

Amae and the EFL Classroom in Japan

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A major concern facing language teachers working abroad is understanding the culture and behavior of their students. When teaching language, and to an certain extent culture, misunderstandings surely arise. However, with some knowledge of the society they are immersed in, language teachers should be able to proceed smoothly with classes and perhaps use situations of cultural difference to enhance their lessons. This of course applies to the EFL teacher in Japan, a country whose isolation from the rest of the world during the Tokugawa Era, 1603-1867, has caused many to view it with a sense of the unknown or unique (Hall, 1968; Reischauer, 1970). The aim of this paper is to provide EFL instructors with a glance at one aspect of Japanese society that affects the behavior of many Japanese: the *Amae* Theory of Psychology as developed by Doctor Takeo Doi. The first part of this paper will focus on explaining this theory while the second part will apply the theory to certain classroom situations.

In his book *The Anatomy of Dependence*, Doi defines *amae* as "an emotion felt by the baby at the breast towards its mother" (1973, p. 20). Obviously this is not an emotion, drive, or instinct peculiar to the Japanese, it is found in animal life as well. The importance of this *feeling*, in regard to the Japanese, manifests itself linguistically. Doi explains that "the special qualities of the Japanese psychology" result from the fact that in the Japanese language alone does a word exist that describes "a phenomenon so universal that it was to be

found not only among human beings but even among animals" (p. 15). Doi further explains that:

The fact that...the word *amae* is, as a word peculiar to the Japanese language yet describes a psychological phenomenon that is basically common to mankind as a whole shows not only how especially familiar the psychology in question is to the Japanese but also that the Japanese social structure is formed in such a way as to permit expression of that psychology. This implies in turn that *amae* is a key concept for the understanding not only of the psychological makeup of the individual Japanese but of the structure of Japanese society as a whole (p. 28).

Doi gives an example of how the idea of *amae* is difficult to express in languages other than Japanese by relating an experience he had while interviewing the mother of one of his patients. The patient's father was Japanese while the mother was an English woman born in Japan and fluent in Japanese. When the conversation, which was in English, turned to the patient's early childhood, the mother "suddenly switched from English and said quite clearly in Japanese, *kono ko wa amari amaemasen deshita-* 'She did not *amaeru* much'" (p. 18). When later in the interview Doi asked the mother why she switched from English to Japanese for that phrase only, she responded after considering the question for a few moments that, "There's no way of expressing it in English" (p. 18).

There is no question that the *feeling* of *amae* exists in every society. What is important about this *feeling* in relation to Japanese society is the uniqueness of the existence of a word to represent the *feeling*. As a result, Japanese adults, when compared with their counterparts in other societies, tend to be more aware of *amae* desires. This in turn effects the behavior of the Japanese.

What is actually at the root of *amae* behavior in both adults and children alike is the desire to be indulged by others. The person exhibiting *amae* is often seeking the dependency of others. An infant displays almost solely *amae* behavior. Without its parents it could not survive. As a child develops, he or she is constantly forced to become more independent. This is true for all cultures. Nevertheless, in any society one can find people who have remained dependent and who seek the indulgence of others. What is unique to Japanese society is the extent to which *amae* behavior is instilled in the everyday life of many Japanese. This is surely connected to the existence of the word *amae* in the Japanese language.

At this point, in order to establish a clearer idea of the concept of *amae* in Japan, it is perhaps best to provide some examples that display the extent to which *amae* is present in everyday Japanese life. These examples may not be unique to the Japanese, but when they are not, they are perceived uniquely by many Japanese. Therefore, Japanese behavior in these situations may vary from the behavior displayed by members of cultures other than Japan.

In *Japanese Patterns of Behavior*, Professor Takie Sugiyama Lebra deals with various dependency types in Japan. She explains that "When two persons are unequal in status or power, the inferior becomes dependent upon the superior for help and support" (1976, p. 50). Lebra states that this type of relationship is found in many areas of Japanese society, "between employer and employee, chief and subordinate, leader and follower, teacher and disciple" (p. 51). Moreover, this seems to occur on a conscious level as demonstrated by the use

of terms related to the parent/child relationship. Concerning dependency and the use of parent/child terms Lebra stated that:

In Japanese tradition, this type of dependency occurs most often as a quasi-familial relationship, where the dependent partner assumes the role of a child toward the supporting partner, who plays the role of a parent. Certain occupational, economic, and political groups, as well as gangsters, use quasi-kinship terms indicating such symbolic filiation. Typical examples are: *oyabun* and *kobun*, *oyakata* and *kokata*, or just *oya* and *ko* (*oya* and *ko* meaning "parent" and "child," respectively, and *bun* and *kata* both meaning "role" or "status")... (p. 51).

