

Teaching Sociolinguistic Knowledge in Japanese High Schools

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This paper presents a preliminary report on teaching sociolinguistic knowledge in an EFL class at a Japanese high school. The teaching approach is based on Ellis' (1991) consideration that creating awareness of rules should be an important goal in helping Japanese students acquire sociolinguistic competence. In teaching sociolinguistic knowledge, many non-native speaker (NNS) high school teachers face problems such as their own lack of knowledge, the existing curriculum requirements, the various teaching goals, student motivation, and evaluation procedures. However, this report suggests that such problems can be overcome and that students strongly benefit from the active teaching of sociolinguistic knowledge.

本論は日本の高校で社会言語学的知識を教える試みの報告である。Ellis (1991)の論に従い、日本人の生徒の社会言語学的能力の習得を助けるには、規則への気づきを育てることが重要な目標であるはずだという方針で指導法を考えた。非母語話者の高校教師の多くは、自分自身が十分な社会言語学的知識をもたない、現行のカリキュラムに制約がある、教育目標が多様である、学生の動機づけ、評価方法などの問題に直面する。しかしながら、この報告が示唆するように、これらの問題は克服できるし、社会言語学的知識を積極的に教えることで学生の得られる利益は大きい。

The concept of communicative competence, first introduced by Hymes (1971) and further developed by Canale and Swain (1980), has contributed to a fundamental shift in the aims and content of second language (L2) pedagogy away from an emphasis on mastering the formal properties of a language to an emphasis on learning how a language is used to realize meaning (Ellis, 1991). The importance of such communicative competence as one goal of English language instruction in Japanese high schools was made explicit through the establishment of three Oral Communication (OC) courses in April, 1994 under the direction of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (*Monbusho*, 1989).

Three years before OC started, Ellis (1991) suggested the need to teach communicative competence in Japanese EFL classrooms. He noted that

communicative competence consists of two aspects: linguistic knowledge and functional ability. Linguistic competence includes knowledge of formulas and rules, while functional competence entails sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic knowledge (p.108). Citing Beebe's research (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990) on the type of sociolinguistic problems which many Japanese learners of English face, such as miscommunication caused by indirectness when responding or by unspecified excuses when refusing, Ellis recommended that EFL teachers must promote the development of sociolinguistic knowledge—how to use English in socially appropriate ways. Beebe (1995) has also argued that the social rules of speaking are part of the basics of second language acquisition and need to be taught from the very beginning.

Responding to these considerations, the following paper discusses some problems associated with implementing the teaching of sociolinguistic aspects of English communication in Japanese high schools. It also presents a preliminary report on teaching lessons designed to raise Japanese high school students' sociolinguistic awareness and examines student reactions to the lessons. Several suggestions for teaching sociolinguistic competence in Japanese high schools are also presented.

Problems in Teaching Sociolinguistics

Curriculum

Unfortunately the sociolinguistic aspects of English language communication are not addressed by the present OC curriculum. The *Monbusho's* guidelines (1989) do not mention that OC should include the teaching of cultural knowledge necessary for communication.

At present the OC courses consist of three different subjects: Oral communication A, B, and C (OC-A, OC-B, OC-C). OC-A basically focuses on speaking in daily life situations. According to the official guidelines, the objective of OC-A is: "To develop students' abilities to understand a speaker's intentions and express their own ideas in spoken English in everyday situations, and to foster a positive attitude toward communication in English (*Monbusho*, 1989, p. 32)¹. Following this objective, the guidelines (*Monbusho*, 1989) say that teachers should base their lessons around everyday situations in school, home and society (p. 36). However, they do not indicate whether these situations are overseas or in a Japanese school, at home, or in society. Goold, Carter and Madeley (1993a) question the validity of this situational approach of OC-A, asking:

How relevant are the everyday situations of Japanese high school students to the everyday situations they might encounter in English speaking countries? Do the guidelines consider these foreign situations? Are they intended to? (p. 5)

Basically, OC-A textbooks present model dialogues on daily life topics without any specific cultural context. However, it is difficult to understand the speaker's intentions without some knowledge of the cultural and situation setting.

