Inter-Cultural Competence and EFL: Context and Concepts

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I. Scope of This Paper

The first part of this paper will concern itself with defining some linguistic concepts relevant to English language teaching in Japan; especially with the teaching of cultural competence, along with the usual aim of helping language students develop linguistic competence. The concepts of cultural and linguistic competence, and how they differ, will aid in understanding the problems that the Japanese students and teachers face in the classroom environment. This paper will restrict itself to the teaching of EFL in Japan, but also, unless otherwise stated, it will concentrate on secondary education. Finally, some suggestions and techniques for teaching culture will be noted; these techniques tend to bring out the cultural background of the language rather than focusing on the linguistic elements of communicative competence, though these elements are always present.

The aim of this paper is not to find fault with the present Japanese system of education; rather it is intended to help heighten the awarness of the need for a sensible understanding of cultures where English is spoken as a first language. Recent critics have noted the "linguistic imperialism" in EFL teaching, but we have neither the time or inclination to go into these concepts here. It is enough to note that when one studies a language, one also studies the culture of which the language is but an expression. Whether this is imperialism or not is a moot point; the reality is that one cannot be had without the other.

It is our belief that students of EFL in Japan find foreign cultures, whether they be English-speaking or not, to be one of the motivating forces behind studying the language. Of course, many students are interested in English, particularily the American variety, as students the world over are. America as a cultural and linguistic force has simply replaced the earlier dominance of the British and the French languages.

In an EFL setting, one of the prime motivators for the student is an interest in the culture of the language. Our hope is that this paper will contribute to an understanding of why and how EFL is different from and similar to language study in other parts of the world so that the quality of language teaching in

this country can be further improved.

II. Context and Concepts

Two very basic concepts in the field of language learning and teaching that must be understood before we go any further concern the difference between EFL and ESL. Too little attention has been paid to the very real disparity between second and foreign language learning in the past. There are various explanations of the two but the definition given by Brown (1980) is widely accepted. We will quote at length:

> In considering the relationship between second language learning and second culture learning, it is important to consider several different language learning contexts. (1) One context is technically referred to as the learning of a second language, or learning a language either (a) within the culture of that second language (for example, an Arabic speaker learning English in the United States) or (b) within one's own native culture where the second language is an accepted lingua franca used for education, government or business within the country (for example, learning English in the Philippines or India). (2) Another context for learning another language is technically called foreign language learning—that is, learning a non-native language in one's own culture with few immediate and widesperead opportunities to use the language within the environment of one's own culture (for example, learning French or German in the United States).
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> Generally, however the foreign language situation is more culturally loaded than second language learning in the native culture (1b), since the language is almost always learned in a context of understanding the people of another culture. Foreign language curricula commonly attempt to deal with the cultural connotations of the foreign language.[1)]

Brown recognizes that most EFL programs emphasize the teaching of culture. He sees the necessity of including and interpreting the target culture for students who are trying to understand the total reality of the language and culture. Further, Brown sees culture as an integral part of the interaction between language and thought (1980; 141). He also recognizes that learning another language means learning another culture (1980; 129).

The foreign teacher in Japan, or the Japanese teacher of English, is at an immediate disadvantage because the culture is so far removed from the learning

situation. Aspects of the foreign culture must be carefully introduced in the class through the use of modern learning aids such as video programs that portray the culture in a realistic light; dialogs that are authentic, not only linguistically, but also sociolinguistically; and realia of various sorts that reveal the contemporary culture and its values. Many teachers in this country tend to forget or overlook the cultural dimension in favor of the linguistic because of the influence of the entrance examinations. Teaching culture becomes of secondary importance so that by the time young Japanese reach college, they are good at translation and some can even speak and understand, but their knowledege of the cultural aspects of the language is woefully inadequate.

These two factors, the importance of the entrance examination and a culturally impoverished environment operate against the learning of another culture in this country. There may be other factors that we have not noted here, but these seem to be the most pervasive. In college, students are freer to study the culture and the language so that they can form a better understanding of both.

Materials that are inherently interesting and amusing (without exaggerating or distorting the content for the sake of theater) are of the most use in Japan. However, this selection of materials becomes somewhat of a problem, as we will note later, because all materials that are produced are targeted for a specific audience, therefore many ESL materials are of no relevance to the students of English in Japan.

III. Cultural Competence and Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is a very popular concept among language teachers today. Sandra Savignon (1983) has defined the elements of communicative competence as being: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence.

