

Identifying considerations for introducing L2 culture in Japanese EFL

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Abstract

Native-speaking teachers (NSTs) can possess a particular sway in the classroom if perceived as representing a culture different than those of his or her learners. This paper is based on a qualitative research study to examine how teachers in Japanese EFL contexts use culture as a vehicle for establishing rapport with students, in an effort to minimize learner anxiety and increase learner motivation. A series of questionnaire responses and interviews with NSTs at Japanese universities is used to illustrate the positive effects that culture can have when connected to language learning. This paper then proposes a set of considerations that acknowledges the relationship between culture and language and guides teachers in similar contexts on how best to implement culture in the classroom in order to emphasize the benefits of exposure to culture while avoiding the obvious pitfalls that exist in an intercultural environment.

Key words: culture, learner anxiety, learner motivation, rapport

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the major points of contention in contemporary language education is the role of culture and its connection to language. While some teachers view culture as either a necessary or inevitable component to classroom learning, others have emphasized local contexts as the proper starting point for foreign language education (Holliday, 2005, and Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005).

Keeping this dichotomy in mind, a qualitative study was conducted to identify how language teachers view culture and in what ways they choose to apply it in their classrooms. This paper explores a sample of the study, identifying university teachers in Japanese EFL contexts who, in the opinion of this researcher, have attempted to make a positive connection between the positive aspects of culture teaching and their effects on student learning. Highlighted below are a few of the study's participants who have indicated that the presence of L2 culture, whether in comparison to L1 culture or presented as an object of examination in the classroom, can serve to reduce learner anxiety and promote motivation among learners.

2. THE EVOLVING ROLE OF CULTURE

Culture, at first glance, is a broad term that lends itself to varying definitions, but Alptekin (1993), citing Widdowson (1990), defines culture for our purposes as a set of “cognitive structures through which we interpret information,” which largely arise from “a society’s imposition of its own differential view of reality on its individual members.” In the absence of previous knowledge of any language or culture, native language learning is developed in tandem with the development of these schemas formed by one’s culture, or local context.

The connection between culture and language acquisition has long been confirmed as a given since Whorf defined his linguistic relativity hypothesis (1956). In one sense of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, one’s worldview is shaped by one’s language, and vice versa. Zhifang (2002) summarized Whorf’s observation of the Hopi language and culture (that study indicated that, as the Hopi language lacks verb tenses, the Hopi culture reflects a sense of time that is significantly different to that of languages that do require verb tenses) and submits that people of different cultures cannot, if ever, hold similar perspectives of the world about them without significant effort. “Cultural communication,” Zhifang says, “is not a process in which all cultures involved converge to a set of *a priori* principles in agreement with natural reason.” Given this reasoning, language learners should pursue an understanding of the target language culture, however different from their own, if target language proficiency is the stated objective.

Contemporary thinking in language education has since tempered educators’ opinions regarding the intensity of this relationship between culture and language, especially where learners come into a second or foreign language classroom having already developed their own series of schemas based on their local contexts. The idea of teaching language in isolation from the target culture, however, has received mixed reception in the field. DeCapua (1998) highlighted the importance of this connection in a study of German learners of English. DeCapua found that transfer of L1 cultural norms into L2 production, in the absence of knowledge of L2 culture, fostered culture stereotyping between speakers. In this case, the German learners of English were perceived by native English speakers as being too direct when expectations of German cultural norms were transferred to spoken English production. The results of this study provide guidance for language learning as to the divide that educators and learners face when each brings differing cultural expectations into the classroom.

This paper argues that, while promoting sensitivity for the local context of language learners is essential, the presence of a separate culture in the classroom remains inevitable,

especially but not exclusively where native-speaking teachers (NSTs) differ in cultural perspective from their learners, and requires that awareness of such differences by all in the classroom also be raised. DeCapua and Wintergerst also reflect this call for more focus on the culture-language relationship (2004). Their work on culture teaching sought to raise the expectations for language educators to be more respectful of differences in the language classroom, outlining the principles for culture learning as, among other key concepts, learning about the self in relation to one's culture and other cultures, exploring the elements of those cultures, and gaining awareness of culture factors in general. While their treatment of culture in language education is intended for teacher education, this researcher believes that these principles can also be applied to the language classroom by providing learners with the opportunity to encounter culture that is different from their own and to negotiate those differences as they might in real world usage. Such guiding principles motivated this researcher to pursue study to examine culture in language education.

