APPLYING HUMANISTIC PSYCHOLOGY AND CULTURAL SENSITIVITY TO TEACHING ENGLISH AT A JAPANESE UNIVERSITY

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Kenneth Groger

There is a very interesting expression in the Japanese language that originated in the days of the Ancient Buddhists and is often connected with the traditional Japanese tea ceremony. It is known as "Ichi go Ichi e". The meaning of this expression conveys a special relationship between two people who are meeting for the first time. This encounter between two persons carries with it a mutual desire to ensure that the meeting is a positive one and filled with harmony and respect. This effort to make a good first impression and to subsequently nurture that new relationship is perceived as paramount in Japan. It is also viewed as one of the fundamental tenets that contribute to a warm, trusting and genuine rapport between two human beings. I have come to realize that this fundamental tenet can successfully be incorporated into the process of teaching English as a second language. In fact it appears that an even more effective and attractive approach to language teaching would involve combining some of the fundamental tenets found in the traditional Japanese culture with some of the humanistic-psychological tenets found in western psychology. The tenets from these two rather rich and comprehensive disciplines can co-exist very well as we teachers attempt to find the answers to solving the problems of student anxiety and alienation, which often accompany second language learning.

If we are somehow able to keep these principles close at hand as we prepare and instruct our lessons, we can take the first large step in addressing many of the issues that often impede successful language learning. It is useful to consider that there are many problems in teaching methodology that can reduce the efficacy of a lesson. If you add to these problems, complications

that may emerge from not accommodating learners' emotional needs, the combination can be stifling to the learning process. Once a psychologically comfortable and culturally sensitive learning environment is developed, I have the latitude and confidence to combine, adapt and experiment with various teaching methods. Humanistic Psychology and Cultural Sensitivity provide us with the necessary tools for implementing strategies that allow us to help students to help themselves. Anyone who has studied a foreign language is aware of the potentially immobilizing affects that can surface as we attempt new types of interpersonal communication. There are numerous obstacles that Japanese learners are forced to confront during each lesson, which can potentially impede their progress. We teachers can play an important role to ensure that these obstacles can be overcome, or at least, cause the minimal amount of harm. I contend that as a result of making a concerted effort to incorporate a substantial amount of humanistic psychological and cultural strategies in my approach, I was able to provide an optimal language-learning environment for my students. Some of the areas where I could produce successful outcomes include:

- ☐ fostering warm and trustful student / teacher rapport.
- ☐ lowering learner anxiety by lowering the affective filter of the students.
- ☐ accommodating the needs of a multi-level and oversized class.
- ☐ maintaining good class management.
- ☐ building motivation and generating interest.
- ☐ humanizing and personalizing class materials.
- ☐ exploring students' hidden talents.
- ☐ Finding optimal class dynamics.
- ☐ Stimulating communicative interaction
- ☐ Being aware of native cultural considerations when trying to elicit student participation.

These are some of the more important issues that can be addressed when combining the finer points of Humanistic Psychology and Cultural Sensitivity

and applying them to second language teaching in Japan. It is my humble intention to invite the reader to consider the tenets of these extremely vital and harmony-producing disciplines as you familiarize yourself with one teacher's efforts to create a space where successful language learning can take place.

In recent years it has become more and more common to for EFL teachers to be confronted with large, oversized University English conversation classes. It is not unusual to have more than fifty students in a class. The majority of these students can be classified as *false beginners* (NOZAKI, 1993). These are students who have studied and attained language skills in some areas but function at a beginner's level because their previous instruction was limited in focus. These types of students present many kinds of problems for teachers. Many of the students that enroll in English classes do so in order to fulfill a course requirement and present motivational problems for teachers. Many of these same students seldom speak in class because they are not accustomed to an interactive style of learning. They are not likely to speak unless first addressed by the teacher. The teacher faces a problem in motivating these students to participate in class. Many of these same students had never experienced a foreign teacher before entering the University and they are likely to be fearful of this new experience. For this reason, they are not ready to participate openly in class discussions. Any participation that takes place will be guarded. Furthermore, they are fearful of speaking in front of so many of their peers. This can present a student anxiety problem for teachers.

