

The Comprehension of Japanese Culture in Learning Japanese as Foreign Language

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Abstract: This study investigated the correlation of Japanese culture knowledge and Japanese language competence of basic level Indonesian Japanese language learners. This study aims to help non-native Japanese teachers to understand certain difficulties that Japanese language students might encounter problem in learning Japanese due to cultural differences, and to help Japanese students to become aware of their own socio-cultural behaviours in communication, in order to reduce cross-cultural misunderstandings. This research used qualitative method, and the data were collected through Discourse Completion Test. The questionnaire used Kasper (2000) categorization. The sample were 40 Japanese students in Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia. The data collected from the questionnaires were statistically analysed using descriptive statistics. The results showed that by understanding Japanese culture, the students can understand better how to communicate and it gives a positive impact on learning Japanese language. However, the results about using a certain level of politeness in various situations was not satisfying. Furthermore, the results of this study related with teachers' way of teaching including language content, language use, and teaching behaviour. These are considered important to help students in understanding the language they are learning better.

1 INTRODUCTION

In language learning classes, learners need to be involved in how cultural contexts influence the idea that is being communicated. This context is not a single culture because the language and target culture of learners are equally presented and engaged simultaneously. It can cause a cultural confusion even in a cultural acculturation. Learning to communicate in additional languages involves the development of an awareness of the ways in which cultures relate to languages whenever it is used (Liddicoat et al., 2003).

Based on the results of the initial questionnaire distributed to students who participated in *Nihon Bunka* (Japanese culture) course, it can be concluded that they facing difficulties to understand the Japanese phrases that are not equivalent semantically to Indonesian language or the phrase used from the context of sentence and the culture Japanese that influence it non-verbally.

Hadley and Hadley's research (1996) explains that learning culture must be accompanied by understanding the culture of the target language they

studied. This is to make it easier to understand the phrases used in the context of everyday sentences and to avoid miscommunication.

In most of the ongoing communication, it almost always involves the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols together. Both verbal and non-verbal languages have a holistic nature (each of them is inseparable). In many communication actions, non-verbal language becomes complementary to verbal language. Non-verbal symbols can also function contradictory, repetitive, and even substitute for verbal expressions. For instance, when someone says thank you (verbal language), the interlocutors will complete it with a smile (non-verbal language); when someone agrees with the message, he will nod his head (non-verbal language). These two communications are instances that verbal and non-verbal languages work together in creating the meaning of a communication (Herdianto, 2010).

According to Samovar, Richard and Lisa (1998), nonverbal communication encompasses all stimuli except for verbal stimuli in a communication setting produced by individuals, and use of the environment by individuals who have a potential message value

for the sender or recipient; so this definition includes both intentional and accidental behaviour as part of the overall communication event; we send many nonverbal messages without realizing that they are meaningful to others. Non-verbal behaviour that serves as a silent language, the concept of time, and the use and arrangement of space.

The understanding of Japanese cultural time is monochronic, while Indonesians' is polychronic. There are differences in talking, touching, distance, as well as other habits that are connected with communication. Based on literature studies that have been conducted, it is necessary to do a research that confirms that there is a strong relationship between culture and foreign language learning.

Based on previous explanations that Indonesian and Japanese have different cultures both verbally and non-verbally, this study focuses on how the relationship between the two variables toward the knowledge of Japanese culture with the ability to speak Japanese, whether they affect each other or not.

2 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Culture is not only inseparably related to language, but also plays an important role throughout the process of language teaching and learning (Kumagai, 1994). The question is not whether or not to teach culture, but, rather, what kind of teaching can promote students' understanding of the nature of the language, communication and human relations. Tucker (1973) stated that the ability to communicate fully in a second language depends on the degree of non-ethnocentrism of the learner.

It is impossible to communicate in a language without understanding the cultural connotations of its use (Mahoney, 2007). Likewise, it is impossible to understand a different culture without learning how different ideas and ways of seeing the world are expressed through its language. As 'foreign languages are not just a code version of English,'⁸ culture is not just another component to be tacked onto the end of the code – it is embedded within it (Liddicoat et al., 2003).

The importance of understanding "culture" in which the target language is spoken for a foreign language students has become clear. In a foreign language classroom, when teachers talk about incorporating culture into language teaching, it often

means simply introducing typical customs or traditions of the given society.

Lado (1957) discussed the comparison of languages and cultures for the purpose of identifying and describing problems that second-language learners will encounter. His fundamental assumption is that individuals transfer forms and meanings, and the distribution of these, from their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture. As a consequence, there occurs miscommunication between people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Kumagai, 1994).

