

## Reflection on Differences in Learning Behavior in Japanese Learners and Western Learners

Laurent ‘Larry’ Fages

### Abstract

One of the most commonly shared and discussed topics amongst teachers of English at the university level in Japan is the apparent lack of initiatives and involvement from certain learners. This varies from college to college but the general tendency is that some Japanese learners do not as readily answer the teacher’s questions or participate in activities as their Western counterparts do. The latter prompted some of us teachers to question the learners’ motives to study at university or simply their motives to learn English. Although this is an interesting subject, it falls unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the differences that exist between Japanese learners and their Western counterparts. To illustrate my point I will draw on my own experience and support it with facts and quotations. It is important to understand that this paper is not a teaching guide offering tips on how to teach but rather a reflection on some of the characteristics that distinguish both types of learners, Japanese and Western, in their overall learning behavior. In the last part of the paper, however, we will look at some implications (not teaching tips) those differences can have for teachers and how they can be dealt with.

In a Western country, in a foreign language class of second year students, a question as simple as ‘what did you do last week-end?’ may spark a number of various reactions from the students, e.g., answers to the question, comments about the questions, follow up on students’ answers and so on. In Japan, however, the same question to the same type of students will often remain unanswered. Similarly, when explaining how to carry out a task, one finds out that most Western learners will start as soon as they are instructed to. If any point in the instructions remain unclear, a myriad of questions about the unclear instructions will follow. Japanese learners, however, more than often will not start the task when instructed to do it. Furthermore, they may not ask for clarification if the instructions are not fully understood. For example, a simple set of commands such as ‘please stand up, make two lines’, done regularly, backed up with illustrations on the board and even translated

into Japanese may be met with a lot of resistance from the learners. Even if the teacher has taken this affective factor into account in the lesson planning stage this behaviour may result in confusion and frustration from the teacher who spent a valuable amount of time preparing the class. It is clear from the above that differences in learning behavior exist between the two types of learners. There is a number of factors that contribute to this behavior, but in this paper I will examine the above through the subject of FACE. I will define the term and explain why it is important to consider it. I will also look at some differences in educational philosophy at the secondary school and university level and explain why in my opinion, the transition from one educational system to the other can be particularly difficult for certain students to cope with. Finally, I will look at an effective way of conveying instructions to facilitate the comprehension of tasks. It would be wrong, however, to view the groups of learners presented in this paper as monolithic cultural and distant groups. The types of learners referred to in this paper may be found in both the West and Asia. The main focus here is therefore to analyze some differences in learning behavior and look at how some cultural factors may trigger those differences.

## **Politeness and Face**

Politeness is a central issue in intercultural communication. This is not surprising because, however we define politeness, it is one of those aspects and behavior which stimulates favorable and unfavorable reactions among participants in any intercultural encounter. Brown and Levinson (1987) tell us that politeness is commonly thought of as *etiquette*, i.e., “a set of rules for being polite in interaction within a particular culture or subculture”. Included in this meaning of politeness are such kinds of behavior as displaying thoughtfulness to others, being sympathetic, tactful and modest. Central to the definition of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson is the concept of *face*. The concept of *face* is much referred to in discussions of Asian cultures particularly in Japan. Yet *face* is a universal concept and is not limited to the Asian context. The term *face* as developed by Brown and Levinson, is derived from Goffman (1967)

“The term face may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claim for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes. A person may be said to have or be in, or maintain face when the line he effectively takes presents an image of him that is internally consistent, that is supported by judgements and evidence conveyed by other participants, and that is confirmed by evidence conveyed through impersonal agencies in the situation”.(p.5)

Therefore, face can be defined as the public self-image that every one wants to claim for him or herself. It is as Brown and Levinson (1987) points out, “Emotionally invested, and can be lost, maintained or enhanced and must be constantly attended to in interaction”(p.66)

Although face is claimed to be a universal feature of interaction, in some Eastern cultures, notably Japanese, it has a special significance and has a great influence on behavior. Some scholars (e.g. Ide 189, Mao 1994, Matsumoto 1989) make a distinction between a Eurocentric view of face and an Asian one.

Eurocentric

Claimed by the individual as their own

Asian

Lent by the group to the individual

Mao (op.cit. 469) suggests that face support and the avoidance of face threatening behavior in the Eurocentric view is motivated by mutual self-interest, whereas in the Asian view, supporting face and saving face is linked to maintaining harmony within the group. Saving one’s face and those of other group members is of great importance in these highly integrated or tightly woven cultures (Simmons, Vasques & Harris 1993), whereas in the more loosely knit cultures of the West there may be less concern with social virtue than with achieving rational ends through attention to mutual face saving. Clearly, the above accounts to a certain extent for the slow paced reaction time of certain classes, as stated in the introduction of this paper, as well

as the slow involvement of some learners which can be perceived by some teachers as a lack of motivation and commitment. Some learners may hesitate to show they are committed to their studies or motivated to learn or even participate eagerly in class activities because they are afraid of being perceived as smarter than the rest of their class. The latter would cause a tremendous amount of peer pressure and would break the harmony of the group. The concern with being thought of as a normal and accepted member of one's group is far greater than maintaining one's right of independence and freedom of action. If we further consider that education in Japan at the secondary school level is mostly teacher-centered and grammar-based we now get a better understanding of why those kinds of behavior happen.

