Socio-cultural barriers to communicative competence for Japanese learners of English

日本人学習者のコミュニケーション能力の発達

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抄録：コミュニケーション能力とは、言語使用能力に限ったことではなく、言語の扱い方において、いかに熟達しているかを問うものである。ハイムズ・フレイムワークによると、“認識と文化的社会要因が、コミュニケーション能力の発達に大きく影響している”と発表している。この論文では、これら二つの突出した要因が、日本人学習者の言語習得を阻んでいることを提唱し、日本人学習者とそれら要因の関係性を解説する。最後には、学習者の言語習得上の障害を解決するべく方法を提案する。

キーワード：communicative competence, socio-cultural factors, language barriers

Introduction

Knowledge of a language is more than how to speak, but how sentences are used to communicate. Knowledge of socio-cultural rules, such as when to speak, when not to, appropriate and inappropriate responses also have to be learnt along with knowledge of the grammatical rules. This aspect of appropriate usage is one of the features addressed by Hymes when proposing a framework to distinguish between knowledge ‘about’ language forms, and the ‘rules of speaking’. The description and understanding of common behavior in specific cultural settings, as Hymes recognizes, are the rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless (Hymes, 1970, cited in Johnson & Morrow, 1981:2). The features of discourse proposed by Hymes’ ‘Ethnography of speaking’ (1972) provide a framework which not only sets out his view of communicative competence, but also assessment of oral discourse. Firstly, the features most relevant to Japanese learners are explained in this paper, before being used to summarize the distinguishing characteristics of a typical foreign language communication classroom. In addition, implications for pedagogic practice and solutions to overcome anticipated problems are also presented.

Communicative competence

Recognition of communicative competence derives from Chomsky’s distinction between the underlying knowledge of a language structure (competence), from the application of that knowledge to language use (performance). However, presence of performance variables (cultural, cognitive etc.) dictates that performance rarely reflects true competence. For Hymes, Chomsky’s limited concept fails to acknowledge language use and the socio-cultural factors in a heterogeneous speech community which, Hymes argues, significantly affects performance. He distinguishes between linguistic competence and communicative competence that deals with producing and understanding sentences.
that are appropriate and acceptable to a particular situation. Thus Hymes coins a term "communicative competence" and defines it as "a knowledge of the rules for understanding and producing both the referential and social meaning of language" (Hymes, 1972).

**The classroom setting**

The classroom will not always be seen as a meeting place between students’ expectations, curricular content, and pedagogical appropriateness, due to the difference in teacher/student beliefs in regard to what is acceptable. The teacher-centered nature of the Japanese education system shapes and maintains students’ beliefs and concepts they hold in regard to the language learning process. These expectations are recognized as a potentially significant element when making the transition to the apparent "randomness" of autonomous communicative classes difficult. It can often lead to difficulty in the classroom when students are asked to perform independent, creative, autonomous activities, leading some to even question whether they should complete the speaking exercise in English or Japanese! These instances of student concern are likely to surface whenever instructional activities are inconsistent with preconceived beliefs about learning. When students become aware of this discrepancy between expectations and what is actually happening, if unfulfilled, they may result in what Linde (in Woods 1996) terms “hotspot”. These false assumptions and prejudices which underlie their attitude towards their role in learning must be addressed or “de-conditioned”.

These "mismatches" clearly illustrate that students and teachers do not share the same understanding of what compromises proper classroom behavior. Nunan (1989) concurs that:

> no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learner’s subjective needs and perception relating to the processes of learning are taken into account.

For example, the author has often observed many Japanese students writing their answers during speaking activities as they assume they will be checked by the teacher. It seems therefore imperative to address these erroneous beliefs to minimize any resistance to a new teaching approach. This recognizes that students’ knowledge and attitude are the key to language success, and involving them in the collaborative process through incorporating their cognitive and learning style preferences is an essential element. This could include being supplied with outlines of the "rules" (teacher and student) expected to narrow the expectations and facilitate learning outcomes. It is recognized that this adaptation must be explained and students will need to be sensitized to both the attitudinal and behavioral expectations required as they move from a teacher-centered system to an autonomous learning environment. While at the same time it is important that teachers are also sensitive to specific Japanese cultural traditions both inside and outside the classroom.

