

A Case Study of Japanese Language Teaching in a Multicultural Learning Environment

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Abstract

An increasing number of international students, whose teaching and learning practices are very different from that of the UK, is studying in the U.K. This study poses the question of whether Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the most optimum language teaching approach in today's multicultural society regardless of cultural differences. The Japanese teaching method (Japanisation) was presented as an alternative teaching method to CLT, and the study investigates any impacts on multicultural students in Japanese language teaching at a university in the South of England.

The study was conducted for one semester using two classes in 2009/2010. Two teaching methods, Japanisation and CLT, were applied. The concept of Japanisation is drawn from the study of the Japanese car manufacturing industry and transferred to the language teaching context. Three tests provided quantitative data to generate data. The quantitative results showed that there was no statistically significant difference between the two teaching methods regarding the attainment in the first two tests. However, Japanisation was associated with significantly higher results in the final test, compared with CLT.

The implication of this study is embedding elements of Japanisation and Japanese educational culture in the Japanese language teaching will possibly enhance students' learning of reading and written skills. Those who develop the teaching curriculum are encouraged at a strategic level to examine other educational cultures and teaching practices from non-Anglophone countries and assess how they may be combined with CLT to reflect new international characteristics of teaching and learning environments.

Keywords: culture, higher education, Japanese language teaching, multicultural

1. Introduction

Background of the Study

In a pilot study, less than half of the Japanese class was British and the remainder were Chinese, Egyptian, Latvian, Greek, French, Malaysian, Polish and Russian. The class was taught using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). However, it was unclear why CLT did not work well for all students as some non-British students appeared to show different reactions to the British students in response to CLT. The researcher found this problematic and this is the main reason for conducting the study. The issues of applying CLT to non-British students were not addressed in studying CLT and formulated the hypothesis that CLT may only be appropriate and effective for Anglophone students (Anglophone refers to USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand within this paper). This study compares the efficacy of an Anglophone originated teaching approach (CLT) with a non-Anglophone teaching approach (Japanisation), applies them to two groups of multicultural students, evaluates the results and considers the implications of applying Anglophone originated teaching approach to the diverse cultural background of students from a cultural point of view.

The Issue under Consideration

The issue under consideration relates to the current language teaching approach and the educational climate within the UK. The language teachers teach students using CLT which originated from Anglophone countries. However, the current teaching and learning environment in the UK is multicultural, where students from different educational cultural backgrounds studying in the UK. The pilot study suggested a possible gap between the current language teaching approach (CLT) and the globalised language teaching and learning environment. In the present study, this gap was explored using Japanese teaching approach to see if Japanese teaching approaches could enhance the performance of the students who are the non-native speakers of Japanese.

Research Questions

This study addresses the two research questions (RQ) given below. RQ 2 has a further three sub-questions:

RQ1. What are the educational values associated with Japanese teaching and learning?

RQ2. Do Japanese teaching methods enhance students' learning when applied in a British language learning context?

The three further sub-research questions are:

– Do students in the Japanese language classes taught using CLT or Japanisation methods show any differences in the performance of reading and written tests and assignments?

– Do students show any preferences to any language teaching approaches influenced by their previous educational culture?

– How do students respond to being taught using Japanisation methods compared with being taught by CLT?

Structure of This Study

The next section discusses the framework of the study, which is followed by the methodology and results before the conclusion.

Theoretical Framework for Analysing Educational Culture

In order to understand the educational culture and the two teaching approaches (CLT and Japanisation), Hofstede *et al.*'s cultural taxonomy was used. Their cultural taxonomy was

chosen as the framework of this study. It is worth noting that the most recent GLOBE Cultural Taxonomy is still built on Hofstede *et al.*'s work (Lustig and Koester, 2010, p.112) and the use of their categorisation is relevant for this study.

Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov's (2010) identify culture in five dimensions: Power distance; individualism–collectivism; masculinity–femininity; uncertainty avoidance; and long-term–short-term. Firstly, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and individualism–collectivism dimensions are explained, after which the educational culture of CLT and Japanisation is explained. Each of these three dimensions consist of two opposing poles and this will help to position where Japan and the Anglophone countries stand among these dimensions.

Power Distance (PD) is defined as 'the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally' (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010, p. 61). According to Dimmock, 'many Asian societies are high PD cultures, while many Western societies have low PD values' (Dimmock, 2000, p. 47).

