ON TEACHING AND LEARNING CULTURE IN JAPAN: THE CASE OF ENGLISH

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Introduction

Communicating one's real intentions, thoughts, and feelings can be difficult and one can be misunderstood even when the interaction takes place between native speakers of the same language. Learners of a foreign language have the extra burden of trying to understand a culture or cultures that are different from their own. Obviously, all cultures share certain basic ideas, such as politeness, but they may express them in different ways both in behaviour and linguistically. If students are not aware of these differences, they might simply act according to their own cultural rules, merely substituting the words they would use with literal translations. That is why students need to develop not only linguistic but cultural competence in foreign language classes because neither a language nor a culture can be understood on its own.

The aim of this paper is to give an overview of the official goals as stated by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and the actual practices of English teachers in Japan with special regard to the cultural content. After a brief clarification of the term culture, and a summary of the goals set by MEXT, the use and choice of textbooks will be discussed at secondary and tertiary levels. The testing of English and the attitudes towards language learning will be focused on next. Some insights about the cultural content of high school textbooks and university courses will be followed by suggestions about utilizing missed opportunities.

1. What should be taught as culture?

Teachers have very different views about what should be taught in the language classroom as culture. According to the **Encyclopædia Britannica** *culture* is "behaviour peculiar to Homo sapiens, together with material objects used as an integral part of this behaviour. Thus, culture includes language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, and ceremonies, among other elements." (2009). No language teacher has an adequate knowledge of all of these areas, and even if they did, it would be a vain attempt to try to pass on all that knowledge in regular language classes.

Over the years, culture has been defined in many different ways. Although the definition above may be very comprehensive as it stands, it is not very useful for classroom teachers. A bi-fold view of culture is probably easier to work with in our case: *Culture*, with a capital c refers to literature, history, politics, arts and sciences; and *culture* with a small c refers to a more practical type of knowledge that can enable students to actually function in a foreign country, and includes behaviour related to everyday life (Adaskou et al., 1990; Kramsch, 1991). Language learners were traditionally only taught about *Culture*. However, because today's world has shrunk to a size where people can meet other people from many different backgrounds either physically or through the means of Internet, telephone, etc., language learners in general need even more information about *culture* than before. Byram (1989), Kramsch (1993), and Zarate (1986) were among the first researchers to draw attention to these new needs.

According to the goals of MEXT, students should get to know about other cultures and be able to express their own ideas. This means that students should learn not only about the target language culture but they should also acquire the vocabulary necessary to talk about their own culture covering both aspects as described above. In order to give a clear example for the need to teach such vocabulary, the reader of the present paper is invited to name as many objects as possible in the photograph below (Figure 1.) in their mother tongue (only if other than Japanese).



Figure 1 : Objects difficult to name in languages other than Japanese

Obviously, there are many ideas and objects in any language that have no equivalents in other languages. Students should be made aware of this, and they should also learn adequate strategies to get around this problem. Saying this does not mean, however, that teachers should focus on cultural differences all the time.

In fact, it would be desirable to do just the opposite, to show students that seemingly different things might be very similar in many ways if one looked at them carefully, or analysed them from different perspectives. Such an approach would probably nurture patience and acceptance of differences not only in other cultures but also in other members of the students' culture.

Understanding present day culture is a very difficult task sometimes even for native speakers of a language. One reason is that no culture is homogenous, there are numerous sub-cultures, and sometimes words and expressions find their way from a sub-culture into the general lexicon. Also, it can be very demanding to keep up with the pace with which cultures are changing nowadays. By the time one can understand and remember a new expression, it might already be out of fashion. Students should be made aware of the fact that culture changes. After leaving school, students should be able to rely more on the strategies they learnt at school than the facts, as the facts might not be correct any more. For language learners, it is a very important skill to be able to tell whether they do not understand something because they lack the cultural knowledge or because of their limited linguistic skills. In the case of English, the situation is further complicated by the great cultural differences in English-speaking countries.

2. The official goals of teaching English in Japan

Until recently, the general pattern of compulsory English studies in Japan comprised 3 years of English in junior high school (grades 7-9) and 3 years in high school (grades 10-12) followed by only one or two years at university level unless one was majoring in English. According to the home page of MEXT, the teaching of English at the lower secondary level aims "To develop students' basic practical communication abilities such as listening and speaking, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages." (MEXT, 2003b). The goals of English teaching at the upper secondary level are basically the same, but more specific examples, such as "understanding information and the speaker's or writer's intentions, and expressing their own ideas" (ibid), are given. The goal for English teaching at university level is that students should be able to use English in their work after graduation (MEXT, 2003a).

3. Textbooks

Below tertiary level, the use of school textbooks is required, and all of them have to be authorized by MEXT. Each local education board can choose from a range of textbooks for each subject authorized by MEXT, and only the chosen textbook can be used by schools under the supervision of the local education board, thus leaving the teacher with no freedom of choice. However, teachers can supplement the textbook with materials chosen according to certain guidelines, some of which are emphasized by MEXT. Two of them emphasize cultural aspects and international understanding (MEXT, 2003b).

