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Cross-cultural communication : female and male Japanese learners in the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom

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I. Introduction

In Deborah Tannen's (1990) illuminating book "You Just Don't Understand" the subject of miscommunication between women and men is discussed from a cross-cultural perspective.

"Many frictions arise because boys and girls grow up in what are essentially different cultures, so talk between women and men is cross-cultural communication."

(18)

Any teacher who can understand a little about and is sensitive to the cultural and social background of their students will be able to provide a more effective learning environment. Such teachers will be better armed to provide for the learners' needs and to tailor lessons, materials and activities accordingly. As the above quote suggests, 'cultural background' may entail more than we might have first expected.

The aim of this paper is to look at the cultural dynamics that affect EFL classrooms of mixed sex, adult, Japanese learners. I will seek to examine not only how Japanese cultural considerations affect the learning environment but also the role that gender plays. The position of the teacher with regards to these factors will also be considered. The major emphasis will be on the problems surrounding the two different cultures of men and women, and the effects on speech patterns.

I will start with a brief definition of gender and how the term is meant to be understood in this paper. I will then take a broad look at some of the differences between men and women's speech styles and research into this area, before focusing on research in the language classroom. As the paper's central concern is the Japanese learner, I will look at specific cultural points and issues of gender for Japanese learners.

II. Defining Gender

Wardhaugh (1998) explains how in earlier editions of his book he used the term 'sex' when talking about the differences between the language employed by women and men, and then goes on

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to say, somewhat reluctantly perhaps, that he now prefers the word 'gender', as "the current vogue is to use *gender* rather than *sex*" (309). This shift from an avoidance of using the word *gender* to describe the structures, lexis, speech strategies and so on, that typify women's and men's language, may be seen as a reflection of the prominence that studies into this area have gained. Previously, *gender* was thought of as a purely linguistic term, referring to grammatical differences marking certain words as feminine, masculine, or neutral. Now, as Freed (1995) reminds us, sociolinguistics has become increasingly inter-disciplined and the term *gender* has become more general.

I will use the term *gender* rather than *sex* for the same reasons that Romaine (1994) prefers to, namely that *sex* is biologically determined whereas *gender* is a social construction arising from the complex forces and rules that mould every individual's acts and habits in their particular society or community.

III. Women's and Men's Speech : General Observations

That there are differences between women and men's speech is not open to question. The reasons for the differences and the form they take however, are very much the source of debate. It must be noted at the start of this discussion that much of the research, although not all, has revolved around Western middle-class white culture. Where possible I will try to comment on the relevancy of the findings with regards to Japanese learners.

Writing about research into variations between women and men's speech Cameron (1992) divides the field into two broad categories,

"the 'quantitative paradigm' in which variations of pronunciation and grammar are studied using statistical analysis, and the more 'holistic' study of communicative strategies which usually goes under the general name of 'discourse analysis'."

(55)

This provides a convenient way to approach this area of sociolinguistics, the surface features of the language itself and an analysis of the choices made by the speaker.

Labov (1972) and Trudgill (1974) both found significant phonological differences between different social strata in the data collected through field studies in New York and Norwich respectively. The data suggested that the higher the social status of the speaker the closer his or her speech was to the accepted 'standard' use of language. Of more interest to this paper was the finding that women tended to use more of the standard forms than did the men of apparently the same social class. The reasons why this is so are very much in debate, with the idea that women's insecure economic social position made them more prone to status consciousness and therefore that standard forms were emphasised to gain prestige, generally thought of as an over-simplification (Eckert 1989, Cameron 1992, Romaine 1994).

Whatever the reason for the differences, they do exist and in a country such as Japan where gender roles are generally even sharper than in the West they sometimes have to be addressed in the language classroom. I am very often asked whether a woman would say this, or do men speak like this? The learner feels this area of language is important, and therefore the teacher has to address the subject.

