

Creating an Active Learning Environment

— An Examination of Cultural Influences in Student Participation and Assistant Language Teacher Expectations in the Japanese EFL Classroom —

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Abstract

Are cultural issues a cause of frustration for the Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) in the Japanese classroom? Student participation is critical for encouraging an active learning environment in the classroom, but for the foreign assistant language teacher in Japan, it might be a particular challenge. According to research, Japan and other East Asian countries tend to have a low voluntary participation rate in general when compared to Western countries, and to the ALT the contrast can be surprising. There is reason to believe that this general tendency in classroom participation may stem from cultural expectations and constructs. In this paper we consider the relationship between culture and participation levels in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, as well as seek to identify common challenges for the foreign language teacher.

キーワード : Participation / Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) / Culture

Introduction

A significant priority of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) educators is to bridge cultural differences and strive for effective and sensitive methods to teach language learners. To be competent and responsive teachers, “we need to learn about our students and their cultures while at the same time reflecting on how our own culturally rooted behaviors may facilitate or interfere with teaching and learning” (Peregoy, 2005, pg. 836). By recognizing these undercurrents of culture, educators can better understand their students, more accurately assess their abilities, and in turn learn how to teach their students successfully.

It may be clarifying to consider what the term ‘culture’ encompasses. When asked for a definition of culture, we may conjure up ideas like art, architecture,

history, traditions, folk dances, and religion. Perhaps a more succinct definition would be “the shared beliefs, values, and rule-governed patterns of behavior that define a group and are required for group membership” (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005, pg 837). Thus, culture is a group specific and communally created social construction. Culture plays a large part in how one perceives the world, the correct and incorrect forms of interacting with the society, as well as defining “what others expect of us and what will happen if we do not live up to their expectations” (Brown, 2007, pg. 188).

Cultural factors are often subconscious, and their effects on language not fully realized, even by the person speaking. As a result, it is easy to confuse culturally defined ideas as universally accepted truths (Hammond, 2007). The true diversity of linguistic culture can more readily be identified when interacting with people from particularly dissimilar backgrounds. If not acknowledged for what they are, these differences can cause not only confusion but significant linguistic and relational misunderstandings. English as a foreign language teachers are at the

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forefront of this collision of cultures.

For any Western English teacher in Japan, there are a few key aspects of Japanese culture that may affect interactions in the classroom as well as influence one's ability to promote an active learning environment. In order to understand the differences in culture, we will first consider common Western and Eastern values.

I. The Cultural Influence

1. Individualistic Western Culture

Many western cultures including the United States are considered to be largely individualistic societies. Individualism "emphasizes the values of freedom, independence, self-determination, personal control, and uniqueness" (Kim, 1995, pg. 20). Just as the name suggests, individualistic cultures tend to focus on the individual, drawing a definite separation between one's self and others. Being true to oneself is valued over conforming to any group mentality and individual morality is encouraged to maintain social harmony (Kim, 1995). In fact, the norms for verbal behavior, and the consequent perceptions associated with these norms, tend to vary quite a bit between cultures. In many Western countries, including the USA, speaking assertively is generally considered to be a good thing. From an individualistic perspective, "avoidance of communication or lack of verbal assertiveness is a deficiency" (Aune, et al., 2001, pg. 384). Talk is seen as a way of distinguishing one's unique identity, a way to make oneself stand out in the crowd. In this way, highly verbal people are perceived in a positive light because they are more successful at establishing their identity.

2. Collectivistic Japanese Culture

Japan, on the other hand, is commonly described as a collective culture. Collectivism places an emphasis on the group to which an individual belongs. It values the "views, needs, and goals of the ingroup rather than that of oneself, social norms and duty defined by the ingroup rather than behavior to get pleasure, and beliefs shared with [the] ingroup rather than beliefs that distinguish oneself from the ingroup, and great

readiness to cooperate with the ingroup members" (Kim, 1995, pg. 25). Collective cultures are more concerned with the consequences one's behavior has for ingroup members than they are for the individual (Aune, et al., 2001). As such, group harmony is paramount. Appropriate behavior of the individual is dictated based on social norms and roles of society, "if an individual's aspirations are not compatible with social demands, he or she is likely to be asked to sacrifice his or her personal interests for group harmony" (Kim, 1995, pg. 28). This type of social behavior is in direct contrast to that of individualistic societies.

