Misunderstanding teaching and learning

Joan Turner and Masako Hiraga

Introduction

As market values permeate higher education globally and students from widely varying educational systems and cultures study in a different one, the context of higher education has become a site of cultural flux and tension. This is the case whether it is a matter of traditional academic values confronting the marketplace, e.g. academic freedom being pitted against the need to generate income, or whether it is students from one distinctive culture meeting another, e.g. students from Japan studying in Britain. Within any culture, traditional educational values will also be the subject of competing tensions, at a range of levels.

In higher education across the world, therefore, issues of power, finance, epistemology, language and cultural history interact in a prototypically post-modern mêlée. In such circumstances, misunderstandings abound, whether they are realised as such or not, in varying permutations at different levels of analysis.

Against this backdrop, we look at misunderstandings emanating from the level of deeply embedded ideologies regarding teaching and learning when two very different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, namely those of Japan and Britain, interact in higher education. Our perspective is that given such circumstances, misunderstandings at the pragmatic level are always latent, but do not necessarily occur in fixed ways. Examples of misunderstanding are then analysed as effects of ideological issues rather than as problems of real-time communication. These ideological issues include cultural value systems informing the roles of tutors and students, the effects on tutor-student interaction of epistemological values and the effects on language use of cultural conceptualisations of communication.

We use the term ideology in the broad-based, interdisciplinary way advocated by van Dijk (1998). Although he is concerned to develop a theory of ideology, as opposed to defining it, he gives a fairly loose definition which we accept as a heuristic in our own work: 'an ideology is something like a shared framework of social beliefs that organise and coordinate the social interpretations and practices of groups and their members, and in particular also power and other relations between groups' (van Dijk, 1998, p. 8).

In this chapter, we are not emphasising relations of power, more the power of embedded belief systems to inform actions in a very specific context, namely that of interaction between the institutional roles of tutor and student.

Cultural value systems and educational ideologies

One traditional manifestation of cultural value systems is proverbs. They are particularly valued as a source of cultural understanding by social historians. Obelkevich (1987, p. 67), for example, states: 'When people habitually use proverbs and similar expressions they will tend to think in terms of them and act in accordance with them. If social life can be interpreted like a text, then as often as not it is the proverb or the stock phrase that provides the clue.'

However, in eighteenth-century British culture, as Obelkevich also documents, proverbs became the victim of social snobbery. He quotes from Lord Chesterfield's advice to his son: 'A man of fashion never has recourse to proverbs or vulgar aphorisms' (Obelkevich, 1987, p. 57).

Although occasionally revived and restored to social dignity, the proverb has effectively been removed from educated discourse and discourse about education, in English. However, this is not the case in Japanese (see Mori and Komiyama, 1984; Shouji, 1987) or in Chinese (see Scollon, 1997). The respect in which proverbs are held is manifested in the more than one hundred books of Japanese proverbs that exist. A few of these source books are mentioned at the end of this chapter.

In acknowledgement therefore of the relevance of proverbs to underlying value systems, and the esteem in which they are held in Japan, we would like to look at some Japanese proverbs for learning and teaching and explore how they both outline traditional structures of understanding and explain continuing patterns of contemporary behaviour. (For the abbreviations of function words, see Appendix at the end of this chapter.)

The first three proverbs we want to look at are:

1. Nanashaku sat-te shi no kage o fuma-zu
   Seven feet leave-GER teacher of shadow ACC step.on-NEG
   'Follow your master seven feet behind so that you don't step on his shadow.'
2. Shi ni wa shitaga-e
teacher DAT TOP follow-IMP
'It is the teacher that you should follow.'

3. Shi wa hari no gotoku, deshi wa ito no gotoshi
teacher TOP needle GEN look-like, disciples TOP thread GEN look-like
'The teacher is a needle, and the disciples are a thread which goes with the needle.'

These proverbs emphasise the importance and separate distinction of the 'master' or 'shi' in Japanese. They indicate the authoritative presence of the teacher, the respect in which he/she is held in Japanese culture and the concomitant deferential attitude which is incurred.

