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Intercultural Communication as Interpersonal Communication インターパーソナル・コミュニケーションとしての異文化間コミュニケーション

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Introduction

This morning, as I turned on the television in my room, I was shocked by the news of the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin of Israel. In our ever-shrinking world where people must learn to live with each other--to accept each other as individuals--it is sad to know that there are still many people who will not tolerate other people's values and opinions. While a sad incident in itself I feel that it more than anything forces us to reconsider the importance of intercultural and interpersonal communication in our world today.

Let me begin my talk with an experience from my junior high school days. I had lived in the United States and Canada for six years before returning to Japan at the age of thirteen. When I returned to Japan, I had almost completely forgotten my Japanese, outside of the ability to conduct everyday conversation. The first year back in a Japanese school, I barely understood what was going on in class. I could understand the 'language' to an extent, but I could not really understand the 'meaning' of what was being said. In a sense, I was placed in a situation which resembles that of many people who, in a foreign cultural environment, are unable to comprehend the real meaning of the circumstances in which they find themselves, even when they understand the language being used. For example, when a Japanese replies, "Kangaesasete kudasai (Let me think about it)" to a request, foreigners might understand the 'literal' meaning of the phrase and expect a positive response. However, this phrase is very often used as a polite and indirect way of saying NO.

Understanding the language does not necessarily mean that the meaning underlying its use is also understood.

Let us now look at this problem of language and meaning from a slightly different perspective. The Japanese are very often criticized for not speaking out and giving their opinions in discussions with foreigners. There are several possible reasons which might help to explain this phenomenon. One might be cultural. As was suggested by Mr. Masao Niisato of the Ministry of Education on the first day of this conference, it is true that the Japanese cultural tradition emphasizes the art of non-verbal communication: the less language used to communicate an idea, the more refined it is considered to be. Take the haiku, for example. There is a limit to the number of (Japanese) syllable allowed in its creation, but the meaning expressed and inferred is vast.

Aside from this 'cultural' explanation, however, there is another point I would like to mention. The educational system itself--which in many cases is still very much teacher-centered--might be another reason. There is very little so-called 'show-and-tell' type activities in Japanese education. In fact, some people suggest that this 'passive' learning environment deprives the Japanese of the opportunity to express, or to form their own opinions. However, this is not necessarily a problem showing a lack of 'what' to say, but 'how' to say it.

The fact that there are so few Japanese capable of attaining the superior level in oral English on

the ACTFL speaking scale--which requires the ability to use English to 'support opinions', 'make hypotheses', 'discuss abstract topics', and 'handle linguistically unfamiliar situations'--does not mean that the Japanese cannot use the so-called cognitively demanding functions of language-- they are capable of doing so in their own native language, Japanese.

The problem here is not simply one of either cultural differences or 'not having anything to say'. It is a problem of not having enough proficiency in the functional use of English to express higher-level cognitive skills--for the expression of one's opinions and ideas: in other words, for 'self-expression'.

Recent Changes in the Direction of Foreign Language Education in Japan

I have tried to indicate through the above examples the importance of cultural factors as well as the development of the self-expression ability in assessing the proficiency of the Japanese in their use of English. Changes made by the Ministry of Education in its guidelines for high school foreign language education point to the importance of the ability to use English for communication purpose as well as the importance of incorporating cultural factors in the education process for the purpose of developing skills for international communication. Furthermore, the Committee on University Educationan advisory committee of the Ministry of Education, has noted in its proposal that university education must emphasize the development of critical thinking skills, as well as the ability to cope with modern technology, the development of self-expression, and proficiency in foreign languages.

In other words, the emphasis in English education in Japan is now without doubt on oral communication--with the ultimate aim of attaining international understanding and cooperation--and the development of critical thinking skills and the use of English--self-expression skills--towards the end.

