Module 6 - Question 1

Write an evaluation of the approach adopted by Jones in his article, drawing on the ideas in this course and on your own experience of the inter-relationships between culture and change.

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1.0 Introduction

Change cannot be separated from innovation, improvement and flexibility as it is an inherent part of all of them. These factors are key to the survival of any institution, be it a large multi-national conglomerate or a small privately owned language school in Japan. Good change management is perhaps all that links successful institutions, large or small. With the prevalence of globalisation, cross-cultural communication is of great importance to many individuals from many cultures around the world. Most models of change and innovation management are designed to be effective in a particular culture or cultures (usually western). This means that these models may be culturally specific and may not be directly transferable without considerable adaptation and flexibility. In a situation where the change agent is from a different cultural or social environment to that which is being changed, it is of particular import that these cultural differences are carefully considered and catered for in project design.

ELT has much to offer management in general where cross-cultural change management is concerned. The reverse is also true and we should not forget that education is a business for many of those involved, whether we like it or not. ELT has been operating in the global community for a considerable length of time and has gained much experience. In this paper I have discussed a small but relevant percentage of the literature related to the management of cross-cultural change both in general and in the more specific context of ELT management. I have applied this and my own experiences of the inter-relationship between change and culture to the evaluation of an approach to innovation adopted by Jones (1995) in establishing a self-access centre for students at a university in Cambodia (see Appendix 1).

2.0 Change and culture

It seems prudent at this stage of the paper to attempt to define what is meant by culture. A very general definition of culture is given by Richards et al. (1992: 94) 'the total set of beliefs, attitudes, customs, behaviour, social habits, etc. of the members of a particular society.' This alludes to the complex nature of culture although the use of the word society may be somewhat misleading. Hofstede (1980: 25) offers that culture is 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another.' This is relatively simplistic, although the term *human group* seems more suitable. It should be noted that one individual may belong to numerous human groups, the smallest being perhaps the family and the largest being the nation, race or religion. The set of beliefs which make up a culture is perhaps more difficult to identify. There have been many attempts to isolate these dimensions of culture as I shall discuss below.

Change is also a reasonably inexact term. In this paper change is used mainly to refer to planned change which is sometimes distinguished by the term innovation. Change never occurs in isolation, it is connected to a myriad of other factors in the culture or society in which it occurs. Miles (1964: 18) cited in White (1987: 212) explains:

> Innovations are always operant in relation to a given social system; they affect one or more parts of the system crucially, and are in a very real sense rejected, modified, accepted and maintained by existing forces in the immediate system.
>
> Miles (1964: 18) cited in White (1987: 212).

A *change agent*, the person responsible for implementing a change, must be very aware and sensitive to the system or culture in which they are operating.

2.1 Change management

'Experts' are often sent from developed countries to help and assist the countries of the developing world. These experts are often respected people from various fields including education, engineering, medicine, etc. The task they face when managing innovation is not as straight forward as directly transferring their knowledge, concessions must be made to

allow for a wide range of cultural variables.

The amount of literature written about implementing and managing change in general is quite staggering. Change management is of great concern to all managers in all businesses. The ability to manage innovation is said to be one of the most necessary skills a modern manager can possess. Fortunes have been made writing about and training people how to manage innovation successfully and the writers have become 'gurus' of international business.

One of the most famous 'gurus', Charles Handy, is internationally renowned for his insight into organisational development, especially innovation management. In typically straight forward language, suggests why change management is so complex and difficult:

> Change is always difficult. There are many people for whom the present is comfortable, who would rather not change at all. You've got to have confidence in the future. That's partly something you get from the community, from the institution, and from the leaders who say things are going to get better

> Handy (1997: 5)

This alludes to the importance of the community, the institution and leadership in the management of change. They are factors which must not only be accounted for but must be considered fully in cross-cultural change management.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner in an interview with Kleiner (2001: 4-5), explain what they feel is most important for a manager's success in a cross cultural setting: '[W]e can never grow to become great business leaders until we actively strive to embrace the behaviours and attitudes that feel most uncomfortable to us'. This could equally apply to the teacher as agent of change. They explain what they mean further with the use of two Japanese words, *shukanteki* and *kyakkanteki*. *Shukanteki* meaning literally 'the host's point of view' and is often translated as 'subjectivity', and *kyakkanteki* meaning literally 'the guest's point of view' and really means the ability to perceive oneself from the outside.

