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Culturally Responsive Teaching in the Japanese Classroom: A Comparative Analysis of Cultural Teaching and Learning Styles in Japan and the United States

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight some of the differences between Japanese and American school cultures and cultural learning styles, and to show how some of these differences might pose challenges in the Japanese classroom for foreign teachers familiar with an American-style approach to teaching and learning. There is an examination of characteristics of school culture and teaching and learning styles often found in Japan. There is also a comparison of conversation styles between Japanese and English as it is frequently spoken in America, as well as a section highlighting the impact is culturally influenced habits of foreign teachers on Japanese students. Finally, there is an attempt to offer some solutions to meet these challenges and bridge the gaps between cultures to best facilitate effective language learning. These solutions range from culturally responsive teaching practices that are applicable generally to strategies catered specifically to Japanese learners.

Keywords: Culturally responsive teaching, cultural learning styles, school culture in Japan, comparative analysis

1. Introduction

Foreign teachers from western cultures such as the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand can be found in abundance in Japan teaching English to Japanese learners of all ages. These "Westerners", for lack of a better term, who are teaching in Japanese schools and universities have a unique opportunity to adapt their lessons and activities to be responsive to Japanese culture. Doing this means going deeper than a surface level comparison of cultures which often deals only with the four Fs: Food, Festivals, Folklore and Facts (Hinkel, 2007), and entails delving into the socio-cultural factors that influence language learning.

What is Culture?

One of the more difficult challenges of the teaching profession is learning to identify the impact of culture on the classroom environment. Accomplishing this requires careful reflection on the cultures represented in the students as well as one's own culture. But what is meant by the term "culture"? According to Hinkel (2007), the popular definition of "culture" refers only to that part of culture that is visible and easily discussed. This can include the folklore, the literature, the arts, the architecture, styles of dress, cuisine, customs, festivals, traditions, and the history of a particular people.

However, a far more complex definition also exits. It refers to the "socio-cultural norms, worldviews, beliefs, assumptions, and value systems that find their way into practically all facets of language use, including the classroom, and language teaching and learning (Hinkel, 2007). These "invisible" aspects of culture are much more difficult to access because most people are not even aware they exist. This is because these aspects have become inseparable from an individuals identity through the process of socialization. Thus, to members of a particular culture, cultural assumptions will appear to be self-evident and axiomatic (Hinkel, 2007).

While the elements of the "invisible culture" may be hard to identify and discuss, acknowledging their existence is crucial for teachers. This is because culture will manifest itself daily in classroom interactions. In addition to the students and teachers, the school itself projects its own values through it's philosophy, policies, and procedures, all of which can be viewed through a cultural lens. Reflecting on these invisible elements of culture can help teachers learn what will work best for the language learners in a particular cultural group.

2. Culturally Responsive Teaching

The aim for reflection is to discover how the manifestations of culture, as well as the differences and similarities between cultures represented affect the process of teaching and learning. For the teacher, the next step is to adapt one's teaching style to mesh with the school culture and the student's cultural learning styles to help maximize learning. Furthermore, teachers should acknowledge the "legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum" (Gay, 2000, p. 29). This is called culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), and it is a useful practice for foreign teachers working in Japan.

It is important to note that many other factors will influence a classroom environment, and that any class will have it's own cast of characters with individual personalities as well as a unique group dynamic. Also, the following descriptions of culturally influenced behaviors should be viewed as tendencies and not as immutable rules. There will always be exceptions.

2.1 The Influence of Culture in School

Schools around the world seek to educate students in various subjects, and also to socialize students to enable them to function smoothly in the societies in which they live. Many of the interactions that occur in schools between and among students and teachers are an expression of traits valued in the broader culture. Working as a foreign teacher in a Japanese school provides an opportunity to observe these interactions and to attempt to learn what qualities are valued in Japanese society.

According to the JET Programme Current Participant Statistics (2007), there are currently 5057 native speakers of English working in Japanese schools through the government sponsored JET Programme. More than half, 2759, of these instructors are from the United States. Most foreign English instructors come from countries that embody 'western' cultural values such as the USA, which at times may seem very different and even opposed to those of Japan.

For instance, in schools in America, students are taught and encouraged to inquire, discuss, debate, and give personal opinions in class from a young age. Classrooms will often have at least a few students eager to voice their ideas, assume leadership roles, and possibly even challenge the teacher in the form of debate. These behaviors, while encouraged in the US, are not ubiquitous to school settings worldwide. Setting up arguments, debates, and opinion-giving are uncommon in Japanese junior and senior high-schools, in part because these activities "function to train people to be competitive and declarative for an individualistic culture" (C.Kelly, personal communication, 2006). A teacher eager to start a classroom discussion with Japanese students may soon find that these instructional strategies don't work as well in a collective, group-oriented culture like Japan.

