

# Insiders and Outsiders : Insights into Curriculum Design and Management Techniques for Japanese Students

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In classrooms in Japan, language teachers are sometimes faced with student behavior that could be categorized as less than optimistic. Examples of such behavior could be lengthy pauses of silence before students answer, no response to questions at all, poor class participation, poor attendance, and, in very rare cases, down-right rude behavior. When such resistive behavior exists, some inexperienced foreign teachers might be apt to think that students are not really interested or serious about their studies, or that the teachers themselves are not teaching in a way that creates interest in the subject being taught. Teachers may also think at times that students may even dislike them, creating antagonistic feelings between the teacher and students.

However, in most cases, the reasons behind certain types of student behavior may not always be as a foreign teacher may perceive them, especially if the foreign teacher is a Westerner and relatively new to Japan. Cultural differences play a big role in many of the misunderstandings between such Western teachers and their Japanese students. These cultural differences strongly influence how teachers see their students and, thus, teach their classes. In addition, the intercultural training needed to manage a course effectively as well as the actual techniques for class management are usually not

taught sufficiently in most ESL/EFL masters programs to meet the needs of the students of a particular foreign country. Thus, Western teachers in Japan, especially new teachers, are left with several serious dilemmas to overcome : 1 )How to manage Japanese students effectively so that their behavior is optimum for classroom learning, and 2) how to design a curriculum that is best suited for these students to also optimize learning time.

The answers to both of these questions are strongly connected to cultural differences. For the scope of this paper, I would like to address a key cultural item that I think contributes heavily to classroom behavior of Japanese students and gives us insights into how teachers can solve the above questions. This cultural item is the Japanese group and its influence on classroom behavior.

## **2. The Japanese Group : A Framework for Evaluating Behavior**

To interpret Japanese behavior, we first need to establish a framework or reference in which to analyze that behavior. The Japanese group, as described by Chie Nakane in her book *Japanese Society* (1970), is an excellent model because it gives us a uniquely Japanese framework for evaluating how Japanese themselves see their relations with others in society based on the group frame. In addition to this group model, Takeo Doi, a renown Japanese psychiatrist, has written two books (1985, 1971) describing the deep inner workings of Japanese behavior and its relation to this group frame. Fortunately, a Western model for evaluating the motivation behind certain behavior also exists. This particular model is based on the Accommodation Theory developed by Howard Giles and Philip

Smith in their report *Accommodation Theory : Optimal Levels of Convergence* (1979). These works combined provide an excellent framework in which to evaluate Japanese behavior in the classroom and develop strategies for dealing with such behavior.

## 2.1 The Group

The group in Japanese society has been well established by Japanese scholars. Japanese, like other cultures, are a product of their environment. According to Nakane (1970), the Japanese group is a product of their rice culture and the agricultural communities (Mura) that developed to support their people. Equally important in shaping the social behavior of Japanese were the harsh conditions and influences over the ages that have forced Japanese to become dependent on the group and develop that group mentality that we still see active in Japanese today (Sansom, 1974).

Historically, if we go back to the feudalistic days of the Tokugawa period (1615-1686) when Japan's rice culture was at its highest, the majority of Japanese (80%) worked as peasant farmers and were under the control of the upper-class regional landlords (Daimyo), who placed heavy burdens, e.g., taxes, on these farmers. The environment of Japan was not very promising for these lower-class Japanese who had very few alternatives for a better life. In most cases, the very survival of these Japanese depended primarily on the protection that the numbers in the village and extended family provided (Sansom, 1974). Outside these groups, life was extremely severe, if not impossible. Thus, Japanese conducted themselves among these groups in a manner that displayed these groups' importance in peoples lives.

After generations of living and being dependent on the group for one's very existence, it is only natural that people developed a group consciousness in which their behavior would adjust according to their membership and position within that group. This meant using cautious behavior for the village people, using friendly, informal behavior for one's family members, and using defensive behavior for outsiders.