In her discussion of professor-student interaction in Japan, from the point of view of non-native speaker (NNS) students, Stieg (1996, p. 364) implies the specific cultural importance of deference when she states: 'It is not reductionist to say that in Japan, students should be deferential to their professors and should use the appropriate language to show deference.' Pre-empting the argument of reductionism moves the discussion away from what Sakamoto and Naotsuka (1982) term 'polite fictions', namely the polarisation of cultural differences in communicative style, one which says 'you and I are equal' and another which is concerned to observe the reciprocal superiority and inferiority of the interlocutors. In a culture where 'vertical' relationships (Nakane, 1970) and an 'asymmetrical' (Lebra, 1992, 1993) communication style are the norm, strategies of deference in both verbal and non-verbal communication are to be expected. Matsumoto (1988) has also demonstrated that deferential language use is pervasive in the linguistic system of Japanese. The point to be made here is that while the pragmatic variables of power and distance may be universal, the semantic, indeed semiotic, concept of deference is culturally variable. This in turn makes the relevance of the pragmatic variables relative at another level of analysis. So, for example, whereas negative politeness strategies in English may be the major basis for deferential language use, deferential language use in Japanese is germane to speaking Japanese. This makes deference not only a pragmatic parameter, but also an ideological one.

**Following a path**

In the Japanese educational context, the social ideology of deference is strengthened by the educational ideology of 'following the master', which is also embedded semantically in vocabulary relating to teaching and learning.

In her study of Japanese metaphors for learning, Hiraga (1998) linked the etymological origins in the Chinese characters of vocabulary relating to study and learning to the conceptual metaphor, LEARNING IS A JOURNEY. The phrase, 'manabi-no michi' (learning-GEN road, 'path of learning'), which literally means 'study, learning, etc.' manifests this metaphor most overtly. The verbs involved are 'michibu' ('to lead') and 'shitagu' ('to follow'), both of which have an etymological trace in the JOURNEY metaphor. 'Michibu' etymologically means 'to let someone pass through by holding or pulling his/her hands', and 'shitagu' 'to follow after someone or to obey'. In modern usage, 'sensei ni tsuku' (teacher DAT attach, 'to take lessons from a teacher'), 'sensei ni tsui-te-iku' (teacher DAT attach-GER-go, 'to follow the teacher') or 'sensei ni tsui-te-ike-nai' (teacher DAT attach-GER-go-NEG, 'not be able to follow the teacher') also imply that learning involves an act of following the teacher, which is represented metaphorically as 'going with the teacher'. The most common Japanese word for a teacher is 'sensei'. 'Sen' in 'sensei' originally means 'one's feet going before others', or 'to make an advance before others'. On the other hand, the Japanese word for a pupil, 'seito', and for a student, 'gakuto', both have the Chinese character, 'to', which etymologically means 'to step and walk along a path'. Hence, both the teacher and the pupil/student are represented metaphorically as people leading or walking along a path. The nouns for study and research in Japanese both imply JOURNEY and PATH. 'Gakumon' ('study') etymologically means 'to study, to listen, to ask, and to visit', and 'kenkyu' ('research') means 'to polish and to reach the extreme end of the dwelling'.

A significant part of learning in this metaphorical conceptualisation is to follow the master loyally and faithfully. This conceptualisation of learning transfers also to spoken interaction, as Extract 7.1 between a Japanese professor of sociolinguistics and her student demonstrates:

**Extract 7.1**

**JAPANESE STUDENT:** Could you tell me, for example, which book I should read?

**JAPANESE TUTOR:** Well, people like X and Y write individualism and collectivism. If you read them and relate them to what you argue about 'losing face,' I think your claim would sound more comprehensive.

**JS:**

Would it be strange if I wrote about the contrast between individualism and collectivism in here?

**JT:**

I don't think you should really need to write about the contrast, because you're writing about Japanese apology only.

