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<https://doi.org/10.15017/3427>

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出版情報 : 言語文化論究. 22, pp.67-88, 2007-02-28. 九州大学大学院言語文化研究院  
バージョン :  
権利関係 :

# Towards a Culture-sensitive Pedagogy: Critical Awareness Versus Student-ethnocentric Learning

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*Abstract: This paper presents and tests a practical model for the formulation of pedagogy towards a culture-sensitive ideal. By submitting extreme forms of imported and indigenous methodology to comparative, evaluation, the paper forges a critical synthesis arguably more attuned to the needs of the student body than either. Though tested exclusively in conjunction with Japanese learners of English and within the Japanese tertiary sector, the model is assumed to be more widely applicable, i.e. to contexts without a homogeneous student body or prevalent educational value system. In conclusion, the paper finds the process to be useful in terms of general orientation towards a culture-sensitive pedagogy and speculates that the same model may also be applied to its subsequent, more detailed refinement.*

Section one: *a statement of the problem*

## 1.1 Linguistic imperialism and the intercultural consensus

Few things galvanize academic opinion as effectively as a liberal *cause celebre*, and the consensus reached on pedagogy's status as an ethnocentric artefact has largely defined the post-communicative EFL/ESL landscape. Indeed, those in search of monsters to destroy have made such a habit of drawing attention to instances of insensitivity that one might almost assume there is still a point to prove. There are no dissenters however, and more disturbingly no practical countermeasures to show for fifteen years or so of concerted whistle blowing. This is not to suggest that continuing to test for traces of linguistic imperialism is pointless, only that one doesn't get closer to solving a problem by recognizing it's (still) there (Phillipson, 2005, 244-249).

According to the three-point distillation offered by Holliday (1994: 100), the open-and-shut case for the prosecution reads thus: English language education is a dangerous commodity due to worldwide demand, its association with excellence and its insensitivity towards indigenous cultures. The virtual monopoly enjoyed by native-speakers on matters coinciding with course design is similarly indicative of an ESL/EFL hierarchy (with native-speakers at the top) and raises awkward questions regarding the transferability of their ideas to

other contexts (Rajagopalan, 2004: 116-117; Hawkey, 2006: 242-252).

Until the emergence of this philosophy in the early 1990s, language learning was regarded as an essentially cognitive activity immune to socio-cultural interference. There was no perceived need to either adjust pre-packaged methodology to context or make allowances for different agendas derived from expectation and experience (Block, 2004: 76). Sadly, and if the current trend in investigative reporting is anything to go by, there are still teachers who would rather persevere in the face of adversity than risk compromising their pedagogic integrity (Cahill, 1996: 5, cited in Liu, 1998: 5). In worst-case scenarios, such dogged determination is rewarded with student resistance and/or a total rejection of the learning process (Canagarajah, 1999: 3, 13, 104; Paul, 1998: 27-28).

This paper does not however reject the principle of intercultural pedagogic transfer. Such arguments tend to invoke the same provincial arguments they seek to destroy by implying that the issue is either geographical or anthropological in nature (Reid, 1995: 3, cited in Liu, 1998: 4). Instead, the approach adopted here is to assume that everything is transferable until proven otherwise. This involves empirically testing the applicability of each pedagogic proposal relative to each context. That this is an admittedly daunting task reflects the fact that a universally appropriate pedagogy is a valid proposition only in the most general sense and, as such, relies upon generalizations being made and acted upon. This may appear counter-productive in view of our quest for heightened sensitivity, but it is worth remembering that real-world teachers can only move further towards a concept of absolute appropriacy without ever actually attaining it. The intention of this paper is therefore to reject abstract posturing in favour of a practical model for the refinement of methodology towards a culture-sensitive ideal.

## 1.2 Interpreting a culture-sensitive pedagogy

A methodology that attempts to be all things to all people is an unfortunate consequence of teachers embarking upon training courses with no clear idea as to their future place of employment. Though this situation is clearly anathema to any appreciation of contextual specificity, its abandonment in favour of indigenous practice merely transfers the burden of accommodation from the student to the teacher. The obvious solution is to actualize what has until now been a largely conceptual proposition, i.e. an appropriate methodological synthesis (Canagarajah, 1999: 104). This implies an extra-intuitive process for assessing learner needs tantamount to a systematic and practical model for inter-contextual negotiation (Davies, 2006: 3).

