

Dealing with Stereotypes in the Japanese EL Classroom

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Introduction

From our self-introductions on the first day of class, and throughout the remainder of our myriad classroom and workplace interactions, culture (and particularly our own cultural background) is a constant and pervasive influence for EFL teachers. In our role as conveyors of culture, “each selection of videos, newspaper clippings, seating plans, activities, and so on has social, cultural, and educational significance” (Duff & Uchida, 1997: 476).

After briefly looking at some of the ways in which culture manifests in EL classrooms in Japan, this article examines in more depth the impact of one of the more unsavoury aspects of culture that frequently finds its way into the classroom: *cultural stereotypes*. Drawing upon my own classroom experiences, I discuss three ways of addressing cultural stereotypes in class which I believe can help increase learners’ awareness about the nature and impact of such stereotypes.

Getting to grips with teaching culture in the classroom

Despite the fact that most non-Japanese English teachers (and indeed many Japanese English teachers) are expected to teach aspects of ‘Western’ and/or national culture in their classes, defining exactly what culture is and working out how we should teach it are often tricky. Numerous definitions of culture are offered in the extensive literature on intercultural communication. At a broad level, a common view sees the notion of culture as representing group-level-negotiated, agglomerated perceptions and assumptions about how the world is or should be (Norton, 1997; Barker & Galasinski, 2001).

Two prominent views of culture within the TESOL realm are the notions of (1) the received or essentialist view of culture – which portrays culture as static, homogenous, and geographically or nationally distinctive – and (2) the critical or pluralist view, where culture is seen as contested, fluid, and multi-faceted (Atkinson, 1999).

In terms of classroom manifestations of culture, most of us aspire to inculcate in our students a pluralist, non-essentialist view of culture which emphasizes the diversity of activities, behaviours, language and so on within Western, national, social group and sub-group cultures. However, essentialised

views of culture often worm their way into classroom interactions. In addition, through our own attitudes and actions, we often perpetuate (or are at least seen as perpetuating) stereotypes about Western culture and national culture. The key to tackling cultural stereotypes is to instil in our students ‘critical cultural awareness’, which Byram (1997: 53) defines 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.” I will return to look at practical ways to foster critical cultural awareness in the final section of this article.

The nature of cultural stereotypes

Before discussing how to tackle cultural stereotypes in the classroom, it is worth taking a brief look at some of the key components of stereotypes. According to Houghton (2013: 159-160), these include:

- overgeneralised beliefs that distort perception and negatively impact intercultural communication;
- the creation / perpetuation of inaccurate information about outgroup differences;
- stereotype confirmation behaviours at individual and group level;
- inaccurate predictions about individual behaviour / attitudes.

On the one hand, cultural and national stereotypes can sensitise people to cultural differences (such as group-level behaviours, attitudes, and so on). On the other hand, they can lead to erroneous prediction and attribution of individual communicative and attitudinal behaviour. In this sense, most stereotypes are mere aggregations (statistical, experiential, etc.) which can provide contextual cues to individual behaviour, but cannot prescribe what to expect in a given intercultural communicative encounter.

Most non-Japanese English teachers in Japan have experienced (and perhaps unwittingly contributed to perpetuating) cultural stereotypes. Such stereotypes can of course rear their heads through means other than our cultural / national backgrounds – including through ethnicity, gender, social status, how we dress and behave, our likes and dislikes, and so on.

Table 1 shows a number of stereotypes that I have experienced that relate specifically to my own cultural background as a New Zealander.

“I heard that New Zealand people don’t use dishwashing detergent when they wash dishes.”
“New Zealand people are very talkative.”
“Do you eat kiwis?”
“Do all New Zealanders play rugby?”
“He is a ‘Kiwi husband’!”

Table 1: Examples of Japanese stereotypes about New Zealanders

Such essentialised (and often highly inaccurate!) views of culture and nationality are regrettably common not only in Japanese classrooms, but also in staffrooms, at *enkai* parties, as well as in the media. And although we might at times feel powerless in terms of our ability to combat such stereotypes at the wider societal level, as teachers there is a great deal that we can do to raise awareness about stereotypes within and beyond the classroom.

