Power Distance in the EFL/ESL classroom.

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1. Introduction

The studying of a second or foreign language is a daunting undertaking for any student, be they young or old. Learning a second language is not only about mastering the basics of the language being studied, it is also about cultivating the mind towards the culture of the language.

1. 1 Question

To fulfil the purpose of the question, which is to discuss the difference in teacher/student and student/student interactions relating to the power distance dimension, I would like to refer to Hofstede (1986: 313), “Differences in Teacher/Student and Student/Student Interaction Related to the Power Distance Dimension”. The table lists the differences of the interactions between students and teachers within the power distance dimension. The differences that are underlined are those that I will focus on in my discussion throughout this paper. It should be noted that these differences are the extremes of behaviour found to occur; therefore not all of the differences in the table can be related to all cultures. Some differences may be specific to a particular country, school, teacher or even class of students.

SMALL POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES	LARGE POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES
- stress on impersonal “truth which can be in principle be obtained from any competent person	- stress on personal “wisdom which is transferred - in the relationship with a particular teacher (guru)
- a teacher should respect the independence of his/her students	- a teacher merits the respect of his/her students
- student-centred education (premium on initiative)	- teacher-centred education (premium on order)
- teacher expects students to initiate communication	- students expect teacher to initiate communication
- teacher expects students to find their own paths	- students expect teacher to outline paths to follow
- students may speak up spontaneously in class	- students speak up in class only when invited by the teacher
- students allowed to contradict or criticize teacher	- teacher is never contradicted nor publicly criticised
- effectiveness of learning related to amount of two-way	- effectiveness of learning related to excellence of

communication in class - outside class, teachers are treated as equals - in teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the student - younger teachers are more liked than older teachers	the teacher - respect for teachers is also shown outside class - in teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the teacher - older teachers are more respected than younger teachers

2.0 The Teacher

The role of the teacher in the second or foreign language classroom is a varied one. Not only are they there to instruct the students on the basics of the language, they are there to also impart knowledge of the culture of the language being learned. As Stevick cautions that when learning a second language, students can feel alienated from their families, their own and target cultures and even from themselves (Stevick 1976b cited in Brown 2007: 200). Teachers should be aware that students could be experiencing the feelings described above and should take them into consideration when planning and carrying out lessons. As Williams and Burden point out, a successful teacher is one who uses his/her knowledge of the teaching and learning processes to enable students to have confidence inside and outside the language classroom (Williams and Burden 1997: 5).

2.1 Culture Differences

In order to further understand the culture of the foreign or second language, teachers need a way of comparing it to that of the students and to do so, they could look to Hofstede's (1986) four-dimensional model of cultural differences. Hofstede gathered data from fifty countries and concluded that there were four dimensions that could be used to compare cultures of different countries. The labels chosen for the dimensions were, individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity (Hofstede 1986: 307). This author will focus on the

individualism/collectivism and power distance dimensions throughout the remainder of this paper.

2.2 Individualism and Collectivism

Hofstede (1986: 307) defines individualism as a culture that "… assumes that any person looks primarily after his/her own interest and the interest of his/her immediate family…" He then goes on to define collectivism as a culture that "…assumes that any person through birth and possible later events belongs to one or more tight "in-groups" from which he/she cannot detach him/herself." For example, a country with a high individualistic culture would be New Zealand and one with a low individualistic culture (or high collectivistic culture) would be Malaysia (data cited from Hofstede 2005: 83). In other words, in New Zealand the individual is more important than the group and in Malaysia the group is more important than the individual.

2.3 Power Distance

Power distance is defined in Hofstede (1986: 307) "… 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." In keeping with the above examples, New Zealand shows a small power distance, in other words, all members of society in New Zealand are deemed to be equal, however, Malaysia shows large power distance and therefore society in Malaysia accepts that there is a large difference between the social classes (data cited from Hofstede 2005: 83).

3.0 Respect in the Classroom

During my secondary education between 1986 and 1993, teachers were automatically given respect from the students, regardless of how young or old the teacher was. Teachers, in turn, respected the students' individuality as learners and subsequently encouraged us to be more independent as learners. Teachers may find it difficult to create an atmosphere for optimal learning if they feel that the students do not respect them. Without the respect of the students, the teacher may have discipline, motivational and behavioural issues during the lesson.

