

The role of teachers as 'InterCulture Practitioners' in teaching Japanese culture

Hitomi Nakata

MA candidate

Department of Linguistics and English Language, University of Durham

Hitomi.Nakata@durham.ac.uk

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine how language teachers can incorporate culture study into their language teaching in the classroom. It has been argued that second language (L2) learning should be linked with cultural awareness of the target language, no matter what the learners' goals are. L2 learners might want to acquire language skills only - such as speaking, listening, reading and writing, for communication in study, business or for their social needs - but since 'each language has its own models of expression' (Byram 1997:52), understanding the culture through key words and phrases that are associated with it is a necessary component to language learning.

The problem, however, relates to methods of introducing and explaining cultural dimensions in the classroom curriculum. In classroom conditions which are limited in terms of time and space, there is a need for designing an appropriate syllabus and developing useful materials. A further question arises from a more basic aspect of teaching cultures. Cultural contours are not always explicit, and so people are not always aware of their national identity and consequent cultural characteristics. What can language teachers do to engender a sense of cultural identity and to raise awareness of cultural attributes?

Learners have (often unconsciously) acquired their own identities through their nationalities. Once they encounter and have a negative reaction to other cultures, how can teachers accommodate or even compromise learners' own cultural perceptions with regard to the concepts of the other culture? It is not an easy task to understand an unfamiliar culture and sometimes even *alter* one's way of seeing the world, and so it is important for the language teacher as mediator and experiencer to be aware of his or her roles; they are supposed not to be judgmental or biased towards any particular culture, and should always keep a neutral stance.

To carry out this aim of investigating the relationship between language and culture and finding answers to these pedagogical questions, I will first mention briefly the transitional notion of culture from the pre-modern period to its current interpretation in the post-modern computer age. Secondly, in order to elucidate the question of culture-clash as it is related to the job of the language teachers, my discussion will use two key terms: 'ICP' ('InterCulture Practitioner') and 'rich points', as coined by Agar in 1994 and 1991 respectively. Thirdly, the overall aspects of the significance of culture education are explored in relation to learners' general perceptions toward cultures. Finally, an example of teaching Japanese cultural expressions will be demonstrated using a set of conversational phrases that can not be directly translated in English.

2. Modern interpretation of culture and interculture

As globalisation has progressed and high mobility has been encouraged at the beginning of the 21st century, plenty of information and materials (both tangible and intangible) have been exchanged between societies and which affect our society. Even if one never steps out of one's home town or home country, one can still enjoy ample imported goods and information. Does this necessarily mean, however, that one is interculturally competent, or do cultures no longer bear any distinctive attributes?

There is enormous diversity in interpretation of the exact definition of the word *culture*. According to the anthropological and sociolinguistical points of view, it has been determined in two ways. First, Culture with a capital C. The culture of artefacts and human tradition: the fine arts, music, drama, literature, and so on. Secondly, there is culture with a small c: referring to a series of customs, traditions and 'historically transmitted patterns of meaning' (Wierzbicka 1997: 21) in which one can define one's identity according to the social norms of the group. In a community, one is expected to behave and act as a member of the group in accordance with others.

As for the first definition, it seems that all human beings can appreciate (or at least have the capacity to value and savour) the whole range of arts, irrespective of period and place of origin. For example, Japanese traditional arts are not only supported by domestic devotees but also evaluated by many international fans. In other words, as the data shows in Nakata (1997), being Japanese is not in itself requisite for the appreciation of Japanese arts. There is no strict relation between one's nationality and cultural preferences. So it is quite possible to have a community of people who appreciate a specific art whose members are drawn from all over the world.

It is argued that a similar phenomenon can be seen in the domain of culture with a small c, as it has been becoming easier to go beyond national borders as words such as 'borderless', 'international' or 'multinational' have become increasingly familiar. Especially since the mid 1990s, as the Internet has emerged and become indispensable to many people, access to and acceptance of other cultures have also become more feasible. The Internet was originally developed as a strategic network of the American military (Hatasa 2000). This government-originated strategy has become widespread as a means of communication at the individual level over the last ten years.

