

# **Teaching Language for Intercultural Communication: Conflict between Theory and Practice**

**Lee Chen**

**Swinburne University of Technology**

## **Abstract**

Adoption of the "communicative competence" approach to foreign language teaching has shifted the focus from purely linguistic skills to the much broader field of teaching language within its socio-cultural dimensions. As a consequence, conversation classes are no longer based on parrot-like learning of dialogues but on a more sophisticated practice of free-form expression, appropriate to communicative situations clearly defined in terms of: speech event, participants, purpose of communication, setting, topic, message form and channel. However, as most, if not all, foreign language teaching in Australia takes place within the confines of the classroom, students' exposure to the appropriate norms of interaction is achieved mainly through role-playing and accompanying explanations.

This paper addresses the effectiveness of role-playing in transmitting the necessary socio-cultural knowledge. It reports selected findings of an ongoing research focused on acquisition of Japanese socio-cultural norms by tertiary students of Japanese. The discussion, based on data derived from tape-recorded conversations between examiner/s and individual students in oral test situations is focussed on the cultural appropriateness of students' opening turns.

## **Introduction**

Foreign language teaching, perhaps more than any other discipline, is under constant pressure to expand the curriculum, to change the teaching methodology and to produce new teaching material in keeping with the changing emphasis on what the students are expected to learn. Long gone are the days of focusing on the linguistic skills alone, that is just teaching the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, perhaps augmented at some stage by studies of the culture of the target language speech community. The communicative competence approach, in vogue since the 1970's, shifted the focus from the purely linguistic skills to the much broader field of teaching language within its socio-cultural dimensions (Okazaki and Okazaki (1990), Neustupny, (1991, 1996). Culture, viewed previously in terms of material achievements of a particular society (Liddicoat, 1997), entered the classroom in a different guise, as a vital adjunct to the linguistic components, aimed at instilling the knowledge required by the students for successful communication within the target language society. Recognition was given to the fact that culture is inseparable from language and that every interaction with a speaker of another language represents a cultural act (Kramersch, 1993). As a consequence, for the past two decades, the teaching, particularly in the conversation classes, has become focused on the situationally appropriate linguistic and non-verbal aspects of interpersonal interaction in the target culture. Despite the recent criticism of this methodology and emergence of new paradigms for preparing learners for meaningful communication outside their own cultural environment (Bolten, 1993; Crozer and Liddicoat, 1997), the majority of foreign language classes are still conducted within the parameters of the communicative competence pedagogy.

Teaching students the skills required for meaningful communication with members of the target language speech community means that pragmatic, kinesic and other culture-specific norms of interpersonal interaction should be taught virtually from day one (Kramersch, 1992). Learning is expected to take place not through rigidly structured lessons based on the progressive complexity of grammatical forms, but through exposure to a variety of authentic spoken and written texts, applicable to a variety of communicative needs. As pointed out by Hymes:

No normal person, and no normal community, is limited

to a single style of speech, to an unchanged monotony that would preclude indication of respect, insolence, mock seriousness, humor, role distance, and intimacy by switching from one mode of speech to another" (Hymes, 1974, p30)

Thus the conversation classes are no longer based on parrot-like learning of dialogues but on a more sophisticated practice of free-form expression, appropriate to communicative situations clearly defined in terms of speech event, participants, purpose of communication, setting, topic, message form and channel (Hymes, 1964, 1974).

The fact that norms of interpersonal interaction are culture based and that these norms vary considerably between cultures has been attested to by numerous investigations (eg Clyne, 1994; Wierzbicka, 1985, 1991; Crozet, 1996; Liddicoat, 1997; McCarthy, 1994). It has also been found that the greater the distance between cultures, the greater the difference in the realisation of the rules governing interpersonal interaction. Thus, in the case of the Japanese social context, the norms applicable to within-culture interactions are often very alien to the Australian students, reflecting as they are the very considerable cultural distance between Japan and Australia.