Japanese speakers also reflect broadly the gender-differentiated use of language apparent in vari-

ationist studies of English speakers. Women generally use more polite or standard forms ; they use lexical items men rarely do. Holmes (1992) for example suggests that we would associate sentences such as 'That's an adorable dog ! ' with a female speaker and 'You're damn right ! ' with a man. The words *adorable* and *damn* in these cases are in a sense gender prescribed , or they identify the gender of the speaker. Similar generalizations also apply to Japanese. The most obvious difference in word selection is in pronoun choice , with women overwhelmingly using *watashi* (I / me) , or less frequently recently *atashi* (I / me) , and men *boku* and *ore* (I / me) . Sentence final particles are also a gender sensitive area of Japanese , with the use of certain endings clearly identifying the gender of the speaker.

We must expect that the learner will bring his or her own socially constructed gender use of language into the classroom while also being curious about the target language's patterns of use. As Beebe (1998) comments, many Japanese women may "perceive English as allowing or requiring them to express themselves more directly" (7) , as indeed Japanese men may also do. Furthermore, the use of the pronoun 'I' free of gender marking, may be liberating or confusing, depending on the individual. Beebe also comments that having to use conventions such as Mr. and Mrs., depending on marital status and sex, as substitutes for the respect suffixes *-san* or *-sama*, may be teaching a sexist practice not found in their own language, although my experience suggests that students are more concerned with showing their addressee suitable respect rather than worrying about using gender neutral terms.

While differences between women's and men's speech in English can be seen in phonological elements such as the use of / n / versus / ng / for word endings (the latter being more standard and used more by women) , and word selection, this is relatively easy to deal with in the classroom. It is likely that the prestige model of a particular country or region, or a dialect the student particularly wants to target, be it British RP or General American and so on, will be the goal. The student is likely to be learning English for travel, or for career purposes, and is therefore best served by being taught a form of English approaching the relevant speech community's norm. It is also likely that the teacher themselves will be approaching the standard form in his or her teaching (whether consciously or not) and thus many of the phonological differences that are evident in the speech of women and men will be blurred. Of perhaps more relevance is how the speaker chooses to use the language at his or her disposal, or the style in which he or she speaks.

Let us first look at some broad assumptions that have been made about 'women's speech'. Women's speech has the following linguistic features :

1. The use of more hedging devices and tag questions.
2. Rising intonation on statements.
3. Use of intensifiers.
4. Consistent use of standard grammar.
5. Indirect requests and euphemisms.

(Adapted from Holmes, 1992 : 314)

In Japanese too, many of these features are evident. The sentence ending *desu ne* closely resembles the function of the question tag in English, and standard grammar is evident in more polite phrases ; both features typically found more in women's speech than in men's. Another clear division between the genders in Japanese is in regard to pitch. Japanese women use a much higher pitch range than do their male counterparts. Male talk is significantly flatter, lower, and does not vary from high pitch to low pitch to any great degree. Interestingly this is also true when

speaking English, which requires a wider pitch range. Japanese men tend to retain their low pitch level and general flatness, sometimes giving the impression of boredom or disinterest. I have found that when this is pointed out in class as a general observation and reinforced with some intonation drilling the male students respond well and appreciate the instruction. As with all learners of a foreign language, Japanese speakers want to avoid giving the wrong signals when they use a foreign language. Japanese women speakers also face interference from their first language (L1) to the second language (L2), such as in regard to the form of the high pitched pattern typical of Japanese women's speech that often irritates native speakers of English as too childish or 'silly'. A sensitive lesson pointing this out is useful.

Identifying the gender differences in language use is one step, and the relevance they have for the classroom is another important one for the EFL teacher. Are we to teach Japanese women to speak like English women? We certainly try to teach other cultural points such as the importance of giving one's opinion, using a firm handshake and so on. Does this then mean that it is our job to also teach typical gender roles? I would argue that it does not. Gender is a political issue, and politics is not the focus of the general EFL classroom. However, there is certainly room, as Beebe (1998 : 7) suggests, for empowering learners to control their choice of language in a way that is sensitive to the context, to decode messages coming their way, and to put themselves in a position where they may understand the historical background underlying some sensitive areas of gendered English.

