Harmony versus Critical Cultural Awareness:  
A Case Study of Intercultural Language Education in Japan  

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The development of critical cultural awareness is an important objective of foreign language education aimed at nurturing intercultural communicative competence. What particular challenges does the development of critical cultural awareness present to Japanese students of English as a foreign language socialized in a culture that values harmony? What learning outcomes can be expected? A complex case study was conducted to examine the development of critical cultural awareness in intercultural language education in a tertiary education context in Japan. Qualitative data were gathered over a nine-month period from thirty-six student participants and myself as teacher-researcher to examine the impact of three separate courses of English language study all aimed at developing critical cultural awareness in students. Data gathered from student participants indicate that the importance of harmony had been underestimated and certain learning outcomes had been unanticipated by the teacher-researcher in the initial conceptualization of the study. This paper will present relevant data in context and consider the implications for the development of critical cultural awareness in intercultural language education.

Defining Critical Cultural Awareness

According to Byram and Guilherme (2000), as Hymes’ notion of communicative competence in foreign language education has been extended to intercultural communicative competence, the native speaker model has been rejected in favour of the notion of an intercultural speaker who possesses not only linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence, but also intercultural competence of which critical cultural awareness is one component. Paul and Elder (2002) document the development of the concept of “critical” from the ancient Greeks through Sumner (1906) to the modern day, highlighting its role in controlling biased first-order thinking, the control of which is a central goal of intercultural communication. They suggest that through critical educational approaches, a higher form of second-order thinking can gradually bring first-order thinking under conscious control, as thought is directed upon thought itself. To this end, Byram and Guilherme (2000) define critical cultural awareness as an “ability to evaluate, critically, and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” (p. 72). Evaluation lies at the heart of critical cultural awareness but three competing viewpoints emerge:

2. Suspension of evaluation is cognitively impossible, so empathy is to be rejected in favor of conscious critical evaluation. Foreign language teachers should:
a. Respect the democratic right of learners to evaluate freely and not attempt to change them, according to Byram et al. (2001).
b. Transmit and nurture in learners values supportive of democracy and human rights, according to Osler and Starkey (1996), Osler (2000) and Guilherme (2002).

A complex case study was conducted to explore how teachers should manage the issue of evaluation of difference in foreign language education implementing these three approaches. The issue of harmony was not the main research focus but emerged as an important dynamic.

**Critical Cultural Awareness and Harmony**

Next, let us examine the conceptual links between critical cultural awareness and harmony starting with socialization theory. Byram (1989) added the notion of tertiary socialization to Berger and Luckman’s (1966) notions of primary and socialization to describe a third phase of socialization that can be triggered by exposure to worldviews formed in other societies through foreign language study. Doyé (1992) breaks Byram’s concept of tertiary socialization into cognitive, moral and behavioral socialization. He categorizes evaluation in the moral domain within Kohlberg’s (1976) Stages of Moral Development. According to Crain (1985), Kohlberg suggested that moral development can take place through (a) role-taking as we consider the viewpoints of others through empathy, and (b) through discussion and debate about moral problems as we are motivated to formulate more comprehensive positions. The latter is characterized by critical evaluation but tension between empathy and critical evaluation exists and proponents of both sides can be found.

Demanding more recognition of empathy-based morality, Gilligan (1982) criticized Kohlberg for exhibiting cultural and gender bias by ranking empathy-based morality lower than the more evaluative, critical, discussion-based form, arguing that women prioritize the former over the latter. Crain (2000) also notes that Tronto accused Kohlberg of ethnocentrism arguing that non-western societies may develop moral orientations more like those Gilligan articulated for women. This all relates to Markus and Kitayama’s (1991) concepts of independent and interdependent selves, the differences between which were clarified by Heine (2001). In short, the relational interdependent Asian self is thought to prioritize harmonious relationships over working towards an ideal and just state constructed through rationality, which can be taken as an implicit goal of Kohlberg’s developmental model.