Cultural Factors in Foreign Language Teaching

The aim of my talk is not to simply elucidate and argue about all the complicated and diverse socio-psychological phenomena that have been researched in the area of intercultural communication and attitude change. Nor do I have anything near the final word concerning the incorporation of intercultural communication in our foreign language curriculum. However, what I do want to say is that the way culture has been treated in the foreign language classroom has most often been (at least in Japan) in the form of 'supplementary' materials for the students to know for interest's sake only, and not as a skill to be used in communication. In this 'test-oriented' country where virtually everything is tested, knowledge about culture and intercultural communication taught in the English classroom has never been tested. I'm not saying that cultural factors should also be included in our already overpacked examinations--although, heaven forbid, there seems to be talk about doing so. All I'm saying is that although cultural factors have been included in our English classes, they have never really held any position of significance in our teaching of English for the purpose of communication.

However, the aim to teach English for oral communication purposes presupposes that we will be communicating with people of other countries and cultures; what meaning is there in the Japanese talking to each other in English? This, in turn, suggests that cultural and intercultural communication factors should be given primary importance in our foreign language curriculum.

What Kind of Culture?

It is possible to consider the basic values and beliefs of a people who speak a common language as an essential part of their culture. It is this kind of culture that we were introduced to most when we studied English literature in university. I remember being told by my professors the importance of studying the works of classic western philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, the Bible, and the works of Shakespeare. We were told that unless we understood the basic ideas expressed in these

works, we could not really understand English literature--because these were the unchanging foundations on which all subsequent western civilization was built.

I do not question the validity of this claim. The great monuments, fine art, music, and other artifacts of the past are also a part of this grand historic view of culture. They are representative of an era and the values most cherished in it. Some people call this High Culture in contrast to the Low Culture that we experience in our everyday lives.

However, no matter how important these cultural values might be in learning about a civilization knowing them alone does not give us much help in understanding what constitutes 'privacy' for a certain person, or the intricacies of human relationships (social distance vs. psychological distance, inner circle vs. outer circle, etc.) and the linguistic forms used to express them.

Then there is the 'Overt' everyday culture. Here belong cultural events which can be explained and described. Holidays such as Christmas, Halloween, Valentine's Day (White Day), Independence Day, Children's Day, the Respect for the Aged Day, etc. There are also non-specified events such as weddings, funeral, commencement/graduation ceremonies, sports events and cultural events. More traditional cultural arts and sports such as flower arrangement, tea ceremony, judo, sumo, American football, baseball, etc. are also a part of this culture. And finally, there are things like manners--for all occasions--which would also be included in this category. All of these events can be systematically explained and described.

As the case of the young Japanese high school student mistakenly shot to death trick-or-treating on Halloween in the United States shows, there is a need not just to learn about, but also learn how to behave in these overt cultural events. However, once you learn them, normally that's it.

There is one other kind of cultural concern which tends to have a greater impact on our day-to-day intercultural dealings. We could call this 'Covert' culture--simply because, unlike Overt culture, it is so much more difficult to define and explain. Suppose you were at a party, what topics could you talk about? With a man? With a woman? How would you decide the kind of language to use in a certain situation? Informal? Formal? A special register? etc. What kind of language function does a certain social situation warrant? Should you say 'I'm sorry' or 'Excuse me', or 'Watch where you're going'? How do you interpret a human relationship when it is different from that in your own culture? For example, attitudes towards old people, little children, the other sex, etc. There are no easy ways to come up with objective solutions to these problems--solutions agreeable to everybody. There are no set 'rules' as in the case of Overt culture; furthermore, unlike the High, unchanging cultural values, they are changeable with the times, as well as with the individual situations in which they appear.

In teaching intercultural communication at the everyday level of personal communication, I think it can be seen that what we need to teach more, if at all possible, is the Covert kind of culture which I just mentioned. Overt cultural events should, of course, be taught. The basic western values should also be taught in literary and historical contexts. However, if the object of our educational endeavor is to be directed towards the education of Japanese capable of coping with people of foreign cultures in actual communication situations, then we will have to lay more emphasis on the teaching of Covert culture.

