

THE EFFECT OF CULTURE ON THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

In the teaching of English to non-native speakers (TESOL), the 'communicative approach' is considered the best method. But the approach was developed in the West, and doubts have been raised as to its universal suitability because of national cultural differences which affect how people learn.

After describing the nature of culture, the cultural and learning differences between Japan and Britain are examined in relation to the communicative approach. This is offset by warnings of stereotyping which ignores sub-cultures and individual personality.

Empirical data is added, from interviews in England with a Japanese student and a Western teacher. This confirms both the effect of cultural differences on how Japanese learn English, and the warnings that statements about national culture cannot be applied evenly to all individuals. The causal complexity which these findings reveal is a challenge to TESOL teachers.

METHOD

Development of the Communicative Approach

The teaching of English to non-native speakers is now a huge industry. In Britain in the 1970s the demand for more teachers, and unease with the prevailing methods, led to the introduction of the communicative approach to TESOL. This was a switch from teaching the language as a system, to teaching it as communication.

"There is no single text or authority on the communicative approach, nor is there a

single model that is universally accepted as authoritative" (Richards and Rodgers 1986, p. 66), but its essence is the development of communicative competence in the learner: getting the learner to use the language. The communicative approach influences methods and materials, as well as the roles of teachers and learners. Methods include such activities as information-gap, role play, pairwork and groupwork: all designed to provoke communication between the students and between the teacher and the students (Harmer 1991). The role of the teacher expands to become facilitator, counsellor, and monitor—as well as instructor.