It is the opinion of this researcher that a target language culture in itself is not necessarily a source of learner anxiety if it can be perceived as a positive force in the classroom, and can ultimately alleviate other negative affect factors and raise learner motivation. Also, whatever the positive or negative forces that culture may bring, educators must give second language learners the knowledge and the experience inside the classroom to negotiate target language culture outside of the classroom.

3. EFL IN JAPANESE CONTEXTS

Japanese EFL education is set within a number of circumstances that can help illustrate the positive influence of a starkly different culture over L2 learners of English who possess linguistic and cultural identities that are different from those of native English speakers. These circumstances are different from that of some other Asian countries, such as Singapore or the Philippines, which have developed their own English cultures. The lack of a concrete, local English dialect in Japan, combined with little more than a surface awareness among Japanese learners of the full array of English varieties in the world (Miyagi, Sato and Crump, 2009) and a lack of purpose for English in daily Japanese society (Sato, 2010), contributes to the distance between cultures that learners encounter when studying English. Because of this distance, the Japanese EFL classroom is a suitable place to explore and measure the effects of a relatively novel culture on student learning.

Such circumstances make possible the close examination of the introduction of target language culture on a personal level into the classroom in the absence of other conflicting influences. While popular culture (in this case, popular culture from English-speaking countries) has grown pervasive through the development of technology and globalization, this researcher believes that a language learner's personal interaction with a foreign culture can yield deeper effects than would a more passive exposure to such culture. This paper seeks to demonstrate that, in exploring the effects of target language culture in EFL classrooms in Japanese contexts, such positive influences can be duplicated in some form in other contexts where English is not the primary medium of communication.

The study outlined below seeks to highlight a portion of the wide array of cultural elements that educators introduce into their classrooms, intended for the benefit of heightening learner interest and motivation. In providing examples of the positive influences that NSTs have when incorporating culture into language study, it is the hope of this researcher that the culture-language connection is viewed by objective eyes with less suspicion and more willingness to consider its benefits.

4. THE STUDY

In 2008, the JALT Research Grants Committee awarded this researcher a grant for a qualitative study based on a research plan that focused on how teachers sought to influence language learners through culture. The research attempted to identify where or how in the second or foreign language curriculum culture could be implemented. As culture remains (even, doubtless, after this study) an overarching concept, it was later determined through consultation with mentors to at least narrow the focus of this research to a few culture-related elements, which could then be extrapolated to other facets of culture. These elements included the usage of authentic materials and extracurricular activities, and interviews with the study's participants sought to outline different perspectives among these teachers.

The main thrust of this research study was conducted over a period of one year, and in two stages. The initial stage saw a distribution of questionnaires to language teachers (see Appendix A). The questionnaire asked teachers to respond to a series of statements regarding their teaching circumstances, their preferred pedagogy and view of culture in relation to language learners. In total, 52 teachers responded to the survey. This research was able to gather a wide sample of educators, native-speaking and non-native-speaking, from various contexts (high school, university, adult education, etc.) and with various teaching

qualifications and experience. Admittedly, however, the main purpose of the questionnaire was not to draw any statistical analysis, but rather to establish contact with as many teachers as possible in preparation for the next phase.

The second stage of the study, conducted over the latter half of the research period, consisted of interviews, either in-person or over the Internet, with questionnaire respondents, asking them to elaborate on their responses and explore in detail the circumstances and elements of their classrooms and language learners. Eleven questionnaire respondents were interviewed at length (45-90 minutes) on a number of responses, selected at the discretion of this researcher. From these interviews, a wide range of teacher beliefs and anecdotal evidence of the usage of culture in classroom contexts were elicited.