... As this paper concerns only Japanese apology, you can introduce collectivism in order to explain why Japanese people behave the way they do when they want to save their face.
... It is said that the Japanese tend to behave collectively. If you wanted to refer to this tendency, you can try to look for the books on inter-cultural communication and then quote or paraphrase some passages that would explain collectivism.

JS: (silent for 7 secs.)
JT: You can consult some dictionaries of communication. There would be a concise explanation and definition of technical terms such as collectivism.
JS: Oh . . .
JT: And then you can also find further references in such dictionaries.
JS: I see.
[English gloss of authentic data in Japanese]

The student is asking for advice, an educational situation that might occur anywhere in the world. However, the manner of advice-giving by the professor is distinctive, in that she provides it extensively. First of all, she makes a specific suggestion for a specific topic, providing also a rationale for the suggestion. She then rebuts the student’s interpretation of her advice, making more concrete the task that the student should be engaged in. After several utterances of digression (deleted in the extract) she further elaborates on her suggestion and its significance for the student’s task. After another digression, the teacher fully elaborates reasons and mentions other reference texts, even telling the student how she can use those textbooks. The student is then silent for seven seconds, (which would be inappropriately long in the British context) when the teacher continues the turn with further clarification. The student now must have a very clear idea of a step-by-step procedure (the tutor has literally mapped out the steps for her) and she expresses her understanding.

As well as exemplifying particularly well the expectation invested in the teacher to show the way, this extract also points up the extent to which it is incumbent upon the teacher to elaborate, an expectation at odds with the interactional dynamic expected in British tutorials in the creative and performing arts (see Hiraga and Turner, 1995; Turner and Hiraga, 1996), where this was a function expected rather of students.

Drawing students out

In data drawn from one-to-one tutorials between Japanese students and British tutors in disciplines related to the creative and performing arts, namely, fine art, drama, music, media studies and dance, the teaching/learning dynamic was not so much one of the tutor leading the student along the path, but more one of the tutor eliciting certain kinds of information from the students. In eliciting comment on their work or their understanding of the discipline from the student, the most frequently occurring speech acts used by the British tutors were:

- requests for more general evaluations by the student such as: ‘Who is your favourite composer?’ ‘Was there any play that you have seen that you were particularly impressed by?’ ‘Why do you want to study dance?’
- more focused requests for evaluation relating to the student’s own work: ‘Does it work, do you think?’ ‘Are you more interested in space or the material?’
- implicit suggestions: ‘You might want to try it from a different angle’
- implicit recommendations: ‘Are you familiar with the work of X?’
- implicit criticisms: ‘It seems to me you need to do a lot of drawing.’

The student role in the exchanges was to describe what they had done or were doing or had tried to do, in the appropriate disciplinary terminology, to evaluate the extent to which their intentions were or were not successful, to show evidence of understanding the criteria on which a work may succeed or fail, and to express possible future directions for the work. The developmental dynamic of the tutorials is explained more fully in Turner (1996). Extract 7.2 from a music tutorial shows the conflicting dynamic of tutor-student interaction, as the tutor attempts to elicit more from the student while the student’s responses remain minimal.

**Extract 7.2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BRITISH TUTOR:</th>
<th>What sort of twentieth-century music do you like best?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JAPANESE STUDENT:</td>
<td>Berg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BT:</td>
<td>Why do you like it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JS:</td>
<td>(pause)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BT:</td>
<td>Do you think he uses the violin well?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of cross-cultural pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983), the student has ‘failed’ to respond appropriately by not justifying her preference for Berg. The expectation of such a justification is embodied in the tutor’s subsequent elicitation. The tutor’s third attempt at an elicitation of the required information is a guess at what might constitute her reasons, as the student was herself a violinist. Evaluating the tutor in Japanese terms, he has ‘failed’ (although the code of honour pertaining to the ‘sensei’ would not allow
conceptualisation in those terms) to signpost clearly enough for the student what she was expected to tell him. As the Japanese students were on bridging courses, that is combining work in English language, specifically EAP (English for Academic Purposes), with work in the disciplines of fine art, music, media studies, drama and dance, preparatory to going on to degree courses at undergraduate or post-graduate level, the recurrent pattern of ‘too few words’ could have been put down to insufficient language proficiency. While in some cases, the students’ language proficiency was not very good, ‘too few words’ was also in the academic context a case of pragmatic failure, one at the opposite end of the spectrum from that identified by Blum-Kulka and Olshaim (1986) of ‘too many words’. In Extract 7.2 the student’s language proficiency was not the drawback to the smooth flow of interaction. She was linguistically capable of elaborating, but did not. We submit that the pragmatic failure is in turn an effect of a deeper ideological misunderstanding of the roles of tutors and students and epistemological understanding of the significance of elaboration.