At university level, university policies vary considerably. Some teachers might even be entirely free to decide whether at all to use a textbook or not. Other universities may require English teachers to come to a consensus and choose textbooks for each course, which all the teachers will use for the course. In extreme cases, a university gives teachers absolutely no choice, forcing them not only to use set textbooks but also to follow an exact schedule where they are to teach a certain unit on a certain day.

4. "Examination hell"

Although the official goals of MEXT emphasize communication and the understanding of language and culture, with Japan being the land of examinations, it seems very unlikely that such goals could be reached without a considerable change in the way people think about learning languages, and in consequence in the way English is taught in Japan. In current Japanese society, with very few exceptions, people's thoughts and expectations revolve around tests. Parents want their children to do well in tests, and expect teachers not to waste precious class time on anything else but preparing their children well for them. However, passing an exam, or even having relatively high scores, does not mean that one can communicate successfully in a foreign language. One of the reasons for this is that school exams are typically written tests, mostly multiple-choice tests. Teachers who want to be called "good teachers" have no choice but to attempt to fulfil parents', students' and superiors' expectations and produce good test results. This will probably mean more drills, more rote learning, and more focus on the skills needed for passing tests.

In his paper, John Shillaw (2004) gives a very insightful overview of assessment in Japan. Over a period of about 10 years, he had many discussions with in-service junior and senior high school teachers and reveals that although listening tests are more and more common, speaking tests, in spite of the stated communicative goals of education, are rare for three reasons: the first reason is the lack of time for such tests in large classes. Also, according to Shillaw (2004: 267), "many teachers are not comfortable evaluating students' skills because they are not confident of their own oral ability, and thirdly, few teachers feel they have been adequately trained to conduct tests of speaking ability". One can easily understand the first reason but the second one may be surprising for many non-native English teachers in other countries. Yet another surprise was to see that in order to improve the quality of teaching, MEXT made the following goal public: "Almost all English teachers will acquire English skills … and the teaching ability to be able to conduct classes to cultivate communication abilities through the repetition of activities making using [sic] of English." (2003a). This announcement implies that MEXT has been aware of the fact that the training of English teachers has not been completely successful from a linguistic point of view. Some teachers in other countries as well may feel the same way about the inadequate training for teachers to conduct oral tests.

The result of the focus on written tests is that when finishing high school, students already know a good number of words and many grammar rules that enable them to be successful at the exams, but most of them lack the ability to use what they have learnt for communicative purposes in the spoken, and to a lesser extent, in the

written form. Normally, the atmosphere, the ease and the level of communication between non-Japanese teachers and their students can serve as good indicators of the English level of the students. In the first year of university, if classes are divided according to written test results, we would expect a clear difference in spoken proficiency between the top and the bottom class; in practice, one often cannot tell the difference.

One might think that, finally, at university level, students and teachers are free of the "exam pressure", but this is not completely so. English, or more exactly English test results, are one of the means to select people in various situations. For example, quite a few companies require certain English test results to take on new staff and for promotion even if the job does not involve the use of English. Therefore, most Japanese learners can never really escape from the threat of having to do various tests. The most widely used test for such purposes is the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). Some students have the foresight to take the TOEIC test in time, so that they are able to apply to study abroad or take special courses at the university, having proved their knowledge by getting a high TOEIC score, they can eventually get a good job. However, the large majority of students consider studying English a nuisance and their sole goal is to get the credits using as little of their energy as possible, and then put English classes behind them as fast as possible.

Testing is very important as a measure of what has been achieved and as an indicator of whether the methods and materials used for teaching have been effective or not. However, if the tests are not designed to measure the skills and knowledge that was aimed at, there is a mismatch. In addition, tests will have a very negative backwash effect on teaching, as teaching methods and materials will be "adjusted" to the tests, ignoring the original goals. Most tests are typically multiple-choice tests. Some may contain translation sections and a listening component, but speaking is very rarely part of any exam. The use of "ungrammatical" spoken forms in a test is out of the question. Although most schools teach American English, university entrance exams especially have to be "neutral" in the sense that all questions should have just one correct answer in any variety of English. Because of the stakes, entrance exams are really scrutinized and criticized, because any ambiguity or contestable point could cause huge problems for the test-makers.

Obviously, for practical reasons, it is not the goals of MEXT but the immediate needs of the individuals – to pass tests successfully – that define what students want to learn, and in consequence, what "good" teachers are expected to teach. The teachers are evaluated on the basis of their students' success, that is to say their students' test results, even if MEXT has different overall goals.