The second course, OC-B, deals with listening. This course, too, has the same kind of objective: "To develop students' abilities to understand a speaker's intentions, and to foster a positive attitude toward communicating in English." (*Monbusho*, 1989, p. 38)². The OC-B textbooks give various types of listening exercises, but, again, no specific cultural knowledge is required to complete the tasks.

The third course, OC-C, deals with several different types of communication such as discussion, public speaking and debate. However, once again, consideration of cultural differences do not inform the treatment of discourse. Goold, Carter and Madeley (1993b) observe that such common and important English language speech acts as interruption or asserting one's opinions in discussion tend to be regarded negatively in Japan and are ignored by the OC-C guidelines (p.7). Obviously, the teaching of sociolinguistic competence has not been considered in the newly revised curriculum of teaching English for Japanese high schools.

Teaching goals: In considering how communicative competence can be best taught in Japanese high schools, Ellis (1991, pp. 110-111) poses three questions:

1. What aspects of communication should a language programme address: linguistic, functional, or both?
2. To what extent do learners need to develop analyzed knowledge? How can this be best achieved?
3. To what extent is it necessary and possible to develop the learners' control of their knowledge in the classroom?

In addition to the distinction between linguistic and functional aspects of language, Ellis' concept of communicative competence also distinguishes between the development of knowledge and the control of this knowledge. A learner's knowledge of grammatical or sociolinguistic rules does not necessarily assure the ability to control the rules in actual language use. Thus, to answer the questions above, Ellis suggests that

the minimal goal of language teaching in Japan should be to give learners *knowledge*, rather than *control*, of both linguistic forms and sociolinguistic rules of use.

This proposal takes into account the particular language learning situation of most EFL students. They have little or no opportunity to use English outside the classroom, and there are practical restraints on teaching conditions, such as the limited class hours and the large class size. Thus, to give learners analyzed linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge (i.e., knowledge of which the holder has conscious awareness) is more feasible than trying to create an appropriate situation for meaning-based practice of speaking skills. It is in this context that Ellis recommends problem-solving activities designed to raise learners' consciousness, rather than practice for achieving control.

There seems to be little doubt that Ellis' (1991, 1992) comments regarding the development of control of sociolinguistic knowledge are appropriate for the Japanese high school situation. It is impossible for Japanese students to have an authentic learning situation in which to use and practice their sociolinguistic knowledge. Such aspects of communication involve many complex psychological factors such as feelings of ethnic identity, solidarity, topic expertise, and the relative status of participants (Beebe, 1988). Clearly, the homogeneous Japanese high school classroom is an almost impossible setting for simulating these factors to practice control.

Another important distinction is between content-teaching goals and language-teaching goals. Ellis (1991) suggests that, by using English as a medium for carrying out consciousness-raising tasks in learning sociolinguistic knowledge, students can be given opportunities for communicating in English (p. 125). However, as Sheen (1992) points out, it is difficult for high school students to do this because of their limited English ability and lack of exposure to meaning-focused input. Thus, if high school teachers are to teach content effectively, it is easier to use the students' first language (L1) as the medium of teaching. The students will also find it more comfortable. In this way, teachers can teach sociolinguistic knowledge about English without using the target language at all.

However, this report does not recommend that English language teachers should neglect the teaching of language for the sake of teaching content. Instead, it is essential to find a balance between language teaching goals and content teaching goals in teaching sociolinguistic knowledge.

The next sections examine different components of the teaching situation to determine how they might affect the teaching of sociolinguistic knowledge.