An example of this can be seen in Western culture in the term "Godfather" as used by some organized crime groups; still, this seems to be one of the few parallels that exists. According to Lebra, these terms are used in "certain" situations. This does not, however, indicate that the atmosphere of dependency does not exist where the terms are absent.

In a rather lengthy quote, Professor Kuniko Miyanaga utilizes a passage from Kenichi Fukuda's book, *Uwayaku wa Naze Monowakari ga Waruika* (Why is Your Boss Slow in Understanding You?) to illuminate her concept of *sasshi* and *amae* (*sasshi* meaning the ability to perceive or guess correctly the cues, verbal and non-verbal, given by others). Fukuda tells the story of a man who "refuses to be dependent on his boss." This creates an uneasy working environment since the man does not play what Miyanaga calls the game focusing "on the give-and-take of *sasshi* and *amae*" (1991, p. 87-88). The following may help to explain Miyanaga's *sasshi* and *amae* concept:

Although a high *sasshi* ability in the recipient of cues is much appreciated, an expectation of *sasshi* effort from the other is discouraged. The word for this is *amae*. Although *amae* has been co-opted as a psychological concept by Takeo Doi (1973), in the interaction ritual, it is simply used to indicate the restriction of excessive dependency on the *sasshi* of the other person. *Sasshi* is good, but asking for *sasshi* is not; it is considered to be aggressive. *Amae*,

when used in a conversation, signifies a passive aggression in which one depends on the manners of the other (p. 86).

What can be derived from this is that *amae* is an underlying trend which functions in many forms in Japanese society. It is obviously not something that is in the forefront of every Japanese person's thoughts, but it does lurk under the surface in many situations.

Professor Chie Nakane, in her book *Japanese Society* (1970), focuses extensively on the vertical formation of groups and *senpai/kohai* relationships in Japan. She concludes that these traits of Japanese society work almost entirely on the premise of emotional bonds. She discerns that the periods of rapid industrial growth both during the *Meiji* Era and after World War II are the direct results of the Japanese ability to quickly mobilize almost the entire nation by utilizing the direct emotional ties between workers and their immediate superiors. Nakane explains that whatever a superior asks of a junior will be carried-out without question of the superior's intentions or authority. As for the superior, he or she is expected to care for the junior, regardless of ability. An example of this is the life-time employment system popular in Japan. The principle underlying trait of Japanese psychological make-up that fosters this system is *amae*.

What can be gathered from these examples is that the way *amae* functions in Japanese behavior patterns is what is distinctive about Japanese society. All societies exhibit *amae* feelings to a certain extent, but in Japan the awareness of this feeling is heightened.

The existence of the word *amae*, a word that represents the desire to be indulged in a manner similar to the indulgence that an infant seeks from its parents, in Japanese language has effected the behavioral patterns of many Japanese. Awareness of *amae* influences interaction; therefore, when interaction takes place between a person functioning with an awareness of *amae* and one who is not conscious of *amae*, misunderstandings or confusion as to intention or meaning may arise on the part of both parties. This is perhaps why the phrase "you cannot understand because you are not Japanese" has been uttered so many times. The point here is not whether the person can understand the meaning, feeling, or significance of the situation, but rather that the persons involved are interacting according to different sets of rules. The mere awareness of Doi's theory, or any other theory of communicational behavior in Japan for that matter, will surely aid the EFL instructor in creating a classroom environment more conducive to both the learning of language and the understanding of culture.

With a limited understanding of Doi's theory of *amae*, EFL teachers in Japan may come to view the behavior of their students in a different light. If teachers are less befuddled by the actions and utterances of their students, they can better impart language and culture in their class. What follows are a few examples of Japanese student behavior types in the EFL classroom and how *amae* may influence these behavior types.

