

Classroom Interaction Affected by Power Distance

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1. Introduction

1.1 Oral Communication course in Japan's high school

A Japanese teacher complains after Oral Communication class, "Students don't speak! They won't positively participate in activities!" Japan started to teach Oral Communication in high school English education several years ago. However, it cannot be said that this subject and other communicative activities have been learned by the students very well.

Why have communicative activities not worked sufficiently in Japanese high school? Perhaps the officially admitted textbooks are not satisfactory. Also, the untrained Japanese teachers of English who are reluctant to teach the subject may be another opposing factor. However, are these the only reasons? When people look at Japanese classrooms, especially in junior high schools and high schools, they notice that not only in English classrooms but also in the classrooms of other subjects students are passive and hesitate to speak in front of other students. There is very little free interaction between teachers and students or students and students during class. It can be assumed that there are some cultural elements which lie in the way of their voluntary interaction.

1.2 Japanese classroom interaction influenced by cultural factors

Hofstede (1986) proposes a cultural analysis in terms of the four dimensions of Individualism/Collectivism, Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance, and Masculinity/Femininity and relates the factors to classroom interaction. One of them, Power Distance, is considered to greatly influence Japanese classroom interaction, especially communicative activities. At school Japanese teachers are likely to control students and students are expected to obey teachers, and this is assumed to have prevented free interaction in class. These facts are reported in several articles by Japanese teachers and educational researchers, who present critical views on Japanese teaching (Sato, 1993; Ishii, 1993; Watanabe and Wada, 1991).

It is too simple-minded to say that the Japanese way of teaching is wrong and the Western way is good. There may be some advantages as well as disadvantages in the traditional Japanese method. Also, it is not easy to change the system because Japanese culture and society are in the background. Still, we may do far better in teaching if we learn from other countries' ways of teaching. Especially, in teaching English, Japanese teachers need to be conscious of the effects of the cultural differences between Japan and the countries where the target language is spoken, but such a consciousness regrettably seems not to be sufficient in Japan.

1.3 The aim of this study

Lack of active interaction in Japan is a crucial negative factor for language learning. When Japan's English teachers apply the Communicative Approach in Oral Communication or other English teaching, if they are aware of the fact that their students' voluntary interaction is partly limited by cultural factors, they may be able to lead students to dynamic communication.

This paper first looks at the relationship between culture and language learning (2.1), especially the Power dimension and language learning (2.2). In section 3, it is observed how classroom interaction is affected by the Power dimension, according to a table I constructed based on several research studies. The details of the table are presented through discussion of studies investigating classroom interaction in Asian nations and Western nations (3.1), returnee students' impressions of Japanese teaching (3.2) and differences in whole class teaching and group activities (3.3). In section 4, the effects of the Power dimension on the Communicative Approach are presented. First, the importance of communicative activities in language learning is shown (4.1). Second, difficulties in communicative activities in Japan are considered (4.2). Finally, two types of classrooms in a Japanese public high school are observed (4.3) and possible strategies to the problems are suggested (4.4).

2. Culture and language learning

2.1 Culture and second language learning

It is not easy to answer the question of how people acquire language. However, it is obvious that the answer cannot be found only by language pedagogy study. Cultural, psychological, sociological and neurological factors may also influence language learning significantly (Holland and Shortall, 1997). To know the learner elements which may affect second language learning is considered to be extremely valuable for developing effective teaching.

One of the factors, culture, becomes highly important in second language learning. Culture is a way of life, the context within which we exist, think, feel, and relate to others. It establishes for each person a context of cognitive and affective behaviour (Brown, 1994b). Culture facilitates human and environmental interactions and it is learned and shared by all the members of a society (Murdock, 1961 cited in Brown, 1994b). These functions of culture are mostly conducted through language. Therefore, culture and language are "intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (Brown, 1994b, p.165). And also, teaching is considered to be an activity firmly fixed with culturally bound assumptions about teachers and students, and culture is assumed to affect teachers' responsibility and classroom interaction (Richards and Lockhart, 1994).

2.2 Power Distance as a cultural dimension

It is useful to categorize cultures to investigate how students with different cultures react to language learning. Hofstede (1986) presents a cultural analysis regarding four elements: Individualism/Collectivism, Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance and Masculinity/Femininity.