Motivation

Motivation is an essential factor for successful language learning (Littlewood, 1984, p. 53). How high school students perceive the learning of sociolinguistic knowledge is, therefore, one of the primary issues in the implementation of this subject. The field of motivation in language learning has been extensively investigated (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dornyei, 1994a; Dornyei, 1994b; Gardner & Tremblay, 1994a; Gardner & Tremblay, 1994b; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Oxford, 1994;). It has been determined that motivation consists of various components (Dornyei, 1994a), such as a course-specific motivational component. This refers to motivational factors which are related to the syllabus, the teaching materials, the teaching method, and the learning task. A key consideration here is the students' perception of the practicality of the lesson. Keller (1983) called this motivational factor "relevance," referring to how much students feel that the lesson is linked to important personal needs (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). However, little research exists regarding Japanese high school students' motivation for learning sociolinguistic knowledge.

Teacher competence

If language teachers are to teach sociolinguistic knowledge, ideally they should be trained in both linguistic and sociolinguistic fields. However, lack of training can be compensated for by reading teacher-training books on teaching culture (Damen, 1987), such as Seelye (1984) or Valdes (1986).

Evaluation: Damen (1987) points out that testing cultural learning may be more difficult than testing language learning. Consequently, in examination-oriented Japanese classrooms, difficulties in testing sociolinguistic knowledge may make language teachers hesitate to even considering teaching the subject.

A Preliminary Report on Teaching Sociolinguistic Knowledge

This exploratory study addresses two research questions: 1) How do Japanese high school students perceive the learning of sociolinguistic knowledge? 2) What pedagogical suggestions can be made for the future implementation of the subject, in terms of teaching goals, teacher competence, evaluation, and curriculum requirements?

Subjects

Kiryu Girls' Senior High School is a Japanese public senior high school. An intact class of 45 second year English course students³ were ran-

domly divided into two groups of 22 and 23 students respectively to reduce the treatment group size during administration of the sociolinguistic lessons. While one group of students received the sociolinguistic lesson, the other group received a regular oral communication (OC) lesson in a separate classroom with a second teacher. During the next class period, the two groups were switched. All sociolinguistic lessons were given by the author, who had also taught the students during the previous academic year.

The average English level of the students was from Pre-Second Grade to Second Grade according to their STEP Test (*Eiken*)⁴ scores. The students had never received formal lessons in sociolinguistics, and the teacher had no formal teacher-training in sociolinguistics.

Five sociolinguistic lessons were administered to the students throughout the Japanese school year, from April, 1992 to March, 1993. Each lesson took five periods, giving a total instruction time of 25 50-minute periods, or nearly 21 hours.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data on the students' perceptions of the sociolinguistic lessons was collected through administration of a short, anonymous questionnaire. The questionnaire was given at the end of the school year, after all five lessons were completed. The questionnaire consisted of two English Likert scale items and a Japanese open-ended item. The first Likert scale item asked students to rate each lesson on a six-point scale in terms of how well they liked the lesson, and the second asked the students to state how useful they felt each lesson was. These two items, which were completed for each sociolinguistic lesson, are given below:

Item 1. How did you like the lesson?

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. I loved it. | 2. I liked it. | 3. I quite liked it. |
| 4. I didn't really like it. | 5. I didn't like it. | 6. I hated it. |

Item 2. How useful did you think the lesson was?

- | | | |
|----------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| 1. Extremely useful | 2. Very useful | 3. Quite useful |
| 4. Not really useful | 5. Not useful | 6. Meaningless |

Item 1 was intended to determine the students' general feelings about the lesson procedure and content. Item 2 was to determine the students' perception of the usefulness of the lessons. Ratings 1, 2, and 3 were considered positive, while 4, 5, and 6 were considered negative. Besides these two structured items, the students were given an open-ended item in Japanese which asked them to freely write comments about the lessons, also in Japanese.

Forty students returned their questionnaires; the other five were absent when the questionnaire was given. Among the forty, thirty-three students wrote additional comments. The collected data was first analyzed according to the percentages of student response to Items 1 & 2. Then, the additional comments were coded into five categories determined by the author, according to the nature of their content. The categories were as follows: 1. The lessons were useful; 2. The lessons were interesting; 3. I wonder if I can use the knowledge in actual communication; 4. I was not so interested; 5. Others.