It is perhaps best to begin this section by examining the relationship between the Japanese *sensei* and the Japanese student. The translation of the word *sensei* into English is usually given as "a teacher; a master; an instructor" (Yamada,

1972, p. 826). However, when considering the two *kanji* that form the word, a deeper meaning may be formulated. The *kanji* for *sen* (先) is most commonly translated as "foregoing; previous." The *kanji* for *sei* (生) is commonly translated as "live; birth" (Ishii, Kano, Shimizu, Takenaka, 1990, p. 14-15). Thus, the meaning of one who was born or has lived previously to another, one who has come before another, can be derived. This of course makes perfect sense in that a teacher must have knowledge that his or her students do not possess: the teacher must have come down the road leading to this knowledge before he or she can lead students down that road. This all is quite obvious, but the point lies in the idea that the *sensei* has reached the end of the road. Almost as if the *sensei* were *all-knowing*. Fujioka Sakutaro wrote the following concerning the traditional relationship between teacher and pupil in Japan:

A pupil was taught to walk "seven feet in the rear of his instructor, lest he should tread on the latter's shadow." The teacher showed the way and the pupil had only to follow it. Hence the pupil was not allowed to depart a step from the teacher's instructions: he was permitted to reproduce but forbidden to improve... (Ratti and Westbrook, 1973, p. 176).

Of course the rigidity and discipline of this type of relationship has greatly diminished in Japan; however, the idea of the *sensei* showing the way and the student only reproducing is something that can still be found today in many classrooms in Japan. This is in great contrast to how many Western EFL teachers present themselves to their students. Therefore, when Japanese students enter an EFL class run by a Native English speaker, the students find themselves in a new environment where the rules that govern teacher/pupil interaction are quite different.

In the West, class participation means being an active learner in the classroom. This is a new and often alien concept for many Japanese students. The Japanese school system has trained Japanese students to be learners who, under a Western system of education, would be considered passive. The Japanese students must, therefore, adjust to this somewhat alien environment. What must occur on the part of the Japanese students is a reevaluation and change in the way that they interact with their teacher; an adjustment to their *sasshi* and *amae*.

In a survey performed during the 1994 academic year at Asia University, students expressed that they liked their Native English EFL teachers because they were *kind* and *friendly* (Lanara, 1995, p. 105). This idea of being *kind* and *friendly* should not be interpreted as reflecting that teachers from abroad are *kinder* or *friendlier* than Japanese teachers. In fact, the opposite may very well be true considering the tight bonds formed from a *sensei*/disciple or *sempai/kohai* relationship. What the students perceived as extremely *kind* and *friendly* behavior on the part of their teachers was probably the result of a combination of the communicative method of language learning and the differences in behavior toward students that exist between many teachers from Western societies and teachers from Japanese society.

For example, communicative language learning will often have the teacher relating experiences or elements of the teacher's personal life as well as asking the students about their personal lives. This may be due to the teacher's interest in his or her students, but it is also a method of modeling and

practicing language patterns. Since this is a deviation from the rote learning of grammar that many Japanese students have been exposed to, they may perceive it as the teacher attempting to befriend them. Here is where Japanese students may have difficulties. They must adjust their *amae* to suit the new environment of their EFL classroom. Consequently, there are three basic situations that may arise. The first, the ideal, will be that students will strike a functional balance between *amae* and *enryo*. *Enryo* is defined by Doi "as restraint or holding back" (1973, p. 39). In the second case, students may *amaeru* (the verb form of *amae*) too much. In other words, they expect the teacher to indulge them almost unconditionally. The third situation is one where students do not *amaeru* enough, meaning they remain withdrawn from and too rigid with the teacher. The following will examine these three situations more closely.

In the ideal situation, where a balance is struck, the students will *amaeru* enough so as to be active in the classroom, in the Western sense, while maintaining enough *enryo* so as to not seek too much indulgence from the teacher. Doi explains the *amae/enryo* relationship in the following:

In the parent-child relationship there is no *enryo*, since parents and their children are not *tanin*... (persons with no blood relationship to oneself, persons unconnected with oneself)... the relationship being permeated with *amae*. In this case, not only does the child feel no *enryo* toward the parent, but the parent equally feels no *enryo* toward the child. With other relationships outside this parent-child relationship, *enryo* decreases proportionately with intimacy and increases with distance... one holds back with the idea that one must not presume too much (*amaeru*) on the other's good will. The fear is at work, in other words, that unless one holds back one will be thought impertinent and disliked accordingly. One might say that *enryo* is an inverted form of *amae* (pp. 38-39).

