Cultural and Academic Challenges that International Students Face While Studying Japanese Language at a British University

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Abstract

Lower track is not very familiar when discussing university students. However, there are lower track students in university language classes and the language teachers recognize them. This study focuses on lower track Chinese students' who had behavioral problems went through cultural and academic challenges. Two aims of this study are: to identify the characteristics of Chinese and British educational cultures and; to ascertain if the Chinese students are able to reach average ability through the use of an experimental class. Participants are 3 Chinese second year undergraduate students who were studying Intermediate Japanese at a university in the South of England in 2017 for a duration of one semester. Students' behavioral changes were observed before and after the experimental study. Two types of observations were used. The results of the cultural challenges showed that students went through the educational culture which is the opposite end of the spectrum. The results of academic challenge, lower track students who could not participate in class activities were able to participate toward the end of the semester. It was concluded that Chinese lower track students were able to reach the average level.

Keywords: culture, higher education, Japanese language teaching, lower track students.

INTRODUCTION

University language teachers encounter various challenges including students' abilities and cultural differences. This study investigates the second-year international students' cultural and academic challenges in Japanese language learning at a British university in 2017. The majority of international students who learn Japanese language at a British university are bilinguals (English and their native language) and they study the third language in their second language. This fact may already create academic disadvantage in learning for international students studying at a British university.

This study was guided by two research questions (RQs). RQ1 relates to students' cultural challenges, specifically, to identify Chinese and British education culture and understand students' educational cultural challenge from Chinese to British. This will be investigated by existing literature. RQ2 relates to students' academic challenge, and the specific question is if the low track students are able to reach to average ability students. This will be investigated by an experimental classroom using observations.

Since globalisation, cultural differences between cultures have been greatly informed. However, the majority of studies assume that all the international students are the average ability and do not focus and describe those in the lower track at university level. This study serves this gap by presenting how lower track international students cope with the academic and cultural challenges in the case of studying Japanese language. The next section aims to identify Chinese and British educational culture (RQ1) using literatures.

CULTURAL CHALLENGE: BRITISH AND CHINESE EDUCATIONAL CULTURE

Hofstede et al.'s (2010) cultural taxonomy was chosen to be the framework for this paper. Their model may be 'essentialism' (Godwin-Jones, 2013, p. 3) and using Hofstede et al.'s (2010) cultural taxonomy may be too stereotypical and simplified as the reality is more complex given that today's society consists of people with various heritages and preferences due to globalisation. However, Geert Hofstede is one of the leading academics on culture (Kirkman et al., 2006; Merkin et al., 2014) who established the basis of categorisation of culture. Despite some criticism (e.g., Baskerville, 2003; McSweeney, 2002; Spector, Cooper & Sparks, 2001; Taras & Steel, 2009), 'Hofstede's model has been used most often and the large number' (Merkin et al., 2014, p. 3). Also, having two opposite poles, this framework is considered suitable to compare British and Chinese educational cultures.

Educational culture refers to the culture of schools, which is predominantly created by the teachers and students within the classrooms. It includes values, beliefs, appropriate behaviour, assumptions and underlying pedagogies transmitted at schools and universities. Students are trained to behave in a specific way between the teacher and students as well as among students.

Individualist and collectivist are defined as '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 interest of individual' (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 90) respectively. Chinese students prefer a collectivist culture. Preferred underlying pedagogy of a collectivist educational culture is the whole class instruction in the learning environment where students speak up in class only when sanctioned by the teacher or the group (Hofstede et al., 2010). Influenced by Confucius educational culture, independent thoughts are discouraged (Tan, 2017). Collectivist culture prefer to express indirectly (Kapoor, Hughes, Baldwin & Blue, 2003) and vaguely or ambiguously (Kaplan, 1966) in both communication and writing style. For example, the writing of collectivist culture is demonstrated by the use of relevant stories, proverbs and phrases without the need for the writer to explain the intended meanings specifically. In writing, the collectivist writers show respect for their readers by presenting materials without spelling out its relevance (Charnock, 2010) and the readers are responsible to understand the meaning by drawing inference from it. The preferred text structure is descriptive, which is demonstrated by the 'background and topic' (Charnock, 2010).

