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The Impact of Culture on Second Language Acquisition[2]

1. Introduction

On one hand, the problem of language teaching and language learning (in particular that of English) has been on the agenda of Japanese public education and professional training programs for many decades. Some improvements in the number of English speakers notwithstanding, ELT (English Language Teaching) and ELL (English Language Learning) still pose a serious challenge in Japan both for teachers and learners, and a serious concern for the business world and international organizations.

On the other, the Japanese language is considerably more difficult to acquire for speakers of English than to acquire other foreign languages in the range of difficulty of Indo-European languages (Spanish, French, German, etc.) So whereas Japanese natives struggle with the acquisition of English, English speaking learners struggle with the acquisition of Japanese to an extent that much surpasses the presumed difficulties arising from the typological difference of the two languages.

The reasons for this are manifold, but one often-neglected aspect of the difficulties might be attributed to the cultural differences in communication strategies of the teaching and of the learning side. It is hypothesized that there is a strong interdependence of communication strategies and of teaching ~ learning strategies – both acquired in childhood as part of the native culture.

As long as native teachers of English try to operate in the classrooms applying their own (digital) communication strategies and hence demanding from learners to follow learning strategies different from what they have been socialized to, the performance of (analogue) learners cannot be expected to improve considerably, since their energies get wasted more on coping with the comprehension and learning of new strategies, than on the language learning proper. Vice-versa, as long as Japanese teachers try to operate in the language classes applying their own (analogue) strategies and demanding from learners to follow learning strategies different from what they have been socialized to (digital), the performance of (digital) learners cannot be expected to improve considerably, since much of their energy is wasted on coping with and comprehending the analogue approach.

It would be easy to suggest then, that for the sake of a better compatibility of teaching and learning strategies, Japanese teachers should teach Japanese learners of English, and English natives should teach English native learners of Japanese. All this in order to prevent the learners

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from the time-consuming process of the cultural adaptation to the "way of communication" (and hence to "the way of teaching") of the teacher with a cultural background different from theirs. The issue of teaching-learning is further complicated however by the fact that whereas the majority of European languages (including English) are considered to be digital in nature, Japanese is considered to be an analogue language (Hayashi and Jolley, 2002). So the question arises, whether from the point of view of teaching and learning, a par excellence analogue language like Japanese is more effectively acquired if it is treated in an analogue way rather than if treated in a digital way? Vice versa, for the sake of effectiveness, English – a par excellence digital language – is to be taught in a digital way? What happens if it is taught in an analogue way? A third problem is the question of language use. The Japanese language use – which is an overwhelmingly high-context usage – is in fact at its best when used analogically. This does not exclude the possibility of its being used in a digital way, but then it becomes insensitive, rude and inconsiderate. The English language (and for that matter many European languages) more often than not would follow a digital way of usage: which means that efficiency is given preference over considerateness, directness over indirectness, and straightness over circumscribing. This does not mean that English cannot be used in an analogue way, but once it is, it sounds rather odd.

These questions, which in some way or other are interrelated and interconnected with each other through a common denominator, namely "cultural-mental programming", are going to be pondered about in the present paper. The paper does not offer ready solutions but rather serves as fuel for further discussions.

2. English education in Japan

Japanese participants of English language courses abroad are often embarrassed by being confronted with the cruel reality in international comparison on self-introduction:
- I am 24 years old, a typist from Italy, have studied English for two years.
- I am a custom-inspector from Greece, studied English for three years.
- I am a graduate of X University in Japan, have studied English for 12 years.

The low efficiency of institutionalised English teaching is a fact that Japan has been facing for decades and has been making endless efforts to cope with. The results are far from satisfactory and are hardly explainable in view of the generally good scores of Japanese students in international comparison from all other subjects but foreign languages. One is at a loss examining the comparative international data: Japan has consistently scored last or next to the last in any of the four language skills (listening, grammar, vocabulary, reading) for the past decades (NKSh 1990/1/14). A turning point impact, expected from the implementation of the JET program, also failed in the sense that in the survey taken 10 years later Japan's relative position – together with that of North-Korea – was placed again as the lowest among 24 Asian countries on average scores. (NKSh, 1999/12/3). How can this be explained?

