Community and its Impact on Language Learners in Japan

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Abstract

For native English teachers employed in Japan, motivating students to actively participate in the classroom can be challenging. Much of the diagnosis around this issue gets labelled as "cultural" and left at that; yet educators cannot expect to be effective in either lesson planning or classroom management without a far greater understanding of these barriers. In order to develop strategies that will mitigate the collective reluctance of Japanese students to engage confidently with English, a retrospective exploration of their community origins is necessary. This not only provides an insight into why Japanese students behave the way they do, but also allows for the adoption of methodologically sound approaches that will lower resistance. This paper begins with a theoretical overview of some frameworks to consider when exploring the intersecting relationships between identity, language, and community before examining how these specifically apply to Japanese students. It concludes with recommendations on how to lower the resistance these background influences have on attitudes to language learning.

Introduction

The role of community is a key factor in understanding the human experience. It provides contextual guidelines within which a person determines appropriate modes of conduct in relationship to their environment and those who inhabit it (Norton, 2000, p. 5). Community, therefore, becomes a shared set of assumptions and values that are accepted as normal behaviour, thereby allowing for an accurate interpretation of meaning when engaging with others who belong to the same group. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952, p. 181) refer to the learning process in becoming a member of a community as "distinctive achievements" which include, but are not limited to: language, dress, food, perceptions and expectations. When measured against a framework of shared values and principles, an object or behaviour can then be determined as either belonging to the community or being separate from it. These traits go on to become inextricably linked to how an individual engages with the world, shaping both sensory perception and cognitive interpretation as they encounter a wider range of environments.

Problems begin to arise, however, when the learned set of guidelines that served so well in the native community become restrictive upon entering an unfamiliar context that has its own unique set of cultural norms. Therefore, the importance of considering how a person may or may not adapt and interact within an alternative environment is crucial for English language educators in Japan where classroom expectations can vary greatly from those of a Japanese learning environment. As Holliday et al (2016, p. 19) states, "Before we can communicate with people who are different to ourselves, we need to understand something about how they present themselves as being or belonging to certain groups". To fully comprehend the roots of these differences, a retrospective exploration of how identity, language and community are intertwined is necessary.

Language and Community

The relationship between language and community is perhaps most easily illuminated when one considers it from the opposing perspective; in other words, imagining a society without discourse. Rather than a vast catalogue of cognitive achievement, in its place stands a primitive species surviving on instinct and the most rudimentary forms of expression. Wenger (1998, p. 51) states, "We must have ways to communicate with each other" and one of the key reasons is for the necessity of establishing communities, a fundamental building block in humanity's evolution. Language, being our primary mode of communication, is clearly an essential component in this process of coalescence, yet, despite its importance in

binding community together, it is also true that it cannot be universally inclusive. By definition, in order to be part of something, there must be another element that is separate, and language plays a pivotal role in this division, particularly when it comes to shaping the identity of a community.

There are numerous frameworks with which to understand these linguistic divisions. One of the original models is that of speech communities which Hymes (1974) describes as:

> A speech community is defined, then, tautologically but radically, as a community sharing knowledge of rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech. Such sharing compromises knowledge of at least one form of speech, and knowledge also of its patterns of use. Both conditions are necessary. (p. 51)

Embedded within this concept is an implied sense of group belonging with the communicative needs of the collective "dominating the development and maintenance of its discoursal characteristics" (Swales, 1990, p. 24). Swales elaborates further by claiming that speech communities are "centripetal", meaning they are inclusive according to birth or adoption, and the "primary determinants of linguistic behaviour are social". These norms then become the foundation on which individual identities are created.

This knowledge of speech and pattern of use was also heavily emphasised by de Saussure who referred to them as *langue,* or the system by which language is formed; and *parole*, the actual speech and speech acts made possible through language (de Saussure, cited in Culler, 1976, p. 29). A speech community therefore shares similar values about the functionality of a language and the degree of appropriateness of its contextual use.