On the other hand, the educational culture of a British university adopts an individualist culture where students are expected to individually speak up in class and independent

thinking is encouraged. Individualist culture prefers to express directly and assertively in both communication and writing style (Charnock, 2010; Kim, 1994). Clarity and reasoned argument (Hammer, 2005; Kaye, 2006) is also preferred. In an individualist culture, the writer is responsible for direct and explicit construction of meaning (Charnock, 2010) with an emphasis on originality or creativity. Originality is demonstrated in writing by the use of the writer's own words and preferred the 'thesis and argument' (Charnock, 2010) text structure which allows the writer's ideas to express.

Power Distance (PD) is defined as 'the extent to which the less powerful members of the institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally' (Hofstede et al*.,* 2010, p. 61). PD has large and small power distances. The Chinese prefer the strong PD culture. The underlying pedagogy of the strong PD educational culture is teacher-centred class (Hofstede et al., 2010) where students give teachers respect as they play role of transmitting wisdom (Hinkel, 1991). In a large PD culture, students believe that teachers should take all initiative in class and teachers are considered experts who play a role similar to a midwife (Hinkel, 1991). On the other hand, British universities prefer a small PD culture, which is student-centred class (Hofstede et al., 2010) where students treat teachers as equals as they and teachers expect an initiative from students in class.

It is possible to say that the Chinese students who were educated up to high school level in China and then studied at a British university face a cultural challenge to adjust to British university educational culture, which is the opposite end of the spectrum.

The next section investigates if the low track students are able to catch up with the average ability students (RQ2) using qualitative methods.

METHODS

Participants

The participants were three second year international students who were studying Intermediate Japanese in 2017/2018 for 12 weeks. The total number of the students in this class was seven but the focus of this study only looks at three lower track students. Three levels of Japanese are offered to the undergraduate students at the universities are: Beginners; Intermediate; and Advanced. The students studied Japanese 4 hours per week as an elective module for 12 weeks for one term as an Institution Wide Language Programme (IWLP) context.

The participants came from China after graduating from a high school to study at a British university for their degree program. In addition to cultural challenges, these international students faced academic challenges. They were not just lower track students in the Japanese class, but also had behavioural problems. One of them hardly attended the classes and rejected the teacher's offer of additional help. He committed academic infraction in his submitted coursework. Two of them distracted themselves and other students from learning by constantly playing with their mobiles and texting on mobile phones during the class. One of the two students also suddenly decided to

open their laptop computer during an in-class exam and cheated by finding answers by Internet.

The Experimental Class

The lower track students were exposed to the following three combinations of experimental class: cooperative learning, reciprocal teaching and auditing Beginners classes. Cooperative learning is defined by pairing high and low track students to work together as it is claimed that 'relatively low-level students …make a contribution when paired with more proficient students' (Younman & Kaylani 1996, p. 317). Cooperative learning benefits both lower track students and higher track students as they learn from each other. Lower track students learn better by one-to-one interaction, but higher track students also strengthen their knowledge by teaching lower track students as teaching others needs different higher skills than just understanding themselves. Reciprocal teaching is based on Vygotsky (1978)'s *zones of proximal development. A zone of proximal development* is defined 'the distance between a child's current level of learning and the level she can reach with the help of people' (Brown, 1994, 7) and group members who are not capable of full participation can learn from the contributions of those more expert than the one who are not capable full participation (Brown, 1994). This point was considered suitable for lower track students as the interaction with peers being slightly ahead in terms of cognitive functioning should stimulate learning process (Adey et al., 2007).

Lastly, three students were advised to audit one of Beginners classes to support both their academic challenge. It would be of benefit to these students by not only catching up on a year gap in the learning content but also the Beginners class's student-centred (Small PD) learning environment which may give them positive influence to become independent learners (Individualist). Originally, the three lower track students were advised to audit Beginners classes for additional four hours twice a week. Two of the lower track students agreed to audit only two hours per week (one class per week) in addition to their Intermediate classes. One low track student declined to audit.

