

《 論 説 》

Figurative Language: A Common-Sense Approach to Intercultural Communication

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In Memoriam

Professor Dennis Nolan, Kanto Gakuin University, 1946 – 2020

Abstract

The current paper presents theoretical background and classroom practice into the facilitation of intercultural communication using figurative language. One aspect of communicating with people from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds that is thought to be challenging for students is *hidden* or *deep* culture (Shaules, Tsujioka, and Iida 2004, Shaules 2007). By drawing on the logic of social theorists, who argue that inter-relationships between peoples in modern societies are organised by the same sets of socio-structural constraints, students were encouraged to recognise the socio-logical similarities of their own and other cultural practice using figurative language (simile and metaphor) negotiation-of-meaning strategies. A lesson is outlined, and in-class observations of its implementation are also discussed. Finally, discussion is made of whether everyday intercultural communication challenges stem from ‘deep’ culture, or rather because the deployment of *common-sense* cultural practice does not typically rely on being able to articulate it (Bourdieu 1992).

“Culture in all its forms is an invitation to join in the larger society [...]” – Roger Scruton (2007, 65)

Introduction

How do you say ‘何々’ in English? Communicative competence is an essential aspect of language acquisition and a particular concern for second-language (L 2) students in monolingual classes, who often revert to their native tongue (L 1) to negotiate meaning. While an expedient strategy that does not require abstraction or deep thinking, reverting to L 1 , or *recoursing*, is a redundant strategy when faced with non-L 1 language users. As such, by encouraging students to not revert to L 1 they are obliged to think about culture in more sophisticated and adaptive ways. Adaptive negotiation-of-meaning strategies are a central aspect of intercultural communication that are concerned with helping students to come to terms with and learning to understand cultural difference (Shaules 2007, 2015, Bagaric and Djigunovic 2007).

Shaules (2007) describes the more sophisticated aspects of intercultural communication, which present some of the greatest challenges to language students, as *deep* culture. To illustrate this, we can consider a widely held conception of Japanese metonymy, which suggests that aestheticization practices are central to both Japanese culture and national identity. In particular, fleeting notions of beauty relating to the inevitability of the passage of time, such as *mono-no-aware* (物の哀れ / beauty in pathos) and *wabi-sabi* (侘び寂び / simple and patinated) are argued to regulate Japanese daily life and collective experience (Saito 2007, Parkes 1995, Keene 1995). To the cultural outsider, the juxtaposition of decay and beauty could be difficult to understand. Yet, these aesthetic ideals are commonly understood to be a central aspect to widely-participated-in traditional communions, such as cherry blossom viewing and the Japanese tea ceremony. To this end, in 2009, BBC journalist Marcel Theroux came to Japan to make a documentary about the importance of the wabi-sabi aesthetic to Japanese people in their daily lives. While many of the people Theroux spoke to appeared to be familiar with the concept of wabi-sabi, he could not find anyone who could succinctly articulate it (Theroux 2009). This demonstrates how L 2 students are faced with not only with

the challenge of understanding other cultures, but in also articulating their own. The tacit nature of enculturation concurs with the presupposition that the social logic of culture is abstracted from its substantive aspects, making resulting cultural practice largely *doxic*—unquestioningly accepted by group members as objective truth. This is made more difficult by the apparently arbitrary nature of some cultural values (Bourdieu 1984). (Imagine, for example, trying to rationalize why it is that we should take our hats off when eating.) As a consequence, although we are intimately familiar with our own culture, we often find it difficult to articulate, particularly when the cultural practice concerned is *aestheticized* (Scruton 2007). This has particular consequences for language students, who must not only learn a new language, but also understand how this language is located within its cultural context and how this relates to the students' own culture (Kramsch 1998, 2010).