Rejecting harmony and standing clearly on the critical side, Guilherme (2002) rejects Robinson’s (1988) conceptualization of culture learning as subjective involvement with another culture that leads to a synthesis of both cultures decreasing differences between them for its underlying harmonious and consensus-driven idea of intercultural relations and lack of criticality. But Guilherme (2002) validates Byram’s (1997) recommendation of critical evaluation to allow the conscious control of biased interpretation, endorsing his rejection of empathy for not requiring learners to take a critical, analytical stance.

The conflicting positions with regard to harmony outlined in this section constitute conflicting underlying views of citizenship education based on different social ideals. Whilst the consensus-driven empathy-oriented (possibly Asian and western female) approach seeks to develop a society that prioritizes harmonious human relationship, the (possibly western
male) critical approach prioritizes instead rigorous evaluation that brings perspectives into conflict through discussion and debate to promote rationality-oriented moral development.

Methods

Research Design

As noted above, three different teaching approaches were identified with regard to the evaluation of difference. These three approaches were implemented over one academic year over a nine-month period in three different English language classes at a university in Japan in a complex, qualitative case study that examined the development of critical cultural awareness in intercultural language education, following Yin’s (2003) guidelines for case study research. The main objects of research were three courses of study designed by myself, as teacher-researcher, which despite their important variations also shared a common core course that aimed to raise student awareness of their own cultural perspectives prior to exposing them to cultural difference in each other asking them to respond in particular ways. Each class consisted of a group of twelve female Japanese students in their second year of university study with me as teacher/researcher.

To make the study trustworthy, issues related to credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were carefully considered, following Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) guidelines. To enhance credibility, researcher and teacher reflexivity were built into teaching approaches to overcome personal bias. Conceptual clarity was also maximized in research design. To increase transferability, the study was designed within McDonough and Shaw’s (1993) notion of the shared framework common to all foreign language teachers. The study was conducted over a prolonged period of time, focusing carefully on various human relationships within the group to develop conceptual depth and richness through thick description to convey detail and uncover generic features of the local context. To enhance dependability, contextual factors and theoretical perspectives were made explicit. Data gathering and analysis procedures were laid out clearly enough that they could be followed by others. Confirmability was enhanced by gathering data from multiple sources, developing chains of evidence and employing forms of respondent validation where possible.

Course Design

In this section, I will provide an overview of syllabus design. Stage 1 (weeks 1-8) focused on raising student awareness of their own values using Schwartz’s (1995, 1997) taxonomy of ten universal value types as the overarching conceptual framework for core course components in weeks 2-5. Having learned to recognize the values lying hidden behind simple dialogues, students were asked to reflect on and articulate their own values making speeches to the class in weeks 6-8, when listeners were asked to respond in course-specific ways. In short, one group would attempt to empathize with the speaker by deploying specific communication strategies that would help them understand the perspective of the speaker but the second and third groups would critically evaluate the speaker. Critical evaluation was defined in terms of comparing and contrasting self and other before evaluating both with reasons. In the latter two groups, students would either evaluate with conscious reference to
their own values or with reference to target values supportive of democracy and human rights that were prescribed by the teacher.

Stage 2 (weeks 8-12) aimed to expose all students to value difference providing opportunities for experiential learning asking them to respond to value difference in course-specific ways. Students were paired up with a student who had a different value and asked to discuss the value difference before imagining the kind of conflict it may cause by writing a critical incident dialogue, which they presented to other students who had to respond in the same course-specific ways, before third-party students were inserted into some of the pairs as mediators. They too were asked to mediate in course-specific ways with their developing understandings of value difference in communication in practice. Stage 3 (weeks 11-14) focused student attention more on conceptual difference between individuals and between the English and Japanese languages.

Stage 4 (weeks 2-25) was divided into three sub-stages. In sub-stage 1 (weeks 2-14), students had to develop a questionnaire based on Schwartz’ value types to interview a foreigner during the summer break about their values, before responding in course-specific ways in the written assignments that followed in sub-stage 2. In sub-stage 3 (weeks 23-25), students had to present their course-specific summer assignments to other students in speeches and listeners had to respond in course-specific ways.

