Overview of Background Factors Which May Influence Japanese Learner Behaviour in the Communicative English Classroom

Patrick Lee

Introduction

Western teachers in Japan would be able to teach more effectively if they made a deeper investment in getting to understand the background of their students. Not to do so, and the resultant lack of cultural understanding of the nature of the Japanese learner, may lead, at best, to experiences of professional frustration when teacher expectations are not met, and, at worst, to a dismissive 'shifting-of-the blame' solely onto the learners themselves for failed learning outcomes.

This short paper aims to provide an overview of the Japanese learner of English in respect to cultural, societal, and educational factors in order to shed light on why many Japanese learners think and behave the way they do in the communicative language teaching (CLT) classroom. Also, the paper aims to provide useful contextual information to CLT teachers who are for the first time teaching monolingual classes of Japanese students in Japan. This basic background knowledge can be used by Western EFL teachers in Japan to inform, and, if necessary, adjust their teaching style and methodology in order to take into account the particular cultural, social, and educational context in which they are teaching. Without knowledge of these local factors, such an adjustment is likely to be too uninformed to be optimally effective in the classroom.

The Three Factors That Have Shaped the Japanese Learner

Three major factors - cultural, societal, and educational - have influenced the development of English language teaching and learning within the Japanese education system. They are regarded as very influential in the shaping of the Japanese learner in terms of classroom behaviour.

An initial foundation of knowledge about the Japanese learner can assist Western EFL teachers in gaining a deeper understanding of their classrooms that, hopefully, 'leads to a synthesis of assumptions and methods [resulting] in better [English language teaching] pedagogy` rather than a continuation of assumptions and methods which are 'not necessarily bad but often counterproductive` (Stapleton, 1995:13).

The three factors to be examined are the influence of Confucianism, Japanese society and 'internationalization', and the Japanese education system. They are not exclusive of each other. Contemporary Japanese societal values have evolved from Confucianist values. Likewise, the education system is also predicated to a significant extent on an instillation of Confucianist conduct and concepts (Willis and Yamamura, 2002:3). However, for the sake of clarity, this paper will examine each factor separately whilst acknowledging the inherent interconnections.

The Confucianist Influence

The considerable influence of Confucianist socio-political thinking on the shaping of the contemporary Japanese education system is deep-rooted and entrenched. Stapleton (ibid:13) suggests that it is 'arguably the single biggest influence on Japanese education`. According to Littrell (2004:1,2), an understanding of the influence of Confucianism is 'essential for successful teaching in East Asia`.

Stapleton`s describes four key aspects of Japanese Confucianism that play a role in the Japanese education system on both a macro and micro level (Stapleton, ibid:14-15). Firstly, a core tenet of the Confucianist value system is *knowing one`s place* in society`s vertical hierarchy. The teacher – student relationship, for example, is one in which role behaviour of the student acknowledges the unquestioning authority and superior status of the teacher. Such behaviour may be manifested through classroom behaviour such as silence by the student while the teacher vocally imparts the knowledge. To question a teacher would be tantamount to questioning his or her knowledge and authority, and by implication, ability to teach.

A second aspect of Confucianist values which is pervasive within the education system is the importance attached to *knowledge and memory over creativity*. Historically, in Confucianist societies, memorization has been seen as the dominant method of acquiring knowledge, and it is acknowledged as a skill in itself. In contemporary Japan, this way of learning is apparent in the acquisition of *kanji* as well as in the learning of copious amounts of data by students in order to pass the crucial examinations on which their future literally hangs. Some students spend many hours memorizing speeches for high school English speech contests without actually knowing the meaning of their speeches.

Because of the dominance of a teaching-learning model in which knowledge is passed down to the student, little scope exists, if any, for exercising personal opinion and entering creative discussion within the classroom. Indeed, according to Phuoc, the Confucianist model is 'suspicious of creativity` (Nguyen Thi Hoai An, 2002:1). Such dominant values are likely to condition students to behave and think with a certain mindset which may provide an initial obstacle to Western teachers` classroom approaches based on eliciting student opinion and democratic exchange between teacher and student.

A third aspect of the Confucianist legacy is a high regard for *literacy*. Of particular relevance is Stapleton`s point that within the language classroom there is an importance attached to the written word at the expense of communicative ability. He states that this is a way of learning a language commensurate with an educational ethos which deliberately promotes a non-questioning, opinion-withholding classroom culture. It is manifested pedagogically through a grammar-translation method which prioritises the achieving of linguistic literacy through the written word (Stapleton, ibid.:15).

