

# What Lies Beneath the Visible Part of an Iceberg?: Classroom Experience of the Connection between Language, Culture, and Communication

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## Introduction

In March 2017, the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) issued a revision of its curriculum guidelines. According to the timetable suggested by MEXT, the new curriculum guidelines would be distributed to schools during 2017, implemented in elementary schools over the following two years, and implemented in junior high schools over the following three years, with implementation scheduled to be completed by 2020 or 2021 (MEXT, 2017)<sup>(1)</sup>. One of the significant changes in comparison to the existing guidelines is that foreign language instruction will be introduced in grades 5 and 6 of elementary school, and foreign language activities (currently taught in grades 5 and 6) will be introduced to grades 3 and 4 of elementary school. The same timetable specifically mentions the hosting of the Olympics and Paralympics in Tokyo in 2020 and refers to communication without the need for words in the guidelines for foreign language activities (MEXT, 2017:214)<sup>(2)</sup>. This can be interpreted as an expectation that foreign language education will be more than simply language learning and that it will enable Japanese people to communicate with the people from all over the world who will come to Japan in 2020.

Increasing understanding of language and the culture that lies behind it (MEXT, 2017:208)<sup>(2)</sup> and furthering understanding of the culture that lies behind a foreign language (MEXT, 2017: 188)<sup>(2)</sup>, are two of the stated objectives of the new curriculum guidelines. This paper will examine the possibilities within teacher training for increasing awareness of the connection between language and culture, specifically for future teachers who will be responsible for foreign language instruction and foreign language activities at elementary schools. First, there will be a review of how culture and language are described in the 2017 Elementary School Curriculum Guidelines for foreign language activities and foreign language instruction. The paper will then examine changes in the significance of having a common language against what Hobsbawm<sup>[1]</sup> and Anderson<sup>[2]</sup> theorized about the role of a common language in the emergence of nationalism in the 19th century. Finally, in relation to foreign language activities and foreign language instruction at elementary schools, this paper will consider what can be taught in elementary school teacher training courses, through a case study of the English Communication and Cross-cultural Experience Practicum courses taken by students affiliated to the International Understanding major within the Faculty of Education at Yamaguchi University.

## 1. Foreign Language Activities and Foreign Language Instruction as Outlined in the Elementary School Curriculum Guidelines

This chapter will examine the description of the need for understanding language and the culture which lies behind it as found in the foreign language activities and foreign language instruction sections of the Elementary School Curriculum Guidelines issued in 2017. In the section of the guidelines entitled “Objectives” the third objective listed for both foreign language activities and foreign language instruction relates to the relationship between language and culture, as shown below.

### Foreign Language Activities

(3) To increase understanding of language and the culture which forms the background to language, and to nurture an attitude of objective communication using foreign languages while being sensitive to others.

## Foreign Language Instruction

(3) To deepen understanding of the culture that forms the background to languages, and to nurture an attitude of objective communication using foreign languages while respecting other people.

(MEXT, 2017: 188) (2)

The content of both these objectives is somewhat similar, but the expressions “being sensitive to others” and “respecting other people” make it clear that the objective is not simply learning a language, but learning how to use a language to convey an intention directly to an actual other person.

Since, in principal, foreign language instruction at elementary school means dealing with English or being obliged to take English classes, the section of the guidelines which follows the objectives can be taken to mean a focus on studying English. The clauses which relate to the objectives are entitled “knowledge and skills” within the “content” of foreign language activities and include, “(ii) knowledge of differences in lifestyle, traditions, and behaviour between Japan and other countries, and awareness of different ways of thinking” and “(iii) experience of communication with people from a different cultural background and deeper understanding in regard to culture” (MEXT, 2017: 210)<sup>(2)</sup>. Clause ii implies the existence of invisible differences in people’s way of thinking behind the visible aspects of culture, while clause iii implies a requirement for direct communication with an actual person. In order to teach this type of content while adhering to the conditions laid down in the clause relating to “preparing instruction plans and applying content” the guidelines state, “topics handled in language activities should increase curiosity about culture, both Japanese culture and the culture of English-speaking countries, and they should play a role in nurturing an attitude of wanting to understand more” (MEXT, 2017: 213-214)<sup>(2)</sup>.