Discourse completion task (DCT) samples

- **Situation A:** You’re reaching the end of your course and are discussing the final term paper with your tutor.
  Tutor: You haven’t written very much have you?
  Student: 

- **Situation B:** You’re having a discussion with your tutor about your recent work.
  Tutor: I think you’re doing good work. What would you say if I suggested you made the concluding section a bit shorter?
  Student: 

- **Situation C:** In the middle of a tutorial on your work, the tutor asks about the work of a contemporary scholar.
  Tutor: Are you familiar with the work of [any scholar you know]?
  Student: 

Extract 7.3 demonstrates examples of fairly extensive elaboration in the British DCT (Situation C) data from students in a range of disciplines and gives a flavour of ‘British’ elaboration strategies, analysed more fully in Hiraga and Turner (1995) and Turner and Hiraga (1996).

**Extract 7.3**

as 1: Yes, at least I’ve read one or two of her recent papers on continental drifts in the North Atlantic... but she doesn’t seem to relate the structures to paleoclimates, and that’s what I’m really looking for. Do you know of any papers that address this issue?

as 2: Not extensively, no. I’ve, of course read her ‘international politics’. It was one of the set texts for a seminar last term, but I thought that her very heavy reliance on macro-economic determinism discounted the role of, often irrational, perceived national interests in shaping policy decisions.

as 3: Yes, I’ve read his works on immunisation and his latest research on AIDS, where he questions its significance as a new syndrome, postulating many of its manifestations could in fact be symptoms of syphilis.

Extracts 7.4 and 7.5 demonstrate a selection of the responses from the Japanese EFL students and give a sense of their difference.

**Extract 7.4**

js 1: No, I'm not, tutor.
js 2: Yes, I am. (If I know the work of X very much.) I read and study the work of X so much.
MISUNDERSTANDING IN SOCIAL LIFE

JS 3: No. (shaking my head).
JS 4: Ah...I read his paper, but I don't think I understood exactly.
JS 5: Yes, a little.

Retrospective interviews with some of the Japanese students at a Japanese university gave further insight into how students were evaluating this situation. Extract 7.5 is an example (actually from JS 5 above, speaking in English).

Extract 7.5

INTERVIEWER: So you think the tutor is making a suggestion rather than testing your knowledge. What would you do?
JAPANESE STUDENT: I would find X's book after the class, I always do that.
I: Your actual response is very short. A little. Is there a reason for that?
JS: It depends on the X, but maybe I want more or some brief information from my teacher even if I know more [than] a little.
I: Right. Yeh. So, it's... Is that because you don't want to take too long a turn before the tutor. Why don't you give the information that you know already, now.
JS: Maybe I think my understanding... the way of understanding is not so good or is not so... in the right way... not right but in a good way, so maybe I want to hear my teacher's suggestion first. It sometimes happens for example in the music class, I have played the flute since I was six years old and my teacher always asks me how long did you practise this piece, and I practise every day, I practise six hours every day but I said I played a little or I tried my best... but... That kind of thing this means... a little means.
I: So you're being kind of... deliberately modest.
JS: Yeh.

From a British perspective, the student's DCT response takes the form of not elaborating, that is, not saying the kinds of things that one might expect in the British educational context. As shown in the examples from the British DCT responses (Extract 7.3), these include making clear how they interpret the rationale behind the elicitation by, for example, giving a view to the tutor of what the student's perspective of author X was and in general taking the elicitation further than what was immediately required at face value.