Stage 5 (weeks 16-27) focused on value difference between cultures using Hofstede’s (1980) theory. Video clips were used as source material from which students had to identify value and conceptual difference causing various kinds of intercultural conflict before responding in course-specific ways. Part of this material was replaced in the third group by material linking the value dimensions to democracy and human rights.

Procedure

Data Collection

Once the research groups had been formed, pre-course questionnaires were administered and semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather detailed description of student background and perceptions of cultural difference following guidelines provided by McDonough and McDonough (1997) and Cohen et al. (2000). Data were gathered from students (through interactive student diaries) and me (through the teacher diary, as a form of research diary following Blaxter, et al. (2001)), and lessons were audio-recorded. The recordings allowed me to listen to lessons during the data analysis period from the standpoint of a researcher to provide a third perspective on phenomena. This is how triangulation of perspectives was achieved.

Student class work and homework work were important forms of documentary data, as recognized by McDonough and McDonough (1997). Selected pieces of student work were discussed in unstructured mid-course and end-of-course group interviews following guidelines provided by McDonough and McDonough (1997) and Cohen et al. (2000). Ethical issues were also considered with regard to research site access, selection of participants, informed consent, confidentiality, data ownership and disclosure.
Data Analysis

According to Hopkins (2002), Creswell (2003), Strauss and Corbin (1998), and Glaser and Strauss (1967) all suggest frameworks for conducting qualitative data analysis. In my case, this took place in four stages. In stage 1, data were loaded into a single hermeneutic unit on ATLAS and organized into coded segments for easy retrieval. Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) summary of how the ATLAS software is used in data analysis was referred to. In stage 2, data chunks were coded to generate detailed description that were then analyzed and categorized in sets of working documents. In stage 3, working documents were broken into parts and the success of course-specific learning objectives were considered in isolation within each course-specific teaching approach. Analytical descriptions of course-specific elements were drawn up highlighting patterns and student particularity. In stage 4, analytical descriptions were interpreted from both emic and etic standpoints considering teacher uniqueness before analytical descriptions were linked back to the literature, generalizable aspects were sought and conclusions were drawn. For the purposes of this paper, clusters of data related to harmony and associated concepts were lifted from the data stock and related back to the literature to identify salient themes. Data are selectively presented by way of illustration to bring the more general issue of harmony into focus.

Results

This section will highlight results pertaining to the conflict between harmony and critical cultural awareness. The main area of tension between them lay in performing critical evaluation within which students had to compare and contrast their own values and concepts with those of others before evaluating self and other with reasons. The desire for self-protection from the potential negative evaluations of others seems to be the main problem with many students clearly comparing and contrasting their own values with those of others but avoiding or refusing to evaluate as they tried to hide their true thoughts and feelings.

Maybe I want to protect myself, and this feeling can be strong when I see or talk with people I don't know well or don't have good relationships with them. (Student A1)

I think that Japanese don't try to state their opinions even if there were appropriate, because we hate being denied by others, and disturbing harmony. (Student C5)

Student A8, who not only completed the critical evaluation but performed it very well indeed, was shocked at how bad she felt about it afterwards losing sleep over the possibility that other students might think she was a bad person, concluding later that she wanted to hide her honest opinion out of concern at the prospect of being shocked by the negative evaluations of other people.

After my speech, I was so upset and fell into sink actually. I had a kind of confidences for what I decided to judge my interviewee’s opinion and describe my feeling about it clearly. I even know that in Japan to express something bad to
someone is not so good, but I realized I need to do so. I want everyone to think about to judge. In this sense, it succeeded. However, I hadn’t expect that I shocked and fell into sink so terribly. (Student A8)

It was hard for me to say my judge in front of many people because I always tend to hide my honest opinion. If I knew that others judge my opinion negatively, I would be shocked. (Student A8)

In addition to sensitivity to potential negative evaluation and consideration for others, other pivotal issues appeared to be honesty and directness. Student A4 pointed out that this class required students to express their ideas and feelings honestly, without attempting to preserve the kind of group harmony that is normally prioritized in Japan.

