

## Teaching for Intercultural Awareness through a Focus on Conversational Routines

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### **Abstract**

*It has been shown that there is a lot of diversity in the ways in which speakers of different languages use language to manage their social relationships. For second language learners understanding the cultural significance of even relatively mundane conversational routines can prove to be problematic. Furthermore, for native language teachers these mundane aspects of interaction are often very difficult to explain. This research used an intercultural teaching methodology to stimulate a small group of Japanese EFL learners to consider the significance of the common question "How was your weekend?" The learners' contextualized understandings were qualitatively analyzed and the implications for language teaching considered.*

### **Key Words:**

*Intercultural awareness, language teaching and learning, EFL*

### **Introduction**

There is an increasing interest in the ways in which language and culture intersect and the implications that this has for intercultural communication, as well as language teaching and learning. Of particular interest is the relationship between culture and oral practices, which can be understood as the routinized patterns of oral interaction that are shared by a specific group (Hall, 1993). It is thought that oral practices such as conversational routines play a discursive cultural role. That is, conversational routines constitute an important part of the shared frameworks that interactants use to structure their relationships and themselves (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Geertz, 1973). A range of research has shown that there is great variation in the types of conversational routines that speakers of different languages use to construct and maintain social relationships (Scollon and Scollon, 2001; Rose and Kasper, 2001). By extension, the logic and expectations behind conversational routines that are taken-for-granted by speakers of one language may well be interpreted very differently by speakers from other backgrounds. This is especially true in the case of routine formulas, which typically function as contextualization clues - invoking in the listener, expectations as to what kind of discourse should follow. A failure to adequately recognize the significance of formulaic utterances and routine formula as contextualization clues can lead to communication difficulties (Gumperz, 1992).

One example of the implications of failure to understand routine utterances in intercultural communication has been documented in Beal's (1992) analysis of workplace interactions in Australia. Specifically, she examined differences regarding the way native speakers of Australian English and native speakers of French interpreted the function of the question "Did you have a good weekend?" when asked in the workplace on a Monday morning. She showed that whilst the act of asking about weekends had cultural significance for both groups, a mismatch in underlying understandings of the nature of the discourse led both groups to interpret each other's behavior unfavorably. The Australian participants indicated that the question is a relatively formulaic greeting and not too much detail is expected in response. However, the French participants tended to view the question as a 'real' question and thus thought it proper to give fairly detailed answers concerning their weekends. As a result of this mismatch the Australians expressed frustration at the length of their counterpart's replies, whereas the French found the Australians to be insincere.

Reading Beal's research made me reflect on my teaching experiences in Japan and the number of times that I had heard Japanese students stereotyped as "socially inept" due to a so-called "inability to

answer basic questions". Native English teachers in Japan are often perplexed when their enquiries into how students had spent their weekends are met with the frank reply "I slept". Rather than social ineptness, what this suggests to me is a lack of understanding of the cultural significance of routine questions concerning the weekend in English discourse. It has been argued that learning the significance of such culturally-embedded discourse is unlikely to take place through simple exposure to input due to the fact that learners tend to approach L2 input with L1 interpretive frames (Schmidt, 1994).

A number of researchers have suggested that it is necessary for language teachers to take an active approach to raising learners' awareness of the cultural nature of particular aspects of interaction (Kramsch, 1993; Rose, 1994). An intercultural approach is one in which the connections between language and culture are taught explicitly. This does not mean that the teacher is responsible for prescribing some interpretation of culture to the students. Rather it means that the teacher is responsible for facilitating the exploration of culture in the classroom (Crozet and Liddicoat, 1999). In an intercultural approach, there are several processes which are considered key. The first is the *examination* of L2 input in terms of its sociocultural dimensions. Another is *reflection* on similar phenomenon in the learners' L2. Another key process is *comparison* of the sociocultural dimensions of L1 and L2 interaction in regard to a particular interactional phenomenon. To facilitate these processes both the L1 and L2 are viewed as important resources (Byram, 1994; Crozet and Liddicoat, 1999; Kramsch, 1993; Corbett, 2003). A central aim of an intercultural approach is to enable learners to develop awareness concerning the embeddedness of language in culture in both the L1 and L2. As learners come to learn about interactional norms in different languages as having their own internal logic, it is hoped that learners will develop intercultural awareness which will enable them to "be on the look out" for culture and construct their own hypotheses about the nature of culture through participation in interaction (See Liddicoat, 2005 for an overview of the goals of Intercultural Language Teaching).