Furthermore, the guidelines say that foreign language instruction materials used in class should relate to “the daily life, customs, stories, geography, history, traditional culture, and natural environment, of people around the world, with a focus on people who use English and Japanese”, and that these materials should be used “to deepen understanding towards a variety of ways of thinking, foster the ability to make fair judgments, and encourage a rich mentality” and to “increase interest in the culture of Japan and of English-speaking cultures and foster an attitude of desire for greater understanding”. Also to “deepen international understanding from a wide perspective” and to “develop a spirit of international harmony” (MEXT, 2017: 198)<sup>(2)</sup>. This points to a requirement to use effective teaching materials. In this way, within foreign language instruction, it is not only English which is being learned as a language, but students are learning differences which cannot be seen, such as the background to the language and cultural variety, as well as cultural awareness and understanding, in addition to the language learning which appears on the surface. Students’ ability to make fair judgments is also encouraged, and there is the expectation that what students have learned will be preparation for someday being a force for harmony between different peoples.

## 2. Significance of Having a Common Language

One of the stated objectives for foreign language instruction is to understand the culture of the people who use that language and to understand the feelings of another person in the actual process of communication. This objective has been included in the guidelines because the significance of having a common language is in the process of changing. It is useful to make a comparison between the current situation and the assertions made by Hobsbawm<sup>[1]</sup> and Anderson<sup>[2]</sup> about the role played by a common printed language in the process of nationalization in the nineteenth century.

According to Hobsbawm<sup>[1]</sup> the reason for the rise of nationalism in Europe during the 19th century was that, due to the invention of printing, people who spoke a variety of different regional languages developed a common identity because they could all understand a single printed language. The regional language which was closest to the printed language eventually came to be established as the common language of those people. Furthermore, Anderson<sup>[2]</sup> theorized that two people, who have no face-to-face contact and neither of whom knows the place where the other person lives, will share common ownership of information written in a printed language at almost the same time, even if they are physically separated, and that this process engenders a feeling of locality and of belonging to the same community. In this way, through the shared ownership of a single language with people between whom there is no direct contact, people turn their consciousness away from the differences which exist in other aspects of their lives and create “imagined communities” (Anderson<sup>[2]</sup>). It can therefore be understood that a common language has the power to bind people together. However, as suggested by Anderson’s use of

the expression “imagined”, the role of a common language in the process of nation-building is not the result of contact between like-peoples of an actual community, and it can therefore hide the multiple differences which actually exist in people’s backgrounds.

In contrast to this, and within the context of the current age of globalization, English has taken on the role of being the common language of the world and its existence is becoming ever more significant, for it is now possible for people throughout the world who understand English to have simultaneous common ownership of the same information. However, in a difference to the birth of nationalism in 19th century Europe, the current development of media and transportation networks means that there are increased opportunities for interaction with people from geographically distant countries or regions, and for these people to actually talk together, face-to-face. With the shared language of English as the catalyst, actual interaction with different peoples is becoming part of everyday life in modern society even though, from the aspect of culture, those people often have greater differences than was the case with inter-regional communication in 19th century Europe. The age in which people could feel a sense of common identity, simply because they were able to read and write a common language, is over. Differences in culture and values which were hidden under the surface by a common printed language are now encountered through actual interaction between people, so in the modern world it is necessary that people have the motivation to overcome these differences.

### **3. First Year Courses within the International Understanding Major**

The major in International Understanding at the Faculty of Education at Yamaguchi University was established in 1996. The objective for the major is to train future teachers of international understanding and foreign language activities who will take responsibility for classes focusing on English and its relationship with culture at elementary schools. In the first year of joining the major, students take a course in English Communication and a Cross-cultural Experience Practicum, and the focus of these courses is communication and cultural understanding rather than acquisition of English. The author (Senneck) has taught these courses since 2010. The following chapter will outline the activities undertaken in the two courses which aim to make students aware of the connections between language, culture, and communication.