The public and the business world, as end-users of the work force, blame the education system and demand immediate changes. All parties involved in the "English education industry" in Japan agree that things have to be changed. Schools expect it from the Ministry of Science and Education, the Ministry of Science and Education expects it from the teachers. Accordingly, to

improve English education, the retraining of some 60,000 public junior high and high school teachers has been planned (JT, 2002/5/25/1). Parents are unhappy because they are forced to perform enormous financial sacrifices to have their children meet university entrance examination standards. English teachers of Japanese nationality expect considerable improvements from the growing number of English native teachers. English native teachers, in turn, expect Japanese teachers' attitude, methodology and what more, the whole system to change so that students cooperate more. Students expect English classes to become less frustrating and more stimulating. What is, in fact, happening?

There are, without doubt, a lot of factors (and possibly many more considering particular cases individually) that might contribute to the low efficiency in varying degrees:
1. Large class-sizes
2. Lecture-type class arrangements
3. Not-sufficient English language skills of the Japanese native teachers
4. Overall ageing of the teachers' population
5. The lingua-typological difference of Japanese from English
6. Fluctuation of native English language teachers
7. Not-sufficient number of English native teachers
8. Rigidity of the curriculum
9. Non-stimulating textbooks
10. Writing-reading oriented teaching methods
11. Exam-oriented content of the teaching
12. Lack of students' motivation
13. Lack of exposure to real-life intercultural communication
14. No real need to know a foreign language within Japan
15. Relatively old age of students when first exposed to foreign language learning

This list neither represents an order of importance, nor an order of difficulty of acquisition, and it probably is not complete either. Though it is evident that the problems constitute clusters: some factors are of an organizational nature, some factors blame the teachers, others blame the system, and some blame the students. I would complete this list by one factor, however, that is usually overlooked and never mentioned among the arguments, although it might be of utmost importance:

16. Difference in mental programming that manifests itself in communication behaviour.

Important though they are, due to space limitations, I do not reflect here on all factors listed (for reference see earlier papers of Hidasi 1997a; 1997b; 1998; 2003a). This time I would limit the focus on factors that are relevant in interactions between English native teachers and Japanese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL).

3. Japanese as a Foreign Language for Westerners

1. According to the Foreign Service Institute, which teaches languages to our diplomatic personnel, one needs to reach a level of 2+ on a scale of 0 - 5, to be able to function at a minimal professional competency (0 means little or no knowledge, 5 is the knowledge of an

educated native speaker). To reach level 2+ with an 'easy' language for Americans to learn, such as French, Spanish, Portuguese or German, takes about 500 to 600 hours of instruction. That would be equivalent of several semesters of college study.

To reach level 2+ with a 'difficult' language, such as Chinese, Japanese or Arabic, probably takes 800 to 1000 hours of instruction. Obviously, the U.S. government cannot find many linguistically qualified individuals for its need among students at American colleges and universities." (Domenico Maceri: More Americans ditch the lingual desert, JT, 2003/11/27/20.)

2. "The US government itself knows just how difficult Japanese is. When the government wants to teach its employees Class One (i.e. easy) languages such as French and Spanish, it puts them through twenty-five weeks of concentrated study at thirty hours per week, for a total of 750 hours, at the end of which students have attained what is called 'Limited Working Proficiency'[3] in reading and speaking. ….to bring students to 'Limited Working Proficiency' in Class Four (i.e. killer) languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean…students have to study for forty-seven weeks at thirty hours per week, for a total of 1410 hours…." explains Jay Rubin (Rubin 2002: 17.), professor of Japanese literature at Harvard University, a well-known translator of Natsume Soseki and Haruki Murakami among others. And he continues on saying that "At five hours per week, thirty weeks per year, a fairly typical university language-learning pace, students would have to stay in college five years to receive the same number of hours as government students in order to attain mere Limited Working Proficiency in French, and to do so in Japanese would take them 9,4 years". (Rubin 2002: 17-18.)

