Japanese Lessons

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Nagging, Preaching and Discussions

Postmodern, deconstructionist anthropology is centrally concerned with the role of symbolic actions in social settings to establish a shared consensus among participants about what is "real" and what is "really" going on. Language is one of the primary forms of symbolic action, and the power of talk to "construct" reality for participants is a point emphasized by such analysts. The European theorists, especially (Bourdieu, Habermas, Foucault, Fairclough, for instance), generally feel that in the situations they are concerned with, including schools, the use of language to construct understandings is nefarious, justifying unjust power inequities. Japanese teachers and schools, clearly not accepting this moral evaluation of their activities, seem to believe wholeheartedly in the power of talk to make reality. They spend what seem like inordinate amounts of time in talk, specifically intended to get children to think about social issues in particular ways. This talk seems to me to come across as exhortation, preaching, persuasion, and nagging.

Let me go back to preschool and Catherine Lewis's writings (1995: 125–26) for a story to illustrate the reality-making power of talk in Japanese schools. Lewis reports that one day at a preschool there was an interaction of several five-year-old boys with the class goldfish.
Their activity consisted of making small clay pellets and dropping them into the tank, calling out “Bombs away!” The teacher several times pointed out that the fish could get hurt this way, that this wasn’t a good thing to do. The activity was apparently compelling enough that the boys ignored her objections. She did not insist that they stop. During the end-of-the-day meeting, however, she brought up this incident for discussion. First she described the boys’ activity and gave her interpretation of their actions: they really wanted to help the fish, giving them clay pellets that looked like food pellets, and they didn’t realize that dropping the pellets could hurt the fish. “What does everybody think about this?” Some children volunteered that it sounded like fun, but most said they didn’t want the fish to be hurt. “What should we do about this situation?” After several minutes of discussion, the teacher summarized two themes: nobody should drop things into the fish tank, and if you see someone hurting the fish, you should tell them to stop. She herself suggested that rotating the chore groups would give everyone a chance to share the fun of feeding the fish.

To most non-Japanese, this seems at best a disingenuous reading of the incident in question. The teacher’s resolute ignoring of the less admirable motives that some might discern in the “Bombs away!” that accompanied the actions, her apparent refusal to deal with the boys’ actions as springing from “bad” motives, is only the most obvious ploy in her reconstruction of the incident for class consideration. She never acknowledged that the clay pellets might look as much like bombs as they looked like food. Children who, during the discussion, mentioned they might also like bombing the fish were not reprimanded, merely ignored, and their comments didn’t get mentioned in her summary.

She also fully refrained from any suggestion that the boys had been at fault in disobeying her. Her talk to them during the incident, “That could hurt the fish.” “They look like food, but they aren’t.” “How sad the class will be if the fish get hurt,” are all determinedly not directives, not orders to be obeyed or defied, though hints like this are meant to be taken as directives in schools and homes, and children know
how to interpret them. By not following the teacher’s hints, the boys confirmed her interpretation that they “did not understand,” avoiding the necessity of any interpretation of defiance. In the summary of the class discussion, however, members of the class were given the authority to “tell them to stop,” an authority the teacher declined to take on herself.

On the other hand, the teacher’s formulation of three practical ways of avoiding the problem in the future seems realistic, and her description of what had happened was not so far-fetched as to be ridiculous to five-year-olds. (If it seems that adults are not susceptible to such simple-minded manipulation, I suggest thinking about the efforts of public relations “spin doctors.”)

In another class meeting the problem of children who are so busy playing they don’t help their *ban* accomplish chores was raised. The teacher’s molding of the discussion is apparent in her reactions to solutions offered by class members. A suggestion that a couple of children should just do the work themselves prompted the teacher’s question, “Do you think that’s right?” and gave children a chance to disagree. This supposedly noncommittal question form is one teachers often use to signal that another answer is required. The next suggestion, “We could make the people who aren’t helping stand in the hall,” elicited another teacher question, “Is it a good situation when people work because they are forced to?” which again signaled that they hadn’t quite hit on an approved course of action. (Incorporated in this question is also the presupposition that those children who are doing the work are doing it of their own good will, not because they are being forced. The power of this presupposition may be no less because it is so taken for granted, so casual, so little a focus of overt attention.) After several other suggestions failed to be recognized as satisfactory—not that they were rejected outright by the teacher, just that she kept asking for more suggestions, someone came up with the idea that “the people who are working could get together and call the others in a big
voice.” This suggestion was promptly accepted by the teacher, who then moved on to another topic.