However, what the retrospective interview makes clear is that the Japanese student was more concerned to act modestly in interaction with the tutor, which meant waiting for her/him to lead the conversational way, as it were. Such a relatively greater concern for the interpersonal mode of communication could be an explanation for the perceived lack of elaboration, of taking things further, in intercultural tutorials in the British context. The Japanese sociolinguist Ikekami, acknowledging the Hallidayan terminology, asserts that 'the Western languages relatively focus on the ideational function, while Japanese relatively focuses on the interpersonal function' (Ikekami, 1991, p. 6). The expectation of elaboration in the British tutorial context then may be seen as serving a particular ideational function for that context, which the role of the student in a Japanese context is in conflict with. In other words, the non-elaborative, or differently elaborative behaviour of Japanese students in intercultural tutorials and DCT responses may be an effect of attending to the culturally different priority of respect and silence before the teacher.

This particular tutor–student ethos has a long cultural pedigree, as Scollon and Scollon (1994, p. 145) show in their discussion of the historical context of conversational interaction in Asia. They quote some recommendations from the 'Li Chi', which dates from before Confucius. They include:

1) 'When the elder asks a question, to reply without acknowledging one's incompetency and [trying to] decline answering, is contrary to propriety.'
2) 'When he is following his teacher, he should not quit the road to speak with another person. When he meets his teacher on the road, he should hasten forward to him, and stand with his hands joined across his breast. If the teacher speaks to him, he will answer; if he does not, he will retire with hasty steps.'

These rules of social etiquette appear to have some traces in the contemporary behaviour of Chinese and Japanese students, which perhaps are more apparent when the behaviour occurs in a western educational setting. From a western perspective, such an embedded ideology appears to sap an injunction on student elaboration, which the western system by contrast is attempting to encourage. This suggests that the issue of elaboration is not only one of pragmatics but one of ideology. In the British context, it is ideologically important for the student to elaborate, but in the Japanese context this militates against due respect to the teacher.

Embodying wisdom

A further strand of ideological assumptions invested in the role of the teacher can be seen in the following proverb and saying.
4. Shi wa sanze no chigiri, oya wa isse no musubi
   teacher TOP three worlds GEN bond, parent TOP one world GEN care
   ‘The bond between the teacher and the student lasts from the former
   world to another world through this world; but, the caring between the
   parent and the child lasts only in this world.’

5. Shi no notamawaku, furuki o atatame-te atarashiki o shiru, motte shi
   teacher NOM say, old ACC animate new ACC know, by which master
   become should
   ‘The Master said, He who by reanimating the Old can gain knowledge
   of the New is fit to be a teacher.’

Both of these proverbs suggest a reverence for what is old and worthy of
transmission. The task of transmission is embodied in the teacher, whose
role in this respect is more important than that of the parent. The saying
listed in (5) is from the Confucian Analects and signals both respect for the
old and the importance of the teacher having the ability to reanimate it.

In their discussion of Western and Chinese conceptions of language and
the significance of writing in the Chinese conceptualisation, Scollon and
Scollon (1994, p. 141) refer to the role that writing plays in communicating
the wisdom of the ancients. The earliest uses of writing in China were based
on communication with the ancestors to whom were ascribed ‘the know-
ledge and power to direct the lives and fortunes of living descendants’. In
the context of tutor–student interaction that we are looking at here, it is not
writing itself that is important but the value inscribed in the role of the tutor,
as it were the mediator of esteemed knowledge, which goes beyond the
merely institutional role. The tutor in Japan is not just the higher status
interlocutor but the embodiment of an ideology to do with wisdom and the
cultural value of education. This ideological underpinning is evident also in
the use of and in the etymology of the term ‘sensei’. It is not used only in
the address of a schoolteacher or professor, but also of such professionals as
medical doctors, politicians, lawyers, architects and masters in various fields
of arts and crafts, sports and board games. As mentioned in the etymological
elements above relating to the JOURNEY metaphor, ‘sen’ in ‘sensei’
etymologically means ‘one’s feet going before others’, or ‘to make an advance
before others’, but now it means simply ‘before’, while ‘sei’ in ‘sensei’ means
‘to be born’. Therefore, ‘sensei’ literally means someone born before you.

