

EXPLORING GENDER ISSUES IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

An Ethnographic Approach

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INTRODUCTION

Ethnocentricity can be one of the greatest barriers to L2 acquisition. Since culture and language are inseparable, students must come to certain understandings not only about the target language's culture(s), but also of the non-universal nature of their own cultural values. In order to better understand the culture(s) associated with the target language (L2), students must first make certain realizations about their own hidden cultural values and assumptions.

This ethnographic study was designed to demonstrate how students can make both self-discoveries as well as open their minds to new points of view. However, the process of creating a sample for students to follow generated a great deal of data that was worthy of note in itself. This document will detail the results of the samples as well as give procedures for use with FL students. Suggested self-discovery and cultural awareness activities could include a variety of tasks. Details of two of the tasks, a *scrapbook* and a *survey* will be explained in detail.

THE ROLE OF ETHNOLOGY IN THE FL CLASSROOM

The concept of an "ethnographic study" involves examining and learning about a person or group of people, focusing on a small group of subjects in their own environment. The idea is to get an in depth understanding of a few subjects being studied, rather than getting a small amount of information from a large sample of subjects.

In this age of mass media we are surrounded with images that promote certain gender roles. These forces shape us and our world view, often without us being aware that they are doing so. This process of subtle gender shaping is all too present, even in children's programming.

There are probably very few Japanese people who are not familiar with the cartoon *Sazae-san*. *Sazae-san* has been around for a long time, starting as a newspaper comic strip in 1946, and as a television program since 1969. According to the official TV Fuji Web page, for more than 30 years, the average viewer ratings have been around 25%, showing its amazing long-lived popularity across the generations. *Sazae-san* portrays a *traditional* Japan from the "good old days" with a traditional father and obedient kids. Sazae's younger sister, Wakame, is well behaved, whereas Katsuo, her little brother, is mischievous. Sazae and her mother, Fune, are homemakers.

This phenomenon can hardly be limited to Japanese media. In the US, for example, *The Simpsons* blatantly reinforces gender-based stereotypes. Again we see the girl, Lisa,

portrayed as intelligent and well behaved, but see Bart, the boy, portrayed as impish. Once again, the mother, Marge, is a homemaker, and Homer, the father, is the breadwinner.

Even *Sesame Street*, which is generally considered to be progressive and “politically correct” can be seen as a gender-role biased program, because in the program, the one of the few female puppets, Miss Piggy, is portrayed as vain, demanding, obsessed with her beauty, and out to trap Kermit the Frog into matrimony. (Lindsey, 1994)

The point to all this is that people see programs like these, as well as other media, and are not even aware of the message that is being sent. How can our students really appreciate the values of other cultures when they have not even learned to be sensitive to forces at work in their own culture(s).

Part I. Self-Discovery Activity: Brainstorming a Lifetime Scrapbook

METHODOLOGY

Brainstorming a lifetime scrapbook involves gathering memories of events that students would like to collect together and place in a “book.” It does not involve the actual gathering of materials for building the book, merely the discussion of what the student would like to put into the book if given the chance. This might need to be done with some amount of cultural sensitivity, since the idea of a scrapbook may be different depending on cultural values.

In a sample of such a “self-discovery” activity conducted in the US, informants for the survey were all Japanese. There were 5 males: ages 20, 28, 38, 44, and 54. The three females that participated were ages 27, 37, and 50. The same question was posed to each informant: “If you could make a scrapbook of your life, what kinds of memories would you include?” The data collected from this survey was compared to data collected by Dr. Sue Barry (Auburn University) regarding the responses of Americans to the same question (See Appendices I & II).

In terms of gender-perspectives, there were no apparent cultural differences between Americans and Japanese. Japanese males mentioned education, jobs, accomplishments, and awards just as did American males. Japanese females mentioned family, friends, romances, and other relationships just as American females did. It appears that in both American and Japanese cultures men are more “achievement” oriented whereas women are more concerned with “personal” relationships.

Although there were no apparent gender differences between the two cultures, some crucial differences were discovered between the cultures themselves. One difference was that Japanese informants mentioned embarrassing memories for their scrapbooks, such as: being small, being too skinny or fat, not being able to run fast, not being good at studying, etc. Two informants, one male and one female, mentioned their “potty” (bathroom) accidents in kindergarten. It appears that this was such a traumatic moment from their childhoods that they could not forget it.

This difference between the cultures was not apparent until the results of this survey were discussed within the research group. The American researchers found it odd that Japanese people would mention something so embarrassing. Then it became clear that Americans never mentioned any embarrassing memories for their scrapbooks.