Another framework that explores the relationship between language and community comes from Gee who developed the concept of 'Discourse' (with a capital 'D'). He defines Discourse as 'distinctive ways of "being and doing" that allow people to enact and/or recognise a specific and distinctive socially-situated identity' (Gee, 2002, p. 160). Again, reiterating how identity is formed through the learning of language, Gee goes on to claim:

> Although there are an endless array of Discourses in the world, nearly every human being, except under extraordinary conditions, acquires an initial Discourse within whatever constitutes his or her primary socializing unit early in life. Early in life, we all learn a culturally distinct way of being an *everyday person*, that is a nonspecialised, nonprofessional person. We can call this our "primary Discourse." Our primary Discourse gives us our initial

and often enduring sense of self and sets the foundations of our culturally specific vernacular language…

(Gee, 2002, p. 160)

In addition to the primary Discourse, "secondary Discourses" can also be acquired, although Gee states these are usually learned in a more public sphere. Furthermore, they can either align or conflict with the identity that has been created via the "initial socialising group" (Gee, 2002, p. 161). The issue of identity, therefore, is a crucial component in understanding how and why a secondary Discourse may or may not be successfully adopted at an individual level.

Identity and Context

The process of how identity is created is a complex one. A wide range of factors contribute to the way both communities and individuals define themselves. Some of these are perceived as fixed, whilst others are seen as more flexible. Holliday et al. (2004) uses the terms "inherited" and "creative" to exemplify the division, defining the former as more "traditional, imposed and presumed", and the latter as "turning, invading, manipulating resources" (Holliday et al., 2004, p. 19). Regardless of which category is being considered, the method by which speakers linguistically express identity-related statements is almost always by framing themselves as the subject. Interestingly, these grammatical structures create the erroneous impression that identity is focused inward; however, when analysed from a more holistic perspective, as Halliday (1985, p. 4) has done in examining language as part of a "social system", it becomes evident that identity is actually "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands the possibilities of the future" (Norton, cited in Knox, 2016, p. 1). Such a premise dramatically elevates the importance of language in determining how we go about understanding and constructing who we are within a wider context.

Halliday (1985, p. 5) placed great emphasis on this issue of context, defining it "as the total environment in which a text unfolds". His work was heavily influenced by Malinowski (1923, 1935) whose seminal "context of situation" also reflected the necessity to understand all surrounding circumstances in which language is used. This "context of situation", if considered in full, means that the sheer scope of what must be assessed when determining identity through language, is extensive indeed. Holliday et al. (2004) provides numerous examples of foreigners whose cultural identities are perceived incorrectly by those without a

thorough understanding of the situation in its entirety. Further nuance is introduced when considering concepts such as Yanne's *Communication Accommodation Theory* (Yanne, cited in Spencer-Oatey, 2009, p. 164), which frames linguistic utterances as either seeking approval and therefore looking to minimise differences or resisting this intention to accommodate when approval is not being sought and the speaker wishes to highlight differences. What is obvious is all these scenarios encourage a multi-faceted appreciation of who people are. Ultimately, the danger in any misperception is not only that it propagates stereotypes, but the missed opportunity to better understand the environment we inhabit.

Gee (2002) adds further validity to this position by providing a case study of a doctoral student from Korea seeking his services as an advisor. He states an issue arose due to unclear expectations between himself and the student in question. The core point of difference lay in the role the student believed her advisor should play, which was one requiring significant input and monitoring throughout the entire doctoral process, as opposed to that deemed appropriate by Gee, a faculty member, who expected the student to be far more autonomous, especially in the initial stages of her thesis.

Although Gee frames the variation in approach around discourse, in a later part of the text he acknowledges how identity and context also played a significant role in the misunderstanding:

> Finally, the student's socially situated identity and her Discourse led to attribute specific situated meanings to her words. In turn, of course, these situated meanings helped create the identity and Discourse model I have discussed. These things - identity, Discourse models, and situated meanings - are all reflexively related. Each of these both creates and reflects - at one and the same time - all the others. They are a package deal and that's why *one has to get the whole package right*.
>
> (Gee, 2002, p.169)

Such mismatched expectations, when left unaddressed, ultimately become detrimental to teachers and students alike.

Negotiation of Meaning

One final framework to consider in exploring the relationship between identity, language and community is Wenger's (1998, p. 52) "negotiation of meaning". His definition of this term comprises two parts; the first being that "the meaningfulness of our engagement with the world is not a state of affairs, but a continual process of renewed negotiation" and

shortly thereafter, “Meaning exists neither in us, nor in the world, but in the dynamic relation of living in the world” (Wenger, 1998, p. 54). The application of this, be it an individual level or on the broader scale of community, has language embedded within it. Language provides human beings with a vehicle to undertake their “negotiations of meaning”, allowing them to not just proclaim a statement of identity in reference to their social membership, but also as a way of externally representing the internal machinations of their values and beliefs. Wenger labels this process “participation” and “reification”, the former reflecting the need to verbalise and interact with others from the same social community; the latter identifying the equally significant need of “giving form to our experiences” which then become a focus for the negotiation of meaning (Wenger, 1998, p.58).