Among Hofstede's categorisations, Power Distance appears to influence classroom interaction largely in Japan and it seems to work as an opposing factor to applying communicative activities. Therefore, it may be worth further considering the relationship between Power Distance and language learning. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to investigating this issue.

The degree of Power Distance is measured by the extent members of this cultural group accept unequal distribution of power. It is true that "all societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others" (Hofstede, 1980, p.136). In other words, inequality exists in every culture; however the degree of the tolerance is different in each society (Brown, 1994b).

3. Classroom interaction affected by Power Distance

To clarify the effects of Power Distance on classroom interaction, Table 1 was constructed, based on the author's personal experiences as a teacher as well as studies by language researchers, educators and psychologists (see sections 3.1-3.3). As shown in Table 1, in large Power Distance societies teachers dominate students, who are expected to act as teachers instruct them to. In this type of classroom, interaction between teachers and students or students and students are limited. On the other hand, in small Power Distance societies students interact with teachers and other students more actively and freely. Below, more details are shown, referring to specific studies by researchers.

3.1 Asian classroom interaction and Western classroom interaction

It can be said, guarding against the dangers of stereotyping, that Asian nations are more unequal societies, and Western countries are less unequal societies. In Asian countries such as Japan and China, less powerful persons tend to accept inequality. They are expected to know and accept their own places. They are relatively passive, use self-denial to fit into their ranks and tend to refrain from stating their own opinions in front of other people. On the other hand, in Western countries such as the U.S.A. and Great Britain, people are prone to resist unequal distribution of power. According to Hofstede's (1986) study, Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, Thailand and Hong Kong are categorized among the large Power Distance societies, while Western countries such as Great Britain, the U.S.A., Canada and Germany are classified in the small Power Distance societies.

These different Power dimensions affect classroom interaction in such countries. Richards and

**Table 1 Differences in Teacher/Student and Student/Student Interaction
Related to the Power Distance Dimension**

Large Power Distance societies	Small Power Distance societies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teacher-centered education • teachers dominate students • students act as teachers instruct them to act • teachers deprive students of self-reliance and creativity • students rarely contradict teachers • students let teachers initiate communication • teachers apply whole-class teaching • teachers use deductive approach • effectiveness of learning is related to excellence of teachers • teachers teach authorized textbooks • teachers mostly give lectures and students take notes silently • teachers rarely ask students' opinions • students expect teachers to set goals for them • teachers are businesslike • students never call teachers by first name • teachers talk in a commanding tone to students • when students have questions, they ask them after class • students are not expected to state their own opinions in front of other students • students hesitate to participate in group work or discussion • students never speak in class unless spoken to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • student-centered education • students have more freedom • students act thinking what teachers' instruction means • teachers try to raise students' self-reliance and creativity • students can criticize teachers • students often initiate communication • teachers conduct group activities • teachers use inductive approach • effectiveness of learning is related to communication in class • teachers encourage students to find their own answers • students often work collaboratively, based on the belief that they are responsible for their own learning • teachers often ask students' opinions • students are expected to set their own goals • teachers are friendly • teachers encourage a first-name basis • teachers use polite words to students • when students have questions, they ask them in class • students are believed to have a right to state their own ideas • students actively participate in group work and discussion • students voluntarily speak in class to contribute to the class work

Lockhart (1994) contrast the attitudes of Asian teachers with those of Western teachers. In Asian cultures teaching is seen as a teacher-controlled process. For example, Chinese teachers state that learning involves mastering a body of knowledge that is presented by teachers divided into small enough portions to be easily understood. Teachers expect students to reproduce the knowledge in the same form as it was presented by teachers (Brick, 1991 cited in Richards and Lockhart, 1994). A Taiwanese teacher argues that if a student does not succeed, it is considered to be the teacher's fault for not presenting the material clearly enough. These attitudes are compared with Western education which focuses more on individual learner creativity and independency. Western education also stresses inductive approaches more than deductive approaches. It proposes collaborative activities to encourage students to take some of responsibility for their own learning. Richards and Lockhart (1994) introduce the surprising experience for an American teacher of foreign students in the U.S. that the students were astonished when they were asked opinions about their goals of study. Japanese students reacted the same way in my own class when they were asked the same question because they had hardly ever asked themselves their aim of learning and they had been learning whatever was presented in front of them.