#### **3-1 English Communication Course**

The objective of this course is for students to give consideration to how they communicate, specifically in English, but by extension, with anyone who speaks a different language to their own. Students learn about the relationship between language and culture, and consider how culture affects how they communicate in their native language.

In the first lesson, students are introduced to the idea that an understanding of culture is fundamental to successful communication. The students are shown the dialogue of an imagined conversation between two famous people, one of whom is Japanese, while the other person is a native speaker of English. In the conversation, which represents a supposed first meeting, the two people make small talk for a while in very basic, but perfect, English in a manner which all the students would be capable of themselves replicating in similar circumstances. All goes well until the English speaker compliments the Japanese speaker on his ability to speak English.

After the native English speaker has said, “You speak good English”, the students are asked to consider what the Japanese speaker will say next. Students with previous experience of cross-cultural exchange are often able to guess that, “Thank you,” would be most suitable as an initial response to the compliment. Other students are encouraged to imagine what their own parents, or they themselves might naturally want to say in this situation. The next slide of the presentation is revealed to show that in the imagined conversation, the Japanese speaker says, “No, no, no. I’m not good at English.”

Students then discuss who they could imagine acting in a similar way. The author has witnessed similar behaviour by Japanese people on many occasions during 20 years of living and working in Japan. The final slide shows that the native English speaker is confused by the Japanese speaker’s vigorous denial of any English ability, especially when contrasted with the English speaker’s assumed inability to speak Japanese. The result of the confusion is that the previous good communication between the two speakers is lost.

Students are then shown another presentation which demonstrates how people of the same culture are able to communicate in spite of poor diction, ambiguous semantics, poor elocution, or even incomplete audibility, but

that people from a different culture will be extremely challenged in the same situation. The objective of the lesson is to demonstrate that culture must be considered in addition to linguistic ability, even at the most basic levels of communication.

Another activity helps students recognize how easy it is to put a limit on the boundaries of communication. As far as possible, students form groups which correspond to the geographic location of their hometown. Each group is challenged to prepare a short conversation using the dialect of their hometown which they consider to be perfectly comprehensible but which they think the other students in the class will not be able to understand.

The dialogues which the students prepare are intentionally extreme examples of regional dialects and in a typical class, students from other areas of Japan will not understand the meaning of what is being said. The presenters of the dialogue then explain the meaning by using standard Japanese.

The activity shows students how relatively easy it is to use language in such a way that someone from a different cultural background will be unable to understand what is being said. Students learn that communication is about good manners and always being considerate of the person to whom you are talking. If you are talking with someone from another region of your own country, or with someone from a foreign country, it is necessary to give due consideration to what you say and to the speed and clarity of your speech. If you fail to consider the other person, then you will fail in communication even if you are nominally speaking the same language.

For the next eight weeks of the course the students reconsider English communication through a practical analysis of how eight of the most common tenses in English can be used for accurate communication. The following tenses are studied: simple present, simple past, present continuous, past continuous, present perfect, past perfect, present perfect continuous, and past perfect continuous.

After detailed discussion of the usage of each tense, the self-study assignment for each week is for the students to write ten true sentences about themselves using the tense being studied that week. By writing in detail about their own lives, students confront the challenge of describing the culture of their daily lives in English. At the start of the following lesson, the teacher prepares a handout showing the uncorrected communication failures from the previous week's assignments. Students discuss what caused the communication failure (spelling, punctuation, ambiguity, culture) and work together to correct the sentences in order to achieve successful communication. This active learning is particularly effective at helping students recognize common problems in written communication.

Students become aware that accuracy in written English is far more important than accuracy in spoken English. When conversing face to face, or directly by telephone, the parties in the communicational exchange usually have the opportunity to confirm any ambiguities or to correct any inaccuracies as soon as they are noticed. However, inaccuracy in written English can be the cause of considerable inconvenience if an immediate check on the writer's real intention cannot be made. In the modern world of SNS and translation software this is a problem which needs to be more widely recognized.

