

The Cultural Influence of ‘Power Distance’ in Language Learning

Johnny Mendoza Govea
2507 Mitsukue, Ikata-cho,
Nishiuwa-gun, Ehime-ken
JAPAN

For
The University of Birmingham
MA TEFL/TESL
Open Distance Learning Programme,
Module 1:
Language Teaching Methodology
&
Classroom Research and Research Methods
February 1, 2007

1. Introduction

Culture profoundly influences the development of language. ‘It is culture, responding to its particular ecological niche, that provides the bulk of the conceptual packages that are coded in any particular language’ (Levinson: 2003: 26-27). In fact, Levinson continues, ‘the contents of language, and much of its form, are thus largely the products of cultural tradition’ (Ibid: 27). Yet, cultural traditions vary worldwide, thereby affecting educational ideologies. For example, in the case of Hong Kong and Sydney,

...the Chinese apparatus is centered on the development and maintenance of a sense of belonging to an orderly and cohesive system, while the Australian system is devoted to the development of learners as independent and creative individuals (De Fina: 2004: 554).

In turn, ‘these philosophies translate into very different classroom practices and methodologies in the two contexts’ (Ibid: 554). So, various, culturally-influenced systems may thus clash due to the differences in the expectations of and the methods employed by both teachers and students involved in a cross-cultural, second language learning process. ‘As teacher/student interaction is such an archetypal human phenomenon, and so deeply rooted in the culture of a society, *cross-cultural* learning situations are fundamentally problematic for both parties’ (Hofstede: 1986: 303).

1.1 Educational values in second language learning

Hofstede notes that in cross-cultural learning situations, there are ‘teacher/student pairs in which the partners were born, raised and mentally programmed in different cultures prior to their interaction in school’ (Hofstede: 1986: 302). As such situations transpire, we must take heed of the kinds of values about language learning that both students and teachers employ. ‘Students bring to the classroom very specific assumptions about how to learn a language and about the kinds of activities and approaches they believe to

be useful' (Richards and Lockhart: 1996: 55). In parallel, 'teachers interpret their roles in different ways depending on the kinds of schools in which they work, the teaching methods they employ, their individual personalities, and their cultural backgrounds' (Ibid: 98). At times, discrepancies between these students' assumptions and teachers' interpretations can occur in culturally mixed, teaching situations. 'Differences between teachers' and learners' beliefs can sometimes lead to a mismatch between their assumptions about what is useful to focus on in a language lesson' (Ibid: 53).

1.2 Teacher beliefs

So, what are some of the initial teacher beliefs upon which they base their theories about language teaching? Richards and Lockhart support the notion that 'teachers' belief systems are built up gradually over time' (Ibid: 30). These systems are based on the following:

1. Their own experience as language learners.
 2. Experience of what works best.
 3. Established practice (*preferred styles, personal and/or institutional*).
 4. Personality factors.
 5. Educationally based or research-based principles.
 6. Principles derived from an approach or method (*Communicative Language teaching, Cooperative Language Learning, etc.*).
- (Kindsvatter, Willen and Ishler in Richards and Lockhart (with my parenthetical, italicized inserts): 1996: 30-31).

Commencing from these sources are beliefs about English, learning, teaching, language programs and curriculum, and language teaching as a profession (Richards and Lockhart: 32-40). Some beliefs about English would be that it is 'the language of English literature' or 'of colonialism' or 'of doing business and making money' (Ibid: 32). Beliefs about *learning and teaching* might be that the teacher 'is a resource

person who provides language input for the learner to work on' or '[should] assist learners to become self-directed by providing access to language data through such activities as active listening, role play and interaction with native speakers (Brindley in Richards and Lockhart: 34). Some teachers might 'teach to the book' or consider themselves professionals 'willing to assume professional responsibilities,' 'take charge of their teaching' and 'improve the learning outcomes of their students' (Richards and Lockhart: 38-40).

1.3 Learner beliefs

Learners' belief systems cover a wide range of issues and can influence learners' motivation to learn, their expectations about language learning, their perceptions about what is easy or difficult about language, as well as the kind of learning strategies they favor (Ibid: 52).

