The Time In Between: Socialization Training as a Learning Priority for Japanese University Students

Stuart D. Warrington
Asia University, Japan

Bio Data

Stuart D. Warrington has taught EFL in South Korea and Japan for over 8 years and ESL in Canada for two years. He is currently a Visiting Faculty Lecturer and Professional Development Chair at the Center for English Language Education (CELE), Asia University, Tokyo, Japan. His research interests are Culture and EFL, Multiple Intelligences, Motivation, Teaching Learner Strategies, Teaching Listening, Video in the Classroom, and Needs Assessment.

Abstract

It is generally accepted and understood by many if not most countries around the globe that success in academics is the priority of learning at university. However, this does not mean that there are not unique understandings and perceptions of learning and the priorities it is given. In Japan, university student perceptions on what is to be learned at university are quite unlike those found throughout the world and are actively practiced today. Japanese university students' learning of socialization or "socialization training" is a cultural phenomenon that is widely misunderstood, misinterpreted and critiqued by many in the EFL profession. For many, it is often deemed incomprehensible. This is especially true for EFL teachers at the university and tertiary levels in Japan. In this paper, an exploration of this unique cultural facet and how it is perceived is undertaken. This is done with the intention of revealing what university EFL teachers need to acknowledge, know and understand about the learning priority given to socialization training by Japanese university students in relation to their own perceptions of learning as teachers.

Key Words: socialization training, group(s), circles, apathy, absenteeism, dedication

Introduction

For many students in university throughout the world, the university level is perceived to be the most important time in their lives academically. It is the period where students are knowingly faced with the challenge of achieving personal educational goals and objectives. It is understood then, that students must strive to achieve the best results, whether it be an A, and/or the best grade point average in order to compete, graduate and receive the credentials necessary to progress, fulfill and benefit their careers and future.

This, however, is seemingly the perception of western universities if not most around the globe. Yet, unlike the majority of these attitudes towards learning and achievement at university, in Japan, there can be found a unique perception among students of what university is for and what the learning priorities are that take place within it. In this paper, an attempt is made to explore this phenomenon of Japanese culture and explain what foreign university EFL teachers need to acknowledge, know and understand when facing and dealing with this remarkable and easily misunderstood facet of culture that continues to thrive in Japan to this very day.

University: The Time In Between

In high school, it is well known that Japanese students meticulously prepare for university entrance examinations and are also obligated to participate readily in clubs. It is a busy life full of much responsibility. This is also true when as adults they enter the working world and are trained for a position with much asked of them and little time to enjoy a social life outside of the "team" they work so closely with. Nevertheless, for many Japanese, there is the time in between high school and the working world as university students, which is unique among others found throughout the world.

Although thought of particularly as a stage in the life cycle or a rite of passage much the same as high school and the working world, being a university student in Japan manifests a clear deviation from the definitional realm of learning as most know it and the priority it is given. Just what does constitute as "learning" for university students in Japan is indeed a fair question. For the foreign EFL teacher, success in academics and the

acquisition of knowledge is primarily seen as the priority of university study. Yet, in Japan there tends to be a preference towards socialization, the process of getting to know others through communicative and group-oriented events, over academic achievement. Some see this as the end product of an education and examination system in Japan that "encourages apathy towards learning" (McVeigh in Poole, 2001, p.155). Indeed this may be so, as the results of a 2005 survey revealed that 60 percent of teachers at private universities and junior colleges across the nation think that their students' basic academic abilities are insufficient (The Daily Yomiuri, 2005), implying that students are not prepared to deal with academics at the university level and as a result perhaps see socialization as the alternative. In addition, it further suggests that Japanese university students have perhaps been conditioned to this type of 'learning' prior to the onset of their university studies.

To many foreign EFL teachers working at Japanese universities, socialization as a learning priority raises some serious questions about the goals and objectives of most Japanese students attending. In particular, many question why Japanese students attend university at all if they simply just want to socialize. It is indeed a valid query, for as many foreign university teachers see it, once students gain admission to university, virtually all learning and study seem to cease (Mack-Cozzo, 2002). In a 2005 survey published in the Japanese magazine "ViVi", the top three reasons for attending university were:

   (1) To make many friends within circles, regardless of what university one attends.

