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Cultural Conflicts in the EFL Classroom

This paper examines some of the cultural conflicts that arise in communication between western English teachers and their Japanese students. As culturally different communication styles are a frequent cause of misunderstanding, both parties need to develop a mutual awareness of their communication norms. This awareness will create understanding and respect for each other's differences as well as result in teachers more effectively teaching and students more effectively communicating in English. Suggestions are made on how this mutual awareness can be created both in and outside the classroom. Educational and cultural backgrounds are compared in order to enlighten western teachers not only about their own behaviors, but also about their notions on certain behaviors of Japanese students. In addition, the integration of the Communicative Approach to language teaching in the Japanese classroom is analyzed.

Culturally different communication styles are a common cause of misunderstanding and sometimes discomfort in cross-cultural situations. To avoid being misunderstood or misjudged, Japanese learners of English need to develop an understanding of the differences in communication patterns between their own culture and English-speaking cultures. This cultural awareness helps to assist students in gaining more confidence in using English with foreigners. In turn, it is equally as important for foreign teachers to understand the cultural and educational backgrounds of their students and to be cautious about upholding western conceptions in what constitutes communication norms. This paper discusses some difficulties due to cultural differences that foreign teachers and Japanese students face in the classroom. First, some cultural factors that affect teachers and students in the EFL classroom will be examined. Next, the Communicative Approach to language teaching and how it is integrated into the classroom will be looked at. Then, the role of language learning strategies will be discussed and finally, further suggestions on how foreign teachers can better understand their students will be made.

Western versus Japanese communication styles

If I introduce a topic, a conversational ball, I expect you to hit it back. If you agree with me, I don’t expect you to simply agree and nothing more. I expect you to add something - a reason for agreeing, another example, or an elaboration to carry the idea further... Whether you agree or disagree, your response will return the ball to me. And then it’s my turn again. I don’t serve a new ball from my original starting line. I hit your ball back again from where it has bounced. I carry your idea further, or answer your questions or objections, or challenge or question you. And so the ball goes back and forth, with each of us doing our best to give it a new twist, an original
Japanese-style conversations, which consider the relationship of the speakers, are compared to a game of bowling where speakers always know their place in line:

When your turn comes, you step up to the starting line with your bowling ball, and carefully bowl it. Everyone else stands back and watches politely, murmuring encouragement. Everyone waits until the ball has reached the end of the alley, and watches to see if it knocks down all the pins, or only some of them. There is a pause, while everyone registers your score. Then, after everyone is sure that you have completely finished your turn, the next person in line steps up to the same starting line, with a different ball. He doesn’t return your ball, and he does not begin from where your ball stopped. There is no back and forth at all. All the balls run parallel. And there is always a suitable pause between turns. There is no rush, no excitement, no scramble for the ball (Sakamoto & Naotsuka, 1982: 83).

When Japanese students adopt this bowling game style of conversation, foreign teachers feel they are conducting an interview rather than having a conversation. Because the student does not serve back a tennis ball, the teacher must continuously ask questions, often changing the topic just to keep the communication going. Basically, the teacher wants to play a game of conversational tennis, but the student answers using the conversational norms of the bowling game. The two parties are “playing the wrong ballgame” (Sakamoto & Naotsuka, 1982: 83).

**Foreign teachers’ expectations**

In subscribing to this idea of conversational ballgames, a western-style classroom could be likened to a volleyball game, where the teacher serves the topic and inevitably a student, or even several will rush to hit it. The topic will then bounce around from student to student and even back to the teacher and then to a student again. As teachers tend to teach the way they were taught (Britzman, 1991; Lorite, 1975), it is natural for western teachers to try this method in the Japanese classroom in order to get what they feel is an interesting conversation going, or to try and give the students a chance to express their opinions. However, teachers may soon become frustrated as the topic is served, and no one initiates to come and hit the ball. It falls to the ground in silence. This leads the western teacher into asking such questions as “This is speaking class, but why aren’t they talking?” and believing the usual stereotypes that all Japanese students are shy, passive, and prefer formula to creativity. However, a deeper look at their cultural and educational backgrounds may shed light on why Japanese students are not receptive to this kind of open class discussion and dispel the criticism that erupts regarding performance.