The emergence of the Internet (and other new technologies) in the 21st century raises the question as to whether it is still necessary for people to learn about each other's cultures in our increasingly borderless world. I would answer 'no' to this question since the phenomenon of globalisation through computer technology is a highly problematic one. It is easy for cultural friction to occur in our seemingly borderless world when people retain the illusion

that they have had prejudice-free interactions with people in different parts of the world whom they have not actually seen in person; this is not the real world but a virtual one. Information transmitted by computer is modified, filtered and culturally neutralized in order to be accepted by as many people as possible. Moreover, cultural information specific to people as individuals, such as social norms, ethical beliefs, behaviour patterns and communicative codes can not be easily read or conceived from a computer screen. In short, intangible information and interaction by way of computer are different than from actual and tangible intercultural communication.

What about e-mail? The emergence of e-mail has surpassed other tools of correspondence for the last decade or so. Its style of communication often demands an immediate response whereby the recipient has to be spontaneous without having time to reflect on the appropriate international protocol. So recipients in this situation will tend to rely on their particular strategies for sending a message, in other words those derived from their own culture. As e-mail is not expected to be very formal, there is usually no problem so long as the context is transferred as well. If one knows the difference between an 'acceptable and internationally neutral style of writing messages' and 'one-culture specific phrases or expressions', personal communications and business negotiations will be conducted all the more smoothly without causing any unnecessary misunderstanding.

It should be emphasised that intercultural education, especially in relation to language teaching, is now needed more than ever before by the current generation of the computer age; this is cultural education in the true sense of the word.

3. Culture and language in L2 teaching and learning

Learning L2 in countries where the target language is not spoken is a type of quasi-international experience in which learners encounter new lifestyles, ways of thinking, behaviour, and types of interaction represented by the language. So language teachers are responsible for explaining cultural behaviour as well as language skills: the reason why people of the target language use this or that phrase at a certain time and how. The links between language, communication and interaction should be taken into account to adjust and lead learners into this new world.

In teaching Japanese in a Western society such as the United Kingdom, it should be pointed out that there are some specific expressions in Japanese which indicate social virtues, for example 'groupism' and 'anti-individualism'. Wierzbicka (1997) chose *wa* as one of the keywords for understanding Japanese culture. *Wa* is usually translated by words such as 'harmony', 'peace' and 'unity', but none of these translations covers the full sense of the connotation, in the sense that they lack the implication of harmony within the group. The most approximate concept may be 'consensus', which connotes the emphasis on mutual understanding or setting goals for a group rather than on aiming for individual success.

This strong group orientation leads to a tendency to avoid making distinctions - in both in a good and bad sense - in Japanese society. As the Japanese saying goes, 'the nail that stands up will be pounded down'. Wierzbicka introduces some interesting examples of this confrontation-avoiding society, for example having relatively little litigation, focusing on *wa* even in a baseball team in which players are otherwise expected to compete. In Japanese society, it is quite often observed that the individual identity is realised in relation to other members of the group or community, rather than emphasising one's own opinion or individual power. In this way, this small but very specific word *wa* is sometimes used to represent the nature of the Japanese society.

It is sometimes anticipated that a student might have negative feelings or react adversely toward this kind of cultural behaviour, even if (s)he understands the meaning and can accept it intellectually as a concept. This affective problem may occur because the idea of groupism may sound awkward due to the learner's familiarity with individualism as well as other differences of perception between East and West, such as a communication strategy of using high/low context. To accommodate learners' confusion in understanding the unfamiliar culture and to be able to explain reasons behind the social phenomena, teachers of the language are expected to have an experience of two languages (learners' L1 and L2) together with their cultures, and to understand the cognitive/affective problems. It is important to explain the gap between learners' L1-culture (e.g. English) and L2-culture (e.g. Japanese) in a rational way, not showing the teachers' preference for a biased personal point of view.

In this sense, the new profession of ICP, InterCultural Practitioner, as invented by Agar (1994), can be applied to the role of language teachers. The idea was originally used with reference to mediators employed by an American and Mexican joint-venture program to solve cultural problems in the two participating countries. The role of ICP is 'to find the locations in discourse where the differences occur and make the frame that explain the differences explicit' (ibid.: 227). That is, the ICP is in charge of trouble shooting whenever cultural problems or misunderstandings occur between different parties and so to facilitate a mutual understanding. The responsibilities may involve the role of reconciling A to B, pacifying emotionally agitated people, or even counselling. According to Agar, ICP may not be able to solve the fundamental problem, but at least their rational explanations can be helpful.

