

# Teaching to Our Students' Strengths: Using intercultural communication methodology to resolve culture clashes found in Japanese EFL classrooms

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**PAC3**  
at  
**JALT**  
**2001**

**Conference  
Proceedings**



**International  
Conference  
Centre**

**Kitakyushu  
JAPAN**

**November  
22-25, 2001**

This article looks at second language acquisition from an intercultural perspective. First, data from a recent study on tolerance of ambiguity in second language acquisition are reported. The study found that Japanese university students of English as a foreign language (EFL) are tolerant of ambiguity when it is encountered in both the formats of reading and listening. However, students become intolerant of ambiguity when English is used as a direct means of communication, as when writing and speaking. This may indicate a “culture clash” between the students’ innate learning style and EFL methodology in Japan. A teaching methodology that takes into account the cultural implications of learning style becomes necessary. This article will provide a specific example illustrating how this can be accomplished through the incorporation of intercultural communication methodology. By teaching to the students’ strengths, EFL instructors can not only overcome cultural clashes, but also enhance second language acquisition.

この研究論文で国際的観点から第二外国語の習得を調べました。最初に第二外国語習得のさい、曖昧さへの寛容度について最近の研究資料を発表します。この研究によって英語を学んでいる日本の大学生が読んだり聞いたりするとき、曖昧さへの寛容度が考えられます。しかし学生達が書いたり話したりするさい伝達の直接手段として英語が使わ

れるとき曖昧さへの寛容度がなくなる。このことによって学生達の学習スタイルと日本での英語指導法には文化的不調和があります。この研究論文によって具体的な例があげられます。学生達の学力に応じで外国語を教える先生達が文化的不調和のみならず第二外国語の習得をも、克服することが出来ます。

**T**eaching English in Japan for the past sixteen years, I have come into contact with many students who study very hard in order to communicate in English. However, the majority of these students have great difficulty in carrying on even a simple conversation in English after years of concentrated effort. The students are bright and they do try to apply themselves. What, then, is the reason that English continues to be such a struggle for them?

I believe that it is because Japanese students bring an innate learning style to the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom that comes into conflict with the methodology currently used to teach English in Japan. This results in what I have termed “culture clash”. Students are unable to perform at their true level of capability due to a classroom environment where rules are unclear or ambiguous. However, if these same students could be taught in a manner that reflects their own learning style, the ambiguity in learning a foreign language can be reduced, resulting in a higher level of second language acquisition.

This article is divided into two sections. The

first will report the data collected from a study on tolerance of ambiguity in second language acquisition. The research was conducted in the fall of 2000 at a Japanese university in northern Japan. The remainder of the article will show how this knowledge was then used to adapt EFL teaching in a Japanese university classroom setting through the utilization of intercultural communication methodology.

### **Tolerance of ambiguity in second language acquisition study**

The research for this study was collected through the use of the Japanese version of the Second Language Tolerance of Ambiguity Scale (Ely, 1995). The survey was divided into two parts. The first half consisted of questions requesting demographic data from the students, and the second half was the actual learning scale instrument. The total sample comprised of 128 students, 68 of whom were female and 60 who were male. Two-thirds of the sample—86 students—were sophomores, and the remaining 42 students were freshmen.

The average length of English study was 7.1 years. As English study begins in the first year of junior high school, the average student has six years of English before entering university. In addition, many students study English either prior to junior high school or in a preparatory school between the last year of high school

and university entrance. Therefore, only 26 students, 50% of the total amount of freshmen surveyed, responded that they had taken only six years of English study. The longest exposure to English study was ten years and this response was reported by three of the students.

Although 17 of the students had never had a native speaker as an instructor, the average length of time with a native speaker as an instructor was 2.56 years and three of the students reported having a native speaker as an instructor for seven years. This is due largely to the Japanese Ministry of Education's funding of the JET program, which brings native speakers throughout Japan to serve as assistant language teachers in junior and senior high schools.

Seventy-four students, or 58% of the total sample, reported that they had had additional exposure to English outside of mandatory English classes in the Japanese school system. Of these 74 students, many had exposure to more than one additional method of English study. Fifty-four had attended a "juku" or cram school, 20 had listened to radio and/or televised English lessons sponsored by NHK (National Broadcasting Company), 14 had attended a conversational English school, 12 had private English lessons with a Japanese English instructor, nine had private lessons with a native speaker of English, nine had purchased and used English software programs, and four reported some other

method of English exposure.