Diverging paths and contrasting epistemologies

Whereas the role of the tutor mapping out the way for the student to follow,
as in Extract 7.1, chimes both with the value system embodied in the three
proverbs cited in (1) to (3) and with the Chinese character etymologies of
words for students and teachers, learning and teaching, the importance of
student elaboration in the creative and performing arts disciplines is linked
not only to the relevant pedagogies, but also epistemologically to creative
performance. In this project, students themselves are pivotal. Especially in
fine art, they are the source of ideas. In order to receive guidance from their
tutors, they have to explain what they are trying to do, how they are hoping
to do it and why they want to do it. This ultimately puts the onus on the
student if not exactly to lead the tutorial interaction, to determine its subject
matter and therefore in effect to lay out the path that the tutorial is going to
take. That is, the subject matter is the student’s work, both its physical
presence in visual terms and the verbal discussion on issues surrounding
the work. The following exchange between a British tutor and a Japanese
student (Extract 7.6) is symptomatic of the student being the engine of
forward movement.

Extract 7.6

BT: Is there anything that you want to tell me?
JS: No.
BT: Are you sure?
JS: Yes.

The apparent reluctance of students to move the discussion forward was not
just a problem of pragmatic failure but also a problem at the epistemological
level of engaging with the subject of study. They were in the position of
finding out the next step, not having it pointed out for them. In Extract 7.7
from a tutorial with a British student, although the student is unsure about
‘where he is going’, he knows that he is the one who has to find a means of
determining this.

Extract 7.7

BT: You seem not to be using the circular device any more.
BS: Yeah, that kinda stems from when I was trying to work with the image
of the pebble dropping in the water, and the kind of rhythm that
ensued... but that wasn’t getting me anywhere, I’m not really sure
where I’m going...

The need for the students to determine the next step is evident in the
following utterance from a British fine art lecturer, in the context of a tutor-
orial with a Japanese student (Extract 7.8).
Extract 7.8

KT: I want to know from you now, the kinds of areas that YOU (stressed) think you want to go into because I need to begin to get an idea of you – you the artist, if you like – of what are the different elements of your practice.

The tutor now waits for five seconds, looking for a reaction from the student, who is respectfully signalling attention by nodding and 'Uh-huh'-ing, and 'mmmm'-ing in the manner of Japanese 'aiizuchi' [see LoCastro, 1987] then goes on: 'So at the moment you appear to be offering a range from something which is illustration through to ceramics with a kind of thematic connection.'

The tutor's utterance is explicit about the requirements placed on the student. He attempts to help her voice the direction in which she wants her work to develop by reformulating what he has understood from what she has done and said previously. In contrast to the PATH metaphor operating in the Japanese context, he is attempting to push her forward along a path of her own choosing, rather than follow him.

An epistemological contrast with fine arts practice in Japan is embodied in the traditional maxim of 'shu ha ri' (see Maruno, 1993, p. 70) which translates as 'keep', 'break' and 'leave' in English. Japanese art students must first follow ('keep') the style of their master by imitation, repetition and practice. When the student has finished the long process of imitative learning and passed the test to become a junior master, then he/she is allowed to transform ('break') the style by introducing modifications. Only a few students can succeed in reaching the last stage in which he/she is allowed to 'leave' the former master to create a style of his/her own. The epistemological framework for this classical Japanese fine arts practice is encapsulated in the following saying:

6. Kata kara hait-te, kata o deru
   model from enter-GER, model ACC exit
   'To enter by imitating the model, and exit out of the model.'

