

An interview with Joseph Shaules

Stephen Shrader

Notre Dame Seishin Women's University

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Joseph Shaules presented at JALT2010, where he talked about intercultural communication (IC) and language teaching. Chatting after his session, we also discussed the importance of maintaining a dialogue in the language teaching community about the teaching of IC and culture. Due to the distance between Okayama and Tokyo, he was kind enough to agree to an interview with Stephen Shrader, a Visiting Instructor at Notre Dame Seishin Women's University, through a series of email exchanges.

Joseph Shaulesは2010年にJALTで、異文化間コミュニケーション(IC)と言語教育に関する発表を行った。私達はその発表後に、ICと文化の教育に関して、言語教育コミュニティでの対話を継続する大切さを話し合った。岡山と東京は遠距離のため、メールのやり取りを通してのインタビューを行った。

Joseph Shaules has worked in intercultural education in Japan, Mexico and Europe for more than 20 years. He has been a teacher of languages and intercultural communication alike, as well as a trainer and program coordinator. He is the current director of the Japan Intercultural Institute, and, with International House of Japan, has developed seminars in leadership skills for intercultural professionals. His extensive publication list includes *Deep Culture—Hidden Challenges to Global Living* (Multilingual Matters), numerous articles, and such language and intercultural education textbooks as *Identity* (Oxford University Press), *Impact Values* (Longman International), and *Different Realities* (Nan-un-do). He is a Specially Appointed Associate Professor at the Rikkyo University Graduate School of Intercultural Communication and lives in Tokyo.

Stephen Shrader: Your work seems to bridge two different areas—language education and also intercultural communication. The ELT books you have published often have a strong intercultural component. Some of your other books and workshops, however, have relatively little focus on language structure or form. How would you describe your own area of interest? Do you consider it one specialty, or two?

Joseph Shaules: My fundamental interest is the transformation we undergo as we learn a new language and have intercultural experiences. It's a bit of a cliché to say that learning a language requires cultural learning, and also that you can't fully understand a cultural community without speaking its language. Somehow, though, the field of language education has developed largely independently of the field of intercultural communication.

SS: Why is that?

JS: I don't know. It's weird. For me, and I think for many learners, a foreign language opens a door into another world. That's how I felt when I was first learning Spanish many years ago. It was a life changing experience. That was also true as I have learned Japanese, and later French. My students are thrilled when they make a foreign friend, not when they successfully construct a sentence. Yet, for understandable reasons I suppose, language education is often weighted towards the mechanics of information processing. And with the nuts-and-bolts challenges of lesson plans and entrance exams, it's easy for the focus of teaching to become the language itself, rather than communication in a larger sense. Yet I am still surprised at how the language and culture connection is relatively weak within our profession.

SS: Are you speaking specifically of Japan?

JS: Foreign language education in the UK has a strong component of cultural learning—I'm thinking of the work of Mike Byram, for example—and in the US the world of ESL is dealing with multicultural classrooms full of students who need to function in American society. That's a very different challenge from here in Japan, where there's often no clear target culture.

SS: What do you mean by "target culture"?

JS: In a French textbook you can often find cultural tips, such as "When entering a store, be sure to say 'Bonjour!'", and information on French values and society. But that's because most French learners see France as the cultural center to the French speaking world. That center doesn't exist in the same way in English. The majority of English speakers are not first-language speakers. My students may use English with an American or Brit, but just as likely with a Malaysian or Mexican. One of the reasons cultural content is relatively rare in Japanese English language education is that teachers don't know what content to teach, given the international scope of English.

SS: I have the impression that many teachers in Japan struggle a bit when they try to include cultural elements into their teaching.

JS: I think most teachers understand intuitively that language education needs to include cultural learning. It expands and gives meaning to what we do in the classroom. Students are interested in life in far-away places and their experiences with foreigners. Many teachers I talk to would be happy to include more cultural elements into their own teaching, but aren't quite sure how to go about it.

SS: Yes, I was about to ask what you mean by "culture learning". How can culture be included into a language education curriculum? What's the content?

JS: It's hard to come up with content if you think of culture as something to put into a language curriculum, rather than the opposite—which sees language learning as part of larger process of cultural learning. It's hard to take a meta-process (cultural learning) and break it up into small chunks that fit into a smaller process (language learning). In fact, it's much easier to do the opposite. When I give intercultural trainings, it's easy to include language learning as a one of the components of cultural learning. That's because language learning fits easily within the larger process of cultural learning. When you try to do the opposite—to include culture as a single component of a language learning process—it becomes difficult to figure out what to focus on.

SS: That's somewhat abstract . . .

JS: Let's put it this way. Putting culture content in a language class is something like saying: "In today's class we'll be talking about culture". That's hard to do. There's simply too much to choose from. The framework of "culture" is actually larger than the framework of "language". Rather, we need to frame our language learning goals within the cultural learning process. So, for example, I start the semester by talking about how the language practice we will be doing fits into our larger goal of cultural learning. When we learn vocabulary we'll see that certain words are hard to translate directly, for example. When we do speaking practice, we are in fact preparing for future interactions. When we study grammar we are going to try to understand which kinds of mistakes might lead to misunderstanding, and which we shouldn't worry too much about in

everyday communication. By putting language learning into the context of cultural learning, we provide a new layer of meaning and motivation for our students. Cultural learning needs to permeate the language learning process.

SS: So when you say “culture learning” you are not really talking about simply giving cultural information. It seems to be more focused on the process of using language as a tool for intercultural experiences.

JS: Precisely. And intercultural experiences are not so much about geography, but about interaction with people. Looking out the window of a tour bus is not much different from watching a travel special on TV. But making friends with a foreigner in your own neighborhood can have a life-changing impact.