To estimate the reliability of this evaluation instrument, Cronbach alpha procedures were used. The present study yielded an internal consistency of .86.

The lesson plan

Curriculum

The subject in which the sociolinguistic lessons were taught was "Foreign Affairs," which is a special subject for inclusion in the English course, as determined by the *Monbusho* (1989). However, the content is defined ambiguously in the *Monbusho's* guidelines (1989), and the exact methods and materials are completely left to the teachers (Izumi, 1995). There is no textbook published for the subject, so this allows teachers to bring in a wide range of relevant material (Goto, 1993).

Teaching material

The textbook selected for the sociolinguistic lessons was *The Culture Puzzle* (Levine, Baxter & McNulty, 1987). The materials used in the lessons were samples of realistic interactions in which cross-cultural miscommunication occur. Although the materials and exercises mainly focused on the American style of communication, they also addressed general issues of cross-cultural communication.

Contents of the lessons

Each of the five lessons dealt with a separate topic. The topics discussed were cross-cultural differences in ways of addressing people (Lesson 1), complementing and responding (Lesson 2), verbal and nonverbal communication (Lesson 3), and conversation strategies (Lessons 4 & 5).

Procedures

As mentioned previously the lesson procedure was based on Ellis' proposal that teachers should give priority to developing sociolinguistic

knowledge. The basic steps in the lessons were:

- (1) Individual reading of an sample English dialogue which shows some form of miscommunication; then answering some ready-made comprehension questions about the dialogue provided in the text.
- (2) Brainstorming on the reasons for the miscommunication in pairs in Japanese. The teacher wrote the students' ideas on the board in Japanese and then categorized them as "reasons guessed from a cross-cultural perspective" and "reasons guessed from a universal view of people as human beings," categories which were created by the teacher.

For example, one dialogue presented an interaction in which X refuses Y's compliments, and Y did not understand why. If the student's analysis was: "X is just being cynical, because X doesn't like Y," this was categorized as a universal view of people, while the analysis "In X's culture not accepting compliments is considered polite" was put into the cross cultural category. The teacher wrote all reasons which were suggested to encourage the students to think freely and be open to multiple possibilities in interpreting dialogues between people from different cultures. All feedback from the teacher was given in Japanese.

- (3) Reading and filling in the blanks of an explanatory summary about the ineffective dialogue. The summary passage explained the reasons for the miscommunication and was taken from the textbook. However, in order to teach certain key vocabulary items, the teacher made the passage into a cloze test exercise.
- (4) Individually reading the revised dialogue from the textbook showing how the communication problem was solved.
- (5) Role-playing both dialogues. A pair was chosen to demonstrate the dialogues orally before the class. The pair was encouraged to give as authentic a performance as possible, with minimum dependence on the written dialogues. The listeners were expected to observe the oral demonstrations without looking at the written dialogues.
- (6) Doing additional cross-cultural quizzes and exercises from the textbook.

The quizzes and exercises required the students to analyze and discuss the cultural information presented. Some of them stimulated students to be aware of their own cultural background.

Results

The following two tables show the percentage of the students' responses in each response category for the five socio-cultural lessons.

Table 1: Student Responses for Item 1 (Like: 1-3/Dislike: 4-6)

Reponse Category	1	2	3	4	5	6
Lesson 1	10.0%	27.5%	42.5%	17.5%	2.5%	0.0%
2	7.5%	35.0%	37.5%	20.0%	0.0%	0.0%
3	10.0%	40.0%	35.0%	15.0%	0.0%	0.0%
4	17.5%	47.5%	17.5%	15.0%	2.5%	0.0%
5	15.0%	42.5%	25.0%	12.5%	2.5%	2.5%
Total	12.0%	38.5%	31.5%	16.0%	1.5%	0.5%