This concept immediately leads to the image of L2 teachers whose work includes explanation of new and unfamiliar cultures to learners. Furthermore, this association of language teacher as ICP can be developed into Agar's other concept, of 'rich points' (1991), and to Wierzbicka's analysis of untranslatable concepts and 'keywords' (1997). The ideas of 'rich points' and 'keywords' refer to some vocabulary of a language, which encapsulate untranslatable specific notions. In Agar's article (ibid.), he describes the idea by using the analogy of climbing mountains. Among other hard points of valleys and trails, the hardest point of the Whorfian cliffs (from the concept of the so called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis¹) requires learners to experience a range of associations and situations to understand the meaning of words and phrases. Rich points are therefore conceived, as Agar describes, '... with the connotations of tasty, thick, and wealthy all intended' (ibid.:176). Because the connotation is so dense (in another word, rich) it allows even native speakers disagreement over what they mean. Needless to say, L2 learners find it very problematic and difficult when they want to analyse the real meaning.

4. What is the role of L2 teachers as ICP?

To the extent that translation is an activity based on human language, it should always be possible to decode and interpret one's own language in terms of another. In this sense, to make learners more aware of certain words and phrases in L2, it is not 'anathema' (Byram 1997: 51) to use learners' L1 to clarify the cultural meanings underlying the surface. The most important thing, especially for beginners, is to avoid prejudicial or negative remarks towards the target culture. The teacher's attitude should be neutral, flexible and sensitive toward all and any cultures that come into the discussion. This is because these factors

¹ '... the structure of our language in large measure determines the way we perceive the world' (Trask 1999: 170).

(neutralism, flexibility and sensitivity) toward the target culture reflect on learners' attitudes even when the culture is the teacher's own.

The fact that L2 learners determine to learn the language implies that they at least have had some positive image of the target language and culture. They will most probably (and maybe unconsciously) build up their (positive) attitudes while learning the language in their effort to understand this foreign and unfamiliar, yet exciting new culture. Thus, language teachers have a responsibility to reinforce learners' initial motivation to learn the language and culture, develop cultural awareness and clarify questions over the differences between the new culture and their own.

The role of teachers, therefore, is first to analyse a culture, its concepts and keywords, and then to introduce and explain them to learners by way of paraphrase or presenting the affective behaviour within a situation-oriented approach, and finally to step back and let learners discover and interpret the meanings for themselves. (It is at this point that learners may show their positive or negative feelings.) Teachers are now in a position to observe the extent of learners' understanding and agreement, and so may lead learners into an analytical comparison of the two cultures.

5. A pedagogical approach to Japanese cultural phrases

Most Japanese cultural keywords have a complicated historical background: for example *amae*, a feeling of dependency or a desire to be passively loved (Matsumoto 1988: 407); *omoiyari*, empathy or conformity; *bun*, portion, share, one's position in a group (ibid.). These words reflect a social concept of human relationship in which people are concerned with the difference between insiders and outsiders, and they play an important role in fostering the commitment and hierarchy of members of a group or community. Although these keywords are too abstract to be discussed in detail at the beginning of a course, it is possible to introduce the concept of 'group orientation', which will also make students' understanding of culturally-based dialogues and other kinds of interaction easier.