Sato (1993), Ishii (1993) and Kawai (1993) as members of an investigating team watched a videotape of U.S. elementary school classrooms and compared them with Japanese classrooms. Sato is surprised to notice American teachers use soft and polite words such as "would you?" and "could you?" to students, contrary to Japanese teachers' talk in a commanding tone. It is often noticed that in the U.S. teachers encourage a first name basis, whereas in Japan most teachers prefer to be addressed by family name with Mr. or Ms. The more equal U.S. relationship between teachers and students appears to be founded on the ideal of an equal relationship between individuals in the society while in Japan teachers are expected to act as an authorized teacher and students as an obedient student reflecting the large Power dimension (Sato, 1993; Kawai, 1993; Ishii, 1993).

3.2 Returnee students' impressions of teaching in Japan

There is another way to critically compare Japanese ways of teaching and learning with other countries' methods. In Japan there is an increasing number of students who return to Japan after having been to foreign countries for several years due to their family's business. The returnee students can look penetratingly at both Japanese and foreign learning styles since they have experienced schools in more than one culture. Watanabe (1989) is a teacher at International Christian University High School, where two thirds of students are returnees from foreign schools. He presents a collection of students' writing, which shows their acquaintances and feelings that they had in overseas and Japanese schools.

For example, Saeko, who returned after three and a half years' stay in Virginia in the U.S. complains that in Japan teachers always teach what is written in the textbooks and often say that they

are running out of time. She is surprised her Japanese classmates do not raise their hands even if they know the answers. On the other hand, in the U.S. she never felt she was restricted by the textbooks. The students often had a discussion and voluntarily expressed their own opinions. What was important there was how actively they participated in class.

Akiko, who had been in West Germany for six years, was very exhausted until she became accustomed to the unpleasant atmosphere of Japanese classrooms. In class no student utters a word and even if they have a question, they do not ask until after class. The class does not consist of communication between teachers and students, but teachers always conduct one-way lectures. In West Germany teachers expected students to participate positively in class and students willingly expressed opinions, which sometimes developed into a long discussion. Teachers seemed not to mind their teaching plan was interrupted by the discussion, but highly valued it. During the interaction, students were not afraid to criticize the opinions of teachers and the other students, which is contrary to Japan.

Sato (1994) also introduces views of returnee students from Canada and Britain. The returnees feel Japanese teachers are not friendly and difficult to get close to, which is opposite to those in Canada and Britain. One returnee expresses an impression that in Canada teachers encouraged students to study, but in Japan students feel that they are always judged by teachers.

3.3 Whole class teaching and group work

One of the significant factors related to Power Distance is considered to be differences between whole class teaching and small group work. In large Power Distance societies teacher-centered whole class teaching is preferred. In small Power Distance societies, group work which encourages active participation in class is proposed. Inagaki, Sato and Ito conducted investigations among U.S. and Japanese high school teachers, and show contrasting characteristics, such as the U.S. preference for pair or group activities and Japanese preference for whole class teaching. Of 455 teachers in California and Michigan, in the U.S., only 27% answered that they arrange whole class teaching, while 92% of 548 teachers in Hiroshima, Japan answered that they apply a whole class method. Concerning pair and group activities, 59% of the teachers in the U.S. manage them at least once in a week, whereas only 16% of the Japanese teachers conduct them at all (Ito, 1994).

These learning arrangements remarkably influence the interactional dynamics of a classroom. Richards and Lockhart (1994) consider that, though whole class teaching, in which 70% of the class time is occupied by the teacher talking or asking questions (Chaudron, 1988 in Richards and Lockhart, 1994), has an advantage of teaching large numbers of students at the same time, it has the disadvantages that it is teacher-controlled and gives students little opportunity for active participation, and that teachers are inclined to interact with only a few students in the class. However,

in Japan the inactive participation may not be regarded as a disadvantage by teachers. Generally, the teachers prefer a silent class and do not pursue active student interaction in class.