3. Estimates of a fairly recent survey carried out in 1993 by the State Department give account of very severe difficulties in the case of the average American language learner. It takes for American language learners 3.5 times more time and energy to acquire Japanese as a foreign language than to acquire Spanish. (Miyagawa: 2003) This would mean in practical terms that if a language learner spends 3 years on learning Spanish then that same learner might need slightly more than ten years to reach the same level in Japanese as a foreign language.

All these estimates – even the mildest ones – suggest that it is not only the difference and /or difficulty of the "langage" in the Saussure-ian sense that presents a problem, but also the process of acquisition. Furthermore, the difference in language usage ("parole") also contributes to the extraordinary efforts that are to be taken by learners. (Hidasi, 2003) It is assumed that most of the difficulty arises not so much from the difference of language, but rather from the difference of interaction by that language and through that language.

4. Differences in teaching methods

The methods of teaching and learning are both affected by culture. In the 1970s, Jules Henry (1976) listed 55 teaching methods, the number of which must have considerably grown since then.

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[3] 'Limited Working Proficiency' has a precise definition. In reading, for instance, it means:
"Sufficient comprehension to read simple, authentic written material in a form equivalent to usual printing or typescript on subjects within a familiar context. Able to read with some misunderstandings straightforward, familiar, factual material, but in general insufficiently experienced with the language to draw inferences directly from the linguistic aspects of the text." (Rubin: 17.)

On the one side watching, imitating, repeating, memorizing and other receptive methods are well represented in the arsenal of teaching and learning of Japanese. On the other, doing, problem solving, comparing, discussing, etc. are nearer to the concept of the proactive Western teaching-learning repertoire. Whereas the former puts emphasis on the perception and consideration of the whole context (high-context culture) prior to understanding, the latter puts emphasis on concentration of the overt (mostly verbal) message (low-context culture) and expects a prompt reaction to it. While the former is nearer to the defensive, the latter is nearer to the offensive type of communication behaviour.

DeKeyser (DeKeyser, 2003) attempts to provide definitions for explicit versus implicit and for inductive versus deductive teaching and learning. His ideas can be best summarized in a matrix format.

Language Teaching and Language Learning	Deductive = from the rules (structure) to the concrete manifestations	Inductive = from the concrete manifestations to the (structure as a) whole
Explicit *Conscious process of teaching and learning*	Traditional teaching based on grammar	To make students "discover" the rules for themselves
Implicit *Unconscious process of teaching and learning*	To use (innate) parameters	To acquire from the input as the result of a natural process

"Via traditional rule teaching, learning is both deductive and explicit. When students are encouraged to find rules for themselves by studying examples in a text, learning is inductive and explicit. When children acquire linguistic competence of their native language without thinking about its structure, their learning is inductive and implicit. The combination of deductive and implicit is less obvious, but the concept of parameter setting in universal grammar could be seen as an example; supposedly learners derive a number of characteristics of the language being learned from the setting of the parameter, and this clearly happens without awareness." (DeKeyser 2003:314-315.)

Whereas present-day FLT in European countries is dominated by the inductive explicit method, much of the teaching and learning done in Japan follows the inductiveimplicit method. This method gives very good results if the time allotted for language learning is not bound, if it is not limited. (As, in fact, is the case of the acquisition of our mother tongue. We are normally not pressed by time – some children learn the language quickly, others need more time – but there are no restrictions on time.)

In the case of foreign languages, however, we are normally limited by performance requirements, deadlines, etc.…One way to shorten the time of acquisition is to make the process "conscious". It is expected that with the raising of awareness, redundancy – and hence waste of time – can be avoided. The process becomes more conscious, more linear, and more rational – at least this is

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the Western belief. In the Japanese tradition though, much more is left in foreign language learning – as in learning of any other skills - to other capacities of the brain, like storage of information by memorizing. It is hoped that these memory traces can be mobilized and activated at the required moment. If, however, there are no exact matches in the memory for the required needs, then there is nothing to be activated. In that case, communication gets slowed down or broken, manifesting itself in the long silences in communication interaction from the part of the Japanese learners of a foreign language.