**The purpose of the interaction**

The function of classroom activities is for students to improve their overall speaking proficiency and acquire knowledge of language use. All discourse has a purpose even if it is only maintaining social relations, meaning that the motivation varies from one occasion to the next. Such a purpose quite frequently determines the manner in which students speak or act. Most oral communication classes at Japanese universities focus less on reading and writing tasks, with the main emphasis placed on speaking proficiency. Class activities aim for students to practice speaking English, display their knowledge of English, and to interact and solve problems using English, with the teacher’s input kept to a minimal in order to allow greater student interaction.

**The participants**

Various features related to the participants
themselves also influence oral discourse. Factors such as age, gender, relationship and social status all have the potential to influence role relationships among participants and determine the order in which participants speak, whether or not they maintain eye contact, use avoidance techniques, and turn taking. This underlying set of non-linguistic rules governs how, when and how often speech occurs varies from culture to culture. This can however produce conflicts because of cross cultural differences, for example in Japan silence may be an intentional and conventional communicative act (Salzman, 1988:23; Wardhaugh, 1998: 239). As Searles accurately points out “one can utter words without saying anything” (Searles, 1969). For university students they all share similar features so this should have a limited influence on their interaction. Conversely, interaction between a teacher and a student would be different than one between only students, especially in Japan where the authority of the teacher is particularly respected. This concept of role and proper behavior is rigid in a vertical society like Japan’s, which sometimes makes it difficult to uncover students’ true individuality and for them to see you as more than an “authority”. Teachers are accorded status and prestige and viewed as the respected “bearers of knowledge” (Stapleton 1996:14), while the students as passive, letting “the teacher’s wisdom ‘pour into’ him” (Brown 1994:17). Thus, the relationship between language use and social structures is clearly related. This raises the question of whether Japanese behave the way they do because of their language, or because their linguistic choices stem from the social structures (Wardhaugh, 1998:278).

These differences in conversation styles between cultures also dictate how a conversation will proceed. Students will still use aspects from L1 in the classroom, meaning Japanese students tend to be quiet, passive, and obedient, while on the other hand Western students appear to be more active in comparison. As a result, the group dynamics and active interaction between teachers and students seldom exist in Japanese classes. This difference in conversation styles can be compounded in Japan where students often directly translate phrases into English from Japanese that sound awkward and stilted. This would seem to support Hymes when he claimed (Hymes, 1972:277) that ethnography of speaking must describe the linguistic options open to the speech community and linguistic competence must adjust itself to the total informational input (Nunan, 1999:9).

It is recognized expectations of ‘autonomous learning’, ‘student -independence’, and ‘student-autonomy’ are learning strategies which vary from Japan’s pedagogical traditions. These Western cultural traditions render expectations of student input, independence, and cognitive processing, unrealistic as they fail to acknowledge the cognitive processing ability of Japanese students. What has been described as a "lack of predominant learning style” means that the difference in cognitive style suggests the communicative language approach favors Western students more than Japanese ones. This would suggest that it is not enough for students to simply immerse themselves in the target language and hope that acquisition takes place.