2.2 Japanese School Culture

One of the biggest difficulties for English teachers is getting Japanese students to practice authentic communication in English. Doing this often requires students to express what they think, to share their likes and dislikes, interests, and dreams. Typically, Japanese students have a hard time doing this in a classroom setting. Why are Japanese students unwilling to take risks, speak more and express their ideas? One reason is because learners are taught English almost exclusively using a grammar-based approach that emphasizes accuracy. Research shows that classrooms that emphasize correctness usually result in learners who are inhibited and will not take chances using their knowledge to communicate (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). In addition to issues with instructional methodology, looking closely at the culture of the Japanese school and the broader Japanese culture can also shed some light on why Japanese learners are reticent to speak freely in English class.

The following is a brief description of some of the cultural values expressed in Japanese schools that might differ from those found in schools in America. It is by no means an exhaustive list, but will hopefully shed some light on why certain behaviors can be seen in Japanese classrooms.

2.3 The Concept of a 'Good Student'

In the United States, a good student is often regarded as one who is competitive and can challenge the teacher with original opinions. American teachers frequently ask their students *what they think and why they think so*. In Japanese junior and senior high schools, this is rarely the case. Traditionally, the Japanese view of a good student tended to value those who are "quiet, passive, and obedient youths who perform well on tests" (Nozaki, 1993, p 28). This concept is changing, however, and many university instructors expect their students to present and defend ideas and engage in lively debate. Nevertheless, students wishing to fulfill the role of the good student may be more inclined to quietly listen and be studious than to speak out and contribute to class activities. Thus, it may be the case that the students with the highest level of English abilities may be the quietest in the class.

2.4 Cultural Codes of Communication in School

Contemporary classroom interactions in the United States are typically based on *inquiry, argument, and the individual expression of ideas* (Anderson, 1993, p. 103). These traits reflect popular trends in current educational theory, but they also are a reflection of the values of American culture. In classrooms in Japan, these traits are, at least traditionally, less important. Instead, school interactions are based, among other things, on *listener responsibility, group mindedness, consensual decision-making,* and *formalized speechmaking* (Anderson, 1993, p.104). The expression of these traits can often be found in the classroom and at times can create challenges for the foreign teacher unfamiliar with Japanese cultural codes of communication.

Listener Responsibility

One characteristic of Japanese communication that differs from American culture is the burden of making sense of a conversation is placed on the listener (Anderson, 1993). In the United States, it is typically the speaker's job to make sure the message is made clear, and those listening can ask clarification questions if the message is not understood. The speaker can then address the misunderstanding and restate the message in a different way. In Japan, because it is the listener's responsibility to comprehend the speaker, embarrassment from failing to understand the speaker the first time often prevents the asking of clarification questions. 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 (Anderson, 1993, p. 102). Thus, determining whether or not students understood directions or information presented can be a real challenge.

Group-Mindedness

The tendency toward group consciousness in Japan is another reason why students may hesitate to express their individualism in class. Most Japanese students will only speak if called upon, and will

rarely volunteer answers or ask questions. This is in part because they have not been encouraged to do so in other classes, but also out of fear of standing out from their peers. If students can give a fixed or memorized answer, they may be willing to raise their hand. However, when students must offer an individual opinion, or are unsure of themselves, they will often spend considerable time checking with students around them before answering. "When put on the hot seat, students want to speak for a group safely rather than make themselves vulnerable as individuals" (Anderson, 1993, p. 103). This vulnerability expresses itself through fear of failing as well as fear of showing off, both of which are frowned upon in Japanese junior and senior high schools. As a result, university level English classes are often filled with a combination of students who are uncertain how to respond in English and won't try out of fear of failing, and students who know how to respond in correct English but won't try out of fear of boasting.

Consensual Decision-Making

One of the manifestations of group mindedness that can frustrate foreign teachers is the tendency for students to engage in consensus checking before giving an answer. If the question posed does not have a single clear answer, requires interpretation, or if the student is unsure, they will often lean over and discuss the response (usually in Japanese) with their neighbors before attempting a reply. This consensus check might take a full minute, while the answer can usually be given in a few seconds. This behavior can frustrate foreign instructors because it wastes class time and runs contrary to American notions about how students should behave and how classrooms should operate (Anderson, 1993, p. 103).