As a teacher in a Japanese high school, I have observed behaviour that correlates with the large power distance dimension in the table above. Students appear to respect older teachers more than younger teachers and one can almost sense the students have a 'fear' of the older teachers. As seniority rules have an influence on the relationship between students and teachers, students think that teachers should be respected because of their age, ability and experience and should never be questioned as what they say is considered to be always right (Davies and Ikeno 2002: 191).

3.1 Team Teaching

I team teach with several Japanese teachers of English (hereby after referred to as JTE) and have been in the position to observe the students interactions with these teachers. I have witnessed that the students never seem to question what the JTE tells them. For example, I had the unenviable task of informing a class of fourteen first grade senior high students of when their oral communication English test would be. Upon hearing this, one of the students immediately replied with a 'yada' (no/I don't want to). This would appear to be a normal reaction from a student however, in collectivist cultures, as Japan is, directly confronting another person is looked upon as impolite and the use of the word no is subsequently rare (Hofstede 2005: 86). By contrast, when the JTE translated what I had said, the same student shrugged her

shoulders and started asking the JTE for the finer details of the test. The student's initial reaction could possibly be seen as one of shock after learning that she was required to do a test or it is possible that because I am not Japanese and therefore not part of the classroom group, the student felt there would be no shame brought on by displaying such an emotional reaction. Taking that into account, by displaying the same reaction to the JTE may have brought considerable shame on to the classroom group. Such as outburst would be undesirable as the Japanese have a strong dislike of openly showing their true emotions (Reischauer and Jansen 2005: 138).

3.2 Teacher-Centred Education

In cultures with a large power distance dimension, the teacher is viewed as having a pivotal role in the classroom. This traditional approach to teaching has also been referred to as "high-structure teaching" (Nunan 1999: 75) in which the learner has very little control over what he/she will be learning and how they will be learning, as opposed to "low-structure teaching" (Nunan, 1999: 75) in which the learner has more independence in what he/she will be learning.

3.3 High-Structure Teaching

The traditional English lesson in Japanese high schools would appear to be centred on the teacher. It seems that much emphasis is placed on preparing for entrance examinations, be they for senior high schools or universities. It seems possible that in order to adequately prepare students for such examinations, a Japanese equivalent of the grammar-translation method is used (O`Donnell 2005:300). It seems appropriate to approach the teaching of English in this way, as the Japanese student must learn Kanji in the same manner, rote memorisation. The grammar-translation method may be an apt method for teachers to use in order to develop the translation and grammar

awareness skills of the students, however in an English oral communication class, a teacher-centred, high-structure method is clearly unsuitable. O`Donnell agrees that focusing on the development of translations skills does not do enough to improve the oral communication skills of the students (O`Donnell 2005: 300).

3.3.1 I Cannot Speak French

My experiences of learning French twenty years ago at high school were not good experiences. It would appear that my French teacher believed only in the grammar-translation method as my lessons were very much geared towards learning lists of vocabulary, translating texts from non-authentic books and completing endless listening comprehensions. He did not use communicative based tasks including classroom surveys, presentations or role-plays during the lessons. I hated learning French and subsequently have a fear of learning languages.

Clearly my French teacher had been taught in this way, as the way in teachers carry out their job is a ‘reflection of what they know and believe….’ (Richards and Lockhart 1996: 29), and he probably believed that it was the only way to teach a foreign language. A very teacher-centred method does not allow for interactions between the students as all of their attention is focused on the teacher and surely that is the point of oral communication classes, for the students to communicate in a foreign language?

Using a method that focuses so much on the teacher also inhibits the interaction between students and teachers. There needs to be a certain amount of interaction between them in order for the students to feel comfortable and to have confidence in their learning. If students are not comfortable in the classroom, then they will be reluctant to take risks during the learning process.

During my high school French programme, I had the great fortune to be taught by a native French teacher for two weeks. Any questions that were posed to her were answered in French and she insisted that French be used as much as possible for all communications in class including when she asked us to complete classroom surveys and role-plays. The lessons were very noisy and it did not feel like my regular French lesson as I was genuinely enjoying each lesson.