Such learning styles, viewed differently by teachers and students, illustrate that students do not learn the same way, and so to avoid frustration must be gradually taught ways to learn. Otherwise if given a choice they will choose a style of learning based on their expectations, thus negating the objective of an approach which envisages students engaged in meaningful, independent interaction. It therefore seems important for teachers to raise “awareness about the pedagogical approaches of the course”. and explain the rationale underlying the selection of tasks, as the notion of learner training demands that students be taught how to learn languages as well as being taught the language itself. This will help recognize that teaching an autonomous approach is not a simple transmission of knowledge but a collaboration as students attempt to express their own meanings for their own learning purposes.
Furthermore, to develop Japanese students’ cognitive processing it may be important at first to make the relationship between form and function transparent. An effective style could include creating a more structured but somewhat informal classroom atmosphere to ease students out of their formality. As Williams and Burton (1997) point out, it is important to present tasks which tap into, not rely on, students’ learning style. This input must provide the information necessary for identifying the elements and their combinations and applications. Although it is not suggested that students are simply provided with comprehensible input, most teachers now accept that some focus on form is necessary to optimize the second language acquisition process. This conscious raising could involve the teacher providing instruction on grammar with varying degrees of elaboration and explicitness. For example, rote-learning could play a part in second language acquisition on the grounds that it reinforces the target language, especially among lower level students. Despite concerns that it lacks the meaningfulness necessary for successful acquisition it does allow students’ progress to be assessed, as well as allow valuable confidence building. In addition, while its limitations are acknowledged it has been pointed out that learning is acquiring knowledge by study, experience or instruction, in other words, the result of reinforced practices. It is generally accepted that this type of instruction (as opposed to a more autonomous approach) speeds up the rate of language development and raises the ultimate level of attainment, seemingly justifying CLA’s claims that a “rule will not be internalized until the learner’s developing language system can accommodate it” (Nunan, 1989).

**Key**

Key is the manner in which something is said and includes “the tone, manner or spirit in which an act or event is performed” (Coulthard, 1985:48) and may differ depending on the topic, participants, and purpose of an act. The university class interactions are usually relaxed as all members are friends so they do not feel threatened. As mentioned, they were usually in groups of their own choice so they feel unthreatened as they know how to interact and what reactions to expect. These and other affective factors (self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, attitude, and motivation) can influence language learning success or failure (Oxford 1990:140). Members of all societies recognize certain communicative routes characterized by special rules of speech. For example, within the Japanese setting harmony within the group is especially valued, meaning that each person within the university group is afforded an equal chance to contribute to the conversation. During group discussions each person takes turns to give their opinion in a methodical and orderly way. This allows the participants to feel relaxed take their time to compose their own answers. This speech style has been compared to bowling in contrast to the volleyball style of western speech styles in that Japanese speakers patiently take turns while westerners react as quickly as possible.

**Channels**

This refers to the choice of method of transmission. An interaction involves not only verbal communication but also paralinguistic elements of speech such as pitch; stress and intonation. Also included are non-linguistic elements such as gestures and body language, facial expressions, which may accompany speech or convey message directly without any accompanying speech. In addition:

> There is tremendous variation cross-culturally and cross-linguistically in the specific interpretations of gestures and body language. (Brown 1994: 241)

Classroom interactions are predominantly oral and students are instructed as to how to complete the task and what type of phrases are most commonly used in an interactive discussion, i.e. what channel to use. Without such specific instruction the students would lack the initiative to instigate interaction by
themselves.

The cultural influence also plays a large part in how Japanese interact. The distinct difference from Western interaction could help to illustrate common frustrations that the students “don’t talk enough”. Another common complaint among teachers is that to overcome the shyness factor the teacher will allocate small groups that reduce the risk to the students and offer a supportive atmosphere that is conducive to developing their communicative competence. Yet despite this preparation minimal interaction may only be evident. According to Yamada (1997), this is because Japanese follow a Listener Talk approach to conversation which tends to value reticence and orderly turn taking with less inclination to dominate the conversation. This may explain students’ reluctance to utilize such speaking strategies as checking for understanding, and seeking clarification if they are unsure. With this style of interaction the onus is on the listener to understand what is being said, rather than ask for clarification. This contrasts with the type of interaction which most Western teachers dream of, with students engaged in continual interaction in what we perceive to be a normal exchange. This Speaker Talk approach includes all the strategies which we teach students to assist them with their negotiation of language learning, and so is more applicable to a Western style of communication.

