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Interculturalism and multiculturalism in secondary EFL in Japan

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The teaching of English in Japanese secondary schools is associated with the development of students' international identity; however, guidelines for the teaching of culture are not explicit. Following a relativist (inter-culturalist) / universalist (multiculturalist) paradigm, this paper explores how government policy, textbooks, students, teachers, and teacher candidates impact the teaching of culture in secondary EFL classrooms in Japan.

The language-culture connection is well established: it is now a given that foreign language teachers teach culture, and the only question is whether culture is included overtly in the curriculum. As part of this department's joint research on multiculturalism, this paper begins to examine the role of culture in secondary English language classrooms in Japan, with the eventual goal of assisting English teacher candidates in addressing the question of culture.

Teaching Language, Teaching Culture: The situation in Japan

In Japanese primary and secondary schools, Monbusho associates the development of cultural identity with the acquisition of language skills. Meanwhile, however, national and international identities are addressed completely separately.

On one hand, the development of children's national identity is

promoted throughout the curriculum, but particularly through the teaching of the Japanese language (kokugo) and through moral education (dotoku). On the other hand, the formation of students' international identity is clearly linked with the teaching of the English language at the secondary level. It is also linked with a new subject of study, "integrated learning" (sogoteki na gakushu no jikan), which will begin in April, 2002, at the primary level. Although "some experts... have voiced concern over the ministry's half-baked approach" (Hani, 2001), many elementary schools are planning to teach English during "integrated learning" in order to broaden interest in other cultures.

These national and international identities are loosely interwoven. Expanding on this metaphor, the "Japanese language/culture/national identity" functions like the warp, those threads that are stretched vertically on a loom, forming the basis for the fabric. This warp requires tremendous patience to set up, because a single broken or misplaced thread can weaken the entire fabric. In the same way, the Japanese education system carefully constructs a Japanese child's national identity. The "English language/international identity" functions more like the weft, those threads that are woven horizontally through the warp. These threads, which may be tight or loose, provide visual patterning and texture. Thus, before exploring the English language/culture connection, we must acknowledge the Japanese language/culture connection.

Parmenter (1999) carried out a two-year ethnographic study of third-year junior high school students in four schools. One element of the study was a questionnaire probing students' own opinions regarding their national identity. About 16% of the students subscribed to the Monbusho's "view of national identity which is labeled by Smith (1991) as 'ethnic-genealogical' and by Kellas (1991) as 'ethnic'. This view of

national identity is exclusive and requires homogeneity." (p.5)

She concludes "For these students, as for Monbusho, self-identity as a Japanese person is unproblematic and automatic because it is based on given, unchangeable factors [of having Japanese ancestry and of having been born in Japan]." (Parmenter, p.5) How does such a construct affect these students' English language learning? Do these students similarly conclude that because they were *not* born in an English-speaking country, they will not become proficient in English or develop an international identity? Or, on the other hand, are they more likely to develop an international identity because their identity as a Japanese is unproblematic and automatic and not threatened?

Parmenter also found that for 51% of the students, identity as a Japanese person is more fragile; it is "virtually synonymous with cultural identity...[through] the development of knowledge, understanding, and practice of a particular language, culture, and lifestyle...[A] ccording to this interpretation, the individual has a choice in whether to become more Japanese or not. These notions of choice and degree are notions that are not apparent in any Monbusho documents." (Parmenter, 1999, p.6)

For these students, identity as a Japanese person is dependent on knowledge and use of the Japanese language —— it is a matter of choice. Do these students also feel a sense of choice regarding their English language learning and their identities as international people? This would be another interesting question to pursue.

Nearly ten years ago, anthropologist Walter Edwards (1989) wrote of a "paradoxical similarity" between the discourse on internationalization and the discourse known as *nihonjinron*. Both stress Japan's relationship with the West, both seem animated by the same ambivalence about Japanese cultural identity, and in each discourse there is a

tendency to treat both Japan and the West as monolithic entities. Perhaps some members of the younger generation have already broken through this jaded, strangled discourse by choosing their own national identities.