These are just a few of the problems that can arise when teaching an oversized and often multi-leveled class. Other problems also arise in a class of this sort. In a large class it is difficult to monitor the conversations of individual students. This leads to problems in maintaining focus. It is also difficult to manage a class of this type. An individual teacher will find problems in responding to student errors in a large classroom. These problems came to the forefront last year when I attempted to teach eighty-one university students Conversational English. Until this time, the largest class in English

Conversation that I had addressed contained forty students. I knew that I would have to re-evaluate and modify many of my teaching strategies to be successful under these circumstances.

The first order of business was to reorganize the class from a single unit composed of eighty-one students into nine groups of nine students each. Without taking this course of action I would be forced to abandon any hopes of conducting a conversation class and I would probably have to resort to a lecture type of class. This would not be so bad if we were concentrating on other skills such as listening and writing. However in order to maintain the necessary element of communicative interaction, dividing the oversized group into smaller groups appeared to facilitate teaching goals. Instead of dividing up the students into random groups, I decided to give each student the choice of which group to join. Japanese learners do not expect to be afforded an opportunity to make these kinds of choices because this does not conform to the Japanese style of teaching. Students are used to being told what to do. This can be a good chance to build favorable rapport with students by humanizing the process at the various stages of setting up the design of the class.

The division of the large class into small groups provided a number of advantages. Small groups provide a safe and enjoyable place for students to speak English to new friends. The small group allows each student more time to speak and more chance to engage in learner-centered activities without fear of having to speak out in front of the entire class. This serves to alleviate much of the learner anxiety and thus contribute to greater communicative competence.

I was fortunate to find effective group leaders to facilitate the administration of the small groups. The leaders were extremely helpful in my pursuit of effective class management. In addition the leaders were also very encouraging and compassionate towards fellow group members. In that particular class I was fortunate to have several third and forth year students,

several of whom had recently returned from extended stays abroad in English-speaking foreign countries. These students were more than happy to be offered an important and responsible position in which they could make good use of their newly polished language skills. It also presented them an opportunity to collaborate with the teacher and make further strides in improving their speaking abilities. Most of them were highly motivated and I hoped that this motivation would extend to the other students.

The selection of group leaders affects class outcome. Finding highly motivated individuals who inspire others would of course be my first choice. Out of a total of eighty-one students there is a fairly good chance that enough of those types of individuals do exist. It becomes a completely other matter of locating them. Many of these enthusiastic students are not likely to be obvious until the third or fourth lesson, because they may need some time to become familiar with the working of the classroom. This learning style of erring on the side of caution can be attributed to the Japanese education system as well as the fear of standing out in front of their peers. However, since I need group leaders from an earlier point in the course, I have worked to identify leaders by other means. I developed a simple, fun and highly interactive icebreaker activity related to finding someone in the class who has had a particular experience over the holidays. This activity accomplishes two useful functions. First, it allows me to get my students moving around the class and interacting with others. It is a wonderful icebreaker activity because students have just returned to campus after an adventure-filled holiday and many of them are anxious to share experiences with both old and new friends. As a teacher it gives me great pleasure to see my students enthusiastically engaged in English communication. My ulterior motive for encouraging the students to walk around and mingle with their classmates is that it allows me time to present each student with my handout description of the "Find someone' activity. I also try to approach each student with a big heartwarming and welcoming smile, which is intended to say, "Please tell me a lot about yourself and that wonderful holiday you had". I ask them follow up questions and encourage them to ask me questions as well.

After exchanging conversation for several minutes I am generally able to determine whether they are appropriate group leader material or not. If they are not potential group leaders, there is no harm done because I have had a positive, uplifting, and rapport-building exchange with a new student. If they happen to be extremely outgoing, enthusiastic, and have a fairly competent mastery of English, I am incredibly thrilled and grateful to know that I have such an individual in my class. Hopefully by the time this activity concludes, my students will feel pleased at having a first encounter in making new friends in the target language and I will have taken an enormous step towards assembling an essential and indispensable cast for bonding together eighty one learners setting out on a special journey.