Covert Culture as a Personal Phenomenon

One of the difficulties with treating Covert culture is that it tends to be revealed more in terms of individual behavior than in terms of social manifestations. In other words, because there is little systematic description possible, each member of the cultural community will have more or less the freedom to define its characteristics according to his or her own interpretation.

What this says, in turn, is that the teaching of Covert culture must involve more than simple stereotypic explanations of what a certain cultural trait means. It must necessarily include individualized realizations of the cultural trait as it appears in actual communication. In other words intercultural communication involving the understanding of Covert culture must of necessity be taught through actual communication--it cannot simply be 'read' from a textbook on intercultural

communication.

The Spread of English

I have been talking up to now under the assumption that language and culture are inextricably related to each other. However, even here, in areas where Covert culture takes precedence over other more stereotypic and well-defined types of culture, there is quite a large room for diversity--even among native speakers.

What I would like to do now, is to show that this underlying assumption concerning the relationship between language and culture itself may not be as obvious as it may seem. David Crystal has written in his book *The Encyclopedia of the English Language*, that the number of speakers of the English language, if all three circles (inner circle--mother tongue, outer circle--official or semi-official language, expanding circle--EFL) are added together, should come to somewhere between 500 million to more than 1 billion speakers. Of this number, he notes that there are over 60 countries in the world where English is the dominant or official language.

If we assume, therefore, that English is used by people from, at least, several dozen different cultural backgrounds, how practical is it to teach the language as if it were inextricably related to one or two native English-speaking cultures? Is it possible for us to learn all the cultural values and ideas inherent in the diversity of cultural backgrounds represented by this spread of English? How can we possibly remember all the information? Again, the only practical thing to do is to actually communicate with the people who use English, and try to understand them at the individual, personalized level.

Culture as Social Schema and Personal Schema

What I'd like to do at this point is to look at culture as a cognitive structure which each person has created within himself, mostly through the life-long experiences he or she has accumulated. It is normally considered that when we face a specific communicative situation, for example, relevant information, or schema, from the stock of past experiences we have accumulated is recalled and activated to help us comprehend and provide the means to get through the situation in the best possible way. There is still very little we know about this schema, but a basic distinction has often been made between what can be called 'social' schema and 'personal' schema (social events vs. personal events). In other words, we human beings are normally born into a society in which certain values and rules are already at work. The human relationships we experience, the ethical values we adopt, the linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic conventions we acquire--these all form parts of the social schema we acquire. As long as we are born into a certain society, we cannot fully free ourselves from the social schema which already exists in that society.

However, our cognitive structure is also greatly influenced by the personal experiences we undergo. The activation of a negative schema of, for example, a 'dog' created through the experience of having been bitten by a dog as a child, has nothing to do with the social image of 'DOG' in that culture or society--which might be based on a positive schema: DOG = man's best friend. In other words, the composite schemata we activate at every instance consist of both social and personal schema--making it very difficult for even individuals living within the same cultural milieu to really understand each other.

There is one more component I would like to introduce into this schematic framework. I will call this 'universal' schema, because regardless of who we are, or where we come from, I believe that there is a basic universal love or consideration for other people that we can always fall back on. I'm sure that many of us have been in situations in the past where both linguistic and cultural schema were lacking, and yet, a basic belief in the goodwill of the people we faced helped to form a congenial human relationship. This is what I mean by the activation of 'universal' schema. I know that social schemata (e.g. caste and other social hierarchical systems), as well as strong personal schemata (e.g. past experiences of being victimized in criminal incidents and violence) very often over-ride this universal schema. However, if our objective is to develop intercultural understanding and initiate

active intercultural communication, then we cannot just sit behind the windows of our social and personal schemata, looking at what goes on outside, safe and sound within our own little world. We must take the risk of walking out into that world; and a reliance on the existence of a universal schema, I believe (whether conscious or not), is what helps us take that risk.