The relevance of Wenger’s negotiation of meaning becomes apparent when considering how educators can mitigate the challenges brought about by linguistic division; whether that be thought of as distinctive speech communities, Primary versus Secondary Discourses or mismatched contextual expectations. Whilst these theories are effective in identifying community separations, they are lacking in practical applicability to classroom solutions. This is where Wenger’s twin components of participation and reification become more than just theoretical abstracts, but potentially provide us with tools that can be translated into language teaching methodology.

Participation

Understanding participation is certainly the easier of the two terms due to its wider familiarity. Wenger describes participation as an active process, which will resonate with language instructors in Japan who often struggle to motivate active participation in the classroom. Wenger, however, goes on to elaborate further, with his extended definition of participation correlating closely with the issue of identity and community:

> Their participation is not something they simply turn off when they leave. Its effects on their experience are not restricted to the specific context of their engagement. It is a part of who they are that they always carry with them… In this sense, participation goes beyond direct engagement in specific activities with specific people. It places the negotiation of meaning in the context of our forms of membership in various communities. It is a constituent of our identities. As such, participation is not something we turn on and off. (Wenger, 1998, p.57)

The ramifications of this perspective are profound when viewed through the lens of English language education in Japan. The Japanese system of learning, particularly through elementary and secondary school, is built on a principle of direct engagement, whereby students attend classes that are often in the form of rote learning intended solely to pass an exam. In other words, there is little to no thought given as to how English can be more widely integrated outside of the classroom.

If considered through Wenger's concept of participation which is "not something we turn on and off", then it becomes unsurprising that Japanese students find using English intimidating. They are being asked to employ a secondary Discourse in class with no consideration given to the adaptation of their identity. Furthermore, the uncomfortable nature of this expectation extends to study or an assignment where a student, despite working in isolation, is still likely to have trouble finding meaning in an English-speaking environment.

Reification

In contrast to participation, reification is about taking the abstract and mentally turning it into something concrete. A good example is to think about the issue central to this paper: community. In and of itself, the word has no tangible qualities, and yet the way I am discussing it suggests it not only exists in the world but is in fact instrumental in shaping the learnings of our students. Wenger sums this up as:

> We project our meanings into the world and then we perceive them as existing in the world, as having a reality of their own... Whereas in projection we recognise ourselves in each other, in reification we project ourselves onto the world, and not having to recognise ourselves in these projections, we attribute to our meanings an independent existence. This contrast between mutuality and projection is an important difference between participation and reification.
>
> (Wenger, 1998, p.58).

Reification shapes the human experience in both process and form but is often overlooked as a factor that influences learning. The focus of educators lies almost entirely on participation, which as Wenger states, is an issue because "when too much reliance is placed on one at the expense of the other, the continuity of meaning is likely to become problematic in practice" (Wenger, 1998, p. 65). In essence, there is an interdependency to both terms that we will explore in the final part of this paper as it applies to Japanese learners of English.

Japanese Ethnocentrism

A common barometer used to discuss second language learner proficiency involves determining how strong the student's desire is to interact with the target language group (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991). These discussions usually cite factors relating to external and internal motivation that act as a driving force to overcome the inherent obstacles in learning a new language. However, as discussed throughout the course of this paper, other equally powerful influences can arise, not just from the forward projection of goal attainment, but also by looking back at the negative consequences a second language may have on the learner's loyalty to their community. An example of this has been found in studies where a perceived threat to the identity of the speaker through second language learning played a significant role in their attitude toward proficiency (Taylor, Meynard & Rheault, 1977; Segalowitz & Gatbonton, 1977). Ellis (1994) also postulated that a learner's beliefs about their own speech community is likely to determine their attitude to an alternative Discourse. He went on to add that communities with "insecure feelings" about their relationship to outside groups will experience even greater caution in their dealings with an L2, and it would seem a reasonable observation that, as a generalisation, the Japanese fall into this category.