Student A4: Japanese somehow hide their feelings in many, many ways….because of…
Teacher: Hmm?
Student A4: Maybe we’re afraid. We afraid of something - to get hurt or something?
Teacher: A-ha. A-ha, yeah. Student A9, tell me what you think…
Student A9: Ah…I read a book a couple days ago, and it said Japanese society respect more about the communication…like a circle … “WA” in Japanese, like..
…How can I say “WA”?
Someone: Harmony.
Student A9: Harmony! Respect harmony than the word which is speak. So even if what we speak is not actually honest or be what we feel, but Japanese society respect harmony. So sometimes we speak different. Ah…we speak different things than what we think. So but…in a class, I felt the teacher want us to speak out what we feel honestly, what…. so not like to try to keep harmony than the ……? No, speak more our feeling or ideas directly more than, rather than, the harmony.

Students claimed that Japanese people speak directly with people they trust precisely because they trust them but need time to establish that trust, which explains why many students found it easier to speak directly in class as they got to know each other better even if they had felt initially uncomfortable. This affected teacher-student relations too. Student A1, for example, cut parts out of her student diary entries before sending them to the teacher early in the course but sent everything towards the end once her relationship with the teacher was more established. This all highlights the relevance of closeness of relationship to honest self-expression among these Japanese students.

Discussion

The desire for self-protection, perhaps from the potential negative evaluations of others, seems to thwart critical evaluation in some students. Out of the following possible evaluative flows, F seems to present itself as a problem when students are asked to do C and D.
A. Self evaluates self (positive)
B. Self evaluates self (negative)
C. Self evaluates other (positive)
D. Self evaluates other (negative)
E. Self is evaluated by other (positive)
F. Self is evaluated by other (negative)

But considering Heine’s (2001) literature review, B seems to attract the research attention of cross-cultural researchers seeking to account for the apparent East Asian tendency towards self-criticism over self-enhancement. Heine’s (2001) claim that North Americans seem to respond to negative input by employing various self-enhancement biases contrasts with my Japanese students, who seemed to avoid triggering negative input by hiding their honest evaluations of others. Heine (2003) does, however, recognize that concern for evaluations by others may be worth exploring in relation to Japanese self-criticism, an issue also considered by Miyahara, et al. (1998). They suggest that what appears to be other-centered styles of communication in young Japanese may actually be an ego-maintenance and face-saving strategy rather than genuine concern for others feelings. But concern for others feelings may be another reason why some Japanese people are reluctant to state their opinions according to Naotsuka, et al. (1981). Indeed, student A4 noted that Japanese people prioritize consideration for others also claiming that they do not, and are not good at, expressing their true feelings.

I felt bad about critically evaluating my Spanish boyfriend even though he always speaks directly to me. I like his directness but I can’t do it myself because I don’t want to hurt him. (Student A4)

The closeness of relationship to honest self-expression in Japan may relate to the Japanese concepts of *uchi* and *soto*. Maynard (1997) defines *uchi* in terms of in, inside, internal, private and hidden with *uchi* persons belong to the same group whereas those outside the group as referred to as *soto* persons, meaning out, outside, external, public and exposed. Maynard (1997) contrasts Americans and Japanese on this point in relation to conflict and harmony. Whereas the former seem less threatened or hurt by residual difference of opinion, the Japanese remain relationally vulnerable feeling psychologically or emotionally stressed by unplanned conflicts in the *soto* relationship. Maynard (1997) notes that among Japanese, direct exchanges occur most frequently between *uchi* members regarded as close friends where the *amae* relationship is well-established and hurt feelings are likely to heal easily.

Maynard (1997) draws upon Doi (1971) to define the Japanese concept of *amae* in terms of the need for psychological and emotional dependence imbued with sweet, all-embracing love and care that motivates Japanese people to unify in groups where they can feel secure. *Amae* releases Japanese people from the potential social injury caused by interaction with unknown others. From this, we can speculate that asking these Japanese students to critically evaluate foreign strangers and (initially) *soto* Japanese peers may have caused the problem. This would also explain why some students found critical evaluation easier over time as they developed more *uchi* relationships with their peers.