Indeed, the rupture in English learning between junior high, high school and university is substantial. The former is test-oriented and mainly conducted in Japanese by a Japanese teacher of English who may have an assistant language teacher, an ALT, to help him with or her pronunciation. It is helpful at this point to look at Nakane's work (2007). She observes that the main mode of communication in Japanese high schools is writing with the teacher controlling and leading the class for the whole hour (pp.43-51). At the university level, learners still learn English grammar with a Japanese teacher but also study more practical use of the language through communicative activities with a native speaker. Those communicative activities, most of which are learner-centered, may not appear serious enough to some learners who may not feel like they study English as they are the complete opposite of what they were taught at high school & junior high school. This results in the learners being inadequate for this type of activities due mainly to a lack of preparation at the secondary school level. Although it has been recently gradually changing, there is still a number of junior-high and high-school which rely heavily on the grammar-translation method and other grammar task based activities with restricted communication in English. The latter is based on my own experience. Therefore, it can be argued that the majority of these behaviour differences are caused by the different teaching/learning styles, with face saving or maintaining face playing a major part. The same differences may exist in certain Western countries too however because

the concept of face is not thought as one that can build pressure on the group the learners will be more eager to take initiatives and accept the consequences of their behaviour without feeling threatened. As a result, making mistakes or failing will be regarded as an independent experience involving the doer and nobody else. This will prompt learners to be more interactive as the pressure of breaking the group harmony is not relevant. It is important to compare and understand both concepts of face, Asian and Eurocentric, and not look at it as better or worse but as different. A sound understanding of both concepts will help native (Western) teachers of English cope more effectively with the different learning behaviour of certain Japanese learners. Until that point, I have examined the learners' concept of face, which may differ from the teacher's, like some of the differences in educational philosophy and styles but the real question is what it all mean for us teachers and how effectively can we deal with it.

### **Some implications**

A clear understanding and effective communication is the key. Considering what is stated in the previous paragraphs, it is clear that certain Japanese learners will need more time than their Western counterparts to engage in any activities or conversation involving the participation of a whole class. It is therefore, crucial for native teachers of English to allow enough time and give as many pointers about the activities to be performed as possible. A bulldozer-like approach where the teachers expect their learners to act fast may be regarded as effective and motivating in some countries as the teachers exude confidence which in turn implies they know what they are doing. In other parts of the world the same approach will be seen too rigid and arrogant by the learners who may feel too pressured. For those learners a collective understanding and approval from all the group members will be essential before engaging in any form of activity. It is clear that the latter will require more time for the learners to organize themselves. It would be too simplistic, however, to think that just because the teacher is more patient with the class, the learners will understand better or work faster. Although a sound understanding of the concept of face will

help if the instruction is still not completely understood by the learners the class will remain slow. The latter brings me to say a few words about effective communication. Although I stated in the opening that even easy instructions can be met with resistance this does not mean at all that it should be given up but rather rethought of. The way the information for a task or activity is presented and conveyed is of uttermost importance. At this point it is useful to look at Wierzbicka's work (1991) on cultural scripts. Those cultural scripts, she argues, consist of a small set of simple meanings which evidence suggests can be expressed by words or bound morphemes in all languages. For example, words such as; PEOPLE, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, THIS, THINK,KNOW,DO,GOOD and so on. These appear to be lexical universals which can be easily translated in all languages. They combine according to a small set of universal grammatical patterns, comprising a mini-language which is an ideal tool for cross cultural semantics. Goddard and Wierzbicka (1997) go on to claim that

“The metalanguage of lexical universals can be used not only for semantic analysis but also to formulate cultural rules for speaking known as cultural scripts, Such scripts can capture culture- specific attitudes,attitudes and norms in culture independent terms,” (p.236).

Furthermore, adding the use of gestures to the instructions as well as dividing the task into sequences.e.g., number 1, number2 and so on, to illustrate points will drive the learners to be more attentive and more willing to participate. It can be argued that this form of approach is more teacher-centered than learner-centered because the teacher controls every step of the instructions. The latter leaves little opportunity for the learners to organize themselves on their own. However, in a Japanese context this is the way learners have been shown and this is more likely to bridge the gap between what they learned at junior and high school and what is expected of them at university. It is important however to give the learners enough time to organize themselves. There is of course no hundred per cent guarantee that the learners will engage faster in the activities but a lot of stress will be relieved and the learners will feel nurtured and will be more likely to comply.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have highlighted some differences in learning behavior that may occur between Some Japanese and Western learners in their leaning behavior. I stated that where the latter may engage in activities as soon as they are instructed to the former may need more time. I chose to examine those learning behavior differences through the subject of face. Finally, I briefly looked at some implications that may help in the classroom in particular through the use of cultural scripts. The valuable lesson to be learned here is that face will always be more important in Japan than in the West. Therefore, a sensitive and nurturing approach allowing sufficient time for the learners to get themselves ready and accept the new teaching philosophy without losing social credibility in the group will always be more rewarding than just expecting them to act promptly.

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