Thirty-five of the total sample population, or 27%, had been to an English speaking country at least once. Of these students, the reasons for their presence in an English speaking country was sightseeing for 24 students, participating in an exchange program for 14 students, and for two students living abroad while their parents were working in that foreign country.

### **General Findings from the Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA) Scale**

The tolerance of ambiguity in second language acquisition scale consists of twelve questions which measure how a student reacts to the EFL learning environment. The scale spans from 12 points, which represents a high tolerance of ambiguity, to 48 points, which represents a low tolerance of ambiguity. The data collected for this study show an average score of 30.7 for the total sample with a median score of 31.0. Three students had a maximum score of 48 and one student had a minimum score of thirteen. The score with the highest number of respondents was 34 (n=12). The score distribution for all participants can be seen in Figure 1.

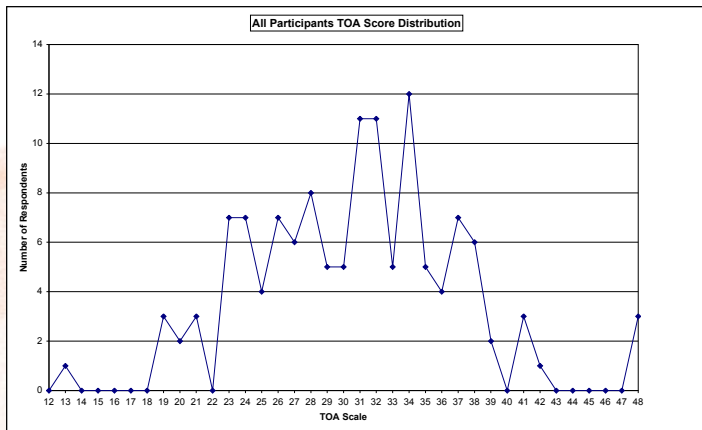


Figure 1: All participants TOA score distribution

As gender has been cited as a factor in communication research, the data were also analyzed according to gender. Six males and five females placed at the median score of 31. Looking at the distribution of scores by gender, 61% of the number of respondents above the median were female ( $n=36$ ) and 39% were male ( $n=23$ ). Of the twelve students who had a score of 34, eight were female. Thus there was a slight tendency for female students to have a lower tolerance of ambiguity. The scores below the median had a more equal representation by gender with 27 females and 31 males scoring below 31. Both the minimum and maximum scores were from male respondents and three males had a score of 48, showing the lowest possible tolerance of ambiguity

on the scale. Figure 2 shows the responses taking into account the gender of the student.

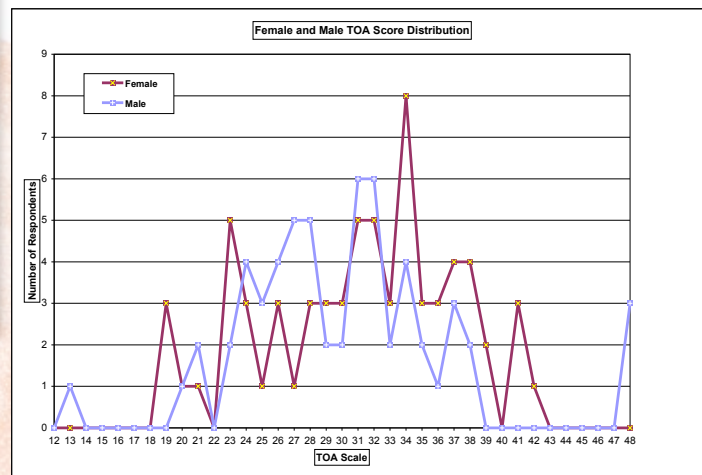


Figure 2: Female and male TOA score distribution

## General Findings on TOA Question Responses

A frequency distribution on the twelve questions of the scale was also performed to determine what percentage of the students responded strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree for each question. One student did not respond to Question 9 and that response was labeled and computed as a no response. Of the twelve questions, five resulted in 70% or more of the students responding either agree/strongly agree (Questions 3, 8 and 10) or