Communicative competence paradigms emphasise the importance of pragmatics within the teaching curriculum. It is said that, in interpersonal interaction in 'contact' situations (Neustupny, 1985) grammatical or phonological errors are treated more tolerantly than inappropriate use of formulaic expressions within the pragmatics field (Clyne, 1994, p.208). This is particularly relevant to interactions with the Japanese as the language is not only rich in formulae for expressing thanks, apologies, greetings, etc., but also selection of the appropriate form is rigidly governed by the configurations of specific communicative situations.

Consequently, as teaching Japanese in Australia mostly takes place within the confines of the classroom, students' exposure to the appropriate norms of interaction, including pragmatics, can be achieved mainly through role-playing and accompanying explanations.

One of the classroom situations which lends itself to testing the efficacy of role-play instruction is the oral test situation, involving dyadic or triadic conversation between examiner/s and individual students. In interviews of this kind, the variables defining the communicative situation (Hymes, 1964, 1974) are clearly defined, giving students the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and ability to use the appropriate interactional formulae.

## **Opening and Closing Formulae**

This paper focuses on students' acquisition of opening and closing formulae appropriate to formal situations like, for instance, job interviews, formal visits etc., characterised by a clearly demarcated status difference between the participants. The data are excerpted from a major ongoing research on discourse analysis of oral test interviews and the discussion is limited to students' correct usage of the opening formula (1996 data) and opening/closing formulae (1998 data). The expression in question is *shitsurei shimasu* (lit. I am being rude), an apology which, in 'native' situations of the type referred to above, is an obligatory formula for the lower-status participant to initiate at the beginning and ending of the interaction (Mizutani, 1983, *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*, 1976, p.665).

### ***Native-speaker survey***

To date no empirical investigation has been carried out on the most appropriate greeting to be initiated by a student of Japanese entering a room for the purpose of a "conversation" with a teacher which at the same time is an oral test. To ascertain that an interaction of this kind is regarded by native speakers of Japanese as belonging to the 'formal' category, a short questionnaire, listing a number of greeting expressions, was

distributed to thirteen native speaker informants: seven members of the teaching staff, three visitors to the Department (non-language teachers) and three exchange students from one of the universities in Japan. All the members of the teaching staff have been working in Australia for approximately three years. The three visitors have spent a very short time in Australia and, thus, their exposure to the Australian norms of communication was minimal. The exchange students have been in Australia for approximately nine months.

**Table 1**

**Appropriateness of opening formulae**

Expression	teachers (7)	students (3)	visitors (3)	total (13)
<i>konnichiwa/konbanwa</i>			1 (14.3%)	1 (7.7%)
weather comment				
<i>Shitsurei shimasu</i>	6 (85.7%)	3 (100%)	2 (66.7%)	11 (84.6%)
health inquiry				
Request for permission to enter				
non-verbal act (bow)	1 (14.3%)			1 (7.7%)
Nothing				
Other				

As shown in Table 1, irrespective of the type of the native-speaker informant, the expression selected by eleven (84.6%) of the thirteen respondents was *shitsurei shimasu*. One teacher opted for a non-verbal greeting represented by a bow. Only one informant, a visitor who had spent many years in the United States, selected *konnichiwa/konbanwa* (good afternoon/good evening), that is an appropriate greeting in an English speaking environment.

***Configurations of the communicative situation***

As the configurations of the communicative situation represented by the oral test interview were practically the same in the two sets of data, the pertinent details are described here for both events.