The following diagram is a simple summary of the components of the Schemata we normally use in our everyday lives.



Scripts and Their Characteristics

Going back to social and personal schemata, one of our problems is to find out whether or not there is anything in the broad definition of schema (including virtually everything that a person has experienced in his life) which might more readily be used in our teaching endeavor. There is a special kind of schema called 'script' which consists of routines that we go through in our everyday lives--very often without even being aware of doing so. The importance of these scripts is that our daily lives are assumed to be composed of one script after another. We begin our day with a personal script consisting of a routine sequence of events that we go through every morning as we get up. During the course of the day, we enact our roles in different kinds of social scripts such as eating at a restaurant taking the train or bus to school, shopping, making reservations, attending meetings and classes, etc., and then end the day with a personal script consisting of a sequence of events we enact after going home and going to bed.

The importance of scripts can be seen in the role they play in our daily lives. Scripts provide us with a 'predictable' and very often automatized framework within which we can enact our roles without placing too much of a burden on our mental capacities. For example, there are times when we get to work only to become suddenly worried about whether we had locked the door to our house, turned off the lights, etc. In more cases than not, we find out that we HAD locked the door and HAD turned off the lights. Since these things are a part of our morning script, we tend to do them without even being aware of them. The same goes for social scripts. We do not think about what to do in what sequence when we take the train or bus to work. We can already predict what will happen when we go to a restaurant. So even when we are enacting a certain script, if the script has already become automatized, we can use the time to think of other things.

One thing we can teach as part of intercultural communication is the typical social scripts which exist in a foreign culture. At the same time that we can teach the typical sequence of events comprising the various social scripts, we can also teach the linguistic expressions which appear with them. Many of the expressions used in scripts are formulaic and idiomatic, and they attain a special meaning within the scripts in which they appear. When a waitress says, 'Is everything all right?' or 'How's everything?' she is not asking about our physical condition. When a Japanese says, 'Tsumaranaimonodesuga' and gives somebody a present, she does not really think it's a 'stupid' or 'worthless' gift. These expressions attain their special meanings only because they are used in a specific script. If a friend drops a stack of important documents and you say, 'Is everything all right?', you mean something quite different from what the waitress meant in the restaurant script. In other words, scripts have a tendency to define meaning, and, therefore, are ideal situations in which to learn culturally significant linguistic expressions.

Pragmalinguistic and Sociolinguistic Schemata

Scripts, of course, are not the only kind of schema we activate in communication. There are also so-called language functions which we use depending on the pragmatic intentions we have. If we want to ask someone to do something for us, we would use an expression with a Request function (e.g. would you, could you, can you, will you, etc.), if we want to make a suggestion, we might use an expression from an Advice function (e.g., why don't you, I suggest, it might be a good idea to, etc.), and so forth.

These functional expressions are sometimes included under the term pragmalinguistics. One characteristic is that in most cases, the situation and the intention is clear to the speaker, but the appropriate expression is not. Many of the research in the area of interlanguage pragmatics has dealt with pragmalinguistic functions and the different ways they are expressed in different languages as well as different sociolinguistic situations.

There are other non-script sociolinguistic schemata which are even more troublesome than the pragmalinguistic problems. These are sometimes called sociopragmatics, and the difference between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic phenomena is that whereas in the case of the former the situation is given and the functional expression is the problem, in the case of the latter, the problem is that the social situation itself is not correctly acknowledged. Problems related to privacy--what can be an appropriate topic of conversation in what situation, human relations--construing the socially accepted human relationship, which, in many societies, could be the basis for selection of topics, register, etc. taboos--what is forbidden in certain societies and cultures, and values and beliefs--religious, ethical etc.

Individual Variation

As I mentioned earlier, the more covert a cultural trait becomes, the more varied its representation becomes, and the more individual variation there will be in its interpretation. Although speakers of the same linguistic community might have little difficulty in dealing with social script situations, once they start dealing with non-script situations, even they will experience all sorts of misunderstandings and confusion, as can be seen in Tannen's popular works.

