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著者 (英)	Cynthia Quinn
journal or publication title	Language and Culture : The Journal of the Institute for Language and Culture
volume	10
page range	73-82
year	2006-03-15
URL	<a href="http://doi.org/10.14990/00000431">http://doi.org/10.14990/00000431</a>

## Processing Cultural Experiences in the Japanese Classroom

Cynthia QUINN

*This paper presents an example of a skills-focused, process approach to teaching culture in a Japanese EFL writing course. Through the application of Tseng's semi-otic-based theory of culture and Byram's concept of critical cultural awareness, it is argued that processing social encounters within one's native culture can contribute to the development of essential skills and strategies for managing cross-cultural difference. For students enrolled in general language education programs who have little contact with foreign cultures, approaching culture learning as a basic socialization process that requires systematic analysis supports learners in managing whatever cross-cultural encounters they may face in the future.*

Recent efforts to find more effective ways of addressing culture learning in the classroom have led to a reexamination of how culture is defined and how it relates to the language learning process. While many interpretations of culture have been suggested, how to best apply these theories to classroom practice still remains a considerable challenge as teachers must find an interpretation that reflects their beliefs and also accommodates the needs of their instructional context.

Given that foreign language study alone does not ensure greater tolerance or an improved understanding of others (Bateman, 2002; Byram & Morgan, 1994; Kramsch, 1993), we cannot assume that cultural understanding is an automatic byproduct of foreign language education. In order to pursue a more productive approach to culture learning, it must be explicitly addressed in the classroom and be well integrated with course content (Kramsch, 1993). Yet while many teachers may recognize this as true, the literature recommends little in terms of concrete, effective classroom approaches to the integration of language and culture. At this point, there is still much debate as to how culture should be approached in the classroom, a discussion that has remained at a largely abstract level and has not yet offered adequate practical solutions. In response to this disparity, this paper introduces one example of how culture learning can be integrated into a writing course.

Particularly in EFL contexts where learners do not have direct contact with people

from foreign cultures (aside from their teachers), approaches to teaching culture are commonly based on either a *culture as knowledge* or a *culture-general* perspective. The first defines culture as a set body of knowledge that describes a specific group. This involves, for example, studying a culture's artifacts (i.e. art, literature), a nation's country and its people (i.e. geography, history, institutions), and/or its social conventions (i.e. customs, lifestyles) (Crozet and Liddicoat, 1997). A major problem with this interpretation is it suggests that culture groups are static, homogenous entities and that understanding is achieved through the accumulation of cultural facts and information (Hall, 2002; Tseng, 2002). As a consequence, this can lead learners to form essentialist descriptions, as they assume that the patterns observed in one person can be attributed to his/her cultural affiliation (Hall, 2002). Another problem with this *culture as knowledge* notion is that it places learners in a passive role as receivers of knowledge. In this regard, the teacher acts as informant who provides students with relevant culture content, a situation that is clearly at odds with a learner-centered curriculum designed to develop autonomous, self-directed learners. According to Atkinson (1999), such a "received view" of culture has characterized the practice of teaching culture in many TESOL classrooms.

Finding effective approaches to culture learning that go beyond this "received view" can be particularly difficult in the Japanese EFL classroom, however. Students often do not have direct contact with the target culture, and with few chances for authentic interaction, more productive means of culture learning, such as experiential-based learning or ethnographic research, are difficult to employ. Additionally, it can sometimes be difficult to convince students that culture study is even worthwhile. At general language education programs where English is required, for example, some students may not see intercultural expertise as relevant to their future aspirations, while other students may have a genuine interest in culture study because they hope to pursue international careers. Under these circumstances, it is impossible to designate a target culture and to anticipate what aspects of culture to study. Student goals, motivations, and interests can vary greatly from one semester to the next depending on each group, making it difficult to anticipate student needs and therefore to create appropriate course content.

