Politeness-Groupism, Individuality, and Japanese Students

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This article first looks at the evidence to suggest that Japanese society has traditionally been based on the principle of group harmony. It then considers the opinions given by students in response to the question *what makes a good English class?* The students ranked their answers in order of importance using the *Nominal Group Technique*, a means of program planning. The student responses were found to fall into two groups, those which reflect the class as a whole, and those which reflect the individual learning strategies of the students. The awareness of these individual responses has been evaluated in the context of the current educational reforms. These reforms, which emphasize the need to increase the amount of individuality in the class, indicate that Japanese society is moving away from the traditional group orientated society towards one in which there is a greater sense of individuality.

本稿は、What makes a good English class?の学生の答えを考えている。答えは学生にノミナルグループテクニックというプログラムを計画する方法で重要さをランキングした。学生の答えは2つの種類に分かれた。1つはクラス全体に関して、もう1つは学生の個人的な学び方。学生は自分の学び方を理解することと教育の改善を一緒に考えた。教育に個性を発展しなければいけない改善と学生の自分の学び方を理解することは似たような必要性を指摘する。

Groupism and Individualism

I would like to provide a brief introduction to some of the issues which concern Japanese students, in particular the issues of groupism and individualism, and how these two apparently opposite poles are relevant to the lives of our students here in Japan.

The Idea of Groupism

The Japanese are well known as belonging to a culture which favours both group thinking and group consensus. Much of the evidence for this cultural trait has been demonstrated in the spoken language of the Japanese, the rationale behind this being that language and culture are directly related.

An interesting comment made by a Japanese student in Britain was this: "I like the English way, because I can say 'Hello Mr. Blair' to the Prime Minister. Isn't that wonderful?" (cited in Davis, 1999). The implication is perhaps that the student, when in Britain, can say what they want to say without having to say sir or to use any especially formal language because they are speaking to the prime minister. The student does not have to think about the importance of what they say in terms of the surrounding group. If the student wants to use such "neutral" language when speaking

to Tony Blair, with no particular reference to the fact that Blair is the leader of the government and the Prime Minister, then there is enough cultural space for the student to do so. Indeed I feel quite able to call him Tony Blair, without feeling any need to add The Right Honorable first.

The converse, the cultural need to add an honorific to the name in order to reflect the importance of the person and their group, is said to be particularly noticeable in the Japanese language. This is referencing speech to the surrounding group. Something which is especially noticeable in the use of *keigo*, the so called politeness language often used by Japanese speakers. To be more specific, in Japanese using politeness is not simply a personal addition to a sentence, rather it is "a choice of expression that conveys additional information about the social context" (Matsumoto, 1989). In other words adding politeness markers to speech is an expression by the speaker that they have acknowledged and accepted the value of the immediate social situation.

It is this information about the social context, or the surrounding situation which is encoded into the language, and which displays the nature of Japanese culture. For example, a hotel clerk can say "This is a service provided by the hotel" in three possible ways:

1. *Kore-wa kono hoteru no sabisu da* [This is a service provided by the hotel].

2. *Kore-wa kono hoteru no sabisu desu* [This is a service provided by the hotel].

3. *Kore-wa kono hoteru no sabisu degozaimasu* [This is a service provided by the hotel].

While the hotel clerk maintains individual control over what they can say, any personal choice is sublimated, or becomes of secondary importance in relation to the social context, namely the relationship between customer and clerk. This relationship can be seen as "I am a member of the hotel group, and you are a member of the customer group. We are two societies or groups meeting here at the check-in desk." It is this sense of group which is seen to be reflected in the speech of the individual. Ide (1989), a well known cultural linguist, offers that the choice of verb and the implication contained in the speaker's utterance about that situation needs to be considered as *obligatory* in Japanese as noun/verb concord (namely *There are two cups* as opposed to *There is two cups*) is in English. One could also add that this obligatory encoding of the situation into language, in this case of *service* group and *customer* group, also accounts for the standard pattern of responses which one hears in hotels in Japan.