Fourthly, using *examinations* as a means of assessing a person`s ability has been a Confucianist tradition ever since the establishment of civil service examinations in China in 136 A.D. (Stapleton, ibid:15). The Japanese; strongly influenced by Chinese culture in this historical era,

had adopted a similar examination system by the seventh century A.D. According to Stapleton, this examination legacy from Confucianist orthodoxy is still very influential in the Japanese education system. The examinations are designed to promote memorization, hard work through study, and in theory, to promote 'harmony by diminishing classroom competition and downplaying differences in opinion` (ibid:15). Japanese learners` overriding need to do well in examinations is germane to students` attitude towards and evaluation of Western teachers` preferred communicative way of teaching, and this need obviates some Western teachers` attempts to effectively implement their version of a CLT approach.

Unquestionably, student learning, participation, and attitudes in the Western teacher`s classroom can be better understood if one has a cultural perspective on the student`s background (Kolarik, 2004:2). However, this permeation of Confucianist values and practice on the nature of learning and the behaviour of the Japanese learner, while remaining important today, is being challenged by new values (Willis and Yamamura, 2002:4) which may work to gradually erode or weaken Confucianist ones. The massive socio-economic forces that have restructured Japan since the end of the Second World War have been instrumental in slowly but perceptively enabling more traditional ways of thinking to be questioned.

The Societal Influence

Societal changes have had a considerable influence on the direction English language learning and teaching has taken in Japan and also on the thinking of influential educators within the Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2003). One source of the pressure has been Japanese society`s preoccupation with the notion of *kokusaika* ('internationalisation`) - 'the desire to become an 'international people` (Kobayashi, 2001:68). It is a nebulous concept, but, despite the vagaries of its precise meaning, the social perception is that internationalization of Japanese society involves people having a foreign language ability, primarily a speaking ability, which will enable

communication with foreigners via the medium of the world`s *lingua franca*, English.

One by-product of internationalization has been an attempt to implement educational reforms which acknowledge the growing need for Japanese to possess English fluency in an ever expanding global community. The most significant step of recent years was the governmental strategy of 2003 that initiated the mass recruitment of several thousand assistant language teachers (ALTs) from overseas (primarily North America) as part of MEXT`s five-year Action Plan for the teaching and learning of communicative English in the Japanese primary and secondary education sectors. The latest initiative (stated in MEXT`s New English Curriculum for 2013) is to provide the tertiary sector with funding which is to be used to develop degree programs in English in order "to make universities more international" (Stewart, 2009:11). One proposed outcome of this plan is the targeted admission of 300,000 foreign students to study in Japanese universities in what will effectively be "a new *kokusaika*" in the tertiary sector (Stewart, ibid).

Another offshoot of internationalization was a growth in the private English language industry, notably the ubiquitous conversation schools, as numerous Japanese sought to study English as a hobby or to learn how to speak English better. This growth perhaps indicated that there were problems regarding the effective teaching of English in high schools and that Japanese people were trying to make up for what they did not receive from the state education system - a functioning ability to speak English.

Paradoxically, despite the growth of a sizeable private English language industry largely based upon Western communicative methodologies, and the presence of ALTs in many high schools, Japan remains a country which 'generally lacks the practical need for such English' (Kobayashi, ibid:71). This observation is not lost on high school students (and their parents and Japanese English teachers), many of whom attach low-priority value to the time spent in the Western teacher`s 'communicative`

classroom because of the perceived lack of relevance such lessons have towards helping to pass the all-important, career-determining, life-shaping examinations.

Japanese society`s desire for internationalization and the resulting demand for English and Western teachers is a possible factor in shaping the mindset of the thousands of Western EFL teachers who may believe that they have been brought to Japan as the solution to Japanese language learners` inability to speak English fluently. Without an appreciation of the social factors which gave rise to a demand for Western teachers of English, many of them attempt a 'communicative crusade` in their classrooms. This strategy may result in teachers confused by the lack of active participatory responses by many Japanese language learners. Moreover, numbers of Western teachers do not realize that their impact as an educational force is relatively superficial given the primacy of an exam-oriented education system at high school; a situation compounded by the existence of a culture of relative indifference and apathy in the university sector towards English study.