   (2) To go out at night, because as a high school student, one could not.

   (3) To go out drinking after one turns 20 years of age (the 2nd year of university) with members of his or her circle.

These, among others listed, did not make any mention of academics, the acquisition of knowledge or learning. This is hardly surprising to some since it has become commonplace to hear of students sleeping in class or not attending courses in favour of some socially related "obligation". In all fairness to some Japanese students, it does seem understood that there is a responsibility on their behalf to study and achieve successful

Asian EFL Journal. Professional Teaching Articles. Volume 12, May 2006

4

results. There are undoubtedly many who do. Still, that in itself does not necessarily warrant, justify nor guarantee the effort and commitment of many students, especially if they perceive the experience of higher learning as no more than a four year "leisure land' (Doyon in Poole, 2001, p.155). Former U.S Ambassador Reischauer concurred with this too, when based on his experience and observations of the learning that transpires at Japanese universities, he said:

> The squandering of four years at the college level…with very little study seems an incredible waste of time for a nation so passionately devoted to efficiency (Reischauer, 1977, p.178).

Ward in 2003 adds that Japanese students are notoriously famous for not taking classes seriously and when they do, it is often used as a 'cover for social life' within the university context. This is often accepted as true since, for most students, the grading scheme of A, B or C appears irrelevant, as long as they pass. In other words, academic inclination, ambition and aspiration are not basic necessities or priorities. This may be a phenomenon linked to the fact that for a large number of companies that do hire university graduates, little consideration is given for grades, grade point averages and academic standing as opposed to the name of the university one graduates from or the fact an individual graduated period. This is supported by Wright (1997) who, in reference to Japanese university students, pointed out that a student's future position in society is often decided by the name of the school they graduate from rather than by the grades they attained there. Hence, successful socialization and the development of a well-rounded member of society appear as the objectives of university life, not academic standing.

Just why such an apparent change in academic attitude and work ethic exists in between high school and working life can seem quite bewildering to some, especially when many other cultures in the world so readily dictate the importance of success at university. This can perhaps only be explained and answered through a closer examination of the function and purpose of university life for students in Japanese society.

The Time for Socialization Training

In general, it appears, as one of my Japanese students put it, that Japanese youths see university "as the time for a rest between the hard study to enter a good university and the hard work to earn a living" (K. Ichinose, personal communication, January 2005). Indeed, the consensus is that since students have worked so hard to gain entrance and accomplished so much, they feel they rightly deserve a break during university. Moreover, it would appear that the higher education system agrees with them. Many of the classes during their first few years at university are large lectures on required subjects in general education, which are not likely to have much relevance for their future. What is more, the grading in these courses is often generous. As a result, many of the students are able to use this period as a time to have fun, make new friends, and participate in club activities (Cummings, 1986).

With this in mind, a tremendous effort is made by students to establish social links and groups. There are at least two aspects to this socializing process: learning to function as part of a group, and discovering its boundaries (Goldsbury, 2005). This is not an uncommon or unfamiliar aspect of education in Japanese society. One of the fundamental aims of education in Japan is to be a socializing process (Goldsbury, 2005) and national conformity is believed to be strengthened by such a system that emphasizes group spirit. Consequently, Japanese students use the university setting as the ideal opportunity to do just so. Participating in extracurricular clubs and activities is seen as important in that they offer the chance for students from different undergraduate programs to get acquainted with one another, providing unequaled opportunities to enlarge one's circle. Every effort is made to make social links to groups in order to maximize social opportunities, group action, group creativity, and group experience so as to make the most of their life within these circles and prepare themselves to enter the working world. It is what is known from this point on throughout this paper as 'socialization training'.