In addition to these activities, students are given a brief introduction to the concept of linguistic pragmatics. Students learn that while semantic meaning is useful for learning vocabulary, the meaning of any word can be entirely dependent on the context in which it is used. To illustrate this idea, students are shown the examples of "not bad" and "quite" as used in British English. Depending on the context "not bad" can mean either "excellent" or "to a moderate extent", while "quite" can mean either "completely" or "to a moderate degree".

As a further example of pragmatics, students are shown two communicative exchanges, both of which start with an identical comment. In each case the conversation opens with a speaker saying: "Nice tie, Chris." In the first conversation this is accepted as a compliment and the speaker returns a compliment about the other person's neckwear. In the second conversation the apparent compliment is assumed to be sarcastic and the speaker responds aggressively. Students are asked to discuss why the responses are different.

The reason for the different responses is cultural context, and in the case of the examples a difference between American English and British English conventions. Students start to learn that pragmatic meaning is entirely dependent on context and that cultural context has one of the most important influences on meaning. Students proceed to study some differences between American English and British English, such as the use of compliments in American English and the use of sarcasm which Fox<sup>[3]</sup> has noted as a common feature of British English.

At the end of the English Communication course students take a written test to measure their ability to communicate using accurate English in an appropriate context.

### 3-2 Cross-cultural Experience Practicum

In the second semester of their first year, students taking the major in International Understanding are given

opportunities to recognize unseen aspects of culture and consider the influence that those unseen aspects of culture have on cultural identity.

To start the course, the students are shown a line drawing showing two people about to walk through an opened front door. The picture is entirely ambiguous as to whether the two people are about to enter or leave a building. Students are asked to guess instinctively whether the two people are entering a building or leaving it. After some discussion, the students are asked whether they think the two people and the building are in Japan or the United Kingdom. The key to formulating an answer is to consider the cultural context of the situation.

Students are instructed to take careful note of the door in the picture. The teacher asks the students to think about the front door of their family home. Whilst it is true that a traditional Japanese home will usually have a double-panel sliding door, the front door of a modern family home or student accommodation, will open outwards in most cases. On the other hand, the front door of a British home usually opens inwards. Students are encouraged to discuss why this should be. When all ideas have been discussed, the teacher shows the original picture again and the students decide whether the two people are entering or exiting the building. The point of the activity is to make students realize how cultural differences can have an influence on all aspects of human life. As a watchword for subsequent lessons, students are told that they should always ask, “Why?”, if they want to understand culture, both the culture of other countries and also that of their own.

Students are then asked to consider the meaning of culture. Students brainstorm any ideas which they associate with culture. The teacher supports this activity by asking students to imagine they are walking along a street in another country, and to imagine the things which they see, hear, or smell, which indicate to them that they are not in Japan. All students can imagine doing this irrespective of whether they have had actual opportunities for foreign travel.

The students are encouraged to think of culture as being like an iceberg, with a smaller visible part and a much larger mass concealed below the waterline. Invariably the students will have mostly considered visible, that is to say, the more obvious aspects of culture, in the brainstorming exercise. The teacher shows that these obvious aspects of culture (art, music, drama, fashion, language etc.) are the part of the iceberg above the waterline, but that there are less obvious aspects of culture (values, beliefs, customs etc.) which also need to be considered in order to gain an understanding of the culture of another country.

Students then undertake various activities to identify aspects of their own culture which differ from those of English-speaking countries. The activities also provide an opportunity to practice explaining aspects of Japanese culture in English.

One exercise relates to mental association differences between cultures. The teacher writes the name of a colour on the board. Students spend 10 minutes writing down as many ideas as they can which form an association in their mind with that colour. All ideas are then written on the board. When the board is full of ideas, the teacher circles certain words without telling the students the reason for circling those words and not circling other words. Students are asked to hypothesize as to what distinguishes the circled words from the non-circled words.

After some discussion, the teacher reveals that the circled words are ideas that non-Japanese people would be most unlikely to associate with the colour in question, while the non-circled words are ideas which people from a variety of cultures might consider as having an association with the colour.

