More Than Words: An Intercultural Perspective
on the Language Classroom in Japanese Universities

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Introduction

ONE QUESTION THAT REGULARLY COMES UP IN THE LANGUAGE classroom concerns what the most difficult part of learning a language is. In response, learners tend to respond with the language skill that he/she finds most challenging, which may be speaking, listening etc., depending on the individual. A teacher will often then look to tailor their classes to meet these areas that are considered weak. Is this, however, all that learning a language entails? This process is rather indicative of what is commonly perceived as 'important' in learning a language, but can we really master a language by simply dealing in terms of its component parts listening, vocabulary, writing or speaking? If so, the impact of ever-progressing technology that allows learners to quickly look up unknown lexicon, or even produce long sentences in the target language with a few swipes on their smartphones is profound. Surely, if learners are able to obtain such comprehensive technical support in mastering and using the four skills of a new language, there must be an impact on how learning in the language classroom is regarded and structured. Likewise, the role of the language teacher must also undergo fundamental change.

In this paper, I will propose that, yes, the traditional language classroom that focuses on the systematic study of 'the four skills' is partly (if not wholly) redundant. However, the new technologies now impacting on language learning merely help highlight what the main focus of the language classroom should be; namely, improving learners' intercultural competence. This paper will look to focus on the main issues in

this topic. It will provide an overview of how technology should be influencing a language teacher's thinking and methods. This will be followed by a definition of intercultural communication and a look at the benefits that can be gleaned from the language learner improving their intercultural competency. The final section will focus on several practical ways in which intercultural competence can be introduced into the language-learning environment.

Discussion

"Why Bother Learning a Language? I've Got Google Translate!"

For any teacher who has experienced their students 'cheating' in class by turning to their smartphones or similar devices to use a machine-translation software 'create 'their English output, it is easy to develop negative feelings towards new technologies that are now readily available to many learners. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence that many instructors fear that machine translation-tools reduce learner motivation and deprive them of opportunities to engage in critical cognitive processes that form the foundation of the language acquisition process. Indeed, Hellmich's (2019) research revealed a general scepticism among language instructors towards technology. As a result of these overall negative views, there are a number of studies that feature instructional units that aim at discouraging students from using online translators (Urlaub & Dessein, 2022).

There is, however, a strong argument that machine learning can assist language learning and teachers' fears are unfounded. Rather than banning devices from the classroom, translation software can act as a useful support to learners, and teachers should encourage learners to use it properly (Cordis EU, 2021).

There are aspects of the language learning classroom in Japan (particularly in further education) that make this issue of machine translation particularly pertinent. These include the generally high levels of 'smart' device competency and adoption in Japan, the still-prevalent use of grammar translation in language learning, the heavy focus on perfect results and a general lack of confidence when communicating in an L2. These factors all contribute to a reliance on translation software among some Japanese language learners.

What is clear is that the advent of machine-translation software challenges teachers to think and rethink what it is that they need to be providing in their classroom. Whereas in the past a teacher, especially one labelled a 'native speaker', would be seen as a tool to model 'real' English, learners now have access to lots of 'authentic' examples of the target language 'at their fingertips' in the form of internet material and machine translation tools.

This raises two questions: what can the teacher provide that the myriad online learning tools and software cannot? And how can a teacher help students fully capitalise on learning resources online? Both are valid questions, and anyone who has tried to introduce online learning tools into the language classroom without careful prior planning will know that the second question warrants its own special focus. The focus for this paper, however, is the first question.

The simple fact is translation tools are simply advanced dictionaries. That is, they give you the nearest version of how a phrase or sentence is said in another language. Granted, they are becoming more advanced and can give very accurate readings of even colloquial expressions and idioms. However, they still have limited scope in terms of grasping context. As an example, the businessperson who has very little English competence can now send an email in the target language by typing it out in their L1 and translating it with translation software, but that person has no way of knowing that the email is tonally correct, nor if, more importantly, the email should be sent at all. To give a brief example of this issue of communication beyond mere grammar structures and vocabulary: the best way to get good customer 'after' service in the UK may involve losing your temper, exchanging heated words with the staff, demanding to see the manager etc., whereas in Japan, it may involve sitting quietly, not giving any of your emotions away at all, and adopting a wait-it-out strategy. A translation app. cannot tell you this. This is where a language teacher can come in.