3. Participation

How might these cultural aspects affect participation and the active learning environment? Studies have found participation to be conducive to language learning and achievement (Tsou, 2005). Being able to interact effectively and fluently in English is an essential aspect of communicative competence. As any other skill set, it follows that this interaction must be practiced in order to improve. By encouraging students to speak up in class when they have questions, comments or answers, teachers are afforded valuable feedback and thereby better able to promote a democratic, student centered, and responsive learning environment. Nevertheless, according to various studies, EFL students in East Asian areas such as Japan tend to have relatively low levels of voluntary participation (Saito & Ebsworth, 2000; Thompson, 2001; Tsou, 2005). It is our intent to find out how teachers view this behavior.

II. Survey Results on Participation and Expectations in the Classroom

To supplement our background research in culture and participation, we decided to ask past and present Japan ALT's about their own expectations for the English language classroom, their real life experiences, and their perceptions of student participation. We procured our responses by creating and distributing an internet questionnaire. We collected 26 responses from participants of four nationalities: the US, the UK,

Canada, and Jamaica. The majority of participants have experience teaching junior high school (17 people or 65.4%), followed by elementary experience (14 people or 53.8%) and high school experience (13 people or 50%). The following sections present our discoveries and conclusions from the results of this questionnaire.

1. Level of Satisfaction with Classroom Participation

In our survey, we asked participants to what degree they were satisfied with the level of participation in their English classroom. Of all our ALT survey participants, 42.3% (11 people) were satisfied with the level of classroom participation, while another 42.3% (11 people) were unsatisfied with the level of classroom participation and 15.4% (4 people) were neutral. This suggests a nearly evenly divided opinion. However, the educational level at which our participants were teaching was highly stratified. The majority of participants have experience teaching junior high school (17 people or 65.4%). Followed by elementary experience (14 people or 53.8%) and high school experience (13 people or 50%).

When we consider the grade level experience of the participants, we can notice a strong majority among those with high school experience (13 people) who were unsatisfied with the level of participation in their classrooms. 62%, or 8 of the 13 participants with high school experience, indicated that they were not satisfied with the level of student participation in their classrooms (See Table A). Four of these had experience exclusively in the high school setting. In contrast, 7 of the 11 participants (64%) who were satisfied with the level of participation had no ALT experience with teaching high school students. One teacher commented,

In my elementary classrooms, participation was usually quite high, . . . I saw a large amount of involvement from 5th/6th year students trying to at least make some sense of English. JHS sees a huge drop-off in participation. Perhaps it is due to the larger amount of structure (uniforms, test focus, etc.), but students overall participate less in the classroom (Teacher 16).

Another teacher noted,

Older students just did not seem used to speaking out in class at all, and were particularly reluctant to participate if personal opinions were necessary. Creative and critical thinking also usually resulted in blank stares and quiet classrooms (Teacher 21).

This feedback suggests that the age level of students may be an important factor for ALT satisfaction with participation.

Table A

ALT Grade Level Teaching Experience and the Level of Satisfaction with Participation

Experience Grade Level	Satisfied	Neutral	Unsatisfied
Elementary (14 people)	6	3	5
Junior High School (17 people)	8	3	6
High School (13 people)	4	1	8

2. Asking Questions

There is a tendency in Japanese classrooms for students to rarely ask questions (Hammond, 2007). We put this to the test with our survey participants and found that their general response also indicated that questions were not often asked in class. 61.5% of respondents (16 people) disagreed that students would often ask questions about class materials. 57.7% (a majority) of respondents (15 people) disagreed that students would often ask for clarification when they didn't understand, although 38.5% (10 people) agreed (See Table B1). This seems to be in contrast with the degree to which our participants considered questions important in the classroom. 100% (all) of participants agreed that there is a need for asking questions in the classroom, with 69.2% (18 people) asserting that it was absolutely essential (See Table B2).

Table B1

Tendency of Students to Ask Questions

Students would often:	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
ask questions about class materials	5	5	16
ask for clarification	10	1	15

Table B2**Essentialness of Asking Questions in the Classroom**

Absolutely Essential	Very Beneficial	Preferred	Unnecessary	No Preference
18	7	1	0	0

From an American standpoint, a class that doesn't ask questions might be seen as one that understands all the material. This is not always the case however. This phenomenon can be a result of various factors, regardless of understanding. One possible factor is the Japanese linguistic culture of 'burden of sense'.