4

They argue that it is important to adopt the guest's point of view about the host's point of view, and by doing so in a bi-polar relationship, such as seller and customer, we can become acutely aware of the reasons for the differences, and learn how too overcome them. If this applied to a cross-cultural, educational setting we can see that the foreign teacher/change agent should attempt to adopt the role of guest and try to understand the hosts', the students' and institution's, point of view.

The capabilities of the change agent are also of great importance to the success of a project. Triandis (2001: 19) suggests that in the future we will:

> '. . . be able to examine the problem of 'fit' between person, task, each managerial phenomenon and culture. Some persons fit better in some tasks and are better at dealing with some managerial phenomena than with others. Furthermore, they are more effective in one kind of culture than in another.'

This level of understanding is not achievable at present, but through the study of 'connectionism' should be available in the future.

2.2 Change in ELT

Even for the relatively specialised field of ELT management there has been a great deal written about innovation. Over the last few decades ELT has seen more changes than many other fields. There have been considerable changes in attitudes or beliefs about what constitutes the most appropriate methodology to use in the classroom. With each new theory comes change, and indeed any scheme which does not have some kind of change as its goal is all but worthless. Education of any kind cannot be separated from change, change that is of people's knowledge and perceptions. How we implement this change is of great importance.

A classroom may be the target of a change, but it cannot be considered in isolation. It is part of a much wider cultural system, which may include the culture of the institution as a whole, the education and political systems in a country, as well as the cultural belief systems

of society. All changes should be considered carefully with reference to these factors. This may be very difficult if the change agent is from a different culture.

Holliday (1994: 3) suggests there may be problems of technology transfer between the branches of ELT in the 'BANA' countries (Kachru's (1985) 'Inner Circle') and the rest of the world. He does point out that what is 'known' about language learning in the west can be applied to other cultures as long as 'it is informed by local knowledge' (ibid.).

2.3 Change and cultural traits

It must be stressed at this stage that we do not wish to deal with ethnocentric stereo-types, but are looking at broad traits found in certain cultures or groups. There may be as much difference intra-culturally as there is inter-culturally and these differences must also be accounted for in project design. '[A]ll cultures contain cognitive tools, and other mediational means, for human adaptation and learning', Vygotsky (1981) cited in Morrison (2002: 227), which will be unique for each culture. There have been attempts by numerous writers to identify these culturally specific cognitive tools, and the number of traits that they have identified has differed. In seemingly parallel studies, Hofstede (1980), Kluckhohn and Strodbeck (1961) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) all identify various dimensions of culture. Straub et al. (2002: 16) recognise the worth of Hofstede's model, 'Hofstede's (1980) work is unique because it offers a mechanism whereby a culture-value can be assigned to a particular group of people.' It does seem to be very accessible but Straub et al. (2002: 16) criticise the model for identifying only national cultures based upon geographical boundaries and not taking into account cultures and groups which exist within a countries borders. I see no reason however why the model could not be used to identify the culture in a more localised setting. It is also the most accessible model, with only four dimensions (although five have appeared in his more recent work). Hofstede (1980, 1986) carried out research to identify national attitude traits related to company culture and the workplace, although his findings are relevant to educational institutions and other areas.

His four dimensions of cultural variability relate in varying degrees to how different cultures deal with and feel about change. He called these four dimensions: *power distance*, *uncertainty avoidance*, *individualism/collectivism* and *masculinity/femininity* (see Hofstede 1980 for full explanation). The first three of these dimensions have a strong relationship to how different cultures deal with change.