Does this mean that a teacher needs to be some kind of culture 'guru'? Of course not, but the mere act of learning another language implies the desire or need on the part of the learner to interact with people from or aspects of another culture. This intercultural element of language learning is not a new concept, but the advent of technology brings it further into focus. This is the main reason why a revisit of the concept of intercultural communication is very much valid.

Definition of intercultural communication

When we come across the term 'culture', there is a common perception that it means peoples, customs and cultures from different nationalities. This leads to the presumption that intercultural communication means two people of different nationalities communicating with each other. Of course, in the field of language learning, this may often be the case. However, limiting intercultural communication to meaning inter-national communication opens the way to stereotyping and potential misuse of the term. Bearing this in mind, what does intercultural communication mean? There is no shortage of explanations and there are myriad books and studies on it:

> *Intercultural communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process, in which people from different cultures create shared meanings*. (Lustig & Koester, 2007, p.46)

I chose this definition because, in my opinion, 'shared meanings' is key here. Rather than the 'them-and-us' thinking that can be inadvertently encouraged by looking at communication from a cultural perspective, there should be a search for common ground.

Benefits of Promoting Intercultural Communication

A quick search for 'intercultural communication' on the internet shows us that it is a topic that the business world takes a great interest in (Make a Difference Training, n.d.) This is not surprising as a team of staff that communicates 'badly' is bad for business. If a breakdown in communication in the workplace is down to differences in cultural concepts and thinking, then the importance of intercultural communication is clear.

As well as the business world, situations you face while travelling or studying abroad can all potentially benefit from heightened levels of intercultural competence. From personal experience, during a homestay in Japan, the homestay 'father' announced to me on my arrival at their house (in English) that I could call him 'father'. My knowledge of Japanese allowed me to work out that he was simply translating the use of 'otousan' directly into English. In Japanese, 'otousan' means 'father' but is also used as a term for addressing 'the man of the house'. Much like 'uncle' or 'auntie'

maybe used in English for old friends of your family, but who you are not actually related to. Of course, 'father' and 'mother' are not used like this in most English-speaking cultures (certainly not in the UK), and they are only used for biological parents, perhaps in-laws or parents' new partners. The potential for the occurrence of embarrassing or damaging misunderstandings that are rooted in gaps in intercultural knowledge is clear.

The case in point here being that a translation machine (or old-fashioned dictionary) will tell a learner that 'otousan' = father, when this is not always the case. This kind of issue is one of intercultural communication, and there is a strong argument that a teacher should be making their learners aware of these potential communication barriers.

Challenges Faced by Japanese Speakers of English Concerning Intercultural Communication

The case of Japanese learners of English provides a perfect example of how key intercultural communication is. Though subject to significant change recently, formal language education in Japan often results in high levels of grammar and vocabulary competence, but this is partnered with issues when it comes to language production (Fujiwara, 2018).

The go-to research on intercultural communication is Hofstede (2011). His cultural dimensions outline potential cultural differences that can result in communication problems. These differences centre around aspects of communication like silence, high and low context, humour and laughter (Tate, 2014). There is also the key tenet of individualistic cultures vs collectivist. The western view is that the Japanese are collectivistic. However, depending on who you compare them to, the Japanese are actually more individualistic than some countries (Vy, 2021).

On further investigation of the numerous intercultural theories, one main issue with many of these concepts is that the focus often falls onto differences between cultures and how these differences may result in communication breakdowns. It can be seen how this perspective on cultural differences could become amplified in a language learning context in Japan given the potential for a them-and-us way in how culture is traditionally viewed there (Nakata, 2014).

There is surely a more effective way of looking at intercultural communication than through the 'pigeon-holing' of people into how we expect them to communicate. This would be to focus on how culture is viewed within a culture. That is, rather than comparing habitual differences between cultural groups, focus on learners' attitudes towards culture, and pinpoint ways to challenge learners to analyse those attitudes critically.

Teaching Intercultural Communication

During a talk that I gave once, a teacher asked me about how we can introduce intercultural material into, as he put it, 'a standard speaking class'. A fair question, if we are going to accept that the standard four skills are rendered almost impotent without intercultural competence inserted, some intercultural elements should enter into the majority of lessons. The homestay example I mentioned earlier could have been averted by an explanation that 'father' is not used exactly the same as 'otousan' is used in Japanese.

