



A Cross-Cultural Discussion of Japan and South Korea and How Differences Are Manifested in the ESL/EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Despite geographical closeness and historical intertwining, Japan and South Korea are culturally very different; in some cases, polar opposites. For instance, Japanese art and aesthetics favor simplicity and straight lines while Koreans prefer bold, colorful and cluttered designs. Other characteristics show us their different ways of thinking. Japanese suppress their emotions in social situations, and Koreans are known for quickly changing their mood from one extreme to another. An awareness of the similarities and differences of these cultures can help outsiders deal with interactions. For the purpose of this paper, I will look at four specific cultural differences relating to Korea and Japan: religion and Confucianism, detailed versus holistic thinking, patriotism through history, and homogeneity. After establishing these differences, I will then describe how they manifest themselves in an EFL/ESL classroom environment by drawing on my own teaching experiences in these countries.

Keywords: South Korea, Japan, Culture, EFL, ESL, Classroom, Patriotism, Homogeneity

1. Introduction

Both Koreans and Japanese take off their shoes before entering a house. Koreans like to sit on electronically warmed wood floors whereas Japanese like to sit on straw *tatami* mats. Although both include rice and seafood as staples in their diet, Koreans prefer the full flavors of pepper and kimchi, which contrasts with the blander flavor of Japanese tofu and sashimi. The Japanese drive in an orderly manner on the left side of the street; however, Koreans often hastily (but skillfully) blow past pedestrians on the right. The former values silence, while the latter often generates loudness; beyond the superficial, Korea and Japan differ wildly. It is important to recognize that no one Asian culture or race is superior to another, but from a non-Korean/non-Japanese EFL/ESL teacher's perspective, it is valuable to have a knowledge of these contrasts. The following four characteristics in this paper, I believe, are important for distinguishing Korean society from Japanese society and Korean students from the Japanese students.

2. Religion

Religions practised in Japan and Korea are very diverse. Korea's most popular religion is Christianity (47%), followed by Buddhism (40%), and then Shamanism (3%) (Cline, 2007). Churches with visible crosses are riddled throughout Korea; the steeple being a permanent fixture on the Korean city skylines. As a result of Christian influence, Koreans tend to have quite a stubborn sense of right and wrong. Japan, on the other hand, is more unified in its religious practices with Shintoism and Buddhism being its two major religions (Pye, 1982). Most Japanese consider both religions to complement each other, and thus are practised simultaneously. Like the crosses seen on the streets of Korea, the Shinto *torii* is the symbol that decorates Japan even more numerously. Unlike Christianity, the Shinto belief does not teach any moral rules, and Japanese tend to interpret moral dilemmas in a case-by-case fashion (Kelts, 2006).

On top of these religions sits Confucianism. Confucianism has influenced Japanese and Korean societies possibly more than its religions. Through five simple principles Confucianism provides a simple guide for order in society: justice and righteousness between sovereign and subject, a strong rapport between father and son, separation of function between husband and wife, respect for elders, and faith and trust between friends (Shinn, 1997). Confucianism has stopped being a religion itself and is now more of a set of rules, which form the basis for order in these two societies.

2.1 Confucianism Infused into Society

In Korea, Confucianism is practised more rigidly than any other society (Kalton, 1994). It is responsible for the respect a younger Korean must give an older Korean; the younger person must speak with strict formality to his elder; he must bow deeper, and pour his drinks with two hands instead of one; he must never doubt or question an older person's

decision and never give an order or talk down to him. Most Koreans have only friends who are the exact same age because it is almost impossible for an older person and younger person to talk freely to each other; however, once friendships are made they often last from very young until death. Women often come after men at work, they have limited opportunities in many career fields as their functions are thought of to be primarily domestic, and in many other ways are considered inferior to men (Kang, 2004). Arguably, this rigid order to society is unrivaled anywhere in Asia.

Japanese society is less affected by Confucianism, but it has affected Japan in different ways. In Japan, Confucianism is responsible for the respect that is found between people. "Thank you" and "I'm sorry" are used in excess in order to preserve the utmost peace between people in daily routines. Koreans, however, routinely spit, yell, or push without apology. In a paper comparing Japanese and Korean Politeness (Kim, Matsumura and Chinami, 2004), data collected showed that Japanese people of high social status use respect words when talking to people of low social status, and that Japanese politeness is often centered around benefit or debt expressions. Korean people found this "very difficult to understand." Japanese are often criticized for being "two faced," meaning that they often do not show their true feelings out of respect for others. They are guided by norms and, rules and regulations that hide the truth from the surface. As a result, outsiders may view Japanese as emotionless and complacent.