A critical pedagogy of this nature therefore presupposes that any proposal from outside will be tested against and adapted to the exigencies of the target situation via an interpretive process akin to Ethnographic Action Research (EAR) (Holliday, 1994: 164). This refers to a process of refinement that is essentially holistic, attempting to engage rather

than exclude personal and contextual idiosyncrasies. It accepts that there are no universal modes of learning and thinking, and that knowledge itself is a value-laden, ideological construct subject to interpretation and negotiation (Canagarajah, 1999: 15-17; McGrath, 2006: 171). A culture-sensitive pedagogy is therefore equated with continuity- an essentially conservative agenda for the absorption of the culturally familiar that may simply involve “not breaking with the cultural tradition of teaching and learning” (Brown, 2000: 230).

Nevertheless, and despite its status as an attractive theoretical proposition, any grand scheme for a cross-cultural synthesis must be assured of its own viability. This paper proceeds from the assumption that, as a precursor to finding the optimum balance between the two, the teacher-as-researcher must initially gravitate towards either the value system encapsulated by the centre-derived methodology, or those of the context to which it will be applied. The implication is that basic orientation towards sensitivity is best deduced from the empirical and comparative evaluation of polar opposites (i.e. the foreign and the familiar) in their extreme forms.

### 1.3 Critical awareness versus student-ethnocentric learning

This paper therefore presents a comparative analysis of two radical interpretations of culture-sensitive pedagogy, referred to here as *critical awareness* and *student-ethnocentric learning*.

The fundamental concern of methodology developed under the umbrella of critical awareness is to “take communicative activities a few steps beyond what are prescribed in textbooks to enable students to move in and out of cultures... (and critically interrogate) the communicative rules prescribed” (Canagarajah, 1999: 188). This involves bringing to light such issues as discourse pattern transfer limitations and varying ethnocentric interpretations of pragmatic force. Value judgements are however avoided so as not to undermine learner perception of any specific culture and minimize the risk of resistance (Hyde, 1994: 301).

Student-ethnocentric learning, on the other hand, presupposes that a contextual contrivance drawn solely from the learner’s own experience will carry greater conviction relative to his or her socio-cultural reality and lead to increased involvement in the learning process. Applied to a Japanese setting, this implies a shift away from the mores of communicative teaching and towards the still-ubiquitous grammar translation method (2.1). If one accepts the view that learners who “have been brought up on the deductive approach... are unwilling to discuss and explore” (Barjesteh and Holliday 1990: 90, cited in Holliday, 1994: 60), then this application of the overtly familiar should provoke a positive response. Nevertheless, an alternative interpretation is that the reticence typically exhibited by Japanese learners is a by-product of social conditioning at odds with their own natural inclinations

towards a more communicative approach (Paul, 1998: 28). This is indicative of the type of issue that must first be resolved if any serious attempt at a culture-sensitive pedagogy is to be made.

The mechanism for evaluating critical awareness and student ethnocentric learning, and for ultimately judging specific aspects of each as superior, must therefore shed light on how well their respective methodologies mediate between the value-laden entities of language, learner and pedagogy. This necessitates an interrogative process of the type envisaged by Widdowson (1990: 30-32). While the precursory stages (an appraisal of contextual appropriacy followed by practical application to the classroom) are undeniably teacher-centred, precedence is given to learner production and, above all, learner feedback (*ibid.* 52). This reflects the fact that, conceptually at least, sensitivity implies a methodology perfectly attuned to the wishes of the student.

Section two: *the nature of the context*

### 2.1 A macroscopic perspective

It is unfortunate that classrooms do not exist as distinct, isolated entities. Instead, they are defined by the multitude of surrounding societal and institutional forces which any attempt at a culture-sensitive pedagogy must first seek to interpret and then accommodate. This macroscopic model incorporates an “interrelated and complex mix of student culture, host institution culture, international education-related culture, professional-academic culture, and national culture” (Kramsch and Sullivan, 1996: 202). Such considerations inevitably frustrate individual conceptions of the ideal and lead us to compromise. It is therefore with a view to explaining some of the decisions affecting this research that we now turn towards a brief examination of the Japanese educational environment.