Teaching social scripts and the relevant expressions (although there are various degrees of freedom in both sequence and linguistic expression), is relatively easy even in the foreign language classroom. Much of the expressions can be learned in display activities and simple role play situations.

The difficulty is with the non-script situations. In simple situations, pragmalinguistic expressions might be relatively easy to learn. However, in situations where sociopragmatic considerations must be included in the decision as to the expression to be used, then things can become very complicated. What is the appropriate thing to say? Should I use a direct or an indirect form of expression, etc.? Furthermore, if individual native speakers begin to differ even among themselves, coupled with the fact that the English language is now being used by so many people of so many different cultural backgrounds, it becomes essential to find a way to deal with these more difficult intercultural communication problems at the individual level--through actual communicative acts.

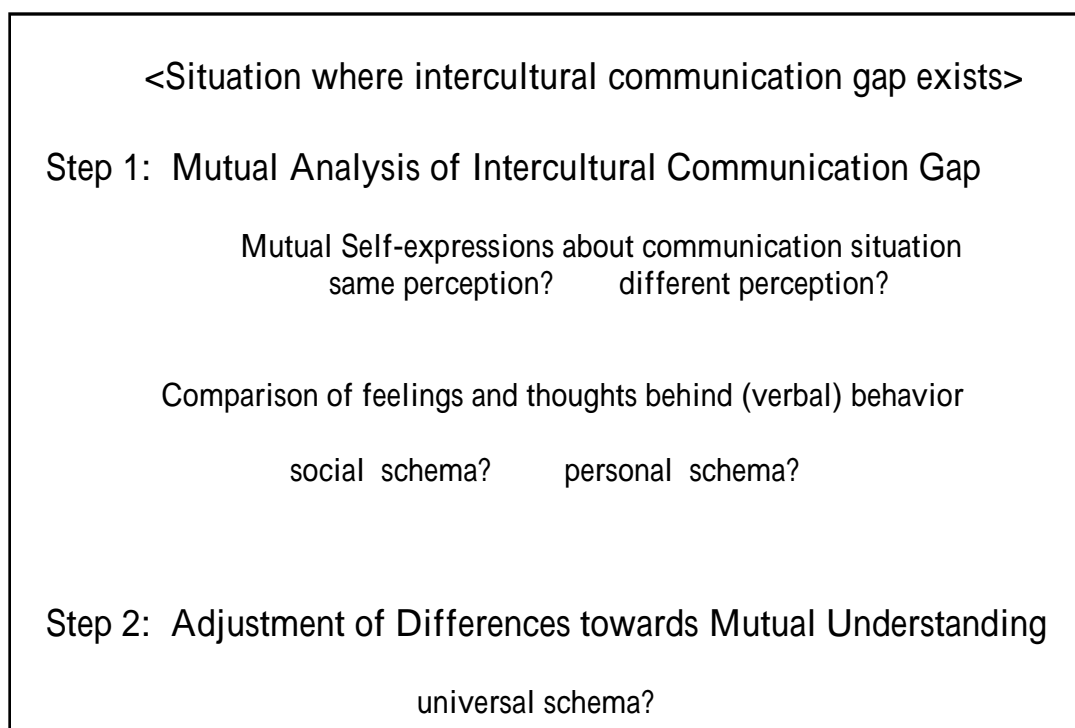
The Need for Self-expression

If intercultural communication must ultimately depend on interpersonal communication ability, then we must direct our foreign language classes towards the training of interpersonal communication. At the very beginning of this talk, I mentioned that the difficulties experienced by the Japanese in expressing their opinions is probably to a large extent a problem of not having had proper training in self-expression. When people talk about teaching conversation, most people only look at the interactional side of 'speech'--as the term conversation suggests. However, there is another side to speaking, and that is the use of language for the purpose of forming thoughts and

ideas--in other words, for self-expression purposes.