The traditional arts, namely, 'sado' ('tea ceremony'), 'kado' ('flower arrangement'), 'budo' ('martial arts') and 'shodo' ('calligraphy') in which the disciples must diligently observe and imitate their master from a distance (see Ikuta, 1987) all share the suffix 'do' in Japanese, which, as in the perhaps more familiar to a western audience as 'tou' in Chinese, means 'the way'. The philosophical ring of the concept 'tou' has epistemological significance in the 'do' of the classical Japanese disciplines, in parallel with the western suffix 'logy' in scientific disciplines. The ramifications of this epistemological contrast are crystallised in the metaphorical concepts on which they are based. On the one hand, it is the spatial metaphor of the way or path and on the other hand it is the verbal metaphor of speech derived from the ancient Greek 'logos' meaning speech. It is the epistemological significance of speech or verbalisation per se, as opposed to what or how much is actually said that we would like to look at a little more closely now, as we suggest that it is subject to culturally contrasting ideologies.

I ideological perspectives on the verbal

One of the main reasons why Japanese students were attracted to the creative and performing arts disciplines in the British university where this study took place was their desire to work in the 'freer' (as they put it) tradition of Britain. The post-graduate students often expressed some dismay with the restricted ways in which they had been instructed in fine art in Japan. However, they were not prepared for the ideological underpinnings of what such 'freedom' meant in the fine art educational context. It meant that not only were the students themselves the source of ideas, but also they were expected to verbalise those ideas. They were required to describe what they were trying to do, explain the criteria on which they thought the work succeeded or failed and express possible future directions for the work.

In a focus group recording made by a group of four Japanese fine art students in Britain who were asked to speak (in Japanese) about what they thought of the kinds of prompts made by their tutors and why they thought they were making them, the students were quite vociferous in their condemnation of what they saw as constant verbalisation. They did not want talk, they wanted techniques. They also found it strange that they never saw any of their tutors' work. Despite the fact then that strictly guided instruction was what they were avoiding, it appears that ideological remnants of the 'shu ha ri' or 'the master as model' educational ethos remained in their expectations of the teaching and learning situation.

The significance of verbalisation in the western tradition is considerable. It can be traced back to Socrates and his search for clear definitions of the virtues. Similarities were rejected and distinctions made because what could be said of one thing, for example, could not be said of another. Tarnas (1991, p. 36) describes Socrates's arrival at his dialectical method as follows: 'After having investigated every current system of thought from the scientific philosophies of nature to the subtle arguments of the Sophists, Socrates had concluded that all of them lacked sound critical method. To clarify his own approach, he decided to concern himself not with facts but with statements about facts [italics added].'

The importance of language for the representation of knowledge and communication recurs in various forms throughout the western philosop-
misunderstanding in social life

7. Iwa-nu ga hana
   say-NEG NOM flower
   "‘Not to say’ is better [profitable]."

8. Chinmoku wa kin
   silence TOP gold
   ‘Silence is golden.’

9. Kougen reishoku sukunashi jin
   effective(clever) words amiable colours small virtue
   ‘There is little virtue in clever words or flattering manners.’

10. Kuchi wa wazawai no moto
    mouth TOP fight GEN cause
    ‘What you say is a cause of fight.’

While proverb (8) also exists in English, it is likely to be used differently, for example, as a welcome contrast to noise, rather than a positive virtue in its own right. Loveday (1986) analyses a number of different ways in which silence is important in Japanese communicative patterns. In making cross-cultural contrasts of expectations in classroom interaction, Cortazzi (1990) also draws attention to the culturally weighted importance of verbalisation in the western (British and North American) context. While we are not suggesting that culturally embedded attitudes are consciously drawn upon by individuals in different contexts, it is possible that the dismissive attitude to words displayed by the Japanese focus group students is a symptom of entrenched ideological focus.

A further strand of culturally embedded thinking relating to the role of language in communication in Japan is the concept of ‘ishin denshin’ or ‘direct transmission’. According to Scollon and Scollon (1995, p. 139), this dominant value in Zen Buddhism originated in China in the early Tang Period (ad 618-907) and has had a major impact on Chinese, Korean and Japanese cultures. In this tradition, it is believed that the most important things cannot be communicated in language; that language is only useful for somewhat secondary or trivial messages.