Uncertainty Avoidance is the dimension which may have the largest influence on how cultures assimilate change. It is the degree to which cultures avoid situations that are uncertain. Hutchinson and Torres (1994: 322) suggest that 'the most important requirement in the process of change is security. This reinforces the need for structure and visibility.' This relates strongly to *uncertainty avoidance* as any change will have an element of uncertainty and this will reduce security. In cultures that have a strong tendency to avoid uncertainty all efforts must be made to assure success by explaining the goals, methods and ideology of a project.

Power Distance is also of considerable importance to the relationship between teachers and students. Hofstede (1986: 307) provides a concise definition 'Power Distance as a characteristic of a culture defines the extent to which the less powerful persons in a society accept inequality in power and consider it as normal.'

Individualism/Collectivism is a dimension that correlates to some degree with *Power Distance*. *Individualism* implies a loosely knit social framework in which people are supposed to take care of themselves, as opposed to *Collectivism*, where human groups are expected to take care of their members. This dimension will perhaps have most effect on how well students work together in groups or pairs.

3.0 An evaluation of Jones' approach

Jones (1995) outlines an approach to innovation management in which he tries to account for differences in culture between Cambodia and those of the west. He writes about how he played an important role in establishing a self-access centre at Phnom Penh University, Cambodia. In the following section I have evaluated his approach.

Kennedy (1988: 329) cited in Williams and Burden (1994: 23) provides some useful advice:

> [I]n evaluating any project we should be concerned not only to evaluate the outcome of the project . . . but the process of innovation itself, the way in which an innovation is introduced to a system through a project, and the stages it passes through, from the identification of a problem to the selection of the innovation and its final incorporation, acceptance and diffusion.

Jones provides some details of the selection of the innovation and method of final incorporation of the project, and it is these two areas I shall mainly focus upon. Harmer (2001: 340) commenting on Jones (1995) explains that 'he was concerned to make SAC [Self-Access Centres] use appropriate to the styles of learning which his students found most comfortable.' I have attempted to evaluate his findings below.

It is necessary to outline Jones' perceived position of the culture he identified within the University. In terms of Hofstede's (1980) *dimensions,* what he found was a highly collectivist society. He states that the group was the preferred method of working, and that individual outspokenness was generally discouraged in class. There appears also to be a large power distance in Cambodian society in general. Jones (1995: 229) cites Chandler 1983):

> The teacher's relation to his student, like so many relationships in Cambodian society, is lopsided. The teacher, like the parents, bestows, transmits, and commands. The student, like the child, receives, accepts, and obeys. Nothing changes in the transmission process, except perhaps the ignorance of the student.
>
> Chandler (1983: 88)

If this is to be believed, and I can see no reason to doubt it, this is typical of a large power distance society. That Cambodia has a large power distance and low individualism is

hardly surprising as most Asian countries, and in fact most developing countries, appear to share similar characteristics. As to the dimension of uncertainty avoidance, I must speculate slightly more. Students are used to strict discipline in class and Jones says that guidance is essential for every task in the classroom, and this points to the institutional culture being predisposed to uncertainty avoidance. All of these factors are of relevance to Jones' approach.

3.1 Retreat from autonomy

Student autonomy is considered to be a highly desirable requisite of the good language learner, or at least that is the view from the developed world. Self-access centres have become a means in many language schools, to promote autonomous learning. I do not propose to discuss the relative merits of self-access centres in this paper, but it does not seem unreasonable to assume, with what we know about learner differences, that any attempt to accommodate a wide range of learner styles will be of benefit. How this is achieved however is subject to debate.

To promote autonomous learning could in many countries be seen as culturally insensitive and promoting the values of the 'Western' world, especially individual autonomy, which may be considered highly inappropriate in cultures which value collectivism. Holliday (1994: 4) points out '[what] happens in . . . English language classrooms stems from deep within the society as a whole; and the role of the . . . English language teacher is not only to teach English but also to socialize the student as a member of that society.' This may be expecting a great deal from the language teacher and be a little dramatic, but it is well to remember the Japanese proverb '*deru kugi wa utareru*' (literally, 'the nail that sticks up gets pounded down') Anderson (1992: 109). This is from a society which also values conformity and collectivism.