The original research plan recommended a third stage, emphasizing reflective journal writing among research participants and recorded classroom observations, in the hope that the aforementioned anecdotal evidence would be corroborated, and subsequently measured against the observed influence on language learners. With the original one-year research phase completed, this part of the research is on hold, but may be conducted in the future.

Through reflection of the data collected, parallels among the study's participants in their questionnaire responses and interviews shifted the focus away from specific cultural elements to guiding considerations for teachers to adopt when planning to include culture in classroom usage. In presentations (including the short paper presented at the NEAR Language Education Conference in May, 2010) highlighting the study, this researcher excerpted interviews with four NSTs at Japanese universities. Their contributions to the study helped form the guidance being proposed in this paper.

4.1 Teacher A – identifying curiosity

The first teacher profiled in this paper is a NST in a university context, and has in the past taught in English conversation schools in Japan. He has several teaching qualifications, including a TESOL-related degree and certification in TESOL. In his questionnaire, the teacher explicitly states a desire to understand the students' culture while teaching the target language culture at the same time.

When asked to elaborate this during the interview, the teacher brought up an example of students asking about high school life in the UK (the teacher is a native-British English user) and comparing that to high school life in Japan. In the view of this teacher, for example, schools in Japan tend to focus on the socialization aspect and host events such as festivals, one element that is noticeably absent from schools in the UK. Such differences then appear

to evoke responses of curiosity and fascination – “They seem to want to continue the conversation for a long time,” said this teacher – which is beneficial “in a holistic way.”

The very idea that students are thus engaged in the conversation is evidence enough of rapport between teacher and learner with culture as the vehicle. Beyond the surface, moreover, the teacher believes he is fostering a sense of curiosity and, therefore, increased motivation that may not have been there, or existed in a minimal capacity, at the outset.

4.2 Teacher B – authentic materials as the selling point

The next teacher has had significant experience in teaching English to native-Japanese students. She is a university teacher who claims a fair degree of independence in being able to choose the setup of the classroom and the preparation of materials, namely those materials which she considers authentic. From the beginning of the interview, she quickly identifies herself as a “facilitator” in the classroom, while the students are engaged in the tasks at hand. As such, the materials chosen (i.e. YouTube videos, materials “designed for native speakers”) for the class are important. At the same time, the authentic materials merely supplement the textbook lesson (the curriculum requires usage of the prescribed textbooks).

When asked about the advantages of such materials, the teacher stated the obvious differences (i.e. “the vocabulary was higher and more descriptive”), but more importantly, the authentic materials possessed a certain “tone” that she herself would not have been able to produce had she made the materials on her own. However, the teacher believes that the authentic materials were not the main source of the students’ interest, but rather that the activities that included authentic materials had a game aspect to them. On the other hand, according to the teacher, where the authenticity of the target language culture serves its purpose was the level of passion she was able to bring to the lesson in introducing the theme and objectives to students. By using, for example, a newspaper or magazine clipping in her lesson, rather than a fully-doctored, teacher-created article, she became more interested in “selling” the lesson theme, which in turn had a positive effect on her language learners.

4.3 Teacher C – culture through extra-curricular activities

This NST is another university teacher with long-standing experience in Japan. In her interview, she stresses the importance of extra-curricular or special activities to her students. Twice a year, she invites her students to her house for a dinner party for the purpose of connecting with them “on a personal level.” Identifying such events as “cultural,” she wants students to see a bilingual, bicultural environment, where it is possible for native speakers

and non-native speakers (her husband is Japanese) to communicate through a common language without the anxieties that a classroom environment may present.

Outside of the classroom, the teacher encourages her students to engage in “English experience,” which involves regular contact with L2 culture (i.e. English karaoke, English movies). Telling students that it is vital to their growth as language learners, she finds that students complete these experiences with much satisfaction. On top of this, the teacher introduces her students to non-native English speakers who are presented as “models of goal-setting and determination...not just to learn English” as a means to expose students to various varieties of English.