Although many students may acknowledge the hard road ahead after university, there does not seem to be much pessimism or concern regarding their seemingly inevitable

Asian EFL Journal. Professional Teaching Articles. Volume 12, May 2006

6

future in the work force. In fact, according to one survey (The Japan Info-Network, 2001), more than 28 percent of Japanese university students are quite satisfied with the thought of simply becoming a full-time employee at a large company. Moreover, almost 80 percent of university graduates get a job in the private sector each year (Amano, 1988). This suggests that a significant number are very willing to take what they can get. In fact, some might go as far to say that it reveals that most university students know and have accepted their fate and are just waiting for it to transpire. It could also be stated from this that many university students in Japan appear to lack the same motivation and interest to achieve high standards in academics typical of university students in other countries. However, what it most importantly implies is that the aims of education have perhaps become subordinated to the aims of training (Goldsbury, 2005). If this is indeed the case, then socialization training appears to be the learning priority for many university students in Japan.

The proof comes in observation. One only has to observe students on campus to see how important socialization is. Many students can readily be seen promoting their clubs and activities with the use of loud speakers and mass display posters. Scores of students hand out leaflets and set up booths to recruit students into their social groups or network to formulate communities of like-minded individuals who meet regularly to engage in a shared interest or hobby. Typically, university students can only belong to one club or social network. However, once they have joined a club or circle, their dedication from that point on is highly expected and anticipated. Not surprisingly then, foreign students attending a university in Japan can be quite taken aback by the whole socialization experience. As one anonymous foreign student attending International Christian University in Tokyo stated:

> The degree of dedication it took to participate fully in a club in Japan took me by complete surprise. While I found it a worthwhile experience, I do wish I had had more free time while school was in session.

What is more, many students' participation in clubs or circles has been known to take priority over classes and, in turn, resulted in excessive absenteeism, tardiness and failure.

It appears then that students seem only to engage a series of social rituals that take the place of and conceal the absence of educational substance (McVeigh, 2001; 2002). What is more interesting, and seemingly unbeknownst to many, is that there are additional measures in place that 'support' this behavior that students readily use to be 'officially' excused from classes in order to avoid the consequences of their actions. This is very true of the university I currently work at, where a student, for example, only has to fill out an official excused absence form for a club or social event, have it readily stamped and signed by a faculty head, and then by university administration and is consequently, deemed approved to be "excused" from class. All be this most intriguing culturally, it is most curious. The fact that permission is publicly granted outside of the classroom with complete disregard for teacher jurisdiction is a significant indication of the importance socialization training has for Japanese universities and Japanese society. It thus seems to suggest that the students are seen as receiving an intensive education, particularly in Japanese group dynamics, within the club itself in order to learn how to handle responsibility (Norris, 2004) and are therefore, perceived as benefiting. Hence, they are 'legitimately excused' from the classroom and their academic responsibility, because they are seen as 'learning'.

Some teachers in other cultures are likely to disapprove of the notion of socialization taking precedence over academics at the university level. In fact, some may question the legitimacy and credibility of the university as an academic institution. Still, for Japanese students, socialization appears as a staple of their education system and is considered normal in contemporary Japanese society. Some may see this as an indirect example of collectivism found through out Japan. Those who have lived in Japan for some time come to know that it is not so much what an individual does, but rather what the 'team' manufactures. That is to say, what the group 'produces' rather than the individual in particular is seen as most significant. Consequently, many university students in Japan strive to make groups, and get involved in other social outlets and functions in order to again, prepare and give themselves the skills necessary to be part of the social network and in the future, a team member in the work place.

Asian EFL Journal. Professional Teaching Articles. Volume 12, May 2006

8

Being a group or team member does, however, have its pros and cons. On the positive side, belonging means that one is seen as protected by the group when threatened from the outside in cases of inter group-friction and conflict. Loyalty, competitiveness, and initiative are strongly promoted and conformed to (Ishida in De Mente, 2003). Yet, on the downside, being part of the group virtually eliminates any possibility of a member taking individual responsibility or an individual position of any kind. Moreover, it becomes literally impossible to stop a course of action set by the group that may be perceived individually, as detrimental, mistaken or misguided. Though these points are meant for consideration here, whether Japanese university students and Japanese society see or acknowledge the shortcomings of socialization training through group oriented action is still debatable and remains to be seen. Some would admit that there is an inability to think and act independently (De Mente, 2003). Still, it is hard to imagine any significant reformulation of thought occurring when the socialization training process remains subjective, familiar and most importantly, traditional and customary to Japanese society.