The treatment of failure was another great difference that was uncovered, especially among male participants. Japanese males mentioned their failures very frequently, such as: failing college entrance exams, not getting the job they desired, quitting school or jobs, etc. Three of the five male participants mentioned failing college entrance exams and becoming *ronin*. *Ronin* literally means "lordless *samurai*." While they are *ronin* they cannot be part of any "group" just as those lordless *samurais* in the feudal age in Japan.

The life of young adults in Japan is to survive academic competition. Much more academic pressure and competition is exerted on boys throughout the school system. For males, successful entry to a good university is indispensable toward building future occupational status. Therefore, their failure on college entrance exams and becoming *ronin* is a very embarrassing and humiliating act for them, although none of my male informants failed to mention it for their scrapbook.

For those experienced in the study of Japanese society, this may come as no surprise, as Japan is often referred to as a "culture of shame." Takeo Doi's *Amae no Kouzo* (translated as *The Anatomy of Dependence*), long considered to be one of the most definitive works dealing with the psychology of the Japanese, states that Japanese are more group oriented, and that having a sense of shame is "extremely important to someone belonging to a group," whereas Westerners prefer to admit guilt since it "permits him (the Westerner) to display his potential power as an individual." Doi's findings continue that for the Japanese, "the sense of shame lies deeper than the sense of sin and guilt" and that this is "something extremely delicate, involving the whole inner personality" (1971). FL students conducting this kind of research as part of their coursework, however, are likely to be surprised by such findings.

Hypothesis:

By mentioning these events for their scrapbooks, Japanese males seemed to accept responsibility for their failures whereas American males prefer not to accept ownership for their failures by not mentioning or trying to forget them. For Japanese males, the fault lies within themselves. For American males, the fault lies outside themselves.

Cultural Assumptions:

In Japan, if a male accepts responsibility for his failures he must reflect and change. However, in America, if a man does not accept responsibility for his failures, he will not need to reflect and change. It is easier to forget them.

Hypothesis:

Japanese are often referred to as modest people. However, from this self-discovery activity, it was apparent that it is not just modesty. Japanese culture values "self-effacement." Self-effacement is the act or fact of keeping oneself in the background and being humble. On the contrary, American culture values self-confidence. Americans are taught to be self-confident or at least to project self-confidence, as can be seen in the cliché "Put your best foot forward."

Cultural Assumptions:

In both cultures, among males achievement is an important goal in their lives. However, each culture has a very different behavior of how to go about fulfilling those achievements. In Japan, if one is self-effacing, one is more likely to be successful in society. In America, if one projects self-confidence, one will be more successful.

Part II. Report on Gender Perspectives: Interview with Native Speakers of the Target Language

Using insights gained from the “self-discovery activity” students would create a list of questions to ask native-speaker informants (written in L2). Students would write and present a report on comparative gender issues based on the information gained through these questionnaires. Samples are provided of how such a survey would be organized (See Appendix III).

The informants used in the example survey were 3 males (21, 37, and 52) and 4 females (18, 19, 48, and 53). They were from various regions of the United States and all came from middle-class backgrounds. As a rule, such a survey should be conducted in the student’s target language, even if the informant is capable of communicating in the student’s native language. Doing this doubles the purpose of the exercise, allowing for authentic communication in L2 with a native speaker of the target language in addition to the study of cultural values.

Examining the differences between American and Japanese cultures, once can easily trace the influences to the origins of Western and Eastern civilizations. An exploration of the basic philosophies behind each culture will reveal many differences, however regarding gender perspectives, both Aristotle and Confucius both teach the same ideals of inherent male superiority. Therefore, it is not surprising that this sample survey uncovered a great deal more similarities than differences between American and Japanese cultures regarding gender roles.

Gender Hypotheses: Similarities

War is a significant factor when we consider gender role from the historical point of view. In Western culture, during the Greek and Roman eras the whole of society was organized and continually mobilized for war. War kept men and women separated and made each gender role develop in different ways. Men, as warriors, must be rugged and powerful to protect their own women and children and women must bear male children who would become warriors. The origin of each stereotypical role probably goes back to this period. One of the male informants (37) gave a very interesting answer when asked what people do in American society to prepare for manhood (See Appendix III). He said that by playing football men learn cooperation and football itself is a metaphor for war. Since women did not have to fight in wars the society told women that their job is to attract men and to bear healthy children.

This could be applied to explain the preparation for manhood in Japan. In Japan, “real tough men” do martial arts (*karate, judo, kenpo*) instead of playing football. Those martial arts used to be very important training for male children in samurai families to be strong warriors in the feudal age. Even today, by doing *karate* or *judo*, men acquire what is called “*samurai* spirit.” They learn how to be tough and strong just like American men and sacrifice their life to a company (which would have been a feudal lord in the past) by working hard for it. In short, males are warriors and females are bearers of warriors.