The difficulty people face when articulating their own culture in relation to others is made manifestly more complicated by the diversity of cultural forms that students are likely to encounter. Diversity has been an important focus of L2 teaching and learning of late, and the focus of a recent JALT (2018) conference. However, Shaules (2015) recognises that while cultures may diverge, there is also common ground. Commonality has been a recurrent theme in philosophy and science since Hobbes (2009) in the 17th century and most notably following the emergence of branches of liberalism during the European Enlightenment (Deneen 2019). Substantive cross-cultural connectedness through explanatory constructs such as *will* (Vandenabeele 2007, Nietzsche 1994) and biopsychological and psychoanalytic *drives* (see Dutton 2009) which focus on commonality have been steadily deemphasized by practitioners as a greater focus has been made on diversity in global and popular politics and in education (Murray 2019, Scruton 2007). While diversity is important and has its place in teaching and learning intercultural communication, *commonality* can also provide students with skills to help them navigate the global community. Directing attention from substantive difference to socio-logical commonality helps students and teachers to frame intercultural communi-

cation as a dynamic advent of shared customs that grow out of endogenous, yet analogical processes of social negotiation. While examining and learning about cultural diversity can help students to deal with the surface aspects and exigent challenges of intercultural communication (e.g. Shaules, Tsujioka, and Iida 2004), by examining the similarities of social logic students can see how societies grow into and out of one-another and are thus interconnected (Scruton 2007, Jenkins 2002).

Although Shaules et al. (2004, 41) suggest that for students, 'Stereotypes are a starting point for the getting-to-know-you process,' fostering an understanding of commonality may help to reduce the focus on the substantive aspects of cultural metonymy that can reinforce problematic generalizations. Take, for example, a recent Netflix documentary by Amanpour (2018) which fetishized gender relations in Japan by belaboring the superficial point that Japanese people express their affections indirectly by saying, 'I like you' (好きです / Suki desu.) rather than, 'I love you.' This was taken as an index of a Japanese tendency to prioritize the face-saving aspects of *hone-to-tatemaie* (本音と建前 / the separation of private and public spheres of social interaction) over close, personal relationships. Yet, this is somewhat misleading if we consider that French people—popularly construed as the very embodiment of romanticism—also say, 'I like you.' (Je t'aime.) This suggests that the emphasis should not be on the surface aspects of cultural-specific behaviour, but rather how it fits into its context (Goffman 1959). In this case is it not the specific amorous phrasing that is important, but the intended message and how it is received. As such, within the classroom setting, it is useful for students to learn how to frame the surface aspects of cultural diversity through the lens of converging social logic by considering how things are done in their own culture in relation to others. To paraphrase Scruton (2007), reflecting on one's own culture helps to reflect on the things we all do, and in turn better understand and appreciate the culture of others.

The challenge then, is to find a language medium that encourages students to seek out a common ground to cultural diversity. If we return to the apparently ineffable na-

ture of wabi-sabi, for a moment, we can draw upon a relatively simple linguistic strategy employed by a children's author. Reibstein (2008) creates, in English, the narrative of his story about a titular cat called Wabi Sabi who seeks out the meaning of her name through the use of simple haiku poetry. Reibstein (2008) does this by presenting the reader with a series of figurative examples, such as dried autumn leaves and old straw mats—things readers can reasonably be expected to be able to recognise and understand, regardless of their cultural heritage—instead of relying on complicated, prosaic description. In doing so, Reibstein (2008) cleverly illustrates the value of a figurative language in intercultural communication. Figurative language requires students to actively take into consideration how their language choices are likely to be interpreted by people from other social contexts. In doing so, students need to actively take agency and establish a common ground of understanding with other people.

Research by Musolff (2015) has previously indicated that metaphor can be a useful tool for L2 students to communicate about their own and understand other cultures. The current paper aims to draw on the ideas of this research by encouraging students to use both metaphor and simile as a means to negotiate meaning. By helping students to learn how to more easily articulate their own culture, it is hoped that students will be encouraged to think about their own culture more abstractly and critically, and in turn be able to understand cultural difference more clearly.