The Problem Socialization Training Presents:

The Impact on the Foreign University EFL Teacher

With the mass impact and influence socialization training has on university students, it is also important to consider its effects on others. This is especially true in regards to foreign educators. Considering foreign university EFL teachers, socialization training presents a problem. There has been a growing concern among foreign university EFL teachers throughout Japan regarding the general tendency for university students to disregard a foreign teacher's status as a professor or educator, reducing it to that unlike their Japanese counterparts. This is often attributed to socialization training. At least, that is how many EFL teachers at the university level seem to see it. Foreign university EFL teachers are often not viewed as serious teachers and are perceived as being easy to get acquainted with and entertaining (Shimizu, 2000). This is perhaps because the students often place them into the whole scheme of the socialization process, expecting them to adhere to and be involved in it, as an integral part. However, it should also be noted that

for many Japanese, the foreign individual is often regarded as a temporary visitor or guest (De Mente, 2003) since they are not Japanese and are therefore, viewed as 'different'.

Overall then, there is a consensus that many university EFL teachers feel they are never taken to be or understood as the professionals they truly are. This would seem to be a valid claim socially and culturally. This would also explain why many teachers resist the stereotypes, seeing such treatment as demeaning, disrespectful and dishonourable to their profession. This then, manifests into frustration and disillusionment with one's own students and teaching, since what the teacher brings and hopes to accomplish in class is perceived as different, unnatural and unconventional. Yet, one has to question if this is not simply a consequence of teachers neglecting their own empathetic development to become as informed as possible regarding the academic, cultural, and social backgrounds of their students (Kemp in Norris, 1995). It would certainly reveal why many teachers grow tired of trying to make sense of a process, they believe, is beyond the scope of their understanding.

Thus, any real advantage in resistance to this cultural phenomenon would seem initially of less benefit. From my own experience, if one fails to socialize with his or her students within the confines of the classroom, the result tends to be immediate disassociation expressed through increased student absenteeism, tardiness, sleeping, lack of attentiveness and even failure. This seems extraordinary, yet the degree of irrelevancy, triviality and insignificance of the class to the student does seem to force some to extremes. This was echoed in a related study undertaken at Takamatsu University which showed that the majority of university students feel their attendance of English classes depends almost entirely on whether they received some extra credit or not, regardless of any other reservations they may have (Williams, 2004). Therefore, for many foreign university EFL teachers, there appears an increased pressure to fulfill or perhaps, give in to student expectations, requiring them to be interesting, cheerful, and entertaining (Shimizu, 2000). Moreover, many may feel they need to provide some incentive to students for attending and participating in class. The reasons for this may involve the perceived risks in receiving a poor reputation and poor student ratings for supposed

insubordination towards the socialization process and a failure to reward students for simply being present.

However, the idea of adherence or compliance to such a social predicament might only prove detrimental to the foreign EFL teacher. One cannot fail to understand that Japanese student attitudes and their expectations of foreign teachers are in part, the direct result of their cultural conditioning. Thus, compliance with such would only seem to prove the students right. Perhaps then, it better to approach Japanese university students from a position of strength in order to achieve something fair, create a balance and gain respect. This, though, may take time and the perplexity, and frustration that arises may only prove to get the better of the foreign EFL teacher, since it is admittingly understood by many Japanese university students that they themselves are unable to identify with other nationalities and races, invoke their "Japaneseness" as justification for their attitudes and behavior, and do not see nor recognize their attitudes towards foreigners as being potentially discriminatory (De Mente, 2003, p.78, 84).