It is worth speculating why this course of action was considered appropriate, and it is possible to see several advantages of it. First, it is within the capacities of the age group involved and probably has some intrinsic appeal—“getting together and calling in a loud voice” sounds like fun. Second, it requires no teacher action and yet may provide a solution to the problem of noncooperation. Third, it assumes that the delinquents are really good at heart and just need reminding of what to do. This may well be true, and if so, the problem will be solved in a way that confirms the teacher’s reading of the motives, the issues, and the best solutions. Notably, no one has been accused of base motives or shirking, no one has been asked to accept an unfair share of the work, and the teacher has avoided being the arbiter, rule maker, and enforcer.

During persistent questioning by Lewis at the end of the goldfish bombing day, the teacher denied that she even privately thought the boys intended to hurt the fish. When children—or adults—understand why actions are wrong, they won’t do them. Conversely, if they do wrong actions, that is compelling evidence that they don’t understand and that more explanations are in order.

Learning empathy is difficult, and probably it is accomplished best if it is mediated by language. Teachers constantly talk about the feelings that a child’s actions will create in others and assume that these feelings act as motives for a child’s actions. A child hefting a rock on the playground, looking to a non-Japanese observer as though he is about to throw it at another child, is asked to “lend” the rock to a teacher, who gently touches the back of his head with it, saying, “Someone could get hurt if they got hit with a rock,” and hands it back to him (Lewis 1995:132). In the teacher’s construction of what was going on, the boy had not thought he might hurt anyone, so she pointed it out to him. Then she acted on the assumption he would not want to hurt
anyone and that the realization of how he would feel, brought to his attention by being touched by the rock, was all the motivation needed to refrain from throwing it. Her actions send a powerful message about what was “really going on” to the boy and to others. It seems to me important that she did not take any actions such as keeping the rock or sending the boy to dispose of it safely that might allow for any other understanding of his actions.

If these teachers are using the “every child is a good child” interpretation of behavior as a ploy to get behaviors they approve of, their use of it is enhanced by their own conviction that this is “really” true; for them it is not a tactic, merely an adjustment to reality. The goal is to get good behavior to follow “naturally” from understanding of the consequences of actions in a social setting.

Teachers can be very patient in their pursuit of such a long-term goal. They are willing to tolerate the misbehavior that precedes understanding, while continuing to place their construction of motives and effects on children’s behavior in a way that seems to combine unique portions of idealism and realism. If a teacher makes a policy of praising the most disruptive child in the class at least once during each period, in part “to keep his classmates from giving up on him” (Lewis 1995: 135), she is not ignoring the real costs to his classmates of his behavior, but she is acting on a belief that being treated like a good child will lead him to act like a good child and that in the long run this will most effectively make him a constructive, happy student and friend.

In this particular case, the troublesome boy was a first grader whose reputation as a “difficult child” had preceded him to school. He was assigned to the most skilled first-grade teacher and was an active topic of conversation among all the teachers of the first- and second-grade classes. They were aware of the problems he presented, especially since one of the things he did was to yell insults—“Stupid, stupid!”—at the teacher several times a day, in a voice that could be heard in other classrooms. It seems to me that the level of cultural consensus about the best way to treat cases like his is illustrated in the lack of criticism
from other teachers about the handling of the case and their tolerance of her tolerance of his behavior, until he could be brought to “understand” better ways to behave. They seemed to think it would take a year or two for him to understand and bring his behavior in line with his understanding.

Fighting is another form of misbehavior that Japanese teachers want to stop in the long run, but as a matter of policy they refrain from stopping fights, not because they don’t recognize what’s going on, but because they know that fights between children are about real issues and they feel children can learn to handle them only with experience. It is better for children to learn this when they are young and are very unlikely really to hurt each other, than to suppress fighting through adult intervention until they are stronger and more dangerous. Teachers respond to fights in the first instance by encouraging other children to intervene and mediate.