Today, the village and family have changed considerably since the past. The village has transformed to communities in housing developments and doesn't have the importance it once did simply because most people do not depend on the communities for their livelihood. The family has also changed considerably. Most families are nuclear and much smaller than in the past, allowing members greater equality and freedom.

The weakening of the village/community and, in some respects, the family has resulted in the formation of another powerful social force: the Japanese company. The company to many Japanese is the dominant player in society now (Nakane, 1970), and provides for all the needs of the individual and, thus, his/her family. Other groups, however, have also emerged such as Universities, clubs and part-time jobs, and serve an important function in the social lives of Japanese.

To make these various groups and the roles they play in Japanese society easier to understand, I have categorized these groups into three sub-groups: 1) the family group. 2) the non-family group, and 3) non-group.

## 2.11 Sub-groups

The family group consists of members from one's immediate family. Family members outside one's immediate family such as cousins, aunts and uncles, and in-laws could be accepted or rejected as a family member depending on the role that particular person plays within the group. As a generalization, behavior in this group can be characterized by the use of the vernacular, that is, the least monitored.

The non-family group is any group that an individual belongs to outside his family group. This could be a company, a university or school, a club within a university, a neighborhood, or a religious organization. Among these groups, the value of the group to the individual is based on the function and importance that group plays in an individual's life. If membership in one group does not conflict with membership in another group, that particular person can continue being a member of both groups. However, if a conflict arises, the person will almost always choose and favor the group that has the most value or importance to him/her.

In the non-family group, behavior is based on a person's position within that group. The group is hierarchial in nature (Nakane, 1970), and many factors, such as age, date of entry into a company, date of university graduation, education, position, and sex, determine one's position in relation to others within the group. This position will determine the type of behavior directed toward an individual member as well as the type of behavior one would present to others (Doi, 1973, 1985). One's position could be higher, the same, or lower depending on the status of the other member within the group.

The non-group is when a person is not within a family group or a non-family group. This usually means when a person is between groups or, in other words, when a person is travelling between home and work/school. This non-group frame can also apply to a family group or a non-family group outside their usual environment where no social deterrents exist, such as occurs occasionally on family, and more so on company, trips. Behavior can fluctuate considerably in this realm based on the people involved. If a person perceives others as outside one's world, behavior toward them can be quite indifferent. However, once a connection is perceived between another, behavior will shift to a more positive tone.

A common example of such non-group behavior can be experienced everyday while riding the crowded trains. We have all experienced in Japan cases in which a businessman pushes and shoves his way to get a seat on the train without thinking twice about how he looks in the eyes of others, but then ten minutes later seems perfectly willing to give his seat up to someone he knows, especially if that person is his senior from work. In this case, we can see that when a person is in the non-group frame, behavior becomes unregulated. However, as soon as someone from one of the other two group frames enters the picture, behavior automatically adjusts to an appropriate level, considering the social rules of the group.

In summary, Japanese have two general types of behavior : one is based on conscious and unconscious social rules for groups in which membership and relations are established, namely the family group and the non-family group, which I will categorize as behavior for *Insiders*. The other type of behavior will be one in which no relation-

ship exists and thus few-to-no social rules apply. This category will be called behavior for *Outsiders*. These two groups, *Insiders* and *Outsiders*, easily describe the general perceptions of society that Japanese base their behavior on.

## 2.2 The Accommodation Theory

Accommodation Theory (Giles, Smith, 1979) recognizes two types of behavior: convergent behavior and divergent behavior. Convergent behavior describes the processes whereby an individual behavior or speech-style shift becomes more like that of those with whom a person is interacting. Body language, pronunciation, speech rates, pause and utterance lengths, and the intimacy of one's self disclosures are just a few areas that are adjusted to bring about convergence. This is done to improve communication, and most people when they are trying to become friends or start a relation with another person for either social or financial benefit will adjust their behavior and look for common ground.

There are four socio-psychological theories that make up Accommodation Theory: *similarity-attraction*, *social exchange*, *causal attribution*, and *Tajfel's theory of the processes of intergroup distinctiveness*.