A brief explanation of these concepts will help the reader understand the wider concept of cultural competence. Grammatical competence is linguistic competence. The ability to use a language in a well-formed way has been the focus of language study for centuries. Sociolinguistic competence concerns the knowledge of the social rules of language use. Hymes (1971) sees it as the appropriateness with which one uses the language. It requires a knowledge of the roles of the participants in a conversation, the information that they share, and the function of the interaction. Discourse competence is concerned with the relationship between a series of sentences so that they form a meaningful whole. Strategic competence is a knowledge of the techniques used in conversation to deal with

problems that arise such as imperfect knowledge of rules; examples of these strategies would be circumlocution, hesitation, guessing, and avoidance.

In contrast to communicative competence, and as a addition to it, Krasnick (1983) has proposed the concept of "intercultural interactional competence" (1983; 218). Krasnick defines this as:

> ....a need for a broad concept of intercultural interactional competence, including knowledge of basic values and norms; verbal and nonverbal interactional competence in using English in intercultural communication; competence in creating and interpreting linguistic aspects of social reality.[2)]

This rather vague definition of cultural competence may appear to be quite similar to the one given for communicative competence, and while it is true that they share many of the same ideas, cultural competence appears to operate between cultures, while communicative competence seems to be all one way. What can be assumed from this is that in cross-cultural interaction there is an exchange and ideally there should be a more balanced exchange of cultural knowledge and awareness. For example, when an American speaks English with a Japanese each partner in the conversation should have some knowledge and sensitivity of the culture of the other—though the medium of communication belongs to only one culture.

The above concept is too complex to go into here and we have included it because we feel that a heightened awareness of the difference between communicative competence and cultural competence will help all language learners in their respective studies.

We would like now to return to the EFL and ESL learners and further note some of the problems that the EFL learner faces in Japan. We mentioned that the ESL learner has a distinct advantage over the EFL learner when it comes to acquiring communicative competence.

Christina Bratt Paulston notes:

> It should be clear then, that the implication for language teaching that we can draw from the notions of communicative competence apply primarily to situtations where the learners live in the country of the target language, whether they are second language students or foreign language students.[3)]

The above quote shows that EFL learners may not even be able to become communicatively competent. It may be necessary for the student to go and live in the country where the language is spoken in order to really acquire the language. This does not mean that we should give up on the Japanese EFL student. It means quite the opposite. Cultural input for Japanese learners should be increased. This may put more responsibility on those who teach English in Japan. This will be a special problem for teachers below the university level, who already have enough to do. The average high school teacher faces classes of forty-five students, and has the responsibility to prepare them for the entrance examination. How can the average teacher be expected to include generous amounts of culture in the classroom? One solution would be to reduce the size of classes. There are enough qualified teachers in this country so that most schools can hire more teachers, thus reducing the burden on those already in place.

IV. Motivation

It may be useful at this point to note the importance of motivation in the learning process. Again, we must turn to Brown for a definition of the two general types of motivation and how they relate to the learning process. Gardner and Lambert (1972) identified these two types in a study done in the U.S. and Canada. Brown notes:

> Instrumental motivation refers to the motivation to learn a language as a means for attaining instrumental goals: furthering a career, reading technical material, translation, and so forth. An integrative motive is employed when a learner wishes to integrate himself within the culture of the second language group, to identify himself with and become a part of that society.[4]

In Japan, the businessman would serve as a good example of someone with primarily instrumental motivation; in some cases, college students possess the second type, but it is, of course, not properly integrative motivation since there is no desire or opportunity to become a part of a foreign culture in an EFL learning situation. EFL students here have an interest in and a liking for the target culture.

In the high school and college classroom the teacher should try to create a second culture for the students—or at least aim at this ideal. This atmosphere is conducive to a relaxed attitude toward the new language and culture.

It should be noted that a cultural atmosphere in the language class is primarily a backdrop to communicative goals. As Savignon notes, "....the inclusion of culture should always be valued in its own right. It should never be viewed as a way to 'motivate' learners, that is, to coax or prod them into the acceptance of linguistic goals." (1983; 113).