The student sample in the 1996 data consisted of 14 students and 15 students participated in the 1998 investigation. In both investigations, the students taking the respective oral tests as a part of final assessment for the subject, had just completed three semesters of Japanese language study, commenced at the beginner level. All students in the 1996 sample were aged between 19 and 22 years but the 1998 sample included, in addition to the above age group, 3 adult learners (over 35 years). The majority of the students in both groups were female (only two males in 1996 and three in 1998). Although there was some degree of variation in their proficiency in Japanese, in overall assessment terms the majority of the students were high achievers with over 70% results in the final examination. It has to be borne in mind, however, that overall proficiency measured through formal assessment, that is including writing, reading comprehension and grammar, is not necessarily synonymous with ability to communicate effectively within the parameters of the Japanese socio-cultural norms. What has to be remembered here is the distinction between learning and communication. The former includes comprehension and production,

that is performance, while the latter involves a much more complex process of acquiring competence in culture specific communicative behaviour.

In both investigations, the examining panel consisted of two teachers: a native and a non-native speaker of Japanese.

The tests were held in a small staff room to create an atmosphere more conducive to an oral test interview than a large classroom which students tend to associate with daily lessons, usually of considerable behavioural informality.

The usual procedure was for students to be allocated individual times for the test. At the appointed time, the student would knock, be invited to enter and, upon entering, expected to produce an appropriate opening formula (*shitsurei shimasu*). After being invited to sit down, the student then would be engaged in a "conversation" with the examiners for approximately 10 minutes. Upon termination of the session, the student was expected to excuse himself/herself (*shitsurei shimasu*) before leaving the room.

The purpose of the triadic interaction carried out in a non-classroom setting was to create an environment closest to what might be termed "natural conversation". However, some unavoidable problems arose in creating a truly authentic context. Prior nomination of the topic alone has shifted the interactional environment towards an interview format rather than a free conversation. In accordance with the Japanese norms of interpersonal interaction in a conversational mode, the status difference between the participants decides who nominates the topic or topics. The one in a status superior position becomes the conversational pivot with the right to hold the floor and dictate what is talked about (Neustupny, 1984). In the case of an oral test, it is the student, the participant of lower status, around whose topic the "conversation" is centred. Also, the question-answer routines, characteristic of oral test discourse, add further interview-like elements to the "conversation". Consequently, the term "oral test interview" was found to be the most apt descriptor of the investigated situations.

***The results***

Table 2 shows the opening formulae initiated by the students in the 1996 sample.

**Table 2**  
**Opening Formulae**

<b>Expression</b>	<b>Number of students</b>
<i>Konnichiwa/</i>	9
<i>Konbanwa</i>	64%
Reference to weather	2 14.3%
Mixture of above	1 7.1%
<i>Shitsurei shimasu</i>	1 7.1%
Other	1

	7.1%
Total	14
	100%

As illustrated in Table 2, *konnichiwa* (good day/afternoon) or *konbanwa* (good evening) were chosen by the majority of the students: 64% of the total sample of 14. 'Good evening' or 'good afternoon', according to the time of the day, are appropriate greetings in a comparable English speaking context. Usage of these terms indicates that these particular students transferred their native norms to the "contact" situation. Although both expressions translate into 'good afternoon' or 'good evening' respectively, their usage in a Japanese context is significantly different. Not only are these expressions inappropriate as an opening formula in interview situations or similar interactions involving status difference between participants, but also they are not suitable as greetings exchanged between members of the same in-group, represented here by students and teachers of the same university department. According to Mizutani (1977, pp.16-17) *konnichiwa* and *konbanwa* are greetings appropriate only when meeting people one does not interact with to any considerable extent and thus reserved for out-group usage.

Two students chose reference to the weather as the sole opening formula while one student added a comment on the weather to the *konnichiwa* greeting. Although weather comments as a type of greeting exist in English and Japanese social contexts, 'hi, lovely day isn't it' or its Japanese equivalent *ii o-tenki desu ne* are rather informal in nature. Mizutani (1977) states that some allusion to the weather might be an appropriate in-group greeting for a casual encounter but for a more formal occasion, such as the investigated situation, an apology (*shitsurei shimasu*) is the most appropriate choice.