IV. In the Classroom

Moving from generalisations about women's and men's speech I now want to turn to a consideration of the dynamics of the classroom and to the role gender plays in the learning process. Research suggests there are some clear differences between the sexes and how they communicate in the classroom. Holmes (1994) comments,

"Women appear co-operative, facilitative participants, demonstrating in a variety of ways their concern for their conversational partners, while men tend to dominate the talking time, interrupt more than women, and focus on the content of the interaction and the task in hand, at the expense of attention to their addressees."

(156)

These are important points, and if true, demand careful consideration on the teacher's behalf. Much work in the communicative classroom is now group-focused, in the form of information gap exercises, discussions, and a variety of other tasks that require co-operation and interaction. The ideal classroom would have everybody participating to an equal degree. Does this happen?

Munro (1986, cited in Sunderland, 1994) argues that there is an inequality in the classroom, with males receiving the majority of questions and dominating the talk time (150). Similarly Gass and Varonis (1986, cited in Sunderland, 1994) found that Japanese male students learning English controlled the talk in mixed pair work (150). There have also been conflicting results however, notably those of Yepez (1990, cited in Sunderland, 1994), who found an equitable distribution of questions in the classroom (150). Despite the inconclusive nature of much of the research to

date, monitoring carefully what happens in the classroom and being aware of potential unequal distribution of chances to speak is important.

So, how does male speech differ from female speech in the classroom? Holmes after re-examining recordings made by Munro (1987) in Australian English language classrooms, argues that men interrupt more often and when doing so do it more 'baldly', in some cases completely contradicting contributions made by female students. Holmes (1994) points out that "such direct disagreement strategies in the classroom appear to inhibit some female learners and discourage them from contributing freely" (159). Another finding was that men were more likely to use what Holmes calls 'response restricting' questions, questions which do not facilitate more turn taking or otherwise encourage collaborative talking, such as 'Do you agree with this one?', 'What you put number four (sic)?'. If these two claims are in fact what generally happens in the classroom then it presents a challenge for the instructor. Obviously talk time is a valuable time for the learner, providing an opportunity to experiment with the target language.

These features can partly be explained by the fact that men and women are the products of separate sociolinguistic sub-cultures, and that adult speech patterns are essentially learned in childhood. Boys seem to grow up in a more competitive linguistic environment where it is necessary to be forceful and even argumentative. Girls on the other hand learn how to talk 'like ladies', being stereotypically submissive, non-argumentative, listening when men are talking about 'serious' subjects, and so on. Romaine (1994) comments "extensive interaction in single-sex peer groups is probably a crucial source of the gender differentiation patterns found by sociolinguists (156)".

The differences I have commented on so far are most likely to affect discussion activities or pair work, integral parts of a communicative approach to teaching. If the learners are given a task which they have to complete as a team it is obvious that if one of the partners is dominating the talk time there will be less time for other members to participate, while it will also reduce the types of language learning patterns the teacher wants to encourage, such as experimenting with language use just beyond their present competence level. If students are "actively engaged in attempting to communicate" (Nunan, 1995 : 51) they are more likely to learn the target language. Communication will be reduced when any one learner is allowed to dominate the others. As the evidence discussed above suggests, it is likely to be men that dominate the discussions.

Is this pattern of male domination reflected in groups of Japanese learners? There is no doubt that women are generally expected to be in the shadows when men speak; a look at Japanese television presents the viewer with many opportunities to see this phenomenon. During news programmes a woman usually introduces a topic before handing it over to the, presumably more knowledgeable, male presenter to comment. The woman then typically throws him what I would call an 'easy pitch' in the form of a question designed to allow the male announcer to show his knowledge. This kind of behaviour in the public environment reflects Holmes' (1994) conclusions based on looking at the English language learners in Australia :

"The learning environment these women language learners provided for the men was clearly rather more favourable than the environment they experienced."