Individualist and collectivist are 'the interests of the individual prevail over the interests of the group' (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010, p. 91) and 'the interest of the group prevails over the interest of individual' (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010, p. 90) respectively. Generally speaking, Anglophone countries have an individualist society and Asian countries have a collectivist one (Dimmock, 2000).

Uncertainty avoidance is defined as 'the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations' (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010, p. 191). High Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) scoring nations try to avoid ambiguous situations, whereas low UAI scoring nations are not concerned about unknown situations. In general, Anglophone countries appear to be labelled as weak uncertainty avoidance countries whereas Asian countries appear to be labelled as strong uncertainty avoidance countries.

Although Hofstede *et al.*'s (2010) categorisation was used as a framework for characterisation, great caution is needed for generalization. There are variations in educational cultural preferences within British students brought up in Britain. Furthermore, even among students who were brought up in Britain, their educational cultural preferences vary depending on their heritage and whether or not they were brought up in a mono-cultural environment. Given that today's society consists of people with different heritages and preferences with globalisation, it is difficult to generalise the cultural preferences of a particular nationality or heritage.

Anglophone Approaches – CLT

CLT is a language teaching approach that has been used for more than four decades. It started in the late 1970s in Europe and gained momentum in the early 1980s. Since then it has taken hold and acquired the status of 'new dogma' (Hu, 2002, p. 94). Although CLT has evolved in its theory during the last four decades, the learning environment has changed considerably in the last four decades.

CLT adopts the following three of Hofstede *et al.*'s educational cultural dimensions: Small power distance, weak uncertainty avoidance, and individualism. Firstly, with regards to the power distance dimensions, CLT adopts small power distance as it takes 'less teacher-centered' (Brumfit, 1985, p. 7) and 'CLT is firmly opposed to teacher dominance in the classroom' (Hu, 2002, p. 95). Secondly, with regards to uncertainty avoidance dimensions, CLT adopts weak uncertainty avoidance as 'learners are not being constantly corrected. Errors are regarded with

greater tolerance,’ (Littlewood, 1981, p. 94), and CLT ‘avoid(s) linguistic correction entirely’ (Brumfit and Johnson, 1979, p. 173). Thirdly, with regard to the individualism *versus* collectivism dimension, CLT adheres individualism as it focuses on the individual student.

Typical CLT used in this study. In the present study, the CLT class was achieved by exposing the sample students to a combination of small power distance, weak uncertainty avoidance, and individualism: The small power distance was established by creating student-centred class. Uncertainty avoidance was achieved by encouraging students’ creativity and avoiding linguistic correction. Individualism was demonstrated through speaking pair work activities which use real life related information gap tasks as well as problem-solving tasks based on themes (e.g. time, shopping, etc.).

Japanese Approaches – Japanisation

‘The term Japanisation came into vogue in the mid-1980s to describe attempts in other countries to make practical use of “Japanese” ideas and practices’ (Price, 2006, p. 19). In fact, Japanisation is the term which is from the study of the Japanese car manufacturing industry in the 1980s, which was adapted to apply for a language teaching context in this study. Although it is a concept originated in the manufacturing industry, it has wider ramifications that go beyond the manufacturing industry. A significant relationship between schools and factories has been pointed out as early as the 1960s that ‘schools can be viewed as organisations in some ways akin to factories’ (Musgrave, 1968, p. 67). The possibility of application to the educational context as is also suggested that ‘workers’ behaviour is an extension of behaviour acquired at school’ (Hofstede, 1991, p. 235). However, the concept of Japanisation seems to have been previously applied to organisational management and not to a teaching context.

One of the key words in Japanisation is Quality Control (QC) groups. QC groups are used to make use of all staff of very different experiences and skills over an extended period of time in order to improve quality. QC groups are also known as Han groups at school as Benjamin maintains: ‘The values and interaction patterns fostered in Han groups in the classroom are among those carried over into adult situations’ (Benjamin, 1997, p. 64).

Han groups are regular working groups used in the Japanese classrooms (Dimmock & Walker, 2002, p. 114; Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999, p. 59; Rohlen & LeTendre, 1996, p. 75). ‘Each Han [group] includes five to eight children’ (Benjamin, 1997, p. 53) and Han groups only ‘change the groupings at the beginning of each term of the school year’ (Benjamin, 1997, p. 53).