Knowledge of how internationalization has shaped the English language teaching and learning landscape helps to shed light on Japanese learners` relationship to English and to the Western teachers invited to teach it. Despite the overtures to internationalization, there has yet to be any significant progress in overall English spoken skills by the Japanese over the last twenty years, and the reason for this may partly lie in the lack of a real incentive to use English, an explanation supported by Guest (2006), who notes that 'the average citizen here really doesn`t need English. In short, there are few intrinsic or instrumental motivations for study in Japan`. Part of the explanation may also lie in the Japanese learner as a social being within a socio-cultural structure that is copper-fastened by specific interactional codes of behaviour and culturally specific mentalist attitudes. Doyon (2000) describes ten elements which he suggests contribute to a form of social 'shyness` within Japanese society. An appreciation of these factors may contribute to deeper understanding of Japanese language learners` behaviour in the classroom. However,

before outlining Doyon`s ten factors, it is important to stress that we must avoid the trap of stereotyping Japanese language learners as a homogenous *masse* based solely on one socio-cultural paradigm. There may be a commonality of certain shared cultural traits, but Japanese language learners are as individualistic in their learning behaviour and personalities as learners in Western cultures.

Using Lebra`s (1976) notion of 'domain', Doyon`s (ibid:4) first factor is a description of three *interactional domains* as a way of accounting for Japanese people`s choice of behaviour in different social contexts. A formal *ritual* domain exists in the eyes of a Japanese person who is very careful about behaviour and how the other person might judge him or her. Reticence, silence, and guarded, formal language are typical in order to reduce mistakes or opinions that might cause an unfavourable reaction. Students in Japanese classrooms typically exhibit this type of domain. The second domain type is the more informal *intimate domain* as typified by friends, family, and work colleagues. Western teachers often prefer to use this kind of interactional domain in their classrooms in Japan rather than the *ritual domain*. Problems can thus arise when students and teacher are operating within two differing self-perceived domains in the classroom. Finally, Lebra`s third domain is called *anomic*, which is characterized by both disinterest in others and social distance.

A second factor is the high degree of *control* that operates within Japanese society. Doyon (ibid:4) refers to the `excessive control` exercised by high school teachers which works to `stifle classroom initiative`. Leaving aside Doyon`s subjectivity regarding what constitutes `excessive`, the removal of choice and decision-making from the hands of the students is likely to nurture a culture of student passivity; although, a direct correlation between the factor of *control* and shyness is not empirically proved. A trait termed *amae* and popularized by Doi (1971) is a third factor in Doyon`s taxonomy. Described as a kind of passive dependence, it is claimed by Doi to be an influence on all vertical relationships within Japanese society. An outcome of such dependence can be an inability or reluctance to accept personal responsibility or feel guilty about passivity. Fourthly,

because of the neo-Confucianist vertical relationships permeating society, deference and acquiescence to authority results in the operation of the ritual domain characterized by reserved, formal behaviour.

Japanese society is a group-oriented society. Doyon explains that *uchi-soto relationships* (inside-outside) restrict Japanese people`s preference to only talk freely to those belonging to their group. As a result, many Japanese experience discomfort in social situations in which they are not part of an established group. Experienced Western teachers in Japan can often identify individual students who are experiencing such discomfort after the teacher has created small groups in order to do a task. For example, in a newly-created group of four, three of the students may already be part of a group of very good friends outside the classroom, and may 'ignore' the fourth student during task discussions. It is important that the teacher monitors actively and encourages the three students to involve the fourth student. This teacher strategy may work for that particular task but the students will often continue to 'ignore' the fourth student in subsequent tasks. A further complication is that the fourth student in the scenario outlined above may well be reluctant to participate anyway (despite the teacher`s best intentions) because of an awareness that he/she is an outsider *vis-a-vis* this particular group. In Japanese society, concern for the feelings and thinking of others is extremely important, and Japanese will verbally and behaviourally exercise restraint by taking little or no risks or initiative.

A seventh factor contributing to social shyness is that of *The Way* (Doyon:4). There is a correct way to do things. In Japanese society, many arts are based on stringent adherence to the correct way to do them, often guided by a teacher upon whom the student is dependent for knowledge and guidance. Without guidance from the teacher, students may be unable to act independently and exhibit shyness and become flustered. Connected to the correct way of doing things is the fear of *mistakes*. Doyon states that 'there is an intense fear of mistakes`(ibid:5) which can be an obstacle to students` use of speaking skills both in the classroom and outside it.

A ninth factor in Doyon`s `shyness` paradigm is the influence of the Japanese education system. Doyon`s point is that a culture of passivity is inculcated in Japanese students from junior high school up due to an overwhelming emphasis on teachers using a 'jug and mug` classroom approach whereby knowledge is `poured` into the students` heads without them having any real opportunity to exercise that knowledge through activities that allow them some form of voice in the classroom. Instilled in the students is a way of learning that entails listening but not speaking (Williams, 1994, cited in Doyon, ibid:5). The result is a student body that is conditioned to seeing `knowledge as something to be transmitted by the teacher rather than discovered by the learners` and which 'finds teacher-centred modes of learning normal` (Littlewood,1999:85), and, by default, may react negatively to student-centred modes of learning introduced by Western teachers.