Burden of sense characterizes the perception of who has the responsibility of making sense of a conversation (Hammond, 2007). It presents a drastic difference between American and Japanese conversation styles. In the United States, the burden of making sense of a conversation is given to the speaker. The speaker must ensure that they are making a clear point, and that they are being understood. If clarification is needed, the listener will ask questions of the speaker, and it is the speaker's duty to clear up these issues by choosing alternate wording or providing more information. In Japan however, "the burden of making sense of a conversation is placed on the listener" (Hammond, 2007, pg. 44). It is the responsibility of the listener to understand the speaker. Failing to understand something will result in embarrassment for the listener.

Often listeners will not ask clarification questions because they do not want to reveal that they have misunderstood. This equates to questions being unexpected in the Japanese classroom. Students may even misinterpret the speech of American teachers due to cultural factors. It may be the case that "in school, even when the teacher directly invites students to ask questions, this is rarely interpreted as an actual willingness to open the floor, but often simply as a polite way to close out a topic" (Hammond, 2007, pg. 44). Realizing this possible difference in the ALT's and students' burden of sense, we can begin to understand the causes underlying participation frustration.

3. Answering Questions

Student willingness to answer questions in the classroom is another area of participation on which we asked our participants to give their opinion. Regarding perceptions on the frequency of students voluntarily answering questions they knew the answers to, the participant responses were fairly divided. When asked to what degree the participant agreed with the statement that students often answered voluntarily, 9 people or 34.6% agreed, 8 people or 30.7% disagreed, and 9 people or 34.6% claimed to be neutral. However, there was a higher consensus on the tendency for students to voluntarily answer a question which is subject to opinion. 84.6% (a clear majority) of respondents disagreed that students would often voluntarily answer a question that is subject to opinion. Furthermore, 65.4% (a majority) of respondents agreed that students would often remain silent when asked a direct question (See Table C). One participant noted, ". . . in quiet classes you can ask a question and nobody will answer. Even when you call on someone, they are clearly reluctant to answer and will answer quietly or not at all" (Teacher 7).

Perhaps one reason for students' unresponsiveness to questioning stems from the group-focused mentality in a Japanese classroom. There is a common perception that one should avoid standing apart from the group and strive to maintain group harmony. This means that in speaking on one's own, one risks either 'failing' or 'showing off', either of which is a disagreeable position. While failing can result in a loss of face, showing off is seen as standing above your peers; "some students consider enthusiastic knowledge display impolite because it could make their friends appear ignorant" (Peregoy & Boyle, 2005, pg. 839). Thus, two types of students might be prevalent in Japanese English classes, those who are unsure how to respond in English and won't try out of fear of failing, and those who know how to respond in correct English but won't try for fear of boasting (Hammond, 2007). For the Western teacher it is impossible to tell these students apart since their response to questioning is the same: silence.

Table C
Types of Questions and Whether Students Would Answer Them

Students often	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
voluntarily answer a question when they know the answer.	9	9	8
voluntarily answer a question that is subject to opinion.	0	4	22
remain silent when asked a direct question.	17	7	2

Another possible exasperation is the tendency for classroom discussion to follow what was originally intended to be a question for one individual. 92.4% of our respondents agreed that students would often delay in answering a question, and 84.6% of respondents agreed that students often consulted with their cohorts about answers before responding to a direct question. One teacher pointed out that, “The students often feel frustrated at being ‘singled out’ to answer a question in front of their peers” (Teacher 25). Whereas American culture values decisive responses, individualized opinions and “assertive, spontaneous, and individually aggressive style”, the Japanese culture discourages these and instead values consensus among the group (Jackson, 2006, pg. 278). Therefore, when called to speak out to answer a question or give an opinion, students may feel the need to reach consensus before they speak. This characterizes a “delayed response, a tendency to move slowly and tentatively on an action until some consensus is apparent” (Jackson, 2006, pg. 278). This group-mindedness can frustrate teachers who value receiving individual feedback. In this Western view, a student discussing answers with others around them before answering feels like cheating, as well as a waste of valuable class time (Hammond, 2007).

Our survey participants tended to confirm these expectations. 96.2% (an overwhelming majority) of our survey participants agreed that independence is needed in the classroom. 80.8% of participants agreed that there is a need for uniqueness in the classroom, with 30.8% asserting that it is absolutely essential. In terms of self-expression, 100% (all) participants agreed that there is a need for self-expression in the classroom. 65.4% (a clear majority) asserted that it is absolutely essential. Furthermore, 73.1% of

participants asserted that conformity was unnecessary in the classroom. Thus, what Western teachers may perceive to be frustratingly low levels of individual participation may actually stem from a misunderstanding of the students’ expectations and the need of finding a consensus.