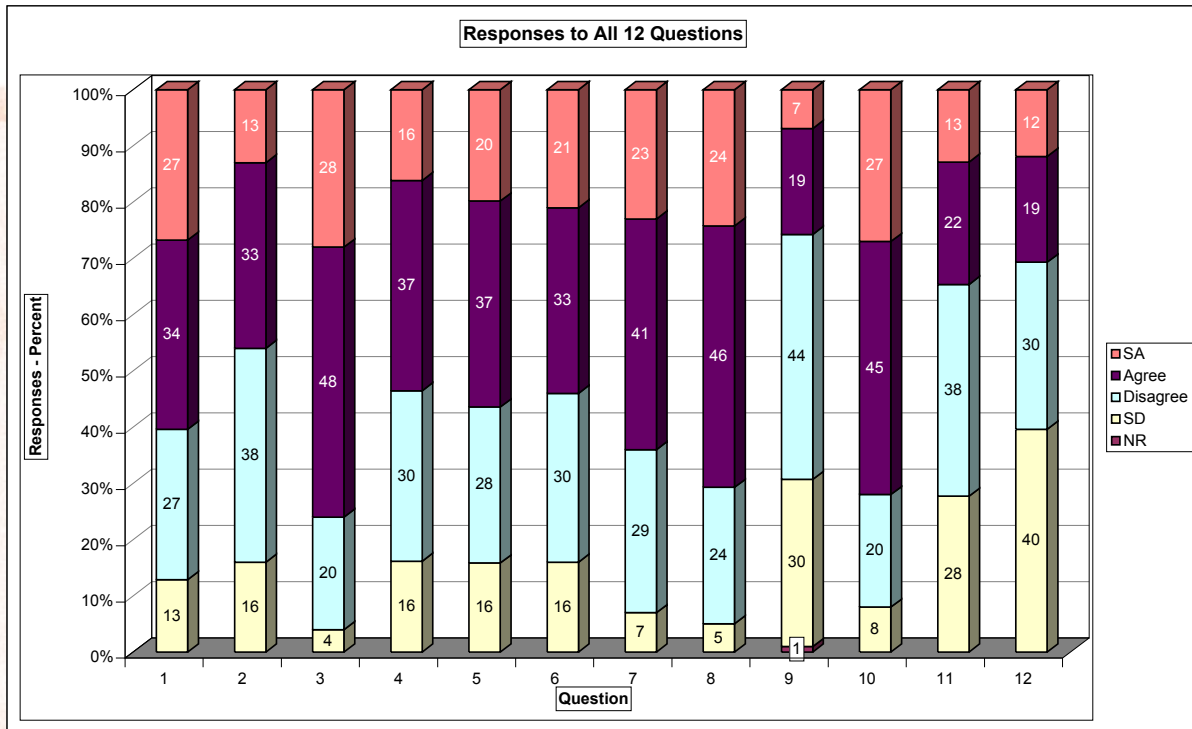
disagree/strongly disagree (Questions 9 and 12). Complete results of the data analysis are shown in Figure 3.

*Figure 3: Responses to all 12 questions. Due to rounding, columns do not always add up to 100%.*

The largest number of respondents to strongly disagree was 40% in response

to Question No. 12. The largest number of students to disagree was 44% in response to Question No. 10. The largest number of students to agree was 48% in response to Question No. 3 and the largest number of students to strongly agree was 28% also in response to Question No. 3. Thus Question 3 had 76% of the students responding either agree or strongly agree.

In looking specifically at the wording of the questions, a total of 76% of the respondents answered either



strongly agree (n=28%) or agree (n=48%) to Question No. 3 which reads, “When I write English compositions, I don’t like it when I can’t express my ideas exactly” (Ely, 1995). Question No. 8 had a total of 70% of the respondents answering either strongly agree (n=24%) or agree (n=46%) to the statement, “When I’m writing in English, I don’t like the fact that I can’t say exactly what I want”. Question No. 10, “When I’m speaking in English, I feel uncomfortable if I can’t communicate

my idea clearly” (Ely, 1995) also resulted in 72% of the respondents choosing either strongly agree (n=27%) or agree (n=45%).

The majority of students answered Questions No. 9 and 12 in the negative. A total of 74% of the respondents either strongly disagreed (n=30%) or disagreed (n=44%) with Question No. 9, “It bothers me when the teacher uses an English word I don’t know” (Ely, 1995). A total of 70% of the respondents either strongly disagreed (n=40%) or disagreed (n=30%) with Question No. 12, “One thing I don’t like about reading in English is having to guess what the meaning is” (Ely, 1995). The remaining seven questions did not show such a clear preference for either agreement or disagreement from the respondents.