Ide (1989) in her account of politeness also suggests that this obligatory social encoding represents a direct contrast with Western society. We as native English speakers typically attempt to avoid potentially "dangerous" situations when speaking to someone, by attempting to find an area of agreement with that person on a one-to-one level. That is to "anoint" the face of the person as Brown and Levinson (1987) have defined it. Conversely the Japanese speaker is not concerned with the *individual* to whom they are speaking as the basis of interaction, but rather with the *status* of that person as a member of a certain group.

If we can accept that there are distinctly non-western cultural differences in the way that language—and in

particular politeness—is used in Japanese, then one might ask if there is a difference in the behaviour of teachers as well. The criticisms of students' work made by Japanese and British teachers were studied by Hiraga and Turner (1996), who in essence concluded that it was up to the Japanese student to accept what the teacher says unconditionally in Japan. This study noted that instances of acceptance of criticism by teachers were 40-50% less among British students. It also noted that Japanese students were far less interested in the content of the criticism per se, and more interested in the input on a general level. That is, what is important is the information from the teacher as *criticism* rather than the content of the particular mistake. Japanese students, when asked to select sections from their own work which they thought were the best were often presented with a challenge which often resulted in a breakdown of communication (Hiraga & Turner, 1996). This may be a difficult concept for non-Japanese to imagine, but it reminds me of some students I have known in writing classes. If I point out a spelling mistake they will ask "Well, how do you spell it then?" And then, immediately take their eraser, rub out the word, replace it with the new word, and then carry on as though nothing has happened. This is for me a culturally definitive type of behaviour. In fact what I usually do with spelling mistakes is to simply point at the word and say nothing, and the students soon understand that this means *wrong spelling*, and causes them to think about the word, and if necessary to look for the correct spelling.

We also find that British teachers will often use a tag question when addressing students, and that this allows the "face" of the student to be preserved, as in *You haven't done much, have you?* (Hiraga & Turner, 1996). This contrasts with the Japanese teacher who appears far more direct than the British teacher, and who would typically admonish the student with *This is far from what is required* or *Work harder* [*Ganbaru*] (Hiraga & Turner, 1996). Such comments, it is suggested, would "demean" a British student by assuming that they are not able to make independent or adult decisions about how to study for themselves.

A British student is more likely to take offence, or even to reject completely such a comment as "You need to work harder" whereas the Japanese student, by considering the status of the teacher as a member of the surrounding group of teachers who are "greater" than them, is seen as more likely to accept this comment without question. One can at least suggest that this is within the student-teacher encounter. It is often suggested that Japanese society conditions people towards the dominance of the group, and it is this dominance of group, or *groupism* which we can see reflected in the Japanese language.

Shifts Toward Individualism

It might be added that this idea of Japanese society founded on the principle of group harmony is the traditional view of Japanese society. Indeed, many people who have lived in Japan may well have observed a shift in the behaviour of their Japanese students. Are we perhaps able to observe less orientation towards the group these days, and the appearance of more individuality in our students? The short answer is, I think, yes. It is certainly the case that there has been a political drive towards promoting the value of individuality within education.

This study asks students what they think about their English classes, and what they as individuals think makes a good class. Given the nature of the Japanese education system and of Japanese society which typically emphasizes homogeneity, consensus and hierarchical relationships, (McVeigh, 2002) it is sometimes difficult to be sure of the extent to which Japanese students are aware of their own individual learning inside the classroom. Individual learning can be considered as a component of individual identity; that is identity which is defined by an individual's relationship to the prevailing culture (Giddens, 2003). In Japan this prevailing culture is generally regarded to be one of consensus, and the relationship between the individual and the group is one which contributes towards this consensus and the importance of the group over the needs of the individual (Biddle, 2001; Shimahara, 1995). There are those in Japan who regard the idea of individuality as a particularly Western notion which runs counter to the Japanese conception of group primacy. The danger, as those who hold this view see it, is that individuality equates to selfishness and irresponsibility (Hood, 2003). The matter of individuality is nonetheless of concern in Japan at the political level, in so much as an overemphasis by the education system on the fostering of *egalitarianism*, that is social homogeneity, is seen to have led to a decline in the development of individuality, and therefore the ability of Japan to be creative and inventive, and to compete in a global economy.

