind. As the first two parts of an introductory lesson in a unit on stereotyping, Activity 1 attempts to get at the students' own in-group stereotypes (i.e. their images of themselves as 'Japanese') to open up the treatment of this sensitive topic. Activity 2 focuses on the stereotypes that non-Japanese have of Japanese culture and people, and attempts to put the students 'in the driver's seat' by casting them as 'experts' of their own culture and asking them to judge how well members of an out group have understood that culture.

3.1 ACTIVITY 1 : WORD ASSOCIATION

1. In order to avoid biasing results, introduce the exercise as a warm-up vocabulary activity.
2. Demonstrate a sample word association by building up a list of responses to the name of the students' (Ss') university on the board/OHP.
3. Explain that Ss will now try a few on their own. Tell Ss to keep the following points in mind :
   - There will be a time limit
   - Try to write as much as you can within the time limit
   - Use either single words or phrases
   - Use the L1 if you get stuck with the L2
4. Set up a time limit, write a prompt on the board/OHP. Ss begin their lists.
5. After the time limit is up, Ss compare with partners/groups.

6. Ss ask teacher/classmates for any items they couldn't come up with in the L2
7. Repeat Steps 4-6 once or twice with new prompts
8. Repeat Steps 4-6 one last time with the prompts *Japan/Japanese People*

In addition to giving students the chance to compare their word association lists, I suggest exploring their associations with one or both of these follow-up activities. As one option, the teacher collects all of the student responses, tabulates the results, and presents data on the frequencies of the responses given (see Ross, in print, for a presentation of such data). The existence of a wide range of responses often catches the students by surprise and offers fertile ground for further discussion.

As another option, assign the topic "My image of Japan and Japanese People" as a short oral presentation to be given in the next class (see Ross, in print, for several examples). Adding this step ensures that students refer back to their own lists of responses and the discussions they had with classmates to clarify their thinking before they present their ideas and opinions to their classmates.

3.2 ACTIVITY 2 : YOU'RE THE EXPERT : Writing 'Critical' Summaries

For the second activity, explain that now that students have explored their own images of themselves as Japanese, they will switch perspectives and examine how non-Japanese view Japanese culture and practices.

Part I : Brainstorming

1. The teacher (T) chooses short expository reading material on some aspect of Japanese culture/society.
2. Before getting the reading, Ss brainstorm on the topic individually or in pairs.
3. T elicits 'answers,' building up a list on the board/OHP.

Part II : First reading

1. T hands out the reading, encouraging Ss to scan quickly to find a) facts and b) opinions presented by the writer.

   Note : Establish a goal (e.g. 4 facts/2 opinions). Set a time limit
2. Ss compare their 'answers' in pairs/groups.
3. T elicits 'answers' ; builds up a list on the board/OHP.
4. T directs attention back to Ss brainstorming list, pointing out similarities and differences between the lists.

Part III : Second Reading/Summary

1. T explains that Ss will write a short summary of the passage after re-

reading it.

2. Ss re-read the passage.
3. Ss write a short (50-75 word) 'critical summary' of the passage.
4. Ss share their work with classmates.

Note : 'Critical Summary'

In addition to summarizing the main points made by the author of the passage, Ss add their own 'criticial' comments about the passage, pointing out :

a) mistakes of fact
b) 'missing' information
c) disagreement with the author

Notice that neither Activity 1 or 2 explicitly mentions the issue of stereotyping. I would argue any direct mention of the topic is to be avoided since it is likely to inhibit student responses and discussion. That is, since the negative connotations of stereotyping are well known, students may unconsciously edit themselves accordingly.

After these two activities have been completed, the next step is to begin a discussion of the two areas I have argued are essential in any consideration of stereotyping : the functions that stereotypes fulfill (Section 1) and their amenability to change (Section 2). A teacher-fronted lesson in which these areas are explored (e.g. in a mini-lecture format) is probably the most effective. At the risk of repeating myself, I would like to stress that it is important to avoid solely focusing on the negative stereotypes students may have of other groups. Be sure to deal with the students' in-group and out-group stereotypes as well as the stereotypes out groups (i.e. non-Japanese) have of the in group (i.e. Japanese) throughout the consideration of the topic.

3. Concluding Remarks

I hope that this paper has made some of the complexities involved in the process of stereotyping clear. I believe that unless we learn more about the cognitive, psychological and social functions of stereotypes and their resistance to change, we will not be able to deal with the issue effectively. Needless to say, we also have to make sure that what we learn about the complex functions behind stereotyping is reflected in our classroom materials and pedagogical approaches. Our goal should be to have our students come out of the classroom not simply with a better understanding of what a stereotype is or what stereotypes they may have of themselves or others, but, more importantly, they

should come to an increased understanding of the many complex issues that are involved in the process itself.

I would like to conclude by making it clear that taking the complexities to heart does not mean that we should give up a proactive stance when dealing with the problem of stereotyping, especially in its most virulent forms. However, as I hope the paper has made clear, any such attempts must be based on a thoroughgoing readjustment to both our theoretical understanding of the issue of stereotyping and to our traditional ways of approaching it.

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