The autonomous learner is difficult to identify. Dickinson (1993: 330-331) lists five

characteristics which he says that the autonomous learner may possess. Autonomous learners are often characterised by:

- Being able to identify what has been taught.
- Being able to formulate their own learning objectives.
- Being able to select and implement appropriate learning strategies.
- Being able to identify strategies that are not working for them, and use others.
- Being consciously involved in monitoring their own learning.

These strategies can be developed or taught to learners so Dickinson suggests. They may however be very alien to the learner in a collective, high power distance society, especially the second and third items. Jones (1995) suggests that his students are unused to formulating their own learning objectives, so help and advice is required from a teacher in the centre. This help may start to become less necessary as time goes on, because the students will start to become familiar with the concepts of formulating their own learning objectives. The role of 'pathways' (Kell and Newton 1997: 48) in the centre could also have been exploited. Learners follow study 'pathways' through the centre, they are guided in the ordering and subject of study items when new to the centre. This system trains learners in the fundamentals of self-study and prepares them for what Miller and Rogerson-Revell (1993) term the 'supermarket' system, where students make their own choices from lists of materials.

3.2 Student-centred design

Cambodia is a relatively unfamiliar culture to most 'Westerners', and I suspect the thought of designing a centre to accommodate the cultural values of the students was quite daunting. Jones fails to describe in detail how he researched the culture, if he did, before entering the country but says that he involved students in the design of the centre. The students were involved not only at the start but remained involved as the centre evolved. This involvement fulfilled a number of purposes.

The students obtained an *ownership* of the project, which made them part of it and created enthusiasm. Jones (1995:232) commenting on the group's enthusiasm 'With enthusiasm came a sense of pride in and responsibility for the self-access centre which, we believe, other students [non-committee members] are beginning to share.' In no sense were the students made to feel alienated or uncertain about the route the project would take.

This collective planning meant that there was little cultural friction which created a productive environment for innovation to occur. Nicholls (1983:75) quoted in White (1988: 139) gives advice on a setting for effective innovation to occur. '[T]he creation of a climate in which ideas can be discussed openly, criticised and rejected, while those putting forward the ideas are accepted within the group, is more likely to lead to successful innovation.' This seems to fit well with what Jones says about the centre's *Self-access Advisory Committee.* 'This small group had some good, practicable ideas, as well as a few that were rather too eccentric and had to be overruled' Jones (1995:232).

Trompenaars et al. (2001: 3) give an example from a case study of the toy maker 'LEGO'. The company was coming up with a large number of creative ideas, but despite this few were being realised. This was because acceptance of an idea depended largely upon the status of the person suggesting the idea. Ideas put forward by board members were generally accepted, whereas the ideas from junior staff were usually ignored. It seems that Jones tried to avoid this kind of idea blocking schism, although there is little chance of discovering what was deemed too eccentric.

Japan is considered to have a high power distance and is well known for its propensity to hold meetings. I often question the effectiveness of these meetings in my own working situation. Ideas are only voiced by junior company members if it is fairly certain that they will be approved by the most senior member of the company present (and are often suggested by their seniors first). In my own experience of holding discussions and debates within company English classes, Power Distance has a great effect on the group dynamic as

the most senior members of the company are never contradicted whereas those in lower positions seldom offer their opinions. Was this the case in Jones' Self-access Advisory Committee? This kind of *Power Distance* affected group dynamic is not immediately obvious to an 'outsider'; it has certainly taken me a number of years to become acutely aware of the situation in my own classes. It also seems appropriate to raise a question about whether there was any unseen inequality amongst the Cambodian members of the group or were they all of equal status?

Many students only have the opportunity to learn a language in a classroom setting, and there are a number of society specific conventions in the classroom which 'derive in part from the deeper and less accessible social and psychological dimensions of the teacher-learner relationship.' Wright (1980: 83).

3.3 Provision of information

In many Western cultures there is often strong resistance to change which causes many difficulties which if handled incorrectly by change agent may result in failure of a project. This resistance, if managed correctly however, can lead to creative improvements in design of product. Resistance is a highly complex entity that affects the outcomes and success of innovation, both positively and negatively (see Waddell and Amrik (1998) for further discussion of this point).