4. Speaking up

100% of our survey participants agreed that there is a need for discussion in the classroom, 53.8% asserted that it was absolutely essential, while 38.5% (more than one-third) asserted that it was very beneficial. However, when asking our participants if students often feared speaking up in class, 80.8% agreed that they did. One teacher commented, “It’s especially frustrating to ask a direct question to a student and they don’t respond at all. If it’s for fear of making a mistake, then I question what led them to feel that way in the first place” (Teacher 17). Communication apprehension is the level of fear or anxiety an individual has in real or anticipated communication with other people. One in depth study by Aune, et al. found that Japanese participants were more apprehensive than other groups like Americans, Australians, Koreans, Micronesians, Chinese, and Filipinos. It also noted that members of collective cultures in general have higher levels of communication apprehension than members of individualistic cultures.

The fear of communicating in a second language arises “from learners’ inability to adequately express mature thoughts and ideas” in the target language (Brown, 2007, pg. 162). In the process of learning a second language, learners must struggle using a language with which they are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with to express themselves. The nature of a collective culture may play a part in shaping how uncomfortable this inability to express yourself becomes.

Collectivist Eastern Asian cultures are known to emphasize the maintenance of one’s ‘face’ in public situations. “Face is lost when the individual, either through his action or that of people closely related to

him, fails to meet essential requirements placed upon him by virtue of the social position he occupies” (Kim, 1995, pg. 28). In a collectivist culture where the opinion and views of those around you are held in high esteem (and indeed play a big role in defining one’s identity), it is understandable that there would be greater anxiety of losing ‘face’ by inadequately expressing yourself in a foreign language.

Besides the fear of not being able to accurately express themselves, the fear of making a mistake may also be higher in the Japanese classroom and keep students from voluntarily communicating. One ALT commented that her high school students “were always very scared of giving the wrong answer and were never very responsive” (Teacher 11). This may stem from the strong tendency to focus on accuracy in the Japanese classroom.

Japanese have commonly been taught English “almost exclusively using a grammar-based approach that emphasizes accuracy” (Hammond, 2007, pg. 43). This stress on accuracy combined with social conscientiousness results in students who are unwilling to take risks. “Research shows that classrooms that emphasize correctness usually result in learners who are inhibited and will not take chances using their knowledge to communicate” (Hammond, 2007, pg. 43). Accuracy, however, does not appear to be a classroom expectation of our ALT participants. When asked how essential accuracy was in the English classroom, 57.7% (a majority) asserted that it was preferred, 19.2% asserted that it was very beneficial, and 23.1% (over one-fifth) believed it to be unnecessary. No one thought it was absolutely essential (See Table D). This may be another potentially frustrating discrepancy in expectations between the ALT and their Japanese classroom environment.

Table D

The ALT’s Expectation for Correctness

Absolutely Essential	Very Beneficial	Preferred	Unnecessary	No Preference
0	5	15	6	0

5. Types of Verbal Interaction

It is common in an American classroom to consider the outspoken and assertive student to be the most knowledgeable. In American school culture, children learn that work and progress are individual endeavors. As such, competition, individual opinions, leadership and debate are often encouraged. Students are rewarded for the ability to work independently, without help and support from others (Fillmore & Snow, 2000). Students are taught to ask questions, discuss answers, debate (occasionally even with the teacher), take leadership, and give personal opinions in class from a young age. To encourage this behavior, teachers commonly ask students what they think, and why (Hammond, 2007). In fact this question and response is an essential form of assessment in the American classroom. It helps teachers gain an idea of where students are in their learning and the extent of their critical knowledge on a subject.

Our survey participants generally seemed to agree with these expectations in the classroom. 69.2% of participants believed individual excellence to have a place in the classroom, 34.6% of participants found this to be very beneficial, 26.9% preferred individual excellence in the classroom and 7.7% claimed it was absolutely essential. 69.2% of participants also believed that there was a place for competition in the classroom, with 34.6% believing that competition is very beneficial to the classroom. However, it should be noted that 26.9% (7 people - over one-fourth) believed competition to be unnecessary. When asked whether participation had ever been a cause for frustration in the classroom, one participant responded “Only in debate activities. My students really had a difficult time in arguments” (Teacher 22). Debate is one form of competition and self-expression in the classroom. When asked the importance of debate in the English classroom, 80.7% seem to feel that debate is useful. 42.3% of participants preferred it, 26.9% thought it was very beneficial, and 11.5% thought it was absolutely essential. At odds with this preference is the general response when asked if students would debate in the classroom. 92.3% disagreed with the

statement that students would debate in their English classrooms. Additionally, 84.6% of respondents disagreed with the statement that students would often speak assertively in the classroom. Furthermore, 96.2% of participants asserted that expression of personal opinion is needed in the English classroom. 42.3% of participants believed this to be absolutely essential. In spite of this expectation, there was considerable disagreement with the statement that students would often answer questions which were subject to opinion. These decidedly Western classroom expectations may be at odds with a more collectivistic Japanese classroom. The collectivist culture rewards conformity, humility, and the maintenance of harmonious relations. Nonassertiveness in this context may be considered very appropriate (Aune, et al., 2001).