These belief systems, rooted in the students' cultures, 'can lead to students undervaluing an activity assigned by the teacher,' generate 'specific expectations as to how teachers teach and what their roles and responsibilities are,' and compel learners to 'value some language learning strategies which the teacher may try to discourage.' The systems can also initiate 'views about what constitutes appropriate forms of classroom interaction and classroom behavior' as well as engender self-perceptions which 'can influence the use [learners] make of opportunities available for language learning and the priorities they set for themselves' (Ibid: 54-56). Some learners' assumptions about *learning and teaching* (see section 1.2 above) might directly conflict with a teacher's beliefs. For example, 'learning consists of acquiring a body of knowledge' which the teacher should 'impart...to the learner through such activities as explanation, writing and example' (Brindley in Richards and Lockhart: 35). If such discrepancies between what the teacher assumes and what the students expect are not rectified, the consequences 'are likely to be misunderstanding and mistrust on the part of both teachers and learners' (Ibid: 35).

2. Purpose

This paper, in relation to Brown's suggestion that the values inherent in 'collectivist' and 'individualist' societies might affect student-student and teacher-student interactions (Brown: 2000: 192), will answer the following questions: 1. How does the cultural value of 'power distance' affect such interactions? and 2. How do these effects drive the author's personal methodology?

2.1 Individualism, Collectivism and Power Distance

Hofstede says that values are seldom recognized as being culturally relative and, thus, 'cross-cultural learning situations are rife with premature judgements' (Hofstede: 1986: 305). His research on differences in work-related values across 50 countries concluded that four characteristics were apparent: individualism versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity versus femininity. He then demonstrates how each of these characteristics is depicted in the student-student and teacher-student relationships (Ibid: 306-316). Hofstede summarizes that 'a collectivist society is tightly integrated' around "in-groups," 'an individualist society is loosely integrated' around self-interests and the interests of the immediate family, and 'power distance as a characteristic of culture defines the extent to which the less powerful persons in a society accept the inequality in power and consider it normal' (Ibid: 307). Uncertainty avoidance and masculinity versus femininity will not be dealt with in this paper as such.

2.2 Mexican-American educational/social setting

In reading Hofstede's article, I choose different items from the table related to the Individualism versus Collectivism dimensions (see below) as they pertained to the author's experience as a student in southwest Texas. The underlined items indicate my choices.

Table 1

Collectivist Societies	Individualist Societies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * <u>positive association in society with whatever is rooted in tradition</u> * the young should learn; adults cannot accept the student role * <u>students expect to learn how to do</u> * individual students will only speak up in class when called upon personally by the teacher * individuals will only speak up in small groups * large classes split socially into smaller, cohesive subgroups based on particular criteria (e.g. ethnic affiliation) * formal harmony in learning situations should be maintained at all times (T-groups are taboo) * <u>neither the teacher nor any student should ever be made to lose face</u> * <u>education is a way of gaining prestige in one's social environment and of joining a higher status group ("a ticket to a ride")</u> * <u>diploma certificates are important and displayed on walls</u> * acquiring certificates, even through illegal means (cheating, corruption) is more important than acquiring competence * <u>teachers are expected to give preferential treatment to some students (e.g. based on ethnic affiliation or on recommendation by an influential person)</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * positive association in society with whatever is "new" * <u>one is never too old to learn: "permanent education"</u> * students expect to learn how to learn * <u>individual students will speak up in class in response to a general invitation by the teacher</u> * <u>individuals will speak up in large groups</u> * <u>subgroupings in class vary from one situation to the next based on universalist criteria (e.g. the task "at hand")</u> * <u>confrontation in learning situations can be salutary; conflicts can be brought into the open</u> * face-consciousness is weak * education is a way of improving one's economic worth and self-respect based on ability and competence * diploma certificates have little symbolic value * <u>acquiring competence is more important than acquiring certificates</u> * teachers are expected to be strictly impartial

(Ibid (with my underlined choices): 312)

Apparently, the experiences were varied in terms of what constituted accepted behavior within a Mexican-American classroom. These reflect the historical tensions between Tejanos, the original Mexican "Texans," and Anglos, who 'saw Tejanos as "culturally dissimilar" and unassimilable (sic)... [while] Tejanos also complacently accepted social inequality' (Rodriguez: 21 Jan. 07). A perceived "'language handicap" in [the segregated] Mexican schools was an excuse to isolate the children' (Ibid). The author grew up during the 1980s when schools were already desegregated through the Equal

Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which was ratified in 1868 but fully enacted in 1954 after *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* challenged "Separate but Equal" educational facility laws. Schools were also providing bilingual (English-Spanish) instruction as per the legal mandate of the Bilingual Education and Training Act of 1973 (Texas Senate Bill 121) (Ibid). Yet, the social stigma of this power struggle in Texas schools was fresh in the minds of the author's teachers, principles and parents during his own educational development.