Once the small groups are in place, it is time to begin the teaching process. Again, it is necessary to motivate the students in order to direct the students toward the task at hand and to encourage them to be receptive learning a foreign language. Even though on the surface a University class may be considered to be a fairly homogeneous group, below the surface the group is amazingly heterogeneous. For this reason, it is necessary to generate a broad appeal in order to capture the diverse interests of the students and to motivate students to be involved with class activities. I try to get out from behind the teacher's lectern and dive headfirst into the world of the student. Only by entering the student's world can I truly fathom what it is that ignites their passion. To know precisely what concerns our students can provide us with important insights on how to reach them, a very useful ingredient for fulfilling the role of educator here in Japan. I have found that successful language learning rarely takes place when students are bored. I also find the Japanese University students' attention span to be somewhat short under the best of circumstances. Having such an extraordinarily large class can present enormous challenges to stimulating and maintaining learner interest. I have found that the process of stimulating learner interest can begin with the development of a visually stimulating syllabus covering a range of interesting topics.

It's impossible to overestimate the importance of warm up exercises and activities. There are so many things constantly happening in the student's immediate environment. This is after all the nature of life on campus. With eighty-one students arriving at the same time from hectic realities outside the classroom, there is no question that they may be distracted. My mission is to get the students focused on a new reality that may be a departure from their everyday stressful University reality. It often seems that a good warm up does provide students with the opportunity to escape from their tense school world and engage in some activity that brings them pleasure and excitement. Using media in my warm up often facilitates the process of quickly capturing the students' attention. Japanese learners are extremely stimulated by visual content.

Resources for the warm up time include the use of a funny story, presentation of a mysterious object, a short skit or pantomime, an interesting sound or piece of music, or even a riddle. These are only a few of the diverse possibilities that have proven useful in stimulating interest and captivating the audience. This leads to the acceptance of procedures directed toward achieving a higher level of learner participation. Learner participation is best encouraged under conditions of trust and support between teacher and student. It can be quite difficult for foreign teachers to get to know their students. There are many reasons for this and most are related to cultural perceptions. The concept of role and proper behavior is so rigid in a vertical society like Japan. (Nozaki, 1993). This makes it very difficult to see the student's true individuality and it is equally difficult for the student to see the teacher as a person rather than as an authority figure. One way to circumvent cultural limitations is to find student activities outside of the classroom where I can see students just being themselves. Extracurricular activities presented the perfect opportunity for the teacher to participate with students in an activity of mutual interest such as hiking, camping and other outdoor sports. During such activities we could relate to each other as people, free of those cultural restraints. Attending student parties and other social gatherings has also proven to be an effective and joyful way for me to witness natural student

interaction without the constraining rules of respecting upperclassmen and teachers. It was incredibly surprising to notice an amazing transformation in some of the personalities as they went from shy student to free-spirited and mischievous person during a social encounter.

This has led to the theory that under the proper circumstances, the student's character can be elicited in the classroom. I have found that the expenditure of a small amount of culturally unconstrained quality time with the student outside of class encourages the student to be less constrained during class. This requires considerable patience but the improved acceptance and rapport is worth the effort. It is extremely important to maintain a lively class environment. Learners are incredibly sensitive to their immediate surroundings. Boredom can be the teacher's worst enemy. It is necessary to keep students stimulated. I have become alert to the problem of excessive teacher narration in which the attention of most of the class is lost while a few of the more advanced students are attentive. It's much better for the entire class if I keep my presentation and instructions clear and concise and then get out of the way. I think a big part of being a teacher is learning to accommodate the needs of the masses instead of amusing myself. This will in turn maximize student interaction time and lead to overall improvement of language skills.

Such a large and multi-leveled class presents problems in finding activities that will motivate every student in to an interactive participant. Many of the lower-level learners require structure and control while the more advanced learners are looking for a freer format. This is where it is necessary for the teacher to develop awareness and an intuitive understanding of various types of learners in the class. This awareness leads to an appreciation of the need for extensive preparation before class. It is not easy to find activities that will accommodate the full range of learner capabilities, but it can be achieved if time is taken to individualize the lesson plan. I find that it is always better to be over-prepared with a wide range of exercises and with follow-up activities that I can assign to those who finish early. There are many ways to modify

the level of difficulty for lower-level students. I will also monitor or have my group leaders monitor some of the lower-level students to make sure they can successfully complete the assigned tasks.