Teaching Practice

The two lessons stages presented in this paper use a test-teach-test (TTT) methodology, in which students were given an open test task to assess their prior knowledge and generate a need for the target language; a language presentation; and then a fluency test task. The two strategies were trialled in 12, 90-minute classes of first-year, Japanese university students. This lesson was taught as part of a functional language English communication course with a maximum of 9 students, making it relatively easy to observe target language use. As part of this course, the students had already undertaken at

least two other lessons on functional language skills for negotiating meaning, making this lesson an extension of language skills they had already acquired and been assessed on. The lesson was conducted only once for each class. 94 students were observed, 52% were female and 48% male, with a mean TOEIC score of 512. 26 (163. 92 s.d.).

Warm Up

As a warm up activity, the students were engaged in a variation of Nation's (1990) fluency activity. This activity was used because the students had done the same activity at the beginning of every lesson, as part of curricula requirements. As such, the students were familiar with the task and used to discussing open-ended questions.

The students were asked to talk about the following two questions:

- 1 . What Japanese traditions, culture or ideas do you think people from other countries might find difficult to understand?
- 2 . How is Japanese society different from other countries'?

At the end of the activity, the students were put into small groups to discuss how easy or difficult they found the activity. Each group then gave feedback to the entire class.

Simile

For the first language presentation, the students were set Test Task 1 in the Appendix and gave feedback to the entire class. Following this, the target language below was discussed and clarified with concept-checking and examples.

Target Language

It's a kind of...	It's like...
It's made of...	In Japan, people usually do/eat/drink/use (etc.) this...

For the final test section of this part of the lesson, the students were then divided into two teams. One member (the speaker) from each team was shown a target vocabulary

item as listed in the same order in the Appendix by the teacher. The speaker then had to explain this to their team members, using the target language that was presented.

Two rules constrained the speaker:

- 1 . Do not speak Japanese.
- 2 . Do not spell (or elicit the spelling of) the target words.

The first team to clearly guess the correct answer was awarded one point. When neither speaker could articulate the target word, the teacher explained, and two points were awarded. Two points were awarded in this case to raise the competitive stakes, as a way to encourage the students to keep trying. After each target word, the speaker was rotated. If either team broke the rules, the other team was awarded one penalty point. The time limit for the task was set at ten minutes, and the team with the most points at the end was declared the winner. Following the task, the students were asked to discuss in their teams which target vocabulary was easy or difficult, and how they might better explain challenging words using the target language.

Metaphor

For the second language presentation, the students were introduced to Musolff's (2015) concept of body-politic metaphor by asking them to discuss in pairs, for one minute, Test Task 3 from the Appendix. The students' comprehension was then concept-checked with questions such as, 'Is farming important in New Zealand?', 'Why are backbones important?', and 'What would happen to the New Zealand economy if there were no farming?' Following this, the students were given another three minutes to write, in pairs, a list of collocations of important aspects of Japanese society with body parts. Next, they were given five minutes to work alone and write a short paragraph explaining a chosen metaphor. Finally, the students were assigned to small groups and asked to discuss their ideas and give class feedback.

Discussion

Scruton (2007) argues that when learning any kind of culture, it is best for students to first attend to its most easily understandable foundations. In this regard, native culture can act as a guide to “common pursuit” when utilized as a foundation for agency and point of comparison for understanding interconnections with other cultural forms (59). Throughout the process of the lesson presented above, there were some remarkable changes in the students’ attitudes towards and capacity for communicating about Japanese culture in English. Although quite familiar with the task, in the warm-up activity, regardless of their proficiency level, the students invariably got stuck, switched to Japanese, and/or asked the non-Japanese teacher for help. In the feedback sessions to this activity, the students almost always complained that the task was too difficult. Similarly, while they fared better in Test Task 1, many students still had difficulty guessing the target vocabulary (温泉 / onsen and 弁当 / bento, respectively), but usually understood the logic of the activity and target functional language well. Interestingly, when told the answers to this task, the students often said that they thought the answer was something more difficult.