Socialization Training Through Dedication

The amount staked in socialization seems well understood by the majority of university students in Japan. To reiterate, it is very clear that the more a student partakes in a club, circle or social event, the more that person is seen as prepared, 'trained' and bettered socially for the transition to working world. The degree of devotion and dedication expressed through the countless hours and minutes involved in social events can thus, never be questioned or mistaken. As one anonymous foreign student attending Waseda University put it:

> The average American college student likely cannot begin to comprehend the dedication and industriousness with which a Japanese college student participates in group activities such as school social clubs and extracurricular activities. It seems as though long after the average American student would be demanding private time and space, Japanese students are getting their second wind for another two or three hours of group activity.

Yet, as intricate, subtle, demanding, and 'groupistic' as this behavior is unappealingly to the foreign student or foreign university EFL teacher, one should be cautious not to underestimate the Japanese in regards to this. They have proven themselves very successful in various ways through their dedication to the social group. Many of the misunderstandings foreigners have of them are perhaps a mistake in assuming they are so complicated when in fact, "they are so simple" (Singer in De Mente, 2003, p.77). What this implies then, is that the many negative foreign or objective perceptions of socialization training as impractical, inefficient and incomprehensible are to the Japanese, mere contradictions and anything but normal.

To the Japanese, socialization training is seen as a form of learning that has proven itself. It is hard to doubt such a claim when Japan has stood second economically among all nations of the world (World Bank Group, 2004). This is perhaps due in part to the ongoing promotion of community consciousness and group solidarity, characterized through self-sacrifice and community dedication. Thus, to strengthen and maintain group cohesion, individual members of a group work to improve their group's internal dynamics, while at the same time reducing intra-group tensions through strong personal rather than ideological ties between superior and subordinates. These ties are typically likened to fictitious familial relationships, analogous to the bonds between parents and children (De Mente, 2003). This may be why in many cases, the social group remains firm and in tact with respect and obedience to those who keep group order. This again, seems indicative of Japanese society's emphasis on the culmination of social interdependence. Dependence on each other appears as a natural part of the human condition for many and any deviance from this is viewed negatively, especially when the social obligations are perceived as too onerous to fulfill.

This is key in understanding why many Japanese university students appear apathetic towards and disassociated with academic success. One's participation in-group activities, whether official or unofficial, is seen as symbolic of the individual's wishes to be considered part of an integrated social network. Thus, belonging to a club, a circle or a socially related group provides not only instrumental opportunities for the exchange of

Asian EFL Journal. Professional Teaching Articles. Volume 12, May 2006

12

information and release of social tensions, but also the chance to express nonverbally, a desire for continued affiliation. It is important to understand as well that any behavior counter to this may be misinterpreted or misconstrued as selfish, defiant, individualistic and/or deserving of ostracism. Therefore, any call or request by a social group, club, or circle to do or take part in something at the expense of missing or being late for classes is perhaps not only seen as preferential and essential, but also unquestionable and obligatory. This may prove why such behavior is often conversely understood by many university EFL teachers as negative, inexcusable, and irresponsible much to the ignorance of students.

Concluding Thoughts

In this paper, an effort has been made to explain socialization training as a learning priority and why Japanese students and Japanese society place an emphasis on it. What is important for EFL teachers and Japanese students to take from this article is that there is an ongoing failure to comprehend one another's goals, objectives, and position and consequently, efforts must be made to consolidate on the matter. With due consideration for what has been explored through this paper, it is hoped that foreign university EFL teachers will use this knowledge to better understand, and productively deal with the issue as it stands in Japan. This is so a balance can found between what we expect of students in class and what this cultural phenomenon of Japanese society obliges and expects of them.

Frustrated university EFL teachers may be prone to deem the difficulties faced as irresolvable and beyond the state of one's control. However, it is perhaps better to abstain from thinking in such a manner, as this would not only prove counter-productive, but more importantly, ignore the issue of socialization training as a complication derived from misunderstanding. Both the foreign teacher and the Japanese university student must strive to recognize that each has "cultural differences in values, motivations and methods that invariably result in further gaps in understanding" (De Mente, 2003, p.79).