The Relativist Approach and the Universalist Approach

Although I have only briefly mentioned a few issues involved in the development of students' Japanese cultural identity, it is against such a setting that the weft threads of foreign language and culture learning are laid.   Next, I will discuss one paradigm for examining how culture can be taught: the relativist and the universalist approach.

In his excellent historical overview of the place of culture in second-language education, Lessard-Clouston (1997) notes that "as our understanding of language and communication has evolved, the importance of culture in L2 and FL education has increased." (p.2) In literature on second language teaching, this importance is reflected in the prominence of research originating in fields that are concerned with culture: cultural studies, multiculturalism, cross-cultural communication, global education, and others.

To uninitiated second language teachers, these overlapping fields appear complimentary or even indistinguishable.   However, with their diverse origins, they encompass two fundamentally different approaches to internationalization as revealed by the question: Is intercultural conflict caused more fundamentally by a lack of appreciation of what humans share?   Or by a lack of appreciation for how we are different?   (Shaules and Inoue, 2000)

One approach to internationalization is through a "relativist" point of view.   These teachers focus on providing students with conceptual

tools for understanding how cultural differences can affect interpersonal communication. This viewpoint is manifested in the field of intercultural communication, which includes anthropology, sociology, social psychology, communication, and comparative pragmatics. (Shaules & Inoue, 2000)

A contrasting approach to internationalization is through a "universalist" point of view. Teachers with this viewpoint focus students' attention on a global vision of shared humanity which respects individual development and social justice. In this approach, culture is seen as something layered on top of a "deeper" universal self. (Shaules & Inoue, 2000)

This universalist viewpoint is manifested in education which promotes world citizenship (called Global Education in the 1990's). Cates (1999, p.11-12) succinctly explains the rationale for English teachers to promote education for world citizenship as follows:

● the emerging role of "English as a global language" for communicating with people from cultures around the globe

● the growing interest in content-based instruction focussed on meaningful communication about real-world issues

● appeals by UNESCO's Linguapax Project and by Ministries of Education for foreign language teaching to more effectively promote international understanding.

Multiculturalism and ESL

In ESL contexts, the universalist approach is manifested in multiculturalism. "In a societal sense, [multiculturalism] indicates the coexistence of people from many different backgrounds and ethnicities." (Kramsch, 1998, p.82) In an educational sense, multicultur-

alism would be the acceptance and the fostering of cultural diversity through appropriate materials and pedagogy. This is the dominant approach to education in North America today, as evidenced by a recent search on ERIC that located nearly 13,000 documents related to multiculturalism in education.

At a recent TESOL conference, criticisms were leveled (Christensen, 2001) against multiculturalism as a basis of ESL pedagogy — according to some in the audience, for the first time. Because of the uniqueness of the arguments and the extraordinary reaction that was provoked, I include the speaker's references.

Superficiality: "The boutique multiculturalist resists the force of the culture he appreciates at precisely the point at which it matter most to its strongly committed members..." (Stanley E. Fish, *The Trouble with Principle*; Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 1999; 61-63)

Veridical insouciance: "Multiculturalism makes 'the avoidance of conflict' more important than the search for truth. By fostering a 'cultural relativism', it makes truth appear relative, vacuous, or not worth pursuing." (Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, *Truth: A History*; New York: St. Martin's; 1999; 205 207)

Moral confusion: "Moral diversity at a deep level...destroys...the givenness of the basic principles that define the moral community... [leading] us to downgrade moral principles from objective claims to reports about how we feel..." (Andrew Oldenquist, *The Non-suicidal Society*; Bloomington: Indiana University Press; 1986; 63)

Christensen concludes that professional honesty should lead teachers to approach ESL through inter-cultural studies rather than multiculturalism. However, most ESL teachers and materials writers have firmly embraced the dominant multicultural approach and see little reason to change.