Formalized Speechmaking

A foreign teacher new to a Japanese junior or senior high school might find it strange that students often stand up when called upon to deliver an answer in class. This is less common at the university level. One of the reasons for this behavior is the importance of formalized speechmaking in Japanese society. If one looks around, it becomes clear that speeches are being given at all kinds of events, from weddings and company parties to the casual Sunday afternoon badminton game. These speeches are often rich in honorific language and formulaic phrases, and without them, events would be perceived as incomplete and could not begin (Anderson, 1993).

Speechmaking is also an important component of foreign language study, and many English club members enter speech contests. In fact, some of the same students who rarely speak out in class may spend considerable time writing and memorizing English speeches to deliver before large audiences (Anderson, 1993).

Because of the importance of giving speeches in Japan, from an early age students are trained to stand tall and provide formal answers to questions in the classroom, in effect giving mini-speeches. A

teacher wishing to generate student ideas in a casual manner may find students reticent and uncertain of their role. While it may feel awkward for the foreign teacher, younger students may feel more comfortable standing to give responses.

2.5 Conversation Styles

The degree to which language and culture are connected is a topic of hot debate. Another challenge found particularly in English classes is the difference between English and Japanese conversation styles. In the US, conversations are manifested in a volley of speech between speakers. Interruptions are permitted, and differing opinions are accepted and often seen as an enjoyable way to spice up a discussion. A common metaphor is the image of a volleyball game, where the nearest and quickest in a group hits the ball and keeps the conversation moving (Nozaki, 1993). A Japanese conversation, in contrast, is more like a game of bowling. One person bowls at a time, while the others patiently watch and wait for their turn. This style of conversing can be frustrating for some western teachers wishing to have class or group discussions and may lead to criticisms of the "unresponsiveness" and "lack of spontaneity" of the students (Nozaki, 1993).

In addition to taking turns, patient listening and agreement are also important components of the Japanese conversation style. In Japan, people often see giving different opinions as the same as confrontation and tend to be more flexible and willing to slip into another perspective (C. Kelly, personal communication, 2006). As a result, it may be hard to get students to debate issues and challenge one another's ideas.

Trying and failing to get Japanese students to be vocal and expressive in class may reinforce the stereotype that the Japanese are a quiet or 'shy' people who prefer nonverbal modes of communication. However, anyone who has sat through a lengthy staff meeting, visited a lively izakaya or karaoke bar, listened to a speech before an event, or witnessed students interacting outside of class knows this is untrue. There are many circumstances in which Japanese people can be very expressive and talkative. These instances, however, are culturally sanctioned times for speaking (Anderson, 1993). Class time, by contrast, 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.

2.6 The Cultural Habits of the Foreign Teacher

Lastly, a frequently overlooked aspect of class interaction that can pose challenges to teaching and learning is the impact of the cultural habits of foreign instructors on the students. A considerable number of western teachers work in schools in areas that have few if any foreigners. This is most common for participants of the JET Programme, where ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers) are frequently sent to very remote parts of Japan to work in the public schools. For some students, encounters with these ALTs will be their first direct experience with a non-Japanese person. During these initial and subsequent

interactions, some of the cultural habits of the foreign teacher may seem strange and unsettling for the students. For example, looking intently into someone's eyes is considered rude in Japan, especially if the person is of a higher social rank. Thus, a foreign teacher looking directly into a students eyes may confuse and possibly upset a student (Nozaki, 1993) A variety of other habits exist that might bewilder students, such as sitting on a desk or blowing one's nose in front of the class. While it is important to expose Japanese students to diversity and different cultural habits, it is a good idea to develop a sensitivity to the impact one's behavior may have on the class.

3. Culturally Responsive Solutions

What can be done to address the multitude of challenges created by the differences between Japanese cultures and that of the native English speaking instructor? More specifically, how can we get Japanese students to take risks and express themselves in English class? The first step is developing awareness that these cultural differences exist, and not to merely dismiss the students as being shy. Next, it is important to avoid pitting one's own culture against Japanese culture, as forcing American teaching styles onto Japanese students will prove extremely difficult for both the teacher and the students. Instead, accepting, studying, and then building on Japanese communication styles is a more effective way to teach English.

3.1 Instructional Strategy Options
Simulating Scenarios where Speaking is Culturally Sanctioned

Identifying contexts in which Japanese people feel comfortable speaking and simulating those scenarios in class is one way to get students talking more freely. It may be a difficult task to transport students out of the classroom physically, but role-plays can be the next best thing. Students can be given the roles of real world professionals, movie stars or musicians, family members, foreigners, or just about anyone. The classroom can also change its role, becoming a bank, a train station, a shopping mall, and for that rare class of brave students, a *karaoke* booth. If students can feel they are not confined by the cultural rules imposed on classroom behavior, they may be able to open up and speak more freely.

