Articles: Gender Studies

Examining Gender and the Japanese Female EFL Learner: Connections of Culture, Silence, and Power

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Much has been discussed concerning differences in foreign or second language learners that can be attributed to gender. Past research also provides evidence supporting the view that Japanese people come from a "silent" culture while Westerners come from cultures that value outspokenness and the assertion of individuality. Taken together, these two conditions would appear to disadvantage Japanese females learning English since they must compete against their more verbose male counterparts as well as enter a target linguistic culture that favors such verbosity. However, one may argue that the stereotypically "demure" Japanese female may actually be at an advantage in learning English due to previously underlying social, cultural, and gender concerns, and that her silence should not necessarily be considered a hindrance to language learning.

Introduction

Recently, language teachers have become increasingly aware of the gender variable in the language learning classroom (Sunderland, 2000b) and have consequently come to view gender as one of many potential variables that can account for significant differences in students' foreign language achievement (Daley, Onwuegbuzie, & Bailey, 1997), attitudes towards second and foreign language learning (Kobayashi, 2002; Wright, 1999), and language learning motivation (Sung & Padilla, 1998). Additionally, issues related to gender and language learning have been found to extend beyond just the sex of the language learners themselves. The gender of those engaged in verbal interactions with language learners has been found to affect learners' language production, including their performance on tests of spoken interaction (O'Sullivan & Porter, 1996) as well as affecting learners' choice of communication strategies (Kocoglu, 1997).

How language educators should address and approach the topic of gender in the language classroom has therefore become a matter of interest to those concerned with pedagogy. As outlined by Singh (1998), teachers' opinions regarding the foundation of gender differences run the gamut from the view that gender is derived and therefore expressed biologically to gender being a product of socialization. These views of gender consequently tend to determine "the extent to which teachers believe they *can* and *should* attempt to impact gender roles in their classrooms" (p. 1, italics in original).

Concern on the part of language teachers about the gender variable should come as no surprise, given that males and females have their own social circles, their own ambitions for their futures, their own speaking styles, and even their own interpretations of how to approach interpersonal interactions (Tannen, 1994). As language teachers can, in a majority of cases, expect their classrooms to be composed of members of both sexes, the topic of gender – and the potential differences that can arise in the process of language acquisition due to gender differences – should

be of interest to all language educators.

In Japan, gender appears to be of particular significance in numerous aspects of life. It has been noted that Japan and other East Asian cultures are viewed as male-dominated societies in which women are treated as inferior. Women have been expected to act in a "traditional" manner, such as to enter acceptable spheres in the workplace (e.g., be a secretary who serves tea to male superiors) or to marry a man with better academic credentials than her own and stay at home to raise children. In modern Japanese society, however, women have come to enjoy greater freedom, with many rejecting their traditionally prescribed roles. In their attempts to embrace their modern freedom, some Japanese women have become ground-breaking business entrepreneurs, heads of corporations, and even powerful top-level politicians, positions men and women alike thought were unattainable for the "inferior" gender just a few decades ago.

That Japanese women have begun to take charge of their lives and are no longer content to remain subservient to male superiors or follow in a husband's shadow does not signify that the rules of social exchange and interaction between the sexes in Japan have been completely discarded. Indeed, one may argue that the fight for equality between the sexes in Japan has not yet been won, just as equal rights still have advances to be made in the West.

For all the perceived differences between the sexes in Japanese society, there remain numerous areas where gender apparently makes little or no difference. One such area is the reticence of the Japanese people. Those familiar with the literature on East-West discourse patterns, or anyone with a Western upbringing who has spent time in sufficiently broad and deep verbal discourse with Japanese nationals, will likely testify that the generalizations stating that Westerners favor verbosity and directness while the Japanese favor reticence and indirect ways of speaking are to a certain extent true. Although stereotypes "do not take account of the variation in communicative behavior that results from contextual factors" (Ellis, 1991, p. 113), there have been enough studies conducted on the differences in East-West speech patterns to assert that such stereotypes are grounded in reality and hence have some basis in fact.

Researchers have addressed directly the issue of Japanese students' reticence in the language learning classroom. LoCastro (1990, as cited in LoCastro, 1996) regarded students' reluctance to ask clarification questions as a fear of showing disapproval or appearing confrontational. Korst (1997) believes that their reticence in English classes originates from students lacking the sociolinguistic skills to respond appropriately. The reason for Japanese students' reserve in the English language classroom has even been explained by the concept of communication apprehension (CA). McCroskey, Gudykunst, and Nishida (1985) concluded that because CA exists to a relatively high degree for the Japanese in their first language (i.e., their distrust of words as an effective medium for conveying meaning causes them to avoid verbal messages whenever possible), it establishes a baseline for CA in any subsequent language learned. The result: the Japanese encounter problems in learning appropriate ways of communicating in English where directness and reliance upon the spoken word are expected and often required.