Data Collection

Qualitative method was used as the focus is on students' behavioural changes and the process of how and when culture and pedagogy may affect students' behavioural changes. It may also be difficult for lower track students to articulate when and why they have stopped their problematic behaviour and started participating in the class. In this respect, observational method allows the lower track students' behavioural changes which enable to reveal their perception. Students may not have even realised their behavioural changes. Originally, a quantitative test was planned in addition to the observations. However, due to the unplanned class changes had taken place in the second semester, the test was unable to implement. Therefore, two types of observations were used: class observation by a senior teaching staff and Researcher's weekly observation, which is discussed next.

Class Observation

The data was collected on 6/11/2017 when the class observation took place by the senior teaching staff for two hours. In this observation, the following eight points were raised: 1) preparation and planning; 2) structure; 3) language skills; 4) class management; 5) techniques; 6) delivery; 7) feedback; and 8) assessment. In addition, the observer's comments, recommendations, further development and the tutor's notes on the feedback are provided. The class observational data was considered appropriate to describe one of the researcher's experimental classes objectively and may contribute presenting different perspectives.

Researcher's Weekly Observation

The following two points are the focus of the observation: 1) if the lower track students change their behaviour, when did this happen? 2) Do the lower track students show any indication of catching up with the rest of the class in respect of class participation and engagement? As for the second point, the specific three points are: 1) whether students were able to answer the teacher's questions; 2) participation in the class and attendance; and 3) students' problematic behavioural changes.

Data Analysis

Both data were analysed using 11 points from Miles & Huberman's (1994) 13 tactics for generating meaning. They are: 1) noting patterns and themes; 2) seeing plausibility; 3) clustering; 4) making metaphors; 5) counting, making contrast/comparisons; 6) partitioning variables; 7) subsuming particulars into the general; 8) factoring; 9) noting relations between variables; 9) finding intervening variables; 10) building a logical chain of evidence; and 11) making conceptual/theoretical coherence (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

RESULTS

Researcher Observation

The researcher kept weekly observational notes to monitor the students' behavioural changes during the experimental classes. As the researcher did not start this experimental class until Week 3, data was collected between week 3 and 11 for nine weeks during the autumn term of 2017 by the researcher, except for week 8.

Week 3

'What a great difference of abilities in this class! I have taught a mixed ability class before but the difference is not as wide as this. Three lower track students are worse than current Ab initio students. I cannot teach the Intermediate content using only whole class instruction. I will have to report this situation to my line manager and will have to change my teaching approach. I will read some literature on teaching mixed ability classes.'

Weeks 3 notes describe how the researcher set out as a problem in this study.

Week 4

'I wonder if it is possible to tell the three lower track students to audit one of Ab Initio classes, in addition to taking the Intermediate classes. I will ask my line manger if this would be possible. I think this will help these students and that they may be influenced by the different class dynamics of the Ab Initio, where students are more motivated, responsive and active in class participation'.

Weeks 4 notes shows that the researcher decided to take action by suggesting the idea of auditing three lower track students to audit Intermediate classes to her line manager. This was because the researcher was told by the line manager that these three lower track students are not allowed to retake Ab Initio due to the University policy. This idea was approved by the line manager.

Week 5

'In the Intermediate class this week, I told the three lower track students to audit the Ab Initio class. One student declined and two students agreed to attend the class for two hours per week. The Ab Initio class is taught four hours (two classes, two hours each) per week. They could have come to all four hours per week if they were keen to study, but they said that they would only come for two hours. This is better than not attending at all. In the Ab Initio class this week, they were not really listening to the class, and were distracted by playing with their mobile phones. This is the same behaviour as in the Intermediate class. Let's observe how they perform in the following classes'.

Weeks 5 notes shows that two of the three lower track students started auditing Ab Initio classes two hours per week from W5. One lower track student declined the offer. This allows researcher to compare the results of lower track students who audited or did not audit the Ab Initio classes.

