

L1 Culture in the EFL Classroom and Abroad

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Abstract:

Culture and language seem to be inextricably entwined. In the literature, Japan is seen to be a particularly extreme example of this. Therefore, when a native Japanese speaker learns English as a second language, one would expect to see some influence on the type of language chosen in a given situation or the structure of conversations in the classroom. Upon investigation, responses from 18 subjects (m: 7; f: 15; age: 25-75) indicate that those effects can be influenced by various factors such as age, expectations and previous experience abroad.

Key words: *culture, Japan, EFL, classroom*

Introduction

“Coming to a foreign country reminds me of starting to watch a movie from the middle. Starting in the middle, we don’t understand the story and we don’t know the characters. It takes a while to understand what’s going on. Sometimes we think we understand, but then we realize that our interpretation was wrong. It can be confusing and even frustrating. If we ask someone who has watched the movie to explain, his or her explanation may be too complicated, or on the other hand, it may be too simple” (Elwood, 2004, p92)

Elwood (2004) has taken a light-hearted look at the misunderstandings and errors she made as an American applying her cultural norms while living in Japan. It is natural to assume that a great number of Japanese learners would experience similar challenges in English speaking countries. To take her analogy a little further, going to some countries is like watching a Hollywood formula film – you can guess most of what will happen, the characters are predictable, and although some things may be different, they don’t really surprise you as you’ve seen something similar somewhere before. Whereas going to some other countries, is more like watching an independent film from halfway through – the twists in the plot are surprising, sometimes exciting, sometimes confusing and the characters don’t always act in the way we would expect or hope. Then think if it’s a foreign-language film and those explaining can’t speak English well...

The social and historical context in which we gain knowledge will be reflected in that knowledge (Kramsch, 1998) as language is never context free. This implies that the language we know is influenced by the surrounding culture, therefore it would be logical to assume that learning another language would be to learn the culture. Kent (2001) cited learning Japanese in order to learn about the culture. Japanese is a language considered to be heavily steeped in culture (Carraro, 1992; Gao, 2005), and this can cause challenges for both learners and instructors in the classroom (Dash, 2003; Robertson, 2005).

What causes these differences? It is something that is difficult to prove conclusively, but it has been suggested that several factors may contribute: differences in the meaning of actual words and sentences - the semantic and pragmatic differences in the languages (Tsujimura, 2007; Nishiyama, 1995; Abe, 1995); and differences in cultural traditions (Nishijima, 1995; Rosen, 2000; Carraro, 1992; Kent, 2001). Some authors also consider the differences in grammar between Japanese and English to have an effect on conversational style (Nishiyama, 1995).

Linguistic Relativity Theory is the concept that language can effect our way of thinking and may offer some insight into the interdependence of culture and language (Kramsch, 1998). It was initially theorized that people speak differently because they think differently, and as they think differently, the language gives them different ways to express the world around them, leading to the development of the

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which is generally accepted in a weak form (Kramsch, 1998). The concept of “schemata” – our frames of reference for dealing with situations - is also important to consider when people encounter different cultures.

As instructors in the classroom, it is our responsibility to help students communicate effectively in English. Therefore, it is also important to identify what students find “different” and how they react in these situations, and identify which of those situations cause them difficulty in order to produce language materials that include socially acquired schematic knowledge from L1 to avoid learner confusion until a certain level of L2 ability is attained (Alptekin, 1993). For that purpose, a variety of learners have been asked what differences they found when traveling abroad.

Historically speaking

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis states that the structure of language one habitually uses influences the manner in which one thinks (Kramsch, 1998). For example, English binds its speakers to a Newtonian concept of time as linear. The idea that we are controlled by our thoughts and not the reverse was fiercely criticized by scientists, but in 1990, it was suggested that cross-language misunderstandings were due to the differences in the underlying meaning of and the value of concepts in words. The most important factor for understanding was identified as common conceptual systems, as different languages categorise reality differently. As these conceptual systems are based on our experience, a weak version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis has generally been accepted in contemporary linguistic research (Kramsch, 1998).

The extinction and creation of languages, also seems to support a weak version of Sapir-Whorf. As a cultural group loses its language, the associated culture slowly disappears (Ladefoged, 2001). This can be seen in cultures where the language has completely died out, but also in languages that remain but are being influenced by loan words from other languages as a result of past colonization or recent mass media.

Investigation into invented or constructed languages (conlang) would seem to indicate that language can be created to have specific cultures, thereby supporting the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, for example: only good or evil culture, as in the case of Tolkien’s languages used in ‘Middle Earth’ in ‘Lord of the Rings’, or the language Toki Pona “good Language” created to only give positive meanings (Dance, 2007). Originally created to reduce the creator’s depression, it has been expanded by and used by people on the internet (Dance, 2007).