### 2.2 Pedagogic ideology in Japan

In ideological terms, the value system behind *yakudoku* (the prevalent language learning pedagogy in Japanese high schools and the very epitome of the grammar translation method) would seem to preclude any shift towards a communicative ethos. All extraneous pedagogy is confronted by a deeply entrenched commitment to directive supervision legitimized by “a tradition of unconditional obedience” (Liu, 1998: 5). Though Sakui has pointed out that efforts are being made to supplement *yakudoku* with a “weak interpretation” of CLT, she also acknowledges that it represents a serious and difficult challenge for teachers and students alike (Sakui, 2004: 161). The suspicion aroused by such alien constructs as “collaboration” and “initiative” reflects the elevation of linguistic knowledge over linguistic skill and the concomitant exclusion of the latter from Japanese university entrance exams. In this sense, *yakudoku* conspires with an equally ethnocentric concept of academic credentialism in order to comply with learner needs and ensure the necessary degree of professional acquiescence (Gale, 2002: 738-739). The assumption that a diet of

translation, memorization and regurgitation may actually stimulate rather than restrain intellectual development also suggests that foreign language learning in Japan may not be exclusively, or even primarily, concerned with responding to linguistic needs (Gorsuch, 2000: 686). Instead, the primary (and discretely hidden) objective may be the dissemination of certain socio-cultural values in order to teach students how to be a model citizens (Gale, 2002: 740-741).

### 2.3 Setting

Pedagogic appropriacy is contingent upon specific and identifiable participants interacting within specific and identifiable classroom contexts. Though excessively reductive, this maxim does give some indication of the enormous influence exercised by classroom variables over the transfer value of ideas. Any setting exists within and, to an extent, is fashioned after the greater host environment. Though it may exhibit a limited capacity for deviation in response to, for example, the introduction of an alien pedagogy or foreign teacher, certain ethnocentric expectations and habit-induced traits will often remain largely unaffected- an observation borne out by our research in the setting described below:

As a consequence of it existing within the private sector, the university in question is equipped and maintained to a standard well out of reach of its public sector counterparts. The students, numbering in their tens of thousands, are almost exclusively Japanese and in their very late teens or early twenties. They have entered tertiary education direct from school and with varying degrees of academic conviction. As with most private enterprises, the onus at the university is on keeping the fee-paying customers (i.e. the students) happy and the success rates high. Unless these criteria are threatened, no institutional attempt at overseeing what goes in the classroom is deemed necessary. Indeed, was it not for the double-whammy of the cursory course guideline (usually emphasizing one or more of the four basic skills) and post-event student-evaluation form, the degree of interference would be nil. What is ostensibly taught and how is therefore left to the discretion of the teacher, and it is in this respect that our setting deviates drastically from the norm established by the greater educational environment.

On the face of it, the tertiary sector's policy of hiring native-speakers for the purposes of English language instruction seems a little incongruous given its complicity in putting high school students through "examination hell" and, by extension, the entire *yakudoku* system. Most likely it represents an acknowledgement of the failings of that system and a belated attempt to correct them. Imported teachers are therefore encouraged to give full rein to their communicative inclinations and are correspondingly granted a great deal of autonomy in matters such as course design, textbook selection and exam composition. These concessions inevitably exacerbate tensions caused by the dichotomy of the classroom and, as a consequence, highlight the need for a culture-sensitive pedagogy.

Whether individual students gravitate towards the centre or the periphery will largely depend upon how enamoured they are of their prior learning experience. While familiarity may indeed be the determining factor in many cases, Littlewood has suggested that Japanese students are, by and large, dissatisfied with their own educational culture and have a repressed propensity towards discovery learning (Littlewood, 2000: 31-35). The following research will attempt to test the veracity of this assumption and explore ways of accommodating whatever context-specific pedagogic preferences are uncovered.

Section three: *the nature of the research*

### 3.1 Design

To reiterate, the fundamental objective of this research is to present language teachers with a practical system for orientating themselves towards a culture-sensitive pedagogy. This involves applying a non-compromised interpretation of whichever methodology is prevalent in the peripheral context (in this case the grammar-translation method) and testing it against similarly unrestrained methodology emanating from the centre. The mode of evaluation is highly interpretive and, in the interests of contextual sensitivity, primarily determined by the preferences of the student body.