At the present there is a lack of empirical research documenting the types of understandings of language and culture which can be generated by an intercultural approach to teaching aspects of interaction. This research aims to contribute to knowledge in this area through qualitatively examining the nature of contextual understandings (Liddicoat, 2006) developed by a small group of Japanese learners of English in regards to the significance of the question "How was your weekend?" in spoken discourse.

## Method

### Subjects

The subjects for this study were 8 intermediate level Japanese students of English (6 female and 2 male). The students were aged between 18 and 22 and were a part of an 'English-majors' stream at a hospitality college in Tokyo. All students had studied English for a total of 6 years in secondary schooling before enrolling in this program. All students had traveled internationally a number of times, but had not spent extended periods of time abroad studying.

### Procedure

The data for this study was collected during a 100-minute session carried out in week 5 of a 13-week course on English communication. As intercultural learning is not an official institutional aim of this course, this session was specially devised by the teacher-researcher to measure the effectiveness of even a single episode of intercultural language teaching.

Students worked in small groups to examine several textbook dialogues depicting native English speakers conversing in the work place on a Monday morning. In all dialogues the weekend was taken up as a topic of conversation: some dialogues showed very brief, routine-like exchanges, while other dialogues showed the weekend becoming the topic of extended discourse. After having some time to examine the materials, students were provided with a number of initial speculative questions which encouraged them to analyze various aspects of sociocultural context which could be considered relevant to understanding the dialogues (McConachy, In Press). The questions were particularly designed to help the learners consider how aspects of interaction, such as the nature of the questions that the dialogue characters asked each other, potentially reflect wider sociocultural structures. At the same time, the questions were prepared to stimulate the learners to reflect on and compare the interactional features of the dialogues with their understandings of norms of Japanese interaction. In order to suc-

cessfully facilitate this intercultural comparison, students were instructed that they were free to use both Japanese and English in the discussions. As the students were conducting the discussions, the teacher helped students express their ideas in English, and also provided further questions to clarify student responses and prompt a deeper level of analysis and reflection.

The initial questions used are listed below:

What are they talking about in this conversation?

What type of questions do they ask at the start of the conversation?

Do you usually ask these types of questions in Japan?

Do you feel that there are many questions? Why? Why not?

Do you think that the speakers have a close relationship? Why? Why not?

Do you think “shuumatsu” is the same as “weekend”? Why? Why not?

Is “shuumatsu” important in Japan? Why? Why not?

Do you think the weekend is important in Western countries? Why? Why not?

The next stage of the lesson involves the students acting out some of the roles from the dialogue with their group members. Whilst the questions above were designed to aid the development of the cognitive dimension of intercultural awareness, this activity was designed to encourage learners to consider the affective dimension of intercultural awareness – awareness of the fact that norms of interaction in a foreign language have the potential to influence an individual’s feelings and conception of self (Byram, 1995). As the learners gained more confidence they were instructed to role-play colleagues greeting each other at work on a Monday morning. This was conducted in order to allow the learners to experiment freely with the weekend as a topic of conversation – to “try on” this kind of English interaction – in a manner which was comfortable for them. As such, the language production was not viewed as an end in itself, but rather as a means for enhancing intercultural awareness on both a cognitive and affective level.