In Test Task 2, the students were sometimes slow to get started, but due to the competitive nature of the activity, became quick to use the target language to rationalize their negotiation of meaning strategies. The students often improvised with spontaneous supplemental strategies, such as using body language and making noise. The speed with which the teams of students were able to convey aspects of Japanese culture increased noticeably as the activity progressed. Even the lowest proficiency-level classes were able to explain at least half of the target vocabulary, and some of the high-proficiency classes completed all of the vocabulary items well before the time-limit elapsed. Generally, the students found the vocabulary at the beginning of the list easier to convey, and this was probably because the items were more concrete aspects of their day-to-day life, such as futons and manga. However, some of words proved to be *unexpected*

edly challenging—particularly visual kei (ビジュアル系 / Japanese pop-glam rock) and senpai (せんぱい / social superior)—and required assistance from the teacher. What was particularly interesting about the students' general success in this activity was, having been provided with some basic communicative strategies, how much more enthusiastic the students became about trying to explain Japanese culture. Some students were even willing to try to explain comparably abstract ideas, such as *hone-to-tatemae* and *mono-no-aware*—concepts that have no immediate English-language equivalents.

The body-politic metaphor activities also seemed to work quite effectively. All of the students understood the concept of using body metaphors from Test Task 3 and were able to explain Japanese society metaphorically and provide support for their ideas in the form of reasons and examples. The majority of the students tended towards the same kinds of easily comprehensible, logically sound, body-politic metaphors. The most commonly used body parts were (in order) *legs* and *feet*, *heart*, *face* and *head* or *brain*. The students typically referred to common aspects of daily or cultural metonymy. Some verbatim examples of this are given in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Examples of Student Body-Politic Metaphor

Daily Life	<p>'Education is Japan's heart because education supports the people who working here.'</p> <p>'Working people are the legs of Japan because it is base the country.'</p> <p>'Old people is the face [...] because recently the population is rapidly aging [...] also Japanese people tend to believe that hierarchy is important so old people are in higher position.'</p>
Metonymy	<p>'I think historic places is soul of Japan, because if Japanese did not make a lot of beautiful historic places, we do not develop our cultures and base of country.'</p>

‘Emperor in Japan is the top [...] so I think the head can express him well.’

‘Companies [are] the heart of the country. It’s because [...] if there are no companies [...] people can’t live.’

Perhaps one of the most pleasing outcomes of this part of the lesson was that the students spontaneously provided straightforward metaphorical relationships that would be comprehensible to people with little or no knowledge of Japanese society. What tended to discriminate the lower from higher proficiency level students was not their ability to complete the task, but typically their grammatical accuracy and how much they wrote. A number of the students also demonstrated some quite novel metaphor use. For example, one pre-intermediate level student suggested, ‘Historic places is nails I think. Because historic places are very old we must care of the places. And if we repair old places, the places will be beautiful. So it’s nearly nail care [sic].’

Generally speaking, the outcome of this teaching practice is that learning to communicate about culture does not need to be seen as an unnecessarily deep or complicated task. The difficulty students face when learning about intercultural communication may stem from the way in which other cultures are, at times, presented as being sociologically alien to the student’s own culture. What makes Reibstein’s (2008) explanation of *wabi-sabi* digestible to a broad audience is not his attempt to provide a philosophically grounded account of the concept, but rather a narrative series of common-sense figurative examples that approximate the concept in a way that a diverse range of people can easily relate to. The students discussed in this paper also appear to have recognised the need to convey their culture to others in as-simple-a-manner as is necessary to facilitate communication in a *common-sense* way.

In the context of cultural logic, *common sense* is not intended as a value judgement, but rather a tacit understanding [a sense] group members have of how to effortlessly negotiate the demands of daily life. The difficulty that students face when explaining