To this end, both methodologies were applied to the same basic agenda, i.e. to present, explain and practice a specific grammar structure. Appendices 1 and 2 are assumed to be self-explanatory in terms of procedure- what follows is therefore a brief summary of the most relevant points pertaining to precisely how critical awareness and student-ethnocentric learning were applied:

#### 3.1.i Critical awareness in action (appendix 1)

The presentation stage of the class practicing critical awareness (referred to hereafter as “class one”) emphasized integrative, *critical learning*. This was achieved via discussion, initially in pairs before switching to an “open forum” with the teacher as chair, on cultural similarities and differences. The students were encouraged to air their opinions at their own discretion rather than await nomination, while the teacher avoided making comparative or value statements pertaining to the topic throughout.

At the explanation stage, an inductive, process-orientated approach designed to promote intra-group collaboration and *discovery learning* was applied. Having been introduced to the grammar under review in a contextualized and apparently incidental manner, the students were divided into small groups and encouraged to speculate on the affiliated grammatical rules. Finally, and after the requisite peer negotiation, the teacher stepped in to confirm and/or correct the hypotheses.

The practice stage involved an exchange of information in accordance with the principles

of *task-based learning*. By requiring them to report back on a peer's opinions and experiences, each student was forced to engage in two meaningful and communicative exchanges with ample potential for incorporating the target grammar.

### 3.1.ii Student-ethnocentric learning in action (appendix 2)

At the presentation stage, student-ethnocentric learning ("class two") involved the elicitation of actual experience drawn from the lives of one or more of the student body. Whatever was returned was not subjected to any form of critical evaluation. Rather the experience was manipulated in order to present the target structure within an authentic and, from the students' point of view, recognizable socio-cultural context. This sometimes necessitated paraphrasing, embellishing and/or dissecting the actual words used by the student(s) until the target grammatical structure finally emerged.

At the explanation stage, the teacher was required to temporarily relinquish his preferred pedagogic value system and approximate as closely as possible the predominant prior educational experience of the student body. This involved submitting the target structure to a deductive, product-orientated approach akin to the grammar translation method.

The inspiration (or lack thereof) underlying the practice stage was similarly based upon contextual experience and expectation. In the case of the research setting, and in recognition of the importance of memorization and regurgitation for the passing of paper-based exams, this required the application of written grammar exercises. The students completed these individually- there was no provision for communicative interaction or practice, and the emphasis was solely upon grammatical precision.

## 3.2 Participants

Both critical awareness and student-ethnocentric learning were applied to the same student body over two distinct and concurrent classes (class one preceding class two by seven days). The class consisted of precisely 20 Japanese nationals (14 men and 6 women) of either 18 or 19 years of age in the first semester of their first year at university. This latter detail is relevant in terms of their prior learning experience- with the exception of one woman who had formerly been exposed to centre methodology at a private language school, none of the students had had any prior language learning experience beyond the ubiquitous *yakudoku*.

All of the students were commerce majors studying English as a compulsory subsidiary subject. With the exception of the more proficient, privately educated woman, the students were also of the same approximate level- categorized here as "high-beginners", they were consistently able to express thoughts and ideas in the target language. Though none had previously submitted themselves to an international testing standard (e.g. TOEIC), it is estimated that, had they done so, they would have emerged with an average score in the



region of 400 points. All twenty students attended both classes.

Though the teacher's own inalienable socio-cultural background also needs to be acknowledged, this paper would like to suggest that the distinction between the centre and the periphery is, in terms of personal orientation, not necessarily (and arguably never) a mutually exclusive, bipolar affair. The case of the privately educated student referred to above reflects the fact that cultural values and practices do not exist in perfect isolation of each other. After twelve years teaching in Japan, the teacher in this instance was at least empathic to and fairly knowledgeable of the indigenous culture, and would claim to be better equipped to conduct critical analysis and intercultural mediation than either relative or actual newcomers to the context.

This is not to suggest that teachers hopping from context to context is a bad thing or even much of a disadvantage in terms of arriving at a culture-sensitive pedagogy. Indeed, the process envisaged by this research actually discourages the immediate formulation of methodological compromises by culturally acclimatized teachers. By pitching radical methodologies derived from the centre and the periphery against each other, the assumption is that a culture-sensitive pedagogy should reconcile itself with whatever preconceptions, preferences and perceived needs are found to exist within the minds of the students. The hermeneutic challenge addressed by the questionnaires (appendices 3, 4, 5) was therefore to elicit those preferences and thus provide a basis for a more contextually appropriate methodology.

