The Connection between Language and Culture: How Japanese Culture Affects Learning English

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the connection between culture and language learning in an EFL context in Japan. Many researchers and teachers have been acknowledging the importance of integrating cultural knowledge into foreign and second language teaching in the classrooms because there is a strong link between the way the language is used and the cultural values which dictate this use. This study focuses on how cultural values and beliefs can sometimes be an obstacle for learning English or any other foreign language and how these affect students' use of this language. This can be often seen in university classrooms when students appear reluctant to speak or are silent. The paper will present the challenges the author encountered in teaching English regarding cultural misunderstanding and how author attempted to deal with them. The author will talk about possible strategies in order to help teachers and their students to overcome cultural barriers and to reduce cross-cultural misunderstandings in language learning.

Key words: culture, language, language education, communication

Introduction

When teaching or learning another language, it is very important to understand that you will encounter individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Because of these cultural differences, there is a possibility that people may not understand exactly what others are trying to say. Or, in the same vein, there is also a chance that people may not understand certain habits, body language cues, behaviors, or reactions that people from different cultures may have that are different from their own culture.

An understanding of the relationship between language and culture is important for language learners, users, and for all those involved in language education. In the interest of not hitting any cultural roadblocks and enabling the most efficient learning environment, it is important that both teachers and students understand each other's cultures and become aware of their own unique socio-cultural behaviors. This mutual understanding of each other's cultural backgrounds and cultural nuances ensures that neither the student nor teacher gets offended over something that was not meant to be offensive. This also makes sure that both parties can best understand what exactly the other is trying to convey, as understanding cultural nuances and minor cues are crucial in understanding the full meaning of what others are saying.

What Is Culture?

Assigning one single definition to culture is extremely difficult, especially in an increasingly international world. While on the surface, culture might seem easy to explain or understand, the definition goes much deeper than what the average person may think. Without understanding culture, it becomes difficult to understand the perspectives of others. As Geertz (2000a) notes, by Clyde Kluckhohn's account of culture (Johnson, 2013, p.99) as (1) "the total way of life of a

people"; (2) "the social legacy the individual acquires from his group"; (3) "a way of thinking, feeling, and believing"; and (4) "an abstraction from behaviour…" (pp.4-5).

Culture shapes and it is shaped by almost every aspect of an individual's life, going as deep as their personal beliefs, their world view, the assumptions that they make, and even their thought patterns. According to Condon (1973, as cited in Kuo & Lai, 2006), "culture can be defined as a way of life. No matter where people live, their behaviors and thoughts follow and are generally based on their own cultures" (p. 2). Therefore, by understanding the culture of students, teachers are able to better understand their interests, their concerns, and what motivates them in the classroom, which is necessary for being a good teacher.

Culture is also a core part of human nature; it is a part of all of us. Humans, whether people realize it or not, use culture to develop and adapt societies, to understand new and different forms of knowledge, and to form relationships with other people. These are all activities governed by the influence of culture. This makes culture a very powerful tool, for all kinds of day-to-day life activities, but also for teaching and learning language.

What Is Language and How Does Culture Relate to Language?

The relationship between a language and the culture of the speakers of a language is very closely intertwined. It can be said that language acts as a representative of a culture in a way, as the members of a culture communicate through their common language, thus imparting a piece of their culture into it. Gleason indicates that "language is not only the product of culture, but also is the symbol of culture" (Gleason, 1961, as cited in McIver & Young, 2020).

This is especially true for a nation like Japan. With thousands of years of history, the Japanese language and culture have become so intertwined and have reached a symbiosis very unique among other world languages and cultures. So, in the same way that a language can represent a culture, a culture can shape and change a language. The members of a culture think and speak in their language, so it follows naturally that as they grow and change, their thoughts and words will change with them. For example, teachers can see instances of different cultures having words for concepts or ideas that do not exist in other languages. In Japanese, there is a saying, "*shouganai*", without a direct translation to English, the saying means something like, "It cannot be helped". This saying is a good example that illustrates a socio-cultural difference between Japanese and English-Speaking cultures. "*Shouganai*" is in a sense indicative of an understanding that there are many things that exist outside of the individual that are not within our control and cannot be helped. Contrast this to many English-Speaking cultures which are strongly individualistic and do not immediately acknowledge the society around them, but themselves first. To what a Japanese person may say "*shouganai*", a Westerner may say "Why must this happen to me?". Expanding on this, it can be said that culture and language are in a way inseparable. Because of this relationship between language and culture, it is important to understand both and their relationship in order to best teach and learn a new language, especially in a culture where the two are so intertwined like Japan.