SS: So could we say that culture learning is not necessarily guaranteed by language learning in and of itself, by travel as a tourist, or by superficially meeting people from other cultures?

JS: Yes, I think that’s right. And I think that relationship formation is where language and culture come together. Language is a practical tool that helps us navigate our intercultural learning, and it also provides an entry point for understanding other ways of thinking and being.

SS: It makes sense when you say it that way. But I guess it’s not always an easy conversation to have with students. I think some teachers feel teaching about culture requires some specialized knowledge.

JS: There are some basic cultural competencies that all language teachers need as a starting point for teaching. For example, we need an understanding of how linguistic meaning is connected with culture. This is one reason it’s often impossible to translate certain words directly into another language. I sometimes ask my students how to say *nakama* in English. The dictionary has translations as far apart as “friend”, “colleague” and “gang member”. My students start to see that for a non-Japanese to understand the word *nakama* they have to understand something about Japanese culture. *Nakama* is related to the in-group feelings we find in terms like *uchi* and *soto*. Words can’t be understood in isolation, or

simply as direct translations. This helps them also see that cultural values are reflected in language—think of proverbs, such as “Time is money”, or “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.”

SS: Can this kind of cultural knowledge be taught? Or is it more a question of gaining awareness?

JS: You can’t separate knowledge from awareness. We are more aware of the things that we have learned about and delved into. The kinds of cultural basics I’m talking about form the background knowledge for competent language teaching. Language teachers don’t need to be linguists, or testing specialists, or biologists, but they need to have basic knowledge of linguistics, testing methodology, and memory. It’s the same thing.

SS: What other cultural competencies do you see for language teachers?

JS: Some other basics include some knowledge of the diversity of world Englishes, and an understanding of the importance of non-verbal communication and body language. Since language teachers often need to help students prepare for going abroad, they should understand some basics about cultural adaptation, such as culture shock.

SS: How about cultural differences in teaching and learning styles?

JS: For non-Japanese teachers, classroom management skills are heavily dependent on cultural understanding. I taught in Mexico before coming to Japan and was initially baffled by the behavior of my Japanese students. I had no idea how to manage learning and interaction. You sometimes hear teachers say Japanese students won’t speak up, as though there’s something wrong with them. But they’re missing the point. Japanese students are acting totally normally. It’s the foreign teacher who is at a loss. The more we understand our students, the more we see how to work with and expand their responses to our teaching. To do this means teachers must be able to look at the classroom through the eyes of their students—which is not an easy thing to do.

SS: And for Japanese teachers of foreign languages?

JS: Obviously they have a different set of challenges. Yet they start with a much better understanding of the classroom and the learning challenges faced by their students. They themselves have been through the learning process their students face. That implicit knowledge is often undervalued.

Beyond that, they are cultural learning role models. Students are very sensitive to how comfortable their Japanese teachers are speaking English, and how they deal with not necessarily having all the linguistic answers all the time. They notice the interaction between their Japanese teacher and the foreign ALT.

If students see their Japanese English teachers actively and confidently engaged in being an English learner and user, it gives them confidence to do the same. A foreign teacher may be exotic and interesting, but they are also often seen as rather inaccessible. Too often, they don't speak fluent Japanese.

Our students need to understand clearly that learning a foreign language doesn't mean you become a foreigner. It means you express your personality, and your cultural self in a foreign language. I tell my students that being international entails the confidence to be Japanese in a foreign language. Japanese teachers of foreign languages have powerful tools for teaching this lesson.

SS: You said that foreign teachers are sometimes seen as exotic. This makes me wonder about the teaching of cultural difference. How do we teach about cultural difference without falling into stereotypes?

JS: Talking about cultural difference is tricky. We often use personality words—shy, outgoing, etc.—when talking about differences between people. But this is problematic when talking about culture. To call someone “shy” implies they have some inner quality of “shyness” compared to what is normal or typical. But 130 million Japanese can't all be “shy”. Culture is about interpreting behavior. Japanese communication may seem “shy” to an Italian used to more expressiveness, but to someone from Ethiopia

or Finland, Japanese indirectness may not seem “shy” at all.

SS: But isn't there a lot of individual variation in how we communicate? No one is ever “typical” of their country or culture, are they?

JS: Of course not. Culture doesn't control us. It provides a framework for interacting with others. Language provides an excellent parallel. No two people speak in exactly the same way, and so there is no such thing as a typical native speaker. That's why textbook recordings can sound so boring—they are providing a depersonalized model of language. In real life, language use is highly idiosyncratic. I express who I am by how I speak. Expectations of usage act as a framework within which we express our individuality. I can say “I'm not” or “I ain't” depending on the impression I want to give. Culture is the same. It provides us with the framework within which we express our individual identity. Culture and individuality are not opposed to each other—they are nestled into each other. You can't have one without the other. I recently met a woman from Mali who was quite outgoing. But I didn't know if her behavior was common in Mali, or a reflection of her particular personality.

SS: If so much depends on the individual, what does it mean to “be” Japanese or American or whatever. In a global world, are those categories meaningless?

JS: Globalization is giving us a lot of things to choose from. I may want to identify myself with my ethnic or religious group, or not. I may feel like a global citizen, or an artist, or a rugby player. That's a question of who or what I choose to identify with. As a language teacher, however, I am more interested in culture as the “rules of the game”. What makes me American in practical terms is not whether I feel American, or act like a typical American, but that I can interpret the behavior of other Americans. I understand what is “normal” among Americans. That's what allows me to communicate successfully with them. The challenge of cultural learning lies in learning about and appreciating the different “normals” we find around the world.