From an economic perspective it is interesting to note that Akio Morita, the former chairman of Sony, raised doubts about Japan's ability to remain in the global market place because Japan, as he saw it, had exhausted the supply of ideas from the West, and needed to develop its own ideas in order to drive the economy forward (cited in Goodman, 2003). For Morita, individuality is a means of achieving economic survival. However, the current chairman of Fuji Xerox, Yotaro Kobayashi, writes that with regard to the development of this creative individuality for the global market place, Japan is still "lagging behind" (Kobayashi, 2000). The issues of creativity and an academic-industrial partnership were also proposed in the Toyama Plan, a package of reforms put forward by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in 2001. These reforms emphasised the need for universities to contribute to "the establishment of a nation based on the creativity of science and technology" (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, cited in Tsuruta, 2003a). These are aims which in turn arise from a desire for Japan to compete in a world of ever increasing globalisation. To this end, the Sony Foundation for Education states that its primary objective is to support teachers who are trying to develop children to be able to take the initiative when learning, and has further stated that, "We want kids to become adults who can think and act on their own" (Uchiyama, cited in Kitazume, 2004).

Individualism in Education

In Japan in 2004, we are beginning to see the introduction of governmental educational reforms which acknowledge that education can be about more than simply rote learning and memorization. As of April 2002 new guidelines were introduced into Japanese schools and universities, the culmination of a process which had its origins largely under

the then Nakasone government of the 1980's. These new reforms are an attempt to introduce Western practices in to Japan (Cummings, 2003).

These guidelines primarily involve a reduction in the workload of the pre-tertiary school curriculum by around 30%, and the introduction of a five day school week. The new pre-tertiary school curriculum also allows for *integrated learning classes* which have no prescribed textbook, and which are taught at the discretion of the individual teacher. They are intended to "encourage students to develop their own interests and to think for themselves" (Goodman, 2003). At the tertiary level, national universities are to be given more autonomy in terms of teaching, staffing and research, and to become self-governing financial bodies by 2004. Implementation of these policies would represent a huge shift from the past, in which students were pre-occupied with university entrance exams which to a large degree still typically require the memorization of large amounts of information, and by virtue of their multiple choice style leave little room for individual comment and analysis (McVeigh, 2002).

Within the educational context it is useful to consider the matter of individuality in terms of the experience of learning. That is, each student (or indeed any person) needs to be aware of the experience so that effective learning can take place. According to a model proposed by Kolb (1984; see also Smith, 2005), there are four inter-related or circular stages of the experiential learning process. The learner carries out an initial learning act which is then reflected upon. From this reflection abstract theories are constructed and these theories are used and experimented with in

different situations. While the learner may start at any one point in this process, and while some learners may be better at one stage compared to another (e.g. a learner may be better at constructing theories than reflection), all parts of the learning experience are required in order to achieve effective learning. The approach proposed by Kolb draws attention to the fact that it is necessary for the individual to understand and value learning as an experience. There is also a further implication, namely that the ability to regard learning as an experience is a skill which can be applied to any situation, whether this is inside a classroom or not.

Individuality implies that a classroom is not composed of people who are the same, but rather that there are many differences in a class. There are potentially as many responses to the learning situation as there are people in the class (Jarvis, 1995; see also Smith, 2005). These differences may vary from learning to non-learning and from reflective to non-reflective (Smith, 2005). Thus, the notion of individuality in the classroom supports both the experiences of an individual and the differences an individual has from others. It considers how different individuals learn, and accepts that different learners prefer to learn in different ways. Learning styles are a reflection of the preferences of learners, and the choices which students can make in a class. There are many different models of learner styles, in particular there is the VARK (visual, aural, read/write and kinesthetic) model (Fleming, 2001). This model categorizes individual preferences as visual (e.g., pictures, diagrams, and video), aural (e.g., lecturers' voices, discussions, explanations, and tape recordings), read/write (e.g., lists, textbooks, and lectures notes), and finally kinesthetic (e.g.,

experience, concrete examples, and field trips).

