Cultural Differences in Motivation to Learn

Junko Kobayashi and Linda Viswat
kjunko(at)kansaigaidai.ac.jp and viswat(at)res.otemon.ac.jp
Kansai Gaidai University and Otemon Gakuin University (Osaka, Japan)

Introduction

Motivation is a key issue in teaching a foreign language as well as other subjects. One crucial difference is that teaching a foreign language has a significant impact on the social nature of learners since it sometimes requires learners to adopt new social and cultural behaviors (Gardner 1979; Williams, 1994). Given that motivation is a complex, multi-dimensional construct whose influence is both internal and external, Williams and Burden (1997) divide motivational components into two categories: internal and external influences with a number of subcomponents. Dörnyei (1994, 2000, 2001a, b), focusing on motivation from a classroom perspective, conceptualizes language learning motivation, and describes a model based on a process-oriented approach.

In the process of language education, how do teachers' remarks affect their students' motivation to learn? A questionnaire was organized and distributed to 90 students in Japan and 88 students in the United States. Respondents were asked to review remarks by native English-speaking teachers that had had negative effects on some Japanese students and suggest responses that the teachers might have given so as not to demotivate students.

The focus of this article is on cultural differences because those differences cause serious problems and because learners are required to incorporate elements of their culture into their own behavioral repertoires. The purposes of this article are to examine four situations in which marked cultural differences were identified and explore possible teaching techniques to resolving problems in actual language education.

Differences between Japanese and American Students

Differences in Students' Attitudes toward Discussion

Students' attitudes toward discussion reflect differences in learning styles between the two cultures. In American culture active initiation of discussion and spontaneous and detailed comments are encouraged (Samovar & Porter, 2001) while in Japanese culture attentive listening and brief comments after contemplation are expected (Kindaichi, 1988). This cultural difference created differing interpretations of one incident: "Several of my classmates and I spent much time organizing our opinions. Then, the teacher said, 'If you don't discuss your ideas, there is no point in attending this class. Please go home.'" Japanese students in general were critical of this teacher's attitude. Typical responses were: "Such remarks would upset the students, and cause them to think less well;" and "The teacher should have refrained from making remarks which will make the students harbor ill feelings even if the remarks are logically correct." Among Americans, quite a few people agreed with the teacher: "Did the students discuss them? If not, the teacher is in the rights to say so;" and "The students should have spoken up as to their progress."

Communication competence is defined as behaviors perceived to be appropriate and effective in particular contexts (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Collier & Thomas, 1988). Especially in intercultural communication, it is important for participants to share discursive meanings (Collier & Thomas, 1988). The first step toward achieving communication competence is to understand the cultural implications of one another's words and actions. In Japanese culture, silence has positive connotations (Kindaichi 1988) because it implies contemplation. However, "in English-speaking communities silence is considered socially undesirable" (Ishii & Bruneau 1994; Samovar & Porter 2001); and therefore, from the perspective of an American, the Japanese student's attitude in the above situation seems to show a lack of interest.

The next step for the teacher is to teach Japanese students how to defend their actions. As Cross (2001) points out, the best advice is to make feedback informational rather than judgmental. However, to grasp the meaning at a theoretical level is one thing, and to apply the knowledge to actual interaction seems to be another. Instead of using judgmental remarks, "there is no point in attending this class," it may be more constructive for the teacher to come up with ways of verbalizing the meaning of silence; that is, by encouraging students to say that they have contemplated the theme but need more time to construct a response.

In addition, teachers can take actions to discourage students from just remaining silent. As Belchamber (2007) suggests, the teacher could first provide time for students to pair-check their opinions and discuss the topic in smaller groups, even if they may need to resort to their native language.