In presenting all sorts of non-L1 culture, this teacher encourages her students to find their own comfort level with English. As the teacher provides a gateway to actual experiences in the language, both personal and independent, she is responding to the perceived sense of inferiority that students may feel with native speakers by introducing more contact with the type of English that breaks preconceived notions about the language.

4.4 Teacher D – responding to an interest in culture

The final teacher profiled for this paper is another university NST. The teacher identified the students in his classroom as having varying levels of motivation, and classroom activities as not necessarily motivating students as much as the level of personal engagement that the classroom might foster. In choosing content for classroom activities, the teacher strongly considers the degree of relevance such content has with language learners (dependent on age group, student background, etc.). In balancing this with culture, the teacher believes that it is important to “err on the side of” teaching culture, benefiting students who identify the presence of strong ties between culture and language.

5. DISCUSSION

The study can draw connections among these four teachers in their use of culture. One rationale for reducing the role of culture in language acquisition is the potential for insensitivity or imposition of one culture over another, especially by a teacher over his or her students. Yet, all of the teachers highlighted in this paper use some form of culture as a way to connect with their students or as a vehicle with which to respond to their students’ needs. The degree to which this is successful remains an object to be measured in further study (good intentions may be just that, and can still create or be unable to prevent learner anxiety), but there is at least a perceived attempt to form a rapport with students.

Teacher A fosters a connection with students by identifying their sense of curiosity. Responding to that curiosity, the teacher emphasizes that which is different to elicit a positive response, furthering learner interest and motivation. Teachers C and D identify overt ties between the L2 and the L2 culture, or at least non-L1 culture. The latter teacher sees an interest in culture among those language learners actively interested in learning the target language; responding to that interest is, at minimum, a basic responsibility of the teacher, and has the effect of fostering greater rapport with language learners.

Least explicit in the implementation of culture is Teacher B, but the stated purpose is no less effective than those mentioned above. In this teacher's belief, the need to "sell" the lesson point is crucial to generating learner interest, and the teacher feels a need to introduce authentic materials into the lesson, not necessarily because there is a direct benefit for students but because there is a benefit for the teacher in terms of the passion that is necessary to be persuasive in the classroom. As a result, whether culture benefits the language learner or the language teacher, its importance and its effect in generating rapport is consistent.

It is worth bearing in mind that all of the teachers highlighted thus far have been NSTs, and as such, the anecdotes outlined in this paper would likely be more amenable to NSTs than they would to non-native-speaking teachers (NNSTs). This research, therefore, would benefit from interviewing NNSTs who had responded to the initial questionnaire. The interview phase involved only one NNST, who had emphasized in her response to the questionnaire the dangers of imposing culture on language learners, and thus is markedly more hesitant than the profiled NSTs in introducing L2 culture in classroom usage. This researcher would like to interview other NNSTs to find any commonalities with this line of thinking.

6. CONSIDERATIONS FOR CULTURE IN CLASSROOM USAGE

Instead of presenting the different reasons why culture can be a detriment to the language classroom and an anxiety threat to learners, both may be better served by a more positive approach, one which presents possible circumstances where it is useful to introduce culture. Based on the interviews and discussions conducted with various teachers over the one-year study, this researcher proposes the following considerations for the inclusion of culture in Japanese EFL or in similar contexts:

- Does the inclusion of culture seek to establish a connection with language learners, or does the teacher include it merely to establish his or her perceived insight?

- Is the addition of the culture in question relevant to language learners, or does it merely serve as “trivia” or needless decoration?
- Does the teacher demonstrate sensitivity to language learners when presenting culture, or is its inclusion an imposition over the L1 culture?
- Does the inclusion of culture further the stated language objectives?
- Is the inclusion of culture practical, or does it interfere with the lesson (i.e. takes too much time to introduce, makes the lesson needlessly difficult)?

It is the opinion of this researcher that, should these questions be carefully considered when teachers in contexts where the L2 presents a markedly different cultural perspective than that of the local context look to apply elements of culture into a particular lesson or curriculum, the threat of learner anxiety should be somewhat diminished, at least with respect to culture. Consequently, in the absence of such anxiety, the potential for greater motivation and interest among language learners should be more easily realized.