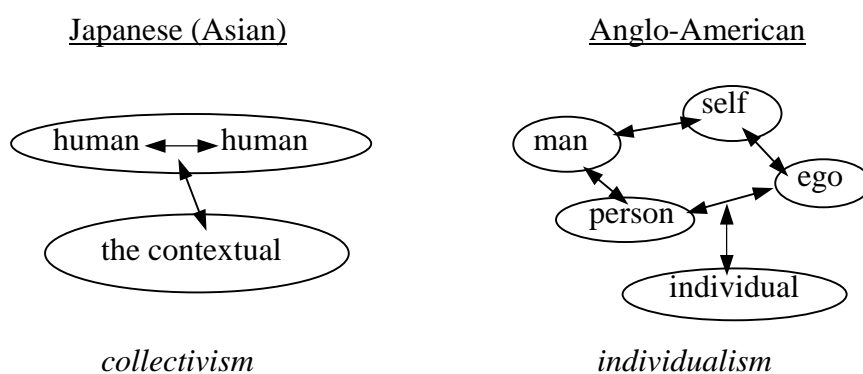
One of the ways in which the group orientation of Japanese society is in the use of personal pronouns and other ways of referring to the self. In many L2 teaching situations, the word 'I' is one of the first items of vocabulary to be introduced. Japanese is not exceptional in this regard, although the subject (agent) is often omitted. However, this relatively simple 'I' can sometimes be problematic due to the variety of words for 'I' in Japanese that depend on context. Table 1 shows an example of how a 40 year old male teacher who has a family uses different words for referring to himself depending on who he is talking to.

TABLE 1. HOW TO ADDRESS SELF: A CASE OF A 40 YEAR OLD MALE TEACHER WITH A FAMILY

English	Japanese		
	Addressed as	Meaning	To whom
I	ore	I (casual/bossy)	wife/parents/friends
	otoosan	father	own children
	ojisan	uncle	other children
	<i>watasi</i>	I (neutral)	anybody unfamiliar
	sensei	teacher	learners
	boku	I (casual)	friends/co-worker
	watakusi	I (formal)	principal/boss

The most neutral style of addressing is *watashi* which can be used by both men and women and in most situations. Yet as shown above, there are almost six other possibilities for a male (teacher) to address himself to others according to interlocutor. There are two basic criteria to distinguish between these six variations. The first is the level of formality. He will use *ore* or *boku* to someone with whom he is on close or intimate terms (e.g. his wife, parents or friends) while *watakushi* is used in certain formal settings or to someone of higher status. Secondly, what is interesting about *otoosan*, *ojisan* and *sensei* is that he calls himself the way his interlocutor calls him. In other words, he addresses himself as *ojisan* to his relatives' children or to any other children based on the idea that they would call him *ojisan*. Similarly, to his pupils, he calls himself *sensei*, meaning 'teacher', and his pupils would use *sensei* when they address him as their teacher.

FIGURE 1. HUMAN RELATIONS IN THE JAPANESE AND WESTERN MODELS



This second style of addressing reflects both the group and situation orientation of Japanese society. That is, one's behaviour (including these varieties of self-address) is structured in relation to other members of the community or group to which one belongs, and truth is equal to the appropriateness of one's behaviour in the group or situation. This can be contrasted with the values of Western standard-oriented society in which one is expected to behave as an individual who follows a fixed norm or rule. The difference can be illustrated as in Figure 1 (above).

6. Methodology

How should teachers introduce these complicated styles of interaction to their pupils? It is not linguistically difficult to practice the sentences, but it may take a little time to make learners understand the sociocultural system and the significance of keywords. Possible procedures might include all or some of the following three steps:

6.1. Presentation of visual information

To show them some (possibly authentic) visual material such as (1) a commercial video, (2) TV program, (3) interview, or (4) home-made video in a fictional setting, (5) skit by native speakers, and so on. Given such non-verbal information as facial expressions, gestures, the timing of utterances and/or phonological information (tone of voice), etc., it is expected that learners will understand how to identify each other using these cultural expressions.

6.2. Consolidation through quasi-visual aids (charts, etc.)

After viewing an actual interaction and before going to the practice, learners should be given some clear visual images which give cultural information, as shown in Figure 2 (p. 18). This

image of seeing ‘oneself’ in relation to others can be illustrated as below, with the same example as in Table 1: a male teacher’s relationship with other members of his community.

6.3 Learners’ practice/role-play/skit

Having confirmed the meaning of the interaction and the relation between A and B in a given skit, learners can go on to the stage of discussing the context and creating a situation where they can use the expressions (as in Table 2, p. 18). The teacher might need to provide extra information of what kind of settings are possible. (In this case, his birthday party at a restaurant where everyone of his community are gathered, etc.) Having acquired a new concept of the culture (as appropriated through their L1), it is expected that they may even create some artificial situations.

6.4. Feedback in class discussion

This final stage is optional depending on time. As a whole group, they discuss whether the presentations have adequately reflected their understanding of the concepts involved.