On the arguments above it is clear that individuality has an important economic role to play for Japan, at least in the eyes of its political and economic leaders, and that education can contribute to the development of individuality by acknowledging the value of the learning experience, and an individual's learning preferences in the class. What, though, is the perspective of Japanese students from inside an EFL classroom, and do these opinions reflect the prevailing concerns with the issues of individuality and consensus? These are questions which were addressed in a study which I conducted among some of my own students.

A Study of Japanese EFL Students' Views on Individuality in Learning

This study used the Nominal Group Technique or NGT, (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975), which is a management focus-group technique used in program planning. The results of this investigation, (see the appendix below for a full listing), are from a study of thirty four EFL students, 12 male and 22 female. The sample was taken from two universities in Tokyo, namely Kyorin University and Chuo University, and the students were all either English majors or Economics majors. They were in their first, second or third year, with an age range from between 18 and 22 years. The level of English did not extend to beyond that of pre-intermediate.

The NGT establishes the opinions of its participants which are then prioritized in order of importance in response to a single question. In this case the students were asked,

What makes a good English class? They were then asked to discuss, clarify and prioritize their opinions in order, from the most important (5), to the least important (1). The NGT is highly structured and systematic, and as such it was deemed to be ideal for Japanese students, as this structure is seen to reflect the organization of classes within the Japanese educational system. The NGT is not normally associated with an EFL classroom, but more so with practicing administrators or professionals. It has for example been used successfully to establish the location of nuclear power stations (Voelker, 1976), and to establish the opinions of professional managers (Hoffmann & Scheller, n.d.). It should be added however that as this technique can be used with any type of question, and it can also be used independently in the EFL classroom as a communicative activity in its own right, for example with questions such as *What makes a good textbook?* or *What makes a good actor?*

Procedure

The students were put into small groups, and they were then presented with the target question, in this case *What makes a good English class?* The students were then asked to write in silence and in five minutes as many answers to the question as possible. At the end of this period, a spokesperson was selected from each group who recorded the answers on a large piece of paper on the wall, so that all the answers were visible to the group (see Figure 1).
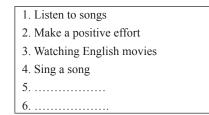
1. Listen to songs
2. Make a positive effort
3. Watching English movies
4. Sing a song
5. ………………
6. ………………

Figure 1. Sample student answers to What makes a good English class?

1. Listen to songs 5-3-3-2-2-2-1
2. Positive attitude 5-5-5-5-5-4-4
3. Watching English movies 3-3-2-2-2-1-1
4. Sing a song 5-5-5-5-5-4-4
5. ……………………
6. ………………………

Figure 2. Sample rankings alongside each answer

The students were then asked to discuss, clarify, question or explain any of the ideas which were displayed in front of them, after which a preliminary vote took place. For this, each student was given five index cards, and they chose which they thought were the five most interesting answers on the wall in front of them. They wrote one idea on each card, and these were numbered from 1-5 according to the students' perception of the level of importance of the answers. The cards were then collected by the spokesperson, and all the rankings of the group members were written next to the ideas generated in the first stage on the flip chart in front of the group (see Figure 2).

The students were then directed to clarify or explain any of their rankings to make sure that all the answers had been understood by all the members of the group. The students were then asked once more to choose and rank five ideas from the list in front of them in the same way as before. These final choices allowed for further confirmation and clarification by the students. They were also taken to be an agreed representation of the opinions of the participants in the group. Finally the cards were collected, and the NGT was brought to a close.

