

# Hierarchy, collectivism and group identity: An analysis of the potential effect of cultural values on ELT in a Japanese high school

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## ABSTRACT

This article sets out to explore the influences of hierarchy, collectivism and group identity on English language teaching within the context of a Japanese high school. This includes a brief overview of the current status of English language education within the Japanese compulsory education system and the use of different language teaching methodologies along with details regarding the context in which the article is set. This is followed by an analysis of the role of hierarchy, collectivism and group identity in Japanese society and education through relevant research in these fields. The article concludes with an evaluation of the significance of these factors on English language education in Japan.

KEYWORDS : cultural values, EFL, SLA, L1 use

## 1. Introduction

Even after almost thirty years since the first attempt, in 1989, by the Japanese government to introduce communicative activities into the classroom (Wada, 2002, p. 32), English teachers in Japan are still struggling with implementing this change (Sakui, 2004, p. 155). According to Waters and Vilches (2008), one of the reasons for this failure in curriculum innovation is the incompatibility of a communicative approach with the reality of the context. In fact, the dominant theories used in Second Language Acquisition were, as Kachru (1994, p. 796) discusses, based on data collected mainly in North America, Britain, and Australia (hereafter NABA) and with little attention paid to contexts in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Holliday admits that many of the current methodologies are not very effective in non-NABA countries and insists on the necessity of a ‘culture-sensitive’ approach (1994, p. 161). However, even for non-native English-speaking teachers (hereafter NNEST) in monolingual class who share not only the first language but also the cultural val-

ues of the students they teach (Atkinson, 1993, p. 7), it is easy to overlook the important role that cultural values play in English language teaching. This essay first examines how cultural values affect English language teaching, with reference to the traditional methodologies prevailing in Japan and the unsuccessful attempts to introduce Communicative Language Teaching (hereafter CLT), and discusses the idea that sensitivity to cultural values in language teaching helps establish learner identity.

## 2. Context

The context for this article is a private senior high school in Japan. English is taught by NNEST as a compulsory foreign language subject, and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (hereafter MEXT) expects teachers to conduct all classes in the second language (hereafter L2) and integrate the four skills through communicative activities (MEXT, 2014)<sup>1</sup>. However, there have been difficulties with implementing these guidelines (MEXT, 2016). The main goal for students

is to pass the university entrance examination, and most of the examinations still place considerable emphasis on reading and translation, with less emphasis on listening ability (Brown and Yamashita, 1995, p. 24). The average class consists of about 40 mixed gender monolingual students, and their level corresponds to A2-B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2017).

### 3. Classroom Culture and Methodologies

The importance of group orientation or collectivism can be seen as the main characteristic of Japanese society, which stems from traditional Confucianism, finding social harmony by establishing a strict hierarchy (Winfield, Mizuno and Beaudoin, 2000, pp. 329–330). Senior high schools tend to provide a strong group-oriented environment (McDaniel and Katsumata, 2012, p. 404), and the school in this context is no exception. The students are required to wear a school uniform, and they are repeatedly reminded that ‘they visibly represent their school and that improper activities will reflect on the reputation of their school’ (ibid, p. 404). The slippers worn inside the school building and sports uniforms have a different colour depending on the students’ year group, and they have lapel pins which indicate their specific year and class. For the students, their home-room class is ‘the central unit of student grouping’ because they study in the same classroom with the same classmates for a year (Dawson, 2008, quoted in McDaniel and Katsumata, 2012, p. 405), unless they need special equipment for music class, or chemistry experiments. The teachers are generally very authoritative and actively control students’ behaviour. The students are likely to be rewarded or punished as a group rather than as individuals (McDaniel and Kat-

sumata, 2012, p. 409). Collective norms are considered to be more important than personal preferences which tend to be regarded as selfishness, and ‘personal feelings should not impede collective achievement’ (ibid, p. 408). Most of the lessons are usually delivered in a lecture style, with desks arranged in rows.