2.3 Blending Individualism/Collectivism

Please note in the selections made from each dimension in the table above that the author's educational/cultural setting blends the notions of Collectivism and Individualism in very interesting ways. For a moment, a review of one of Hofstede's plot graphs is in order. According to a power distance X individualism-collectivism plot for 50 countries and 3 regions, the United States is in the small power distance, high individualism quadrant while Mexico diagonally opposes it in its position in the large power distance, low individualism quadrant of the graph (Hofstede: 1986: 309). This means that in the United States, there is more likely a chance that all of a person's educational experiences will be reflected on the right side of Table 1 (above) which represents characteristics of Individualist Societies. It also means that a Mexican's responses would be more likely captured on the left side of Table 1 or the Collectivist Societies side. Yet, true to the geography of the author's U.S./Mexico border homeland, his answers were mixed on both sides of the Table just as his culture and educational experience is mixed with both characteristics of individualism and collectivism.

3. Japanese educational/social setting

Now, let's take a look at the educational setting for Japan, as this is where the author

now teaches English as a second language. Again, using Hofstede's plot graph, we find that Japan is in the lower realm of the large power distance, low individualism quadrant of the graph (Ibid: 309). This means that Japanese society is neither as tolerant of large power distance as Mexicans are nor as individualistic as Americans are. According to the graph, Japanese society should fit somewhere between American and Mexican societies in terms of power distance and individualism/collectivism, though the probable answers of one of its members for Table 1 would fall mainly on the Collectivist Societies side. Let's investigate deeper:

Following [World War II] the Japanese educational system was restructured by the American occupation to conform to American concepts and to be less elitist and more fitted to the type of mass society Japan was developing (Reischauer: 1977: 170).

Using the American six-three-three-four system, that is, six years for elementary, three for junior high, three for high school and four for university, a single track with each level leading sequentially to the next, and an intensity of the educational experience, 'Japanese schools actually achieve remarkably uniform levels of excellence, with few of the great discrepancies in quality that are common in the United States between city, rural, and suburban schools' (Ibid: 170-171).

3.1 American versus Japanese educational systems

Japanese educational steps are sequential and, being part of a collectivist society, are strictly enforced to maintain the harmony of the class groups within each step. 'In the looser American system, the self-educated man can more easily make his mark or the late bloomer can make a brilliant finish after a slow start.' Unfortunately for such people, 'there is less room...in Japan's tighter society.' This stringent policy is reinforced by 'the close link between academic achievement and success in life' (Ibid: 171). As a result, staying on track is of the utmost importance and the high school and university entrance examinations, being the gates through which every student must

pass in order to succeed academically, 'are competition at its worst...subjecting the student to severe pressures...and even distorting the content of his education.'

Particular to the field of English study,

this means that there is careful preparation for the sort of complex grammar questions that are asked on examinations, but less attention paid to actually learning to read English and virtually none to speaking it or understanding it by ear (Ibid: 172).

'From kindergarten to the university entrance examination, [children] are expected to be disciplined and competitive and at university they are again allowed to take it easy' (Hofstede: 1986: 313). Though somewhat more lip service is given to communicative strategies now in the Japanese educational system, the above statements still reflect the status quo.

4. Asian versus Western teacher-student roles

The distance of accepted power between teacher and student within Asian societies is a much wider than it is in the West. Confucius said that "teacher" is the most respected profession in society. For Asian communities, based on his model, 'teaching is viewed as a teacher-controlled and directed process' (Richards and Lockhart: 1996: 107). The Chinese attitude facilitates the expectation 'that the learner will, at an appropriate time, be able to reproduce the knowledge in the same form as it was presented to him by his teacher' (Brick in Richards and Lockhart: 1996: 107). In regards to Japan, 'the traditional special aura about learning and the teacher's role lingers...and teachers remain for the most part proud and dedicated participants in this heritage' (Reischauer: 1977: 171). On the other hand, Western education 'focuses more on individual learner creativity and encourages the teacher to facilitate learning and encourage independent

learning' (Richards and Lockhart: 1996: 107). Socrates once said, 'Children today are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers.' This remains true of some Western learners today as in Socrates' day and so their teachers must 'emphasize inductive approaches more than deductive approaches, as well as collaborative arrangements such as group work, which encourage learners to assume some of the responsibilities for their own learning' (Ibid: 107).