Section four: *results and analysis*

#### 4.1 Observations

The following represents a summary of student behaviour not apparent in the feedback from the questionnaires, as observed by the teacher at specific moments during each class:

##### 4.1.i Observations pertaining to the critical awareness class

a) The initial discussion about movies met with a positive response- all of the students participated in making intercultural, critical comparisons. Among the most interesting was the contention that Japanese cinema is less concerned with family values and more concerned with global issues than its American equivalent. To illustrate this point, the student in question referred to two animated movies- *Momonoke Hime* and *The Lion King*.

b) The second critical discussion (about Paul, Carol and Lynn's "friendly disagreement", appendix 1) was more stilted. The students did not feel there would be any significant differences in the way a similar group of friends would interact in Japan, and resolutely rejected the suggestion that this conversation would involve a greater propensity to agree.

c) The issue as to whether one should adopt the discourse patterns of one's native speaker interlocutor or instead emphasize one's own socio-cultural identity, proved the most divisive. The class was split between eight "centrists" (i.e. those in favour of approximating western culture), six "non-conformists" (recognizing the inalienable nature of one's socio-cultural background), and six "diplomats" (advocating negotiation and a case-by-case response).

d) The explanation and practice stages of the class ran smoothly- every student interacted in a mixture of Japanese and English, discerned the grammatical rules, and reported back on his or her partner's cinematic preferences.

#### 4.1.ii Observations pertaining to the student-ethnocentric learning class

In all but the presentation stage, the student-ethnocentric learning class was extremely teacher-centred. There were, however, no overt signs of student resistance and (perhaps predictably) very little need for the teacher to actively direct the class. When asked about their personal lives at the presentation stage, the students were forthcoming and provided several anecdotes capable of demonstrating the target structure (see appendix 2 for the actual example used).

## 4.2 Student feedback

The relevant questionnaire was completed by all 20 of the participating students immediately after each class. Results were as follows:

### 4.2.i Student feedback on the critical awareness class (appendix 3)

a) A majority (14 students) considered the textbook to be too ethnographically biased towards the west.

b) The students unanimously favoured (12 of them strongly) the inclusion of indigenous culture and intercultural critical analysis. These results confirm a trend previously identified by Long (1997: 31).

c) The students also unanimously favoured (13 of them strongly) the use of discovery learning.

d) A majority (13 students) had no strong feelings regarding group work. The remaining 7 students were favourably disposed.

e) The students were unanimously opposed (17 of them strongly) to the concepts of "teacher as fount of all knowledge" and "student as non-interactive recipient".

f) The students unanimously favoured (12 of them strongly) the use of communicative

activities for the practicing of grammar.

#### 4.2.ii Student feedback on the student-ethnocentric learning class (appendix 4)

a) The students unanimously favoured (16 of them strongly) the use of personalized contextualization.

b) The students unanimously favoured the accommodation of both western (centre) and Japanese (periphery) culture in the lesson plan.

c) A majority (14 students) was favourably disposed to directive/deductive modes with regards to grammar. The remaining students were neutral.

d) The students unanimously favoured (13 of them strongly) the use of teacher-student interaction.

e) A majority (14 students) had no strong feelings regarding the use of the L1. The remaining 6 students were favourably inclined, two of them strongly so.

f) A majority (15 students) did not consider writing to be more interesting than speaking. The remaining 5 students were neutral.

g) A minority (7 students) considered writing more useful than speaking for language learning. The remaining 13 students were neutral on the issue.

#### 4.2.iii The overview questionnaire

The following data was drawn from an overview of both classes, the relevant questionnaire (appendix 5) being submitted to all 20 students immediately after the completion of the class two questionnaire:

a) A majority (14 students) preferred the critical awareness class (class one) to the student-ethnocentric learning class (class two).

b) The same majority (14 students) considered the critical awareness class to be “better for learning English” by virtue of its emphasis on speaking.

c) Nevertheless, a bigger majority (16 students) thought an amalgam of the two would constitute the most appropriate methodology. The remaining 4 students favoured a critical awareness (communicative) emphasis but in conjunction with an explicit grammar teaching component.