Since these settings are better suited to traditional methodologies, it is no wonder that many English teachers in Japan have preferred the Grammar Translation Method (Wada, 2002, p. 36), or ‘*yakudoku*, a form of teacher-led grammar translation’ as described by Humphries and Burns (2015, p. 239), in which teachers generally deliver the class in a lecture-style and students are occasionally allowed to speak (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011, p. 19). Teachers are less likely to be seen as a ‘facilitator’ (Harmer, 2015, p. 117), but rather as ‘a fount of knowledge’ as described by Holliday (1994, p. 59). Also, it suits the examination culture in this context since the aim of the Grammar Translation Method ‘closely corresponds to the content of college entrance examinations’ (Wada, 2002, p. 36), which plays a significant role in teaching practice (Gorsuch, 2000, p. 699). In this teaching context, the teachers are usually evaluated by the number of their students who are accepted into national universities. In addition, young teachers tend to teach in the same way they were taught by their own teachers (Sato, 2002, p. 69; Oka, 2006, p. 60) and follow the senior teachers within the same institution, ‘leading typically to perpetuation of existing norms such as *yakudoku*’ (Humphries and Burns, 2015, p. 245). These cultural influences have led to the prevailing methodologies’ dominant status for the majority of English education in Japan (Hino, 1988, p. 46).

Despite the tendency for cultural influences to

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<sup>1</sup>MEXT became aware of a necessity to develop learners’ communicative competence and started to encourage the use of CLT. However, they do not provide a concrete definition of CLT, which results in schools adopting different interpretations of the approach (Steele and Zhang, 2016, pp. 17–18).

go unnoticed, attempts to make changes potentially meet difficulties when there is a clash with established classroom culture. For instance, the dominant methodologies established in NABA, such as strong CLT<sup>2</sup> (Scrivener, 2005, pp. 38–39) face resistance from the students such as silence in class as discussed by King (2013). In fact, the students in this context, from personal experience, tend to be silent in communicative activities. It seems easier for them to do pair work with their friends, but talking in a bigger group is more likely to put them under pressure. King's analysis indicates that this is partly because of Japanese students' 'hypersensitivity to others' (King, 2013, p. 338). Due to this hypersensitivity, Japanese people tend to be very afraid of making mistakes and being corrected in front of other people (Honma and Takeshita, 1998, p. 122; Thompson, 2001, p. 309), so they choose silence as a defence mechanism. Interestingly, the hypersensitivity makes some students react in the opposite way. Greer describes one of his students, who speaks English with a strong Japanese accent and produces grammatical errors, to avoid other students thinking 'who does she think she is?' (Greer, 2000, p. 183). This particular student tried to avoid being seen as a 'show off' by deliberately avoiding speaking English fluently. The concept behind this behaviour is to 'keep *wa* [harmony] and not embarrass others' (McDaniel and Katsumata, 2012, p. 408, my italics). For the same reason, during a conversation, hesitation is thought to be polite, and speaking spontaneously shows immaturity. Interrupting someone can be regarded as rudeness, which impedes the class dynamics often observed in CLT-style classes.

Also, the teachers' new role can be a prob-

lem in a CLT-style class. Teachers are expected to be authoritative, a fount of knowledge instead of a facilitator, and therefore, the students might attribute the new style of teaching to a lack of the teachers' skills (Chowdhury, 2003, pp. 292–293), and so might the institutions in which the teachers work. The school in this context, from personal experience, demonstrate understanding of the new teaching style in English classes, but it will not be applied to other areas of school life. Since collectivism, or keeping harmony is also an important aspect in any Japanese workplace, outside of the language class English teachers are required to be an authoritative figure in the same way as other teachers.

#### 4. Potential Arguments against Cultural Influences

However, some studies cast doubt on these preconceptions. Littlewood (2000, p. 31) concludes in his survey that 'there is actually less difference in attitudes to learning between Asian and European countries than between individuals within each country'. It could be true that as Littlewood suggests Asian students 'want to explore knowledge themselves and find their own answers' instead of being 'spoonfed with facts from an all-knowing "fount of knowledge"' (ibid, p. 34), but he also admits that they have difficulties when joining the discussion in the UK or US partly due to 'different conventions and expectation'. Similarly, Savignon (2002, p. 12) and Liu (2009, p. 65) suggest that one of the reasons for unwillingness to participate in communicative activities is the students' unfamiliarity with new methodologies. Aspects such as conventions, expectation, and

<sup>2</sup>CLT (Communicative language teaching) has no concrete definition and different people have different interpretations (Savignon, 2002, p. 6; Duff, 2014, p. 20; Harmer, 2015, p. 57). However, the basic idea of CLT is that 'learners will learn best if they participate in meaningful communication', and it is likely to be divided mainly into two groups: strong CLT and weak CLT. In strong CLT, students learn through communicative activities, and explicit teaching is very limited, while in weak CLT, teachers employ not only communicative activities, but also the wide variety of teaching styles including traditional exercises (Scrivener, 2005, pp. 38–39).

familiarity are likely to be the product of culture. Despite the learning style potentially not reflecting what students really want when asked, cultural values are strongly integrated into the students' perceptions and this includes what students are familiar with in terms of classroom behaviour.