2.2 Manifestations in the Classroom

In the classroom, these beliefs can control the learning atmosphere. For Korean students, if the class consists of students of different ages, free discussion on teaching topics is hindered. The younger students are often silent as they either don't want to offend their elder classmates with their superior ability, or they don't want to appear their equal in commonly used role-plays. Because women often defer to men in Korean-Confucian society, women are also reluctant to participate in classroom activities. In Japan, age and sex are less of a factor but the same problems occur between higher and lower ranked employees within the same company. Because Japanese place a large emphasis on hiding any offensive feelings, personal opinions are rarely voiced in a classroom in fear that their thoughts may be considered offensive to other students or the teacher. In contrast, Korean students readily voice their concern if they have a problem or request. This observation is supported by Kristina Beckam-Bristo's study of cross-cultural classroom behaviors (2003). According to her survey, Korean students believe that offering personal viewpoints in class is highly acceptable (given a rating of 5 out of 5), while Japanese students believe this behavior to be highly unacceptable (given a rating of 1 out of 5). Confucian values in both countries stress education as the single best way to advance their status in life and view their teachers as a source of knowledge similar to a scholarly book. As a result, students are taught to listen and memorize information given by their teacher. Therefore, students often feel awkward when participating in discussions, role-play, or debates; again, this applies to Japanese students more than Korean students.

In Korea, where the bond between family members seem to be the strongest, mothers of school children often meet with teachers multiple times a month and request constant updates on their child's progress. A bad student is considered a loss of face for the entire family. From my experience, this happens far less in Japan.

3. Detailed versus Holistic thinking

Japan is known for its love of details. The gardens of most Japanese homes, although small, are tirelessly cared for; the streets of Tokyo are some of the cleanest and well kept in the world; Japanese-made products are usually of outstanding quality; the infamous Japanese bureaucracy makes doing even simple business activities overly complicated because paperwork must be checked and rechecked. The time and money that the Japanese invest in caring for seemingly unimportant details is truly unique.

On the other hand, Koreans take a more holistic approach in the way they approach tasks; they focus on the big picture. They often leave out unimportant details or cut corners as they always have their sights set on the end goal. The streets are not clean; city parks often have dirt where you would expect grass; fake designer apparel and products are sold; electronics are arguably lower in quality and cheaper in price than their Japanese equivalents. Modern Korean apartment buildings are usually built with cheap materials, in as little time as possible, and with almost no aesthetic appeal. Koreans value function, quantity, and speed. They don't like to waste effort on anything that doesn't contribute to their ultimate purpose.

3.1 Manifestations in the Classroom

For ESL/EFL students, this culture difference is very apparent. When Japanese students speak and write English, they are generally a lot more careful to use correct grammar and vocabulary. The most popular questions in a classroom revolve around the finer points of grammar. They often won't speak at all unless they are confident that they will speak a perfect sentence; they care very much about the details of English. On the other hand, Koreans are less concerned about the grammar of spoken English. Koreans are more content on just communicating their idea regardless of its grammatical sense. Missing articles, wrongly used prepositions, subject and verb disagreement are of little importance to a Korean as they do not subtract from the end point of transmitting their general idea. Repercussions of this are that Japanese get less practice at speaking because they are afraid to make mistakes. According to Berlitz (n.d), when

teaching in an EFL context, speaking practice is the “quickest and most effective way to learn a language.” In a study conducted at Nagasaki Jushin Catholic University (Suzuki, Jung, Watana, Min, and Yoshihara, 2004), it was found that university students in Korea were overall more competent in all areas of spoken English than Japanese university students.

Additionally, it can be considered that a strict adherence to time is detail-orientated behavior when following any form of schedule. Inside and outside of the classroom Japanese students strictly follow deadlines, start-times, and end-times. They religiously come and leave class on time with very few exceptions. Korean students, however, believe that so long as the appropriate amount of class work, homework, and study is done, then the amount of time spent in the classroom is not crucial. Evidence for this is given in a study of classroom behaviors (Kristina Beckham-Brito, 2003); the data collected showed that Japanese students found it extremely unacceptable to arrive 7 minutes late to class (given a rating of 1 out of 5), while Korean students found this behavior to be extremely acceptable (given a rating of 5 out of 5).

