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# DECONSTRUCTING ACADEMIC STEREOTYPES OF JAPANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*Culture plays an integral part in shaping students attitudes and approaches to learning, and teachers may gain insight into their students learning processes by having knowledge of their cultural and educational heritage. However, cultural preconceptions persist of Asian students who are often treated as a homogenous group with stereotypical generalizations applied unreservedly. This paper attempts to critically explore what can be learnt from previous research on the impact that culture has specifically on Japanese students, within the context of three areas of tertiary study: oral participation, critical thinking and academic writing. It concludes with consideration of the philosophy of culturally responsive teaching, as a method of increasing the intercultural competency of both students and teachers.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge of their students' culture undoubtedly has benefits for the teacher (Kramsch, 1998; Gao, 2006). Teachers working in Japan or teaching Japanese students overseas can gain useful insight from learning more about their students' backgrounds, culture and traditions; especially in an educational context. However, in attempting to identify cultural distinctions, teachers often fall folly to simplistic overgeneralisations. Often cultural stereotypes are used to explain away classroom problems, such as a silent unresponsive class, without taking time to explore other factors. Ultimately, universal labels are not helpful in representing individual students. But likewise, at the other end of the spectrum, ignoring the part that culture plays in students' learning is a missed opportunity to gain further insight that may help the teacher to better facilitate the students' development.

Therefore, it is necessary to take a critical approach regarding how much can be learnt from a student's cultural background and the impact that it has on their classroom behaviour.

## 2. BACKGROUND

It is often claimed in the literature that Confucian heritage cultures (CHCs), such as Japan, have common learning traits, such as they are collectivist orientated, obedient to authority, passive in class, and less likely to have had the opportunity to study in a student-centred environment (Kember, 2000; Wong, 2003; Durkin, 2008). It is sometimes argued, in contrast to Western students, that CHCs put greater emphasis on avoiding confrontation, and place greater importance on maintaining group harmony by avoiding sharing conflicting personal opinions (Nguyen, Terlouw and Pilot, 2006). Furthermore, it may also be the case that in their educational background there is a greater power distance between the students and the teacher. This has led to the claim that "The western model of social constructivist learning environment where the teacher acts as more of a guide and facilitator, of near equal status with the students (especially at masters level), is in contrast to the view of the teacher's guru-like role of absolute authority and knowledge in the CHC" (Durkin, 2008, p.17). However, such assertions about Asian students may be considered excessively stereotypical and unhelpful in labelling individual students with general characteristics. Kumaravadivelu (2003) claims the field of TESOL has persistently repeated stereotypes regarding Asian students that categorize a diverse and contrasting group of nearly three billion people as a distinct homogenous group. He highlights three persistent preconceptions:

Repeated often in the professional literature, conference presentations, and personal conversations are three common stereotypes about students from Asia: They (a) are

obedient to authority, (b) lack critical thinking skills, and (c) do not participate in classroom interaction (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p.710).

This paper will explore these common preconceptions focusing on Japanese students within the context of tertiary level English study. It will focus on examining the impact of cultural stereotypes relating to three core academic skills: oral participation, critical thinking and academic writing.

## 3. DISCUSSION

### 3.1 *Oral participation*

In Western tertiary education active participation in classroom discussion and debate is considered an essential skill to develop for involvement in tutorials and seminars. Students are expected to develop skills at critically evaluating others arguments and offering well supported counter-arguments. Therefore, the common stereotypes of Japanese obedience to authority and passivity in class (Anderson, 1993) are often viewed negatively as a hurdle to effective study. It is often argued that Japanese students do not feel it necessary to voice opinions or challenge lecturers and therefore find it difficult adapting to group discussion style learning environments (Littlewood, 2000). In the context of Japan, "Foreign instructors often complain that their efforts to spark lively communication in the English classroom are frustrated by the persistence of Japan's "silent classrooms." Some instructors concede that it is unfair to blame students for their reticence because it merely reflects their "Japanese culture"" (Bailey, 2002, p173). The importance of this learning trait is supported by Harumi (1999) who agrees that Japanese students are often silent in class, but suggests Japanese use silence in the classroom for different reasons, such as for social discretion to maintain group

harmony (*wa*) or as a form of wordless communication requiring mutual intuitive understanding (*haragei*).   Therefore, the role of silence in the classroom may often be misinterpreted by the Western teacher.