Differences in Ways of Voicing Objections to Teachers' Remarks

When faced with a problem, Americans value confrontation, which involves reporting one's feelings honestly and expecting reciprocal honesty (Stewart & Bennett, 1991). This contrasts with Japanese culture where harmony is a prime value (Nakayama, 1989) and where confrontation should be avoided as much as possible. This cultural difference produced differing interpretations of a situation in which an American teacher said, "My daughter is being bullied by Japanese people because she is half Japanese and half American. Japanese people are narrow-minded." Most Japanese responses were passive: "The teacher should have refrained from making such a prejudiced remark in class;" and "I wish the teacher could have understood that only those people who are bullying are narrow-minded. Not all Japanese are narrow-minded." On the other hand, many Americans focused on students' active reactions. Representative responses were: "Any student who was offended by this should have asked the teacher to clarify if all Japanese people acted in this way or if it was a few Japanese individuals;" and "The students should stand up for their culture."

In Asian cultures influenced by Confucianism where students are expected to respect and not to challenge their teachers (cf. Hu, 2002 regarding Chinese culture), many students hesitate to voice obvious objections whereas American students are less likely to be so inhibited. In addition, the teacher needs to consider carefully ways for introducing a topic such as discrimination. A very constructive criticism offered by one American student is worth considering: "Instead of stereotyping people of Japanese descent, the teacher should have asked for suggestions from the class on what her daughter could do to stand up to the bullies."

This can be viewed as an opportunity for teachers to introduce an American value; that is, challenging a teacher's comments by asking questions is acceptable. Sue (2004) points out that true power resides in a group's ability to define and impose reality upon others. With regard to social identity, power relations play a crucial role in social interactions between language learners and target language speakers (Peirce, 1995). In order to affect that power relationship and reform one another's social identities, the teacher needs to help students understand the importance of active participation while bearing in mind that "knowledge is jointly constructed by students and faculty" (Fink, 2003, p.19).

Differences in Views about Competition

Competition is the primary method among Americans for motivating members of groups (Stewart & Bennett, 1991) while Japanese people in general value cooperative attitudes (Nakayama, 1989). This cultural difference caused differing interpretations of one incident: "A teacher said, 'I have another class. The average scores in that class were higher than those in this class. Why can't you get higher scores?'" A large number of Japanese replied: "The teacher shouldn't have compared them with the other class." However, many Americans responded: "The teacher was probably using competition as motivation;" and "Nothing is wrong with that." This suggests that healthy competition can be a positive driving force, however many motivational researchers assert that healthy competition is an unfounded myth because there is little room for true involvement in learning when students are busy avoiding the feelings of failure (Ames, 1992; Convington & Teel, 1996). Some American students even took a challenging attitude: "You could turn that around and ask yourself, as the teacher, what he/she has done differently in the class." This implies that teachers need to consider carefully how students will react to comments they make.

Some Americans commented that the students should have communicated their request clearly to the teacher; that is, the students should have told the teacher not to compare them to other classes. Whether students will openly state their opinions

depends to a large extent on cultural differences but also is impacted by how well teachers demonstrate their willingness to listen to students. Fink (2003) states that in significant learning, students see how different people can come up with different solutions to the same problem. This could be a perfect opportunity for that type of learning to take place.

Differences in Views about Efficiency

American culture values pragmatism where the focus is on getting things done (Stewart & Bennett, 1991) while Japanese culture generally gives priority to the other person's feelings (Kindaichi, 1988). This cultural difference brought about differing interpretations of one case: "When I explained the reason why I was late, the teacher said, 'That's none of my business.'" Most Japanese reacted negatively to this teacher's remark: "When the teacher didn't listen to the student's reason, the student would think that they would prefer to be absent from school rather than show up late;" and "The teacher should have listened to the reason because the student might have had a valid reason." On the other hand, many Americans supported this teacher's remark: "I believe this is a valid point as it is not possible for the teacher to decide which reasons are all right to be late and which ones are not;" and "You shouldn't give excuses. They are just cheap, and a waste of time and energy." Also, some Americans were in favor of the teacher's position in spite of disagreeing with his/her choice of words: "The teacher could have said, 'I don't need to know why you're late. Just try not to be late again.'"

One practical solution would be to let students know in advance what they should do in case they show up late. Another solution would be to clarify the standards about what reasons are justifiable.