## Discussion of the results

Based on personal observation, study, and research, I concur that the Japanese learner has a tendency to be a reflective-observer, who is field-dependent and employs a modeling strategy (Condon, 1984). However, most EFL classroom instruction remains based in field-independent methodology.

The field-independent language learner has a rule-oriented approach to language learning, which appears to suit the classroom environment, whereas the field-dependent language learner tends to excel at learning language within the context of an actual language

speaking environment (Brown, 1980; Chapelle, 1986; Damen, 1987). The data for this study give support to this claim. Students who had been abroad—especially those who had participated in an exchange program—had a higher TOA in the process of second language acquisition. The opportunity to experience English in context transferred to the classroom environment, giving students the ability to be more tolerant of ambiguity when reading, listening, and even writing in English.

Unfortunately, this higher TOA did not transfer to classroom learning when speaking in English. The experience of being in an English speaking country seems to have accentuated the students’ inability to communicate effectively in English. This also appears to be the case with students who have been exposed to a native English speaker (NES) as an instructor for an extended period of time. Students become more aware of their lack of communicative ability and thus become more intolerant of ambiguity when speaking in English. It is therefore questionable if such early exposure to an NES instructor is indeed merited. Moreover, as the data also showed that TOA was not affected by the nationality of the university instructor, it would appear that students are receptive to an NES instructor at the university level once they have acquired a knowledge base in English.

Furthermore, instructors who are native English speakers will have their own goals and methodology

that are a result of socialization in an educational system foreign to Japan. Thus, different learning styles will have been developed and these learning styles will be reflected in their instructional techniques. As many researchers advocate, “the closer the match between a student’s learning style and the teacher’s instructional methods, the more likely the student will experience academic success” (Irvine & York, 1995, p. 491). Therefore, it is paramount that foreign instructors teaching English in Japan are aware of the lack of continuity between their preferred mode of instruction and the learning style of their students.

### **Resolution of the culture clash**

Byram (1989) has developed a four sector circular model for FL education that makes use both of the target language and the native language of the student. The four sectors are language learning, language awareness, cultural awareness, and cultural experience. Each complements the other and is taught in varying degrees as students advance in their second language proficiency. Byram is quick to point out that culture experience does not necessarily mean travel to a country in which the target language is spoken. “That aspect of a stay abroad which consists of using the foreign language to cope with new experience by modifying existing schemata, can also be found in the classroom when pupils are taught through the foreign language” (p. 145). This can

be done through the use of intercultural communication methods.

I would like to introduce a specific example of teaching methodology I have developed for the field-dependent, reflective-observer who prefers a modeling approach to learning. Intercultural communication methodology often makes use of description-interpretation-evaluation (D.I.E.). By using a D.I.E. approach in the EFL classroom, students can experience the target language as if they were in the foreign country. As language must be viewed in context, students are taught through the use of short video segments in the foreign language. This method has been specifically adopted for the Japanese university EFL classroom but could easily be adapted for any classroom environment.

First students are allowed to reflectively observe a short video interaction between native speakers in the target language. As the video provides context, students’ field-dependent needs are also met. Then students are taught to make non-judgmental observations on what they see. The stated observations are then interpreted as to what they mean in context to a native speaker of that language. Finally, students evaluate how they will have to adapt their own communication strategies in order to use the second language effectively. Depending on the level of the student, discussion is conducted in either the target language or the native language of the student.

## Conclusion

A teacher who is aware of the cultural implications in her/his students' learning style can easily adapt to teach to the students' strengths. By introducing intercultural communication methodology into the EFL classroom, teachers have the ability to increase both students' cultural awareness of the target language as well as providing insight into their own values and attitudes expressed through the use of their native language. As Gridinsky (1998) clearly illustrates:

Not only is cultural learning of paramount importance in the language classroom but equally important is the role that one's native

LC [languaculture] and its corresponding filter has on the process of interpretation. Since C1 [first culture] specific knowledge influences both perception and how one interprets the world (Wolff, 1989), it must actively be addressed in the language classroom. (p. 177)

As foreign language teachers, we must actively seek ways in which to foster cultural awareness in our students, both of their own culture as well as the second culture. When this can be accomplished, true second language acquisition will be the result as we teach to our students' strengths.

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