Central to this common explanation of Japanese student behaviour is the notion of avoiding conflict in an effort to maintain group harmony and avoid losing face.  Loss of face may be caused by making mistakes and appearing unintelligent, or potentially offending others (Durkin, 2008).  Furthermore, seeking help from the teacher may lead to loss of face due to shame in acknowledging weakness. Therefore, the risk of speaking out is usually carefully evaluated before the student decides to contribute (Cocroft & Tim-Tooney, 1994). In addition, Hammond (2007) identifies other elements that may contribute to student passivity in class.  He argues that the lack of clarification questions students ask in class may also be due to cultural expectations of communication, as in Japan the responsibility is with the listener to comprehend the speaker.   In addition, students may prefer not to volunteer an answer based on either fear of getting it wrong or fear or appearing boastful.  As a result, answers are often shared and checked for consensus with those nearby in order to increase the chance it is correct and to distribute the risk by giving a group response.  Finally, Hammond (2007) suggests the way students interact in class may be linked to the traditional conversation style in Japan being different to the West, with clear turn taking and patient listening more important than open debate.

In exploring the educational context further, Hammond (2007) claims that Japanese high-school learners are taught language almost exclusively using an approach that emphasises accuracy and grammar, which may inhibit learners who become afraid to make mistakes.  This could result in students considering English as a set of rules to be learnt and mastered rather than a means of communication.   Etherington (2006) supports this hypothesis, based on interviews conducted over many years with a Japanese student

progressing through an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program, then both undergraduate and postgraduate education in English. The researcher noticed a development in the student from an initial perspective of seeing English only in terms of a subject to be studied, to later, developing an active interest in the wider communicative potential of learning a new language.

Although some students may fit this common profile of passivity in class, it is a simplistic generalisation. Lack of involvement in discussions may not only be a cultural construct but may be due to a variety of factors such as English proficiency, level of confidence, anxiety and fear of making a mistake, motivation, and familiarity with the subject (Kumaradivelu, 2003). Undoubtedly, speaking in a second language can cause a great deal of anxiety for a student and problems with language or content may possibly have a greater impact on the students' choice of whether or not to actively contribute in the classroom. Therefore, university lecturers need to acknowledge Japanese students may have a cultural tendency to be less vocal in class, but not use it as an excuse to engage and involve them less in an effort to be culturally sensitive. Littlewood (2000) found that in general, Asian students do not want to adopt the role of obedient listener, and this may be more a consequence of their educational contexts than personal disposition. As Bailey (2002, p.178) claims "Not only can the cultural argument be both presumptuous and ethnocentric, but it is also equivocal because it allows both foreign instructors and Japanese students to avoid feeling any responsibility for the failure to develop language skills in the classroom." In essence, the passivity stereotype may negatively reinforce a position both teacher and student do not prefer, but is often used as a scapegoat for language and classroom problems.

### 3.2. *Critical thinking*

Another key area in university level study that frequently evokes preconceptions regarding Japanese students, is their ability and willingness to express critical thought. As previously discussed, Japanese students are often considered to be less vocal in class in expressing arguments in discussions and debate. However, in Western tertiary education involvement in discussion and debate is considered a fundamental process for fostering critical thought. But despite its central importance, critical thinking in itself is a concept difficult to clearly define, which makes any efforts to measure it or make cultural distinctions questionable (Paton, 2011). Furthermore, the meaning of critical thinking might also be misunderstood by students themselves, who may have misconceptions about the concept and view its application purely in negative terms i.e. seeking to find fault. Therefore, some students may hold doubts about what may be viewed as Western critique as being overly cynical and unnecessarily offensive (Durkin, 2008). Therefore, the emphasis placed on critical thought in Western education may seem at odds with the values of other cultures.

In regards to critical thinking, "Those taking a universalist stance claim that certain groups of learners, specifically non-Western or Asian, are deficient in critical thinking abilities because they have been raised under social practices where group harmony and conformity are stressed" (Stapleton, 2001, p.508). Egege and Kutieleh (2004) argue critical thinking is not universal but is rooted in Western academic traditions. Others have gone so far as to argue that critical thinking may be culturally incompatible and not necessarily beneficial to international students. For example, Fox (1994) claims that critical thinking is an inherent part of US culture and not a teachable set of behaviours. This claim reflects common Western preconceptions, that may be considered cultural chauvinism (Paton, 2011), or native-speakerist culturism (Holliday, 2003) that make exaggerated favourable comparisons of superiority in this area over Asian learners. Therefore, it is important not to

take a deficit approach that positions Western students and learning styles above their Eastern counterparts. Misconceptions of Asian styles of learning and their incompatibility with Western study contradict the high levels of achievement of Asian students (Kember, 2000). Furthermore, critical thinking differs greatly in individuals from the same country so culture cannot be isolated as a variable (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). This desire to label the 'other' as a collective and not a group of individuals is overly simplistic, as Kumaravadivelu (2003, p. 716) claims "We may be stereotyping our learners partly because it helps us reduce an unmanageable reality to a manageable label".