### Data collection and analysis

The data for this research came from two sources. The first is researcher notes that were taken during and immediately after the lesson. The second source is a reflective journal entry that each student was asked to write in either English or Japanese at the end of the day. Students were instructed that they should write about things that they learned in the lesson, but that this would not be used for assessment in any way. Students were also encouraged to reflect on how they felt when performing the role-plays, and how they felt in general towards this type of interaction – specifically, discourse surrounding the question “*How was your weekend?*” The data from both sources were subjected to content analysis, and thematic categories were created from the data, reflecting the researcher’s orientation to grounded theory.

### Results and Discussion

The data showed that the students had expressed a general unfamiliarity with the use of questions concerning the quality of the weekend and the notion of the weekend in general. In regards to this there were diverse interpretations. During the lesson the students showed a developing awareness of the cultural-embeddedness of aspects of interaction such as the nature and amount of questions. This also leads to the learners contemplating the impact of these potential differences on the self, and in intercultural communication. All comments below appear in English, although many have been translated from Japanese during the transcription process by the author.

#### *Conversational routines surrounding the weekend in Japanese*

Comments provided by students in the learning journals indicate that conversational routines involving enquiries into others’ weekends are not common in Japan.

(1) S4: *In Japan we don’t usually go out of our way to ask about each other’s weekends, so for me, it felt a little strange.*

(2) S2: *In Japan, we don't really have a custom of asking others "How was your weekend?" so it felt a little strange for me.*

(3) S1: *I don't really understand the purpose of asking about weekends. If I were asked, I would think "Why do I have to tell people about things like this". I mean, that is if the other person were Japanese.*

Whereas Beal's (1992) research emphasized that even when questions such as these form part of conversational routines in different cultures, the discourse that goes along with it and its cultural significance may be completely different. As far as the learners above are concerned, discourse surrounding weekend activities is culturally unfamiliar. Without some kind of cultural frame (Goffman, 1974) for interpreting this type of question, the learners may have difficulty determining its significance for English speakers. In fact, at this stage of understanding, it is arguable that routine questions concerning the weekend may even be imposing or face-threatening for the learners. In order to alleviate this situation it is necessary for the learners to begin to develop explanatory frameworks for the cultural phenomena they encounter.

### **Explanations**

Whilst all students were in agreement that asking questions about weekends was not common in spoken Japanese discourse, interpretations varied as to why this might be so. Here is one example.

(4) S3: *In Japan we don't usually ask what people did on the weekend, and I think people aren't really interested. I think that Westerners are friendly and this is why they ask about other people's weekends.*

In an attempt to find a way to explain interactional differences between Japanese and English this student has attributed Westerners with the characteristic of "friendliness". The comment about Japanese people not really being interested in what other people do on the weekend seems to imply that the student feels that Japanese people lack this quality of "friendliness". What can be seen here is a type of stereotyping of both cultures: "friendliness" is perceived as something inherent rather than something that is simply displayed in different ways in different situations in both cultures.

Below another student provides quite an interesting perspective.

(5) S5: *I haven't really heard of people exchanging opinions over the weekend in Japan, however I think it's better to talk about it than not. I feel like people in Japan don't communicate enough due to the fact that we tend to bow rather than speak. Verbal communication is important and I don't think that we can communicate well enough by just bowing.*

This student has drawn on a common image of a Japanese preference for non-verbal communication to explain the lack of oral practices concerning the weekend in Japanese spoken discourse. In other words, the student is suggesting that the lack of importance given to the weekend is simply an extension of a general tendency of Japanese people not to talk too much. Whether or not this is really the case, this student's verbalization of implicit assumptions concerning Japanese culture provides a stepping-stone for a reanalysis of both cultures in that now it has become a conscious phenomenon, capable of being reflected on and examined further. In the interaction below between S1 and S6 which took place in response to the initial questions, the attempt to explicate understandings of the meaning of the word "shuumatsu" lead to the construction of an interesting conclusion.

