Some adaptation and acculturation problems encountered by foreign teachers in Japanese schools

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Introduction

This paper identifies some of the adaptation and acculturation problems encountered by foreign teachers in Japanese schools. It first mentions some differences between Japan and the countries where native English speaking teachers may come from, how teachers from Japan and abroad may be viewed in Japan, and some of the dangers of having a dualistic world view. The paper then focuses on a model of four coping styles that foreign teachers utilize in Japanese schools and also looks at four patterns of psychological adjustment and acculturation. Finally the paper suggests some ways foreign teachers can develop from ethnocentrism to a larger world view through cultural awareness.

Problems, Differences, and Dangers

This section looks at some problems, differences, and potential dangers foreign teachers in Japanese schools face in their adaptation and acculturation efforts.

To begin with, the way people of different cultures view time is important (Anderson, 2004). Two of the most important structures, monochronic and polychronic time, have been well described by Hall (1987). Hall describes monochronic time as meaning people pay attention to and do only one thing at a

time, and polychronic time as being involved in many things at once. People of the United States, for example, basically operate on the monochronic time structure. People in Japan, interestingly, basically operate on both monochronic time and polychronic time. As Hall mentions, the Japanese deal with foreigners by using the monochronic time structure, but use the polychronic time structure when dealing with people from their own country. Polychronic people, in contrast to monochronic people, are highly distractible and subject to interruptions, consider time commitments an object to be achieved, if possible, are committed to people and human relationships more than to jobs, change plans often and easily, are more concerned with close relationships than privacy, and, among other features, are high-context oriented.

High and low context communication has to do with how people communicate in their culture (Anderson, 2004). In high-context cultures like that of Japan, people communicate more non-verbally and with more internalized meanings. That is, meanings are shared among the members of the group and much of the communication is made implicitly. In countries that are more low-context oriented (e.g., the United States), meanings are conveyed more verbally and explicitly. In schools, these differences in communication styles can be problematic in areas such as contract negotiations in both spoken and written forms.

Some other major communication differences between many countries from where foreign English language teachers come from and Japan include the following (Gudykunst & San Antonio, 1993): individualistic vs. group-orientated styles, self face vs. mutual face concern, linear vs. spiral logic, direct vs. indirect style, person vs. status oriented style, speaker vs. listener oriented style, and verbal vs. context based understanding. Gudykunst and San Antonio cite some other selected differences between the West and Japan as listed below:

1. independence/dependence
2. unstable/stable

3. rational/emotional
4. objective/subjective
5. talkativeness/silence
6. universality/particularity
7. active/reactive

Another area of concern is pragmatic competence. Fukushima (1990) pointed out that Japanese learners of English often memorize certain set expressions and find it difficult to alter their utterances to meet the communicational situations they find themselves in. Along with potential pragmatic failure is the problem of language proficiency. Often Japanese learners of English will directly transfer certain Japanese into English resulting in expressions like, "I'm glad if you could..." rather than the more natural and typical expression, "I'd appreciate...", that a native speaker of English may use.

Expectations of teachers by Japanese students may or may not prove problematic for the foreign teacher in Japan. It may be important to be aware of differences in expectations. In a survey of Japanese students of English at the university level, Shimizu (1999) identified some positive attributes of native English speaking teachers and Japanese English teachers and the results were quite interesting. As for the positive attributes, the native English speaking teachers rated higher than their Japanese counterparts in areas such as "good pronunciation", "entertaining", "broadminded", "don't treat me stupid", "reliable", "friendly", "kind", and "qualified". However, the Japanese students did not think that their native English speaking teachers were as "knowledgeable" as their native Japanese teachers. Being aware of these different expectations and coping with them on a personal level may prove essential for a foreign teacher to adapt and acculturate in Japanese schools.

Lastly, Ryan (1999) makes a very valuable point in mentioning that there may be some danger in all this cultural contrasting between Japan and the West. He mentions a study done by Stewart and Bennett (1991) in which they looked at

references to cross-cultural examples in an American cross-cultural textbook. They found that Japan by far had the highest frequency of references. Ryan is concerned that there is too much cultural contrasting between Japan and the West. He questions, for example, how collectivistic Japan is when many other countries are more collectivistic (Central America). Ryan then goes on to warn us of the dangers of dualism in our thinking, and even biculturalistic thinking, when we foreign teachers should be developing more multicultural world views in ourselves as individuals (identity) and the societies in which we live. Ryan adds that in culturally stereotyping, people from any culture may be guilty of overestimating many of the differences between groups and underestimating differences within groups such as high/low context communication, high/low uncertainty avoidance, and cultures of masculinity/femininity.

Warnings & Coping Styles

This section discusses some of the behaviors Native English Speaking (NES) Instructors tend to find most challenging among their Japanese students in classrooms in Japan. Komisarof (2002), in his review of the literature, cites several areas of concern for the foreign teacher. Below is a list of some of the most problematic.

Japanese students:

1. hesitate to speak English in front of large groups
2. don't challenge the instructor's statements
3. hesitate to initiate discussions or ask questions about the topic
4. don't volunteer answers to questions posed in class
5. are reluctant to demonstrate extraordinary ability or knowledge
6. are loathe to disagree or correct each other
7. are reluctant to ask questions for clarification

8. feel uncomfortable in unstructured learning situations
9. make infrequent eye contact with the teacher
10. engage in long periods of silence when called upon
11. have less demonstrative facial expressions than students in many NES teachers' countries

Komisarof then introduces a clever model of four coping styles that foreign teachers use when dealing with their students. The first style is Malaise. With Malaise teachers do not attempt to make changes in their students' behaviors and do not accept their students' behaviors. This often leads to a lot of frustration and confusion for the teacher as they do not realize that their expectations for behavior are in conflict with Japanese classroom norms. Fortunately, this condition typically decreases with time as the teacher develops more cultural awareness.