Multiculturalism and EFL in Japan

Is societal multiculturalism —— the acceptance and the fostering of cultural diversity through appropriate materials and pedagogy —— an appropriate approach for English education in Japan? Multicultural children with diverse language backgrounds ought to be an important resource in a multicultural pedagogy. However, Parmenter (1999) notes that the existence of foreign children, of returnee children, and of children with one parent who is not Japanese* is virtually ignored by Monbusho in its 1989 policy on moral education, which states that students were born and have been brought up in Japan.

> Despite an explicit policy of internationalization adopted in the education reforms of 1989 and continued in the 1998 reforms, multiculturalism (or even the acknowledgment that it exists in Japan) as an education policy in Japanese schools is still virtually non-existent. (Parmenter, 1999, p.5)

This is not an encouraging foundation upon which to build a multi-cultural EFL pedagogy. Furthermore, there is no acknowledgement of language diversity —— the very area in which diversity should be welcomed in a foreign language classroom.

> The kind of statement, which appears in the National Curriculum of England and Wales, stating that pupils, where appropriate, 'should be encouraged to make use of their understanding and skills in other language' (DfE, 195, p.2) is conspicuously

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*In 1998 there were nearly 30,000 new marriages between Japanese and foreigners —— twice as many as ten years previously. (Daulton & Seki, 2000, p.32)

absent from the Monbusho guidelines.   As far as Monbusho is concerned, there is one national language, one national culture, one national knowledge and even one national way of life. (Parmenter, 1999, p.5)

Among international families in Japan, anecdotes abound about how English-speaking children cope with learning a "third language" (Japanese classroom English) and how children with an L1 other than English are somehow expected to excel at English.   Meanwhile, some of these children make heroic attempts to suppress their non-Japanese identities.   Monbusho's policy is not on their side, on the side of societal multiculturalism —— at least *in Japan*.

In fact, secondary English language textbooks have traditionally tended to focus on multicultural issues in *other* countries.   As an example, topics in one high school reading textbook (*Unicorn*, 1993) include the Trapp family fleeing the Nazis; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his March on Washington; and excerpts from the diary of Anne Frank.   These topics elicit automatic sympathy —— a universalist vision of social justice —— while relegating institutionalized racism and genocide to other eras on other continents.   In the same textbook is another passage that looks at Japan from the eyes of a foreigner, further reinforcing an "us-them" attitude.   Is this multiculturalism?   I think not.

Teachers

Various factors will determine an individual EFL teacher's relationship with culture in the classroom.   It is commonly assumed that teachers who are members of, or who have resided in, the target

culture(s) will be more confident in presenting abstract culture and may have more access to artifacts of the concrete culture. In Japan, students, parents, administrators, and teachers themselves put an unrealistic emphasis on the importance of being a native of the target culture. (Takada, 2000).

Yet, Medgyes (1994) insists that, through the internet, many NNS teachers can access enough target culture (both concrete and abstract) to present cultural content with as much confidence as any native speaker. How valid is the NS/NNS distinction when it comes to culture in EFL teaching in Japan?

In a 6-month ethnographic study of four EFL teachers (NS and NNS) of adult learners at a private language school in Japan, Duff and Uchida (1997) investigated how teachers' sociocultural identities and practices were negotiated and transformed over time. None of the teachers perceived their role as necessarily involving the explicit teaching of culture, but implicit cultural transmission was very evident. The teachers did not reflect on or always even recognize the cultural and political underpinnings of their practices, materials, discourse or teaching contexts.

Duff and Uchida (1997) found that "EFL teachers' roles as cultural (and linguistic) negotiators and practitioners cannot simply be defined according to whether they intentionally or explicitly teacher cultural facts or whether they are NSs of English or Japanese or citizens of the US or Japan. Rather, the cultures manifested and constructed in each classroom represented many elements, created by teachers, students, and others and shaped to a large extent by other factors, such as institutional goals and course textbooks." (p.479)

Textbooks

Because Japan has a national curriculum using approved textbooks, it is to be expected that textbooks have a strong influence on instruction. This is borne out by a recent survey of 876 Japanese high school teachers in nine randomly selected prefectures, in which teachers gave quite strong agreement (3.7 on a five-point scale) to whether their instruction was influenced by English I and English II textbooks. (Gorsuch, 1999)

How much culture is actually presented for overt teaching in secondary English textbooks? "As a common, cost-effective fixture in most classrooms, textbooks have potential power to aid teachers in implementing educational policies..." (Gorsuch, 1999, p.9) If one of the Monbusho's policies is to internationalize, then we would expect textbooks to contain appropriate cultural material. However, Ashikaga, Fujita, and Ikuta (2001) analyzed all 17 authorized "Oral Communication A" high school English textbooks for cultural content and found that the cultural content varied significantly from textbook to textbook. It is worth looking at their research in more detail.