Taking into consideration communication practices in Japanese culture that (a) discourage directness and verbosity along with (b) female social roles in a culture that has for centuries largely kept women a step behind men in terms of social status, one could effortlessly accept the following line of thought:

1. Japanese females learning English would be particularly reticent in the (coeducational) language classroom, above and beyond their male counterparts.

2. Such excessive reticence would be problematic from the language educator's point of view, particularly when communication in the target language is expected and encouraged in the classroom.
3. Language educators hence should be concerned about this "problem" and be urged to take correctional measures.

Educators do, in fact, have a choice as to what course of action to take regarding gender roles in the classroom. As Grossman and Grossman (1994, as cited in Singh, 1998) enumerate, classroom educators have the choice of (a) preparing the genders to fulfill different roles because of underlying psychological differences, (b) preparing students for androgynous (i.e., gender-neutral) roles, (c) deciding if they want to prepare the students for different gender roles or not, or (d) helping the students to decide for themselves if they wish to conform to gender roles or prefer to be androgynous. Though each of these choices has its benefits, all have their drawbacks, and each sparks controversy. While the third option listed above leaves the educator the choice to "opt out" of doing anything at all related to the issue of gender in the classroom, the other three options assume that gender roles are indeed a problematic issue for the students and must be dealt with on either the educator's or the students' terms.

Sunderland (2000b) reviewed current research on gender and language education with several implicit underlying assumptions (which she herself admits to), one of them being the existence of an "educational disadvantage" for a particular gender (i.e., a disadvantage against women). Past studies have explicitly dealt with the topic of there being "ways of knowing distinctive to women" (see Fujimura-Fanselow, 1996b) that could negatively impact how females approach the task of learning in the classroom. While some of these studies urge a pedagogical transformation to involve more active participation on the part of females who are ignored, silenced, and in some cases sexually harassed in the classroom, it is my belief that such pedagogical overhauls should only be utilized when and if these "ways of knowing distinctive to women" are better understood in the situational and cultural contexts where the learning takes place.

By placing background culture and modern social views into perspective, it is the aim of this paper to impress upon the reader the fact that having silent Japanese female EFL students should come as no surprise to educators, that their reticence should not necessarily be considered a sign of their insecurity, nor should such reticence be thought of as inherently problematic for the conducting of effectual language lessons. Furthermore, it is my belief that these female students do not need to have their gender made explicit, nor are they in need of special assistance from their language teachers to make up for the "deficit" of their being female. In fact, there are indications that the fabric of modern Japanese society and culture actually works to motivate female language learners to learn a foreign language such as English more so than it does for males.

The "Two Strikes" Against Japanese Women

I propose that there are at least two major reasons why Japanese females would initially appear to be disadvantaged in the EFL classroom. The first of these "strikes" is the requirement of native Japanese (both male and female) attempting to acquire the linguistic, communicative, and culture competence of a "noisy" target culture that expects speakers to express themselves and fill in periods of silence with verbal interaction. Such a culture lies in stark contrast to their home culture that expects considerably less verbosity and more restraint when it comes to voicing personal opinions.

The literature presents numerous references to how East Asian cultures, including the Japanese, value silence and shun verbosity. Yoshikawa (1977, as cited in Ishii, Cambra, & Klopf, 1978) has briefly enumerated five differences between the values Japanese and Americans have about speech:

1. The Japanese, being more group-oriented than individualistic, value harmony over direct confrontation, and will therefore tend to be other-directed in conversations.
2. Speech for the Japanese should be composed of minimal verbal and maximum nonverbal messages in order to communicate feelings or attitudes. For Americans, it is the opposite: minimal nonverbal and maximum verbal messages are used to exchange ideas or convey messages.
3. The Japanese consider it bad policy to use language to persuade and thus resort to nonverbal messages to make themselves understood. In contrast, Americans talk to establish mutual understanding.
4. For the Japanese, it is total understanding with an interlocutor or no understanding at all. For Americans, it is realized that total understanding of the other person is not possible, making oral interaction a more flexible and cooperative process.
5. Japanese will opt to use indirect language when communicating their feelings or ideas while Americans will tend to be more up-front and direct.