(161)

Another metaphor that illustrates Holmes' point was made in a commercial shown on Japanese television a few years ago. Set on a relay track in slow motion, a *la* 'Chariots of Fire', housewives

compete on the first leg to provide their partners with the power drink that will see them through the day at the office. This image nicely illustrates the idea that women 'hand' their speaking partners opportunities to speak. However it is easy to become snared in over simplification. I have already mentioned above that some Japanese women may feel English is liberating, they may be stronger speakers of English than their male co-learner, they may not be 'typical' women at all, and they may in fact dominate the conversations.

What can we say about some of the cultural factors brought into the classroom ? Ide (1994, cited in Mishina 1994) points out that Japanese women may not feel as submissive as their Western counterparts and some sociolinguists may think.

"Japanese women do not regard themselves as miserable or lower in status to the same degree that western women do. Maybe this is because, from the structural point of view of our society, everybody knows that the mother has the power in the family."

(427)

While this is probably true, and women may not feel as threatened in a wider social context, it does not help much if women, secure in their position as 'the power in the family', continue to pass up opportunities in the language learning environment simply to protect the face of men in the class.

Martin (1964, cited in Wardhaugh 1998) mentions that in Japanese social interactions attention will be paid to four general factors in this order of importance ; out-groupness, social position, age difference, and sex difference (274). It is certainly the case in classrooms I have observed that age difference is a very important element that can decide who talks first or who answers an open question addressed to the whole class. It will often be the case that younger students may hold back from answering questions or initiating talk for fear of threatening the face of their elders. The first two factors are negligible, as the classroom provides a certain anonymity (although once it is known for example that a student is a president of his or her own company, or a doctor the dynamics can easily change). Age difference may be a greater force acting in the classroom in Japan than gender.

In a Japanese class in which students are of a similar age however, phenomena involving gender will surface, with some men expecting and often receiving more opportunities to speak. One way to approach the problem of male dominated talk time is to give clearer instructions when giving tasks. Often, a teacher may give the students a list of situations that have to be ranked in some kind of order (least liked, most useful, and so on). In this kind of activity the teacher is more interested in the process of coming to the noted conclusions rather than the results themselves. As many commentators have said, (Cameron 1992, Holmes 1992, Romaine 1994) women are more likely to exhibit just the kind of conversational skills that are ideal for pair or group activities, namely facilitative questions, encouragement, a less bald approach to disagreement, while men would seem to be at a disadvantage when it comes to fulfilling the teacher's aims. On the other hand, men's sociolinguistic culture makes them very efficient in reaching decisions in activities such as the above. One reason why Holmes found so many interrupting and response-restricting questions in Munro's tapes is perhaps the fact that the goal of the activity had not been explicitly spelled out. Perhaps asking the students to make a list of preference *with* reasons would be a more effective way of forcing the male students to alter their approach to the task, and as a consequence allowing more learner interaction.

Assigning roles to group members is also an effective way of by-passing the problem of gender imposing its social constructions on the situation. If the teacher creates rules of interaction by creating roles such as those of a talk monitor (someone who has to summarise what has been said before a point can be agreed upon for example), or a note taker (a role that may suit male learners' need to be in control and focused on a task), then, in my experience, communication will often become smoother.

V. Focus on the Teacher

So far I have concentrated on some of the problems that may arise as gender roles are played out among the students. I now want to look at the role of the teacher, and where he or she stands. All teachers, no matter how professional or careful they are, give different treatment to different students. This maybe conscious or unconscious. It may be benign or malign. Sunderland (1994) comments :

“There is now a considerable body of research which suggests our differential treatment in mixed-sex classrooms is not only by students' individual characteristics, but also by the social characteristic of gender.”

