

Uncovering Teacher Assumptions and Developing Intercultural Communication through Heightened Local Culture Sensitivity

教師の思い込みの発見と現地文化に対する文化的感受性を高めることによる異文化間コミュニケーションの促進

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With the official shift away from teaching prescribed linguistic forms to incorporating them as a part of a broader repertoire for communication (Amano, 1999; Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2013), I, like many English teachers in Japanese universities, teach “English for communicative purposes” courses. However, when I began teaching them, I would often become discouraged and frustrated when I set up communicative activities and students would only use a minimum amount of English, and then either stop the activity and say “*Finished*,” or revert to Japanese. When I discussed my frustrations with one of my Japanese-American friends also teaching at a university in Tokyo, she suggested that Japanese students need more structure. She gave me an example of a conversation activity that worked in her class where she used vocabulary cards containing target verbs and nouns, and the students would have a conversation flipping over the cards. I have used similar activities to introduce or promote vocabulary acquisition; however, in her case, the purpose of the cards was to assist the students’ conversation. For example, on the topic of global warming, several vocabulary cards would be laid out, and students would discuss the topic with question prompts that were in the textbook. They would answer the questions while looking at the cards, and use the vocabulary in the conversation. When they used the vocabulary they replaced it with a new card. She found that students were able to discuss more when they could see the vocabulary in front of them. In other words, by *directing* and *limiting* the linguistic focus of the conversation activity to the specific set of terms in her vocabulary card activity, she found that her students were able to communicate *more*.

For me, this was an entirely novel idea. Up until that point, I thought that limiting the focus to specific vocabulary would stifle student conversation. However, when I spoke about this activity with a non-teacher Japanese friend, their response was, “*She understands how Japanese like to learn. Free conversation is very difficult for us.*” This comment caused me to start to re-evaluate my teaching practice. I realized that perhaps I was not thinking about my learner needs as deeply as I should have been. Like other teachers, I over-simplistically attributed students’ reticence in conversation activities due to their low English proficiency (Tsui, 1996), or their lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes or being laughed at—not to lack of structure.

As I thought this over further, I started to reflect upon my own assumptions as a non-Japanese university teacher. I am Canadian and completed my Masters at an American university; I wondered about the influence of my North American education on my expectations for my non-North American learners. I looked to Barna (1994) who suggests six “stumbling blocks” that can affect intercultural communication. Of the six, I realized that *assumptions of similarities* and the *tendency to evaluate* may be the two blocks that teachers are the least aware of. *Assumptions of similarities* refers to the taken for granted, unquestioned belief that people share similar values and beliefs as ourselves. The *tendency to evaluate* refers

to the tendency of approving or disapproving the statements or actions of the other person based on our framework rather than making an effort to understand it from their worldview (Barna, 1994, pp. 341-342). I realized that I had succumbed to these stumbling blocks—I had been expecting my students to conduct the communicative activities as Western students without deeply considering their existing values and communication style.

I decided that as a window and a model for intercultural communication, before imposing my values onto my students, I should first make an effort to understanding their worldviews. It was only when I approached teaching with a heightened local cultural sensitivity—to understand and respect the students' background schema, and adjust my teaching to meet their expectations—that I began to see them take great strides in developing their communicative ability.

In this short reflective article, I will first share questions from my teaching practice and then examine the research to reflect upon classroom intercultural concerns. I will conclude with future considerations about my learner development practices.

Understanding my Students' Worldviews

In order to deepen my knowledge about my students' perspectives, the questions that I wanted to answer were: *How do my students best learn? What kind of classroom and activities are comfortable for them and will promote their learning? How do they communicate? What communication techniques do they use in Japanese that they can learn in English? and What is different for them about communicating in English compared to communicating in Japanese?*

Learning in Japan: Expectations of teachers and students.

In Japan, like in many Asian cultures, the teacher's role "has socially been prescribed as that of a model, a knowledge transmitter, a learning guide, an authority, an expert, a nurturer and a virtuoso, and the student's role as that as a receiver, a follower, an apprentice and an audience" (Li, 2003, p. 74). This is in contrast to Western education systems that tend towards teachers acting as facilitators where questions and discussions among students are encouraged (Saito & Ebsworth, 2004). Students are viewed as co-creators/facilitators in the learning process and the teacher can be wrong. Expatriate teachers with TESOL training often are prepared with activities that focus on a learner-centred classroom, the development of learner autonomy, meaning focused input/output, and encourage unplanned discussions (Li, 2003; Saito & Ebsworth, 2004). However, Western concepts such as autonomy, spontaneous discourse, and a democratic learning environment may often be unfamiliar to the Japanese learner and can be met with resistance. As I started to think this over more, I understood my friend's comment now that "*Japanese students need more structure.*" I began to look for patterns and create formulas for students to remember and develop. For instance, instead of introducing a topic, teaching them the vocabulary and then giving them discussion questions, I started with how to give an answer to a question that promotes more discussion. One effective pattern I introduced to them is an "Answer-Add-Ask" (AAA) pattern, where lower-level students focus on pragmatics such as turn-taking and higher level students can engage in developing and expressing opinions in a modified Response-Opinion-Ask pattern.