V. Materials

Many teachers in this country, especially foreign teachers, favor texts printed in English-speaking countries. The problem with many of these texts is that they are meant for the ESL student and not the EFL student of English. This is a minor problem in some cases, but is serious in others, especially if the teacher is untrained or inexperienced. Since many teachers use the text as a syllabus, this reliance on texts meant for ESL students can become a serious problem to acquisition and understanding. Many of the language items in books like this do not address the specific needs and interests of the Japanese students. To illustrate, an ESL text designed for native seakers of Spanish may work very well in New York City, but will have little relevance here—other than the fact that it is meant for non-native speakers of English. Suppose we have a dialog between Jose and Maria about their landlord. Perhaps they are talking about the lack of hot water in the building or the rent. The topic of conversation may be anything that a textbook writer in America feels is relevant to the lives of people like Jose and Maria. The point is that it is not culturally relevant to someone who is trying to learn how the "typical" native speaker thinks and behaves. This is not to belittle the importance Spanish-Americans have in modern American society; I merely wish to emphasize that this is not ideal EFL learning material.

Other texts may be problematic in that they present information that is both linguistically and culturally misleading. For example, some dialogs accurately reflect what most natives would say and do in a given situation, while others do not. From a situational and cultural standpoint, dialogs can be natural and current in content or they can be misleading and dated. In some cases they present an idealized picture of the culture, not the reality. Many dialog writers do this in order to present their culture in a favorable light. Fowles (1972; 155) notes that they often "present a picture of the American household which resembles that of a family in a TV situation comedy. If we work with the dialogs, the postman is the platonic image of the public servant, the waiter a paragon of servility."

It should be clear to the teacher that whatever type of material is used in

the classroom it should be as authentic as possible. To provide students with input which is misleading or inaccurate is to practice a type of cultural fraud.

VI. The Active Classroom

If it is admitted that the EFL situation obtains to Japan and the environment is input-poor, then the time spent in the classroom becomes of increased importance. Students must be able to get the most from their English classes—this means chances to speak and listen—to become involved in an active way in class activities. As noted earlier, one major problem here is the size of classes—forty or more students in many cases. Reducing class size is one solution, but where this is not possible, activities have to be designed that allow maximum participation for the maximum number of students. Activities will be suggested later in this paper that address this problem.

Learning styles differ in each country. Americans do not study and learn the same way that Japanese do. This becomes a major factor when many of the so-called "new methods" are tried in Japan. These methods were devised for western class environments and must be modified or discarded. We are speaking specifically of TPR, Suggestopaedia, Counseling-Learning, and the Silent Way. To our mind Suggestopaedia is completely unsuitable, while TPR is quite useful at a beginning level in Japan. We do not wish to comment here on the other two. A quote from Jack Richards will help clarify.

> Education in different countries reflects culturally specific traditions of teaching and learning that may substantially shape the form and content of much school learning. This could be reflected in how the teachers' status and functions are viewed (i.e., transmitter of knowledge, counselor or helper), influence the dynamics of classroom interaction, and ultimately affect the amount of teacher talk versus pupil talk that characterizes classrooms. In some cultures students are encouraged to express opinion and disagreement, to display knowledge and verbal skills before peers and teachers. In others, a passive nonverbal mode is considered more normal. Learning styles may also reflect cultural traits. Rote memorization, for example, is a favored learning style in some Asian cultures but is not valued in many Western countries.[5)]

The passivity of many Japanese English students is often frustrating to the foreign professional who may be used to active and verbal students in the classroom. Foreign teachers should keep this in mind and once the ground rules for

a class are set and value is put on verbalization, Japanese students can, and do, become quite talkative if given interesting and motivating material along with a supportive classroom environment. A final note—Richards (1985; 14) points out that active class participation "may involve face-threatening behavior for teachers in some cultures, since they involve both teachers and learners in non-traditional roles."

VII. Activities

We would like to note some activities that will aid the teacher in helping students to become more active in class and therefore become more open to learning language and culture. It should be remembered that the narrow linguistic concerns of the past can now be expanded to include more elements of culture. As Krasnick points out, "with an appropriate cultural orientation, most learning activities can take on a cultural dimension or aspect." (1983; 217). Some activities would include role-playing, socio-drama, newspapers, values clarification exercises, videos, cartoons, and problem-solving activities.

It goes without saying that not all activities that seem to include a cultural element really do. On the surface, problem-solving activities appear to offer a source of cultural input, but Paulston cautions:

> Problem-solving interaction activities are excellent for developing linguistic competence, but unless the teacher consciously sums up the discussion with comment on the relative acceptability in our culture of the alternative solutions, these activities may confirm cultural bias.[6]

This type of activity can be used to help students understand culture but the teacher has to be specifically aware of what must be done. In other words, the teacher must be trained and aware.

Values clarification exercises are similar to problem-solving activities in that they must be given a cultural orientation not found in the exercise itself. Green (1975; 156) feels that values clarification exercises help us to understand ourselves and others by looking at what we do as a manifestation of what we believe. In other words, we learn when we place value on the thing to be learned.