When fights and disputes become the subject of class meetings, as they often do, the details of what went on are not glossed over, but described in full. Efforts by classmates to intervene are talked about, the resolution of the fight is commented on, weak children are described as having become stronger, and aggressive children are cast in disfavor as bullies. I think the realistic description of actions that is encouraged by teachers in these discussions gives more credence to the interpretations of the actions that allow teachers to construct in adult, culturally Japanese terms an understanding of “what really happened,” why the outcome was satisfactory or not, and what should be done in another situation.

Often the “satisfactory” solution seems unexpectedly realistic. When Sam took toys from the other children his first day at kindergarten, his desire to have them was treated as legitimate. He was persuaded to ask, and enabled to ask, and in return the other children were expected to honor his cooperativeness. Sam’s desires were not suppressed, but the best possible interpretation was placed on them—he wanted to participate. The other children were expected to tolerate his clumsy efforts at
interaction until he got to be more proficient. I didn’t see it, but I’d be willing to bet that the class meeting at the end of Sam’s first day at kindergarten included lots of talk about what his behavior meant, what children could expect of him, and strategies for dealing with him.

In the give and take of school life, Japanese teachers seem to be constructing a kind of psychological tolerance for what are seen as individual differences of skill and temperament. Just as teachers and adults tolerate misbehavior that arises from lack of understanding and skill, so too children must tolerate such behavior from each other. One shouldn’t be so touchy that every little thing a classmate does is irritating and cause for discomfort. Others have their limitations, too. Some kinds of physical contact, including hitting, are often seen in Japanese classrooms, and teachers seem to construe this as not serious and discourage children from taking it seriously. Teachers and parents consistently interpret children’s hitting them as unskillful but sincere attempts at interaction, and they teach children to take this approach themselves, too. Again, talk in class meetings is involved in creating in children an acceptance of this approach.

Affectionate forms of physical contact, holding hands and arms around shoulders, are common among Japanese children at school, too. It is also true that outside of Japanese schools physical contact is not seen as grounds for complaint. In crowded trains and subways people are jammed together and do not hold their bodies so tightly as Americans to minimize body contact. On busy sidewalks, people are less concerned about keeping their packages and briefcases from touching other people, and they often brush shoulders in passing. Cars, bicycles, and people come much closer to each other on streets than in the United States.

Learning these norms of tolerance for touching makes it very difficult for young Japanese women when they encounter touching behaviors from men in work and public situations. They report feeling that men they work with touch them inappropriately, and they are shamed and resentful when men “feel them up” on crowded trains and
subways. They can’t think of very effective ways to avoid these encounters, or to pass the blame to the men involved, without embarrassment to themselves.

The Japanese term for this aspect of social life is butsukariai, “bumping up against one another.” It is inevitable, literally and figuratively, especially since the Japanese see themselves as living in a crowded country populated with unique individuals. Much of the learning of “how to live in a group” that is the business of school is learning to tolerate and appreciate individuals, at the same time learning the limits of individuality that make social living possible. Tolerance in terms of differences associated with ethnic, religious, or cultural groups is not an issue that many Japanese schools are forced to be concerned with, but the problem of weighing tolerance for individuality with the self-effacement needed for living together is a problem at the center of Japanese social life. It is dealt with at school but not solved there; it is not solved anywhere in Japanese life but always remains an issue, as it does in other societies.

Teachers talk at length and repetitiously about how to interpret other people’s feelings and actions and about the lessons to be drawn from social interactions. They stress that other people are much like oneself, that they have generally good motives, that one shouldn’t do anything to others that would bother oneself, and that everyone has shortcomings. This way of teaching an interpretation of social interaction, of constructing a viable understanding of social experience, depends on an adult ability to create coherent verbal formulations of experience that make sense of what goes on in school.