5. Class-room interaction between English native teachers and Japanese learners of EFL

"The keystone of all teaching-learning situations is good communication, for the acquisition of knowledge is predicted upon an accurate exchange of information between the instructor and his students." This statement by Condon (1982:340) has remained and probably will be true for generations to come, but the question remains what is meant by "good communication" and by whom. Is it a smooth, verbose interaction, exchange of ideas, exchange of doubts and offering solutions to problems, discussion and debate? If yes, then it is a piece of "good communication" in the sense of Western thinking. In a Japanese setting, however, things seem to work differently.

For describing the Japanese teaching-learning interface, I turn to Hofstede's (et als.2002) cultural dimensions theory as a frame of reference. Out of his five dimensions (identity, hierarchy, truth, gender and virtue) only four will be utilized for the present study since gender has no relevance in the context of the present study. Hofstede's analysis assumes, that Japan is markedly different from other Asian countries (even its close East Asian neighbours) in a number of dimensions. This would also explain to some extent the great difference of Japanese performance in achievements of foreign language acquisition as contrasted with that of these countries.

Identity Some recent studies, based on comparative cross-cultural surveys, have found that there is a definite shift in values of Japanese towards values traditionally attributed to western cultures (see Matsumoto, 2002). As experience shows however, these changes might be traceable on the level of consciousness, but few of these manifest themselves on the level of behaviour. Students, for instance, who confess to a strong preference for individualism above collectivism (Hidasi, 2002a) would, in real-life situations, often behave according to attributes associated with collectivistic behaviour patterns. This can very well be seen in classroom situations as well. Students would not volunteer – even if requested to do so – in answering a question, in contributing to classwork. A question directed to the class by the teacher is usually left unanswered, not so much because of lack of knowledge, but because no one takes the odium to be singled out from the group. By avoiding eye contact with the teacher, students signal their unwillingness to cooperate on an individual basis because this would mean standing out from their peers. Since cooperation and, hence, group achievement is given preference in Japanese culture over individual achievement, people tend to be less competitive in their behaviour and attitude, and less assertive in their communication than their scores suggest in sociological or psychological surveys.

Not only styles of, but the function and expectations toward communication also differ. Whereas in Western communication settings the main function of communication is information

presentation and information exchange, in Japanese communication this function is frequently only of secondary importance. The primary function of communication is to maintain good human relationships (Hidasi, 1997b). This is a culture driven requirement: of primary value are smooth human relationships and communication supporting it. For this sake the Japanese are ready to sacrifice their individual preferences or conveniences, keep back opinions, control their communicative behaviour in a way that would best meld into the group.

Truth The former dimension coincides with the high ranking of Japanese in uncertainty avoidance. The Japanese students avoid risks and show little value of personal choice or freedom of thought. An American student comments: "A Japanese person would rather be quiet than risk thinking differently than the group. When they are unsure of how to do something, they either refuse to do it or they follow the crowd as carefully as possible. Because Japan is a collectivist society, they are afraid to do something individual so if they are not sure of the right answer, they avoid the question. In my classes I often see the teachers call on Japanese students and ask them, 'what do you think?'. The students usually look down shyly and avoid eye contact as they scramble through their notes for the 'right answer'. The teacher may have to ask the question in multiple ways and even tell the student that there is no wrong answer. The students still give vague answers if any." (E.C. sophomore's semester report) Students are reluctant to give opinions when confronted with open questions for debate. "What do you think about unemployment?" "What are the benefits of studying abroad?" Just to be on the safe side, answers are mostly general (often dutifully memorized "prêt-à-porter" texts) instead of contributing individual solutions. Many native teachers would then conclude in their final evaluation that " X. has no opinion"; "speaking competence particularly low"; "unable to express what (s)he wants", etc.