$n = 40$

Table 2: Student Responses for Item 2 (Useful: 1-3/Not Useful: 4-6)

Reponse Category	1	2	3	4	5	6
Lesson 1	25.0%	27.5%	37.5%	7.5%	2.5%	0.0%
2	30.0%	27.5%	35.0%	7.5%	0.0%	0.0%
3	32.5%	35.0%	22.5%	10.0%	0.0%	0.0%
4	60.0%	20.0%	15.0%	2.5%	2.5%	0.0%
5	52.5%	22.5%	22.5%	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%
Total	38.0%	26.5%	28.5%	5.5%	1.0%	0.5%

$n = 40$

Table 1 shows that a higher percentage of students gave positive ratings on Item 1, 82% for the total of 1-3; compared with only 18% in the total of 4-6. This suggests that the students liked the sociolinguistic lessons. While 50.5% of them answered that they loved or liked the lessons (the total of 1 & 2), only 2 % of them clearly expressed dislike (the total of 5 & 6). Among the 47.5% students who gave ratings between positive and negative (the total of 3 & 4), the positive response (31.5%) was about twice as much as the negative (16%).

Table 2 shows an even more marked tendency toward a positive

view of the sociolinguistic lessons, with 93% of the students' ratings positive (the total of 1-3) and only 7% negative (the total of 4-6). A total of 64.5% of the students answered that they thought the lessons were useful (1 & 2), while 1.5% did not agree with the practical value of the lessons (5 & 6). Among the 34% of the students who gave ratings between positive and negative (3 & 4), the positive response (28.5%) was more than five times greater the negative response (5.5%).

Following analysis of the questionnaire data, the students' comments about the lessons were translated into English by the author. Five types of responses were identified.

Type 1: *The lessons are useful.* Twenty-four (60%) students mentioned the usefulness of the lessons. Typical comments were: "It was very useful to learn practical knowledge about cross-cultural communication problems." "If I went overseas without having these lessons, I would be sure to suffer from culture shock." "Really useful. This kind of lesson should be given not only to English course students, but also to the students in other courses."

Type 2: *The lessons were interesting.* Seven (17.5%) students mentioned that the lessons were interesting or enjoyable.

Type 3: *I wonder if I can use the knowledge in actual communication.* Two (5%) students expressed concern about their ability to use the knowledge in actual situations. Some comments were: "I wanted to practice. Maybe the lessons were a little too theoretical, and I may not be able succeed in actual communication." "I think these kind of things can only be learned by being accustomed to them. However, what I learned in the lessons will be activated sometime in the future."

Type 4: *I was not so interested.* Two (5%) students wrote that they were not interested in the lessons.

Type 5: *Others.* Three (7.5%) students wrote other types of comments: "The content was suitable for Foreign Affairs class." "I think that if we had also learned about other cultures in addition to the American culture it would have been more interesting." "I couldn't understand some parts of the lesson, perhaps because of my lack of reading ability."

Discussion and Pedagogical Suggestions

The majority of the high school students (93%) gave the sociolinguistic lessons positive ratings in terms of their usefulness (Table 2). Even though the lessons were focused on developing knowledge of cultural issues rather than on practice, many students considered them to be extremely useful (38%) or very useful (26.5%). Furthermore, most of the comments (24 out of 33) written in response to the open-ended question referred to the usefulness of the sociolinguistic lessons. These results suggest that learning sociolinguistic knowledge is perceived as having practical value. As mentioned previously, this perception is an important factor in motivating students to learn the subject.

On the other hand, two students expressed their concern about the effectiveness of the lessons in terms of actual usage. This suggests that it is also necessary for the teacher to clearly explain the reason for putting priority on the development of knowledge rather than on control through practice.