By introducing new activities into the classroom, the teacher was able to increase the amount of interaction between herself and the students thus leading to an increase in the students willingness to communicate with her even though the risk of making mistakes were higher than if the students did not speak.

3.4 Initiating Communication

The reluctance of the Japanese student of English to take the first step in initiating communication is often frustrating for the language teacher. Their reluctance could be seen as a lack of confidence in their ability, a fear of making a mistake or they are not motivated enough to make the effort, however it is more likely to be the result of their culture that has resulted in this unwillingness to take a communicative risk. The students also seem reluctant to view their opinions; they do not want to appear to be drawing attention to themselves in any way. As the famous Japanese saying says, "….the nail that sticks out gets banged down" (Reischauer and Jansen 2005: 136), therefore the Japanese prefer that individuals to not stand out, they want to protect the harmony of the group.

3.4.1 The Greeting

From my first lesson in a Japanese high school, greetings have always been the first form of communication that has taken place between the teacher and students; the teacher undoubtedly initiates this group greeting. My initial reaction to this greeting

was one of embarrassment and I was reluctant to use it however, with practice, I learned that it is an excellent tool in gauging the mood and general attitude of the students. If an individual student is not engaging in the greeting, then it gives me the opportunity to initiate communication with that student without placing pressure on her to communicate plus it ensures the student that I am interested in what she has to say.

The JTE`s at the school I teach in place a lot of importance on the greeting. It has been the case that if a new native English teacher does not begin their lesson with a greeting, then I have been informed of this and requested to ask the new teacher to ensure that he/she begins each lesson with a greeting. It is as if the JTE`s measure the skill of the native English teacher on the use of their greeting.

3.5 Speak Up!

Oral communication classes were introduced into the high schools of Japan in 1994 in order to improve the communication skills of the students (Browne and Wada 1998: 107). The Japanese characteristic of placing importance on nonverbal skills and the ability to 'read' a situation without any verbal interaction is not particularly suited to studying in a class that focuses on verbal communication. As Reischauer and Jansen (2005) agree that the Japanese "…..look on oral…..and on sharp and clever reasoning as essentially shallow and possibly misleading." Taking that into consideration, it would seem almost impossible to get students to speak up in class without being invited to, and in my experience, it is impossible. The only instances in which students are less reluctant to speak up is when there is a tangible reward on offer.

3.5.1 Sticker Chance

The previous native English teacher in my school started up a reward system, that we continue today, whereby all students have to wear name cards. On the back of the

name card is a grid with twenty squares. When the twenty squares have a sticker, the student is further rewarded with an item of stationery. In my previous high school, the English department had adopted a similar system except each student had a map of Great Britain or North America. The coastline of the country was replaced with small circles, each designed to take a sticker and when the coastline was a mass of stickers, the student was rewarded with an item of stationery. In both schools, the students had to correctly answer a question, be in the winning team of a task or have used a lot of English in a lesson to be rewarded with a sticker.

3.5.2 Motivation

Teachers using the systems described above have one thing in common, a desire to motivate the students to speak English. This is not just about a student raising their hand to ask a spelling or grammar question, it is about motivating the students to speak up, to answer questions directed at the group and to introduce an element of competition into the lesson. I use the sticker system as a motivational tool but am generally becoming more resistant to using it as I feel that relying too much on the reward system defeats the purpose of learning. The students' attention is focused on the reward rather than the path that leads them to the reward. As Dornyei points out in Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom (2001: 125),

> "…. All rewards do is simply attach a piece of 'carrot or stick' to the task. By doing so, they divert the students' attention away from the real task and the real point of learning".

3.6 Questions and Answers

I was never the type of student to carry out a task or talk in a certain manner for the 'sake of doing it' or because 'that is the way it has always been done'. I need to know

the reason behind the actions and words. During my education I always felt confident to ask my teachers the reasons behind the way things happened and if their answers did not satisfy me then I questioned their reasoning. This did not happen very often but the point is that I was secure enough to know that I would not be 'looked down upon' if I did question my teachers. There were other students who frequently questioned or criticised the teachers and who were never chastised for it, in fact the questioning of teachers was encouraged as it was seen to promote further learning and encouraged the student to be independent as learners.