FIGURE 2. EXAMPLE OF VARIATION IN JAPANESE FORMS OF SELF-ADDRESS

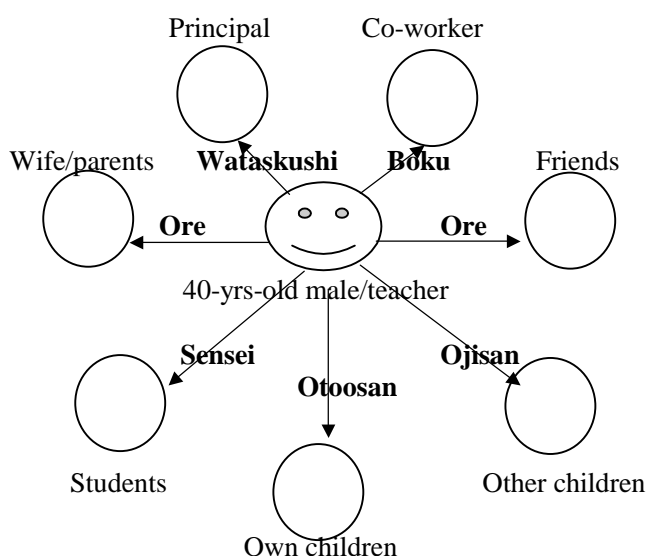


TABLE 2. EXAMPLE OF CONVERSATION BY A 40 YEAR OLD MALE TEACHER (TAKASHI)

<u>At a restaurant</u>	<u>Gloss</u>
Wife : Nani ni simasu ka?	What do you want?
Takasi : Ore wa karee ni suruyo.	I’ll have curry.
His child : Nani nomu no?	What will you drink?
Takasi : Otoosan wa biiru ni suruyo.	I’ll have beer.
His boss : Tabako doodesu ka?	What about a cigarette?
Takasi : A, watakusi wa suwanain desu ...	Oh, I don’t smoke.

By going through all processes described in 6.1 to 6.3 (6.4), learners will develop competence not only at understanding the culturally-specific expressions and types of interaction but also at performing properly in the right time and in the right place in the country (Japan) where their target language is spoken. Having once acquired this basic pattern of communication at an early stage, learners can apply the concept to more advanced levels. Thus, the goal and attainment of learning language can be not only linguistic competence but cultural as well.

7. Further implications and conclusion

In their effort to understand different approaches to interaction, learners may come to perceive their approach to equivalent situations in their daily life, which has not been thought about critically but taken for granted, and start describing themselves in the way in which other people identify them. Learning L2 culture can lead them to reassess their own culture and contribute to learning their culture in more objective and insightful ways. Furthermore, by analysing and comparing more than two cultures, they will be able to develop a wider viewpoint toward the world. This should not be forced, but a teacher of any L2 as an ICP, should be aware of this very rewarding spin-off from teaching the target language and culture. If the teacher is successful in enhancing the learners' awareness of their own cultural identity to that extent, to the level of not only understanding their own and other cultures but also recognising their identity and nationality and accommodating their findings within their existing cultures, the introduction to the L2 world (language and culture) can be said to have made a good start.

References

- Agar, Michael (1991) 'The biculture in bilingual', *Language in Society* 20, pp. 167-81.
- (1994) 'The intercultural frame', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 18: 2, pp. 221-37.
- Byram, Michael (1997) 'Cultural awareness' as vocabulary learning', *Language Learning Journal* 16 (September), pp. 51-7.
- Hatasa Kazumi (2000) 'The use of Internet No', trans. H. Nakata, <http://www.sla.purdue.edu/fll/JapanProj/NihongoRensai/rensai5.html>.
- Matsumoto Yoshiko (1988) 'Reexamination of the universality of face: Politeness Phenomena in Japanese', *Journal of Pragmatics* 12, pp. 403-426.
- Nakata Hitomi (1997) 'Viewing Japanese Culture from Two Different Perspectives', presentation at Triennial Conference of European Association of Japanese Studies.
- Trask, R.L. (1999) *Key Concepts in Language and Linguistics*, London: Routledge.
- Wierzbicka, Anna (1997) *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words - English, Russian, Polish, German and Japanese*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.