There are a few characteristic of Han groups. Firstly, Han groups are ‘family-like’ (Rohlen & LeTendre, 1996, p. 88). Han groups ‘only change the grouping at the beginning of each term’ (Benjamin, 1997, p. 53) which resembles QC group’s ‘extended period of time’. Han groups are ‘formal groups’, which is defined as ‘either more or less permanent with defined roles over a long period’ (Brumfit, 1985, p. 72). In contrast, Anglophone group formations are ‘factory-like’ (Rohlen & LeTendre, 1996, p. 88) and they are ‘informal groups’. Informal groups are usually of an *ad hoc* formation and ‘occur primarily for social purposes whenever people interact’ (Brumfit, 1985, p. 72). Secondly, Han groups, ‘comprises a mixture of different academic abilities’ (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999, p. 59), which resembled QC groups ‘very different experience and skills’. In contrast, Anglophone group formations tend to form with those of similar academic abilities.

Typical Japanisation used in this study. The Japanisation class was achieved by exposing the sample students to a combination of large power distance, strong uncertainty avoidance,

and collectivism: Large power distance was established by creating a teacher-centred class where students played a passive role. The opportunity of speaking practice in pairs was hardly provided. Strong uncertainty avoidance culture was achieved by stressing on one correct answer and elimination of errors. Specifically, grammar exercises focusing on one correct answer was used. Collectivism was demonstrated through turn-taking and Han groups.

2. Methodology

This section discusses the details on participants, data collection procedure and data analysis.

2.1. Participants

The sample populations comprise a mixture of undergraduate and postgraduate students who were studying Stage 1 Japanese at a university in the South of England in 2009/2010. Students were randomly assigned. This study used two groups, Group 2 and 3 (total is 34 students). CLT was applied to Group 2 and Japanisation was applied to Group 3. The breakdown of the participants are: one Australian, eleven British, three British-Chinese, one British Indian, one Bulgarian, seven Chinese, one Egyptian, two Greek, one Hong Kong-Chinese, one Indonesian, one Korean, three Malaysian-Chinese and one New Zealand-Chinese.

2.2. Data collection procedures and analysis

While RQ1 is answered using literature review, RQ 2 is investigated through the data generated by three tests, two types of questionnaire (Researcher Questionnaire and University Questionnaire) and observation. Therefore, this section explains the details on data collection and analysis which involved in RQ2 which has three further sub-questions. As for the first sub-question, three tests were used for data collection. To answer the second sub-question, two questionnaires were used. Lastly, observation was used to answer the third sub-question.

The first sub-question: Three tests. In order to answer the first sub-question, three tests were used for data collection, that is, Assignment 1 which was administered on 6/11/2009, Week 6), Assignment 2 which was administered 9/12/2009, Week 9, and the Reading and Written Test which was administered on 23/01/2010, Week 12.

In analysing the data, descriptive statistics for the mean, Standard Deviation (SD), minimum and maximum score, skewness and kurtosis of Groups 2 and 3 were compared using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). For the statistical analysis, a *t*-test was used to compare the two groups for three sets of data, namely, Assignment 1, Assignment 2 and the Reading and Written Test results. The *t*-test demonstrates whether the mean values in each group are statistically significantly different from each other. The skewness and kurtosis of the data are examined to ensure their suitability for parametric tests '(e.g. *t*-tests and analysis of variance)' (Pallant, 2010, p. 213). For all tests, the level of confidence is set at 0.05.

The second sub-question: Questionnaires. In order to answer the second sub-question, two questionnaires (Researcher questionnaire and the University questionnaire) were administered and collected during the class on 19/01/2010 at Week 10. Two versions of the questionnaires were prepared to reflect the two different teaching methods experienced by each group: One was answered by Group 3 who experienced Japanisation and the other by Group 2, who experienced CLT. However, the majority of questions were duplicated for both groups. The format of the questionnaire mostly consisted of closed questions with some open-ended questions, and the respondents were asked to tick the appropriate box. Questions asked about educational culture and Japanisation, and questions related to educational culture are based on Hofstede *et al*'s (2010) uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and collectivism-individualism.

There were nine statements about uncertainty avoidance, power distance and collectivism-individualism, and students were asked to tick the boxes for the answers most relevant to them.

In analyzing the Researcher Questionnaire, the students were grouped by ethnicity and compared in each group in depth. This enabled the examination of which end of the spectrum the student prefers by ethnicity. Two analyses were conducted based on the following ethnicity:

Analysis i): The Chinese and British students' preferences in both CLT and Japanisation classes. The Chinese and British students were highlighted in particular in this study as Dimmock and Walker (2005) claim that they have contrasting perceptions and expectations in teaching and learning regarding good teachers and good students.