The second style is called Accommodation. In Accommodation, again the teacher does not try and change students' behaviors but he or she accepts the students' behaviors out of respect for cultural traditions and/or assumes students would be uncomfortable, or unable, to behave differently anyway. Teachers using Accommodation try to work around norms as a way to avoid conflict, build harmony, and create a comfortable classroom atmosphere. Unfortunately, little or no intercultural adaptation for students takes place.

The third style is Coercion in which teachers do try and make changes in students' behaviors but do not accept students' behaviors. With this style, teachers view student norms as barriers to be overcome and replaced thinking that students can learn new behaviors (e.g. communicative competence) and engage in some intercultural adaptation.

The last style is Conscious Intercultural Change Agentry (CICA) where teachers try to initiate changes in students' behaviors as well as develop an acceptance of students' behaviors, that is, they develop an accepting attitude toward students' behavior. They use this style also to develop a method for

incremental change of common Japanese classroom norms based on deep understanding of values, assumptions, and communicative norms in Japanese culture. Teachers utilize their knowledge of Japanese culture to enable students to adapt to the instructor's culture of learning and teaching. With CICA, teachers create contexts for students to practice and gradually adopt a verbal and nonverbal communication style in class that is compatible with English as it is spoken in the teacher's culture. Students can reach attainable goals in a comfortable atmosphere and the learning environment is structured in manners compatible with Japanese values (collectivism/group work, higher power distance) and communication styles (face maintenance strategies). CICA is characterized by acceptance of students' communicative norms, despite the seeming paradox that the teacher wants students ultimately to enact different ones. CICA is usually a gradual process where students are seen as willing partners in change (unlike coercion). Teacher patience is critical. Norms are not seen as barriers but as an essential starting point - and they need to be fully understood in order to be changed. Only by working with Japanese norms can a teacher facilitate their transformation. Ethnocentric judgments are not made and a high level of acceptance maintained.

Finally, Matsumoto and LeRoux (2003) identified four patterns of psychological adjustment and acculturation in the literature. They used two basic questions [Q1. Do I value and want to maintain my own country's cultural identity and characteristics? Q2. Do I value and want to maintain relationships with other groups of people as well (especially of my host country)?] to categorize people into four patterns of psychological adjustment and acculturation.

The first group is known as the Separators (Yes to Q1, No to Q2). Separators live in their own little "native country" and do not associate much with people of their host country.

The second group is called the Assimilators (No to Q1, Yes to Q2). Members of this group have abandoned their own culture and have embraced their host

culture.

The third group is called the Marginalizers (No to Q1, No to Q2). Marginalizers have abandoned their own culture, have not accepted their host culture, and basically live on the fringes of both cultures.

The forth and final group is called the Integrators (Yes to Q1, Yes to Q2). They maintain their own culture and identity, value and maintain relationships with people from their host country, see the good and bad, right and wrong in both cultures and accept and respect both. They conceptualize their behaviors, see the two cultures existing simultaneously, switching back and forth in behaviors, thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and language - fluently and effortlessly. Integrators are multicultural individuals of society.

Matsumoto and LeRoux then go on and expand on this last group comparing "monocultural minds" to "multiculturalism and multiple minds". They explain that the monocultural mind knows basically only one language, one way of thinking, one way of acting, and one way of feeling and expressing emotions whereas the multicultural mind knows more than one language, maintains several thoughts (sensation, perception, cognition, problem solving, thinking, deliberation, etc.), emotions (ways of judging others, expressions and feelings of their own emotions, etc.), and holds useful social and personality processes (ways of understanding their own behavior and that of others around them).

Lastly, Matsumoto and LeRoux outline some psychological traits and skills of the multicultural/integral mind. Multicultural minds not only have the ability to adapt to life in a different culture but are also well-adjusted, highly mature, successful, well-rounded, emotionally and interpersonally competent, and self-actualized. The psychological traits and skills of the multicultural mind include; self-acceptance, self-esteem and self-confidence, tolerance of ambiguity, creativity, autonomy, self-expressiveness, personal responsibility, and nonjudgmental listening.

The multicultural mind is a healthy, well balanced and adjusted mind that is characteristic of a fully integrated human being.

Closing: Possible Solutions

This paper identified some of the adaptation and acculturation problems encountered by foreign teachers in Japanese schools. Although there are several differences between Japan and the countries where native English speaking teachers come from, these differences need not be overwhelming. Teachers need to be aware of the possible differences and potential problems while at the same time make efforts towards developing positive coping styles and ways of psychological adjustment and acculturation. Foreign teachers can develop from ethnocentrism to a larger world view through greater cultural awareness. Teachers from Japan and abroad alike need to engage in more communication on such matters through associations, networking, and even casual chat. Better orientation (at the start of the school year) for Japanese teachers, foreign teachers and their students as well would be beneficial for all and help build better cultural understanding. Schools could conduct ongoing workshops that would again help all teachers and students regardless of their nationalities. Finally, teachers and students alike could write handbooks that would help teachers and students adjust to each other as individuals and as members of different cultures in their one shared school culture.

Resources for adjusting to change and overcoming culture shock

Adjusting to change
http://www.bpahealth.com/e_bpapress_07.html
Overcoming culture shock
http://www.culturebridge.com/articles/culture_shock.html
Culture Shock - Educate Yourself
http://www.juliaferguson.com/shock.html
Overcoming culture shocks
http://www.hindu.com/mp/2004/07/15/stories/2004071501490300.htm

How to overcome culture shock

http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Spring04/DeJesus/page3.html

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