### 4.3 Analysis

In the most general terms, the data revealed a pronounced bias against *yakudoku* and towards the following:

- 1) Multicultural integration with regards to materials
- 2) Critical discussion and learning
- 3) Discovery learning
- 4) Personalized contextualization

Nevertheless, this pro-communicative/anti-directive dichotomy is in considerable need of qualification. It ignores the fact that the students refused to equate grammar translation with inferior or redundant pedagogy and actually expressed a preference for directive/deductive teaching modes at the explanation stage. The extent to which discovery learning was embraced must also be reevaluated in light of the apathy displayed towards group work.

While it is undoubtedly constructive to engineer and act upon even the most general of comparative evaluations, inconsistencies such as these tend to expose either/or choices between competing methodologies as insufficient. The following section therefore presents an example of how increased sensitivity may be attained by means of a critical synthesis.

Section five: *reflections, recommendations and limitations*

#### 5.1 Reflections and recommendations

As we have already established, this research aims to provide a template for initiating a process of refinement towards a culture-sensitive pedagogy. Consequently, it is directed more towards orientation than end-product solution. Though the process itself is transferable, all data received is inextricably linked to a particular group of students in a particular classroom- whether any conclusion subsequently drawn is more widely applicable is a matter for further, setting-specific empirical testing. The following recommendations for an appropriate critical synthesis are therefore merely demonstrative of the process in action.

- i) The presentation stage should attempt to reconcile intercultural critical analysis with personalized contextualization. One possible solution would be to elicit true, anecdotal information from a student and then displace it to another cultural setting for critical comparison. This procedure may also be reversed by the simple expedient of relating an incident recorded in the text to the student's personal experience.
- ii) The explanation stage should attempt to redress certain ethnocentric prejudices

regarding centre methodology. In particular, this would involve challenging the stigma attached to discovery learning (i.e. of it being fun and interesting but of dubious educational value) by applying a more directive sheen wherever possible. One option would be for the teacher to accompany students to the board at the follow-up stage in order to augment, correct and confirm their interpretation of the relevant grammatical rules. Similarly, whether a lack of enthusiasm for group work actually extends to a preference for individual exploration could be tested via an experiment in “non-collaborative discovery learning” (e.g. the discerning of the rules without any peer assistance whatsoever).

iii) The practice (production) stage should attempt to develop a mutually satisfying balance between speaking and writing. This involves reapplying the evaluative process mapped out above to specific aspects of centre and peripheral methodology (in this case an emphasis on speaking versus an emphasis on writing). Though it sounds straightforward enough, all negotiation towards realignment is subject to conflicting ethnocentric preconceptions regarding how best to learn a language and how that learning will be measured. The latter point is particularly relevant in this instance given the Japanese infatuation with paper-based testing- a potentially deleterious influence from the perspective of developing communicative competence that nevertheless must be accommodated.

## 5.2 Limitations

A problem inherent to any form of critical evaluation is whether one’s perception of failure (or success, for that matter) is attributable to defective principle, subjective interpretation or flawed execution. Doubtless all have been in evidence during the course of this research, operating in ways not merely encompassed by the following:

i) Particularly if left at this juncture, the scope of the research was arguably too broad to be of any real use. The decision not to isolate and focus upon any of the composite “mini-battles” (e.g. intercultural versus monocultural, new versus familiar, speaking versus writing, *etc.*) effectively frustrated the formation of anything other than a very general critical synthesis. While this is defensible in view of its “initial orientation only” agenda, the research hereby acknowledges that subsequent, more detailed refinement by the same means may (or may not) be more difficult to procure.

ii) In terms of assessing and acting upon student opinion, the process envisaged by this research is essentially democratic and, as such, not perfectly representative. Classroom teaching is a communal experience, and the extent to which any methodology can claim to be sensitive to all desires and all needs is obviously limited. Some will inevitably be diametrically opposed and, as a result, irreconcilable. In this respect, a critical synthesis is a compromise solution- sensitive to all participants and tailor-made to none.

iii) The final limitation noted here relates to the research applying itself exclusively to the

student body. At no point were the potentially conflicting value systems of the teacher, institution and wider educational context elicited or referred to on anything other than a descriptive basis. The question raised by this omission is, “How far should the concept of sensitivity be extended to entities other than the students?” And while the research takes the prevalent testing system into consideration, it rightly or wrongly rejects a fully integrated approach as too complicated, impractical and potentially damaging to those most in need of a culture-sensitive pedagogy- the students themselves.