Analysis ii): Preferences for the other nationalities in both CLT and Japanisation classes.

On the other hand, students' comments in the University questionnaire were analysed around turn-taking, the Han group and collectivism

The third sub-question: Observation. In order to answer the third sub-question, observations were carried out for two semesters (Semester 1 and 2) from October 2008 to May 2009. Observational notes were recorded which are the researcher's diary entries on the four occasions (Week 3, Week 5, Week 6 and Week 8) in the duration of this study. Week 8 is a reflection of the four weeks' observation. Observational notes were taken during every class by the researcher to monitor two following points in students' behavioural changes: Firstly, if they change their behaviour as a result of the use of the *Han* group, Japanisation; secondly, if the behaviour of the non-British students show any similarity to those of British students.

Reliability

The Part-time Programme of the Modern Languages Department at the University stipulates that students undertake the assessment tasks by two main assessment schemes: 'heavily based on home assignments' and 'timed and supervised assessment tasks' (Modern languages Part-time Programme, 2009, p. 7).

The former consists of two pieces of assessed home assignments weighted at 10% each (20% of the total) that are submitted on certain deadlines (submission in week 6 and week 9 of 12, respectively). For simplicity, these were referred to as Assignment 1 and Assignment 2 in this study.

The timed and supervised assessment task, known as the Reading and Written Test, is normally assessed on a Saturday by invigilators and consists of one, timed, task-based written examination lasting 90 minutes weighted at 40% (Teaching and Assessment Guide, 2009/2010, pp. 7–8). The Reading and Written Test is required to be inspected and approved by either the Part-time Programme Coordinator or the Deputy Director of the Centre for Language Study before the exam is administered. Scoring of the Reading and Written tests for the three groups (Groups 1, 2 and 3) in this study was done consistently by one teacher. Reading and Written tests was a blind scoring test using students' ID numbers instead of students' names (exception applied for Assignments 1 and 2). On this basis, the Reading and Written test itself and scores obtained can be considered more reliable than Assignments 1 and 2.

3. Results

This section presents the results of RQ1 and RQ2.

RQ1: What are the educational values associated with Japanese teaching and learning?

RQ 1 asked what the educational values associated with Japanese teaching and learning is. The Han group is a pedagogical value used in this study as an influence of collectivist educational culture. Turn-taking is another preferred pedagogy of collectivist cultures. In the empirical study, Han group is combined with other characteristics of Japanese teaching and learning, that is, strong uncertainty avoidance and large power distance: Preference for one correct answer, error elimination and control of errors are the preferred pedagogy of strong uncertainty avoidance cultures; teacher-centred class is the main preferred pedagogy of large power distance cultures.

RQ2: Do Japanese teaching methods enhance students' learning when applied in a British language learning context?

RQ 2 has following further three sub-questions whose results are presented under the three headings below:

1. Do students in the Japanese language classes taught using CLT and Japanisation methods show any differences in the performance of the Reading and Written Tests and Assignments?

This sub-question was investigated through the three tests (Assignments 1, 2 and Reading and Written Tests) between the two groups. There was no statistically significant difference in the first two Assignments. However, there was a statistically significant difference in the Reading and Written Test, where the Japanisation class obtained higher average marks (the mean score of Group 3 was 6.97 points higher than that of Group 2) than the CLT class. [Group 2 ($M = 68.95$, $SD = 7.98$); Group 3 [$M = 75.92$, $SD = 7.69$; $t(29) = -2.40$, $p = 0.02$]. The difference between the mean scores of the two groups for the Reading and Written test was very large (eta squared = 0.17) (Pallant, p. 209). Furthermore, the distribution of kurtosis of Group 3 (Japanisation) was almost twice as that of Group 2 (CLT), meaning that the marks in Group 3 were more clustered around the average than the marks in Group 2. Since Japanisation aims teaching around the average students, this may have been one of the factors contributing to the observed distribution of Group 3 where more students in Reading and Written tests were clustered around the average.

2. Do students show any preferences to any language teaching approaches influenced by their previous educational culture?

