Understanding International Classroom Cultures: Japan

English Language Institute
International Student & Scholar Services
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Agenda
- Features of Japanese Culture
- Classroom Cultural Differences
  - Class Participation
  - Teacher-Student Distance
- Learning in Japanese Schools
- Japanese Students in the U.S.
- Linguistic Differences between Japanese and English

Features of Japanese Culture

Presenter
Kazuma Hatano, Ph.D. Student, Learning & Instruction

Feature of Japanese Culture: Keijime

- Two modes of communication
  - Social / Public / Outer / Omote
  - Emotional / Private / Inner / Ura
- Keijime
  - For Japanese, the ability to shift successfully between the two modes is a crucial social skill.
  - Primary pedagogical focus in Japanese education

Features of Japanese Culture: Shame & Guilt

- Shame & Guilt
  - Reflect concern with others
  - Stem from one’s ability to put oneself in another person’s position (empathy)
- Shame - Others are one’s audience or spectators
  - Japanese are intensively aware of their audience.
- Guilt - Others are victims of one’s actions
  - Japanese have an intense feeling of victimizing (causing problems for) others
Feature of Japanese Culture: Shame

- Japanese feel shame any time they receive the gaze or attention of others, whether positive or negative.
- Japanese feel that they become vulnerable to shame by disclosing the self.
- In threatening interpersonal situations:
  - Japanese remain silent or laugh to avoid disclosing the self.
  - Americans talk or defend themselves through argument to avoid burying the self.
- Formality → A strategy to avoid exposing the self.

Feature of Japanese Culture: Guilt

- Japanese people’s awareness of another as a victim of one’s action or inaction is necessary to function in Japanese society.
- Feelings of guilt make Japanese feel very apologetic.
- Japanese must apologize for their actions.
- A person who is guilty and yet fails to apologize is extremely offensive to Japanese.

Feature of Japanese Culture: Guilt

- Actions which cause guilt include:
  - meiwa ku → “causing trouble”
  - shimpai → “causing worry”
  - wagamama → “being selfish”
  - sewa o kakeru → “having oneself looked after”

Classroom Cultural Differences: Class Participation

- In Japanese classrooms, there is no culture of discussion.
- No concept of building knowledge collectively.
- Japanese students learn from textbooks and answer teachers' questions according to the textbook.

Class Participation: Culture of Discussion

- Japanese students are accustomed to one-way knowledge transfer.
- Find class participation challenging.
- Are not familiar with the concept of students contributing to class.
- Never viewed giving their opinion as a contribution.
Class Participation:

Iwareru

- *Iwareru*: “spoken of by others”
- Japanese students
  - really care about their inside group’s opinion of them
  - don’t want to show off or appear as an “apple polisher”
  - avoid active class participation as a result

Class Participation:

Haji

- *Haji*: shame
- Japanese students
  - prefer to ask questions after class
  - find it humiliating to ask questions in public
  - worry that their question may not be correct
  - don’t want to feel shame if they make a mistake

Class Participation:

Haji

- Since Japanese tend not to speak up, there is a proverb to encourage them to do so:
  - “To ask a question is a temporary shame. Not to ask a question is a lifetime of shame.”

Class Participation:

Meiwaku

- *Meiwaku*: bothering others
- Japanese students
  - prefer to ask questions after class
  - think the class is a public setting and that asking questions satisfies private need
  - worry that their question may not apply to everyone
  - don’t want to “break the air”

Class Participation:

“Breaking the Air”

- Good Japanese teachers know whether students understand or not by the air (atmosphere) in the class.
- Japanese students expect teachers to “read the air” in the class. If a teacher can’t read the air, the teacher is not good.
- Students don’t ask questions because they don’t want to break the air.

Class Participation:

Silence as a Value

- "Silence is golden. Talk is silver.”
- The best approach is to be active and productive without saying anything.
- The worst is to talk a lot without being active or productive.
- Silent people who know and do a lot are especially respected.
Classroom Cultural Differences: Teacher-Student Distance

Presenter
Yuri Nakajima, Ph.D. Student, Educational Leadership & Policy

Private/Public/English Modes

- Japanese people
  - change modes depending on the situation
  - basically have two modes:
    - Private
    - Public
  - also have English modes (fake identity)

How Do Japanese Address People?

- Japanese people change the way they address people:
  - For people in public (class, workplace, etc.):
    - Last name + San
  - For people in private:
    - First name (+ San, Chan, Kun)
    - Last name (+ San, Kun)
  - For teachers:
    - Last name + Sensei [teacher]
→ Japanese students are not used to calling teachers by their first name.

Reluctance to Visit Teachers During Office Hours

- Japanese students
  - are not used to the concept of office hours.
  - have a negative image of going to the teachers' office due to high school experiences.
  - are afraid of bothering their teacher.
  - feel they must be very prepared if they go to the teacher's office.

Reluctance to Visit Teachers During Office Hours (cont.)

- Graduate Japanese students
  - are expected to learn by themselves in Japan.
  - think that going to the professor to ask a question reveals that a student is not doing much.
- Undergraduates in Japan don’t have a close relationship with their teacher or professor.

Learning in Japanese Schools

Presenter
D.J. Brocklehurst, M.A. Student, Learning and Instruction
Learning in Japanese Schools

- In elementary and high school:
  - Classes are teacher-fronted.
  - There is a starting ritual in each class.
  - Attendance, effort and homework count a lot towards one's final grade.
  - Test scores are only one consideration.
  - Students are not overly concerned about high school grades because University entrance is based on ENTRANCE EXAMS.

- In the university:
  - Classes are also teacher-fronted.
  - There may be a starting ritual in each class.
  - Class attendance is unimportant.
  - Grades are based on final exams.