The method I have suggested elsewhere to teach self-expression takes an idea from research in learning strategies and Di Pietro's Strategic Interaction. I have used a form of retrospective reporting of the underlying perceptions, feelings, thoughts, ideas and intentions of interactants in problem-solving situations, which define the verbal expressions they use. I have tried to use the method, for example, to show how differences in perception might result in different or similar linguistic expressions and behaviors, in both native and intercultural situations. The basic idea has been to develop a method whereby both cultural and individual differences could be observed and incorporated in the teaching of interpersonal communication. The basic outline of the method is given below.

Using Self-Expressions to Solve (Intercultural) Communication Problems at the Personal Level



For example, given a situation in which it is now five o'clock signifying the end of the work-day, the perception of a westerner might be that the rest of the day can now be used for his own private life. However, to a Japanese worker, it might be perceived as the beginning of the second stage of his job in which, over food and drinks, human relationships among the workers are formed and talked about. If, because of the different perceptions about the situation, a conflict in opinion occurs between the foreign worker and his Japanese colleagues, the idea is to have the parties involved express their own thoughts and feelings about the situation--in other words, to tell their side of the story. There might be social schematic differences as well as personal schematic differences.

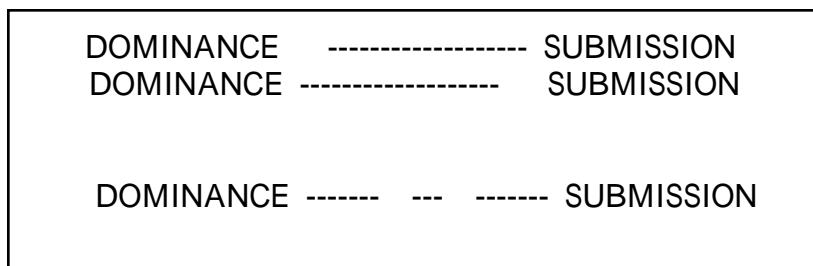
However, the next step, after everything has been said by both sides, is to find a means to adjust each other's position in order to come up with a common solution on which both sides might agree. This will be discussed in the following section of this talk.

Intercultural Communication as a Mutual Activity

As was inferred above, another point which must be mentioned is that communication in any form must be mutual. As Widdowson points out, being either too dominant in one's opinion or too submissive, to the extent that you cannot even express your own ideas about a certain topic (think of

two lovers-- everything looks 'too' perfect--you tend to accept everything about the other person, only to find out later...), becomes a hindrance to real communication. It's not easy to maintain a level of dominance and submission which makes an 'optimal' level of communication possible--a level of communication in which both participants learn to accept the other's position and ideas. However, the process of communication is just such a process of ADJUSTING the levels of dominance and submission so that an optimal level can be reached by both participants (see the diagram below).

Adjustment as an essential component of communication

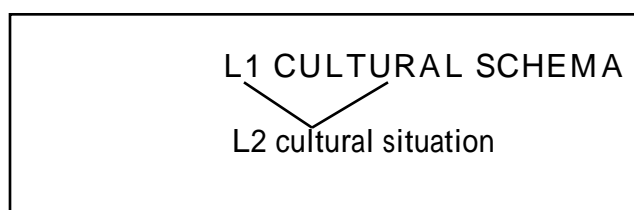


If a person were so dominant that he were to stop at the stage of expressing his own position, without consideration for the other person's position, he would be going only so far as the stage of self-expression. If a person were so submissive that he had no opinions of his own, he would not even be at the stage of self-expression. However, what is necessary is for the interactants to adjust their positions so that they can come to a solution on which both might agree and act accordingly.