In order to meet student expectations of providing them with models for them to frame their output, I gave them many examples of English discourse markers that they could use to structure their conversations. Additionally, I used Bloom's taxonomy of questions (Anderson et. al., 2001) as a framework to provide the learners with many examples of

English question stems. In student reflections, a common sentiment shared by all levels is that they initially find creating their own questions and continuing a conversation to be very difficult; however, remembering the examples made it easier. After discussion activities where students were required to discuss one topic for 5 to 10 minutes, students frequently commented that the structured patterns they learned in class helped to maintain the momentum of communication and extend their conversations beyond their expectations. For instance, Kotaro, a second-year student, was surprised at how long they could talk about one topic and now wanted to talk more than the time allowed, while Atsumi, another second-year student, observed that asking questions was very helpful for her to keep the conversation going. Moreover, students felt that their English ability had progressed. For example, after a discussion activity, Shoei, a first-year student, commented, “*I feel my English improved a lot,*” while Yu, a second-year student, felt he “*could speak more than usual.*” Teppei, a second-year student, observed that using the ready-made phrases helped with communicating more fluently, and Saki, another second-year student, found the phrases so useful that she wanted me to prepare more that she could memorize and incorporate in her conversations.

Regarding values, Western, including English-speaking cultures, tend to be classified as *individualistic* with self-determination to achieve personal (individual) goals. This is in contrast to Eastern collectivist values that tend to emphasize a sense of self that is interconnected with others and the harmony of interpersonal relationships (Hofstede, 2011). For Westerners, being different and having unique ideas is highly regarded. However, for Japanese, being part of a group and being similar is seen as desirable. In my case, I recognized that students liked to work together, but I had thought that this was due to it being easier to complete the assigned tasks rather than a cultural preference. However, I now started to recognize the cultural implications of collectivist values on their communication. For example, in discussion they were much happier when they shared the same opinion than if they disagreed (i.e., happy shouts of “*Me too*” vs. silence).

In order to facilitate familiarity with new types of communicative activities as well as promote solidarity amongst the students, I now consider the first month of the year as an extended “ice breaker.” In the first month, I have students do tasks working in pairs and groups with the primary purpose of finding similarities and becoming closer to one another. For example, they would form teams with team names based on one thing that everyone in the team liked (e.g., “navy blue” or “sleep”), and they would share their reasons for choosing this university. They would work on projects that they would present to the class and vote on. The secondary objective of these activities was for them to become familiar with interactive activities. Advancement of their English skills was a third objective, so while I structured the activities to use English I was not strictly enforcing English usage at this point. In student reflections, they made comments about how they came to class more eagerly because they had friends and wanted to communicate with their friends. They also mentioned that, because others were trying harder, they also wanted to make more effort themselves to communicate in English.

Promoting English communication while maintaining Japanese values.

An important concern for collectivist societies is the concept of *face*. Research has found that individualists have high *self-face* concern that leads towards dominating conflict strategies, while collectivists have high *other-face* concern that results in avoiding conflict and high *mutual-face* concern that lead to cooperating conflict strategies (Oetzel et al., 2001). As such the free-flowing style of discussion and debate commonly practiced in North America or Europe is unpractised in Japan because people prefer to avoid the risk of

offending other people. Rather, Japanese spend more time finding similarities or common ground through which they can develop their relationships.

Recognizing this concern, I began to teach discourse markers, strategies, and patterns that helped to promote *other-face* and maintain harmony in a discussion. For instance, in order to “save face” when disagreeing, the response in the Respond + Opinion + Ask/Pass pattern should be positive (e.g., “*That is a good point.*”), before stating disagreement (Positive Response + Disagreement + Pass). Students find disagreement much easier to give and receive when adding this positive statement.

Face-saving discourse markers and strategies cannot be taught in one lesson, but need to be practiced throughout the term in various fluency activities. By the end of the school year, at all levels, most of my students successfully structured their opinions using these patterns and there were significantly fewer silences in their discussions.

Most students mentioned that due to the frequency of practice in the class they could use the phrases more naturally. However, there were comments regarding how the psychological difficulty of voicing disagreement affected participation in the discussion. Rei, a second-year student, observed that while it was easy for him to discuss when he could agree with other people, it was difficult to disagree because he did not want to “oppose” others. Being afraid to disagree made it difficult for him to convey his opinion and therefore he was less active.