For example, in a Japanese language class, a teacher may introduce some Japanese customs or social rules such as when you receive a present, do not open it in front of the giver but instead just put it aside, or they eat raw fish, and so on. These are, of course, part of Japanese culture, and may be useful to know when visiting a Japanese home. Yet, it does not explain the reasons or beliefs behind all these social behaviours to which one must be introduced in order to understand Japanese culture.

Another problem with teaching language from a cultural perspective is that there is a clear dichotomy between native and non-native speakers of the language (Kumagai, 1994).

3 METHODS

3.1 Participants

Respondents in this study were taken purposively at the Japanese Language Education Department at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia Bandung, Indonesia. Respondents were set in a group with basic level competencies in the Japanese language with a range of 17 to 19 years old. Respondents came from undergraduate students who took the subject of *Nihon Bunka* (Japanese Culture) academic year 2017-2018 in a total of 40 respondents, 22 females, and 18 males. *Nihon Bunka* is a Japanese cultural introduction course containing Japanese culture in terms of season and food, festivals / events, customs, customs, and religion.

3.2 Instrumentation

In this study, the data were collected using the following instruments:

Discourse Completion Test (DCT): This test kit is a written questionnaire that makes a brief description of a particular situation that is intended to describe the speech acting pattern being studied. DCT is used to find information on the level of

comprehension and ability of respondents to speak Japanese toward the phrases used in the context of the given situation and to seek a correlation between the cultural understanding with the level of Japanese ability orally. In this study, the DCT is used with the type of *open item-verbal response only production* questionnaires. DCT contains the daily play of parts (role play) that Japanese people use in certain situations and contacts.

Questionnaire: One of the main research instruments is a questionnaire because of the survey method used. The questionnaire is used to collect information in the learning process of *Nihon Bunka*, the importance of a cultural understanding of foreign language learning, and the influence of cultural and language skills.

Deep Interview: This stage is conducted after the information collected through a questionnaire that is distributed. To deepen the information, the deep interview is conducted. The information collected including on how is the influence of cultural understanding of each respondent who has the ability of Japanese language from various levels of ability, correlated with his language performance.

3.3 Procedure

In this study, the respondents are not given treatment and not influenced by anything, but it can be seen from the work of the matter in the form of DCT, in order to know the ability to speak Japanese and understanding the use of phrases that fit the context in everyday life. DCT contains the daily play of parts (role play) that Japanese people use in certain situations and contacts. In this study, the DCT is used with the type of *open item-verbal response only production* questionnaires.

The steps in data collection are, (1) spreading the questionnaire to the respondents following the course of *Nihon Bunka*; (2) giving DCT questions on respondents; (3) analyzing the results of the questionnaire that has been disseminated; (4) conducting a deep interview with several sample respondents, representing each group based on their level of Japanese language proficiency; (5) summarizing the results of information collected with the relevant theories.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected in this study is about the learning of *Nihon Bunka*, the importance of cultural

understanding of foreign language learning, and cultural influences on language skills.

Based on the results of a questionnaire that has been disseminated about learning of *Nihon Bunka*, it can be concluded that 60% of respondents stated that learning *Nihon Bunka* provides more benefits in building understanding of the target culture and language. This result is like Kumagai's (1994) statement that the importance of understanding the "culture" in which the target language is spoken is important for students studying a foreign language.

75% of respondents stated that considering Japanese culture is identical with the discipline and uphold its own cultural value. This shows that the Japanese language learner feels the importance of understanding the culture of the target language in learning the target language.

Most of the respondents also realized that in learning Japanese, they are not only need to understand the vocabulary and grammar, they also need to understand the Japanese language culture. After a deep interview, it can be concluded that by understanding the culture of the target language, we indirectly strive to understand the Japanese language itself and the character and habits of the Japanese. This is effective in minimizing the misunderstandings of non-verbal communication expressions that cannot be directly understood.

Mahoney (2007) states that the culture being generated by the teacher and culture being elicited also by the teacher. And culture being generated by the student, language and culture integration. This study held a pilot interview and class observation with *Nihon Bunka* (Japanese Culture) teacher not involved with the study was also carried out to uncover any problems with the proposed procedures. As well as some interview questions, the classroom observation instrument was modified after the pilot observation.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Learning a language without the cultural framework in which it exists, is like cooking ethnic food without the spices of the region. According to Mahoney (2007), the teaching of culture and language must be integrated. Not only culture is a major and indispensable component of "knowing" a language, but also it is one of the most fun aspects of getting a new language and getting yourself motivated in learning a foreign language.

The importance of cultural understanding by language learners, is to reduce the

misunderstandings that may occur due to cultural misunderstandings between the language actors, it is important to track the extent of the learners' knowledge of it. It is also important to learn the language delivery strategy in the lecture or in the classroom especially the *Kaiwa* (speaking) class which is the application of the language ability itself.

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