Week 6

'In the Ab Initio class this week, we had an hour in-class test. All the first-year students and the two Intermediate students started the test without reference (books, computers and mobile phones). However, suddenly, one of the lower track Intermediate students took out her laptop from the bag and started typing and writing answers! I told her 'What are you doing? You cannot use translation from the internet using a laptop or mobile'. This was unexpected and unbelievable. The two Intermediate students said that they studied Ab Initio last year and they were allowed to use laptop or mobile during the in-class test! I have reported the incident to my line manager'.

Weeks 6 notes shows the lower track students' problematic behaviour which was described in the Introduction.

Week 7

'In the Ab Initio class this week, one of the lower track Intermediate students still relied on their mobile phones to do anything during the class, so I told her not to rely on Google Translate. I have shown them that there is a Japanese-English and English-Japanese dictionary at the back of the textbook which they can refer to.'

Weeks 5 to 7 notes show that the lower track students have not changed and still show behavioural issues.

Week 9

'In the Ab Initio class this week, we had Coursework 1. Students were asked to write a self-introduction for the first hour of the two hour class. The mark of this coursework is linked to their 50% of their mark for this term. Two Intermediate students were just auditing the class and did not need to take this exam. But they came to the class. However, they do not really need to do the Coursework so I told Intermediate students to come back after the first hour of the Coursework 1. They did come back to audit the rest of the class for the next hour.'

Weeks 9 notes show that the low track students' engagement improved. For example, they came back to the class after the Coursework 1 even though they did not have to, which shows their motivation to study.

Week 10

'The Intermediate students started being more involved in the classroom activities! They looked at me and answered my questions when they knew the answer. They also engaged in the activities without my help by explaining what to do or how to construct sentences. I praised one of them, 'You must have studied hard'. I have reported this to my line manager that these students could now read and write 46 basic characters for Japanese words (hiragana) which means they reached half of the Ab Initio level requirement. But I am surprised that they could catch up within two months. Once the students realised that they needed to study, they became more motivated. I thought that it was a good idea that they had audited in the Ab Initio classes'.

Continued from Week 9, Weeks 10 notes show that the two lower track students' positive behavioural changes: 'answering the teacher's questions' and 'engaged in activities without the teacher's help'. The lower track students' significant progress was observed in their participation in class.

Week 11

'In the Intermediate class this week, one of three students who declined to audit the supplementary Ab Initio classes came. The student only attends the class once every two weeks. I have paired this student with other two students, one of whom is a top student in the class and one of the lower track students. This student could not participate in any of the activities and just sat and watched the two of them doing pair work. After talking with this student, he told me that he will change to another module next term. It was obvious that the other two of the lower track students who were auditing for the past six weeks had made a significant improvement. They actively engaged in the pair activity and I praised them again that they worked hard to be able to do the same activity with the rest of Intermediate students'.

It was possible for the lower track students to participate in the class in just 9 weeks. By contrasting the degree of their participation, the lower track student who refused to audit Ab Initio classes and the one who audited Ab Initio classes, it is clearly shown the

significant improvement in the two lower track students' language ability. However, it should also be noted that the lower track students' progress was not just from attending the Intermediate classes, but also from auditing the Ab Initio classes. Although they were not yet to the same level as the rest of the students, they could at least participate in the class.

Classroom Observation

Four key words emerged from the observer's comments as characteristics of the experimental class: 1) 'fast paced'; 2) 'variety'; 3) 'purposeful'; and 4) 'engage'.

1) 'fast paced'

The observer commented that the class was 'structured' and 'fast paced', which is the characteristics of high track students (Boaler, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c). However, the teacher never thought the class was 'fast paced', which contradicts the class observer's comment.

2) 'variety'

The teacher's use of various modes of activities was confirmed in the observer's comments, 'whole class, pair work, group work, independent work' and 'role play'. Furthermore, the observer described some of the techniques used in the class as follows: 'students are required to move at time to form groups or pairs, work with others and vary the dynamic'. The observer thought that 'mixing up work groups and communicating expectations probably helped with this (teaching a mixed level class)'.