(148)

Sunderland (1994) goes on to point out several areas where this differential treatment may occur : teacher attention, gaze, and questions. The evidence which suggests that teachers give more attention to male students is mostly drawn from research into non language classrooms and children, where it is probably explained by the fact that the boys demand more attention by being disruptive. Sunderland points out that “the quality of teacher attention may be far more important than the quantity” (149). In an adult Japanese language classroom discipline problems are not likely to be a major factor in determining the distribution of teacher attention.

Perhaps more interesting and in need of more research is the role gaze plays in the class. Swann and Graddol (1989, cited in Sunderland) found that the teacher's gaze tended to stay longer on boys, compared with girls. Again this may be because of the teacher's concern for potential disruptive behaviour, but as gaze can act as a signal for a student to speak it should be carefully monitored. Even a ‘sweep’ of the classroom will necessarily involve starting at one student or ending on another, unless the teacher perpetually gazes at the floor or into space. This suggests interesting possibilities for examining the role student seating position plays and how the classroom is set up.

The teacher must also consider how fairly he or she distributes opportunities to speak. Largely, the teacher can control much of the talk time, when the students are not working in pairs or groups, by prompting students or asking specific questions. These questions must be equally challenging for all students, male and female. Particularly in Japan however, the teacher must be careful not to threaten the face of the students by asking questions potentially too difficult for the student. The Japanese sense of groupness means that being singled out, and being put on the spot to answer a question, may result in embarrassed silence. This is not simply due to the potential embarrassment of making a mistake, but also touches on the idea that the Japanese student does not want to stand out and is reluctant to volunteer an answer when the social roles of all other participants are unclear. Instead of asking the group ‘How was your weekend ?’ and waiting for an answer, found that the students reluctance to do so prompted me to use small pair work for even this type of ‘warm up’

question, with the students then reporting back.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, the topic of gender in language is providing sociolinguists with many challenges, most notably that of how to explain the differences evident in women and men's speech. Much of the research is at yet inconclusive, especially with regards to the language classroom. However, issues such as learner talk time in pair work and group tasks, and whether men discourage women from using this time effectively are important concerns for every teacher. Careful monitoring of these situations by the teacher, and reviewing of lessons with the help of a colleague are worthwhile steps to take to prevent gender from encroaching negatively. As Beebe (1998) suggests it may also be necessary to "alert students on a piecemeal basis, as sexist discourse arises in the classroom" (9).

For the teacher of Japanese adults, perhaps attention to how face can be maintained in the classroom is of more concern than gender. Factors such as age and negative politeness strategies seem to feature more in the social make-up of the student than gender, although the latter is still a factor. Small group work, while an effective communicative tool, is also important in allowing the Japanese learner to be free of the worry of 'standing out', and should be used as much as possible where careful teacher attention is possible.

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[要旨]

キーワード：言葉のやりとり，性差，第2言語習得，異文化間交流

教室における学習者間の「言葉のやりとり」は，語学教師にとってきわめて重要な関心分野である。第2言語の習得においては，生徒が分かりやすい表現を見聞きすると同時に，分かりやすい表現をする機会が大切であると一般に広く考えられている。社会言語学では，語学教師は，学習者の社会的文化的背景を理解することによって，学習者間の「言葉のやりとり」と「学び」に対する理解度を深めると考えられている。

女性と男性の学習者が言葉のやりとりをする場面では，彼らはあたかもそれぞれ異なる社会言語学的「副次文化」のバックグラウンドを持っているかのようである。本稿はEFL環境における日本人学習者に主眼を置き，まず，女性と男性のスピーチパターンの重要な差違についての研究に広く着目しながら，この状況を探っていく。特に，EFLクラスで学ぶ日本人学習者の性差に関わる，文化上の具体的な問題点と，それが女性学習者にとっての「学習機会」に不公平を生じる結果となっていないかに注目する。

このエッセイは，教師がこれらの文化的要因に対して細やかな注意を払うことをすすめる，それらに対して教師がとるべき具体的な処方が存在することを主張するものである。