Therefore, the materials chosen are extremely important. The teacher must also possess certain personality characteristics such as a willingness to listen, the ability to accept opinions that differ from his or her own, and an inclination to examine self-values in an honest manner. Green observes:

> As I see it, the qualities of a class in which values clarification is stressed are also the qualities that will foster enthusiasm for the subject matter and better communication among students and between the students and the teacher. These two criteria seem to me to be basic to motivating a student to learn a foreign language.[7]

A fairly well-known values clarification exercise (sometimes known as "Crocodile River") concerns the story, which is told by the teacher to the class, of a young boy and girl who are in love but are seperated by a river full of crocodiles. The names of the characters can be chosen at random, but the students should understand the attitudes of each. On the girls' side of the river are three men. Each has a boat, so she appeals to each of them in turn to take her across the river. The first man refuses because she has never done anything for him. The second man wants money—of which she has none. The third man wants sex. After much agonizing, she agrees to do what the third man wants, and the next day he takes her across. She and her boyfriend are reunited and plan to get married. Before the marriage her conscience begins to bother her and she cannot decide whether to tell her boyfriend the truth or not. She finally decides to be honest with him and he rejects her because she has been unfaithful.

The students are asked to value the characters in rank order from the person they value most to the one they value least. They are also asked to give reasons for their choices. It is best if Japanese students are put into groups of from three to five and told to agree on their answer. It is important to make it clear that there is no "right" or "wrong" answer. All people hold different values for different reasons. The teacher should also avoid stereotyping his or her culture (if foreign) by making any pronouncements on the story, characters or opinions of the students. A careful follow-up processing discussion afterwards will allow the students insights into themselves, their culture and the target culture.

Robin Scarcella feels an activity called socio-drama has high student appeal and "creates a comfortable atmosphere which promotes cross-cultural understanding." (1978; 48). Socio-drama is a type of role play but is more student-centered, presenting the students with a social problem to solve themselves. Through socio-drama "students become aware of discourse in relation to social expectations, formulas of politeness, social attitudes and appropriateness of response to a cultural situation." (1978; 44). Scarcella stresses the importance of the presence of a native to serve as a model.

The students are presented with an open-ended story that contains one clear,

easily understandable conflict which relates to the students. It is different from situational role play in that, since it is student-centered, the students define their own roles and who will play them and there are several enactments where they amend or change certain parts. Socio-drama also involves a series of definite steps. They are: 1) Warm-up. The topic is introduced in a relaxed atmosphere. 2) Presentation of new vocabulary. 3) Presentation of dilemma. The story should stop at the dilemma point and the students are asked to focus on this. 4) Discussion of situation and selection of roles. 5) Audience preparation. Students who are not directly participating become the audience and are asked to perform certain tasks. For example, they may be asked to determine why the conflict is not being solved and to give suggestions. 6) Enactment. The players are asked to enact their solution to the conflict. 7) Discussion of situation and selection of new players. 8) Re-enactment. 9) Summary. 10) Follow-up. This may involve activities like writing or discussion. (Scarcella 1978; 42-3).

Cartoons appeal to younger learners of course, but can also be used with more mature students. Fowles (1972; 156-7) recommends the use of cartoons from newspapers because they provide a direct access to contemporary culture and are interesting for their authentic nature. He feels that the class should focus on three questions when it is considering the cultural meaning of a cartoon: 1) What is the factual meaning? 2) What is the incongruity that would make an American laugh? 3) What is the cultural anxiety behind the cartoon which is mitigated by the laughter? (1972; 157).

Situational role-playing is and has been popular for a long time. It is excellent in communicating culture in that it "provides a sensitizing situation in which the students work as a group." (Donahue and Parsons 1982; 311). The above authors also recognize that it helps in "understanding and using appropriate verbal messages in specific sociolinguistic situations." (1982; 364).

With the advent of advanced learning systems that provide more culturally-rich learning experiences, the value of culturally-based learning materials will increase. The VTR is appealing because it literally gives the learner a "picture" of the target culture. The attractiveness of movies and LL programs with everyday settings are probably most popular at this particular moment. Learning machines in the future will provide fully interactive experiences for the student and contain dimensions that are but a dream today.

For the time being, in the EFL situation in Japan, the teacher in the classroom has a responsibility to give the students a learning experience that is not merely restricted to the code of the language, but goes beyond it to the richer and more meaningful dimension of culture. With an increased emphasis on cul-

ture, not only will learning become more effective but the students will come to better understand the world outside Japan.

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