Some simple emotions may exist and motivate action regardless of cultural labels or rhetoric for discussing them, but many emotional states are so inchoate that a verbal and cultural interpretation of them is necessary before even the person experiencing them is able to know what is being experienced and what implications it has for action and interaction. An example from American culture comes from the frequent occasions when one young child hurts another and caretakers,
in talking about the event, stress that the offending child “didn’t mean it.” Coming to see that the offense “wasn’t meant” is supposed to reduce the hurt felt by the injured child and to change the child’s understanding of the emotions engendered by the offense. Older children and adults, too, employ this verbal formula to evaluate and clarify reactions to potential offenses. The talk and the actions of teachers create for Japanese children a culturally valid way of understanding motives and feelings, their own and those of others, in the context where they must interact with others.

In Japanese classrooms seemingly endless discussions of events in class interactions and class academic work offer opportunities for teachers to shape children’s perceptions of what happened, why, whether the outcomes were satisfactory or not, how improvements can be achieved, and whether others agree with one’s own readings of actions and incidents. I think these discussions provide for Japanese children in school settings a “reality check” that is a “culture check” on their experiences of school life.

Another tactic, if that’s a good term, that I see in Japanese teachers’ efforts to construct reality for children in culturally acceptable ways is, paradoxically, accepting and acting on the power of children in constructing situations. By this I mean that Japanese teachers seem to take children’s own readings of what’s going on very seriously and refrain from overriding them in authoritarian ways.

William Cummings (1980:118–19) tells the story of a girl who reacted to her classmates’ nickname for her, “Piggy,” by refusing to go to school. Her mother reported this to the principal, who visited her at home to hear her complaints, then investigated with the classroom teacher, who held intense class meetings to discuss the issue. After several days of discussion, the whole class went to the girl’s home to apologize and ask her to forgive them. After two more days she agreed to return to school. It seems to me that parents and teachers showed an unexpected amount of tolerance in their handling of this situation, a tolerance that amounted to giving a child power over her own actions
and assigning legitimacy to her feelings to a remarkable extent. They also demonstrated persistence, patience, and realism in getting the classmates to accept responsibility for better behavior. In other situations one could imagine a mother, a principal, or a teacher not taking this complaint seriously and instead forcing a child to go to school. Or the teacher might simply impose punishments on the children who disobeyed her orders to stop the offending behavior.

The verbal exhortations one encounters in Japan seem to us somehow old-fashioned and quaint. We have become so convinced of the power of teaching by action that we ignore even the possibility of teaching through words. Japanese schools, in contrast, are plastered with mottos and sayings and admonitions and goals and questions to ask oneself and charts for keeping track of achievements and failures. These do not just remain unnoticed on the walls and in the textbooks and notebooks. Teachers constantly talk about them and involve children in creating them. Goals for the year, for the term, for the week, for Sports Day, and for the summer vacation are all discussed in class meetings and recorded for future consideration of whether or not they have been met.

One of the things I notice about these goals is that many of them seem to be things I would expect, such as making an effort not to forget to bring school materials from home, or practicing *kanji* every day. Others seem to be entirely unnecessary. Do children really need to have set as a formal goal “playing energetically during recess” or “answering in a loud voice when you are called on”? Somehow, for Japanese children, the habit of evaluating even actions like these in terms of goals to be met seems to spill over into the habit of evaluating other behaviors in terms of meeting goals, too.

Some are goals for small or large groups. A *ban* might set a goal of finishing their chores more speedily or of reducing the number of “forgotten items”; a class might set a goal of not losing sight of the teacher during a field trip or of listening more quietly when classmates
are talking. Some are goals for individuals: to learn the multiplication tables, to eat some of everything at lunch, or to use the horizontal bars on the playground.

Nearly all the evaluation of meeting goals is self-evaluation, done publicly. Often charts are made for keeping track of progress in reaching the goals. For group goals, group discussions precede the recording of evaluations. Often a graduated system of score keeping is used. Not only does a group or an individual get a red star for achieving a goal, but they may get a gold star for trying even if they didn’t succeed. It is up to the group or the individual to make decisions about this, but they have to announce the decision publicly, in discussions or on a chart. Especially at the youngest ages, other children will not be at all reticent about saying whether these self-judgments are plausible or not.