**Cultural and educational backgrounds**

Cultural and educational backgrounds are additional factors that may affect performance in the EFL classroom. Nozaki (1993) states that “Japanese tend to think quiet, passive, and obedient youths who perform well on tests are good students” (28). While westerners, on the other hand, admire those who challenge teachers with original opinions. In American classrooms, teachers tend to ask their students what they think and why they think so in contrast to Japanese classrooms which tend to have a non-interactive, lecture-style system of education (Anderson, 1993).
Anderson (1993) goes further to identify some key characteristics of the Japanese communicative style related to classroom behavior: group-mindedness, consensual decision-making, and listener responsibility. A closer look at each of these characteristics and a comparison to western characteristics is needed for foreign teachers to understand some of the classroom behavior exhibited by Japanese students.

The concept of group-mindedness is purely contrary to western thought:

“The (Japanese) self is fundamentally interrelated with others and to understand the Japanese sense of self requires dissolving the self/other or self/society boundary that is such an obvious starting point in all Western formulations of the self (Markus & Kitayama, cited in Greer, 2000: 185).

This group-mindedness is conditioned from a very early stage in life when Japanese mothers discipline their children (Greer, 2000) using hito, an “unidentified, seemingly ubiquitous someone” (Anderson 1993: 104). Hito, meaning person in Japanese, watches peoples’ behavior and may laugh at them, hito ni warawareru, as it falls outside the normal range of expectations. According to Greer (2000), hito has taken on the:

“personification of certain historically-created Japanese systems of meaning that guide the Japanese social self in the direction that Japanese culture has deemed meaningful” (185).

This constant surveillance by hito “plays an indispensable role in inducing shame among Japanese” (Lebra, cited in Greer, 2000: 187), and thus it strengthens the pull to conform to the group. The concept of hito is further reinforced in the classroom where children are taught, “that there is often a single right way of doing things” in their school activities (Tsuchida & Lewis, cited in Greer, 2000).

This adherence to group-mindedness may help explain why some students deliberately pronounce English with a Japanese accent and make grammar mistakes on purpose in front of a group of their peers. Greer (2000) explains this phenomenon as representing the Japanese notion of empathy and that students who do this are placing the needs of their fellow students over their desire to speak English naturally. Causing other students to think he or she “was better at English than they were would violate the inter-subjective experience that self has with the other” (186), in other words, go against the group. Torikai (cited in Greer, 2000: 186) stated, “Pronouncing English like a native English speaker is kind of embarrassing; you are laughed at by people around you (mawari no hito nimo warawareru).” However, she continues with some interesting advice for learners:

“But gosh, if you worry about things like that, you’re never going to get good at English. What I want to say is, let’s stop teasing people who are trying to sound like native English speakers” (1996: 5).

Nevertheless, foreign teachers need to be culturally sensitive to this concept of hito and be careful in asking students to perform in a way that risks group disapproval. Doing so may result in
their unwillingness to participate or cause students to be ostracized by their peers.

Perhaps the characteristic that foreign teachers find most puzzling and even irritating is consensus decision making, sometimes called consensus checking. This is when a student is called on as an individual but before answering, leans over to discuss the response in Japanese with one or more nearby students. The foreign teacher sees consensus checking as a waste of class time as the response can usually be expressed in a few seconds. The teacher has called on a specific student and therefore would like to hear the thoughts of that one student - not nearby students. In western classrooms, consensus checking is a sign that a student may not be paying attention or is not skillful in self-expression. This desire to reach a consensus has evolved from interactions in Japanese elementary school lessons where in formal question-and-answer contexts, the teacher often leaves the initial evaluation up to other students rather than commenting on a student’s response directly (Anderson, 1993). This is the opposite of western-style formal question-and-answer contexts, where talk tends to be more “dyadic”, involving the teacher and one student only (Anderson, 1993: 105). In American classrooms, after the student answers the question that was directed at him or her, the teacher gives an evaluation and then perhaps asks other individual students while the rest of the class listens.

The last key characteristic for understanding the Japanese style of communication listed above is the notion of listener responsibility. The responsible party for interpreting a message in Japanese culture is said to fall on the listener (Clancy, 1987). This is opposite to western culture where it is believed that it is the speaker’s responsibility to make sure that a message has been conveyed clear enough to be understood by the listener. If the message has not been understood, the listener will ask questions for clarification. However, in the Japanese classroom, students are highly unlikely to ask for clarification, due to being embarrassed about not having understood (Nozaki, 1993). In these cases, instead of expecting students to ask if they do not understand something as we would in a western classroom, foreign teachers need to be able to detect the nonverbal codes that show a lack of understanding, such as silence, facial expressions or attitudes (Anderson, 1993).

Furthermore, foreign teachers should be aware that generally, “Japanese speakers use silence more, emphasizing the context and the listener’s ability to fill in that which isn’t said directly” while English speakers conversely have the tendency to be more verbal than Japanese speakers, “emphasizing the speaker’s choice of words and counting on that to carry the meaning accurately” (Shaules & Abe, 1997: 59).