So, to ask if misunderstandings are caused by the different grammar or different meaning of words or the differences in culture would seem irrelevant, as these different aspects of the language are interdependent, so a change in one will always affect the other. It is important to look at each area and understand the effect on conversational style in each language.

Grammar

While English follows the SVOC pattern for basic sentence structure, Japanese tends to follow an SOV pattern, that often omits the subject (S) and as in English, the object (O) is not always necessary, so a Japanese sentence such as

これを食べますか? Kore (O) wo (object marker) tabemasu (V) ka(question marker) (“Do you want to eat this?”) in casual conversation, can be reduced to just a verb (V). For example:

食べる? Taberu? (lit. ‘Eat?’ - “Do you want to eat (this)?”)

うん、食べる。Un, taberu. (lit. ‘Yeah, eat.’ - “Yeah, I’ll eat (it)”)

Nishiyama (1995) argued that this style of grammar with the verb in the final position encourages ambiguity in Japanese through the use of long and wordy explanations, and leaves the main point of the sentence, or conversation until the very last. In more formal/structured situations, that may be the case, but as can be seen from the above example, casual Japanese does not suffer the same indirectness as more formal situations.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics includes the concepts of speaker's intended meaning, the nature of the information and the relevance of context, rather than the pure meaning of the words when taken alone. (Kramsch, 1998; Tsujimura, 2007)

In Japanese, as in most languages, the meaning of many words and phrases can be completely different in different situations. For example:

- とんでもない (tondemonai), can mean "Don't mention it" or "You're welcome" when saying thank you for a favour. But it can also be a negative reaction similar to "You've gotta be kidding!" or "That's out of the question!" in response to another's description of the situation.
- 適当 (tekitou) Can mean "as appropriate" if choosing and appropriate answer on a multi-choice examination. It can also mean the exact opposite – "randomly".

If we consider similar situations in English, "premises" can be the ideas on which an argument is based, or the place business is conducted from.

Understanding these words relies on the schemata, frames and structures of expectation that we have. Schemata and frames are used to understand the meaning of language and behaviour in a given situation. Structures of expectation allow us to predict what is likely to happen in that situation. All of these are based on the experience gained living in one's own culture. If the situation or the language used in that situation are different from what is expected, or have a different meaning to what the learner knows and expects, there is an increased chance of confusion and misunderstanding until the learner understands these differences. "These behaviors have become second nature to them because they are grounded in their physical experience of phenomena around them" (Kramsch, 1998, p26).

Using the schema we are accustomed to, we interpret the meaning of what goes on around us. So to suddenly find oneself in a situation where those behaviours have a different meaning, where the schemata we know become irrelevant, would lead to the confusion outlined by Elwood (2004) or even the unintended insults outlined in Kent (2001). What we expect in certain contexts has to broaden to allow us to understand different cultures.

In English, the four maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner, proposed by the Cooperative Principle are often violated in order to produce sarcasm and jokes, which can cause confusion for learners. Japanese has ritualised expressions, used at all levels of society on a daily basis, that directly violate these maxims (Tsujimura, 2007), which may cause confusion when attempts are made to translate them directly to English. These kinds of expressions, such as saying a gift is worthless when presenting it, are usually used to humble oneself in front of another of higher standing. The hierarchical nature of Japanese society and conversation style require this, even though it transgresses these maxims.

The meaning of words - semantics

Semantics refers to the differences in meaning based on the grammatical usage of words and sentences (Tsujimura, 2007). The use of homophones (words with the same sound but different meaning) and polysemy (multiple meanings of the same words) can produce ambiguity that is often used in jokes and riddles in both Japanese and English. Errors that may be attributed to cultural differences can be traced to differences in the actual usage of words. For example the Japanese 'hai' is often translated as 'yes' in English. A more accurate translation would be 'I'm listening' or 'I understand you'. This is why many students answer in the following manner:

A: What did you have for lunch?

B: Yes... I had a tuna sandwich and some fruit

B says 'Yes' to show they understand the question, then provides the answer to the question. Whereas a native speaker would probably say something like "Lunch? Let me see... oh, that's right, I had a tuna sandwich and some fruit"

Words like 懐かしい ('natsukashii') which translates as 'nostalgic' and 面倒くさい ('mendoukusai') which means 'bothersome' if translated as a single word, are not words that native English speakers use in everyday conversation. When used by Japanese speakers, it often sounds strange to native

ears. It would be more common to say “that reminds me of when....” rather than ‘nostalgic’ and “it’s a pain” instead of ‘bothersome’, but as dictionaries often give one word equivalents, the learners are unaware unless instructed in the best expression. Nishiyama (1995) discusses the issue of dictionary translations and the confusion that can be caused when words are assigned one meaning by a dictionary, but in actuality the meaning of the word is much broader or narrower in one of the languages.