In addition, there is some research that indicates, due to the globalization of cultural values, collectivism in Japan has been declining with a corresponding rise in individualism (Matsumoto, Kudoh, and Takeuchi, 1996; Matsumoto, *et al.*, 1997). Matsumoto, Kudoh and Takeuchi (1996, p. 102) find in their research that Japanese students show more evidence of individualism than American ones. Nevertheless, McDaniel and Katsumata (2012, p. 408) refute this idea by pointing out the role of the education system, which from kindergarten to university places an emphasis on collectivism. As Chinese philosopher Tehyi Hsei believes 'the schools of the country are its future in miniature' (quoted in McDaniel and Katsumata, 2012, p. 402), and people will continue to value collectivism unless the education system changes to a large extent.

## 5. Learners' Identity

A sensitivity towards cultural values might enable students to build their own identity as a L2 learner. Tomita (2011) insists on the necessity for students to establish their identity as learners, instead of forcing them to pretend to be a native English speaker<sup>3</sup>. Honna and Takeshita (1998, p. 118) problematize students' acquiring native-like proficiency with 'behavioral acculturation' as the conventional objective of English language education.

In order not to make students pretend to be something other than Japanese, it is important to

think what culture should be included in English language teaching. Horibe (2015) categorises culture when teaching English as an international language into three areas: culture as social custom, culture in the pragmatic sense, and culture in the semantic sense. Even though he believes that '[a] language can never be culture-free in its essential sense as long as it is a natural language' (Horibe, 2015, p. 243), he suggests that culture as social custom or in the pragmatic sense does not have to be from native English speaking countries. In fact, there are often cases in which course books exclusively focus on native English speaking cultures that are not always appropriate for the context. Humphries and Burns (2015, p. 243) suggest that some teachers in similar contexts find it difficult to explain the meaning of some topics to students as these are of little relevancy to the students' lives. Also, considering the possibility that the students will need to use English with other Asian people, Horibe's (2015) idea that Japanese students should learn Asian Englishes and cultures is convincing. Similarly, students in class are often required to practice the non-verbal language used by native English speakers (Honna and Takeshita, 1998, p. 124), which could threaten their identity as a L2 learner. Considering the students' needs, it might be necessary to take other non-native English speakers' norms into account (Horibe, 2015, p. 248). To establish more clearly the role of English for Japanese students will potentially enable students to keep their identity as a L2 learner and to learn English while preserving their own cultural values.

## 6. Conclusion

Many English teachers see themselves as eclectic in terms of the methodologies that they use

<sup>3</sup>The concept of 'native speakers' has been a controversial issue. In this essay, the term 'a native English speaker' is used to refer to 'the inner circle' as described by Kachru and Nelson (1996, pp. 77-78), where 'English is the first or dominant language: the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand'.

in class (Bell, 2007, p. 136), this implies that teachers choose the most appropriate methods depending on the context. The importance of context has been much discussed in ELT research (Bax, 2003; Harmer, 2003). Despite the importance of context being recognised by many teachers, it seems that less importance is given to cultural values, compared to other factors such as age or gender differences, but the influence of culture should not be overlooked. Culture is strongly rooted into the society and the lives of students. Collectivism, hierarchy, and harmony intertwine with education in Japan, which affects not only students, but also teachers and institutions (Humphries and Burns, 2015, p. 241). Considering those influences and the increasing use of English between non-native English speakers, it is necessary for the students in the context to be L2 learners of English as an international language, instead of assuming a native-like standard as the sole goal of learning English. This might encourage teachers not to exclusively teach native speaker cultures, but to take into account Asian cultures (Horibe, 2015, p. 248). In addition, as Lightbown and Spada (2013, p. 88) discuss, a sensitivity to cultural influences could allow teachers to determine the most appropriate ways of keeping students motivated. One of the possible approaches in this context could be the judicious use of L1, such as translation activities as a type of 'real-life activity', because many occupations for L2 users require occasional translation, not to mention occupations such as translators or interpreters (Atkinson, 1993, p. 54, *italics in original*).

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