Learning in Japanese Schools

- In the university (cont.):
  - Exams are based, for the most part, on class notes.
  - Some entrepreneurs sell copies of class notes.
  - There is extensive use of supplemental texts.
  - The university is a venue for growing socially.

Hierarchy and Status in Japanese Schools

- Japanese culture follows the "seniority system".
  - Younger students defer to older students.
  - Younger students may remain silent in the presence of more senior students.
  - Students don't want to stand out.

Insights for U.S. Faculty

- Teacher picking up chalk
  → Japanese students will start taking notes because they believe that anything written on a blackboard is important.
- Oblique hints about what is important for the test
  → Japanese students may not catch these hints.
- Lack of starting ritual in class
  → Japanese students may not realize class has begun.
- Attendance Sheet
  → Japanese students won’t realize it’s a legal document.
- Take-Home Tests & Group Work
  → Japanese students come from a collectivist society so may assume that collaboration is permitted.
Japanese Students in the U.S.

Presenter
Tomoka Toraiwa, Ph.D. Student, Educational Leadership & Policy

Japanese Students in the U.S.: “Read the Air”

- Japanese students do not want to stand out in class.
- They “read the air” by sensing the atmosphere in the U.S. classroom.
  - Reading the air is one technique they use to avoid standing out.
- The atmosphere of U.S. classrooms tells Japanese students that they must go to class and study hard.

Japanese Students in the U.S.: Difficulty Speaking Up

- Can’t find the right timing. Wait for a chance to join the discussion. By the time an opening appears, the topic has changed
- Feel they can’t cut in. Less turn-taking in the U.S. + don’t want to interrupt
- Can’t read U.S. body language to know when it’s okay to interrupt. Think it could be the content or tacit rule about the acceptable length of silent time
  - Ex. Japanese students are often interrupted when they pause because Americans think they have finished talking.

Japanese Students in the U.S.: Language Barrier

- They know they have to participate in class (“read the air”)
- Because of the language barrier, they participate in class by focusing on reading assignments, etc.

Japanese Students in the U.S.: Perception of Classmates

- Japanese students are surprised to hear U.S. teachers praise students, seemingly without regard to the quality of the students’ comments.
- Are always concerned about the quality of comments they make in public
- May perceive U.S. students as making comments which are irrelevant to others and the topic at hand.
Linguistic Differences between Japanese and English

Presenter
Kazunori Kimura, Ph.D. Student, Linguistics

Politeness in Japanese Language

- Speech has various levels of politeness depending on whom one is talking to.
- The level of politeness is realized through different endings on verbs.
- Use of the incorrect level of politeness (e.g., casual speech to social superiors) is very offensive.
- Japanese have difficulty translating polite expressions into English.
  - Ex. “Perhaps, if it is not too inconvenient for you.”

Japanese Students in the U.S.: Politeness Puzzle

- On one hand, it is allowed, or even required, to be frank and casual with professors or instructors
  - Ex. calling them by nicknames or first names
- On the other hand, overgeneralization of egalitarianism in English leads to inappropriate usage of casual speech.

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Barriers to Communication: Pronouns

- No use of “you” except when strong emphasis is needed
  - Ex. “You did it.” or “You are to blame.”
- A person is addressed by name or title.
- Japanese students are afraid of being rude when they use “you” in English.
- “He” and “she” are also infrequent in Japanese conversation.

Barriers to Communication: Question Types

- Negative Questions
  - “Don’t you have a cup of coffee?”
  - Yes (hai) means rejection → “Yes, I don’t.”
  - No (iie) means acceptance → “No, I do.”
- “Would you mind . . .?” causes additional confusion even after the correct response to negative questions has been mastered.

Barriers to Communication: Modals

- Japanese students may not know the differences in meaning among:
  - Can / May
  - Should
  - Must / Have to
- Additionally, they may be confused by the nuances in the use of modals.
  - Ex. “You may go now.” (interviewer to interviewee)
  - Ex. “You might want to . . .” (professor to student)
Barriers to Communication:
L vs. R and B vs. V

- Japanese sound system does not distinguish between "l" and "r", "b" and "v".
- Students find it hard to perceive and produce speech using these sounds correctly.
  - Ex. Teacher said, "I didn't correct your homework." (Japanese student understood "collect".)
  - Ex. "Am I arrogant?" (Japanese student understood "elegant").

Barriers to Communication:
Incorrect Translation

- Direct translation from Japanese to English frequently fails.
  - Ex. Bakanishiteruno
    - Direct translation: "Are you making fun of me?"
    - Correct translation: "Are you kidding?"

More Reasons Why Japanese Students are Quiet in Class

- All language differences described prevent Japanese students from speaking out.
- Japanese students are afraid of miscommunication or failing to make themselves understood.
- Silence is a safe strategy when facing such language barriers.

Linguistic Differences:
Learning English in the U.S.

Presenter:
Kentaro Iida, Undergraduate Student, Management

Learning English in the U.S.: Influences

- Influences
  - Friends
  - Japanese community

Learning English in the U.S.: Friends

- International students
  - easily become friends with one other.
  - understand one another’s emotions without words.
- American students
  - don’t care how they talk in front of international students.
  - teach international students slang.
Learning English in the U.S.: Youth Vocabulary

- Profanities
- "like"
- "You know"
- "What’s up, man?"
- "Yo."

Learning English in the U.S.: Japanese Students

- Unique Japanese culture . . .
  - Once you join you cannot leave
  - They don’t speak in English, even if there are non-Japanese speakers in the group.

Conclusion

- Those factors influence Japanese students’ behavior.
- Their behavior doesn’t necessarily mean they are bad people.
- If you hear some bad words from Japanese students or are treated rudely by them, in most cases they don’t mean it.
- You could be the one to correct their mistake.

Thank you for coming to our workshop!