4. Patriotism through History

The history of Korea is usually considered one of the most tragic of all Asian countries. The Korean people have been fighting to defend their small peninsula from invasions by the Japanese and Chinese for centuries. This has created a sense of paranoia and skepticism towards foreigners and a strong sense of pride among themselves. The main factors in contributing to Korea's pride and fear of the outside world were the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953). During the Annexation period in Korea, Koreans were forced to speak Japanese, take on Japanese names, and were essentially stripped of their culture (Ishida, 2004). As a result of this, Koreans strengthened their hold on their culture and grew excessively skeptical of foreign influence. They possess a strong hatred of Japanese even to this day. Without having time to rebuild their culture and forget about the Japanese, the Korean War ravaged the peninsula. Almost as if a bulldozer had run up and down Korea multiple times, the country was left in ruins and divided in two; a cease-fire agreement adding to frustrations. Powered by pride and xenophobia, Korea built itself up from nothing into the third largest economy in Asia (Delfeld, 2005). Because of history, Korea has always been a “defender”; it has always been in a situation where it had to fight for its life or come from behind. Through hardship, Koreans have become a proud people, and are well regarded for their “can do” attitude; however, through this nationalism has come very strong and stubborn feelings.

Japan, however, has always been an “aggressor”. Before World War II, Japan's war strategy was primarily to preemptively attack, invade, and assimilate neighboring countries to preserve the status quo in its own kingdom. This was done successfully at the request of the Emperor, and until World War II, it was never made to deal with a major defeat. Unlike Korea's stubborn nature, Japan is a country that adapts to change quite well. After World War II, Japan embraced its new pacifist constitution (Tamamoto, 2001). It then dug itself out of poverty and quickly became Asia's first true capitalist nation. By the 1960s it had carefully secured trading relationships with China without disturbing its bond with the US (Morrison, 2006). It pioneered the “Asian Miracle” export-led strategy in which Korea's economic policy was based on. As opposed to Korea, Japan seems to have easily forgotten its past and has become a strong US ally. Also in stark contrast to Korea, the attitude of Japanese is not patriotic. In Masaru Tamamoto's journal article *A Land without Patriots* (2006), it is argued that in a pacifist “Japan there is no concept of war – all wars are bad. Consequently patriotism is not an operative idea.” Tamamoto explains “over the decades, the great majority of young men of draft age have said that they were unwilling to fight in defense of their country, that they would run away.” On a popular news website Japan Today, the question “Do you think Japanese are patriotic?” was asked to readers; the overwhelming majority did not think so (Kanda, 2006). Japanese university student Suguru Oose posted, “We live in Japan but we do not know much about our politics and culture...we do not care whether we are patriotic or not.” Another student Wataru Kinoshita answered, “I do not say I hate Japan, but I do not deeply think about my own country. People are shallow, easily give up on things and have no endurance. I want people to have stronger ideas and beliefs.” Modern Japanese could be characterized as passive and unpatriotic.

4.1 Manifestations in the Classroom

When teaching students of these countries, the differences in Korean and Japanese history is very apparent. A solution to motivating students to participate in group problem solving activities is to find a relevant topic that students have strong opinions about. Because Koreans have such strong feelings associated with their pride and nationalism, it is very easy to find a topic which may form the basis for debates or group discussion activities where students can logically work out their ideas in English. In Japan, there is a more passive and less emotional attachment to topics which affect Japan collectively, so Japanese are much more complacent in these activities. Therefore, patriotism is a great tool to provoke instant speaking activities for Koreans, but not for Japanese.

Furthermore, Koreans “can do” spirit is also alive in the classroom. Students fiercely compete with each other, and “slower” students are easily inspired to make great improvements and move ahead many “ranks” in the classroom. Japanese students again are relatively unmotivated to compete against each other.

5. Homogeneity

The last culture difference considered is the homogeneity of the cultures in Korea and Japan. Although both cultures are considered homogeneous from the western perspective, Korea is far more homogenous than Japan. According to a government press release in 2007 on the website Gateway to Korea, 1.5% of the Korean population are foreigners. By nationality, Chinese make up the largest portion with 52.4 percent, followed by Southeast Asians with 23.7 percent; Americans with 3.4 percent; Japanese with 3.3 percent; and Taiwanese with 2.9 percent. Eighty percent of the population has the surname Park, Kim, and Lee (Cullins, 2002). There are virtually no physical differences among Koreans by regions. There are technically five dialects of the Korean language in South Korea, but all of them are very closely related and understandable to one another (Baz, 2001). Up until 1989 it was very difficult for a Korean to receive a passport, and therefore Koreans could not easily travel outside of their border (Prideaux, 1997). Now Koreans can freely travel, but this very recent exposure to the outside world has meant that most Koreans have a very shallow understanding of other countries. Traditionally, Korea is not thought of as a tourist destination by vacationers, and as a result is not visited by many; there is little “international flavor” present in Korea. Mainstream pop culture also tends to be in only one form. The Korean fashion trends tend to be religiously followed by young Koreans. When walking the streets, it is immediately apparent what is in style because everyone conforms to the same fashion consciousness. Koreans tend to think as one. Among Koreans, there is little variety of what one eats, watches on TV, does on the weekend, or dresses oneself with.