**Students’ attitudes about foreign teachers**

Another factor that may affect communication style is students’ attitudes towards their foreign teachers. “Although Japanese sometimes seem to be infatuated with westerners and are very curious about them,” Nozaki (1993: 29) states, “they are at the same time a little fearful of these strangers from the outside and do not know how to deal with them”. Most university students come from areas where there are no foreign residents (Nozaki, 1993), so have had little or no interaction with foreigners. Considering this, teachers should be aware that their seemingly normal actions might make some students uncomfortable and that the passivity and quietness of students may be due to fear or at least perplexity with their foreign teachers. For example, the western communication norm of looking at the other person straight in the eye while talking may
seem rude to Japanese and may make them uncomfortable. There are other habits of western teachers that may bewilder students, such as sitting on the desk while teaching, using students’ first names and requesting that students address them by their first name to mention a few.

Research has shown that Japanese university students have different attitudes towards their foreign teachers and their Japanese teachers of English (Shimizu, 1995; Hadley & Hadley, 1996). In particular, students rated the personal qualities of how easy they were to get acquainted with and being entertaining as two important characteristics in foreign teachers (Shimizu, 1995; Hadley & Hadley, 1996; Cutrone, 2001). Knowing this, foreign teachers are faced with the burden of trying to satisfy students’ expectations that they are funny or entertaining. In facing this challenge, Shimizu (1995) states that it is not necessary to become a full-fledged entertainer, but that foreign teachers should instead find ways to personalize the classroom to allow students to get to know them. One of the ways to do this is through activities that involve sharing of personal stories and backgrounds. Students seem to appreciate learning about their foreign teachers, and the familiarity that grows from these sharing experiences can make it possible for students to feel more comfortable with them.

Equally important as getting to know each other in the classroom, outside activities are just as indispensable for the foreign teacher and Japanese student relationship. With large classes that only meet once a week, it is nearly impossible for teachers to get to know their students as individuals. However, in order for foreign teachers to dispel the stereotypical notions of typical Japanese students, it is crucial to get to know them outside of the classroom. Eating lunch with students or participating in club activities, even getting together off campus, permits students to not only practice real English, but gives them more confidence in dealing with foreigners.

**Communicative style of language teaching**

The current method of language teaching today from the west that has saturated the world of language teaching in Japan is called the Communicative Approach. This approach has evolved through trial and error, moving away from the behavioral or structural styles of teachings that basically adhered to learning through repetition and guided drills. In Japan, tertiary language education programs have shifted away from the traditional, literature-oriented grammar-translation method to communicative language teaching. For example, in 1997, Rikkyo University established an innovative English language curriculum with the goal “to equip students with communicative competence” (Torikai, 2000: 12). This so called communicative competence is achieved when learners are able to perform the communicative functions that they need.

Looking back, the most traditional approach to language teaching has been called the Grammar-Translation Method, which mostly served the purpose of understanding foreign texts. Other trends in teaching followed such as the Direct or Natural Method, the Oral Approach, and also the Audio-lingual Approach. Each of these methods followed the idea that second language learning was a matter of habit formation and required students to practice particular patterns of language through structured dialogues and drills. The idea was that learners would gain sufficient rehearsal until an appropriate opportunity presented itself where learners could give an automatic response. Unfortunately though, real-life communication is not so structured where one can survive in a second language environment by regurgitating memorized chunks of language. The behaviorist
methods of teaching language do not allow the learner to create using the target language, but only recite memorized lines, which is very unnatural and not real communication. The biggest critic of these approaches and the person who caused a worldwide rethinking of language methodology is Noam Chomsky. He dismissed the behavioral or structural theories by saying “sentences are not learned by imitation and repetition but are generated from the learner’s underlying competence” (Chomsky, 1959). The emphasis then shifted to understanding the learner’s needs and language teachers became concerned with what meanings people wanted to convey; thus, the idea for the Communicative Approach to language teaching was born.

The communicative approach considers the following four elements of communicative competence: strategic, sociolinguistic, grammatical, and discourse competences (Canale & Swain, 1980). It utilizes the functional syllabus, which incorporates the performance of language functions such as: asking for or relaying information, persuading, inviting, complimenting, or apologizing. So even in the classroom, communicative language teaching makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication and adhere to the four elements of communicative competence mentioned above. By setting up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life, teachers create a need for students to communicate. Teachers in communicative classrooms are in more of a facilitator role and find they talk less and oversee more. After setting up the exercise the teacher steps back and observes, helping out like a referee when students are for example having difficulties in expressing their needs or having trouble with grammar. The goal is the performance of the task and the focus is primarily on meaning rather than solely on grammar. Students participate at their own level of skill and comprehension. During a communicative activity, the classroom is far from quiet with students often leaving their seats to complete a task. Students become initiators of the task they have to complete. They have more speaking time with their peers, produce a higher quantity of output and gain confidence in using English because most communicative activities are conducted in small group or pair work.