Most students (82%) liked the lessons (Table 1). In addition, seven students mentioned that the lessons were interesting or enjoyable in the additional comments. Such interest, defined as the individual's inherent curiosity and desire to know more about the subject, is another important component of motivation (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dornyei, 1994a). Being allowed to use Japanese in discussion, and the teacher's use of Japanese in his explanation may have also helped to create interest in the subject and make it easy to learn, thus enabling the students to enjoy the lessons.

Regarding balancing the use of the L1 and the L2, using English for the receptive tasks and Japanese for the productive tasks may be a reasonable compromise for achieving both language-teaching goals and content-teaching goals. The use of the learners' L1 by both the learners and the teacher at appropriate moments seems to be advisable in order to avoid ending up with only a superficial understanding of cultural problems, the content-teaching goal.

However, there are also indications that the students are not satisfied if they do not use English communicatively. The questionnaire results suggest that Lessons 4 and 5, which required student output, were more popular than the other lessons. These two lessons included conversation strategies in addition to cultural knowledge. Thus, it is suggested that teachers should not neglect language-teaching goals. Pursuing language teaching and content teaching goals together may result in increased benefits; the deepened knowledge of content will enhance the learning of language related to that content (Mohan, 1986).

As for teacher competence, it is recommended that high school teachers complete a basic course in sociolinguistics before teaching this subject. However, as this report indicates, carefully designed textbooks can compensate for the teacher's lack of knowledge. Teachers can tell the students, "Let's learn together from the textbook," while still asserting their authority in teaching the linguistic aspects of the text. Also, if various teaching materials such as video programs or audio tapes are developed to supplement the textbooks, the teachers' burden can be greatly lessened.

When grading students, I evaluated both their participation in classroom discussion and their performance on tests. The test questions included both sociolinguistic analysis of a sample dialogue and linguistic understanding of the text they had learned, focusing mainly on key vocabulary items. If the lessons are based on the teaching of knowledge, rather than control, it is relatively easy to make the type of objective test questions which are familiar to Japanese high school teachers. On the other hand, if teachers are to test students' control of knowledge, they must make reliable oral tests. Such a requirement may put too much pressure on teachers and discourage them from teaching the subject. Teaching knowledge rather than control, therefore, seems to be advantageous in terms of evaluation as well as instruction.

As a final consideration, it should be noted that the sociolinguistic lessons were taught within the relatively free curriculum of Foreign Affairs, a class which is open only to English course students. Before it is possible to teach sociolinguistic knowledge to all students participating in English language learning, it is necessary to wait for a more relevant and specific curriculum to be established through future revision of the *Monbuscho's* course of English study.

Conclusions

If English language education in Japanese high schools seriously aims at raising students' communicative ability and international understanding, as the *Monbuscho* (1989) states, it is necessary to pay more attention to the teaching of the sociolinguistic aspects of communication. I suggest that the *Monbuscho* set up a new course within the OC series in which students can learn cross-cultural problems in communication. As mentioned, there are a number of issues which must be addressed in introducing this new subject. Therefore, more action research must be conducted to facilitate the introduction of this important aspect of English fluency.

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Notes

1. The English translation is from *Monbusbo*, 1994, p. 110. The Japanese original of this quotation is:
身近な日常生活の場面で相手の意向などを聞き取り、自分の考えなどを英語で話す能力を養うとともに、積極的にコミュニケーションを図ろうとする態度を育てる。
2. The English translation is from *Monbusbo*, 1994, p. 111. The Japanese original of this quotation is:
話し手の意向などを聞き取る能力を養うとともに、積極的にコミュニケーションを図ろうとする態度を育てる。
3. The English course, a special course offered at public senior high schools, requires students take more credits in English than general course students, in addition to subjects such as Foreign Affairs and Language Laboratory.
4. The STEP (Society For Testing English Proficiency) Test is a standard, nationwide English proficiency test authorized by the *Monbusbo*. By fall, 1992, 22 of the 45 subjects had passed the Second Grade exam. By spring, 1993, 31 had passed. Based on this, the author estimated the subjects English level at the time of the study.

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