these aspects of their culture is that articulating common-sense is an unnatural task. In fact, if common-sense required articulation on an ongoing basis, it would be of very little use to us in everyday life. As Bourdieu (1991, 1992) argues, culture and language have the appearance of being *natural* precisely because they have been habituated within a particular social context that is acquired and embodied through a life-long process of enculturation. Consequently, mastering one's own cultural common sense does not require an explicit understanding of *why* we do things, but only a tacit understanding of *what*, *when* and *how* to do them. As such, in the context of teaching intercultural communication skills, it may help to think of common sense as being analogous to Bernstein's (2003) *elaborated* and *restricted codes* (articulated and circumlocutious language, respectively). For the native speaker, the *common-sense* aspects of their culture are a restricted code that is understood and accepted at face value and therefore nullifies explanation and articulation. Yet, for students of other cultures, this new cultural code has not been engrained, and so like learning a new grammar, requires elaborate, explicit and articulated learning. This necessity for belabouring does not make the mundane aspects of L 2 culture *deep*, rather it simply means that they do not lend themselves to articulation, because the native speaker is so very rarely required to do so (Bourdieu 1991). Key, then, to effective teaching and learning about other cultures is in raising students' awareness of their own.

As the outcomes of the lessons described in this paper indicate, L 1 speakers can quickly get the hang of articulating 'deep culture' once they have established a few simple strategies that create a socio-logical connection to the other party's culture. It appears that the extent to which everyday culture is *internalized and unconscious*, in the way Shaules (2007) describes, is a function of how much students have been encouraged to reflect upon common-sense assumptions. As the lesson presented seems to indicate, through a process of relatively simple, analogical and critical self-examination, students can quite easily become aware of the relationship between the subjective and experiential nature of the world around them and how this is likely to be objectively

viewed through other cultural lenses. This also helps students to view L 2 culture more objectively, too (Musolff 2015).

So, why does the idea that other cultures are *deep* persist and what challenges does this create for students? The inherent problem with *deep culture* is that it is not ideologically neutral. Shaules (2015) betrays the social value of *deep cultural knowledge*, when he figuratively describes it as like reading the ‘user’s manual for a camera with highly advanced features.’ (2015, 64) Such a *manual* inclines the learner to acquire the intercultural mind in order to *stimulate personal growth, broaden horizons* and *reveal unconscious biases*—concepts that are all intimately connected to and reproduce social distinction through the cultivation of an individuated cultured disposition (Bourdieu 1984, Holt 1998). Shaules (2015, 21, 22) underscores some of the social biases of the ‘intercultural mind’, when he describes it as a liberating experience that is ‘magical’, ‘unspoiled’ and ‘profound’, and is at odds with ‘globalization [that] is diluting the intercultural experience [...] making [it] less powerful or meaningful.’ Viewing the acquisition of an understanding of deep culture as a personal journey may be deeply problematic for the wider value of intercultural communication for students, since the liberalizing processes of the development of the individual negates the collectivist aspirations of global culture and its potential for “broader human flourishing” (Deneen 2019, 78–79).

Broadly speaking, ‘deep culture’ is usually culture with a capital C, the kind of culture sociologists refer to as *legitimate culture* (Bourdieu 1993). The collocation of ‘deep’ with ‘culture’ signifies a particular relationship [social logic] between the perceiver [the student], the object of perception [substantive culture] and the social class processes of enculturation required of elevated modes of perception [deep culture]. Essentially, the *deep* or *legitimate* aspects of any given culture connote and denote its *religiophilosophical* and/or *artistic* production (Hughes 2010, Scruton 2001). This is a particular problem for younger students, as cultural competence in general, and cosmopolitanism in particular, take a significant amounts of time, education and concerted ef-

fort to acquire (Bourdieu 1984, Holt 1998, Caldwell and Woodside 2003). Further, foreign [L 2] culture is often perceived as 'deep' and presents challenges for learners, because it is commonly appropriated as an aspect of L 1 legitimate culture that is contraposed with dilettante tourism. This aspect of highbrow social logic exists in a historical context of reciprocal cultural exchange as can be seen in orientalism (as in Japonism and Chinoiserie) and occidentalism (such as the Japanese *Wakon-yōsai* movement [和魂洋才 / Japanese spirit, Western technique]) (Said 2007, Kikuchi 2004, Ward 2020, in press, MacCannell 1999). Like other forms of cultural knowledge that are specifically valued by upper social tiers, cosmopolitanism is not geared towards practical ends. Rather it serves the less practical social function of accruing social status, by allowing the *well-travelled* person to be conversant on a variety of different sociocultural contexts (Bourdieu 1991, 1993, 1984).