Therefore, traditional preconceptions of Japanese students as lacking critical thinking skills needs to be re-examined. Stapleton (2002) found that in contrast to conventional preconceptions, Japanese students where not hesitant to voice opinions, possessed critical thinking skills and furthermore, there may be the emergence of a new generation of Japanese learners with greater individual voice. However, the evidence provided for this last assertion may be considered anecdotal and aspirational, as it was limited to students having the opportunity to voice opinions on course feedback surveys, and a shift in some exams formats. Stapleton (2001) also argues that familiarity with the topic had the biggest impact on the quality of critical thought in the writing of Japanese students. Therefore, it may be suggested that Japanese students do in fact possess and value critical thinking skills, but it is the responsibility of the teacher to place greater importance on creating context, and building on prior knowledge, in order to maximise performance in this area.

In evaluating critical thinking in a cross section of Asian learners Lun, Fischer and Ward (2010) found that Asian students relied more on dialectical thinking to solve critical thinking problems than those from Western countries. As they claimed, "Asians, compared with Westerners, tend to perceive more changes are more tolerant to contradictions, and perceive things as more interrelated" (Lun, Fischer and Ward, 2010, p. 605). However, they

go on to acknowledge that differences in performance of critical thinking skills found in their study could partly be explained by language proficiency, as verbal reasoning and argument analysis require a certain level of language ability. Ultimately, Lun, Fisher and Ward (2010, p.613) concluded "the difference in critical thinking appears to be more of a linguistic issue rather than a cultural issue". Therefore, although culture may play a part in the amount of previous experience students have had at writing critically, language ability may offer a greater barrier to successfully adopting a critical approach. In summary, the ability to think critically should not be considered an exclusively Western trait, and Japanese students should not be labelled as deficient in critical thinking as an attribute. However, they are from a cultural and educational background that does not prioritise or value it to the same degree as in the culture and conventions of Western tertiary education. Therefore, the challenge for the teacher is to help activate and foster a mindset in students that values a critical approach to academic work.

### 3.3 *Academic writing*

The final academic skill to consider regarding Japanese learners is academic writing. The writing style of Japanese students has also been attributed certain stereotypical conventions. Stapleton (2002, p.250) asserts that "Japanese have a preference for an inductive style of writing in which the reader has more responsibility in deriving meaning". Suzuki (2010) also concluded that Japanese people are more likely to use indirect and succinct forms of arguments in their writing. Consequently, presenting a strong voice in academic writing is not necessarily considered as important as in Western cultures. Japanese writing is often claimed to be influenced by a format known as 'ki-sho-ten-ketsu' that favours an inductive style, with greater reader responsibility in making connections between arguments and also may contain sudden topic shifts (Kubota, 1997). This can make it difficult to follow for the Western trained reader use to a deductive style. However, it has

been argued that this is an overgeneralization that does not appreciate the dynamics of culture and language as fluid concepts, and the historical impact and exchange of English between the West and Japan (Kubota, 1997). Although L1 writing style and ability may impact on L2 writing style and ability, Kubota (1997, p.474) concludes "the widely accepted stereotype of Japanese texts overemphasises differences from English and constructs a fixed and exotic label for Japanese cultural uniqueness". Similarly to English rhetoric, written prose in Japanese cannot be reduced to a single formulaic form.

Another consideration in teaching academic writing to Japanese students is that the teacher needs to be aware of the impact of directions and comments that may influence students to attempt to meet their expectations. In the context of teaching Japanese students, "the importance of thinking critically about teachers' comments and opinions should be emphasized, especially in a cultural context where students are not used to the idea of challenging their instructors" (Asaoka & Usui, 2003, p.164). Therefore, expectations must be communicated clearly so that the students appreciate the lecturer's position of welcoming challenge or opposing viewpoints.

A final consideration in regards to academic writing involves students' attitudes towards plagiarism. It is often claimed that Japanese students do not consider plagiarism negative, as in a Confucian heritage culture they believe that knowledge is shared by society rather than having individual ownership (Sowden, 2005). As a result, learners may believe that as long as sources are acknowledged in the reference list, the essay may be a patchwork of others ideas' written as if their own (Norris, 2007). This may be partly due to the educational heritage, as Japanese students may have little opportunity to draw from outside sources in secondary education, and even when studying at the tertiary level in their first language (L1), they do not receive systematic training in how to cite sources. Furthermore, there may be no strict policies or penalties to consistently enforce the rules (Norris, 2007).