#### Section Six: *conclusion*

As this paper has demonstrated, a culture-sensitive pedagogy is a relative and very elusive concept. Despite Rajagopalan’s assertion that “hybridity pulls the carpet from beneath the feet of linguistic imperialism” (Rajagopalan, 1999: 215), it is not so much a solution to the problem as an exercise in damage control- language cannot be divorced from its wider ethnocentric connotations and is therefore irredeemably corruptive when imposed upon another cultural context. Nevertheless, that the pursuit of sensitivity is a worthwhile and perhaps even necessary endeavour is indisputable. The evaluative process outlined by this research therefore provides a practical basis for initial orientation and subsequent refinement towards an appropriate critical synthesis.

That the process was tested against a culturally homogeneous body of students should not be misconstrued as a limitation- a similar template for comparative evaluation could conceivably be applied to any pedagogic proposal and any context. This does however imply a rejection of the standard depiction of sensitivity as a construct synonymous with familiarity. Instead, the conviction acted upon here is that the determining factor is, or rather should be, what the students actually prefer.

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APPENDIX 1: Class one lesson plan (critical awareness)

Total duration of lesson: 50 minutes

Part 1 (presentation): Critical Learning:

- 1) Students are referred to the cultural “Snapshot” in their textbooks. Topic focus: The world’s most successful movies (*New Interchange 2*, Richards, Hull and Proctor, 1997: 80).
- 2) Attention is directed to the list of movies (all American). The discussion questions provided by the text are ignored in favour of the following:
  - i) What are some of Japan’s most successful movies?
  - ii) How are Japanese and American movies different?
- 3) Students are referred to the listening exercise provided by the text (*ibid.*), and asked to listen to the dialogue twice, the first time without simultaneously reading the transcript.
- 4) Questions with regards to difficult vocabulary are elicited and explained via teacher-student collaboration.
- 5) The discussion questions provided by the text are substituted for the following:
  - i) What is Paul, Carol and Lynn’s relationship? How do you know?
  - ii) How would a similar conversation be different in Japan? Why?
- iii) Do speakers in Japan have similar ways of expressing likes and dislikes? How are they different?
- iv) What does this tell us about Japanese and American culture?
- v) When you speak English to a native speaker, do you think it’s better to communicate in a Japanese style, or should we try to copy the native speaker’s style?

Part 2 (explanation): discovery learning:

- 6) Attention is directed to the example sentences (*-ing versus -ed adjectives*) in the “Grammar focus” (*ibid.* p. 81). No grammar rules are given.
- 7) Students are divided into two groups of three and asked to decide as a team on the grammatical rules underlying the examples referred to above. In order to relieve anxiety, students are assured that the rules will be clear to them by the end of the class. They are also offered the option of using Japanese to discuss the rules. During group discussion, the teacher disengages from the students entirely.
- 8) A speaker from each group is nominated to report back (in English).
- 9) The students are each given a grammar book (*Grammar in Use*, Murphy, Altman and Rutherford, 1989: 180) with which to compare/confirm their interpretation of the rules.

Part 3 (practice): Task-based Learning

- 10) Students are referred to the “Let’s go to the movies!” information-exchange exercise

in their textbooks (*New Interchange 2*, Richards, Hull, and Proctor, 1997: 82).

- 11) Students are divided into pairs and asked to discuss the questions in the textbook without making notes.
- 12) Each student is then asked to report back from memory on his/her partner's opinions and experiences. Discussion closes the class.

*Acknowledgements:*

I am indebted to A.S. Canagarajah's model for *critical learning*, adapted with regards to part 1 of the above class (Canagarajah, 1999: 188-189). Part two (*discovery learning*) is similarly indebted to the model offered by Azer (Azer, H. 1990, cited in Holliday, 1994: pp. 184-187).

APPENDIX 2: Class two lesson plan (student-ethnocentric learning)

Total duration of lesson: 50 minutes

Part 1 (presentation): personalised contextualisation:

- 1) Students are asked by the teacher what they did yesterday. All the students are given the opportunity to answer.
- 2) One or more of the students' responses are manipulated by the teacher in accordance with the target structure and written on the board. *The actual example as occurred in the class was as follows: "Madoka stayed in the park for too long and was late for her class. She should have left the park earlier."* The students are informed that today's class will be spent learning this structure.