Strategies for addressing cultural stereotypes

1. Develop students’ critical cultural awareness

I noted earlier that providing students with opportunities for critical reflection upon their own and other cultures is an important part of our role as teachers of culture. In this respect, cultural stereotypes can be used as a springboard for class discussion and activities. A good starting point could involve having students brainstorm commonly-held Western stereotypes about Japan, and then giving them an opportunity to discuss to what extent they agree/disagree with these based upon their own views and life experience. The use of authentic materials (such as magazine or newspaper advertisements, comics, blog or forum posts, and the like) is recommended to facilitate this kind of activity.

Borghetti (2013) used travel brochures in an exercise aimed at illustrating how both positive and negative stereotypes are often exploited for commercial purposes. Abrams (2002) had his students engage in long-term ‘culture portfolio’ projects whereby his students (in small groups) were tasked with examining particular cultural stereotypes. This involved initial critical discussion, followed by Internet research, and ultimately correspondence (via interviews, online forum discussions, etc.) with people from the culture to which the stereotypes related.

2. Expose students to diverse cultural narratives

I believe that it is crucial to give our students opportunities to engage with a range of cultural narratives at a personal level. An example of this was at our high school’s English camp, where our Japanese students and numerous international exchange students engaged in a small group intercultural communication exercise. For this, each person talked about themselves and where they were from using a ‘show and tell’ item which they were asked to bring to the camp. The international students were from a wide range of countries and, by happy coincidence, none of them spoke English as their first language. This helped to put both my students and the exchange students themselves on a more even English language level footing. In fact, the camp itself was really intercultural communication writ large, as our Japanese students and the international students spent two days sharing their unique stories with one another. This was done through a variety of activities, such as teaching and learning traditional arts and crafts, making newspapers, and preparing and performing original skits in English.

Even if you do not have ready access to a group of international students, there are of course numerous other ways to broaden your students’ cultural awareness through cultural narratives. For a group of adult learners whom I teach, I assigned pairs of students a country to represent as part of a Model United Nations exercise. The students were expected to research their assigned country and give a short presentation based on a cultural heritage or environmental issue that they considered the UN could help with. I tried to select countries which my students were unlikely to know a great deal about, or which they might have negative stereotypes about – for example, Afghanistan (the Taliban, civil war, and so on).

For the research component of this task, students were encouraged to seek information from a variety of direct sources (which we discussed in class beforehand). These included Internet chat groups and forums, Facebook groups, community groups, and even consulates. Some pairs went to great lengths to get information – one pair even interviewed a Turkish restaurateur as part of their presentation in relation to a request seeking World Heritage status for Turkish cuisine!

3. Focus on marginalised cultural narratives

Irrespective of our ethnic background, I consider that it is important that all teachers in Japan help to dispel the myth of the Caucasian native-English-speaker as the ‘ideal’ English teacher (Kubota & McKay, 2009).

One way of doing so is to have groups of students research and give presentations on minority ethnic groups in Western countries (eg, native-Americans, immigrant groups, etc.). As with the Model United Nations exercise discussed above, this should, if possible, involve some primary research (ie, interviewing/corresponding with members of the particular ethnic group). Moreover, this and other similar activities should also draw upon a variety of English language models – particularly *Outer Circle* and *Expanding Circle* World Englishes – in order to demonstrate that *all* English users are custodians of the English language (not just native-speakers). Again, using authentic materials to achieve this helps to add more verve to lessons. Readily adaptable authentic materials (many of which are free!) are widely available on the Internet. One resource I recommend is Pinner’s (2014) excellent list of Internet sources for obtaining authentic World Englishes materials.



Final thoughts

Whether we are teaching pre-school children, senior citizens or any level in between, most – if not all – teachers have encountered some form of cultural stereotype in the Japanese EL classroom. In many of these situations, it is perhaps tempting to simply throw one’s hands in the air, wondering how we should deal with such problematic cultural representations (and whether there is any point in doing so).

However, by actively engaging with cultural stereotypes and encouraging our students to reflect critically upon them, we can help to break down these stereotypes and, in the process, instil in our students a more open, pluralist view of Western and national culture. Furthermore, by providing students with a platform to explore and discuss cultural stereotypes through the kinds of learner-centred activities discussed above, we enable them to become teachers of culture and, even more importantly, we equip and empower them to challenge and change these stereotypes.

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