In such cases where culture learning goals are not easily identified, a *culture-general* perspective, as it is termed in the intercultural education literature, is often recommended. Here, the focus is on "encounters with difference" rather than on a specific culture group, and learners are introduced to general concepts of culture and culture learning through such activities as cross-cultural conflict analysis and critical incidents (Moran, 2001). While this type of culture study explores cross-cultural experiences (rather than artifacts) and challenges students to engage in more active inter-

pretation (as opposed to just receiving information), expecting learners to explain situations and cultural misunderstandings that they have never directly encountered can be daunting. At times, discussions can lead to culture generalizations that reflect information students have previously learned, such as well-known cultural value descriptions like collectivism/individualism or competition/harmony. In the end, common cultural stereotypes are elicited rather than being challenged through personally meaningful critical analysis.

In order for students to move beyond such generalizations, they need to understand culture as a fundamental social phenomenon and to develop an ability to manage difference. Given that many Japanese see themselves as members of a monocultural society, cultivating this sort of cultural self-awareness in the classroom is an essential part of intercultural education (Shibata, 1998; Yoshida, 2003). To address this need, this paper presents an approach that aims to problematize students' understanding of culture and to foster cultural self-awareness. By applying a process interpretation of culture to a Japanese EFL writing course, students explore their native culture as a means of heightening their awareness of cultural influences.

It is argued that such an approach to teaching culture can help students develop important critical skills for analyzing cross-cultural encounters as they interpret the values and meanings underlying their everyday experiences. By discussing experiences from their own lives and learning to do so in cultural terms, students can engage in more meaningful, personally relevant dialogue with classmates and improve their ability to critically analyze cultural situations. In this way, they are ultimately better equipped to manage whatever cross-cultural experiences they might encounter in the future as well as other intellectual challenges. These goals and beliefs are articulated in Tseng's (2002) interpretation of culture and Byram's (1997) critical culture awareness, each of which is briefly introduced below.

## **Theoretical Constructs**

### ***Process View of Culture***

As opposed to traditional interpretations of culture as a system of knowledge, Tseng (2002) views culture as a social process. Drawing from Piercian semiotics, meanings evolve through the interaction of our "inner worlds" and the "outer world" indicating that knowledge is dynamic: we actively create and reshape meaning based on transactions between our individual perspectives and our external realities. Tseng maintains that this meaning-making process has implications for how we conceive of culture learning in the language classroom. The interaction between our inner and external realities corresponds to the relationship between one's individual culture (IC),



which are valuable skills for raising self-awareness and advancing cultural understanding.

## Course Implementation

In order to illustrate how these constructs can be applied to classroom tasks, this section introduces three writing assignments completed in an intermediate-level writing course: a subculture classification essay, a family story analysis, and a generation gap essay. The assignment goals and content are briefly summarized followed by a discussion of how each task applies the theoretical constructs outlined above.

The overall aim of the course is to advance students from writing paragraphs to composing multi-paragraph, source-supported essays. Three genre-based papers were adapted from the course textbook to include an experiential component, for which students selected a relevant personal experience and then completed interviews and/or observation reports as outside support. In addition to pre-writing, drafting and revision, the assignment cycle included activities that encouraged student interaction and idea exchange. For example, students presented their interviews and/or observation notes as part of the pre-writing stage, examined each other's writing via peer reading groups, and presented "key ideas" from their drafts as a means to stimulate discussion on difference. All of these activities were designed to maximize opportunities for exploring anomaly and eliciting tension.

### *Subculture (classification essay)*

The students were first introduced to the concept of subculture through an exercise in definition. Prompted by a clip from the movie *The Breakfast Club*, the class identified various culture groups in Japan and discussed what made each group unique in order to arrive at a working definition of "subculture". The activity also served as topic brainstorming, as students considered what groups they personally belonged to and could eventually write about.

Next, students chose three subcultures they identified themselves with and wrote a classification essay to describe each group in terms of how it is unique from other culture groups in Japan. Determining a group's unique features was aided by an observation notes homework sheet that required them to itemize language and behaviors they noticed in group members over a two-week period. This information was processed via small group discussions and used to support their written work. Once students drafted their essays, they read their papers to peer reading groups in order to share and compare class members' subcultures.