Cultural traditions

Kent (2001) stated that learning the language was required to understand the culture of Japan. Whereas Gao (2005) explained that learning the culture is necessary to understand the language. Given that many aspects of language and culture are interdependent, differences in one should indicate differences in the other.

Nishiyama (1995) has suggested several differences in conversation style and culture that could cause difficulties in communication. The need to maintain harmony in relationships leads to the avoidance of direct negative responses, the use of set phrases always used in particular situations, and the use of silence were focused on. Japanese grammar was considered to encourage this style of communication. Also outlined is the difference in nuance when translating words to other languages, differences in social norms and the associated differences in the perception of animals and things in society.

Kubota (1999) has voiced concern that this type of reporting promotes Orientalism – highlighting or the ‘otherness’ of especially Eastern cultures typical of colonial times. While I agree that the colonial stereotypes should be reassessed, I think it is difficult to do without investigation into the areas authors such as Nishiyama (1995) have identified. Kubota’s evidence that Japanese people do not fit some of the stereotypes is not as extensive as required to refute the typically cited cultural differences but may indicate the culture is undergoing change. Malcolm (1992) has also supported Kubota on an anecdotal level regarding how the culture is changing in younger generations, however Hendry (1989) has made the relevant point that many English speakers who interact with Japanese people are business people and scholars who only interact with the upper levels of society, which reinforces the stereotypes of indirectness and ambiguity in particular. Different social groups and different geographical areas within Japan are known to be more direct than the typically cited business person or academic (Matsumoto & Okayama, 2003). Perhaps, more importantly, as stated by Sower (1999), the Orientalism debate does not provide guidance on how instructors can help their students in the classroom.

Cultural differences that could cause problems for Japanese learners abroad include some of those frequently outlined in the literature: the need for group harmony (Hinenoya & Gatbonson, 2000), consideration of the ‘other’ rather than the ‘self’ (Bachnik, 1992, Hall & Noguchi, 1995; Shibamoto, 1987; Adler & Graham, 1989) and the resulting ambiguity in communication (Carraro, 1992; Nunan, 1999); topics and actions that are considered rude or offensive in different cultures (Kent, 2001); fear of making mistakes (Galloway, personal communication, July 28, 2007; Krishnan, 2006). Also to be considered is the classroom environment learners have experienced before coming to the English Conversation classroom (Nunan, 1999).

Ambiguity arising from considering other’s needs before their own has lead to a variety of problems. The literature discusses business situations (Nishiyama, 1995; Kent, 2001; Carraro, 1992) and communication with airline staff (Gao, 2005). When offered a choice, many Japanese are likely to respond that ‘either is fine’, as highlighted by Gao (2005), but also seen personally when offering tea or coffee to friends, who stated they wanted to avoid difficulty for the host, so that response was offered. They seemed surprised when I explained that if the host was not happy to make it, the host would not offer, and the purpose of having the choice is to make the guest happy. Offering direct responses in various situations should be especially stressed for learners going abroad for study or business.

It is possible to cause offence in any unfamiliar situation, even in one’s own language. Once the issues of language and culture are combined, the chances of causing offence are increased. While in Japan it is not always considered rude to comment of the physical appearance of others, for example “you’ve gotten fat!” in English speaking cultures this is often seen as rude (Kent, 2001). In the same way, perception of personal space would seem to be different. Many English speakers would consider a lift or train full long before a Japanese person would, therefore offence can be caused by Japanese people pushing to fit into and elevator or crowded train in English speaking countries (Elwood, 2004). But also from the English speaker’s perspective, Japanese personal space can seem much larger

than that of English speakers, as Japanese speakers can be offended or confused by English speakers touching without realising— a slap on the shoulder, grabbing an arm or giving a hug.