Gender Hypotheses: Differences (Behaving in Gender Appropriate Ways)

American, survey participants reacted in many ways as expected. They took a great deal of time to respond to each question. A common reaction was, “Oh, boy! I never thought about that before!” Just like the tip of the iceberg, how people behave and act are only above the surface of the water, and below the surface of the water there is a huge part of the iceberg that is unobservable. These are the values, beliefs, and assumptions that form certain behaviors within their culture.

Since these values and beliefs are such a powerful and rigid system, people take them for granted. They remain unaware of those deeper structures of values and beliefs related to their gender perspectives of the world unless they are challenged to give more careful consideration of those notions, such as being “forced” to think about it in responding to a survey.

One of the first patterns that emerged from administering the gender-roles survey to Americans was that most participants would initiate responses to questions with statements such as: “Well, in general...”, “Traditionally...”, “It should be...”, etc. Reactions to the questions were at least as interesting as the actual responses themselves. As expected, all participants are aware of the conventional gender perspectives of American society and the expectations of what a man or woman “should be.” Also, they are aware of recent social changes in terms of gender roles.

Most participants attempted to distance themselves from conventional beliefs by using the disclaimers listed above (“In general...”, etc) beforehand to try to convince me that their response did not reflect their own ideals or desires. “That’s the way it’s supposed to be in our society, but that’s not the way I want or act,” was a common expression. The participants would first go back to the traditional stereotypical images, then on the modernized ideals, and finally would reveal their own beliefs.

All informants showed a profound understanding for what is proper, accepted, and expected as a woman or a man in American society. They expressed these views to be “stereotypical.” They all appeared to be aware that these conventional beliefs about gender-roles are a script that they are supposed to follow for everyday life. However, none of them appeared to be pleased with it. They actually expressed feelings of how they are different from how they are expected to be and seem take pride in that fact.

Depending on the age of the informant, there were clear expectations about themselves, not as being labeled as a “woman” or “man.” In this way, gender-roles in terms of modern American society are in a state of dynamic change. So many women are taking over the jobs that traditionally men “should” hold. Many men are becoming a minority in fields from which women were formerly excluded. People are trying to do what they “want” to do regardless of former gender-based expectations.

Because of this movement in America, younger generations, in particular, show a sense of equal gender responsibility. They have clear ideas about their own future spouses and families, such as to share all the housework, to take care of the children together, and to both serve as “bread winners” for the family. Both the male group and female group are satisfied with their own genders even though most of them said it is harder to be female these days.

One of my female informants (18) said that being a woman is a disadvantage because when a person is striving to get ahead there is always the factor of being a woman that pushes them back. This same informant claimed that she wanted to be a lawyer so that she could get more power by defending men. Her view can be substantiated by the fact that the percentages of female lawyers and judges doubled to 29% between 1983 and 1996 (Morin & Rosenfeld, 1998). The men appeared to be more satisfied with themselves due to more opportunity. Women appeared to have greater difficulties in finding good reasons to be happy with who they are.

In contrast, there seems to be less awareness of the gender script in Japan. People know how they are supposed to be according to their gender. People do not appear to question the

script, but to simply follow it. However, it was clear to see from the scrapbook that Japanese women today have role constraints in their quest for self-fulfillment.

In Japan the belief of men fulfilling an occupational goal and women being in a domestic role is still rigid. It is something that is embedded in the language in the Chinese characters used as the principal writing system. According to Schonfeld,

There are words whose meanings embody stereotypes. For example, *yome* 嫁, a combination of “woman” 女 and “house” 家 means “bride.” The word *kanai* 家内 a combination of “house” 家 and “inside” 内 translates to “wife.” Then, perhaps more demeaning, the word *syujin* 主人 for “husband” is a combination of “lord, chief, master, main thing” 主 and “person” 人. While many women take offense at its meaning, *syujin* is still in common use (1999).

Usually people do not get offended since nobody really pays attention to those literal meanings. However, that is why those beliefs are so deep inside one’s unconscious mind that it is hard to get rid of them

CONCLUSIONS & CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

Conventional gender role expectations support a powerful belief system, which determines how we make sense of the world and how we see who we are. The ideas, values, and assumptions within a society become their own schema for gender perspectives, for understanding the world around them. There seems to be some contradictions between the society and its people. What the society expects them to do or to be, and what they want to be and to do. The society controls people, however, we also need to realize that it is the people themselves that create the society that governs them.

Foreign language students are likely to be exposed to cultural values and socio-linguistics that may be seen as strange or even as offensive. Imagine, for example, students of Japanese as a foreign language exposed to the Chinese characters in the example above. The activities mentioned in detail here are only two of many “self-discovery” and/or “intercultural discovery” activities that could be used with advanced FL learners. Other activities performed, but not detailed in this article, included a variety of task.