Discussion

The NGT generated of a lot of answers and it provided some very personal insights into what the students thought of their English classes. One of the most striking aspects of these responses is that they appear to fall into two distinct categories (see table 1). There are opinions which reflect the dynamics of the class as a whole, (e.g., *Have a good relationship with each other, Everyone concentrate to the class as you can*) and there are personal responses which

reflect the individual opinions and learning preferences of the students. (e.g., *Don't be afraid of making mistake, Make effort to learn English*). This may not seem to be a particularly striking finding; however, taken within the current social context of Japan, and the debate within education concerning an individual versus consensus dichotomy, this polarization of responses appears to make more sense.

Table 1. The most important group and individually orientated responses by category

Group	Individual
5. Most important	5. Most important
We should speak positive English.	Don't be afraid of mistakes.
	Positive attitude.
They have a good relationship with each other.	Make effort to learn English.
	To talk with native speakers.
All student speak English one time in a class.	Listen to native English.
	Sing a song.
Everyone concentrate to the class as you can.	Listen to English.
	Use English only.
We enjoy English conversation.	Always speak in English.
	Cooking confectionary, the recipe is in English.
	Use the picture (not only talk).

Individually Orientated Responses

The most important responses (ranked as 5), which have been characterized as individually orientated responses, (e.g., *Don't be afraid of making mistakes, Positive attitude*),

can be seen to imply that each student is aware of his or her own intrinsic motivation, and consequently that they are able to value learning as an individual experience. This is a trend which can be observed in many of the other answers given by the students, even those which were not considered to be the most important. Responses such as *Pay attention to your English ability not only the exam* and *Do not speak English* (ranked as 2) also implicate the value of the experience for these particular learners. The answers ranked as 5 are perhaps in contrast to the aims of an educational system which traditionally has socialized students "to regard knowledge not as a value or aim itself, but rather as a step toward the goal of passing exams and eventually securing employment" (McVeigh, 2002).

The Japanese education system has been described as producing passive EFL students, who prefer to listen rather than speak (Yamada, 1997). One of the consequences of such an educational system may be that Japanese students are not schooled in how to develop an argument, nor in how to give their own opinions and insights. Such a lack of development may well entail short sentences when speaking English, very short discussions, or in some cases silence. (See McVeigh, 2002, for some possible interpretations of student silence in Japan.) A determination not to be intimidated by mistakes when speaking English shows that there is a willingness to hypothesize and to experiment, and that this is considered to be important by the students in this study. To be overtly concerned with making mistakes would suggest the dominant effects of this system, and when students are not worrying about making mistakes, the assumption here is that they are interested in the process of learning.

Other responses by the students such as S*ing a song, Cooking confectionary,* and *Use the picture (not only talk)* (overall rankings 5) indicate that students have individual preferences with regard to how they want to learn. An interest in use of song and of pictures indicates that some of the students have aural and visual preferences, respectively. This can also be taken as evidence that there are different learning styles in the class (Fleming, 2001). Similarly, individual learning preferences (of an aural nature) can be seen with such answers as *Tune your ear to your teachers voice* (overall ranking 2), and *Try to listen to other's English* (overall ranking 1). Such preferences when examined within the context of a prescribed curriculum, in which individual choices are not usually considered (Shimahara, 1995), are of relevance to the educational system, and one of the recent educational reforms gives universities have more control over the content of their courses (Tsuruta, 2003b). One of the universities in this study is currently introducing elective English courses for the first time.

Group Orientated Responses

The nature of the group is clearly important to the students in this study, and the students seem to value a class which provides a supportive and permissive atmosphere. This can be evidenced in group-orientated responses such as *They have a good relationship with each other, All students speak English one time in a class* (overall ranking 5), and *Student should take part in the class* (overall ranking 4), *We make a good atmosphere*, (overall ranking 3) through to *Pleasant class* and *We should try to have fun* (overall rankings 2 and 1, respectively). These responses express the type of behaviour which we would traditionally expect to find among Japanese students, namely a strong desire to see a unified and harmonious group (Shimahara, 1995).