The results of the Researcher Questionnaire showed that the majority of students showed preference to the Anglophone originated language teaching approach, CLT, than Japanisation regardless of their previous educational culture. Some international students' preference for CLT was not reflected on their previous educational culture. It seems that their preference for CLT may be modified by the British university learning environment where they are currently studying. International students who were brought up outside the UK seemed to conform to the British educational culture in which they were currently studying, as 'a framework of cultural expectations about learning will probably be modified or supplemented in relation to the expectation of teachers and students in the host culture' (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006, p. 9).

3. How do students respond to being taught by Japanisation?

The results of the questionnaires showed students' two reactions in response to Japanisation: either rejection or acceptance. The university questionnaire results showed that students who

could not accept the different educational culture conveyed their opinion by low university quantitative rating, critical comments, and wishing to change to the CLT class. The observations confirmed that students showed difficulty in understanding the notion of the Han group in both observation and students' comments in the questionnaires. Three out of four observational notes showed that the Han group did not function at all. However, the last observational notes (Week 8) indicated Group 3 which experienced Japanisation seemed 'more united as a group than Group 2'.

4. Conclusion

Teaching and the learning environment has become more multicultural compared to forty years ago when language classrooms contained significantly fewer international students at the inception of CLT. CLT places an emphasis on individuals which is ideal for Anglophone educational culture. However, the universal effectiveness and applicability of the Anglophone originated CLT is questioned due to the current globalised educational climate. It may be a 'conflict' (Hu, 2002, p. 102) or be 'incompatible' (Hu, 2002, p. 102) with some students, and thus may not offer a universal optimum language-teaching theory. In contrast, Japanisation focuses teaching on the majority students. However, this approach may not necessarily meet the higher and lower end of student's requirements, either. If CLT were incorporated with the teaching approaches from non-Anglophone countries, students' diverse preferences and expectations from both ends of the three dimensions of culture could be captured.

This study contributes not only teaching practitioners who teach in the current multicultural learning environment to be sensitive to the international students' different educational cultural expectations and requirements in teaching and learning. It is hoped that this study contributes in some ways to the development of one new teaching theory which integrates non-Anglophone countries' teaching and learning approaches reflecting the new multicultural teaching and learning environments.

Implications

The implications of the study have two emerging themes. The first implication raises the question of whether CLT is universally effective for all language students regardless of their educational cultural background. Meeting the students' requirement by one teaching method was difficult. The data collected in this study also suggest that using Japanisation only or CLT only did not work well for every student in both groups, which may be a consequence of cultural-cognitive differences between Asian and Western learners (Dimmock and Walker, 2005, p. 109). This could be explained by the consequence of cultural cognitive differences between Asians and Western learners (Dimmock and Walker, 2005, p. 109). Previous studies describe the cultural inappropriateness of CLT as follows: 'a teaching or learning approach that is taken for granted and regarded as universal and common sense by people from one culture may be seen as idiosyncratic and ineffective in the eyes of people from a different culture' (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2006, p. 75). Sonaiya (2002) also points out that 'while shared human values may make certain methods (or certain aspects of specific methods) universally applicable, this should not always be assumed to be the case' (p. 107).

The second implication of the study concerns whether teaching should be focused on the minority of the high-ability and low-ability students or the majority of students who operate at an average level. According to Stevenson and Stiger (1994), individualist educational culture produces 'educationally advantaged minority and disadvantaged majority' (p. 223). CLT is an ideal teaching method for educational culture which prioritises one-to-one interaction and paying attention to the needs of individual students. However, paying attention to individual

student's needs may not necessarily meet the needs of all students as a class or the majority students. CLT has been claimed to be associated with the enhanced students' communicative skills. The findings of this study suggested that the students in the CLT class struggled to read and write in Japanese, which became apparent when they took the Reading and Written Test. Reviewing what CLT has brought to today's students, perhaps the area of grammar, reading and writing need more attention in using this method.

Limitations

Quantitative data cannot answer the second and third sub-question which relate to students' perceptions and feelings. Therefore, questionnaires which provide qualitative data and observation were used along with student observation. The questionnaire was primarily used in answering the second sub-question which provided quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire adopted multiple type questions and these options may have limited students' other answers. However, a full understanding of students' perceptions and feelings may not necessarily be gained from the questionnaire. Observation was used to compensate for this potential limitation. Observational data were used to answer the third sub-question. However, it should be noted that the opportunity to observe students might not happen at the right time and the right place during the research within the assigned timescale. Moreover, the interpretation of the observational data might be culturally biased and the use of qualitative methods always embraces possibilities in obtaining a unanimous interpretation.

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