I have found that the use of the appropriate types of activities will determine the degree of communicative interaction that I can generate in my classes. Information-gap exercises seem to elicit the most favorable responses. These exercises seem to stimulate interest and facilitate long-duration student interactive engagement. Problem-solving puzzles also tend to be very popular with Japanese learners. Providing students with the types of tasks that require corroboration and negotiation within their small groups will contribute to an overall high level of motivation in the classroom. The best recipe for maintaining a high level of motivation is to provide students with the opportunities to continue interacting with their fellow small group members in the pursuit of completing clearly defined tasks. One very effective way to maximize motivation is to add inter-group competition to the range of activities. By designing the situation leading to each of the small groups engaging one another in friendly competition, I can create a highly stimulating atmosphere where students are deeply involved with the task at hand. The motivation is derived from the desire of the students to help their small group / team to prevail in a passionately contested event. One positive outcome that I noticed from this type of activity was that students become engrossed in the spirit of competition to the extent that they totally emerged from any previous fear and anxiety they may have had about the learning process.

Finding good materials to use in a university English conversation class demands matchmaking skills on the part of the teacher. Knowing the types of students that are likely to enroll in my class will greatly help me to select appropriate materials. One of my main objectives in the language-teaching process is to establish good communications and an interactive rapport in the classroom. It then becomes imperative to find materials that will include a great deal of specific language that will produce the types of value clarification exercises that will create trust and build solidarity. Unfortunately

many of the textbooks used in university second-language classes tend to be about places and people that are not within the sphere of interest of the student. Such books contain materials that are outdated, unrealistic, irrelevant, and lacking in continence. It's not often that I see students warmly embrace such textbooks. An appropriate textbook can be like the teacher's loyal assistant and an effective one can serve as an indispensable resource for language learners. In my experience I am rarely able to locate the "ideal" textbook for whatever diverse and multi-leveled class of learners that I may have for a particular term. Such textbooks do not seem to exist. Perhaps I should someday set out to write what I haven't been able to find. This has in fact inspired many of my colleagues to seek out new callings. However I remain unconvinced that such extreme measures are needed at this time. There are alternative methods to relieve such frustrations. Most textbooks have a few redeeming qualities. If I select a textbook having undesirable sections the choice is to either eliminate those sections or humanize them.

Humanizing the textbook can be an enjoyable and stimulating activity, especially when the students are involved in the process. Class time can be used to animate the text through exercises such as rewriting the dialogs to include more realistic types of discourse. The students can be led to can add humor, mystery, and vulnerability to the characters. If the students don't have any objections, and it is wise to have consensus on this point, adding some visual spice to the stories can be a real source of pleasure. I think these types of activities, where learners have a chance to demonstrate some hidden talent such as artistic or graphic design ability can facilitate the building of confidence among individuals who need a sense of accomplishment for future motivation. The best part about humanizing a textbook or even getting students to produce their very own special dynamic and creatively humanized textbook is that it is learner-generated, stimulating and communicatively interactive.

Teachers can do other things with textbooks to make them more attractive and interesting to students. I found that some of my students enjoyed the idea of substituting Japanese names for the hard-to-pronounce English names,

thereby personalizing the text. Many students also enjoyed renaming some of the places found in their textbooks. We gave Japanese names to the streets (sometimes fictitious, sometimes real.) We could quite competently and with a bit of flare personalize most of the textbook by giving the stories and situations a localized setting. The names of the food items were exchanged for foods found in Japan. Perhaps I would not be so inclined to do this in a cross-cultural class. However with a new group of anxious learners it can contribute to generating enthusiasm, while producing a fun and comfortable atmosphere for second language learning.

My experience has shown me the importance of developing innovative lesson approaches that take into account the great diversity of student needs. Some of these approaches are based on a view of the human condition and the need to work within the comfort zone of the student to establish a framework to address many of the problems that emerge from an oversized class of Japanese learners. During this last year I have been able to combine, adapt and integrate these methods in ways that created some positive changes in learners' perception towards language learning. Among these changes include the development of humanistic and compassionate ways in which the students may feel free to interact with the teacher and their classmates. In addition to these changes I have also witnessed the amazing difference in the level of enhanced student participation that is achieved by paying more careful attention to learners' native culture and taking the necessary steps to work within the cultural context in teaching English.

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