4.1 Different expectations

So, if teachers in Japan are expected to lead and dictate the flow of information in their classes in the Confucian way, what happens when the instructions they give are geared toward making the students decide what to learn, as in the Western inductive approach? Here is what one Japanese EFL teacher says,

If I do group work or open-ended communicative activities, the students and other colleagues will feel that I'm not really teaching them. They will feel that I didn't have anything really planned for the lesson and that I'm just filling time. (Ibid: 108)

Regardless of whether this teacher's students and faculty peers actually think in the way he describes, his way of thinking about the situation is a good example of the different expectations of teacher roles in a cross-cultural context. Here is another example from an American teacher in a U.S. based program for foreign students:

My students are surprised if I try to get information from them about what they want to study in my class. They feel that I should know what they need to know and that there is no need to ask them. (Ibid: 108)

In this case too, the teacher faces a mismatch of role expectations. Additionally, it is highly likely that the native languages of the teacher and students are different with reference to foreign language classes, thus creating a further disadvantage for the students. Fortunately, the author's native language is English but many of his classmates were native Spanish speakers and had to improve their English language skills through EFL classes in the environment described in section 2.2 above. It becomes imperative that the teacher and/or institution take the initiative in such a circumstance.

The chances for successful cultural adaptation are better if the *teacher* is to teach in the students' language rather than if the *student* is to learn in the teacher's language, because the teacher has more power over the learning situation than any single student' (Hofstede: 1986: 314).

If this cannot take place in the initial meeting of the teacher and the students, as was the author's case when he first arrived in Japan, then it ought to as soon as possible in order to initiate a deeper appreciation for students' position as language learners, to activate a culturally-sensitive curriculum and to build a bridge between different expectations.

5. Adaptation to team-teaching environment

For the author, the element of team teaching also comes into play where the head teacher of the class, a Japanese EFL teacher, uses communicative activities to some extent but relies heavily on grammar instruction and basic functional instruction. The author works as this head teacher's assistant, thus the author always follows his lead in terms of tone and pacing of the lessons, classroom management, methodology used and "communicative activities." The author understands how the grammatical constraints

dictated by the entrance examinations for high school weigh heavily on his supervisor in his role as the only junior high school English teacher in the area and he admires the head teacher's sense of responsibility for his students' needs. Yet, 'where grammar is the agenda, whether overt or covert, then grammar rules' (Thornbury: 1996:280). The primary objective of language is communication.

Up to, and including the 1960s, language was generally seen as a system of rules, and the task for language learners was to internalize these rules by whatever means were at their disposal (Nunan: 1999: 9).

The above statement to some extent reflects the thinking, educational training and hands-on experience of the author's supervising teacher. In contrast, 'during the 1970s...language was seen as a system for the expression of meaning...rather than as a system of abstract syntactic rules' (Ibid: 9). The entirety of the author's educational career until present has been imbued with this current view of language learning.

5.1 "Ironing out" the differences

In all fairness, a language program that teaches a multitude of elements such as meaning, form, syntax, accuracy, fluency and context and teaches each to perfection is a well-rounded, ideal, ambitious and **highly unlikely** one. The process of mending the fences between a strictly grammar-based curriculum and a highly communicative one is a delicate matter that the author will attempt to display by touching on the cross-cultural, cross-generational and cross-methodological elements at play.

By linking developments in language teaching firmly to the educational mainstream, and by testing new ideas critically, we should reach a phase in the evolution of the profession in which we are not ashamed to admit to merit past practices, while, at the same time, being able to acknowledge that significant improvements are necessary (Ibid: 69).

The author and his supervisor do make compromises within their methodologies to accommodate one another, just as Nunan suggests. Of course, the head teacher is much more fluent in many teaching practices with his decades of experience while the author has a fresh perspective on using language as a tool for communication. Neither teacher is wrong in his approach; a comprehensive synthesis of each would facilitate the students' improved learning. In this way, it would be easier to avoid the situation in which 'learners do not find room to speak as themselves, to use [English] in communicative encounters, to create text, to stimulate responses from fellow learners, or to find solutions to relevant problems' (Thornbury: 1996: 279).