In a Japanese English classroom, it may be the case that the student with the highest English ability is actually the quietest in class. This is caused by many factors, one of which is the commonly held perception of appropriate classroom behavior; in Japan, “class time... is not a time for speaking and expression. School culture designates it as a time intended for listening, receiving information, and giving formal and correct answers to questions” (Hammond, 2007, pg. 46). Consequently, the kind of student that has typically been most valued in the history of Japanese education is one that performs well on tests and is quiet, passive, and respectful of the authority of teachers (Hammond, 2007). Though certain aspects of this perception have been gradually shifting, it is still a pervasive view.

Less verbal people in collective cultures may be perceived more positively because they are “successful at maintaining the social order without saying more than needs to be said” (Aune, et al., 2001, pg. 392). Seen in this context, rather than viewing communication avoidance as a shortcoming, it is possible to view it as a “sensitivity to the social context” (Aune et al., 2001, pg. 392).

III. Not overgeneralizing

It is important to note at this point that all the culturally influenced behaviors suggested in this paper are generalizations as observed by educators in Japan and as revealed by research. They are not absolute rules, individuals will have their own personalities that differ from these norms, as will each classroom have its own group dynamic makeup. Although culture does affect individuals of a community to some extent, in an effort to avoid stereotypes we should not oversimplify or create exaggerated categories in this respect. Cultural level analyses are not appropriate when considering individual-level phenomena (Aune, et al., 2001). Every person in a culture is not the same, nor do they possess the same traits. Cultural systems may encourage one type of cognitive style, but it does not mean that all individuals of that system hold true to cultural norms (Norasakkunkit, Kitayama, & Uchida, 2012). Individuals will always differ. Still, these generalizations provide cultural aspects to consider when interacting with students, and it is our hope that they can help prepare foreign teachers in Japan for thoughtful responses to situations they might encounter.

IV. Concluding remark statements

Teaching a language in a foreign culture and environment can be a very challenging experience. As one of our participants relates,

As someone who has studied foreign languages, I know the importance of actually putting each lesson to use myself, rather than just reading from a textbook or listening to a native speaker talk. Many of my lessons were created with this in mind. I incorporated all kinds of games, activities, songs, pictures, skits, etc. in order to give my students hands-on experience with the language. But often to my dismay, the majority of them were too shy or afraid to participate. I felt this was a major hindrance to many of them actually making progress in their language learning. (Teacher 12)

In this paper we addressed areas of frustration for

the Assistant Language Teacher in Japan, particularly as they pertain to participation in the classroom. We believe participation to be an integral aspect of active language learning, and that, by increasing our knowledge of factors influencing the will to participate, we will support the language teacher in making educated teaching decisions. We believe many frustrations result from the variance between the individualistic cultural expectations of ALTs and the reality of their more collectivistic Japanese classroom environments.

We found reason to believe that participation was a common cause for frustration from our questionnaire participants. In the process, we found that those teachers who had experience teaching higher education levels also experienced higher levels of dissatisfaction with regards to participation. We considered the areas of asking and answering questions, and the ways in which cultural expectations may vary between the foreign teacher and Japanese students. We addressed a general fear of speaking in the Japanese classroom and found that many of our survey participants also experienced this phenomenon. We discussed possible cultural factors and educational pedagogy that may play a role in aggravating communication apprehension. Finally, we discussed participation as it relates to different types of verbal interaction in the classroom, specifically in the areas of self-assertion, self-expression, and debate. We considered that the divergence in cultural expectations for these activities may result in what participants perceived to be lacking forms of participation.

Working as a foreign teacher in a Japanese school allows a unique opportunity to observe the qualities and traits that are valued in Japanese society which will help teachers understand their students. With awareness and continual observation of these cultural differences, a teacher will be better equipped to assess their students' abilities and needs and create a learning environment where students feel comfortable to learn and grow.

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