Reluctance to speak is an issue with many Japanese speakers. It may be due to a fear of making mistakes, or may be from the classroom environment they've come thus far in. If a classroom is large and noisy, as many Japanese secondary school classes are, there are few chances for a speaker to contribute, so many learners are not used to contributing in class. In addition, if the teaching style did not encourage involvement, the learner would be at a disadvantage, as they would take this prior experience and use it as the basis for their decisions about how to contribute in the L2 classroom. (Nunan, 1999; Richards & Lockhart, 1996)

From a young age, Japanese people are encouraged not to act before they are certain they are correct. In the classroom, this can provide frustration to the L2 instructor. Krishnan (1992) quoted Takano Junko from Sony giving advice to Japanese people who want to improve their English "Courageously understand the fear of making mistakes, and be patient" p1. Even in business the propensity to avoid mistakes can be seen and cause problems for workers if they work in non-Japanese corporations. In Japan, it is considered better to take extra time and ensure there will be no mistakes, even if this means customers or deadlines have to wait. There has been a case where this caused a staff member at an international corporation to receive a poor annual evaluation. All other aspects of his work were satisfactory and accurate, but as customers complained about slow service, it had a dramatic effect on his annual evaluation (Galloway, personal communication, 2007). In the same way, many students are concerned about making mistakes at school and in English conversation classes. Some students will wait until they are sure they have the sentence perfect before they speak, putting accuracy above fluency. This can have a serious effect on both pace of the lesson and the time available for other students to speak in a 40-minute class.

Study

Without wanting to perpetuate the myth, Japan has long been portrayed as part of the "mysterious orient" especially in the media and travel advertising, so most English speakers expect there to be differences when they visit Japan (often more than there actually are). By comparison, how do Japanese speakers feel when confronted by English-speaking cultures? Compared to the literature above, what differences did the 'average' person feel?

Subjects

The subjects of this case study are Japanese citizens both male (7) and female (15) who have lived in or traveled to English speaking countries for study abroad, work or travel. Some of the subjects (18) have studied English conversation post-secondary, while some (3) have not. Ages ranged from 25 – 75.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 3 questions:

1. What did you find different about the country you visited, compared to Japan?
2. Did anything shock or surprise you?
3. Would any of the everyday actions you noticed be considered rude in Japan?

Results:

1: differences

- uncertainty of when to say 'thank you' and 'sorry'
- differences in meaning of some words
- gift giving
- giving opinions/disagreeing
- shoes inside; no bath, only shower
- small talk with shop assistants

2: shocking/surprising

- hugs
- size of meals
- chrysanthemums for mothers day
- men help with the housework/cooking
- have to make conversation with staff in shops
- giving an opinion even without all the facts - guessing

3: Rude

- saying 'thank you' instead of 'sorry'
- not apologising
- giving one's own opinion and doing what one prefers.

Some students considered nothing to be shocking or surprising, but upon investigation, they had experienced travel since they were very young, or for example, visited the US but studied the culture extensively before going by reading their guide books and watching US media.

Discussion

Generally, issues that the respondents suggested had similarities to the information presented in the literature, although some of the specific points focused on were different. An important indicator of perceived difference between cultures seems to be age and gender. The older male subject felt the strongest differences in gender roles and social position. He felt that women especially reacted badly to some things he said. Younger female respondents reported fewer shocking or surprising situations. Older female subjects seemed more open to new cultures and judged less than their male counterparts.

The following differences were reported by respondents:

- Pure culture- some differences identified such as leaving shoes on inside the house; no bath, only a shower; meal size; chrysanthemums for mothers day (in Japan chrysanthemum are placed on graves); and men helping with the housework and cooking, are issues that stem from purely cultural or generational differences. In every country some things will be different, and between generations there are differences in, especially, the roles of men and women, even in English speaking cultures – consider our great-grandparents' generation and the current generation.

This area can lead to speakers causing offence by assuming that men and women have the same roles that they are accustomed to and commenting on it, or by using language that suggests women are of lower social standing.

- Small talk with shop assistants - in English speaking countries it is not uncommon for there to be small talk such as the weather or how your day has been with register staff in a supermarket or wait staff in a restaurant. In Japan this is unthinkable, as those situations have set phrases so as not to offend the customer. Respondents explained that the use of these set phrases is practiced by staff until perfect, and the customer is not expected to converse, so expectations are clearly different for Japanese speakers and English speakers. Consequently Japanese learners report feeling uncomfortable when first instructed to say 'thank you' or 'Have a nice day' at the end of a shopping conversation. Teaching this kind of language is important to reduce the chances of learners being labeled rude and to increase their chances of getting good service.

- Hugging – body language varies between different cultures all over the world, as does personal space and degrees of acceptable physical contact. Respondents reported that in Japan, hugging is rare between adults, even within families, so to encounter the English speaking culture where hugs are freely exchanged seems to have shocked many unprepared learners, and has led to misunderstandings about relationships in some situations.

