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Communicative interactions in foreign language education: Contact anxiety, appraisal and distance

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ABSTRACT

Framed against a backdrop of complex intergroup dynamics and the legacies created for foreign language education, the current article tests three hypotheses which explore the efficacy of direct contact encounters between Japanese university students and ‘idealized’ native-speaker English teachers. As antecedents to positive language learning outcomes, attention is given to student self-reported measures of pre-contact and post-contact anxiety, student appraisals of teacher desirability, and perceptions of distance between student and teacher. Drawn from 132 individual contact encounters experienced by 22 students, the data indicates that significant differences between pre-contact and post-contact measures were only observable in relation to students’ self-reported feelings of anxiety. Moreover, while more localized assessments were found to be significant in relation to teacher appraisals and perceptions of distance, these were limited to either pre-contact or post-contact measures. The outcomes are discussed in relation to the teaching of English as Foreign Language (EFL), the role of social interaction between student and teacher, and the significance of culture.

1. Introduction

It has been noted how many Japanese view communication with non-Japanese as a frightening, embarrassing and generally unpleasant experience (Kowner, 2002). Within the Japanese sociocultural context there exists an historical legacy, dating back to 1854, of carefully managed intergroup contact encounters with selected out-groups and out-group members, or with what Kobayashi (2010, p. 328) refers to as Japan’s “ideal stranger”. These groups and individuals have been those deemed able to contribute to the prosperity, strength and vitality of the in-group based on a distinctly racialized worldview (see Rivers & Ross, 2013). English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education stands at the sharp end of such historical embodiments wherein the sociocultural mechanics impacting upon discourses of language, culture, identity and interaction promote the ‘commodification of personhood’ (Crang, 1997) through which “otherness is sought after for its exchange value, its exoticism and the pleasures, thrills and adventures it can offer” (Rutherford, 1990, p. 11).

Framed against a backdrop of complex intergroup dynamics and the legacies created for foreign language education (see Bailey, 2006, 2007; Houghton & Rivers, 2013; McVeigh, 2002, 2004), this article tests three hypotheses which explore the efficacy of direct contact encounters between Japanese university students and ‘idealized’ native-speaker English teachers. As antecedents to positive language learning outcomes, attention is given to student self-reported measures of pre- and post-contact anxiety, student appraisals

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of teacher desirability and perceptions of distance between student and teacher. While the provision of contact opportunities between students and native-speaker teachers is a ubiquitous feature of contemporary EFL environments, the dynamics involved in this relationship remain understudied.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The significance of culture and cultural logic

Geertz (1973, p. 89) defines culture as “an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men [and women] communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about attitudes towards life”. While culture stands as a common reference point in various public discourses (see Johnston & Klandermans, 2013), for scholars the concept often appears contentious. Brumann (1999) draws attention to the trend of associating conceptualizations of culture with ‘boundedness’, ‘homogeneity’, ‘stability’ and ‘coherence’, associations which the author claims have prompted some to call for the concept to be disregarded. However, defending culture as a workable concept, Brumann (1999, p. S1) suggests that “the unwelcome connotations are not inherent in the concept but associated with certain usages”. These connotations have been elicited from uses including forming identities (Bayart, 2005), shaping intercultural relations (Dervin & Machart, 2015), impacting upon degrees of criminal culpability (Rivers, 2015; Tunick, 2004) and providing a willing handmaiden to romanticized nostalgia through discourses of *culturespeak* (Hannerz, 1999).

Given its proclivity for storing the collective memory, culture offers a chronological framing of events that frequently clash with modernity as “the cultural actor is a person of and from the past, and the economic actor a person from the future...from the start, culture is opposed to development, as tradition is opposed to newness” (Appadurai, 2013, p. 180). Intergroup interactions that bring individuals from different cultural groups into contact must therefore negotiate the extent to which the past is permitted to impact not only upon the future, but also upon the here-and-now. The significance of difference, or an interest in the other, has been addressed by Guest (2002, p. 157) who examines the tendency to only view interaction as a cultural exchange when interacting with individuals defined as belonging to another cultural group. The author describes how it is common to treat the cultural-similar as an individual to whom “we ascribe personalities” rather than as those we seek to identify cultural explanations that can be applied to. The author ponders why interactions with people assumed to be from different cultural groups prompt individuals to seek to understand the experience as “entirely a product of his or her culture”. The practice of rationalizing individual behaviors and actions on distinctly cultural terms has further been noted by Scollon, Scollon, and Jones (2013) who caution that in such instances culture operates as a tool of division, placing individuals in different groups on the basis of differentiating features that highlight either difference or similarity. One domain in which culture, cultural appraisals and the intersections of culture, language and race are frequently explored is EFL education, particularly when situated within non-Anglophone contexts.

2.2. Culture in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education

The notion of culture has been of core interest in language education for some time, and as observed by Atkinson (1999, p. 625) “...except for ‘language’, ‘learning’ and ‘teaching’, there is no more central concept in the field of teaching English than ‘culture’”. Its relevance and significance have rarely been questioned, yet culture remains difficult to define. Kramsch (1991, p. 217) put this down to the “unavoidable subjectivity and relativity” that accompanies the concept of culture in the sense that the different contexts that exist in different locations inevitably contribute to a different interpretation of what constitutes culture. It might be argued that the difficulty associated with defining culture has contributed to its longevity as a topic of interest in the area of language education, as could the significance given to language as a transmitter of cultural knowledge to others. Indeed, language and culture are widely seen as being inextricably intertwined (see Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999; Risager, 2006; Young, Sachdev, & Seedhouse, 2009), and as a result the teaching of language inevitably involves some form of normative cultural reference (Nguyen, Harvey, & Grant, 2016) despite an understanding that “cultural authenticity is a chimera” (Stanley, 2015, p. 27).

Atkinson and Sohn (2013) point out that culture in relation to language education has been heavily critiqued for its essentializing and stereotyping, or top-down, tendencies. Holliday (2009, p. 146) has drawn attention to traditional conceptualizations of cultural plurality “which have ritualized the sharing of superficial national and ethnic cultural exotica”. Such criticisms have underpinned a shift in emphases from developing ‘cultural competence’ in relation to a supposed target language culture, to the promotion of ‘intercultural communicative competence’ (Alptekin, 2002) as a conceptualization of “the qualities required of the sojourner” (Byram, 1997, p. 3). More recent developments have included more progressive terminology such as ‘interculturality’ (Barrett, 2008), ‘global cultural consciousness’ (Aubrey, 2009) and ‘intercultural citizenship’ (Byram, 2008, 2011). These concepts have collectively attempted to facilitate greater consideration of “the ways in which people of different languages including language learners themselves think and act, and how this might impact on successful communication and interaction” (Byram, Holmes, & Savvides, 2013, p. 251).

The growing interest in negotiations of culture in EFL have developed due to the growing forces of globalization and the further pluralization of English(es), to the point that contemporary paradigms of teaching and learning must “evolve from one of treating any foreign language culture as separate from the lives of language learners into one that recognizes that multiple cultures are already present in the local contexts that learners occupy” (Sybing, 2011, p. 468). Therefore, a primary implication here relates to the importance of reducing the perceived distance between the cultural-Self and the cultural-Other. However, despite theoretical developments promoting a greater recognition of difference, it remains that within many foreign language environments linguistic

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