Hiraga (1998, p. 14) refers to ‘learning without clear instructions, or learning by environmental stimulus and habituation’ as characteristic of Japanese learning, particularly before the Meiji restoration (1868). Remnants of this value system can still be found in primary education, where teachers avoid giving instructions in words and instead attempt to be themselves an exemplary model for the pupils (Miyake, 1995, p. 85). What might be termed an osmosis model in educational psychology is also the basis for ways in which mothers discipline their children (Azuma et al., 1981).

From the perspective of a westerner teaching English in Japan, Bowers (1988) points to the Japanese values of ‘sasshi’ or the perceptive understanding of messages from a minimum number of explicit clues and ‘enryo’ or ‘self-restraint vis-à-vis explicit verbal responses out of consideration for the source and/or presence of other receivers’ as a source of difficulty in classroom communication. As a further interlaking of the suspicion of the verbal and the importance of observation, it is interesting to note that while the verb ‘sasuru’ currently means to guess, its Chinese character etymology is ‘to observe’. Similarly pointing up the value of observation is the verb ‘mi-naru’. It means ‘to learn’ but it is etymologically compounded with observing and imitating.

Thus observing and imitating does not just have prominence where it might practically be expected, namely in the teaching of fine art, but is germane to the conceptualisation of learning in Japanese culture.

Teaching and learning ideologies

We have looked at underlying cultural values in educational ideologies as a source of explanation for socio-pragmatic misunderstanding in an intercultural tutorial context. We see the dynamics of tutor–student interaction as motivated by the ideologically embedded roles of tutors and students in each culture. The understanding of one’s role in such an interaction is likely to influence what kinds of things are said or not said by each of the participants. While socio-pragmatic ‘failure’ has largely been seen as a prob-
lem at the level of the individual speech act, caused, for example, by the introduction of a 'taboo' topic into a discourse, or from an underestimation of the 'size of imposition' or the status difference between participants, we have stressed the importance of ideological factors motivating participants' understanding (albeit not consciously) of the situation they are in. Such factors dictate the particular assumptions and expectations regarding the participant roles in a particular 'genre' or 'activity type' (Levinson, 1979) and stress their relatedness within a deeper cultural matrix.

Frameworks of understanding are ideologically entwined and teaching and learning is always to some extent teaching and learning ideologies. Misunderstanding teaching and learning is therefore always, at some level, to be expected.

Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviations for function words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACC(utive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMP(limiter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAT(ive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEN(itive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GER(undive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMP(ervative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEG(ative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOM(inactive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PASS(ive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POL(ite)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL(ural)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q(uestion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOP(ical)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When a string of words in English corresponds to one word in Japanese, dots are used instead of spaces to show word boundaries.

References


‘I couldn’t follow her story. . .’

Ethnic differences in New Zealand narratives

Janet Holmes

Introduction

I could hear them speaking English but I didn’t understand what they were saying. . . and they were using language that while I understood the individual words or parts of sentences I couldn’t understand the the concepts that they were talking about.

This is a quotation from a conversation between two young, well-educated Maori men. It identifies a communication problem which has nothing to do with understanding the meaning of individual words, but rather with comprehending the global meaning that the speaker is trying to convey. There are many different levels at which people can miscommunicate (Coupland et al., 1991). Some reflect differences in the linguistic resources which participants bring to an encounter, such as different ranges of vocabulary. Others are more difficult to identify because they arise from different socialisation and acculturation processes, resulting in different sociolinguistic and pragmatic rules of which participants may be unaware.

So, for example, different social and ethnic groups may use different rules for encoding and interpreting speech acts, or different rules for interaction, including turn-taking. At an overt and conscious level, such differences often go unnoticed, but they can nevertheless have an effect on intergroup relations at a less conscious level. Participants may leave an encounter feeling dissatisfied, bemused or uneasy, though they are not able to identify the source of these reactions. Others may feel angry, frustrated and resentful because they have failed to communicate their message to what appear un receptive ears. Still others may feel exhausted after the effort involved.
Misunderstanding in Social Life
Discourse approaches to problematic talk

Edited by
Juliane House, Gabriele Kasper and Steven Ross