4. The effect of the Power dimension on the Communicative Approach

Above, the general effects of the Power Distance on classroom interaction have been examined. From here the point is further narrowed to the effects of the Power dimension on language learning, especially on communicative activities in Japan. Japanese high school recently started to teach Oral Communication, and some teachers try to apply the Communicative Approach. However, students are often reluctant to participate in communicative activities. From the previous considerations, cultural factors such as Power Distance seem to underlie this problem. By observing what is happening in Japanese language classrooms, we can expect the effects of the Power dimension on the Communicative Approach to become clear, and the possible solutions for the problems may be suggested.

4.1 Importance of communicative activities in language learning

To begin with, it is necessary to clarify the importance of communicative activities in language learning. According to Richards and Lockhart (1994), second language learning is a highly interactive procedure, and through interaction with other students in small groups, students can obtain the chances to use their linguistic abilities to complete various tasks. Brown states that “interaction is the heart of communication” and “the best way to learn to interact is through interaction itself” (1994a, p.159). Ellis announces that interactional modification such as meaning negotiation accelerates rapid and successful language learning (1990, cited in Edwards, Shortall, Willis, Quinn and Leeke, 1996).

Nunan (1989, 1991) investigated forty-four good language students in Southeast Asian countries to find out the common efficient patterns in their learning. The learners discovered one of the most helpful factors in the learning was communicative language use outside and in school such as interactional practice with other students. They reported that one of the least helpful things was teachers’ talk which explains everything to students.

4.2 Difficulties in the Communicative Approach in Japan

In Japan, English classes have been conducted by whole class teaching and lectures, like other subjects. As a result, many teachers may not be adequately familiar with interactive teaching and group activities. Most teachers learned English through the traditional Grammar Translation Method, and actually teachers sometimes seem to have difficulties communicating in English themselves. Even if courageous teachers try to apply the Communicative Approach, it often results in failure since traditionally Japanese students are not expected to engage in or are even prohibited from free

and voluntary interactions in class due to the large Power Distance.

Another way to see the Japanese situation more distinctly is to consider the differences between a deductive approach and an inductive approach. As seen in Table 1, in large Power Distance societies teachers tend to apply a deductive approach. Japanese teachers may adhere to the traditional Grammar Translation Method, since it depends heavily on a deductive approach, while the Communicative Approach emphasises inductive reasoning (Holland and Shortall, 1997). Japanese students are, as a result of a long experience of deductive learning, likely to hesitate to work on the inductive reasoning of communicative activities.

4.3 Two types of classrooms in a Japanese public high school

In the public school in Japan where I teach, there are two types of classrooms. One classroom is a relatively high-level, but silent class. The other is a relatively low-level, but active class. Communicative activities are always successful in the second class. Why does this happen? By answering this question, it may be possible to understand the actual situation in which general Japanese classrooms operate.

4.3.1 Traditional Japanese classroom

What are the differences between the two classes? The former class can be described as a traditional Japanese classroom. In this class most students plan to continue their education after graduation, and most of their subjects, except for physical education and art, are conducted by lectures. In terms of Table 1, the students in this class act as students in the large Power Distance societies. I usually teach them English reading, to prepare for the entrance examinations. They seldom speak in class unless spoken to. It is not difficult to imagine what happens when they are to participate in the communicative activities. They are afraid of making mistakes and hesitate to speak in front of other students. According to Knowles' categorization (1982, in Richards and Lockhart, 1994), they appear to be authority-oriented learners. They prefer to have content presented in a straightforward manner and expect teachers to direct everything and become compulsive note-takers. Or based on Good and Power's definition (1976, in Richards and Lockhart, 1994), they can be described as dependent students, who demand the teachers' assistance and reinforcement to complete a given task.

4.3.2 Another type of Japanese classroom

On the other hand, in the latter class the students are different from the stereotype of Japanese students. Most of the students do not plan to continue their education after high school. They have many subjects which involve activities such as cooking and nursing. Most of them work after school. The students behave as students in small Power distance societies.

With reference to Knowles' definition, they have a concrete learning style or communicative learning style. They like to be able to recognize real life applications or social usefulness for tasks. According to Good and Power's definition, they have some characteristics of social students. They enter into learning tasks actively, and place a high value on personal interaction. When they need the teacher's help, they do not hesitate to ask for it.

4.3.3 The backgrounds of the interactional differences

It is certain that in both classes learners' personalities and cognitive styles differ among individuals. However, the general atmosphere of the classrooms can be classified as above. The reasons for the differences can be illustrated below.