The textbooks were analyzed according to these criteria:

a. **Content**: concrete culture (tangible manifestations of a culture such as history, geography and products); abstract culture (intangible manifestations of a culture such as behavioral or thinking patterns).

b. **Origin**: target culture (cultures where English is spoken as a first language); source culture (Japan); target and source culture (direct comparison of the two); international culture (culture of other countries; global issues).

c. **Method of presentation**: dialogue; dialogue notes; cultural notes; activities; supplemental materials.

Results showed that about one-fourth of the total cultural elements were related to abstract culture. Of these abstract cultural elements, about three-fourths were related to the target culture, and about half of the elements were presented in the cultural notes.

About three-fourths of the total cultural elements were related to concrete culture. Of these concrete cultural elements, nearly half were related to the target culture, and about one-fourth of the elements were presented in the *cultural notes*, one-fourth in *dialogs*, and one-fourth in *activities*.

From this we can infer that writers of secondary English textbooks find it relatively difficult to present abstract culture, and that when they do so it is overwhelmingly restricted to explanations (in Japanese) about the target culture in the *cultural notes* section of the textbook. Of course, the extent to which an individual teacher ignores or develops this information will be quite idiosyncratic.

Textbook writers seem to find it much easier to present elements of concrete culture and to include concrete culture from all three origins (target, source, and international). Concrete culture elements are fairly evenly distributed among the *cultural notes*, *dialogs*, and *activities* sections of the textbooks. Even if individual teachers decide to skip the *cultural notes*, concrete culture is still delivered because *dialogs* and *activities* form the bulk of the lesson.

Ashikaga, Fujita, and Ikuta (2001) found that about one-quarter of the elements of concrete culture came from the source culture (Japan). McKay (2000) strongly recommends that the source culture be used in teaching about culture, providing the following example from Japan:

> [O]ne Japanese English textbook approved by the Ministry of Education asks students to describe annual Japanese events,

such as the Children's Day Festival and the Moon-Viewing Festival, and traditional arts, such as *Haiku* poetry, *Noh* dramas, and *Bunraku* puppet shows...It may be that students are not well-informed about such aspects of their own culture, and hence, the textbooks could provide them the opportunity to learn more about these topics.　(p.10)

Students

Even when textbook writers and teachers do their best to present culturally appropriate material, it does not follow that student attitudes toward cultural content will fall neatly into place.　In a survey of 300 Greek young adult learners at private institutes, Prodromou (1992), found a strong belief (60%) that content about British life and institutions should be included in English lessons.　This belief, however, did not carry over to content about America (26%), Greece (27%), or other countries (36%).　Prodromou concludes (p.49) that "it is both disconcerting and stimulating to discover that our assumptions and those of our students do not always coincide."

In Japan, Yoneoka (2000a, 2000b) investigated changes in student attitudes towards buzzwords of the 80s, *kokusaika* and *kokusaikaijin* by surveying over 100 Japanese university students in 1989 and a similar population in 1999.　Three types of attributes were found: experiential, cognitive, and affective.

The current Japanese conceptualization of "being international" stresses experiential attributes (such as living abroad and having foreign friends) and cognitive attributes (such as the knowledge of language and knowledge of the Japanese cultural heritage).　These results are in sharp contrast to results from similar questionnaires conducted with students in the USA, Germany, and India, in which affective

attributes (such as lack of prejudice or interest in world issues) were stressed.

