Language and Culture: Motivation of Learning Japanese for the Students Who are in Multicultural Environment

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Language and culture are interactional. Language is a part of culture and culture cannot exist without language. Learning a language is imperative to understanding the culture in which it embeds and is embedded. Considering the cultural effect behind language, I empirically studied the language learning ability of students who have a multicultural background. Considering of one Japanese parent with the other parent being American, Korean or Filipino. These students did not speak Japanese and had little interest in learning Japanese. Motivation to learn Japanese was provided by evoking child-parent attachments, thereby indirectly tying the students to their Japanese parents' native culture and language.

Keywords: language and culture, multicultural environment

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Language and Culture

Language is more than a communication system. It embodies social functions, such as the speech community, group boundaries and solidarity, physical contact, and performative language (Johnson, 1989). Language is strongly related to culture (Martinez, 1986). Culture cannot exist without a language because language is a medium of transmitting culture. Language per se, however, is a part of culture. When the cultural effect on language is considered, the context of speech is important (Briggs, 1986) since communicational patterns in context are based on culture. Performing communication in a unique environment or context may be a part of one's culture. Each culture is evidenced through the unique communication pattern in the language. Thus, each unique language contains not only communicational patterns but also culture patterns. In addition, using the same language in a group appears to indicate a sharing of the same value system, which implies that language reflects identity or membership in a group (Stevens, 1992). Language transmits the inherent aspects of culture from generation to generation, and introduces culture to those who have different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the importance of learning a language is not only important for understanding the language itself but also in understanding the culture behind the language. Furthermore, in the global view, learning other languages is imperative to understand other cultural patterns and sharing other cultural values.

Teaching Language in the Multicultural Setting

In the present paper, I explore the effects of culture with regard to language. I used culture as a motivational tool for learning language. Since I had taugh Japanese to half-Japanese students (nine students) who have multicultural backgrounds -- they were born in the United States and one of their parents is Japanese and the other parent is American, Korean, or Filipino, I analyzed my performance

of teaching and the students' abilities to learn. All Japanese parents were born in Japan, and Japanese is their native language, though their children, my students, have not realized the importance of the Japanese language as a communication system and the uniqueness of its culture in which to understanding their multicultural backgrounds. It may be due to the fact that first, their parents do not use Japanese at home; and second, their Japanese grandparents are in Japan. Hence, they do not need Japanese as a communication system. Furthermore, since their grandparents do not understand English, and the students rarely see their grandparents, willingness to communicate with their grandparents may be weak. There is no immediate need for speaking Japanese for the students.

In the following sections, I will illustrate the approaches I used to motivate the students' to learn their parent's native language, Japanese.

First Teaching Process

My class meets on Saturday mornings from 9:00 to 11:30 on the campus of the Louisiana State University. The students were seven girls and one boy whose ages range from 6 to 14 years old -- one first grade student, one third grade student, three fourth grade students, one six grade student, and one eighth grade students -- were learning Japanese in my class.

When I started teaching Japanese to these half-Japanese students, I had expected that they could understand some simple words or sentences due to the fact that one of their parents is Japanese. In fact, the students knew a few words and short phrases in Japanese, but they had not had a chance to use these words and phases; their parents did not speak Japanese at home at all. Moreover, most of them had never learned the *Hiragana* (Japanese alphabet) before. Thus, I spent a great deal of time teaching *Hiragana* and its related words. I taught five letters from the *Hiragana* and several words with each letter during each lesson. To make them practice the letters, I used a spelling drill. The drill illustrated how to write each letter and introduced words containing each letter. When I taught

new letters, I showed the students how to write the letters on the board. For practicing conversation, I asked the students simple questions related to their daily life, such as, "what time did you get up?, " "did you eat breakfast this morning?, " and, "what did you eat last night?" Even though I asked the same questions every week and the answers are simple -- numbers or names of food -- the students had trouble in answering the questions. It was difficult to observe much improvement in their Japanese. The students appeared to be have little familiarity with Japanese and its culture, and they were not interested in learning Japanese. Thus, I changed my focus from directly teaching the language to teaching the language through its culture as I felt that uniqueness of the culture could stimulate the students to learn the language.

Cultural Approach

The first cultural approach was introducing the geography of Japan to the students; I taught them the names of prefectures and their locations while using a Japanese map. The students showed little interest in the map, even less than I thought. They simply enjoyed matching the names of the prefectures with their locations, but little more. To involve the prefectures more in the culture, I assigned the students to find their Japanese parent's hometown and to ask their parent about his/her hometown. However, no one did the assignment the following week.