Part 2 (explanation): directive teaching:

- 3) Attention is directed to the relevant *Grammar Focus* in the students' textbooks (*New Interchange 2*, Richards, Hull and Proctor, 1997: 95).
- 4) The example sentences are read aloud, the students repeating after the teacher.
- 5) The grammatical structure is dissected and explained by the teacher. Example sentences are translated by the teacher into Japanese. The role of the student is confined to listening, note-taking and responding to "spot-checks" with regards to the past participles of verbs selected at random by the teacher.

Part 3 (practice): grammar translation exercises

- 6) The students are asked to complete the "Grammar focus" follow-up exercise (*ibid.*). Like all subsequent exercises at the practice stage, this exercise is performed individually and in writing.
- 7) As feedback, nominated students read their answers to the rest of the class. All deviations from absolute grammatical accuracy are corrected by the teacher. A second student is then nominated to orally translate the sentence into Japanese.
- 8) This mode of practice is then applied to relevant exercises from the students' grammar book (*Grammar in Use*, Murphy, Altman and Rutherford, 1989: 73), and continues until the end of the lesson.

APPENDIX 3: Class one questionnaire (critical awareness)

Please answer the following questions by writing a number (1-5) next to each statement.

- 1 = strongly agree
- 2 = agree
- 3 = neutral
- 4 = disagree
- 5 = strongly disagree

- 1) The cultural focus in our textbook is too western!
- 2) I want to talk more about how the differences/similarities between Japanese and western culture.
- 3) Learning about western culture is useful for me.
- 4) I don't want to talk about Japanese culture in my English class.
- 5) I enjoyed the style of grammar learning in this class.
- 6) I like working as part of a team.
- 7) I like discovering grammar rules for myself.
- 8) This style of grammar learning was too difficult!
- 9) The teacher should tell us the grammar rules. We shouldn't have to discover them.
- 10) Using the grammar in a speaking activity is a good way to remember it!

APPENDIX 4: Class two questionnaire (student-ethnocentric learning)

Please answer the following questions by writing a number (1-5) next to each statement.

1 = strongly agree

2 = agree

3 = neutral

4 = disagree

5 = strongly disagree

- 1) I enjoy talking about my own life in my English class.
- 2) Not thinking or talking about western culture is a good thing!
- 3) I need to learn about foreign culture in my English class.
- 4) It's not useful to learn about Japanese culture in my English class.
- 5) I like the grammar rules to be explained to me by the teacher.
- 6) I don't like the teacher to ask me questions about grammar.
- 7) I always write down the grammar rules in my notebook.
- 8) I like it when the teacher uses Japanese to explain grammar.
- 9) Practicing grammar in writing activities is more interesting than practicing grammar by speaking.
- 10) Writing practice is a better way to remember grammar than speaking practice.

APPENDIX 5: The overview questionnaire

Please think about class 1 and class 2 and answer the following questions:

- 1) Which class did you enjoy more today? Why?
- 2) Which class do you think is better for learning English? Why?
- 3) Did anything surprise you in either class?
- 4) Which style of class would you prefer- class 1, class 2, or a mixture of 1 and 2?

## Towards a Culture-sensitive Pedagogy: Critical Awareness Versus Student-ethnocentric Learning

Stuart Gale

### Summary

This paper proceeded from the assumption, long since established, that the greater the degree of sensitivity manifested by pedagogy in relation to the context and preferred learning modes of the student, the greater the degree of subsequent learning. The objective was therefore to test a practical model for developing a more contextually appropriate methodology. To this end, the research component conducted a comparative evaluation of two extreme methodologies, one imported and one indigenous, in order to move towards an ideal critical synthesis. These extreme forms, represented by the terms *critical awareness* and *student-ethnocentric learning*, were equivalent to “strong versions” of communicative methodology and that strain of the grammar translation method still prevalent in Japan. Though the research data revealed a definite propensity towards the former among Japanese students, it also successfully identified specific aspects of the indigenous methodology that would be retained in the interests of preferred learning modes and, by extension, sensitivity. In conclusion, the paper speculated that this same process of comparative evaluation could also be applied to non-monocultural contexts and using progressively less extreme methodological forms in pursuit of further refinement.