The practice of continual self-evaluation in public, for academic goals and goals of character development, is either a brilliant tactic for motivating individuals in many areas of life and at many levels of accomplishment, or a nasty, Machiavellian plot to impose the values of the authorities on tender minds. It is, again, through teacher-guided discussion that these goals for the groups and for individuals are set and formulated. Although teachers may adopt verbal strategies for a role in discussions that does not appear dominating, such as sitting in the back during discussions and raising a hand to be recognized by the student meeting leader before speaking, it is still the case that teachers can and do influence the choice and wording of both goals and evaluation criteria. Their changes of wording usually tend to formalize, soften, and generalize the goals. In this sense they are imposing values and conceptions of actions on the thinking of children. One could see their acceptance of goals that children might find attractive—“playing energetically at recess,” for example—among the total set of goals to be pursued as a subtle form of coercion, leading children to accept teacher goals, too.
At the most linguistic, grammatical level, the form of talk in discussions is nonauthoritarian and nondirective. Japanese contains linguistic forms that are imperative verbs, best translated as the equivalents of English imperatives, such as “Stop!” “Give it to me!” “Sit down!” “Answer!” or any other direct order. In Japanese conversation these are almost never used, and they are not used in discussions or formulations of goals. Instead, there is widespread usage of a form that is more like the English “Let’s” do such and such, and of another form that is explicitly a request for a favor. In English the “let’s do such and such” form is usually clearly addressed to a group that includes the speaker and someone else. In Japanese it usually includes the speaker, but it may not, and it usually includes another person, but it may not. In other words, it can be used for “you do such and such,” “let’s (us) do such and such,” or “I’m going to do such and such.” It is, as a form, ambiguous among these possibilities, and in group meetings and in setting goals this ambiguity is exploited.

In Japanese sentences the subject is commonly omitted whenever it can be inferred from the context, and the verb is not marked for singular or plural number or for gender. (It is marked for relative hierarchical status, formality, and for in-group versus out-group membership.) In many contexts the subject that can be inferred is thus indeterminate. This feature is used to avoid pointing a finger of blame at anyone (including oneself, whenever useful) or explicitly saying who is responsible for certain acts or who should do certain things. (English uses forms like “My jacket got lost,” “There isn’t any more dessert,” and “Where have my car keys gone?” to accomplish the same purposes.) Thus, even when the topics of discussion are personally threatening, the forms of speech used tend to mitigate the threats.

(To interpose a totally American reaction, I find it irritating enough when at the end of an airplane flight in the United States, an announcement reminds me to “Check the overhead bins and the area around you for any items you may have forgotten.” But I dislike it
even more when the announcement at every train station in Japan seems to be saying “Let’s check carefully and not leave any forgotten belongings.” Who are they kidding?)

It is not just in awarding themselves stars on charts that children are involved in self-evaluation. Hansei (self-evaluation, reflection), is an activity that applies to many different kinds of actions. This is what classes do when they review their class trip or their preparations for Sports Day, or after reading a story or completing a lesson in social studies or mathematics. As a literary form hansei are intended to embrace both emotional reactions and intellectual understandings, which are not nearly so separated as they tend to be in Western literary forms.

In the third term of first grade, Ellen and her classmates began keeping a formal hansei notebook containing reflections about school. Ellen’s first entries noted what she liked about school and what she found “troublesome.”

I like to read. I don’t like lunch.
I like Japanese. I don’t like to carry a heavy backpack.
I like recess and other things. I don’t like to walk to school.
I like phys ed and art.
I like cleaning.
I like to be class leader.
I like my friends.

This notebook was handed in to the teacher, who responded to Ellen with “You like a lot of things. I’m relieved. As for the troublesome things, what can make them better? If you think good thoughts, maybe they’ll get better.” Later entries still had lunch as a troublesome thing, but by the end she had stopped mentioning it, whereas the list of things she liked had expanded to include the teacher, the backpack, and school in general. The teacher’s last comment in reply dealt mostly with a bad spelling mistake Ellen repeated several times. It is not difficult to see some mental coercion here.
In the cases where writing a *hansei* is used as a disciplinary tactic, teachers sometimes reject what is offered and require children to keep rewriting their thoughts until they are acceptable. During discussions, they refuse to end the discussion until a resolution or understanding they find acceptable has been formulated. They are acting as though the power of words to create reality is very strong, perhaps strong enough to overcome dissimulation on the part of students.