Japanese Socio-Cultural Differences and How to Address them

In order to form a positive teacher-student relationship and ensure that Japanese students stay motivated to learn, an English teacher must understand how to empathize with Japanese students and accommodate for cultural nuances. This understanding includes being aware of the many socio-cultural differences and uniquely Japanese patterns of communication present among Japanese Students. In addition to this, an effective English teacher should also know what these socio-cultural differences mean and be able to appropriately react to them.

Being able to understand situations in which these differences are negative or positive will determine how a teacher should move forward in the classroom. There are many social and cultural discrepancies in culture and language between the East and West, stemming from everything from language to personal values. Understanding the many socio-cultural differences present in Japan that have a bearing on learning and communicating in English allows teachers to connect to students struggling to learn behind a socio-cultural barrier. To start, here are a couple of common instances of socio-cultural differences.

Silence

According to King & Harumi (2020) "Silence is an issue that touches all who teach" (p. 3). English teachers regularly encounter long silences in the classroom. There are two different reasons why a classroom may fall silent, one being negative, and another mostly positive. It is important to understand both reasons to effectively connect with your students.

Positive silence occurs when students are thinking and/or processing information from their teacher. This can be seen after a teacher asks a question or assigns group work. Students need some time to think and prepare to answer questions or participate in group work, especially considering these activities are not being done in their native language. This silence is necessary and positive and should not be cause for any concern. Tannen (1985) confirms that "Silence is seen as positive when it is taken as evidence of the existence of something positive underlying - for example, proper respect; the silence of the telephone when it represents solitude for creative work; the silence of `sweet silent thought'... "(p. 94).

On the other hand, negative silence makes people uncomfortable "hinges on whether or not participants feel something should be said, in which case silence is perceived as an omission" (Tannen, 1985, p. 96). Negative silences occur when students are disinterested in a topic, are not paying attention, or do not wish to participate. This variant of silence is unwelcoming in the classroom as it is not conducive to learning.

To get a better understanding of the nature of these silences and how to identify them, teachers need to understand the foundation upon which this socio-cultural habit is built. In this case, silence most likely stems from the Japanese cultural value of actions over words. This appreciation for silence and actions over words has its roots in Buddhism, particularly the Zen aspects of Buddhist teaching, which state that speaking in itself is superficial and that enlightenment can be reached only through silence. Because of this, it really should not come as a surprise that most Japanese people will value silence over unnecessary speaking, and actions over words.

Moving on from the cultural foundations and on to the social foundations for this behavior. Japan is a small, ancient island nation/society. The aim is almost always intergroup harmony therefore Japan has developed into what is referred to as a "high-context culture". "High-context cultures rely on context (social or physical) to convey a large part of the message's meaning. Messages are more elliptical and indirect; don't trust words alone" (Nam, 2007, p.107). So, people became very skilled at understanding each other`s message or "reading the air" ("*kuuki yomenai*").

What defines a high-context culture is that its members operate with the understanding that the people in their country share the same cultural background and understanding as them, so a lot of communication and details are implied during conversation. This contrasts rather starkly to Western "low-context" cultures, where a shared understanding and cultural background cannot be assumed. "Low-context cultures context is not assumed; messages are more direct and completely encoded in words; put thoughts into words and let them carry the meaning" (Nam, 2007, p.107). Effective communication is simple and clear. Meyer states (2015) that "The United States is the lowest context culture in the world, followed by Canada and Australia, the Netherlands and Germany, and the United Kingdom" (p. 34). Due to the very diverse lingual, ethnic, and value systems that tend to be present in western countries, when speaking, individuals find themselves having to explain many things in great detail, where the Japanese do not.

Another reason for this communication style is the difference between collectivist and individualist cultures. Chiu, Kim & Wan (2008, as cited in Carducci, 2012) stated that "Individualistic cultures, such as North American and Western European countries, are characterized by a cultural perspective that emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual's personal characteristics, needs, and motives as the focal point of predicting and understanding the individual's actions" (p. 414). Japan and east-Asian nations tend to be more collectivist than in western countries. In Japan, this collectivism means that the Japanese people value face-saving, fulfilling the needs of others, and group orientation over themselves, contrasting more individualistic western societies. "Collectivistic cultures such as Japan, India, and China tend to be characterized by a cultural perspective that places less emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual's personal characteristics as the focal point of predicting and understanding the individual's actions" (Carducci, 2012, p.414).