A major purpose of this assignment was to introduce the notion of "culture group"

and for students to reflect on what factors influence relationships among its members. In doing so, they had to consider the shared habits, conventions, beliefs, practices and/or behaviors that bring together a group of people. This endeavor applies Byram's critical cultural awareness as students are challenged to articulate the factors underlying group solidarity, which encourages them to explore their own role in a particular culture group and their own purposes for membership. By writing about their personal experience in this way, students achieve a deeper sense of cultural self-awareness while also develop a metalanguage for describing cultural realities.

Peer reading groups and other interactive activities are integral to Tseng's process conceptualization of culture learning, and so by comparing their subculture group descriptions, students had an opportunity to realize differences between their own ICs and the SC of their classmates. As an example, one student explained how language use and code-switching functioned as a means to unify her "English literature faculty" group, while another student described how certain fashions served as an important feature of her "Kobe girls" group. Through sharing these defining features, students were exposed to new perspectives on otherwise familiar social behaviors and lifestyles. Ultimately, this encouraged learners to consider other groups in social and cultural terms rather than as simply different, strange or unusual. Such interaction helps learners to revise and expand their perceptions of the external world (SC) and in so doing, also revise and expand their own IC.

### ***Family story (narrative essay)***

Students chose a frequently told family story and interviewed family members to learn its details. The assignment required that they introduce the situation and family background to the reader, narrate the story, explain the story's underlying message (i.e. what lesson does it teach, what purpose does it accomplish, etc.) and clarify the family values implied via the narrative. Prior to writing their essays, the class presented their interview notes in small groups.

In writing this paper, students were essentially interpreting family stories as cultural texts that hold some significance for the family. The writers had to isolate important values and clarify how such values impact family relationships and contribute to their solidarity. Similar to how the subculture assignment required students to explicitly address the basic criteria for group relationships, the family story also explored group tendencies but from another personally meaningful perspective.

For instance, in one essay a student introduced a story her mother has told many times about her elderly neighbor. Whenever they met, the neighbor often carried on about her past and enjoyed telling lengthy stories which her mother found irritating and bothersome. After many years, however, the mother remembered these encounters and

recognized how she now behaved similarly. She explained that she regretted not being respectful to the neighbor and not taking advantage of the opportunity to gain insight into another generation's perspective. In her essay, the writer interprets the meaning of this story as it was told to her by her mother:

These days, when my mother tells me to listen to other's talk seriously, she tells me this story [of the elderly neighbor]. Of course, it's generally important thing, but I didn't consider so much... She wants to teach me that people have important ideas and I should consider them. Like my mother did, young people don't pay attention so much. I did it too. When I talk with older person, sometimes they talk about their youth days. For example, my grandfather went to WWII, so he talked about the war and my grandmother talked about those days and how hard it was. My grandfather really went to the world war, so it's real experience, not reading or watching video or TV program. He saw his friend shot, so it is has big impact... But I listen only a little, so the same as my mother... My mother's story is about respect, I think. I should respect their telling. Respect has big meaning, but I mean it is like consider towards others. It's not polite to think only about our way. It is selfish thing. If we consider others thinking properly, then we can widen our mind. So I think my mother wants us to widen our mind. And this is value in my family. We try to communicate well, for example, every day we try to talk to each other including my father. We need respect to do this communicate well. My mother wants to teach me and my brother the respectful way. Maybe we realize these things later, but it's nice to realize now.

Through thoughtful consideration of why certain stories are told in families, students exercise interpretation and analysis skills in order to uncover basic values and beliefs. In the above example, the student distills a common story down to its underlying motivation, and in turn, can recognize where she lacked consideration towards others. The ability to reflect on one's own actions and to realize a discrepancy between one's own and others' motivations is a crucial aspect of interpersonal relations. While this situation occurs within the native culture, it shows a sensitivity and raised awareness towards others, a practice that is not unlike the approach one would take to process a cross-cultural encounter.