Other students commented that using the patterns helped encourage more honest communication. For instance, Haruki, a second-year law student, pointed out that by starting a response with a positive statement about the other person’s opinion people felt more comfortable about sharing their true opinions. Shuma, another second-year student, commented on the Japanese value of *ocha wo nigosu*, which is to be ambiguous as a means to preserve good social relations. He mentioned that, although he felt that this “virtue” was comfortable for Japanese, it made it difficult to understand people’s true opinions. For Shuma, using the ready-made phrases combined with the patterns that positively recognized the other person’s comments helped to make an atmosphere where it was both comfortable to talk, and easier to understand people’s true feelings about a given topic.

Some students even mentioned that they wanted to use the patterns to promote communication in Japanese. For instance, Chihiro a second-year student, stated that it was difficult at the beginning to use the phrases and patterns, but after using them in the class, they became natural and she started “*to think that I can use this way in Japanese discussion, too. If I say ‘I agree with you’ or ‘I can understand what you said’ before describing own idea, I can show how I think people’s idea and give the reliefs. Therefore, I would like to use this [sic] discussion phrases in Japanese discussion.*”

Explicit teaching of intercultural differences.

Another way I was able to deeply understand my Japanese learner perspective was for me to not only learn about differences between English and Japanese communication, but to become able also to explain it in a simple way for my learners to understand.

In order to raise student awareness I began providing examples using visual aids. For instance, I found that most students believe that English is more direct, but they do not know why. I introduced Hall’s (1959, 1976) work on *High Context* and *Low Context* cultures. In High Context cultures, such as Japan, the onus is more on the listener to understand. This is in contrast to Low Context cultures such as English-speaking America, Australia, Canada or the UK where the onus is generally on the speaker to make themselves understood. I prepared a slide show where I explain and give examples of High Context

and Low Context communication. Additionally, I used cartoons with Japanese speakers and English speakers that visually highlight various intercultural differences that can affect communications. Some explicit learning points include the difference between waiting to be asked for one's opinion vs. proactively stating an opinion, and cultural expectations about the way to communicate an opinion. For instance, in Japanese, it is common to say the background first and then end with the main point. In English, the opinion comes first and then the reasons. By understanding differences from the learner perspective rather than simply saying "In English we do this, in this way," I have become able to provide more comprehensive suggestions and explanations to my students, and, in turn, they have become more motivated to try different models of communication.

Future Considerations

For teachers like me who are from a culture that is different from their learners, the role that we language teachers have provides an opportunity for us to view our own values through an introspective lens whereby we can deepen our intercultural awareness. In order to develop intercultural communicative competence in our learners, it is important for us as educators to understand that our worldview is limited due to the assumptions that we either consciously or unconsciously hold. We must first seek to understand our students from their worldviews and then bridge the gap. The end result may be that our students do not communicate in ways that we expect. However, our purpose should not be to meet *our* expectations, but rather to empower our students to communicate *their* intentions authentically. We can do this by being mindful of our students' individual and cultural needs as we foster their communicative competence. Looking forward, I would like to pursue more research into learner intercultural communicative competence and develop activities that use more authentic examples of Japanese and English. In order to raise awareness and uncover teacher assumptions about how students from different cultures should engage with their pedagogy, I would like to develop a practical model that educators can use to identify intercultural concerns within their classroom. I am looking forward to exchanging ideas with the Learner Development community about these issues in the future.

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Reader Response to “Uncovering Teacher Assumptions and Developing Intercultural Communication through Heightened Local Culture Sensitivity”



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Satchie discusses why intercultural understanding is substantial for both learners and teachers. She shares her struggles in teaching her Japanese students communicative English and explains different changes she made to her approach after a friend of hers said that providing more structured speaking activities was more in line with what Japanese students expect. That was in contrast to Satchie's assumption that more control over students would hamper the development of learners' conversation skills in English. This caused Satchie to realize that she was teaching through the lens of western educational values.

Reading Satchie's article brings to mind remarks that my students' have made like: “My English is poor, so if I speak, that will be troublesome to my classmates.” and “It is embarrassing to make mistakes.” I used to try to promote more open-ended speaking activities, hoping that my students would improve their speaking fluency. However, my students were reluctant to speak. From reading Satchie's article, I can see that I inadvertently ignored my students' cultural value of *face saving*. Students' lack of linguistic knowledge was one cause of their reluctance, but lack of knowledge resulted in reluctance rather than in having many students talking with inaccurate English.

Reflecting on this teaching experience, I think that teachers should be aware of intercultural differences whether or not they share the same culture with their learners and respect learners' own culture or not. In retrospect, I feel that I have unconsciously adopted teaching styles that are often seen as western, even though I was educated in Japan and got used to exam-based cramming until going to university. I came to believe that trying to speak without being afraid of mistakes and less-controlled activities were more meaningful. I got trapped by the “assumptions of similarities” referred to in Satchie's article: Our belief that people share similar values as ours.