- Group harmony and ambiguity – several subjects were shocked that even people who did not know each other well, or who were clearly of different social standing (eg teacher and student) would direct-

ly disagree with each other, without necessarily causing offence. As silence is often used in Japan to avoid disagreement (Gao, 2005), the verbal nature of disagreement in English was felt to be “a little scary” to quote one respondent. Consequently students would be less likely to use language relating to disagreement in the classroom as disagreeing with ‘others’ felt uncomfortable for them. In English speaking countries, if someone doesn’t speak, agreement is often assumed. It is important that this be taught so there is no room for misunderstanding when learners interact with native speakers.

- Rudeness – One respondent noted an incident at a shop where she was overcharged due to a computer error. She was shocked that the staff did not immediately apologise, merely explaining and rectifying the situation. This situation is comparable to one Labaglia (2007) described while working in France – there was considered no need to apologise to the customer as the problem was not her fault, so the customer did not expect to receive an apology, merely an effort to address the problem. This also links to word usage, as “sorry” is considered the appropriate response in many situations in Japanese compared to English.

- Fear of making mistakes- Two subjects were surprised that people frequently gave their opinions on a variety of topics without knowing much about the actual situation. To make leaps of logic based on the few facts they had, even if they would be proven wrong later when more facts were available was unacceptable to the respondents, possibly due to the perceived embarrassment of changing one’s position on a topic. This is comparable to the delayed responses of students in the L2 classroom. Especially higher level students say that when they know some expression is incorrect but are unable to recall the correct expression, they will stay quiet and try to remember, rather than use the expression they know to be incorrect.

-Word usage – In Japanese ‘sorry’ is the expected response when given something (eg a drink from the host) as an apology for increasing the workload of the person offering. As the English response is ‘thank you’ or equivalent, in this situation, most subjects found it difficult to decide which word was most appropriate in a given situation. Some quoted host family members or friends as saying things like ‘Why do Japanese people apologise so much?’ Naturally this caused confusion, as for the respondents ‘sorry’ is the most natural response in that situation. Some respondents also reported confusion caused by differences in meaning between Japanese-English loan words. For example in Japanese the words ‘ga-rufurendo’ and ‘boifurendo’ (pronounced very much like ‘girlfriend’ and ‘boyfriend’ in English), mean female friend and male friend respectively and have no connotations of romance in Japanese.

Nishiyama (1995) suggested that scientifically proving theories in this area is difficult. But this kind of self-reporting is valuable to instructors as it can provide a vignette of the areas in which some learners currently face difficulty. In these times of high technology where global broadcasting is the norm, there are more rapid changes in culture than in the past, leading to changes in the effects of culture on L2 and therefore a greater need for investigation.

Conclusion

As we all cling to what we know when put in an unfamiliar situations (Ellis, 1997), the chance of students bringing their culture into the classroom is very high (Dash, 2003; Robertson, 2005). From this small study, whether or not students bring their culture into the TESOL classroom seems to depend on a variety of factors, most notably the time spent interacting with English speakers in English both in Japan and abroad, and other exposure to English speaking cultures, such as TV programs. Age and gender also seem to exert a strong influence on this – but again, if older male learners have experience interacting with other cultures, the age and gender effects may disappear. As most English conversation students in Japan have not had a chance to experience regular interaction with English speakers on a daily basis such as living abroad for an extended period of time, it is inevitable that these learners will bring their culture into the classroom.

Although the sample in this study is small, it indicates the need for more study of how learners function in different cultures and what aspects of their own cultures influence their actions and language choice in L2. As most of the literature focuses on business people and academics, it is necessary to look at more general populations to provide a more balanced view that may help reduce the image of research promoting Orientalism. The examination of a larger sample may also give greater insight into the effects of age, gender and experience with other cultures on respondents’ assessment of differences between cultures.

Recommendations for EFL instructors in Japan:

Learn about the culture: In my experience, many new instructors complain about student responses during role play situations. The importance of understanding the fear of making mistakes that Japanese people feel in the role play situation, or the relationships between people of different social standing such as older male and younger male or female, will help instructors in the classroom. When a cultural difference is suggested for a particular response, the instructors can be more adequately prepared and able to respond appropriately if it happens again.

Learn Japanese: Living in a monolingual country as an EFL instructor, it is important to learn the language, understand how the pragmatics differ from your own, and how the culture effects what is said and how people act in different situations. This will also help instructors understand why students make certain mistakes when speaking English. The grammatical differences can be seen and the effects of transfer and interference from L1 become evident, enabling the instructor to give easier to understand explanations and to better plan lessons.

To effectively instruct EFL in Japan, it is important to have a basic knowledge of the cultural differences between Japan and English speaking countries. This will help learners address areas of difference and feel more comfortable interacting with native speakers. To understand Japanese culture, it is important to learn the language. Plus it will make the instructor's experience living in Japan so much more fulfilling.

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