Levels of Intercultural Communication and Universal Schemata

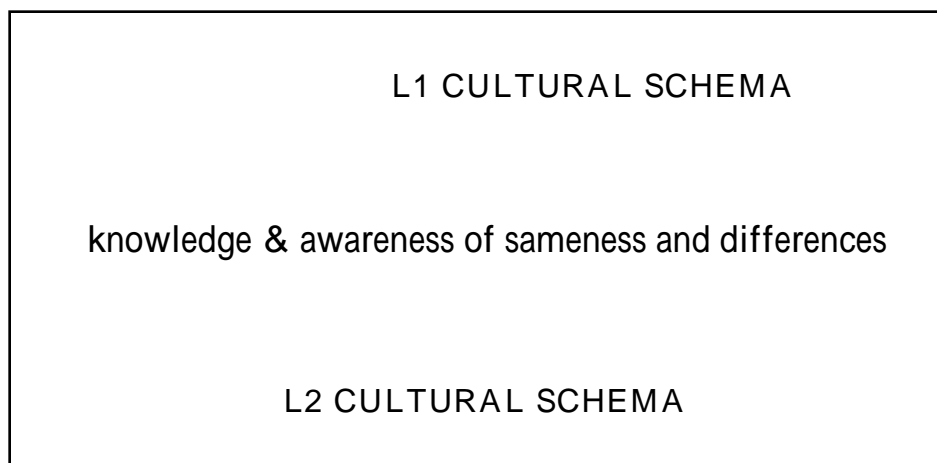
To sum up, let me present three patterns of intercultural communication which we normally observe (cf. Meyer, 1991). The first could be called the monolingual level of intercultural communication. At this level, the interactant tries to interpret all foreign cultural phenomena in terms of his or her own cultural framework (too dominant). When people complain about why foreigners do things their own way and cannot be like us, we are at this monolingual level of intercultural communication. This might be schematized in the following way.

Monocultural Level: I understand, but I am correct and you are wrong



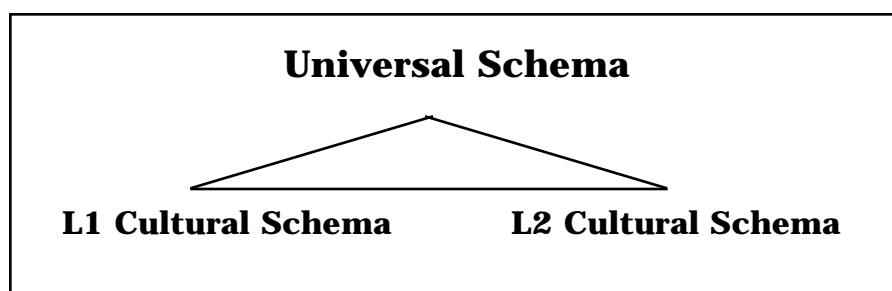
The second level is the one we are probably most accustomed to. It could be called the intercultural level, where 'knowledge' and understanding of the differences between cultures is acknowledged. This is the level where intercultural awareness develops as a cognitive function. However, having an awareness of the similarities and differences between cultures does not necessarily mean that the problems arising from the differences can be solved. This might be schematized as follows:

Intercultural Level: I understand your position.



The third level called the transcultural level is just that level in which differences between culture is overshadowed by a more universal type of schema that I mentioned earlier. I believe that, despite all the retrospective discussions that might be held between speakers of different cultures, there is a limit as to how far we can go with language alone, because language is, after all, a product of the culture from which it was born. It is at this level that the ability to communicate at the interpersonal level becomes the significant factor. The ADJUSTMENT attained between individuals will most likely be based on some form of universal schema, and this is where our educational endeavors should be directed. This might be schematized as follows:

Transcultural Level: I understand your position, so let's try to solve the problem.



Final Words

What I have tried to do in this talk is to show that intercultural communication and the understanding of cultural issues is an essential part of our foreign language education. At the same time, I have tried to show the difficulties involved in stereotyping cultural traits--especially covert and non-script traits. As a result I have emphasized the importance of educating Japanese students towards developing their abilities in self-expression. Intercultural communication is, after all, interpersonal communication. Unless we learn to deal with individuals, I do not think we will be able to solve the problems in intercultural communication either.

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