Understanding learners' cultural values and communication styles is essential, but teachers should not let students stick exclusively to their own cultural values. For example, a student may constantly refuse to disagree with someone to save the person's face. This communication style may work on certain occasions, but the student will face communication troubles in another context. Our job, in terms of intercultural awareness raising, is to encourage students to go beyond their comfort zone, and be exposed to and understand different values and communication styles without downplaying their own cultural values. How to do so in terms of learner development in language education is worth exploring.

In encouraging students to be open to different cultural values, one thing we should keep in mind is that no student is on one end of the continuum of Western vs. Asian values. Learners, even from the same culture, stand on

various points on the continuum. Therefore, the danger of ignoring individual differences could be a risk whenever teachers categorize students into distinct groups of “Asian” and “Western” based on stereotypical views of the respective cultures. However, culture is definitely an essential variable; understanding and considering intercultural differences can contribute to the creation of a learning environment where learners can prepare themselves to communicate successfully in authentic communication settings.

Reader Response to “Uncovering Teacher Assumptions and Developing Intercultural Communication through Heightened Local Culture Sensitivity”



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How much do we place our own expectations about what entails a good discussion (based on our cultural background and life experience), instead of properly understanding how communication takes place in our students' cultures? I could certainly relate well to the discouragement and frustration Ms. Haga originally felt, and this short reflective article gave me plenty to reflect upon concerning my own teaching situation and how students in my classes communicate and discuss.

What challenges me the most about this short paper is figuring out how I can integrate some of its ideas into my own teaching. In particular, I teach a class on debate, and as Ms. Haga suggests, using strong language to disagree with others (let alone crushing the logic behind their arguments) is highly counter-intuitive in Japan. Is it possible (and desirable) to have students preface their rebuttals with words of affirmation? Is it acceptable to reject the conventions of debate, which encourage contention? I suppose an initial answer to these questions would need to be fleshed out by looking at the course outcomes more closely, and perhaps giving them an overhaul. In the end, the skills that learners develop in the course should match their perceived future needs. In what cultural context will they need to develop arguments? What kind of disagreements and counterarguments can they expect to hear? Do they feel they will need to be able to affirm other people's opinions before offering their own (preserving “other-face”), or will they need to make their own arguments clear, convincing and superior to others' arguments (“self-face”)?

As I thought through these questions, I couldn't help but wonder how practical it is to try and help students develop a more informed understanding of communication in “English cultures.” With the global expansion of English education, is it even true that interaction in English globally can be restricted to low context culture norms? Perhaps English communication in countries like Singapore or India is more “high context,” making it more similar to Japanese communication than one might think. For that matter, as Japanese English begins to emerge as a legitimate form of the language, perhaps high context

communication in English will also become a valuable tool for students to acquire.

Speaking of Japanese English, the increased adoption of English into Japanese society will hopefully give more and more people in Japan a greater sense of ownership of the language still referred to as “foreign.” The general attitude towards English that I often encounter in Japan is that *“it is spoken by people in other countries, but is completely unnecessary for everyday life in Japan.”* On one hand, there is merit to this viewpoint. Most Japanese people conduct their business and social lives without ever having to speak a word of English. Besides that, the foreign population (the majority of which is Chinese and Korean) is still under 2% of the whole. International business can be either delegated to the few who speak English, or assisted by professional interpreters. However, this attitude towards English may not always be the norm—especially in light of the Ministry of Education's endeavors to increase the number of “Super Global Schools” (which will ideally enable more Japanese people to play active roles in the world, presumably in English). It may take years or even generations to see a marked difference in the overall attitude towards English in Japan. However, should English become a greater part of the Japanese identity, communication may *stylistically* come to resemble Japanese, while *linguistically* patterning itself after western norms of communicating in English. In other words, Japanese English may follow the grammatical rules of western English, but use a more roundabout way of expressing opinions, such as leaving the onus on the listener to understand the speaker's feelings. It will be interesting to see how perceptions of the importance of English evolve in Japan, and how those involved in language education adapt to the newly evolving practices in English use. I am also interested to see how learners develop communication practices that sit somewhere on the spectrum between traditional western and traditional Japanese communication styles.

Reading Satchie's article, reflecting on it, and writing this reader response have helped me to recognize the importance (and responsibility I have) of better understanding my students' worldviews, cultures, experiences, and perceived future needs, and to better meet my students in their contexts of use. As a result, I am trying new ways of making open-ended communication activities meaningful for my students, and I also hope to integrate some of these ideas into the overall structure of my debate class in the coming months.