7. CONCLUSION

Even after giving due consideration to the potential pitfalls that concern the presence of culture in the classroom, this study establishes that such a presence that should not merely be negotiated or tolerated as some obstacle to overcome, but rather should be seen as a vehicle, particularly for NSTs, that facilitates progress among language learners. When discussing culture conscientiously and reflectively, the teachers interviewed for this study, for the most part, view culture as a potentially positive force, at least in the Japanese EFL classroom, where the culture that accompanies English is a largely unknown subject for language learners to explore.

The series of considerations presented in this paper, based on the examples provided in this study, should serve as a starting point for harnessing target language culture to establish a connection with students while helping to avoid the dangers of anxiety or lack of motivation that have plagued past teachers. Further study would do well to examine just how a novel culture, when not seen as an invading or imposing power on unsuspecting students of a different context, can actually be of tangible benefit to the classroom as a tool for establishing real and meaningful connections between teachers and learners in situations where linguistic and cultural distinctions are significant in scope and necessary to overcome.

NOTES

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Culture and Language Acquisition – Questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of an ongoing research project to explore the role of culture in the language classroom. All language teachers are encouraged to participate. Completion of this questionnaire should take at least seven (7) minutes. Kindly complete all sections to the best of your ability. All responses will be kept in strictest confidentiality.

Name: _____ Gender (circle): Male / Female Age: _____

Email: _____ Phone number (optional): _____

Part I: Teacher Profile

What is/are your native language(s)? _____

What other languages can you speak? _____

What language(s) do you currently teach? _____

How long have you been a language teacher? _____ years _____ months

Language teaching qualifications (check all that apply):

- Unrelated post-secondary degree
- Related undergraduate degree
- Related graduate degree
- Teaching certification (i.e. CELTA, TESOL)
- Teaching license
- Other (please specify) _____

Environment(s) currently teaching (check all that apply):

- Elementary education
- Secondary education
- Post-secondary education
- Language school
- Preparatory school
- Community/cultural center
- Private lessons
- Other (please specify) _____

Part II: Curriculum and classroom profile

Note: If you teach in multiple environments, please answer based on your main teaching environment.

Circle the number that best fits your answer (5 = completely; 3 = somewhat; 1 = not at all).

I decide which textbooks are used in class. 5 4 3 2 1

I prepare my own teaching supplements/materials. 5 4 3 2 1

I decide how my classroom is set up (desks, board, etc.). 5 4 3 2 1

I consistently follow the teacher's guide/plans provided
in the textbooks used in class. 5 4 3 2 1
(next page)

Part II (cont'd)

I design the assessments (tests, quizzes, etc.) used in class.	5	4	3	2	1
I use authentic listening and/or reading materials in class.	5	4	3	2	1
I actively encourage students to study a language outside of class.	5	4	3	2	1
I conduct extracurricular activities (field trips, parties, etc.) for my students.	5	4	3	2	1
I allow my students to give input on the curriculum.	5	4	3	2	1
I am satisfied with my students' performance in class.	5	4	3	2	1

Part III: Perspective on Language

Circle the number that best fits your answer (5 = completely; 3 = somewhat; 1 = not at all).

I believe learning grammar and vocabulary is important.	5	4	3	2	1
I believe native-like fluency is necessary.	5	4	3	2	1
I believe understanding culture is important for learning a second language.	5	4	3	2	1
I believe I understand the culture of the language(s) that I currently teach.	5	4	3	2	1
My view of the second language culture influences what I teach in class.	5	4	3	2	1
I consistently try to connect language to culture during class.	5	4	3	2	1
My students are interested and motivated in class.	5	4	3	2	1
My students would be more interested and motivated in class because of the second language culture.	5	4	3	2	1

Part IV: Conclusion

If you have any comments or suggestions regarding this questionnaire and/or your answers to this questionnaire, please add them in the space below.

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