Content

Hymes suggests that “content enters analysis first of all perhaps as a question of topic, and change of topic” (Hymes, 1972). In the case of Japanese students, if they are able to personally relate to a subject then they can produce interaction, however, a topic that is unrelated or abstract can often prove problematic. Years of assessment on the correctness of grammatical translations has made accuracy a large part of the students’ learning style, so rather than be encouraged to be creative and original, students are urged to memorize knowledge for examination purposes. Many of the activities that are used in communicative class have the possibility to be expanded upon and digressed from. This was something which the teacher is continually encouraging students to do. If students only adhere to the task, then their interaction can be limited and mechanical. It is well known that each language has its own rules of usage as to when, how, and to what degree a speaker may impose a given behavior on his/her conversational partner. Due to the influence or interference of their own cultural norms, it can be hard for non-native speakers to choose the forms appropriate to certain situations. If the students are able to develop and fully interact then there would be the potential for more natural and meaningful communication. The inability to initiate and continue dialogue is due to several factors including the fear of making an error, an important aspect of Japan’s form-orientated value system:

“They (Japanese students) feel that any failure is an aggression against authority…therefore any unforeseen situations which cannot be handled by rote are frightening to them.” (Wadden, 1993:189)

The form of the message

Message for and content are closely related. The message form refers to how something is said and how interpersonal factors affect the speech act, as Hymes suggests, “how something is said is part of what is said” (Hymes, 1974:5). As many Japanese students are self-conscious as they are cautious about making errors in the belief that such ‘ignorance’ would be a cause to “lose face” (Dimitrios, 2004). In classroom activities, to directly ask other members in the group their opinion could cause an uncertain situation for the other members. Many students are poor at avoidance techniques so are forced to convey their uncertainty through non-linguistic means such as silence or gestures. As a last resort the student will revert to using Japanese to show that they are uncertain of how to answer. The student who asked the question will allow this to pass as a means to avoid any further
discomfort without any attempt to explain the meaning. This can be observed as many students quickly say “change” to seek agreement to proceed to the next question.

Due to the nature of English classes, the purpose, form, key and content are easy to identify in the university classroom discourse. The purpose is often determined by the teacher and as mentioned, how the interaction will proceed can be anticipated to some extent within the Japanese classroom. This is particularly evident with turn-taking (in turns and unnatural) and linguistic elements (basic, silence, no querying or clarification). For the students to digress from the target language would be seen by them as “incorrect”, which means to some extent this type of interaction is unnatural and forced. Despite the author’s attempt to produce thought-provoking questions that would allow such expansion, the author felt that due to the immaturity of many students they had not formed any opinion and were unable to discuss such topics among themselves. The setting is also a powerful psychological factor which has a significant affect on students in a hierarchical society such as Japan.

Culture factor

Even within the classroom the situation is not only determined by cognitive and expectancy concerns, but also social and affective dimensions. Such is the strength of these dimensions that they can often determine the level of participation among students, and even render opportunities to communicate and express feelings unproductive. Consequently, rather than be a motivation to use the language, activities can result in the prominent use of L1, correctly labeled as “the most prominent difficulty students experience during a communicative lesson” (Eldridge, 1996), indicating that although the rationale for pair/group work is for students to engage in meaningful communication, the use of L1 is in conflict with these goals. This is evident even for tasks which students could easily perform in L2, yet still resulted in minimal L2 interaction. Only on several occasions did the author actually hear a student ask a fellow student to speak in English, or admonish their partner for using too much Japanese.

These powerful counteracting forces are connected with socio-cultural factors, the most relevant of which is especially prominent in a collectivist country such as Japan:

“...shyness is more prevalent... than in any other culture we surveyed. For 3 in 4, shyness is viewed as a ‘problem,’ with over 80% labeling themselves as shy... more than any other nation. The Japanese report feeling shy in virtually all social situations...” (Zimbardo, 1977)

Manifestations of this influence which can be observed in the Japanese classroom include (Wadden, 1993):

1. Students seldom initiate discussion.
2. Students generally avoid bringing up new topics.
3. Students rarely seek clarification.
4. Students are reluctant to volunteer answers.