The exercise is then repeated using a different colour, but this time, it is the students themselves who decide which words should be circled. The exercise is useful for highlighting the fact that, even in the consideration of something as simple and basic as a colour, people from different cultures will have widely different mental associations regarding that colour. Students realize that people with a different culture and language will naturally have a different way of looking at the world. As a self-study assignment, students do some research and write a list of associations that people from a country other than Japan might make for one of the colours discussed in class.

Another activity considers how culture affects naming conventions. First, the teacher makes a short, informal presentation, giving the students as much information as possible about his or her name, including the meaning of the name and the reason why it was chosen for him or her. Students are then given the task of preparing a similar presentation about their own name. This class is especially effective when there is a mixture of students from various countries, but even if only one cultural heritage is represented, students are made aware of some of the values and traditions which govern naming conventions in their country.

A major element of the course is a detailed discussion of the events taking place within the cultural year in

Japan. Students are placed in groups and provided with a blank grid showing the twelve months of the year, plus an additional category for “end of year activities” and “new year activities”. Students work through the year, starting with “new year activities” and write down as many cultural events as they can which take place in the various months of the year.

Once that task has been completed, each student is assigned one month to research in more detail and is asked to make a presentation to the class about the cultural events in that month. If students from other cultural backgrounds are present they are encouraged to share with the class details of what events or activities take place in their country in each month of the year. In terms of intercultural exchange this activity is particularly useful in opening students’ eyes to how their perception of the progression of the calendar year is connected with their cultural upbringing and that people from another culture will have very different cultural perceptions of the same time of year. Students learn how to describe Japanese cultural events in English and explore the difficulty of explaining concepts which are untranslatable in other languages. Although students are focusing on annual events which are very familiar to them, they are encouraged to think about those events from the viewpoint of people who are unfamiliar with Japanese culture.

Discussion of superstitions is another topic studied during the course. Superstitions are a valuable resource for the consideration of cultural differences because an action or belief which is considered good luck or bad luck in one culture will sometimes have the opposite meaning in another culture, or may merely be considered eccentric. The teacher introduces some examples of superstitions from non-Japanese cultures and asks students whether they consider those actions to be lucky or unlucky. Students discuss the unseen culture which lies in the background to many superstitions, such as superstitions being used to promote safety or good manners.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In advance of, or in addition to, first-hand experience of cross-cultural interaction, the activities outlined in this paper can assist students undertaking teacher training to take a glimpse below the surface of the water and consider the less obvious aspects of the cultural iceberg. Upon completion of the courses, students will understand that having a common language is not enough on its own to ensure satisfactory communication between people, and they will be more aware of the influence which the unseen aspects of culture have on almost every aspect of their lives. This knowledge prepares them for further study of language, culture and communication, and enables them to introduce elements of cross-cultural understanding into future classes they will teach at elementary schools.

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## 概要

### 氷山の一角の下にあるものは—言語・文化・コミュニケーションの関係を教室で体験する

Senneck Andrew・石井 由理

本稿では、小学校の新学習指導要領の外国語活動および外国語の目標に示されている、言語や外国語の背景にある文化に対する理解を深めるという点に着目し、授業を担当する教員自身の言語と文化の関係に対する意識を高めるための教員養成課程の授業の可能性を探る。はじめに平成29年度に告示された小学校学習指導要領の外国語活動および外国語の中で、言語と文化に関するどのような記述がなされているかを概観する。次に共通の言語をもつことの意味の変化について、19世紀にナショナリズムが出現した際に言語の果たした役割に言及しながら、現在のグローバル化時代には言語の背景にある文化を知る必要性が増していることを述べる。そして小学校での外国語活動および外国語を教える教員を養成するために、教員養成課程で何を学ぶべきかについて、山口大学教育学部国際理解教育選修の専門科目である「英語コミュニケーション」と「異文化体験実習」の授業の内容を事例として考察していく。

キーワード：小学校、外国語、異文化理解、教員養成

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