Despite the stereotype that Japanese culture is very homogeneous, relative to Korea, it is quite the opposite. Similar to Korea, 1.6% of the Japanese population is foreign; however, a look at the break-down of nationalities with the foreign population shows a different story. Koreans make up 30% of the foreign population, followed by Chinese from China with 26%, Brazilians 15%, the Filipinos 9.3%, Peruvians 2.8%, and Americans 2.4% (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2005). Non-Asian people make up far more of the population in Japan than in Korea, and the spread of nationalities within the foreign community is very diverse. Unlike Korea, Japan has an indigenous people called the Ainu who speak their own language and have different physical characteristics (Ferreira, 2007). Japan has dozens of dialects; some, like the dialect used in Kagoshima, are almost unintelligible to speakers of standard Japanese. Japanese are also avid travelers and love to mix other cultures with their own (Ferreira, 2007). The Japanese traveler was voted the best tourist in the world according to a 2007 survey conducted across hotels in Europe (Reuters, 2007). Pop culture in Japan is extremely diverse, and cities or even wards within cities differ immensely in this regard. In a paper called *Speech Patterns of Japanese Girls or Gals: Symbol of Identity and Opposition to Power*, Kazuko Tanabe (2005) describes how girls who frequent Shibuya, a small shopping district of Tokyo, have developed their own highly developed form of slang and speech pattern not understandable to outsiders. “Shibuya Girls” can also be readily identified by their blonde hair, overly tanned skin, European brand clothing, excessive make-up, and high heels. In contrast, one train station north of Shibuya, is Harajuku where fashion and youth culture are fusions of punk, gothic, and anime. One station south of Shibuya is Shimokitazawa, which boasts the bohemian-hippie Japanese; artists, musicians, long hair, and used clothing are popular themes here. In traditional culture there is also much diversity. The Japanese Buddhist festival of Obon is important as it commemorates the souls of passed ancestors. The dances and rituals performed vary depending on which region you live in – in effect, the traditions of the same religion “vary widely” about every 300 kilometers (Hammond, 2005). Japan is more heterogeneous and thus has more experience dealing and adapting with differences in its society.

5.1 Manifestations in the Classroom

In an EFL/ESL classroom, creativity and awareness of cultural differences is an important element in learning. Cultural problems in the English language exist. To be effective, teachers should encourage students to learn to speak English as it is spoken in an English speaking country. Cultural differences affect what students expect to hear, vocabulary, degree of formality, literal translations from their own language into English, and cultural misunderstandings. For Koreans, the informality of English is a problem they have difficulty overcoming. Because many students have not been to an English speaking country or have not interacted with an English speaking foreigner in a natural setting, they are surprised and uncomfortable with the informality of English in many situations. Japanese on the other hand, have traveled a lot more, and therefore this barrier is more easily overcome. Literal translations of some phrases and idioms are particularly difficult for Japanese and Korean students; only the most well traveled students can grasp the cultural significance of these easily. Japanese students are also better prepared for role plays and practical activities that mirror real life situations.

Diversity of personalities within a classroom is also an advantage when debating issues and discussing perspectives. The majority of Koreans tend to learn English for two reasons: a job related promotion or to study overseas. Japanese have a much broader spectrum of reasons for learning English; being transferred overseas, talking to foreign friends, traveling, watching American movies, or an international career are some reasons given by my students. Japanese have a more worldly perspective for learning English.

6. Conclusion

Koreans and Japanese, despite minor overlaps in culture, are quite distinct. Although both share Chinese lineage, history and isolation have left few similarities beyond the superficial. Confucianism has rendered Japan into a quiet, polite, and socially rule-bound society; on the other hand, Korea is not controlled by politeness but by a dominant-subordinate hierarchy based on age, sex, and social position. History has shown that Japanese can skillfully change and morph from successful aggressors into pioneering pacifists, while it has turned Koreans into stubborn patriots. Koreans rush to completion but Japanese tend to take time on the steps in between. Though both could be considered homogeneous cultures by western standards, Korea lives up to its name as the ultimate "Hermit Kingdom". For EFL/ESL teachers, it is important to consider culture differences when planning lessons. The most commonly used techniques for teaching English will often go against cultural learning norms for both nationalities. English teaching methods need to be executed to carefully penetrate culture differences and ensure a clear acquisition of the language.

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