The *similarity-attraction theory* proposes that the more similar our attitudes and beliefs are to those of others, the more likely it is we will be attracted to them. Language is adjusted to gain the social approval of the listener. Adjustments also aid intelligibility and predictability. Since people usually try to be on the good side of those they meet or know there is a tendency to behave in a convergent

manner. Many factors could affect the move to converge and the level of convergence, such as a speaker's repertoire of vocabulary and knowledge, the probability of future interaction with the listener, status relationships, and relationships, and recollection of previous shifts made by the listener. Convergence depends on one's need for approval; the greater one's need for approval, the greater will be one's tendency to converge. This theory tends to emphasize the rewards attending a convergent act.

*The Social exchange theory* states that before we act (in a selfish manner) we attempt to assess the rewards and costs of alternative courses of action, and we usually choose an action that maximizes the chances of a positive outcome and minimizes the chances of an unpleasant one. Thus, engaging in convergent speech acts will reap more potential rewards than costs for the speaker.

*The causal attribution theory* suggests we evaluate other people's behavior according to the motives and intentions that we attribute to them. In short, what can this person gain from acting as s/he does?

*The theories of intergroup distinctiveness* say that when members of different groups are in contact, they compare themselves on dimensions which are important to them, such as personal attributes, abilities, material possessions and so forth. These intergroup comparisons lead individuals to search for and even create, dimensions on which they can make themselves positively distinct from outgroups. This helps people develop positive group identification and gain great satisfaction from the group.

In addition to the group frame, the four socio-psychological theories that contribute to the Accommodation Theory provide in-



sights into the motives behind convergent/divergent behavior, and behavior that is less than optimal for language acquisition/learning. Next, I will describe classroom behavior, incorporating both the group frame and the Accommodation Theory.

### 3. Classroom Behavior and Strategies for Influencing that Behavior.

There are many types of class settings with numerous conditions. The possible behavior problems that can occur are also quite numerous. For the scope of this paper, though, typical university conversation classes that meet once a week for 90 minutes will be the focus of analysis. The aim of this section is to acquaint the reader with how the framework can be applied and used for gaining insights into better curriculum design and/or classroom management. The reader should keep in mind that this framework is to be used as a tool, and that how this tool can be used will differ tremendously depending on the teaching style and personality of the teacher.

Several examples of classroom behavior will be described. An analysis will follow, along with ideas for influencing behavior toward more optimal conditions.

1) *First Day Syndrome*: In many first year conversation classes in which foreign teachers try hard to get students to talk, students seem to come down with a sudden case of extreme shyness. Teachers address questions to the class, but are often met with silence and blank faces. We know that young Japanese are not shy because we can see many of them babbling along with their friends on the trains,

in coffee shops, and many other places. However, for many reasons, when students get into the class, they suddenly become very quiet.

The reasons, of course, vary, but one reason is that the students in the class have not yet become a group. On the first day students are meeting each other for the first time and usually don't know one other. In essence, they see the other students as borderline *outsiders* and thus exhibit some defensive or reserved behavior. However, teachers should keep in mind that most students do realize that they will be attending this class for some time with the other students and are motivated to get along with these students. In addition, despite their reserved behavior in class, most students are honestly interested in learning a foreign language. However, the social forces of the group and the classroom setting are stronger initially and have socially more priority than their desire to learn English.

If we believe that increasing input as well as student output will increase fluency in a foreign language (Krashen, 1987), then the necessity of active interaction between students and the teacher will be critical to the students' language acquisition process. Furthermore, much research has shown that students perform better in a relaxed environment (Krashen, 1981). Thus, the motivation of the language teacher to develop the class' group dynamics would be extremely high. To help form the class into a group, students need to be encouraged to interact with the other students in the class. Students can only really become friends after exposing their real self that is, the self that is willing to show their weaknesses as well as strengths.