Lecture

When trying to initiate a casual discussion or generate student ideas fails, one can always turn to what the students are familiar with: lecturing. It may seem counter-productive in an English class intended to get students speaking, but there are times when direct instruction can be the best way to present information. Listening tasks can also take this form. Students will be comfortable and relaxed with this familiar approach and the teacher will be freed from those long, uncomfortable stretches of silence.

Encouraging Speaking through Rewards and Competitive Games

Already a common activity format for many JET Programme ALTs, the use of point systems and competitive games can be a saving grace for a class hesitant to speak up. When speaking out can gain points for a group, the stigma of showing off is removed. Also, when students are working in groups to complete a task, consensus checking is built in and won't waste class time. Designing games that are fun, competitive, and include the target English practice are an excellent form of external motivation.

Pair work and Group work

Working in pairs or small groups can be a great way to free students from the fears of addressing the entire class. To ensure all students are actually practicing English, it is important to give students focused tasks to complete. A useful sequence is to give students a structured practice first, followed by others that allow for more personalization and creativity (C.Kelly, personal communication, 2006). For example,

"(circle one) I _love, like, hate_ natto."   followed by:

"Write three things you love, and three things you hate. Tell your partner."

This strategy gives learners the tools to create sentences using the target grammar, then, once they have started talking, allows them the freedom to branch out into more natural conversation.

Another useful strategy for generating student ideas is the Think, Pair, Share method. Instead of calling on a student and putting them on the spot by asking what they think, pose a question to the class and give them some 'think time'. Next, have them turn to a partner and discuss their ideas. Finally, the pairs of students can share their ideas with the class.

Beyond elementary school, group work is seldom seen in classrooms. Because students are perhaps not used to working in groups, they may need some support. It is important to realize that group-mindedness does not necessarily mean productive group work. There may be instances when some students are left out while others complete the entire task. Other times, students may be unwilling to lead the group or volunteer ideas and opinions for the same reasons mentioned earlier: fear of failing or showing off. An effective remedy is to assign group roles to each student. For example, in a group of three, one student can be a "director" and lead the group discussion, another can be the "secretary" and take notes, and the "reporter" can report to the class.

Move Slowly towards Student-Centered Teaching Styles

Introducing lessons that are based more on inquiry and student centered learning is a worthwhile idea, it simply needs to be approached slowly. Many practices that are commonly seen in schools in the US will be new to Japanese students. Clear explanations and careful modeling of each step the students

must take is key. Also, an explanation of why these methods are used in America and the cultural influences behind them can be a helpful and motivating factor for success.

Give Individualized Positive Feedback

It may be common sense for some, but giving positive feedback to students who take the risk to speak in class is one of the easiest and most important things a teacher can do. Be careful not to always correct students, or at least offer a positive comment before you point out a mistake. Always focusing on learner errors will cause the learners to do so as well, reinforcing the Making students feel good about themselves will surely help motivate them to try again.

Get to Know Students Outside of Class

Getting students to open up and express their individuality in class can be difficult no matter how hard you try. Regardless of how friendly you are, in Japan the roles of teacher and student are strict and clearly defined (Nozaki, 1993). In the classroom, the teacher is the "authority", and this role may limit the chances of getting to know students on a personal level. Therefore, try and talk to students outside of class. You may find the students are much more talkative and willing to share their personalities in more relaxed settings like the hallways, cafeteria, or during club activities. Making connections outside of class can have a profound impact on interactions inside class.

3.2 Conclusion - Bridging the Culture Gap

Tuning oneself in to the impact of culture on the classroom environment is an effective way to improve one's teaching abilities. Learning ways to observe, accept, and build on the influence of Japanese culture in the classroom can make teaching Japanese students easier and more rewarding. Reflection on one's own culture and its influence can also have its rewards on a personal as well as professional level. These reflections can be shared with learners who will benefit from gaining a culturally responsive perspective to language learning as well. Also, finding ways to highlight and celebrate the cultures represented in the classroom through learning activities will help learners to feel proud of their own culture and will spark interest in the cultures around them. Analyzing the influence of culture as it is expressed through language will enable learners to see how cultural understanding can impact language learning.

Remember not to pit American cultural teaching styles against Japanese school culture, but to build slowly on Japanese communication styles to ensure students feel comfortable in class. The differences between Japanese and American cultures can be a source of both frustration and inspiration. Developing skills as a culturally responsive teacher will help move classroom experiences away from the former and toward the latter.

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