3.6.1 Do Not Criticise The Teacher

As has been shown, in a large power distance culture, teachers automatically receive respect from students, therefore it seems obvious that students do not criticise or question teachers' as they appear to respect them too much. It is this point that seems to be very much culture driven. As the author of this paper is focusing on the Japanese culture, openly questioning a teacher would make the student stand out from the other students, which is frowned upon in Japan. That is not to say students do not question the teachers. Perhaps the students do not want to appear to be asking 'stupid' questions or they in fact do not want to draw attention to themselves, they want to stay vocally within the group, retaining 'face' rather than stepping outside the group with a risk of losing 'face'. Reischauer and Jansen (2005: 125) concur by stating " Maintaining face ….. is much on the Japanese minds, but it is face before the other members of the group that most concerns them".

4.0 Methodology

The methodology that I use in my lessons does not appear to follow any particular approach or method. I believe that every lesson for the student is also a lesson for me.

Student reactions to my teaching style, the activities I use in lessons and the language I choose to teach in gives me feedback which I can use for future lessons. If I were to choose a method, which I feel, links closely with my teaching, then I would be inclined to say that the reflective teaching method would be the closest. As Richards (1996: ix) states, “Reflective teaching goes hand-in-hand with critical self-examination and reflection as a basis for decision making, planning and action”. It is this “self-examination” that Richards (1996) refers to that tends to shape how I plan and execute my lessons.

4.1 Workplace

Not only do the students and their beliefs have an influence on how a teacher carries out their job but the workplace can also have an influence. The school in which I teach prefers that I use the textbooks assigned to each grade as a reference only. The syllabus is based on the textbooks, however the materials I use are all self-made as the school recommends that I try not to use the activities in the books. The main philosophy of the school is that oral communication classes should be fun, a class in which the students can ‘step outside’ of their cultural norms to be noisy and to be active in class.

4.2 Tasks

My lessons are always based around a task and this task is usually completed at the end of the lesson. The task may take the form of a role-play dialogue, a class survey or a presentation. It is the opinion of the author of this paper that student’s respond well to tasks and it ultimately gives them a reason as to why they are studying a particular language pattern or particular vocabulary. At the beginning of each lesson, I

feel it is important to explain what the learners will be studying and the tasks involved throughout the lesson as it helps them mentally prepare themselves. This teacher-centred dialogue correlates with the large power distance characteristic that "…students expect teacher to outline paths to follow" (Hofstede 1986: 313), even though I was educated in a culture that correlates with a small power distance dimension, as a teacher it is vital to try and modify ones teaching methods to match those of the culture that one teaches in.

4.3 Intercommunication

Confidence is vital in foreign and second language learning. Students put themselves at risk of failure every time they are in the language classroom and if they are in a class of their peers, it can make the risk much more tangible. As O'Donnell (2001:98) says, "….no student is likely to be keen to do a task…that puts them in a situation where they are made to look small in front of their contemporaries". For that reason, by introducing and practicing the target language and in preparing tasks that are within the students' capabilities, their confidence to communicate in the foreign/second language should be increased. If they possess the confidence to intercommunicate in class, then it might be possible that they would have the confidence to communicate using the second/foreign language outside the classroom.

5.0 Conclusion

As Nunan (1999: 4) states, " All cultures have their own concepts of teaching, learning and education….", and it is these concepts that shape the beliefs of the students and teachers and it is vital that teachers are aware of this in order to reduce the amount of stress the students may feel when learning English. Teaching in Japan is not just as straightforward as one might think. The culture differences between a

large power distance culture bathed in collectivism and a small power distance culture swathed in individualism are such, that in the opinion of the author of this paper, new expatriate teachers should be given the opportunity to attend culture lessons before they start teaching. If a teacher were not aware of the social expectations or the cultural beliefs of the citizens of the county in which they are teaching, then one would expect the teacher to not be an effective practitioner. One must be aware of what is socially and culturally expected of oneself as a teacher to have an impact in the classroom and just being a native speaker of English is insufficient to be a teacher in the oral communication classes of Japan.

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