However, student A9 added that whilst Japanese people do hide their feelings, they can imply what they really mean or express bad feelings indirectly knowing the other Japanese
person will understand referring to Hall’s (1990) notion of high context culture. Hall (1990) suggests that the need for verbal explicit description is less in cultures such as Japan where social mobility is low and common understandings about context can be heavily relied upon when conveying messages through indirect language, implication or even non-verbal communication. This may also explain why some students used vague language patterns that obscured the critical evaluation. Tobin (1992) relates this in turn to the Japanese concepts of *honi* defined in terms of spontaneous feeling, and *tatemae* defined in terms of formal appearance, the influence of which was noticed by student C5:

> When we students met for the first time in April, we didn’t know well each other, so I couldn’t use *honi*, because there was a possibility that I said rude things to other students. Some weeks have passed, and we were using *honi* without notice. I think that’s a evidence which we understand each other. We had tried to tell something we had wanted to. As a result, we learned to discuss difficult things with using *honi*. It’s just Japanese characteristics that they cannot speak with the person they don’t know with using *honi*. (Student C5)

Thus, difficulties students seem to face regarding critical evaluation may relate to underlying Japanese communicative patterns and cultural tendencies that equip Japanese people to get along with *uchi* people in high-context culture. Rephrased in those terms, the common aim of these courses was to help Japanese students improve their communication with *soto* members, especially foreigners in intercultural communication, through critical evaluation. The challenge was not and could never be to help Japanese students transfer *uchi*-oriented high-context communication patterns automatically to *soto* relations in intercultural communication. But clearly, being asked to critically evaluate *soto* members made some of these Japanese students feel uncomfortable for reasons they attributed to Japanese culture.

So, given the clear cultural obstacles caused by critical evaluation, was there any evidence that it is worth pursuing as a pedagogical goal in Japan? In the empathy-oriented course where critical evaluation was not required, students did claim that empathy facilitated communication with unfamiliar others helping them get to other people better, which may be taken as an indication that this approach is more suitable for Japanese students, especially considering Lebra’s (1992) description of the Japanese empathetic self in terms of the fusion, synergy or interchangeability between self and other such that the self and other become loaded with each other.

But the kind of *intellectual empathy* required in this course must be firmly distinguished from that kind of empathy. The definition of empathy taken in this course was the critical thinking skill described by Paul and Elder (2002) in terms of the accurate reconstruction of another person’s point of view, free from one’s own biases. But the possible Japanese tendency to fuse self and other through empathy as described by Lebra (1992) may explain why some students felt threatened by intellectual empathy.

If we consider other’s side and try to understand their opinion or position, we can remove the cultural gap or some kind of misunderstanding. On the other hand, to empathy too much is sometimes dangerous a little bit I think. How is it so? Because I think sometimes people who give priority empathy tend to change their opinion
and sink in a strong people who have a big influence. So before we use empathy, we have to treasure our culture, mind, value, nationality and belief. (Student B1)

The empathy-oriented approach thus carried its own particular set of challenges for students at the heart of which lay the issue of influence. Many students in all three courses reported changing in direct response to others, regardless of teaching approach. But whereas students performing critical evaluation were able to analyze exactly how and why they were changing in terms of discrete points taking responsibility for their change, empathy-oriented students could not because their evaluation processes had not been exposed and analyzed. Let us take students B9 and C9 as two contrasting examples. Student B9 was in the empathy-oriented class and having interviewed a foreigner in the summer break, had written a non-judgmental description of interviewee values. However, she was clearly being influenced as noted in the following teacher diary extract:

It was almost like “you are what I want to become.” She was using him as a role model. She had a strong positive evaluation of him after the speech and this, she said, had made it easy to empathise. Maybe she found a lot of common ground and similarities. I am left wondering whether this is the sign of effective empathy because in a sense, she hadn’t suspended herself but was finding herself through him. But this didn’t come through in the speech because like I said, she had barely talked about herself. (Teacher-researcher)

In the case of student B9, the teacher recognized that influence was taking place unconsciously insofar as the student’s mental processes were not being consciously examined by the student herself. The teacher commented on the insidious nature of the process in the following teacher diary extract:

It does seem almost insidious and because one does not understand what is going on or who is influencing who, or how the change is occurring, we can label the agent as an unidentifiable, hegemonic force. Well, I’m not satisfied with that. Had we done a thorough and rigorous critical evaluation identifying which parts she was judging positively and negatively in herself and the other, it all would have seemed much clearer. Her personal choices would be on the surface and she would become responsible for them and the need for creating a non-existent hegemonic force would simply evaporate. She herself would be the agent of any change or non-change and we could quiz her about it. (Teacher-researcher)

Student C9, however, had made a clear critical evaluation of self and other on a point by point basis which revealed evolution in her concepts and values related to the value of self-direction as described by Schwartz (1995, 1997). Student C9 claimed that whilst she had valued self-direction strongly in the past, she had defined it in terms of making decisions by herself without discussing anything with her parents because she was afraid they would disagree. Through critical evaluation, she came to the conclusion that she had actually been selfish in the past insofar as she had not cared about anyone’s opinions but her own, a point she resolved to change in the future. She was already trying to discuss her ideas more with
other people and to develop her ability to express herself. This is how she came to redefine her target future self.

Conclusion

This qualitative research project comprised a complex case study that examined the development of critical cultural awareness in intercultural language education in a tertiary education context in Japan. The aim was to establish how foreign language teachers should manage the evaluation of cultural difference. The main area of tension between the development of critical cultural awareness and harmony lay in the critical evaluation of self and other. Many students avoided or refused to evaluate by hiding their true thoughts and feelings out of sensitivity to the potential negative evaluations of others, consideration for others or because of insufficient closeness of relationship with other students at least in the earlier stages of the courses.

These tendencies may be underpinned by various Japanese communicative patterns and cultural tendencies that equip Japanese people to communicate with in-group members in high context culture. But the goal of intercultural language education remains, however, to equip people to communicate with out-group members with whom no or few common understandings exist. Despite the discomfort experienced by many students, critical evaluation unexpectedly seems to equip some students to control the extent to which they are influenced by others as analysis and evaluation reveal the underlying dynamics, making them available for conscious selection by students. On the contrary, students who do not perform critical evaluation sometimes seem threatened by others if they realize they are being unconsciously influenced and do not understand the basic processes through which the influence takes place. In that case, students cannot take responsibility for their own unconscious selections and the resultant change.

The conflicting positions with regard to harmony outlined in this paper constitute conflicting underlying views of citizenship education based on different social ideals. Whilst the consensus-driven empathy-oriented approach seeks to develop a society that prioritizes harmonious human relationship, the critical approach prioritizes instead rigorous evaluation that brings perspectives into conflict through discussion and debate to promote rationality-oriented moral development. A strong argument in favor of critical evaluation is that it can empower students to take responsibility for the extent to which they are influenced by others, but the tension between harmony and critical evaluation cannot be underestimated.

Let me leave the final word to student C3 who was the strongest opponent of critical evaluation refusing in the end to use it in the future even though she had learned how to do it during the course. But in addition to highlighting student concern about the threat critical evaluation poses to harmony, let the internal contradiction in her argument also highlight the nub of the problem yet to be addressed in intercultural language education. Whilst student C3 is clearly a proponent of the Japanese concept of harmony, her staunch defense of it in the face of a more critical approach is unashamedly evaluative and the point expressed so articulately could itself form part of a very strong critical evaluation:

I am not going to judge eternally, even though I learned the way to judge through this course. I’m not good at judging anything anyway. Especially I’d not like to
judge whether it is good or bad toward culture, people, and historical things in my life although I sometimes need to judge. In fact, those who felt painful dropped out of this course. The Japanese conception, “Wa,” in other word, “harmony” is indeed beautiful. We don’t have to be westernized by denying such a beautiful conception. The point is that even though we try to become cosmopolitans, it is wrong to deny the way with agony, which Japanese have cultivated so far. I am not going to introduce the way to judge everything into my life. All of things have both good and bad elements. We can argue a lot against Westerns who judge such Japanese as indecisive people. (Student C3)

References