One student did not produce any acceptable English-transfer or Japanese formula, beginning the interaction with a statement that her child was sick and she had to hurry to get to the university in time for her test.

The overall results were very disappointing as only one student out of 14 remembered the correct formula *shitsurei shimasu*. The students in this study, as a part of the regular coursework, were exposed to a variety of interpersonal communication rules through appropriate videos, dialogues as well as overt instruction. Yet, despite this exposure, continued to transfer the rules for the Australian interaction to the particular situation described in this paper. As already mentioned, *konnichiwa/ konbanwa* appear to have been equated with "good afternoon/good evening" which are appropriate greetings in the English-speaking environment. These findings strongly suggest that role-playing limited to classroom instruction is in itself an insufficient medium for transferring socio-cultural knowledge. It appears that students, in the process of learning a foreign language, tend to concentrate more on vocabulary and grammar rather than the socio-linguistic aspects of interpersonal communication. There is also the possibility that the teachers themselves tend to deviate from the Japanese rules under the influence of the cultural environment in which the actual teaching is carried out. In other words, teachers when greeted with the *konnichiwa/konbanwa* expressions tend to reciprocate in the same way. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, in some cases, the teachers even initiate this form of greeting thus failing to provide a culturally adequate model

In view of the unsatisfactory performance of the student sample in the 1996 data, instruction in the socio-cultural components of interpersonal interaction has become more intensive in the conversation classes. Furthermore a concentrated effort was made, from the beginning of year 1 level, to reinforce the classroom teaching through usage in suitable out-of-class situations such as, for instance, entering a teacher's room and similar. The results of the "follow up" investigation, undertaken in 1998 on a new group of 2<sup>nd</sup> year students and extended to include closing formulae, are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 3**

## Opening Formulae

Expression	Number of students
<i>Shitsurei shimasu</i>	11 73.3%
<i>Shitsurei shimasu/konbanwa</i>	2 13.3%
Nothing	2 13.3%
Total	15 100%

The findings for the opening formulae, presented in Table 3, emphasize the value of sustained repetition and reinforcement. Thirteen students out of 15 memorised the correct formula, giving an overall success rate of 86.6%. An interesting case is the usage of *shitsurei shimasu* followed by *konbanwa* (good evening) which is indicative of the dominant role of native interactional norms in foreign language learning. The two students seem to have memorised the correct formula merely as items of foreign language vocabulary to be used in certain situations. In the "real life" interview situation, however, the formula appears to have been found inadequate in the light of the native norms for appropriate greeting. Hence the follow-up with the Japanese equivalent to 'good evening'.

The strength of native norms is further illustrated by the figures listed in Table 4 which show only 2 students using the closing formula *shitsurei shimasu* correctly.

**Table 4**

## Closing Formulae

Expression	Number of students
<i>Shitsurei shimasu/arigatoo gozaimasu</i>	10 66.6%
<i>Shitsurei shimasu</i>	2 13.3%
<i>Sayonara</i>	1 6.7%
Nothing	2

	13.3%
Total	15
	100%

Although in overall terms *shitsurei shimasu* was memorised by 12 (80%) of the 15 students, the success of training students in this aspect of socio-cultural behaviour was considerably marred by inclusion of *arigatoo gozaimasu* (thank you) in the formula by two thirds of the sample. Although 'thank you' in an English speaking environment is appropriate as the closing for an interview situation, it does not normally occur in the Japanese context. As pointed out by Wierzbicka (1985, pp. 491-514) the equivalent of English 'thank you' does not exist in Japanese. Expressions of gratitude in Japanese are numerous and a careful selection has to be made to initiate a formula appropriate to the demands of a particular communicative situation. Usage of *arigatoo gozaimasu*, although not entirely inappropriate to the oral test situation, was not only superfluous but also very strongly marked as a transfer from English

Although only one student chose *sayonara* as an equivalent to English 'goodbye', this expression too is of interest as an indication of adherence to native norms of interaction. While 'goodbye' is an acceptable parting formula in an English speaking environment, it is not so in the Japanese context. As a matter of fact, of all the Japanese parting expressions, it is the least suitable for an interview situation. *Sayonara* is a parting formula used to younger people but "not to older people or one's superiors" (Mizutani, 1982, p 59).