How Japanese collectivism manifests in the classroom will usually display the use of silence, where students may remain silent in order to save face by either not standing out in front of their peers or avoiding being embarrassed. This silence can also be a tool to maintain group order, as some Japanese students may think that by remaining silent, unnecessary conflict or disorder is avoided. According to Harumi (2001) students,

> Tend to be silent when they are not sure whether their answers are right or if their
> ideas differ from those of others. It might sound strange that Japanese students are
> too awkward to state their opinions freely. However, this derives from the Japanese
> cultural norm of wa—meaning harmony—and the importance of consensus-decision
> making. In order to keep harmony, there are students who think that they should
> provide answers which match others' ideas (p. 32).

On top of this, silence can also mean that a student is formulating an opinion, gathering the courage to speak in English, is leaving space for a senior to speak, or is attempting to disagree in a less confrontational manner. Regardless of the exact reason, it is important to be able to identify and understand the cultural reasons for this silence, know whether it is positive or negative, and be able to accommodate for and, if needs be, address it.

Ambiguity

Japanese statements are often said to be ambiguous or indirect, especially by Westerners. "Japanese is ambiguous" ('*aimai*') or that Japanese "don't say things clearly" ('*hakkiri iwanai*')" (Pizziconi, 2009, p.221). This ambiguity is fostered by the nature of the Japanese language itself and supplemented by Japanese socio-cultural values. This is derived from the Japanese tendency towards collectivism and their valuing of empathy and politeness towards others. According to Matsumoto, Kudoh & Takeuchi (1996) "Japanese people took advantage of the power of collectivism and channeled their energies into selfless work for the common good" (p. 83). In order to refrain from conflict or to avoid offending others, it is very common that Japanese people will repress their own ego and not become too partial to one side, so as to avoid isolating themselves as well. A good example of this indirectness and impartiality can be observed in the Japanese use of the word "no" ("*iie*"). Out of a reluctance to offend someone by disagreeing with an opinion or refusing a request, Japanese people will often try their best to avoid saying "no" directly. This can be done through apology or doubt, and most popularly as we have discussed, ambiguity and silence.

In addition to this, there is the politeness phenomenon, to which the previously discussed Japanese socio-cultural tendencies of silence and ambiguity are closely related. The Japanese language has many different words for addressing different types of people politely. Because of this, it can be very difficult for a Japanese person to find the right way to express politeness in English, which may result in silence or an ambiguous statement.

There are of course many other complex Japanese language-based behaviors that contrast to those of English. After understanding some of the major socio-cultural differences between Japanese and English-speaking peoples, an English teacher can form a more complete understanding of their Japanese students.

Suggestions and Tips

The English classroom will always be a place that at least two different cultures exist. To supplement the growth of this understanding and to support an efficient and effective classroom learning dynamic, here are some tips and suggestions on how to best accommodate for and work with Japanese socio-cultural differences.

The teacher's questions should not be too easy or too difficult, if they are too easy, students may see them as meaningless, resulting in a negative silence. If the questions are too difficult, students may become frustrated and unwilling to participate. Because of this, it is best if the teacher asks questions of moderate difficulty, appropriate for students` level and awards positive feedback for participation, which will encourage students to participate in classroom interactions more.

Provide students with opportunities to use and experience different types of communication by assigning pair work, group work activities, and having discussions. Pair work can serve as a comfortable way for students to work, and group work is a great way to take advantage of the group-minded nature of Japanese culture. A great way to supplement group work is by giving each member of each group their own responsibilities and making sure each student has a chance at performing each role. According to Bouchard and Nicolai (2014) "The importance of pair/group work in Communication Language Teaching has been identified by many researchers on language learning and teaching, notably by Nihalani et al. (2010),who argue that L2 interaction in the language classroom can potentially be achieved through collaborative/cooperative learning in which students work together to achieve a common goal" (p. 96).

Self-esteem and confidence are key to learning a language. Environments that induce anxiety are not conducive to learning and should be avoided. The teacher should foster an environment in which students are comfortable and are not anxious to speak. This can be done by ensuring that both parties understand each other's cultures. The teacher should also make sure the student understands that through hard work, they can learn English.

The classroom needs to be made a pleasant environment where students know that it is okay to make errors and are comfortable with doing so. This is necessary for classroom participation and ensuring effective teaching.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore the connection between culture and language learning in an EFL context in Japan. The author showed how cultural values and beliefs can sometimes be an obstacle for learning English or any other foreign language and how these affect students' use of this language. This can be often seen in classrooms when students appear ambiguous, reluctant to speak or are silent.

It is important for a teacher to find ways to encourage communication in EFL classes while accommodating Japanese culture and styles. An understanding of students' culture can help to narrow the cultural gap that sometimes creates confusion and frustration in English communication classes.

BIO DATA

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