Even if we look beyond university, as only a relatively small number of jobs require English, students will be able to do their jobs with a complete absence of any knowledge of a foreign language, so most students lack a real, intrinsic goal. Although many students will have to take an employment examination after graduation, very often containing an English component, basically, after getting their credits, they are generally not motivated to learn languages. Considering all these factors, this situation seems to be a good candidate for being called TENOR,

an acronym created from **T**eaching **E**nglish for **N**o **O**bvious **R**eason by Péter Medgyes (1986: 108).

5. Cultural content in textbooks

Several studies examined the cultural content of textbooks in the past, such as Kitao (1979, 1988) and Iwata et al. (2001). A recent study, carried out by Yasue Oguro for her Ph.D. dissertation, which was submitted in 2008, not only provides academic analysis of the cultural content of reading textbooks authorized by MEXT, but also a personal account of her English studies in Japan (pp. 3-7). When she arrived in the United States she was often misunderstood and at times she "questioned [her] ten-year education in English in Japan." Later she added what she saw as one of the problems with her English studies in Japan: "… when we studied English with written materials, we translated. We did not read to learn from the text; we did not read to use the information later in life" (p. 2). In fact, when teachers ask students to read a text and they ask about its content afterwards, students often give the answer: "I was only asked to read!" Which really means: "I was not told to understand it or remember its content."

Oguro's analysis of the 14 reading textbooks in use at the time of her study focused on how culture was presented, if at all, in the reading textbooks for high schools. As culture presents itself through authentic materials, she examined whether the textbooks contained authentic or "tailored for textbooks" material, and she also analyzed pre-reading and post-reading activities. Her conclusion about reading passages was that "culture in the original passages had been eliminated mostly through the editing processes of simplification, alteration, and elaboration" (p.74), and her overall judgment was that it was not possible to achieve the goals set by MEXT with the help of these textbooks.

At university level, when teachers have the liberty to choose their own teaching materials, it depends completely on the individual teacher how much, and what kind of cultural content, will be taught in class. There are many textbooks published both by Japanese and foreign EFL publishers that focus mainly either on British or American cultural content. Sometimes, certain issues are presented in a more international setting, and several textbooks on the market aim to help students talk about their own (Japanese) culture, as well as issues currently discussed in Japanese society. An English language teachers' meeting that was held in April, 2009 in Hiroshima City, concerning the teaching of culture in English classes is worth mentioning here. More than 50 teachers listened to the panel discussion where four teachers from three local universities talked about what they taught as *culture* and *Culture* in their courses and how. The high attendance rate showed that teaching culture was an important issue for Japanese and foreign language teachers in general. The four panelists' completely different approaches to teaching culture proved that individual teachers often set up their courses based on their personal beliefs about the students' needs, and unavoidably also based on the teachers' own experiences, expertise and interests.

6. Missed opportunities

Before coming to Japan, many foreigners believe that almost everybody can speak English in Japan. Within the first few hours of their stay they realize that that is just a myth. If university graduates could really use their English in their jobs, tourists would have no problems with communication in any hotel in Japan, which is not the case.

Many researchers have pointed out that there are serious problems with English education in Japan and consequently with its results. Neustupný and Tanaka (2004) partly blame foreigners living in Japan for not assisting the Japanese in their attempt to learn English by, for example, creating English-speaking support groups. They allege the lack of these groups creates a negative attitude towards speaking English. Although there might be some truth in this, the authors seem to have overlooked two other possibilities that are not presently used to their full potentials. *Returnee* Japanese students who have lived and studied abroad for a number of years, and English-speaking foreign children living in Japan with their families, or children who have one parent of non-Japanese origin could be helpfully involved in English activities to increase the opportunities for Japanese students and teachers to use English in a communicative way. These children could be of enormous help to the English teacher, both as a source of information and also as teaching assistants in the class. However, many teachers feel threatened by their presence and try to avoid contact with them. In addition, when attending regular Japanese schools, many of these children get bullied partly because *they are different*, and sometimes also because they can speak English. Miyamoto (1995) recounts his conversation with three mothers who told him that returnees had to speak English badly if they did not want to be picked on by other children. Then he adds: “I was further taken aback to hear that the children’s teachers often took the lead in such bullying.” (p. 142).

Conclusion

The most important factor in any learning situation is motivation. If it is intrinsic, coming from the individual who actively *wants* to achieve a goal, or simply enjoys the activity of learning, then learning will take place. Japan is not the only country where the students’ goal is just to pass the exam whereas the educational authorities’ aims are much higher, wanting citizens to be able to use languages in their jobs. Even now, the average Japanese has relatively little contact with other nations. As a result, raising the cultural awareness of young people with the help of language education is a very important goal set by MEXT. However, it seems that the materials and the testing system approved by the same authorities are not helping. One might wonder if they are not actually working against achieving the goals set by the authorities. We are of the view that probably, without radical changes in teacher training and in teachers’ mentality, teaching and testing practices, English education in Japan may have difficulty changing much in the future.

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