(1) The purposes of the study are different. In the traditional class the main goal of the study for most of the students is to pass the entrance examinations. In the active class the intention of the study is to gain the practical ability to use English. Some of them want to utilize English when they work or travel in foreign countries.

(2) The content of the materials also differs. In the traditional class teachers have been focusing on reading and grammar mainly based on the authorized textbooks, which are effortful and complicated. The vocabulary of the textbooks is difficult, using unfamiliar words for daily life. Oral Communication is studied only as a part of the course and even in Oral Communication class teachers tend to emphasize the vocabulary and structure. In the active class the reading materials are simple and easy, built on current topics such as the Nagano Olympics, World Heritage and their favourite Japanese singers. It is smooth to move from the reading to a discussion.

(3) Attitudes of teachers are dissimilar. In the conventional class teachers feel obliged to finish the materials in the assigned time. The main focus of teaching is likely to provide students with knowledge for entrance examinations. In the active class teachers feel more freedom while proceeding with the materials. The chief objective is to lead students to acquire the practical abilities to use English.

4.4 Potential strategies for the difficulties in communicative activities

Even in a large Power Distance society like Japan it is considered possible to assist students to participate actively in communicative activities. To achieve this aim, first, it is meaningful for teachers to spend plenty of time to explain to students the significance of communicative activities, which in turn can facilitate improvement of language competence. Second, considering that Japanese students have a cultural barrier against speaking English in class, it is essential to deliberately select materials related to current and interesting topics which are easy to lead to a discussion. Last, teachers' attitudes toward teaching should be altered. Japanese teachers are accustomed to whole class teaching using a deductive approach to finish the assigned materials in a given time. This

approach has been supported by Japanese culture and society. However, to lead students to participate positively in communicative activities the teachers' stances may need to change into a more inductive one. Teachers should remember that, as Richards and Lockhart argue, "the interactional dynamics of a classroom are largely a product of choices the teacher makes about learning arrangements" (1994, p.146).

Following is a possible model for improving communicative activities. Okada (1991), an English teacher at ICU High School, reports the great difficulty she had in conducting communicative activities with non-returnee students, students who had grown up in Japan. She herself used to be a returnee student who had been in Britain and the U.S. for 8 years and believes that if students would like to learn English, they must positively speak it. However, in her English class for domestic students, they hesitate to speak in front of other students and sometimes it takes a year to remove their psychological block against speaking English. When she conducts the class only in English, the whole classroom becomes silent and dark as if it were covered by heavy clouds and every student becomes nervous and looks down. To overcome these difficulties she manages the speech class by starting with demonstrating court trials in English, which appear to break the psychological barrier against speaking English in front of other students, then leads them to speeches on their own favorite subjects, such as rock music, table tennis and Russian cake. She repeatedly explains to worried students that it is not easy to become able to speak English, but it is possible if they have the courage to speak English.

5. Conclusion

At the outset of this paper it was suggested that some cultural elements are preventing the success of communicative activities in Japan, and that if teachers are conscious of the cultural factors in teaching, they may lead students to participate more positively in communicative activities. Following the observations reported here, this idea seems to have some validity.

In large Power Distance societies, teachers tend to dominate students and deprive them of free and active classroom interaction. When the Japanese traditional whole class teaching is applied to language education, it causes several problems, especially in conducting communicative activities, which are considered by many language researchers to be effective and essential (Brown, 1994a; Ellis, 1990; Nunan, 1989, 1991).

Though in Japan the Communicative Approach has not been applied successfully, it is also true that some types of classrooms exist which appear to be relatively less affected by the Power dimension. From considering this type of classroom, it is possible to allow students to participate positively in communicative activities. What teachers need to do is to spend time talking about the importance of communicative activities and their cultural barriers, to select materials to decrease students' negative cultural factors and to try to change teachers' attitudes to apply the communicative

activities.

Hofstede suggests to teachers abroad that if they try to cope with the perplexities of cross-cultural situations, “the burden of adoption in cross-cultural learning situations should be primarily on the teachers” (1986, p.301). The same thing can be said to Japanese teachers who teach English to Japanese students. The teachers need to know how to teach the culturally obstructed students to conduct the Communicative Approach successfully, by reconsidering the materials, the goal of teaching and their teaching attitudes.

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