Other authors as well note how, in the high-context culture of Japan, greater reliance is placed on silence as a method to convey meaning (McDaniel, 1993) and, consequently, how verbal aggressiveness and outspoken behavior are typically shunned by the Japanese (Barnlund, 1989; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Matsumoto, 1994; Nishiyama, 1973, as cited in Ishii et al., 1978). Additionally, it has been repeatedly pointed out that in public learning situations, the Japanese would rather remain silent than risk giving a wrong answer in front of their peers (Samimy & Adams, 1991; Thompson, 1987; Yuen, 1996). Part of the reason for this reticence can be attributed to the Japanese education system, where "information loading" (Rohlen, 1983) requires the instructor to talk and the students to absorb the information. Although there has recently been some dissent against the view that Japanese value silence more than Americans (see Hasegawa & Gudykunst, 1998), few would argue against the position that the Japanese belong to a "reactive" or "listening" culture where people will prefer to listen first, gauge the other's position, react to it, and then formulate their own positions (Lewis, 1996).

The second "strike" or disadvantage that targets Japanese women learning English, over and above silence being culturally valued but potentially detrimental when moving into Western communicative patterns, stems from the fundamental perceived differences of male and female speech patterns. As outlined by O'Loughlin (2002), a considerable amount of research exists to bolster the claims that male and female conversational styles are distinct and that female language can be characterized as being cooperative and collaborative while male language can be characterized as being uncooperative and controlling. Not all that dissimilar to Western gender distinctions, within the framework of Japanese society, the males are usually the outspoken ones while the females are "shy, demure, and doll-like and removed from self-fulfillment" (Dunn & Cowen, 1993, p. 41).

Both gender and culture have been found to affect the form of speech patterns. Miller, Reynolds, and Cambra's (1987) study of language intensity in Japanese males and females presented results that evinced an interaction between gender and culture that influences language

intensity (e.g., how strong persuasive messages are made). Japanese men were found to use significantly higher levels of language intensity in relation to Japanese women. This study echoes the results found in a previous study by Miller (1982, as cited in Miller et al., 1987), which found that with increased social desirability, women will tend to use lower levels of intensity while the opposite can be said for men.

One reason attributed to this distinction in language intensity is the sharp differentiation between the sexes, which is more distinct in Eastern societies as seen in Japan and China than in Western societies such as that found in the United States (Miller et al., 1987). These authors also state that one way sex role differences can be expressed is via speech and language behavior. Because gender roles are socially defined and people are, at birth, perceived by society to be either male or female rather than as a human being (Lo, 2000), each gender is expected to behave differently, that is, act within the confines of the boundaries set by each given culture. In Japanese culture, it is more socially desirable for females to remain quiet, especially in the presence of men who are considered socially superior. Such behavior falls within the boundaries of acceptable behavior for women in that culture. Even so, such behavior need not necessarily be considered a disadvantage in the language classroom that normally expects (or at least where the instructor usually hopes) that the students will be communicatively active and where students should be treated equally, gender notwithstanding.

Not all would agree with such an explanation of Japanese female reticence. Some like Fujimura-Fanselow (1996a) reject outright such uniqueness-of-culture explanations of silence for Japanese females. However, it is my belief that the two "strikes" outlined above can potentially invigorate Japanese females to study foreign languages for two different reasons, one being the power the fruits of language learning can bestow upon women (power that cannot necessarily be bestowed upon men), and the other being the advantages that come with being a member of the "listening" gender that is expected to remain demure and silent.

Japanese Females, Language Learning, and Perceived Power

It is my contention that gradual shifts in the values of society have given those traditionally thought of as being "disadvantaged" in Japanese culture a greater boost. Dunn and Cowan (1993) discuss how the Japanese have been thought to retain gender-specific roles as they, like many other Eastern cultures, have generally retained their traditional values. However, the modern age has increasingly made acceptable what the traditional view held as anathema.

For instance, traditional views toward education allowed only limited schooling for women in Japan. It was once considered acceptable for women to be educated just enough so that they (a) would not appear more intelligent than their (potential) husbands (Morley, 1999, as cited in Starobin, 2002), and (b) could become a *ryôsai kenbo* (良妻賢母), or "good wife and wise mother" (Adachi, 2002; Amano, 1997). Starobin (2002) believes such traditional thinking has led to the long-time appeal of two-year colleges in Japan. Such colleges have expressly targeted Japanese women who were meant to be satisfied with a terminal two-year degree. Upon graduation, women were expected to be in the workforce for only a short time, as their ultimate aim was to become housewives and mothers.