Japanese society has provided possible solutions for nurturing the formation of the group. Most companies send new recruits on

week long training trips where new workers are indoctrinated into company policy, develop pride in their company, etc.. Universities also conduct similar excursions, called *Freshmen Seminars*. During these seminars, students spend two or three days studying and conducting activities and projects with other students. In both cases, students are forced into a situation in which there is plenty of opportunity to develop relationships with others. After such outings, it is easy to see how much closer and cooperative workers/students have become with one another. The main point is that students need a push to hurry along the socializing process which leads to a tightly knit group .

For language teachers that meet with students only once a week, the task of creating such an environment would be much more difficult. However, there are many activities for pair and group work that are designed to help students interact and exchange information about themselves. These activities should be interesting and fun so that the enjoyment of the task will help lower their guard and help them relax. Thus, spending two or three classes on such activities and allowing personal and group relationships to develop, will lower anxiety, thus, preparing students for greater language acquisition and making the class much easier to teach for the remainder of the year.

The teacher also has to develop a relationship with the students and become an *insider* in the group. One very basic way to do just that is to learn student's names as quickly as possible. Name cards are fine for the beginning, but this technique is much more impersonal than knowing students' names based simply on sight. Learning a student's name gives the teacher a tool in which to interact with the

student. After you have demonstrated several times that you know a student's name, they will become more attentive to the lesson, knowing perfectly well that they may be called on to answer a question, to give an explanation, or to just wake them up. An important point to remember is to try to pronounce student's names correctly. Japanese are not used to hearing foreigners pronounce their names, and when a mistake is made, usually students laugh, but in some cases students do take offense. Also, there is the generalization that western foreigners cannot speak Japanese at all. The poor pronunciation reinforces this generalization, but even worse it also establishes you more as someone outside the scope of things Japanese. Interesting enough is that the Japanese word for foreigner literally translates as *outside person*.

Another important point is to introduce yourself in a way that is beyond the normal standard introduction of name, birthplace, and hobbies. This has the effect of personalizing a normally formal ritual. Also, exposing more about personal items in one's life is a sign that you have lowered your guard and are willing to trust your students with personal information, the same as themselves - an *insider*. There are many ways that one can do this. One interesting way is to have questions come from students. If you use some kind of pair or group work for this activity, students will ask questions they really want to know, but they will also have to interact with other students to reach a consensus about which question to ask and thus promote group development. The interesting thing about asking questions in this way is one can really see how Japanese see foreigners as outsiders. For example, students will usually ask questions about Japanese

food, such as natto (fermented soy beans), to find out whether the foreign teacher is capable of eating something considered uniquely Japanese and beyond the grasp or taste buds of foreigners. If we look back at the Accommodation Theory of intergroup distinctiveness, we can get some understanding of why Japanese might exhibit this type of behavior as well as other types of distinct behavior in the presence of Western foreigners.

Of course, the more the teacher understands about Japan and the Japanese language, the more of an eventual *insider* the teacher will likely become in the eyes of the students.

2. *Attitude and Participation Problems*: Occasionally in Japan, teachers are faced with students who exhibit antagonistic, divergent behavior toward the teacher and resist participating. The reasons for such behavior can vary tremendously, and probably there is more than one reason at the source. One reason could be dissatisfaction with the course, and in such cases a teacher should look for a way to find out if indeed that is the case and make appropriate changes. However, here are a few possible reasons connected to the framework already described.

If the class being taught is an elective course and is not needed by the student to graduate, the student sees no connection with the course and his university education and thus no social forces to monitor his selfish, uncooperative behavior. This reason is covered under the explanation for the *social exchange theory* (see section 2.2). However, in such a case the student obviously doesn't feel his/her membership in the group is threatened at all. Usually, there are other

members sitting nearby giving the student some silent moral support. Perhaps, the student has satisfactory membership in other groups and isn't concerned about that particular class. The teacher is also seen as an outsider, and combined with the fact the teacher is a Westerner [*intergroup distinctiveness theory* (see section 2.2)] , the student has no real social motivation to exhibit convergent behavior toward the teacher, except for possible pressure from the other students in the class, which would not be likely.