When preparing L 2 students for engaging with people from other cultures, a distinction needs to be made between pragmatic intercultural communication skills that can be easily taught in the classroom, and more time-consuming, abstract and cosmopolitan values. By viewing L 2 culture as quintessentially deep and mysterious, we run the risk of imbuing it with the kinds of qualities that render it daunting and significantly less useful for students as a means for navigating daily life in other cultures. Although potentially fulfilling in the long run, to understand, for example, the wabi-sabi aesthetic, the student of Japanese culture does not need to toil over the philosophical subtext of Kenko Yoshida's (1998) *Essays in Idleness*. Nor do students need to pore over the wistful poetics Jun'ichiro Tanizaki (1977) reifies in the traditional Japanese *washiki* toilet (和式) or connect these to the conceptual implications of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* urinal sculpture in its radical reconceptualization of western art (Goldie and Schellekens 2009). As Reibstein (2008) eloquently suggests, a Sunday walk in the fading light of an autumnal park will suffice. There is, no doubt, value in developing the *intercultural mind*, but students must first take this walk before endeavouring to run.

Conclusion

The outcomes of the teaching practices described in this paper indicate that language students are actually quite capable of explicating ‘deep’ aspects of Japanese culture and society in meaningful ways without recouring to L 1. The participants also demonstrated the capacity to reason abstractly about their own culture, and in doing so, relate their culture to others in a way that meaningfully communicates common-sense ideas. However, given that this lesson was taught in the final class of each semester, it is difficult to assess to what extent the students adopted the skills presented outside the classroom. Also, given that the observations made for this paper were taken from a relatively high-tiered university, the TOEIC scores of the participating students were slightly higher than the national average (The Institute for International Business Communication 2019). Further study could be geared towards gaining a better understanding of the long-term benefits of this kind of lesson; how well it could be adapted for multilingual classes; and how well lower-proficiency students perform on the tasks. Research could also be undertaken to examine how students are able to maintain and develop these skills over time and how the practices presented in this paper fit more directly into ESL theoretical frameworks.

Appendix

Test Task 1

Read each conversation with a partner; then answer the question below.

Yoko:	One traditional thing many visitors to Japan like to try is X. Do you understand?
Marcel:	I’m sorry, I don’t understand X. Can you explain?

Yoko:	In Japan, people usually do this when they stay in a traditional Japanese hotel. It’s a kind of way to relax. It’s like a bath, but it’s made of hot spring water.
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What is Yoko talking about?

Taro: In Japan, many people eat Y. Do you follow?

Marcel: I'm sorry, I don't follow. What do many Japanese people eat?

Taro: In Japan, many **people usually eat this** at lunch time. **It's a kind of light meal, but it's made of** rice with meat or fish and pickles. **It's like** a lunchbox.

What is Taro talking about?

Test Task 2 Vocabulary Items

- | | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. futon / 布団 | 7. tatami / 畳 | 13. sashimi / 刺身 | 19. bonodori / 盆踊り |
| 2. manga / マンガ | 8. anime / アニメ | 14. yakitori / 焼き鳥 | 20. otaku / オタク |
| 3. oshibori / おしぼり | 9. origami / 折り紙 | 15. ohanami / お花見 | 21. jyanken / ジャンケン |
| 4. kendo / 剣道 | 10. furisode / 振袖 | 16. visual kei / ビジュアル系 | 22. omotenashi / おもてなし |
| 5. ryokan / 旅館 | 11. senpai / せんぱい | 17. sado / 茶道 | 23. tanka / 短歌 |
| 6. washitsu / 和室 | 12. hagi-yaki / 萩焼 | 18. honnetotatemae / 本音と建前 | 24. mono-no-aware / 物の哀れ |

Test Task 3

People in New Zealand think that farming is the backbone of the country. It's mainly because, farming supports the New Zealand economy.

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