3) 'purposeful'

The observer used the term 'purposeful' twice in the comments such as 'there is a purposeful working atmosphere throughout the session' and a 'calm and purposeful learning environment', which the teacher did not notice.

4) 'engage'

The observer mentioned the term 'engage' twice in the comments such as 'students who have been identified as less motivated, seem to engage and be on task' and the 'group comprises of 3 distinct levels of competence: Ab Initio/Intermediate/upper Intermediate. In spite of this, the session appeared to be useful, relevant and students were engaged throughout'.

CONCLUSION

To answer RQ1, the lower track students went through considerable educational cultural changes from collectivist to individualist and from large power distance to small power distance. This includes different expectation in pedagogies, how to communicate and writing styles. Students not only had to adjust to educational cultural differences, but also improve their academic ability from lower track to average. This was investigated by using observations to answer RQ2. The results showed that the two lower track students were able to start participating in the class activities as a result of the experimental class in nine weeks. Once lower track students realised that they needed to improve their language ability themselves and perhaps with some influence

by the trusting relation between the teacher and the students, reaching the average level may not be impossible for students.

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

McDermott's (1977) claims that if there is trusting relations, students will spend their time and energy on learning, but if not, 'much of the students' time and energy is likely to be developed to not working and disrupting what the teacher is attempting to do' (Oakes, 1985, p. 117). If students see teachers' directions as in their own best interest, they will participate cooperatively (Oakes, 1985). This trusting relationship is considered important to promote or limit classroom interaction which helps teachers to deal with students' behavioural problems and also students work cooperatively with the teacher's goal of learning. In order lower track students to perceive the trusting relations, language teachers may ask how lower track students are making progress in each class and closely and regularly monitored them.

The limitation of this study is that the very small number of participants, the duration of this study and the methods. It is a very small number, duration is short and quantitative method could have been incorporated. For this reason, it is difficult to generalise the results. However, the results contributed to uncover some aspects of the particular students in this study and also may contribute to the existing knowledge on international students' cultural challenge.

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APPENDICES

Preparation and planning:

– Lesson plan produced; handouts prepared
– Timings are precise, but adaptations are necessary as the session unfolds–some items need further explanation or practice and take longer than anticipated. This was managed smoothly and without ceremony although students were told they should have learnt this in the previous year

Structure:

– There is a purposeful working atmosphere throughout the session
– The tutor has expectations of learning and makes these clear
– To cater for the mixed abilities/levels, a range of differentiated exercises are distributed according to need

Delivery:

– Calm and purposeful learning environment
– English is used as a Lingua Franca

Language skills:

– Reading, Writing – grammar, explanation given using meta-language, assumes students are familiar with this
– Speaking, Listening (to others).

Techniques:

– Once the *nai* concept is understood and practised, further written exercises are suggested as homework tasks
– A Speaking task is issued
– Whole Class/Pairwork/Groupwork/Independent work
– Role-play–students gently encouraged not to write everything down but to attempt more spontaneous interaction
– Tutor ensures role-play is spoken after 10-15 mins, not just written
– Asked students to say their role-plays aloud to the whole class

Class management:

– Students are required to move at times to form groups or pairs, work with others and vary the dynamic
– Instructions are given, and students appear to understand, or discuss with peers, then engage with the task
– Students who have been identified as less motivated, seem to engage and be on task
– Tutor moves readily to check and respond to individual queries

Observer's comments:

– This was a structured session and seemed quite fast paced, although during the feedback meeting you said that you felt that it had been slow because of the *nai* form exercise.
– You expressed your reservations about this group which comprises 3 distinct levels of competence: Ab initio/intermediate/upper intermediate. In spite of this, the session appeared to be useful, relevant and students were engaged throughout. Mixing up work groups and communicating expectations probably helped with this. Additionally, all registered students attended this session.