## Discussion

As mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this paper, the latest paradigms for foreign language teaching emphasize the need to expose students to all socio-linguistic variants of the target language from the very beginning of their studies- a most challenging and praiseworthy theory but how feasible is its implementation? Admittedly, the theory and practice might converge in second language teaching situations like, for instance, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in Australia where it is possible for students to immediately put into practice the classroom acquired knowledge by interacting with the target language speech community. In foreign language teaching situations, however, acquisition of language, particularly pragmatics, presents a much more difficult task. As illustrated by the very brief survey of only one situation, pragmatics taught through role playing and/or explicit explanations do not become truly meaningful unless constantly reinforced through repetition and situationally appropriate practice. The findings also suggest that, while students might acquire high levels of competence in the purely linguistic aspects of the language, the pragmatics of socio-culturally appropriate interpersonal interactions tend to be dominated by the native rather than the target language norms.

The issue this paper raises, therefore, is the very urgent need for further research that would help to resolve the very real conflict between theory and practice.



## References

- Bolten, J., 1993, "Interaktiv-interkulturelles Fremdsprach-lernen", in H.P.Kelz (ed.) *Internationale Kommunikation und Sprachkompetenz*, Dummler, Bonn.
- Clyne M. G., 1994, *Inter-cultural communication at work: cultural values in discourse*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Clyne M. G., 1996, "Teaching verbal interaction and culture in the language classroom". *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* , 19,2:37-58
- Crozer, C., and Liddicoat, A.J., 1997, "Teaching culture as an integrated part of language teaching: an introduction", in A. J. Liddicoat and C. Crozet (eds), "Teaching language, teaching culture", *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, Series S, No.14:1-22, ALAA, Canberra.
- Hymes, D., 1964, "Toward ethnographies of communication: the analysis of communicative events", in Giglioli, P.P. (ed), *Language and Social Context*, Penguin Books Ltd , Middlesex, England.
- Hymes, D., 1974, *Foundations in Sociolinguistics: An Ethnographic Approach*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Pennsylvania.
- Kramsh, C., and McConnell-Ginet, S., 1992, *Text and Context: Cross-disciplinary Perspectives on Language Study*, D.C. Heath, Lexington, Ma.
- Kramsh, C., 1993, *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- MaCarthy, M., 1994, "What should we teach about the spoken language?", *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* 17: 104-120.
- Mizutani, O. and Mizutani, N., 1977, *Nihongo Note 1: Speaking and Living in Japan*, The Japan Times Ltd, Tokyo.
- Okazaki T. and Okazaki H., 1990, *Nihongo Kyoiku ni Okeru Komyunikatibu Aprochi*, Bonjinsha, Tokyo
- Neustupny, J.V., 1984 *Communicating with the Japanese*, Papers of the Japanese Studies Centre, No.13, Japanese Studies Centre, Melbourne.
- Neustupny, J.V., "Problems in Australian-Japanese Contact Situation", in Pride, J.B., (ed), *Cross-Cultural Encounters: Communication and Miscommunication*, River Seine, Melbourne.
- Neustupny, J.V., 1991 Atarashii Nihongo Kyoiku no tame ni. *Sekai no Nihongo Kyoiku* 1:1-14
- Neustupny, J.V., 1996 "Teaching Japanese for Interactive Competence", in Marriott, H. and M.Low (eds), *Language and Cultural Contact with Japan*. Monash Asia Institute, Melbourne.
- Wierzbicka, A., 1985 "A semantic metalanguage for a cross-cultural comparison of speech acts and speech genres", *Language in Society* 14, 491-514