In a culture with a large Power Distance it may be acceptable, and in many cultures the norm, for those in power to exercise control over and direct the activities of those with lesser power. In this sense it seems expedient behaviour for the expert to tell students to visit the centre and study if they wish to improve their English. There may be some problems though, resistance, both positive and negative, may be quickly forgotten because it comes from those in power. This lack of resistance may be inefficient the longer term by not shaping a project to suit a culture. In small Power Distance countries this kind of top-down

instruction may be less acceptable, therefore creating positive resistance.

Jones (1995) mentions little about resistance to his centre's construction, but because the ideas came from this visiting expert, perhaps resistance was not voiced. It is difficult to tell if this was the case, but if it was, it may be possible that the centre is not as culturally sensitive as Jones (1995) himself thinks.

3.4 Speed of implementation

The innovation was implemented during Jones' academic year in Cambodia. I will assume that this was less than a calendar year, this is purely conjecture, but this still seems like a reasonable time frame for the project. We presume that the changes were implemented gradually over this period and perhaps the centre continued to evolve after Jones had left the country.

4.0 Implications for teaching

At the time of writing I am involved in planning a teacher development program for a high school in Japan, which I will also teach. Although the projects are not obviously similar, there are a number of similarities. I am from a different culture to the participants of the course, who are all Japanese (I am British). I have been careful to involve the participants in the planning of the course to avoid amongst other things, cultural insensitivity. We have discussed the needs of the participants in a number of meetings, and I believe there is evidence to suggest the Japanese enjoy taking part in meetings, making it a familiar setting for the alien concept of student-centred learning.

An understanding of the relationship between culture and change is necessary for every expatriate teacher if they are to avoid insensitivity, although reaching a state of cultural

enlightenment will involve much more than reading a few books about a country's culture. Culture is unique to every institution within a country, and every person within those institutions. A quantitative value given to a country's culture, such as that provided by Hofstede's dimensions, may serve as a guideline to a teacher new to a country, but it should only be a used as a guide line. It is good also to remember that some resistance to change or new ideas can be used to one's advantage, in as much as it will provide a creative environment for change and mean the change will be more culturally specific.

5.0 Conclusion.

As Jones (1995) wrote the paper whilst still in Cambodia, and spent at most a year there, I find that it is very difficult judge the success of the project from the information provided. The time frame for such judgement would be more suitable if we provided with further report perhaps five years after the inception of the project. However I think that what Jones achieved was in fact sensitive to the culture of the institution as well as the larger culture of the country, perhaps overly so.

Anderson (1994: 107) states that Western instructors 'who develop careers and find personal fulfilment in Japan, are those who are able – often by trial and error – to build on the Japanese styles of communication rather than striking out against them.' I believe this applies to some extent to everyone living or working in another culture. It is important to adapt, remain flexible and entertain ideas which may seem alien to one's own culturally acceptable *modus operandi*. It may also be beneficial to have a healthy level of resistance to an idea, in order to create a kind of *check and balance* to the change agent's power, and also to make a creative environment for innovation.

Handy (1990: 7) and Senge (1993: 22) cited in Kennedy and Edwards (1998: 61) give the example of putting a frog into hot water , that if the water is hot the dramatic change in temperature will cause the frog to leap out. If the frog is put in cold water and the water

slowly heated the frog will not notice and let itself be boiled to death. We can speculate about the deeper meanings of this allusion applied to change. In Jones' approach I believe he has taken the middle ground. I would liken his approach to the Japanese tradition of bathing outside in winter in hot springs. Many hot springs are in the mountains in Japan where it is very cold and snowy. Bathing is performed with only a small handkerchief sized towel to protect your modesty. There is always a dilemma when about to immerse oneself in the very hot water, if one enters too quickly the shock from the change in temperature is quite large, but if procrastination occurs for too long you become very cold. You *must* enter the water, and initially it is quite uncomfortable. After some time though, you feel warm and comfortable and are happy you took the plunge, and as long as you remember to put your towel on your head to protect you from the falling snow, you will remain comfortable for as long as you wish to bathe.

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