Conclusion

It appears from the replies given by the students in this study when asked what makes a good English class that there is awareness by the students of the group as a whole, and an acute sense of their own individuality within that group. The responses given by the students in this investigation need to be considered in terms of the current educational reforms and economic impetus, both of which acknowledge that there is a need to increase the amount of individualism in Japan, and in particular among Japanese students. Within the classroom this would imply a departure from the hitherto traditional approach towards education in Japan which might be defined as a situation whereby the teacher teaches and the student listens. It further indicates what many have been aware of in Japan, that we are witnessing a change in the thinking of young people in Japan, and that there is an emerging sense of the value of individuality in the classroom.

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Appendix

Full List of Ranked Responses to What Makes a Good English Class?

Some answers have been given different rankings by different students and appear more than once.

Group orientated responses, from 5-1, the most important to the least important.	Individually orientated responses, from 5-1, the most important to the least important.
5. Most important	**5. Most important**
We should speak positive English.	Don't be afraid of mistakes.
They have a good relationship with each other.	Positive attitude.
All student speak English one time in a class.	Make effort to learn English.
Everyone concentrate to the class as you can.	To talk with native speakers.
We enjoy English conversation.	Listen to native English.
Try discussioning in English.	Sing a song.
	Listen to English.
	Use English only.
	Always speak in English.
	Cooking confectionary, the recipe is in English.
	Use the picture (not only talk).
	Make English girlfriend as you can.

4.	4.
They make a good mood with a smile.	Positive attitude.
We enjoy English conversation.	Make an effort to speak.
We make a good atmosphere.	Try to speak with native English speaker.
All the student speak English one time in a class.	Use English only.
They have good relationships with each other.	To talk with native speakers.
Pleasant class.	Watching English movie.
Student should take part in class.	Don't be afraid of mistakes.
Ask questions if you do not understand.	Make English girlfriend.
Learning interesting themes.	Do not speak Japanese.
We should positive speak English.	Cooking confectionary, the recipe is in English.
	Sing English song.
	Listen to native English.
	Tune your ear to the teacher's voice.

3.	3.
Laugh.	Positive attitude.
Try discussing in English.	Listen to native English.
We enjoy English conversation.	Positive Listening.
They make a good mood with a smile.	Make an effort to speak with each other.
All student speak English one time or more in a class.	Make an effort to speak.
We make a good atmosphere.	Listen to English.
Each student manner.	Use English only.
Friendship.	Watching English movie.
They play a lot of games in English.	Make an effort to learn English.
	Do not speak Japanese.
	Cooking confectionary (the recipe is in English.
	Pay attention to your English ability not only the exam.
	Songs and film.
	Study hard.
	Eye contact.

2.	2.
To play a lot of games in English.	Listening to music.
Student should take part in class.	Do not speak Japanese.
Try discussioning in English.	Positive listening.
Make a good atmosphere.	Study hard.
We should try to have fun.	Tune your ear to the teacher's voice.
Learn interesting themes.	Curiosity in the English speaking country's culture.
All student should speak one time in a class.	
We are always smiling.	
Pleasant class.	
They have a good relationship with each other.	
Each student manner.	
The class helps the student and the teacher.	
Communication.	
To make a good mood with a smile.	
An English teacher makes students laugh.	

1. Least important	1. Least important
Each student manner.	Try to listen to other's English.
To play a lot of games in English.	Watching English movies.
We should try to have fun.	Listening English movie.
Enjoying.	Positive attitude.
Try discussing in English.	Beautiful girls and handsome boys.
Keep good health.	Don't be afraid of mistakes.
We make a good atmosphere.	Listen to English.
Always smiling.	Do not speak Japanese.
Student should take part in class.	Attend every week.
The teacher should have a sense of humour.	Easy to understand class.
The class helps the students and the teacher.	Homework.
Friendship.	