Therefore, differences in expectations, or confusion over the exact rules, may result in students unwittingly plagiarising. However, Wheeler (2009) argues that foreign teachers in Japan too readily accept explanations that Japanese students engage in plagiarism as they do not consider it a moral transgression. Based on a survey of Japanese students, he reached the conclusion "that it is a lack of understanding of the act, rather than cultural values, that is the root cause of plagiarism committed by students" (Wheeler, 2009, p.17). Therefore, lecturers ought perhaps to be careful to establish clear expectations for their students' writing, and outline the reasoning and purpose of citing sources, to ensure students do not inadvertently plagiarise.

### 3.4 *Culturally responsive teaching*

If we accept there are cultural differences in the learning approaches of Japanese and Western students, it is necessary to consider how teachers and students should respond to them. Durkin (2008) argues that students often respond to the contrasts in Western and Eastern approaches by plotting 'the middle way' which selects favourable elements of both. This approach is more conciliatory and indirect than traditional Western approaches to debate, as "one of the top priorities is to maintain relationships and preserve the dignity and integrity of all participants" (Durkin, 2008, p.23). This approach allows students to build an awareness of, and integrate practice with, Western approaches, without feeling forced to discard or disregard their own educational heritage. Likewise, lecturers should also challenge their own academic assumptions and be prepared to 'meet in the middle' in consolidating their expectations in respect for both cultural backgrounds. For lecturers, this could involve balancing the importance of constructive conciliatory dialogue and empathetic listening with more confrontational debate. In essence, welcoming challenge and a diversity of opinions, that allows students to be open and honest, while maintaining sensitivity to others feelings.

This might allow Japanese students to accommodate new approaches into their existing cultural norms and values and as Durkin (2008, p.24) states "This need not result in reducing the rigour of academic critical thinking; one could argue that it would enhance it by making it more humane, caring and holistic."

The future labour force is required to have intercultural competence that is receptive to new ways of thinking and appreciates differences in perspectives (Durkin, 2008). Therefore, exposure to new approaches and ways of thinking might actually be a factor in students' decision to study in a second language, and be a key benefit of their education. Likewise, lecturers also need to acquire intercultural competency that appreciates and nurtures students from different background rather than holding stubbornly to the belief that their educational approach is the best (Durkin, 2008). The suggestion is, that having a clear understanding of cross-cultural differences can allow for international students to be better supported in adapting to, and absorbing, new academic norms and conventions.

However, the situation may be different for Japanese students studying in English in Japan. Brown and Adamson (2011) argue that courses that focus on English for academic purposes should not be solely focused on preparing students for academic study overseas in Western universities. An increasing amount of Japanese students are studying courses based on the concept of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). These CLIL programs offer the students the chance to study content in English, whilst remaining in Japan. These content based courses are usually taught by Japanese lecturers. Therefore they argue, "if learners are preparing for study domestically in Japan, the medium of instruction may be English, but the academic community, the learning context and, importantly, the expectations of faculty members will be grounded in the Japanese academic context" (Brown & Adamson, 2011, p.8). Likewise, Nguyen, Terlouw and Pilot (2006) call for more consideration of the cultural heritage of the host country when importing Western concepts of learning. They

argue that due to the pressures of globalisation, a 'false universalism' exists, where Western methods have been exported without full consideration of their compatibility with the host culture, and whether the pedagogy is culturally appropriate. This may result in Western methods being ineffective in certain areas of study, such as in group learning situations. Consequently, Western methods should not be applied exclusively and unreservedly. Hammond (2007) suggests following a philosophy of culturally responsive teaching, where lessons and activities should be adapted to be responsive to Japanese culture and the legacies that affect their attitudes to learning. This would require greater reflection from teachers and students on the impact of the cultures of both parties, and how the invisible aspects of culture may manifest themselves in the classroom. It is often asserted that English is becoming an international academic *lingua franca* (Paton, 2011), but this does not mean the language has to be rooted exclusively in English speaking academic traditions and conventions.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, certain stereotypical preconceptions persist regarding Japanese students; such as they are passive in class, obedient to authority, and lack critical thinking skills in discussion and writing. Although there may be an element of truth to these assertions, due to the students' cultural and educational heritage, they are arguably simplistic overgeneralisations that neglect the diversity of Japanese students and culture, and portray culture as static and uniform. It has been suggested that the differences between the East and West are often overemphasised, and do not accurately reflect the students' own preferences and abilities. Therefore, this paper has argued that although much can be learnt from cultural background, it should not be restrictive or applied unreservedly to all students. However, awareness of various cultural perspectives can help increase the intercultural

competence of both students and teachers, and assist them in finding what Durkin (2008) calls 'the middle-way', based on mutual respect, awareness and inclusion of multiple cultural perspectives.  This would lead to more culturally responsive teaching that appreciates the cultural and educational heritage students bring with them to class.

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