With the appropriate balance of *amae/enryo* a Japanese student can function quite easily in a communicative EFL classroom. The student will feel close enough to the teacher to take chances with his or her English while maintaining enough *enryo* to act respectfully toward the teacher.

In the second case, a student will *amaeru* too much. The student will expect the teacher to be quite indulgent; thus, a break down in the efficiency of the classroom may occur. There are any number of ways that this expectation of being indulged may manifest itself. Of course, the following examples are often the result of many different factors, but a thread of *amae* frequently winds through them.

The following are some situations that may be viewed as the consequence of too much *amae* and not enough *enryo*: students who habitually come to class late and treat this with a nonchalant attitude, students who rarely do their homework, for they believe there will be no repercussions, students who do not struggle to stay awake when sleepy but rather make themselves comfortable. This list could continue to include numerous other types of behavior; however, let us look at one last example, an actual and unique incident.

A male student was displaying a balanced *amae/enryo* for the first few months of class. At this point the teacher started to continually come upon the student at the gym while working out. Often the two would help each other exercise. This led to a closer relationship between the two. At the beginning of class one day, the student decided to change shirts, so he removed his t-shirt and put on another one. There was no malice or intent of disrespect in the student's actions. The teacher perceived

this and handled the situation in a *joking* manner during class but talked to the student after class. The student apologized yet did not feel reprimanded because the teacher had handled the incident in a calm and friendly way; thus, while understanding that his action was out of line, his rapport with the teacher was not effected. Obviously, students do not do their homework, come to class late, and so on for many different reasons; however, an underlying element that may aid students in acting this way can be an unbalanced *amae/enryo* where there is an excess of *amae* and a lack of *enryo*.

The third situation that may form in relation to *amae* in the EFL classroom is one where students do not develop enough *amae* feeling toward the teacher. When this occurs the student will be functioning from a position of too much *enryo*. The student will withdraw and not actively participate in the class. This is not an indication that the student does not like the teacher or the class, but merely that the student does not feel comfortable enough or close enough to the teacher, and quite possibly the other students, to interact in the manner that the teacher desires.

Doi terms this behavior as being *hitomishiri*. Doi explains that *hitomishiri* is "literally, coming to know people, which is usually translated as *shyness* or *bashfulness*" (1973, p. 105). This term, as with *amae*, derives from the parent-child relationship, but is also used to label adult behavior. Doi states that:

Kono ko wa mo hitomishiri suru (this child already shows *hitomishiri*) is used of babes-in-arms, and refers to the way a baby comes to distinguish its mother from other people...The word *hitomishiri* is sometimes used in a similar sense of adults, when it becomes synonymous with "self-consciousness" in the sense of shyness or

embarrassment. One may say, for example, "I tend to *hitomishiri*, so I don't like visiting strangers (p. 105).

Doi professes that *amae* and *hitomishiri* "are the reverse sides of the same coin" (p.107); therefore, it can be concluded that a strong sense of *hitomishiri* will result in a strong display of *enryo*. Thus, a student with too much *hitomishiri* will be limited in how much they can *amaeru* toward their teacher. This in turn will create an unbalanced *amae/enryo* in the favour of *enryo*. The result would be a student who very rarely raises his or her hand or actively participates in the class even though they like the class and the teacher, come everyday, are always on time, and always do their homework.

The psychology of *amae* is not confined to the Japanese. It is a theory that can be found in all societies and even in animals. What is unique in its relationship to Japan is the existence of terms connected with these feelings. This linguistical relationship leads to a heightened expression of this behavior in everyday life. Thus, the level to which the Japanese mind, both conscious and subconscious, is aware of these mannerisms becomes elevated. A knowledge of some of these principles can only help the non-Japanese foreign language teacher working in Japan. The idea is not to soften the cultural friction that arises in the classroom, for that friction is an important and desired aspect that will help to develop the students' abilities to interact with members of different cultures. What the teacher will gain from even a limited understanding of these principles is a clearer picture of what is behind the behavior of many Japanese students. Moreover, this will give the teacher some idea of the extent of the non-language education that is occurring in the class. An

understanding of *amae* will also decrease much of the tension that the teacher feels as a result of being unaware of the underlying aspects of his or her students' behavior.

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