Doyon`s tenth and final factor is the nature of a work-obsessed society which has resulted in a population that is *too busy to learn social skills*, and this situation may contribute to a shyness in Japanese culture due to people`s lack of free time to polish important social skills.

A further factor which Doyon did not include is the collectivist nature of Japanese society as a factor influencing classroom behaviour. Littlewood (1984:84) suggests that a feature of a collectivist mentality is a reluctance to 'stand out` and draw attention to oneself. The significance of a collectivist society on student learning is given credence by Hofstede`s influential papers on culture. Collectivism is regarded as one of four cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1986:304) that act together to formulate Japan`s cultural identity.

The Educational Influence

Several writers have advised Western teachers to investigate, or, at least, gain an understanding of a country`s educational traditions and the cultural import attached to them so that appropriate methodological approaches can be formulated and selected before walking pedagogically blindfolded into the classroom (Guest 2006, Li 1998, Flowerdew 1998,

Oxford and Anderson 1995, Hino 1988).

Japanese English education is primarily geared to the need to pass university entrance examinations (Mantero and Iwai, 2005), and, as a result, it is widely accepted that other educational variables have been heavily influenced and shaped by this fact; an influence Mulvey terms a *washback effect* (2001:1). By this, Mulvey means `the cause-and-effect nature of the entrance examinations` influence on senior high school teaching methodology and textbook content`. One critical variable is the nature of classroom English instruction in the Japanese junior and senior high school system. English classes are overwhelmingly teacher-centred and biased heavily towards grammar instruction. Sakui (2004:159) describes the typical Japanese high school English classroom:

> Teachers spent most of the class time involved in teacher-fronted grammar explanations, chorus reading and vocabulary presentations. Students attended to teachers` explanations, learnt to translate at the sentence level, read the textbooks aloud in choral reading, copied vocabulary items in their notebooks, and engaged in sentence manipulation exercises ... This practice is understandable when so much emphasis is placed on preparing students for grammar-skewered entrance examinations.

This later point is supported by Norris-Holt (2002), who states that the Grammar Translation Method, or modified forms of it, is the preferred form of instruction used by Japanese teachers of English because it is the most effective methodology for teaching classes of over forty students when the teachers have to finish using the required textbooks by the end of the year. This is a situation compounded by overwork and lack of time. Typical class content includes 'a lot of drills, repetitions, and memorization of idioms and vocabulary` (Mantero and Iwai:ibid). One outcome of such teaching methodologies, according to Hynes (2002:41), is that learners are conditioned into 'adopting a passive role in the classroom`. Williams (1994:10) also highlights a relationship between teacher-centred approaches and student reticence. The latter is

a classroom behavioural phenomenon borne out of lecture-style input (in which the students` role is to listen), oral pattern-drills (if at all used), and absence of meaningful speaking practice. It is difficult to imagine Japanese learners developing a positive regard for the learning of English under such sterile conditions.

Despite criticism and scepticism of the actual importance and influence of the university entrance exams (Stout 2003, Mulvey 2001), most Japanese high school students` primary motive for studying English is to pass exams. This *fait accompli* means that Japanese English teachers continue to teach according to their students` needs – lessons heavily weighted towards exam preparation, with a strong focus on the structure of the language, rather than its communicative value. According to Locasto (1996), cited in Norris-Holt (*ibid*:5), Japanese learners attach considerable importance to grammar, translation, reading, and writing because these are language areas assessed in the entrance exams. It is logical to assume that many students, driven by the all-important goal of exam-passing, are conditioned to undervaluing the importance and relevance of the communicative language practice that is typical of Western EFL teaching approaches. Japanese students` beliefs about how a second language is taught and learned have been shaped by a rigid teacher-centred approach underpinning the education system`s way of teaching. Burrows (2008) describes how this reality must shape students into becoming passive recipients of the teacher`s knowledge, as well as students who are likely to be reluctant and uncomfortable about asking questions. Some aspects of 'negative` behaviour in Western teachers` classrooms may thus be an attitudinal fallout from a previous intense learning experience combined with a lack of understanding of perceived appropriate behaviour in a CLT classroom.

It is hoped that this review of three major socio-cultural forces will help to elucidate the typical background of the Japanese learner and serve to inform understanding of Japanese learners of English in the Western teacher's CLT classroom, whilst acknowledging that the influences that shape the Japanese learner are not limited to the three described.

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