One of the reasons behind their cautiousness links to ethnocentrism, which Hales and Edmonds (2018, p. 1283) define as denoting "a positive orientation toward those sharing the same ethnicity and a negative one toward others". They claim that ethnocentric behaviour is in many cases passed down from generation to generation, and when considering the isolationist history of Japan, which was then followed in the early part of the twentieth century by an intense period of nationalistic expansion, it becomes conceivable these experiences still influence the Japanese psyche today. Hayes (1979) argued as much when claiming:

> The inward nature of the Japanese, the periods of ethnocentricity, ultranationalism and xenophobia all augur against the teaching of English. It may very well be that the Japanese do not want to learn English, or, for that matter, any foreign language, as the bilingual and those having spent any time abroad are "deviant" in the Japanese eye, not to be entirely trusted… they may be "contaminated" and no longer "pure" Japanese.
>
> (Hayes, cited in Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000, p. 226)

How much of this historical bias remains in the mindset of today's younger generation is of course open to debate, particularly when considering that unifying factors such as globalisation, the internet and social media have all emerged in the interim.

Nonetheless, the characteristic of in-group consciousness with its embedded prejudices and discrimination toward outsiders is still very much evident across all facets of Japanese society (Koike & Tanaka, 1995).

In terms of how this is reified, a good example is the linguistic divisions in the Japanese language. Words with a foreign origin typically use the *katakana* syllabus, whereas those derived from Japanese use *hiragana*. Furthermore, there are even alternative names for the Japanese language itself; when learned by the native population it is referred to as *kokugo*, but when studied by foreigners, it is known as *nihongo*. Ramsey and Birk (1983) proposed that by making both a psychological and linguistic separation between the two learning groups, it highlighted the inherent belief that the Japanese language could only be mastered by those who were Japanese; that foreigners, while capable of holding a superficial understanding, could never be truly fluent. If this is indeed the case, it would seem a reasonable assumption that the reverse is also applicable; that in the mind of a Japanese person, a foreign language cannot be learned to any degree of proficiency unless it is the primary Discourse.

Common Traits and Beliefs

Of course, it is not only historical influences that act as barriers to English proficiency in the Japanese community, but also shared traits and beliefs among the general populace. One of the most recognisable of these is a perceived sense of introversion. Matsumoto (1994, p. 210) in proposing that members of many Japanese communities display an unwillingness to express themselves publicly, claimed that the trait could be traced to the country's Confucian influences. He elaborated further by claiming that the qualities of individualism and outspokenness, so respected in a western culture, are contrastingly viewed critically in Japan. This means that a natural inclination to staying quiet in a public arena becomes a significant barrier in an English language classroom where extroversion is both prized and rewarded as a major virtue.

Another trait the Japanese display is that of groupism, which means possessing a tendency to place the well-being of the group over that of the individual. This is reinforced across almost all facets of Japanese society; from the school system to the workplace to community relationships, where standing out, even in a positive light, is perceived negatively. A story that came out of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, where Japanese collectivism to the disaster was praised around the world, revealed how deeply embedded the sense of groupism is at a community level:

> In Tohoku, those who had little damage to their houses at that time tried to keep quiet and hide the fact. They felt sorry not to have been as damaged as other people and at the same time they were afraid to be envied. They knew that it was dangerous to be the only ones whose damage was so minimal. They wanted to avoid being excluded from the people who share sorrow and toughness. Mothers told their children never to speak, even to their friends, about the limited damage to their house.
> (Yama, 2013, p. 61)

How this trait impacts on L2 proficiency is that the tendency to prioritise group orientation over individualism leads to an unwillingness to engage in a secondary Discourse. This results in many of the qualities language instructors in Japan see in their classrooms: a reluctance to voice opinions; relying on peers for clarification when requested to speak; and finally, the long bouts of uncomfortable silence students maintain when asked a question. The primary issue, given that mastering any kind of language requires engagement, lies in the fact that "they cut themselves off from the social interactions needed in order to succeed in L2 learning" (Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000, p. 229).

Regarding the beliefs about language learning itself, as mentioned previously, there is also a perceived difficulty to mastering Japanese that subsequently influences the general attitude to learning all languages. Part of this derives from what is known as *kotodama*, which can be translated to mean "spirit of the language" and reifies itself as a projection of complexity and intricacy around the Japanese language. This subsequently leads to the belief no-one other than the Japanese can fully understand it (Miller, 1982). Somewhat ironically, the other claim that inhibits proficiency in a L2 relates to the mistrust Japanese have in language itself. They recognise the inherent limitations of the spoken word and therefore prize the unspoken as an equally fundamental component of effective communication (Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000, p. 230). When one considers the compounding effects of these elements, it becomes readily apparent that teaching a second language in Japan is going to be fraught with obstacles that in many cases seem insurmountable. The final question to therefore consider is, can instructors do anything to, if not overcome, then at the very least mitigate the challenges of teaching English in Japan?