Amano (1997) outlined the four categories behind the social functions of higher education:

1. research function, achieved through academic research and production of future researchers

2. general education function, aimed at producing a civilized citizenry
3. professional education function, for training future professionals
4. enlightenment function by providing critical assessment and better understanding of the society

Amano contends that higher education in Japan has essentially only served the second and third aims listed above and that there have been different motivations behind the roles of higher education for Japanese men and women. Specifically, primary education for women has been for fostering knowledge and attitudes "relevant to gender-roles assigned to women" (p. 217) while professional education for women has been limited to "expressive" jobs such as child care worker, teacher, and secretary, with men having enjoyed the more public domain jobs (i.e., "careers"). As this distinction is in many ways still held and reinforced, women continually opt to enter fields deemed "proper" for women. One such field is language studies. In fact, Sunderland (2000a) believes that Japanese women are *steered* into language because such study is found within the educational field, which is traditionally thought of as being female-oriented because of its social acceptability.

A study by the Benesse Kyôikukenkyûjo (1996, as cited in Kobayashi, 2002) is a case in point. The study found from a study of 2,358 high school students (1,203 male and 1,155 female) that 66% of the females chose liberal arts courses while 62% of the males chose physical science courses. Although 66% entails only two-thirds of the total number of participants, the choice of specialization within the liberal arts field is even more telling. The male students in the liberal arts courses were found to overwhelming favor traditionally male-dominated domains such as economics (25.3% male vs. 7.3% female) and law (15.1% male vs. 4.7% female) while the female students opted for traditional (i.e., "safe") domains such as education (22.1% female vs. 16% male) and foreign language study (13.1% female vs. 4.5% male). Similar figures have even been found above the high school level. The Japanese Ministry of Education (Monbushô) reported in 1998 (as cited in Kobayashi, 2002) that 67% of foreign-language-major university students in Japan are female. It is Kobayashi's opinion that that such figures confirm English as the "popular, socially expected choice for women as their major in Japan" (p. 188).

Ultimately, whether or not Japanese women are truly herded into the field of language learning may make little difference. These women may simply feel themselves to be disadvantaged outside of traditional female fields, for instance, in the sciences or even economics or law within the liberal arts field. Engaging in foreign language learning, especially as a university major, presents them with a relatively safe place to be within the walls of academia.

Choosing to engage in language study beyond high school may not result entirely from the belief that it is a "safe" field, however. In recent times, more and more women are rejecting educational paths that limit their full potential. During the 1990s, there was a greater acceptance of women gaining advanced degrees in four-year universities (Starobin, 2002). It has been documented that for Japanese males the advancement ratio to institutions of higher education has historically been 10% greater than that of females, yet the advancement ratio for women has not only increased since the mid-1970s, but has from the outset of the 1990s actually surpassed that of men (Amano, 1997). With increased opportunities to enter and graduate from four-year universities, Japanese females have had a greater chance to express their freedom – yet surprisingly they often opt to do so via language study.

Why would Japanese females choose to express their societal freedom by entering a field of study long deemed "proper" and traditionally acceptable? Such study presents (and represents)

power that women may attempt to assume but that men do not, for the latter do not need to resort to language study to rise within the culture's hierarchical structure. Past research has also shown that females tend to do well at foreign languages (Arnot, David, & Weiner, 1996, as cited in Sunderland, 2000a) and will choose to study foreign languages when they are actually given the choice (Wikeley & Stables, 1999, as cited in Sunderland, 2000a).

Kobayashi (2002) mentions the mass media and the English language teaching industry in Japan as identifying and even bolstering the association between Japanese women and English via the recognition of English being all the things Japanese women look for, including being feminine, intellectual, international, and professional, all of which allow women to express their femininity yet also step out of their traditional boundaries. In Kobayashi's view, "many OL (office ladies), believing the appealing advertisements of the English language industry, are convinced of the power of English as a way to change their clerical, non-professional jobs into something professional and independent" (p. 190). In short, females associate and are associated with positive images of English study and English use in Japan, and using such positive images can in turn be socially advantageous by allowing them access to independence and freedom.