There are many views on the best way to teach intercultural competency. This section will take a theoretical look at this, and the following section will provide some more practical examples.

A key point is how to approach comparing cultures. It is important to focus on the interactions versus general observations of culture. This involves a general shift to a local perspective as opposed to a global one (Make a Difference Training, n.d.).

There are certain styles of teaching and learning that are more suited to intercultural communication. These include promoting cooperative learning, supporting inquiry-based instruction, integrating task-based instruction with differentiation, as well as focusing on linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic skills (Leon-Henri, n.d.).

The biggest perceived barrier from introducing intercultural communication into the language classroom can often be a lack of knowledge, both from the teacher and the learners. The obvious answer is to use information technology (ICT) (Chiper, 2013). There are of course practical barriers to this as some contexts do not allow access to ICT devices. However, where possible, the teacher should make full use of the information on the internet and allow learners to do so too. Sites such as YouTube allow instant access to authentic material from almost anywhere in the world.

Practical Applications

So far, this paper has viewed the teaching of intercultural competence from a theoretical viewpoint. To finish, we will move on to some more concrete examples of how some key elements can be introduced.

Time, and people's perception of it, is a topic that often arises when looking at cross-cultural interactions, and it is something that is obviously different from culture to culture (even between male and female, or between generations). There is a simple activity that can act as a great introduction to the concept of time and how it is perceived.

Have learners stand up in the classroom, close their eyes and count up to (what they think is) 60 seconds. When they reach 60, they can sit down. Of course, people sit down at different times: some people before 60 seconds has passed, some after. A post-activity discussion with the learners can help them notice how people's perceptions of time can be very different. This particular activity fits with some of the concepts discussed earlier. The learners can be reminded of the very individualistic nature of our perceptions of time, which is completely unrelated to their upbringing or cultural background. There is also the potential to focus on interactions in this activity: simple questions like "what do you do if you are late to meet a friend?" or "do you like to arrive early for an appointment?" can help focus on learners' daily interactions. The teacher can then move onto attitudes toward punctuality etc. however they see fit.

A second activity can help learners find shared ground between their own culture and others. This particular activity relates to Japan but can be used as a template for other contexts. To give a quick background, this was taught as part of a course on English-speaking cultures to first-grade university students in Aichi, central Japan. The topic was food in the US, with the specific aim of showing how famous cuisine in the US gives us strong hints about its social history - pizza is a popular food in the US and was brought over by Italian immigrants, and the same can be said for hamburgers from Germany or tacos from Mexico. The challenge here was to connect this concept to the personal experiences of the students (the majority who had never been to the U.S.).

For the centre point of the activity I chose to create this connection between American culture and my Japanese students by using the question "Where is tempura from?". The thinking behind this was that tempura is viewed very much as *washoku*

(Japanese food) rather than *youshoku* (western/foreign food) in Japan. The truth is, however, that tempura was originally brought from Portugal. There are several important points to this. Firstly, it is an example that helps blur the line between the labelling of 'this is Japanese' and 'that is NOT Japanese', which will hopefully encourage the thinking that cultural 'norms' are in fact quite fluid and ever-changing rather than static. The introduction of this topic also helped to highlight that every culture is connected to outside influences. This activity also to underlined similarities between Japan and US cultures, in other words, a shared cultural feature.

It can be seen that a teacher can encourage intercultural communication through the content of their classes and how they present that content.

Conclusions

The advent of new technology in the language-learning classroom presents new challenges for teachers. Learners now have the tools literally at their fingertips to produce high-level language output. It is no longer (and probably never was) enough to merely 'fill' learners with grammar structures and vocabulary. The teaching of intercultural competency has become even more important. Teachers must be careful that their attempts to raise intercultural awareness are not merely focusing on differences like 'over there they bow, but over here we shake hands'; rather, learners must be encouraged to look for shared ground and areas of commonality, which will allow them to grow in confidence and believe that they can achieve effective communication in any situation they may find themselves in.

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About the Author

Luke Blower is an English and English-speaking cultures teacher at Aichi Gakuin University. He was born in Southeast England and moved to Japan in 2003. Luke has nearly 20 years of experience in English language teaching, and throughout his career, he has been very keen to apply intercultural communication and methods of improving sociolinguistic skills into his teaching. The concepts introduced in this article are some examples of this.

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