The significance of these factors is illustrated in the following common complaint among native English teachers:

“...[students] seldom volunteer answers, a trait that many Western instructors find extremely frustrating. Most Japanese will only talk if specifically called upon, and then only if there is a clear-cut answer. This does not necessarily signify an unwillingness to comply, but may simply indicate that the student is too nervous to respond, or too uncertain of the answer to risk public embarrassment.” (Anderson in Wadden, 1993)

Minimizing Affective factors

There is a general acceptance in the literature that there are certain personality traits which have a
beneficial influence on the learning process. These language learning characteristics are:

...behavior or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, and include any set of operations used by the learner to learn and to regulate their learning. (Rubin’s, 1981)

They can lead to effective communication and include strategic competence to compensate for pragmatic failure because of certain linguistic limitations. For example, the literature (Rubin, 1981; Willis 1996b; Naiman et al. 1978) lists strategies used by good learners as including:

1. Clarification strategies
2. Monitors progress
3. Memorization
4. Guessing/deductive inference
5. Deductive reasoning
6. Practice

The rationale behind the research into the characteristics of successful language students is pedagogical in that it assumes that strategies used by good language students can be identified and taught to weaker students. Svanes (1988) points out that in combination with motivation these are the best predictors of language success. Developing these skills therefore grows out of student acceptance of responsibility for their own learning and assuming some of the initiatives that give shape and direction to the learning process, while sharing in the monitoring progress to evaluate the extent to which learning targets are achieved.

It is accepted that these skills are beneficial to students, but to be taught as a by-product of language learning seems ineffective. Moreover, the importance of these strategies requires that Japanese students be taught these before language learning so that students are fully equipped when they enter a communicative class. Since many students lack strategic knowledge about how to approach language learning it seems important to give them these and other meta-cognitive learning strategies so that features made available through teacher correction, conscious raising and, in particular, instances of negotiation of form, become optimally salient. This will allow for detection and rehearsal when student attention is stretched to the maximum.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted that some of the features from Hymes’ framework are especially prominent in a Japanese setting. The classroom is a powerful setting for Japanese students and has a significant affect over their interaction. Due to the affect of the Japanese social structure the students are aware of how to interact with other students and teachers which also has a significant affect on turn-taking, face-saving and other speech acts. With knowledge of such features and the affect they are exerting on interaction teachers will be better equipped to overcome any cultural or linguistic barriers. It could make them aware of how to instruct the students, what activities are the most affective, and how to question and interact with the students.

An understanding of these factors could help to understand the implications for how learners perform in certain situations. It will not only benefit the teacher but also students who are unaware of the various ways to interact. Many students have to be taught explicit linguistic feature which many teachers automatically assume students possess. It can therefore lead to misunderstanding when students can neither perform the acts nor the teacher understand the reason for students lack of discussion. Many foreign English teachers can struggle to adapt to the different cultural as well as linguistic aspects of the country. This framework is especially useful for teachers to be able to analyze how students will react and perform in certain situations and be aware of what factors actually affect interaction. It provides a means to not only evaluate but also predict interaction
which could enable teachers to prepare for any problems as well as make them aware of the actual nature of the problem. Any analysis which assists the understanding of the lexical and paralinguistic communication act serves a useful purpose as it allows full awareness as well as knowledge and can therefore help reduce cultural misunderstanding.

In conclusion, foreign language teachers coming to Japan have to expect the students to remain quiet because of the setting, therefore they need to employ techniques to overcome this barrier. They should also provide significant lexical items to encourage interaction as the Japanese speech style varies (turn-taking etc.). The students cannot be assumed to possess such techniques and must therefore be taught them. With the provision of such techniques teachers can more effectively target their lessons with a better prospect of success.

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