In the interaction below it can be seen that through challenging each other's taken-for-granted knowledge of the concept of "shuumatsu", the students were forced to make explicit their understanding of an important cultural concept that had remained implicit. The result was that they became aware that they didn't really understand the concept in an unambiguous way.

(6) S1: *When is shuumatsu?.....It is Saturday and Sunday, isn't it?.*

S6: *I think so...but I'm not sure...I've never thought about it deeply. I heard that the traditional Japanese working week was 6 days.*

S1: *Really? Is that true...I didn't know that.*

S6: *I think that's why we had to go to school 6 days a week too.*

S1: *Oh. Wow! I didn't know that. ha ha. But we still don't know what shumatsu is.*

In the reflective journal entry, S1 exhibited developing intercultural awareness pertaining to the cultural embeddedness of “shuumatsu” vis-à-vis “the weekend”.

(7) S1: *I learned that vagueness of the concept of shuumatsu, such as when it begins and ends, might be a Japanese phenomenon. Maybe Japanese people don't think it's important. I think English speakers have a clearer idea of what the weekend is.*

This comment seems to show recognition of the weekend as a cultural artifact. It hints at the fact that the cultural importance of certain ideas or concepts affects the way we speak about them, and this in turn contributes to the way we conceptualize them (Bruner, 1990). In concrete terms, S1 has perceived the lack of prevalence of “shuumatsu” in the oral practices of

Japanese people as being related to the unimportance of the concept generally, which is in turn reflected in the ambiguity of the concept. A similar understanding is provided by S6 below.

(8) S6: *In class, the teacher said that in Australia many people work from Monday to Friday to enjoy the weekend. In Japan it might be the opposite. In Japan working is a virtue so the working week is number one, and shuumatsu is something that we don't think about so much.*

This comment again is interesting in that it alludes to the relationship between temporal distinctions such as “working time” and “non-working time”, and how these are arbitrarily assigned across cultures. As such, the construal of time itself is intimately connected to the cultural value given to the activities that are considered meaningful within it. S6 implies that as working time is considered most valuable in Japanese culture, it is only natural that “shuumatsu” occupy a relatively unimportant status in the oral practices of Japanese people.

### **Student comments on aspects of interaction**

During the lesson and again in the learning journal comments below, students explicated their perceptions of potential differences in the roles of speakers and hearers in interaction.

(9) S3: *In English speaking countries it is normal to ask a bunch of questions to keep the conversation going, but I think we don't do this so much in Japan. We don't really ask for specifics of things like that. We don't usually ask questions such as “Who with?”, “When?”, and “Where?”*

(10) S7: *In Japan, if we were to ask what another person had done on the weekend, the ensuing conversation wouldn't be very long, however I felt that people in English-speaking countries really ask detailed questions.*

Aside from the comments above, S3 and S7 indicated to the researcher, unfamiliarity with the practice of generating such follow-up questions, even in Japanese. Such comments clearly show that the learners have begun to make explicit hypotheses concerning the nature of interaction, both in English and Japanese. What is important here is not so much whether their interpretations are necessarily true, but that they have become aware of aspects of interaction – the role of speakers and listeners in generating talk – and come to see that such important norms of interaction can be configured differently across languages and cultures. The analysis below provided by S6 indicates the development of certain hypotheses concerning not only aspects of interaction, but how this also has an affective dimension.

(11) S6: *I felt that asking a bunch of questions to people in the workplace is very different to things in Japan. In Japan conversations tend to take place with one or two utterances, so I felt that people from English-speaking countries are friendly.*

It can be seen that this learner has associated perceived interactional differences concerning the use of questions in interaction as being related to wider cultural characteristics: in this case, the friendliness of native speakers of English. What this shows is that the learner is still making assessments of L2 interactional behavior from an L1 perspective. In other words, this learner has perceived friendliness as something belonging inherently to native speakers of English, rather than something which is also able to be exhibited in Japanese, albeit in different ways. The difference here is perception of whether the act of asking multiple follow-up questions in English discourse is caused by friendliness, or simply a way of showing friendliness. On the other hand, the student quoted below shows signs of a more developed intercultural awareness.