In large classes, solutions to such problems are difficult, to say the least. If the student with an attitude problem is sitting near friends in the back of the room, the ploy to divide and conquer works extremely well. Moving a problem student near the teacher and next to good students takes away any support the student might have had. Although it seems to be unfitting punishment for a university student, it works, and most students will comply with a teacher's request. Another possible solution is to use the group forces against the student. Assignments, e.g., oral presentations, can be given to groups of four or five students. For such an assignment, each student in the group has to prepare one part of the presentation. The responsibility is now thrown on the group. Surprisingly, pressure from other members is usually enough to get the student to perform. Once the student is performing in front of the class, this gives the teacher the opportunity to provide positive feedback and allow the student to see the teacher in a different light and possibly accept the teacher as an insider.

One last point is that according to the *social exchange theory* (see 2.2), the student weighs the costs of acting in a selfish manner. If the

teacher confronts the student enough instead of ignoring him/her, the teacher will make the costs the student has to pay more than he/she bargained.

3. *Mixing Groups* : In some Universities and Junior colleges, students are divided into groups and attend other classes with the same students in that group. Occasionally, a part of one class will be added to that of another class to form one new class. In such cases, very distinct behavior starts to emerge. Students from one class will usually all sit together in one part of the classroom. The other students from the other class will do likewise. Behavior of all the members as a class will be extremely monitored and reserved for a much longer period than a new class of all new members. If pair work is conducted, the behavior of the students will vary dramatically with the interlocutor. Pair work among group members will display vernacular behavior and the content of their discourse will be much more personal and encompass many more subjects. Also, the length of discourse is noticeably longer. However, when students are paired with members of another group, behavior becomes monitored and students finish their activity in a much shorter period. The content of the discourse is usually superficial, and very few follow-up or confirmation questions are asked. In such cases, students are not trying to honestly communicate but are only going through the motions of the assignment.

In these mixed classes, there is a conflict between *insiders* and *outsiders* and being members of two competing groups, and thus behavior does not improve at a normal pace as the semester con-

tinues. Nakane (1970) explains such problems as a conflict between *attribute* and *frame*.

*Frame* is a criterion which sets a certain boundary and gives a common basis to a set of individuals who are located or involved. *Frame* may be an institution, neighborhood, or class. *Attribute*, however, expands beyond boundaries and may be acquired by achievement or birth. This could be a teacher, a lawyer, and in this particular case, an English student. In the mixed group scenario, the students' *frame* is their membership in their original class, which is well developed and has clear boundaries. The *attribute* for the students is the fact that they are all English students or University students. There are no boundaries as there can be English students all over Japan. In this particular case, membership in their group, based on *frame*, is stronger and more important to the students than their membership in another group based on *attribute*. Thus, students see the other students as a competing frame, or as *outsiders*. If they could look at the other students from an *attribute* perspective, that is, as students trying hard to learn English, they could accept others as *insiders* and work together positively to achieve their goal. However, the powerful forces of the group and maintaining group identity based on *frame* are much stronger than the individual needs and desires as English students.

The group dynamics of such classes are difficult to enhance. Utilizing techniques like seating assignments to break up the two groups and interesting activities to help students share information about one another does help considerably. However, from experience the group dynamics of such classes never achieve that level of



openness that non-mixed classes do.

#### 4. Conclusion

The Japanese group as described by Nakane (1970) and Doi (1973, 1985) as well as the contributions provided by the Accommodation Theory (Giles, Smith, 1979) on convergent and divergent behavior provide a useful framework and tool to evaluate Japanese behavior in the classroom. This framework also gives us insights into how we can manage our students better and develop appropriate activities and curricula to produce a better classroom environment that enhances more efficient language acquisition/learning. It is hoped that the ideas in this paper will inspire discussion on how to evaluate student behavior and develop better materials for the cross-cultural teaching environment of Japanese University language classes.

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