Recommendations

Having presented several theoretical frameworks on how community affects identity and language and explored some of the ways in which this applies to Japanese language

learners, the final area to consider is what can educators in Japan do to reduce the impact of these formative influences. The following suggestions, whilst not overly innovative in their underlying structure, have been proposed to specifically mitigate the inherent barriers found in Japanese learners, thereby reducing friction to student engagement with English content.

Develop an English-speaking Identity

One of the issues surrounding English-learning environments in Japan, particularly throughout elementary and secondary school, is that they are framed within a localised context. Students would undoubtedly have been exposed to non-native teachers of English who conduct their lessons almost exclusively in Japanese. In many cases, there is little need for engagement with the L2 as the content of these classes is directed entirely toward passing an exam. Students are therefore accustomed to sitting passively through such lessons with little incentive to become emotionally invested in English. Given the issues around identity that have previously been discussed, this is an obstacle that must be addressed.

One of the first things that could be done early on in a class is to have an open discussion about how students feel toward studying English. This process of reifying the unspoken, and perhaps even unconscious biases toward learning a second language gives students permission to both acknowledge and accept their feelings without judgement. It also provides the teachers with a starting point to go about establishing identity exercises that will reduce the obstacles discussed. Perhaps one of the most effective approaches to lowering resistance is through establishing parameters that clearly separate the Japanese identity from the English speaking one. Creating nicknames, for example, may be one way to help compartmentalise the secondary Discourse from the primary one. Role-play is another, where rather than simply having students cold-read a textbook dialogue, time is spent asking questions that pertain to character identity. Who is this person? What is their relationship to the other person in the conversation? What do they want in this moment? Try to look beyond the obvious, and search for subtext clues that will add layers of context the students will not only recognise but allow them to characterise in speaking.

Encourage Group Dynamics

Given the affiliation Japanese learners have with group orientation, establishing a class environment that harnesses, rather than opposes this dynamic is likely to garner better results. This could be implemented via seating arrangements, where rather than having students sit at individual desks facing the teacher, they could instead be organised into cluster

formations. Activities could then be conducted as group work, which encourages students to engage with English in a far more social manner than when they are working in isolation.

With this collective dynamic in place, teachers could also consider group project work as a further means to integrating socialisation into the classroom. Activities such as poster presentations, filmmaking and social media threads all offer the opportunity to collaborate. These types of projects carry the additional benefit of establishing viable channels that encourage English use outside the classroom, thereby addressing Wenger's claim that true participation cannot be turned on and off.

Another strategy to incorporate is that of gamification. Creating a healthy sense of competition between the groups provides additional motivation to engage in a way that exceeds the minimum requirement. This can range from something as simple as keeping a tally on the board, to utilising learning technology-based educational apps such as *Kahoot, Quizziz or Socrative*. Regardless of the way it is conducted, the objective is to create a sense of group affiliation through reward.

Create a Class Community

Once the issues of identity and groupism have been addressed, another step that could be taken is the creation of a classroom community. This is a process that undoubtedly takes time and effort on the part of the instructor but provides a space which students will not only come to enjoy, but ultimately value. Some simple ways of developing a sense of community could involve recognising birthdays and having a monthly party to celebrate; creating a wall of achievements where outstanding classroom contributions are publicly acknowledged; allowing students to choose English music to be played at certain times during the class; encouraging creativity that does not focus on accuracy, but rather individual expression; having mini-festivals, such as pretending to visit another country or viewing short films the students have made; and finally, setting up a classroom social media account allowing students to post anything English-related that they may encounter in their day-to-day lives. These are just some of the approaches a teacher could choose in looking to transform the classroom experience from a passive, unresponsive environment, to a community the students identify with and take pride in.

Conclusion

The role of community is an often-overlooked influence when considering how to navigate the challenges of teaching English in Japan. However, the deeply historical roots

and commonly shared traits and beliefs not just of the Japanese, but all communities, play a significant role in determining an individual's attitude to those outside their primary social group. As language teachers, our predominant focus is naturally directed toward the linguistic implications of this, and the importance of developing an insight into the speech communities of our students should be self-evident. It is of course important to acknowledge that while the points discussed in this paper may be recognisable in many Japanese learners, there are naturally exceptions that do not conform to these observations. Such students, who have adopted a sense of identity expansion beyond their peers, provide optimism that, contrary to the common assumption that the Japanese are too shy to communicate effectively in English, there is in fact a capability for learning and fluency that can be harnessed by adopting more socially inclusive approaches than those found in many of the current curriculums and textbooks.

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