Capitalizing on Cultural Differences in EFL Classrooms in Japan

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Every year more and more EFL teachers arrive in Japan enchanted by the idea of living and teaching in an exotic culture of the Orient. Teaching in a very different culture is an interesting experience on the one hand, but as a cultural experience it can also be a very frustrating one and, in fact, often is. Building rapport between students who speak "a little English" and teachers who speak little Japanese is not easy. The more high spirited a teacher is, the greater the dilemma, and the more often the teacher is critical of the students, their previous English teachers, large class size, and the Ministry of Education, if not the Japanese culture itself. This article offers practical suggestions to EFL teachers for coping with cultural confrontations and outlines how some features of the Japanese school culture can be useful tools for class management.

Positive Features

Many culturally derived expectations regarding language and education are unconscious and unless made explicit they are not available for analysis and reflection. As McGroarty and Galvan assert, both the EFL teacher and the students bring culture into the classroom. Nothing shapes one's views of language and education, they add, so profoundly as culture, and these views influence expectations regarding the nature of both teaching and learning in a language classroom (1985, p. 82).

According to Reischauer, one of the outstanding Japanese virtues is the great capacity for cooperation within various groups (1990, p. 25). This group consciousness fosters a sense of collective responsibility that is alien to westerners (Taylor 1989, p. 73). But this also means that the stronger the group ties, the weaker the sense of individuality; that is, love of consensus means dislike of individual initiative in the classroom (Taylor, 1989, p. 115).

A second characteristic that the Japanese share is a Confucian cultural heritage that displays unstinted efforts in acquiring education (Reischauer 1990, p. 27). In practice, students are constantly told from childhood on to sit quietly and listen to the teacher, and not to stand up and speak out unless called upon. As a result, they are reluctant to express their opinions. Moreover, they feel insecure in responding to the general open-ended questions EFL teachers often ask in the classroom. Unfortunately, such a lack of self-assertiveness can become a serious drawback in the quest to master a foreign language.

A third characteristic of Japanese society is its orderliness in various aspects of life (Reischauer 1990, p. 28). Though EFL classrooms are generally packed with some 40 to 80 students, the size of the class should not worry or disturb a teacher. The students are generally trained to maintain order in large class situations. What is important is that the teacher approach the

class with enthusiasm and adapt his/her teaching style to the Japanese school culture. Students are very sensitive to the attitude of the teacher.

Practical Suggestions

Recognizing the capacity for cooperation, unstinted efforts in acquiring education, and orderliness as virtues of Japanese students that you can rely on in order to facilitate class management, there are several ways to modify the school culture and the students' learning styles. Consider, for example, roll call, a seating chart, and small group activities.

Roll Call

School administrators usually require teachers to keep a record of the attendance of each student, and roll-call is usually a boring routine task. It can, however, be converted into a very effective warm-up communication activity. For example, why not require students to reply with something other than 'here' or 'present' by asking each student a question? For the first few classes it is advisable to write 3 to 5 questions on the board to minimize the students' feeling of insecurity. Good questions are those that help elicit pieces of information about each student; for example,

"Mr. A, how do you come to school?"
"Miss B, do you like the city/town you live in?"
"Mr. C., have you ever had a native speaker (American, British, etc.) teacher of English?"
"Miss D, have you ever been abroad?"
"Mr. E, do you have a friend/friends from an English speaking country/ countries?"

From this question-answer roll call, the teacher will know who needs extra encouragement and attention.

A variation, if this roll call takes too much time and bores other students, is to have everyone write answers to questions on a piece of paper. Whether or not you let students read their answers directly from their papers, they perform with more confidence and comfort once they have pre-written answers. One important instructional goal is to incorporate writing with speaking in order to enhance speaking capability (Yoshitake 1989, pp. 28-31).

In brief, a teacher from a more liberal tradition, or one with a new class from a rather rigid educational system, can use the roll-call as an ice-breaker to generate rapport between the teacher and the students. It is a good idea to suggest and demonstrate to students from the very first class that their verbal participation will be expected and required.

Seating Chart

Class size is generally quite large in Japanese schools. In this situation, one technique for efficient class management is to assign seats. To indicate to the students that in the EFL class individual decision is respected and stressed, the teacher can let the students select their own seats for the semester. This should not take more than five or so minutes for a class of as many as 40 to 80 students in Japan. Usually orderliness in the room does not deteriorate. Moreover, to enhance the student's commitment in the direction of defining himself/herself in terms of individuality, it is a good idea to pass around a seating chart for each student to sign.

With a seating chart, the teacher can easily record student attendance, class participation and test grades *and* constantly refer to them. It can also be used in encouraging students to take direct and active responsibility for their learning by making class grades, evaluation and standing available to students whenever they wish. When the teacher has several large classes of forty to eighty that meet only once or twice a week, a seating chart makes it possible to address students by name. Knowing individual students is an important part of class management and a significant first step towards person-to-person communication.

Small Group Activities

In small-group teaching, the class is divided into groups of two to six for the purpose of engaging in cooperative learning experiences. (Bejarano, 1987, p. 485) Any class activity except tests can become a group task. For example, in listening comprehension training, each student will respond with more assertiveness if he/she has listened to the tape lesson in a group in which members can support each other in performing assigned listening tasks. Even in having individual students read a passage out loud, if time to practice in small groups is allotted before they are required to read, student performance will be more successful. This is not a waste of time because it will keep the students from mumbling in low voices one after another out of fear of making errors, and thus hampering the flow of the class.

Small group teaching which gives students the security of a group-bond works particularly well with Japanese students since they are trained to cooperate and help each other to prevent situations that might otherwise prove embarrassing to friends. (Condon 1986, p. 32) The groups can be made smaller and smaller gradually to encourage students to become more self-assertive and ready for individual spontaneous interaction with the teacher.

Conclusion

No matter how well Western-style class behavior is explained or rationalized to Japanese students, one will have difficulty conducting EFL classes effectively without using practical, step by step techniques. As students become more comfortable with Western classroom expectations (i.e., those of the Western EFL teacher), EFL classes can be effectively enhanced by the rapport between the teacher and students. Those teachers who can demonstrate an understanding of the cultural frictions that are likely to confuse students will overcome potential frustrations and succeed in generating the attitudes desired and needed for functioning both inter-culturally and in English.

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