Female Silence Does Not Constitute Inactivity

Even if one accepts the proposition that Japanese women are herded toward languages (and that the women accept this coercion), it may be to their benefit. As mentioned above, past research has found women to be generally good at learning foreign languages. In specifically examining Japanese female EFL learners, Kobayashi (2002) found that Japanese female students' mean scores were significantly higher than male students' means in the following five scales, indicating, first of all, that Japanese females have a more positive attitude toward language learning, especially in the long term:

1. *Attitudes towards long-term English learning*, which included wanting to enter a profession where English use is required, continuing English study even after the university entrance examinations are completed, and viewing English as a promising school subject for future use.
2. *Interest in culture and communication*, which included wanting to make friends with people overseas, wanting to master American English, and being interested in learning about various kinds of language and culture.
3. *Perceptions about studying English in a school context*, which included viewing the study of English for the university entrance examinations as a good opportunity to build up their grammar and vocabulary base and believing themselves to be people who enjoy learning English.
4. *Images associated with English*, which included viewing professions that involved English use to sound intelligent, viewing people who have mastered English as being able to rely upon their proficiency to earn money, and viewing proficiency in English as being a benefit to successful job-seeking activities.
5. *English learning activities outside school*, which included joining English study clubs (at school or outside school), joining English conversation schools, and using television or radio English conversation programs.

Furthermore, it is the opinion of not a few researchers that focusing on linguistic input in

language learning is essential, which is something females are thought to do to a greater extent on average than males. Schmidt (1990, as cited in Crookes & Schmidt, 1991) claims that attention to input is one necessary condition for language learning. While production in the target language is also important for language learning and acquisition, greater concentration on input correlates with greater attention paid to linguistic forms. To this end, it has been conjectured that women, rather than men, are likely to be better second language learners, as they are more sensitive to new forms and hence are more apt to incorporate them into their attempts of second language production (Ellis, 1994).

Such speculation has been supported by research on sex differences, which has shown that men will tend to use opportunities to interact as a means to produce more output while women use such opportunities to obtain more input (see Gass & Varonis, 1986). Yet another potential explanation regarding focus on input comes from Seliger (1983), who remarked that "some learners do, in fact, 'feed' on the input of other learners almost as much as or more than they feed on the input of the teacher. Still other learners appear to be dependent on the teacher for whatever input they receive" (p. 247).

Ellis' (1994) expansive look at past research offered another explanation for why females would excel at language learning: higher employment expectations derived from foreign language study account for more positive attitudes towards language learning for females than for males. This view likely holds water in the Japanese EFL situation, as English presents women with significant vocational value, as described above. It has also been said by top educators in the field of language learning that Japanese women who gain advanced degrees abroad in language education appear far less apt to return to Japan to work than do their male counterparts (E. K. Horwitz, personal communication, March 2, 2004), for they may not encounter the same degree of equity in regard to salary and status in their work in their home country that they find abroad.

One possible motive behind Japanese women's reticence, in their ultimate pursuit of better jobs, higher pay, and eventually respect, is that that their silence is one of their language learning strategies (i.e., increased silence leads to increased concentration on linguistic forms). Oxford and Shearin (1994) expounded upon the influences provided by motivation to learn another language, with one reason being, not surprisingly, the amount of input received. While being more oriented toward social interaction is one likely reason females will use conversation strategies more than males (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989), it may be speculated that such increased strategy use is related to increased motivation and satisfaction in language learning, helps explain increased silence in female learners, and, ultimately, perpetuates the cycle of silence found in the classroom.

Conclusions

What I have attempted to illuminate in this brief paper are a few underlying societal-, culture-, and gender-based connections between the reticence of Japanese females and their study of English. While it is fully understood that language production, practice via verbal output of learned linguistic forms, and participation in the classroom by means of the expressing of ideas and opinions are all important components to successful language learning classes, educators should not lose sight of the fact that teaching language to learners from other cultures involves respecting the many facets of the learner, including where the learners find themselves situated in their native culture. An understanding of the target culture by the learners or of the source culture by the language educator presents both cognitive and affective considerations (Bedford, 1981) that cannot be ignored.

It should also be realized that not every class will necessarily be composed of Japanese female students longing to break free of the social chains of the past and excel at a foreign language, nor will every class be made up of females not daring to speak. Instead of it being the job of the teacher to assess the gender roles of the students and assign ways for gender to be acted out, it might be better to work with and adjust to the students over the span of the course. From the results of his cross-cultural study, Littlewood (2001) remarked that most students in all countries would like to see themselves as active participants in the classroom learning process. Contrary to initial impressions, allowing Japanese women in the language classroom to remain silent may be one of the most effective ways for them to acquire the language. If so, their silence should not be discouraged. As Triandis and Singelis (1998) recommend, instead of making assumptions about a group, make a "first-best guess" according to background culture and demographics as interactions between participants unfold. The students – male and female alike – may enjoy and benefit from being allowed periods of silence. If so, they will thank you for them – but not in so many words.

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