Although the social conditioning and education students bring with them to the university classroom proves challenging, so too do the expectations we have of students to unlearn these. University student acceptance and understanding of the type of learning EFL teachers expect of them may remain trying for some time. Nevertheless, by taking the time to comprehend the process behind socialization training, and acknowledging the culture that drives it, there is reason to believe that progress can be made. Undertaking the determination, patience and perseverance to strike a balance between student and teacher understandings of learning priorities appears as the first step towards an answer.

References

Amano, I. (1988). Daigaku: Shiken no jidai {Universities: The moment of truth}. Tokyo: Tokyo University Press.

Cummings, W. K. (Ed.). (1986). Educational policies in crisis: Japanese and American perspectives. New York: Praeger.

Daigaku ni haitara nani o ichiban shitai desu ka? (2005, Summer). *ViVi*, 6, 204.

The Daily Yomiuri Online (2005). 60% of university teachers say students lack basic abilities. Retrieved May 13th, 2006 from **http://www.eltnews.com/news/archives/2005_07.shtml**

De Mente, B.L. (2003). *Kata: The key to understanding & dealing with the Japanese!* Singapore: Tuttle Publishing.

Doyon, P. (2001). A review of higher education reform in modern Japan. In G.S. Poole, Higher education reform in Japan: Amano Ikuo on the 'university in crisis'. *International Education Journal, 4*(3), 149-176.

Goldsbury, P. (2005). Education and training. *The Aikido Journal*. Retrieved May 13th, 2006 from http://www.aikidojournal.com/article.php?articleID=511

Ishida, T. (2003). Channeling competitive power. In B.L. De Mente (Ed.), *Kata: The key to understanding & dealing with the Japanese!* (pp.149-150), Singapore: Tuttle Publishing.

Japan Info-Network. (2001). *University students' vision of their future: Online survey*, (5; December). Retrieved May 13, 2006 from http://web-japan.org/trends01/article/011205fea_r.html

Asian EFL Journal. Professional Teaching Articles. Volume 12, May 2006

14

Kemp, J. B. (1995). Culture clash and teacher awareness. In R.W. Norris (Ed.), *Some thoughts on classroom management problems faced by foreign teachers at Japanese universities*. Retrieved May 13th, 2006 from
http://www2.gol.com/users/norris/classman2.html

Mack-Cozzo, J.B. (2002). If you think we have problems … Japan's inferior university system. *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research*. Retrieved May 13, 2006 from http://www.taemag.com/issues/articleid.16861/article_detail.asp

McVeigh, B .J. (2001). Higher education, apathy and post-meritocracy. *The Language Teacher*, *25*(10), 29-32.

McVeigh, B .J. (2002). *Japanese higher education as myth*. Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe.

Norris, R.W. (2004). Some thoughts on classroom management problems faced by foreign teachers at Japanese universities. *Bulletin of Fukuoka International University*. Retrieved May 13th, 2006 from http://www2.gol.com/users/norris/classman2.html

Poole, G.S. (2001). Higher education reform in Japan: Amano Ikuo on the 'university in crisis'. *International Education Journal*, *4*(3), 149-176.

Reischauer, E. O. (1977). *The Japanese*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Shimizu, K. (1995). Japanese college student attitudes towards English teachers: A survey. *The Language Teacher, 17*(5). Retrieved May 13th, 2006 from http://jalt-publications.org/tlt/files/95/oct/shimizu.html

Singer, K (2003). Behind the bamboo curtain. In B.L. De Mente (Ed.), *Kata: The key to understanding & dealing with the Japanese!* (pp.76-77). Singapore: Tuttle Publishing.

Ward. N. (2003). *About Japanese universities*. Retrieved May 13th, 2006 from
http://www.nigelward.com/japan/belonging.html

Williams, R.T. (2004). Dealing with absenteeism in English classes at Takamatsu university. Retrieved May 13th, 2006 from http://www.takamatsu-u.ac.jp/nlibrary/kiyo/no42/no42_williams.pdf

World Bank Group. (2004). Total gdp. Retrieved May 13th, 2006 from
http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GDP.pdf

Wright, M. (1997). Japanese universities and lifelong education: Trends and transitions. A Conference of Comparative and International Education Society (Western Region), University of Southern California, November 14-15,1997.