5.2 “Wine with cheese and crackers”

Recently, the author attended a Mid-Year Conference for Assistant Language Teachers (ALT), the author's official title, and their respective team-teaching partners, the Japanese Teachers of English (JTE), which was sponsored by the local Prefectural Board of Education, the national Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology as well as the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations. His head teacher, a JTE, was in attendance as well. After all the formalities, a keynote speech was given by Professor Tatsuya Matsumoto of Matsuyama Shinonome College in which, to paraphrase, he said that JTEs should control the class (i.e. classroom management) and ALTs should take initiative to motivate students (i.e. create instances for working out meaning). He also said that English was like wine which tastes better with “cheese and crackers,” a metaphor for JTEs and ALTs. Of course, one can have just cheese with wine or just crackers, he continued, but the combination of the two is “really delicious.” So, the convergence of the best thoughts of two minds into the English foreign language curriculum gives more advantages to students and opens the

eyes of both teachers as well. By working out roles for each teacher beforehand and together creating opportunities for different strategies to language teaching, a team-teaching pair can instill fluency as well as accuracy in their students' English abilities.

6. Classroom awareness

Thus far, I have presented the power structures within teacher-student relationships, teacher-teacher relationships with regard to a team-teaching pair and the cross-cultural, historical influences that affect all involved. Now that there is a clear understanding of these elements, possible scenarios for resolution must be introduced. 'If CLT [(Communicative language teaching)] is to become more 'communicative'...teachers need to be encouraged to gain greater understanding of the interactional processes of their own classrooms' (Burns in Thornbury: 281). Specific to the author's situation, both he and the head JTE need to (re)evaluate their own influences and interaction in terms of what best suits the students' needs. The author readily accepts his role as an assistant English teacher within the classroom power structure. He consistently acknowledges the authority and experience of his head teacher and he whole-heartedly remains faithful to the notion of a communicative approach to language learning while being mindful of the practical expectations of such a program within the Japanese educational structure. The author also recognizes that his head JTE is constantly revising his own personal methodology, as teachers are always sensitive to the inner workings of their classrooms and set out to strike a delicate balance of power between themselves, assistant teachers and their students. Furthermore, the students recognize their roles as sometimes passive, sometimes active learners, depending on how learner-oriented the lesson activities are and adapt accordingly in relation with the teachers and

each other. These actions represent a good start toward the direction of learner-centered education.

6.1 Communicative language teaching

From traditional, teacher-centered classrooms, students ‘often knew a good deal about the language but were unable to use this knowledge to communicate appropriately’ (Nunan: 70-71). This meant that a move toward low-structure, or learner-centered, teaching was necessary to better facilitate communication and give learners more options as well as greater autonomy. (Ibid: 75) Communicative language teaching ‘refers to a diverse set of principles that reflect a communicative view of language and language learning and that can be used to support a wide variety of classroom procedures’ (Richards and Rodgers: 2001: 172). The author couldn’t define this term prior to his studies within this Master’s programme but he was aware of the effects of such an approach since this was how language was presented to him during his previous tenure as a student from pre-school through post-secondary university. A learner’s active involvement is paramount to the success of any kind of curriculum, most especially a language learning curriculum in which the language is both the content of the lesson and the mode of instruction. One of the basic principles upon which communicative language teaching is founded is that ‘learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error’ (Ibid: 172). Therefore, low-structured teaching is key to the promotion of a learning environment that supports this principle.

7. Conclusion

An examination of the author’s current working conditions as an assistant English teacher within the classroom of a Japanese Teacher of English has been presented in

terms of power structure between the two teachers, the teachers and students as well as among the students. Student-student interaction is either promoted or denied by how many pedagogical opportunities they are allowed with the teachers' choice of curriculum. The postulation was made that the dynamics of the classroom are influenced by the Collectivist Japanese society of the JTE and his students on the one hand, and the author's own Mexican-American blend of Individualist/Collectivist social upbringing on the other. In terms of how this affects the author's choice of methodology, the simple answer is that it emboldens his fervor to champion a more communicative, low-structured classroom in order to further grant students chances to learn English by using it in meaningful ways. The author promised his students that he would learn as much Japanese as possible to better understand their difficulties, with the idea in mind that language learning isn't just about learning the rules or forms. It's about getting the thoughts that form in your mind across to another human being in such a way that is easy for them to understand. Understanding is based on mutual expression, trust in communicative abilities and sympathy to such expression of human thought. Listen with your heart as well as your ear in order to get across your meaning and benefit the communication process. This notion translates well in any language.

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