The second approach was I brought Japanese food, Japanese noodle, in the class. I showed them how to use chopsticks to eat the noodle. All of them knew the chopsticks and some of them knew how to use them. They were very excited to eat the noodle with the chopsticks. I, however, was not sure that they were excited due to be hunger, it was before lunch, or due to be a new experience. They, except one boy, loved the noodle. His father is American and his mother had never cooked Japanese food at home. Other families eat Japanese food occasionally. It seemed that Japanese food was familiar with them.

The next approach was to show Japanese cultural videos to the

students. Each video was a 30 minute program which explained Japanese culture from different perspectives, such as conventional manner; traditional events; school activities; daily life in rural and urban areas; and business trade. The videos were in English with subtitles when people spoke Japanese. I showed the students three videos. They seemed to enjoy watching TV, but did not seem to enjoy the contents of the programs.

Since I found that a visual approach was more effective with the students, I used a new set of videos -- Japanese folk tales. I showed the popular stories, "*Momotaro*" and "*Omusbi kororin,*" to them. They enjoyed the folk tales, because the videos were cartoons, and the story lines were very simple. The students picked up on the words that were used many times in the stories, such as *ojiisan*(grandfather), *obaasan* (grandmother), *inu* (dog), and *onigiri* (rice ball) and uttered these words. It appeared that teaching the vocabularies visually and actively was effective. This suggests that context of speech is important to learning the language and may provide more impetus for learning language.

Environmental Approach: Parental Attitude

Learning ability is assumed to be related to ethnic identity. Ethnically, the students could have multi-identities: American and Asian (or more specifically, Japanese, Korean, or Filipino). However, their identity of being Japanese is hardly seen or used. That is, the motivation for learning Japanese does not raise from their identity as Japanese, even though they are half-Japanese. Since the students are in the process of cognitive development, parental attitudes toward Japanese or value judgment of Japanese are influential on their children. I may be able to motivate my students externally, but internal motivation is cultivated by their parents' seriousness or sensitivity to their learning Japanese.

Since one of the students' parents is Japanese, their domestic environment, which may be influenced by Japanese culture, could be related to their interest in learning the language. I visited each student's home to understand his/her domestic environment and the

parent's attitude toward Japanese culture. When I visited the students' homes, I told their parents about my ideas and how their children behaved in class. I took note of the cultural influences in the students' domestic environments. In the family headed by an American father, I saw little influence from Japanese culture, but when a Japanese father was present (both parents are Asian), I saw a good deal of Japanese cultural influence. However, interestingly, after my visit, all parents became serious about their children's learning abilities and sensitivity to Japanese culture, although I did not expect that my visit would motivate their parents' interest in Japanese and its culture, which would, in turn, affect their children's learning ability. The week after my visit, for example, one student, who was always late, came to class on time, and her parent stayed for a part of the class and helped with her daughter's writing. Other parents helped their children's homework more seriously. Moreover, the parents tried to speak Japanese to their children when the sentences were simple and colloquial. After my visit to the students' homes, the students gradually showed interest in Japanese and its culture. The parents behavior encouraged the students to learn Japanese. Assumably, parental attitude toward Japanese or its culture has an effect on the students' learning ability.

Conclusion

Japanese is neither the students' native language nor a school requirement. Instead, learning Japanese is considered an extracurricular activity. Thus, the students had little interest in learning Japanese. Taking a direct approach through culture did not inspire the students' interest in learning the language. This may be due to the fact that they did not recognize language as a communication system, as they have not directly experienced Japanese culture. Since culture is largely transmitted by parents, parental attitude toward their own native language and culture would provide the best motivation for the children's learning ability. Thus, parents should have high regard for their native culture as well as adopt it in their daily

lives, if they wish their children to learn and appreciate their native languages. Motivation arising from the family environment may be the first step in learning language. In other words, the most effective way to motivate the student is to motivate their parents. It is important to evoke parental ethnic identity and to motivate their attitudes toward children's learning ability. As the Japanese proverb (derived from a Chinese poem) says "*Showo into hhosureba mazu umawo iyo* (He who would that daughter win, with the mother must be gegin)." Parental attitudes are strongly related to children's learning ability. Parents appear to be the most significant factors in motivating their children's interest in language and culture.

Language is the system of communication among people, but it is not just about gathering knowledge or exchanging information. It is a dynamic and interactional process. In other words, understanding the context of language, or cultural background of language is significant to understanding language at a deeper level (Bovillain, 1993).

We have seen more cross-cultural or interracial marriages not only in the United States but also in other countries, and, therefore, more children have been growing up in a multicultural environment. The transmission of languages from parent to child with play an important part in preserving the uniqueness of the parents, traditional or native culture. For children to learn the second language, whether it is parental native language or not, is important for understanding other cultures, as a result, they will have maltucultural thoughts and global views.

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