Through peer reading groups and other class activities (e.g., interview reports, key idea discussions), students compared their stories as a means to process their experiences in cultural terms. In one case, a student had written about a story her father told and that revealed her parents were divorced. After the reading discussion, several students remarked on that discussion in their journals and said that the author was unique

in that she talked about her family situation openly and wasn't a "problem child". In terms of Tseng's process notion, for some students, this type of encounter created a tension that led them to confront a perspective that was inconsistent with their current thinking. Through transaction with another family culture (or subculture or generation), they must work through this anomaly to re-establish the views that contribute to their own ICs. Overall, the important point is how such interactions with other class members deepen students' understanding of themselves and of their views towards others. By exploring family groups as cultural entities, learners apply similar skills as they would to foreign culture groups; they uncover established values that contribute to the uniqueness of their own ICs and consider how they color their world outlook.

### ***Generation gap (five paragraph essay)***

This assignment required students to interview an older person and to highlight three ways in which that person's life, experiences and/or ideas were different from their own. As with the other essays, students presented their interview notes, participated in peer reading groups, and presented key ideas for discussion. The goal of the assignment was for students to interact directly with someone of a different generation and to attempt to view the world from the interviewee's perspective. This was facilitated through a shift in writer perspective: students wrote their essays in the first person rather than reporting the interviewee's information in the usual third person (see Shibata, 1998). This change in perspective afforded them a closer relationship with the ideas and feelings of the interviewee and consequently had a stronger impact on how they felt about the differences between their own IC and SC of the elder person.

In one case, a student shared her Generation Gap essay for which she had interviewed an 80-year old woman who described how different education practices were in her time. The woman described how fearful she was of her teachers and how she felt it was important to maintain distance between students and teachers for effective learning. The writer shared this woman's views in her peer reading group and other students raised several questions, which in turn led to a class discussion of how teacher-student relationships vary cross-culturally.

Through these kinds of discussion opportunities that center on difference, students explore subjects from multiple perspectives and challenge their current conceptions. Similar to the advantages already mentioned with the Subculture and Family Story assignments, as students uncover differences between their ICs and SCs, they are applying important critical skills that further their capacity for managing difference. Instead of using hypothetical situations as a means to develop basic cultural analysis skills, through the tasks described in this paper students are taking advantage of recent personal experiences as data for cultural interpretation. The contexts here are real and

meaningful for students and therefore have the potential to engage learners on a deeper level.

## Conclusion

By shaping class assignments to elicit memorable personal experiences and by promoting a focus on difference, students are not just exchanging their ideas, but collaborating and reflecting on how to reconcile various meaning constructs. Students learn to express their own behaviors in cultural terms and to comprehend culture as a social experience that requires negotiation and careful, systematic interpretation. Through this process, students must identify beliefs underlying others' perspectives, interpret how these perspectives are different from their own IC, and resolve conflicting views. Such an approach helps students develop a basic capacity for dealing with difference, and in doing so, addresses skills that are central to managing cross-cultural encounters.

In her discussion of the role of anomaly in the FL classroom, Tseng (2002) acknowledges that although cultural differences can exist between people within the same culture, differences will likely be less profound since each person's interpretation will be limited by the social culture in which he/she participates. Implementing a process culture approach in a monocultural classroom has its limitations, yet for students who have little contact with foreign cultures, creating a learning context that relates to their immediate lives and that engages them in active interpretation offers greater potential than relying solely on traditional knowledge-oriented approaches to teaching culture. Studying subculture, for example, not only teaches students how to characterize a culture group, but also challenges their preconceived notion of a monocultural Japan. Such endeavors can have personally relevant outcomes as they encourage learners to question their own beliefs and world views. In contrast, traditional approaches emphasize "otherness" and do not involve students in productive, meaning-making processes. Being interculturally competent is an active process; not a passive reception of information gleaned from texts or cultural artifacts.

In addition to making culture a personally relevant phenomenon, such classroom tasks help students develop a metalanguage for describing and reflecting on social encounters. This is an important part of the culture learning process, for it supports students in becoming autonomous learners who can continue to analyze cultural experiences beyond teacher-guided classroom settings (Crozet and Liddicoat, 1997). Through exploring culture as a fundamental social process and by developing basic analysis skills, students are provided with a solid foundation for meeting whatever intercultural challenges they may face in the future.

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