Even though the Japanese school system with its emphasis on rote-learning and teacher-centered classrooms is slowly changing, it is important to remember that students have had years of this conditioning and need some time to get used to the student-centered style of the communicative approach. Japanese learners are socialized into patterns and roles in classroom interaction at a very young age (White 1987), so it is unrealistic for foreign teachers to expect them to comply with their way of teaching from the beginning. To better accommodate their learners, foreign teachers should understand and then build on the communicative style of Japanese rather than fight against it. The following section will look at ways to do this.

**Small group and pair work**

In recent years, small group and pair work have gained more positive prominence in the EFL classroom in Japan. Research has shown that students are more likely to learn from each other than the teacher in the language classroom (Long & Porter, 1985; Varonis & Gass, 1985; Porter, 1986). Activities performed in small groups and pairs are less threatening than speaking in front of the whole class and they permit more speaking time for each student than in teacher-fronted activities (Pica & Doughty, 1985). Traditional teacher-led discussions limit the amount of speaking time available to learners as well as the depth that the discussion can reach. Activities designed for small group and pair work lowers what Krashen (1985) calls the Affective Filter. A high affective filter is a “mental block that prevents acquirers from fully utilizing the comprehensible input
they receive for language acquisition” (1985: 3). When students are threatened or embarrassed, they will not only feel severe discomfort, but also will shut down causing difficulties in learning. Making Japanese students to stand out in front of their peers may cause superior students to “deliberately do poorly to avoid standing out, and extremely sensitive students may even drop out of a class, or school, to avoid being singled out (Laufer, 1999). Creating a safe classroom environment, meaning one that allows students to speak freely in small groups and pairs without the pressure of having to speak in front of the whole class, not only increases interaction and quantity of output, but also encourages students to talk and at length. Instead of struggling against the Japanese way of consensus checking, foreign teachers can create activities that allow for discussion with their peers before reporting back to the teacher. Assigning small groups with clear roles such as a leader or note taker, and giving ample time to practice an answer make it less threatening for students than having to respond directly to the teacher without preparation.

Learning strategies

A final factor that is important in the EFL classroom is the concept of learning strategies. With the pressure of studying for entrance exams over, Japanese university students need to break away from the habit of memorizing information only for test purposes and learn strategies how to learn. Exposing students to different learning strategies can give them a push toward taking charge of their own learning, and therefore become autonomous learners. Learning strategies can be defined as the specific actions used by learners to enhance language learning and help develop language competence. These actions take the form of either visible behaviors such as keeping an English diary or unseen mental processes like linking new material to what is already known.

As the communicative classroom tries to use the target language as much as possible, it becomes necessary to teach students how to respond in English with phrases such as “Can you repeat that please?” and “What does _____ mean?” This type of learning strategy, called Classroom English, provides them with the tools necessary to learn English from using English. Using these phrases, students can let the teacher know they are having problems comprehending. Mitchell (1988: 54) concluded that the use of such phrases “encouraged some realization that not understanding all of what you hear is a normal part of the FL learning process, rather than an indication of personal failure”. Classroom English can help Japanese students who tend to rely on listener responsibility to feel more confident about asking for clarification.

In order to create awareness of the conversational ballgames analogy, teachers should expose students to model conversations of each type of ballgame. Students can compare the differences between the two and using conversation strategies, practice how to have a tennis game conversation. These strategies include phrases: reacting appropriately to information, agreeing or disagreeing with the speakers and stating why, asking follow-up questions, and supporting with related information.

Mutual awareness of communication styles

In closing, Japanese learners of English do not have to give up their own cultural style of communication, but they should be aware that their conversational norms are different from English. Years of conditioning and developing cultural communication patterns are difficult to change even
if awareness has been achieved. In other words, if you have played bowling your whole life, it is difficult to suddenly change and jump into a game of volleyball. Exposing students to western-style conversation strategies such as those mentioned above and allowing them ample practice in pairs rather than directly with the teacher can be effective in raising consciousness of communication patterns. This awareness will allow the two cultures to better understand each other and respect each other’s differences, and is invaluable in order for teachers to more effectively teach and students to more effectively communicate in English.

References