(12) S5: *I think Westerners have a friendly feel about them. In Japan this would be thought of as being “over-friendly”, so I really feel that cultural differences are very difficult. I hope that I can communicate enough that the other person doesn’t interpret me as being rude.*

Rather than completely associating Westerners with the attribute of friendliness, this learner is making attempts to compare the cultures in their own terms. In other words, they have shown awareness of the contextual limitations on the expression of friendliness in a particular type of discourse, and recognition of the consequences of differences in cultural norms for intercultural interaction. Several other students also showed evidence of a growing awareness of the consequences of differences in interactional norms.

(13) S4: *I don’t know how much I can ask or say without it becoming imposing for the other person. I’m kind of worried about this for when I go overseas.*

(14) S2: *I learnt that in Western countries, asking about weekends is a kind of greeting. I think it’s hard to determine exactly how much one should ask and say, and this is something I’m going to keep in mind when I study overseas.*

The above comments show a certain amount of uneasiness with not knowing exactly what the rules of interaction are in regards to the amount of talk. This is perhaps an important stage in the development of intercultural awareness. In a certain sense, ignorance of the cultural variability of norms of interaction across cultures may give learners a sense of (false) confidence, that, when slowly stripped away, may leave learners feeling without anything to hold on to. However, the comments above suggest that the learners have begun to develop awareness of the particular aspects of interaction which can vary across cultures and the ways in which perception and understanding of such differences has implications for intercultural communication. In other words, what is evidenced here is what might be called *intercultural meta-awareness*. It is intercultural in the sense the learners show evidence of developing recognition of the culturally-embedded nature of concepts and ways of interacting across cultures. It is “meta” in the sense that awareness of the potential complexities of intercultural interaction has helped these learners to understand the need to monitor the nature of their own perceptions of language and culture, and continue to formulate hypothesis through future interactions. In other words, awareness of the dynamic nature of language, culture, self, and other, has come to be placed as an object of ongoing conscious monitoring and reflection.

## Conclusion

Contrary to the default expectations of many native speaker teachers, the common conversational routines that English speakers use to manage their social relationships are not always based on a universal logic – we cannot assume that the intent behind questions will be equally obvious to our students. Even when conversational routines are shared, interactional norms may not be. In other cases, conversational routines may be absent in the learners’ culture and it will most likely take more than mere exposure to gain an understanding of the cultural significance of language use. This research shows the initial stages of the development of intercultural awareness and how this might be taught in the foreign language classroom.

The learners in this study have dynamically engaged with the learning material and each other through a process of examination, reflection, and comparison, which has led to numerous understandings which can be considered important. It can be seen that the learners have not only become aware of certain aspects of interaction in the L2, but they have also had to *bring to awareness* their understandings of concepts which they had taken for granted. This process forced the learners to challenge their own assumptions and begin to develop explanatory frameworks for aspects of interaction in both the L1 and L2. In some of the learners, awareness was generated concerning differences in the interactional import of concepts and common-sense ways of interacting across cultures. From this recognition, several learners were able to develop from this, insight into their own needs as an intercultural communicator – intercultural meta-awareness.

On the whole the dynamic nature of culture prevents it from being easily explainable or teachable. In fact, even within cultures there is the possibility of diverse explanations for cultural phenomenon, as this research has shown. The issue of importance is not necessarily that teachers impart cultural “truths” to learners in the classroom, rather that students develop an awareness of the general nature of culture and start to develop the skills necessary for future culture learning. It is key to remember that developing intercultural awareness is an ongoing process and language teachers should aim to

incorporate activities which encourage learners to develop the skills of examining input, reflecting on their own experiences, comparing noticed phenomena and developing hypotheses about language and culture.

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