SELF-DISCOVERY ACTIVITIES: (Adapted from McIntyre & Lawrence, 1995)

I. Write about a nontraditional role. Choose a chore around the house that is not usually done by the opposite gender, and complete the task without saying anything. After completing the task, describe what you did; explain how it made you feel; and tell how others reacted to your efforts.

II. Surveys. Which gender is associated with different activities? You might use the illustrations in the text as a starting point. This could be focused vocabulary practice for household chores and/or professions.

Which gender is associated with ...

- a) washing clothes.
- b) mowing the lawn,
- c) making the beds,
- d) preparing meals,

Which gender usually prepares to be a ...

- a) dentist
- b) dancer
- c) judge
- d) engineer

e) vacuuming,

f) cleaning toilets. etc.

e) lawyer

f) policeman etc

Which of the above categories do you believe women should not be involved in? Why?

Which of the above categories do you believe men should not be involved in? Why?

Do you believe it is harder to be male or female in our/your society today? Explain.

III. Collages. How does society influence our appearance as females and as males? Ask each student to make a collage of magazine pictures that shows how their gender is being encouraged to look and dress. They can make one collage for males and one for females in the United States and one for males and one for females in the target culture. When the collage is complete, they write about what the pictures tell females/males they should look like in both cultures. Then they discuss which gender they think has the most pressure to look good and why that might be, and is it the same for both cultures. When seeing videos or reading authentic texts from the target culture, look at how frequently males/females are mainly characterized by their appearance.

IV. Analyzing jokes. Ask students to collect jokes that they hear over a period of time into a notebook. Then in groups have students analyze these jokes. Are there more jokes about women or men? What is being laughed at? What can we learn from this about our culture's attitudes?

V. Scrapbooks. Have single gender groups brainstorm all the things they would put in a scrapbook to illustrate the important events in their lives. Then compare/contrast what each gender might consider eventful enough to include in a scrapbook. This activity may also be done with a group of native speakers that represent different age, gender, and ethnic groups

VI. Collecting compliments. For a period of two weeks, ask students to collect compliments they hear or overhear from teachers, parents, and peers. Categorize comments by gender and then look at what each gender is complimented on or appreciated for.

VII. Controlling conversations. Have students focus on who controls topics in conversation, who speaks directly and who uses qualifiers such as "this probably isn't important, but" or "if it's okay with you." Students can study conversation in classrooms or in literature and can discuss their findings.

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GENDER SCRAPBOOK RESULTS

APPENDIX I: American Scrapbook Responses		
<u>Topics</u>	<u>Females (4)</u>	<u>Males (6)</u>
Family	15	1
Friendships	5	1
Romantic Relationships	10	3
Pets	4	1
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Hunting	0	3
Sports	7	14
Vehicles	0	6
Work	3	5
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Awards, Accomplishments & Recognition	6	12
Clubs	1	1
Education	3	10
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Accidents & Illness	4	4
Birthdays	0	4
Childhood Experiences	4	0
Misc. Experiences	2	5
Religious Experiences	2	2
Travel	8	7

APPENDIX II: Japanese Scrapbook Responses		
<u>Topics</u>	<u>Females (3)</u>	<u>Males (5)</u>
School & Education	5	13
Sports	2	6
Jobs	4	8
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Hobbies	3	6
Travel	4	3
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Family	7	3
Friendship	3	0
Romance	5	1
Marriage	2	2
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Illness & Death	2	4
Failure	2	7
Inferiority Complex	5	1
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Achievements	8	17
Personal Relationships	12	1
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Positive Experiences	23	29
Negative Experiences	9	10
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Philosophy	5	1

APPENDIX III

Report on Gender Perspectives: Interview with Native Speakers of the Target Language

Sample Questions

1. How do you think men identify themselves?
2. How do you think women identify themselves?
3. What do you think it means to be a boy?
4. Did anybody ever call you a “sissy?” If so, why and how did you feel about it?
5. What do you think it means to be a girl?
6. Did anybody ever call you a “tomboy?” If so, why and how did you feel about it?
7. What do you do in your society to prepare for manhood?
8. What do you do in your society to prepare for womanhood?
9. What is the main difference between men and women?
10. Are men difficult to understand? Are women difficult to understand? Why?
11. Are you glad to be a man/woman?
12. What is the role of men in the family? What is the role of women in the family?
13. What is the role of men in your society? What is the role of women in your society?
14. Can men be secretaries or nurses? Can women be judges or truck drivers? Why or why not?
15. Would you open the door for women? Why or why not?
16. Do you think that men should open the door for women? Why or why not?
17. Do you believe it is harder to be male or female in your society today? Explain.

*** Informant Information***

Name: _____

Age: _____

Sex: _____

Occupation: _____

Where are you from? _____

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Have you been abroad? How long?