Yoneoka notes that in the past decade, even as students' international experiences have dramatically increased, students downplay the importance of these experiences and further emphasize cognitive attributes. Thus, their ability to reach the ever-receding goal of *kokusaika* leads to a deepening lack of self-confidence as *kokusaijin*.

> Students may assume that they cannot be responsible for such a demanding task as internationalizing oneself in terms of knowledge and experience...[leading] to a feeling of self-helplessness with respect to active attitudes and participation in the *kokusaika* process...Students have been led to the international waters, but they are not drinking as they should. (Yoneoka, 2000b, p.16)

In seven or eight years, it will be interesting to see whether the new "integrated learning" course in elementary schools has indeed made the next generation thirsty for internationalism.

Teacher candidates

As mentioned earlier, in her discussion of national identity, Parmenter (1999) argues that the perspectives of Monbusho and of most junior high students diverge considerably. This picture becomes even more complex when the perspective of pre-service student teachers is added. She finds that teacher candidates make *almost no reference at all* to the ethnic-geneological interpretations of national identity. Some teacher candidates see national identity as something to be protected from outside influences; some see national identity as a

"necessary and valuable precursor to participation in international society"; some even question the concept of national identity, challenging "the very notion of the appropriateness of education for national identity in the contemporary world." (Parmenter, 1999, p.9) Even within one highly centralized education system, teacher candidates display a multiplicity of perspectives on national identity.

What about candidates aspiring to become teachers of English? Their perspectives on international or multicultural identity will probably be even more disparate and less developed, possibly leading to an unbalanced or incoherent delivery of culture in English courses.

For many new teachers, "...implicit knowledge (abstract culture) may be difficult... to deliver to students. This is a result of the education system for English teachers, which often fails to adequately prepare English teachers who have limited intercultural experience of their own." (Ashikaga, Fujita, & Ikuta, 2001, p.8)

These teachers may also be handicapped by a lack of theoretical training concerning the teaching of culture. "The majority of language teachers in Japan don't have formal training in either intercultural communication education or global issues education, yet are often expected to take the lead in movements towards internationalization within educational institutions." (Shaules & Inoue, 2000, p.15) The picture is further muddied by buzz words (internationalization, globalization, borderless) emanating from Japanese mass media every decade or so. Rather than simply mouthing each new catchword, English teacher candidates need a conceptual framework to help them define their personal approach to the question of culture in the classroom.

Duff and Uchida (1997) recommend that "in teacher education programs, student teachers and practicing teachers should reflect on their own teaching foundations and experiences, cultural biases and

understandings, and knowledge of what constitutes (and is constituted by) cultural knowledge." (p.479) In "reflective" training programs, teacher candidates explore their pedagogical beliefs that underlie their classroom actions; Duff and Uchida suggest that this process be extended to reflection on cultural identity as well.

When it comes to the preservice training of English teacher candidates, the literature is full of pedagogically solid, laudable suggestions such as these. The problem, of course, is how implement these ideas within the candidates' limited pre-service training.

Conclusion

It seems that the multicultural approach to culture in secondary English classes is impeded by Monbusho's incoherent policy, as reflected in textbooks and in teacher training. Instead, an inter-culturalist approach that develops students affective attributes (see Yoneoka) may be a more meaningful and, in the long run, more sustainable. The single, clear, and measurable objective of such an approach would be to help students stop being ethnocentric and to start becoming ethnorelative. In order to do this, teachers and students would need to develop three sets of skills: to balance "big C" culture with "small C" culture; to recognize the cultural dimension of interaction; and to increase their repertoire of behaviors. (Bennett, 1996)

It follows that this type of inter-cultural training cannot be adequately covered in English classes. Monbusho has made a fundamental error in equating the development of an international identity — an ethnorelative self — with the learning of a second language, as if students acquire tolerance while they conjugate verbs. Rather, the development of an international self is complimentary to, and must be

integrated with, the development of national identity. The develop-ment of these sets of skills needs to occur in the students' native tongue, throughout the curriculum, in an integrated, spiraling syllabus. To achieve this, all teacher candidates, not only English teacher candi-dates, need basic inter-cultural training.

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