Conclusion

The results indicate that teachers have multiple solutions available for resolving problems. Although both teachers and students may react negatively when confronted with new value sets, the teacher is obligated to find ways to help students to learn to deal with the cultural values of the target language group while at the same time being mindful of the values the students bring to the classroom.

Fink (2003) notes that we make meaning based on our experiences and on the information and ideas we encounter. In order to interact effectively with other people, we first should recognize other people's differing viewpoints and interpretations. In that sense, this study is meaningful because it clarifies how people may interpret incidents differently depending on their cultural backgrounds. Recognizing each other's viewpoints and interpretations will prevent us from imposing our own views on others and contribute to reforming each other's social identities.

Language education should aim not only at helping students learn the language itself but also understand its cultural background. Therefore, it is important to learn with each other what the expectations in another culture are in particular situations. One culture may give priority to verbalizing what people think spontaneously and clearly while another culture may give priority to considering others' feelings before expressing whatever occurs in their minds. By understanding each other's differing viewpoints, we will gradually be able to acquire shared meanings indispensable for smooth communication. It is up to the teacher to create opportunities so that significant language education can be realized and students' motivation to learn can be maintained. While the focus of this article is on Japanese and American cultures, the findings are applicable to the language teaching context in general.

References

- Ames, C. (1992) Classrooms, goals, structures and student motivation. Journal of Educational Psychology, 84, 267-271.
- Belchamber, R. (2007) The advantages of communicative language teaching. The Internet TESL Journal. Retrieved August 2, 2007 from http://iteslj.org/Articles/Belchamber-CLT.html.
- Collier, M.J. and Thomas, M. (1988) Cultural identity. In Y. Y. Kim and W. B. Gudykunst (eds.) Theories in intercultural communication (pp.99-120). CA: Sage.
- Convington, M.V. and Teel, K.M. (1996) Overcoming student failure: Changing motives and incentives for learning. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

- Cross, K. P. (2001) Motivation: Er…Will that be on the test?' Cross Paper #5. CA: League for Innovation in the Community College.
- Dörnyei, Z. (1994) Motivation and motivating in the foreign language classroom. Modern Language Journal, 78, 273-284.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2000) Motivation in Action: Toward a process-oriented conceptualization of student motivation. British Journal of Educational Psychology, 70, 519-538.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001a) Motivational strategies in the language classroom. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001b) Teaching and researching motivation. New York: Longman.
- Fink, L.D. (2003) Creating significant learning experiences. CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gardner, R.C. (1979) Social and psychological aspects of second language acquisition. In H. Giles and R. St. Clair (eds.) Languages and social psychology (pp.193-220). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hu, G. (2002) Potential cultural resistance to pedagogical imports: The case of communicative language teaching in China. Language, Culture and Curriculum Retrieved August 2, 2007 from http://www.multilingual-matters.net/lcc/015/0993/lcc0150093pdf
- Ishii, S. and Bruneau, T. (1994) Silence and silences in cross-cultural perspective: Japan and the United States. In L. A. Samovar and R. E. Porter (eds.) Intercultural communication: A reader (7th ed)(pp.246-251). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Kindaichi, H. (1988) Nihongo [The Japanese Language]. Tokyo: Iwanami.
- Nakayama, O. (1989) Bokashi no shinri [Psychology of fuzzy thinking]. Tokyo: Sogensha.
- Peirce, B.N. (1995) Social identity, investment, and language learning. TESOL Quarterly, 29, 9-31.
- Samovar, L.A. and Porter, R.E. (2001) Communication between cultures (4th ed). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Spitzberg, B. and Cupach, W. (1984) Interpersonal communication competence. CA: Sage.
- Stewart, E.C. and Bennett, M. (1991) American cultural patterns: A cross-cultural perspective (Rev. ed). Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.
- Sue, D.W. (2004) Whiteness and ethnocentric monoculturalism: Making the invisible visible. American Psychologies, 59, 761-769.
- Williams, M. (1994) Motivation in foreign and second language learning: An interactive perspective. Educational and Child Psychology, 11, 77-84.
- Williams, M. and Burden, R. (1997) Psychology for language teachers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.