Hierarchy The words and statements of authority – and hence of teachers – are not doubted and not criticized. Their truth-value is taken for granted and often treated as such. This relatively high power distance sets the tone, where students would not ask, would not demand to elaborate even if they do not understand something. Teachers and students do not interact in the real sense of the word: their communication is less mutual, but rather a one-way process directed from the teacher to the students. Students do not make the effort to become active and dynamic players of the communication – if they react at all, they do so only after being encouraged. They do not enter into the communication flow with the same commitment, because they do not feel they have the right to do so. One can interpret their passiveness in interaction from different standpoints: as a sign of respect – within the Japanese frame, and as a sign of indifference – within the Western frame. This, in fact, is often given as a feedback from English native teachers. (see Komisarov 2002)

Virtue In contrast to the short-term orientation-mindedness of people coming from Western cultures, most of the Japanese can be characterized by a long-term orientation. In communication too, this comes to the surface with respect to the direction of the communication flow, with respect to handling time, and with respect to the effectiveness in communication – all of which are intertwined. In contrast to the speaker oriented communication pattern (SOCP)– which is characteristic of practically most Western cultures, the Japanese invariably follow the hearer oriented communication pattern (HOCP). The SOCP uses an offensive mode of communication, in which the message is clearly articulated, in which the responsibility for the message transfer is mostly born by the speaker. The native English teacher – feeling this responsibility – often turns

to the students asking them: "Do you understand?" "Do you have any questions, remarks, comments?" As a rule, rarely ever does anyone raise their hand in a Japanese classroom. For one thing, the 'hierarchy' dimension is at work. There is another reason, namely a difference in strategy. The listener – in a teacher-learner setting the student - waits until he understands. And he does not like to be pressed. In fact, Japanese students get very frustrated by constantly being urged in the English classroom. In the defensive type of
Japanese communication, understanding depends mainly on the meaning attribution capacities and abilities of the listener. The listener does not feel the need and the right to urge his partner and bombard him with questions for clarification. It would be impolite. He does his best to listen and to make sense of the whole context – sooner or later. Since traditions of Japanese communicative behaviour give preference to consideration and politeness towards your partner, the cooperative principles of Grice (1975) are in fact violated on a daily basis. ("Avoid obscurity of expression"; "Avoid ambiguity"; " Be brief"; "Be orderly"; "Be relevant", etc.) To be precise, they are based on a different communication pattern! The expression of demand, request, wish, rejection, assertion and criticism in a direct and straightforward manner is seen as impolite in Japanese communication behaviour, while being ambiguous, silent, and expressing yourself vaguely or obscurely is not regarded as an obstacle to successful communication. So, from a Japanese point of view there is no violation of cooperative principle at all, because indirectness or ambiguity does not contradict the requirements of communication behaviour (Hidasi 1997b). Many of the communicative means used for this purpose (evasion, ellipsis, silence, hesitation, avoidance of topic, unrelated topic, etc.) serve as face-saving strategies:by avoiding direct confrontation and conflict in communication neither the speaker nor the hearer is driven into the cul-de-sac of taking sides, from where there is no escape. The desire to save face is the principal reason for developing elaborate evasive communication tactics. Once a Canadian colleague formulated this as follows: "My Japanese students behave - instead of communicating in the English class."

Another aspect of the incomprehensiveness comes from the fact that the time devoted to decision making is much longer in Japan then in English speaking cultures. Teachers often have to wait long minutes before the reply – after due hesitation – arrives. This slows down the communication flow and the dynamics of the teaching. Delay in providing a prompt reaction affects the effectiveness of communication. Effectiveness in communication means namely two things in Western (short-term) thinking: preciseness of message transfer on the one side and economizing on time on the other. This interpretation of effectiveness of communication leaves Japanese students with a great handicap since neither of these is a prerequisite in their native communication. In other words, they are expected to perform according to the requirements of Western communicative behaviour by the native English teacher, when, in fact, what they have acquired and practiced since early childhood follows a different pattern.

The characteristics of Japanese communication patterns function well within a Japanese context. The problem arises when these same communication strategies are transferred to communication with foreigners and/or in a foreign language. This often leads to misunderstanding, embarrassment and frustration.

6. Differences in the mental programming

We assume that differences in communication behaviour, in communication patterns, and in communication styles can be attributed to the fundamental difference in paradigms of the analogue versus the digital perspective. The difference in paradigm manifests itself on practically all levels of human behaviour: on the level of perception, processing information, storing information, memory management, reproduction and production. "Analog attributes of persons are comprised of continuous, holistic perception of reality without distinct boundary between figure and ground as well as between the observer and the observed; are comprised of highly contextual, subjective, subtle nonverbal communication; and are comprised of implicit social systems."(Hayashi–Jolley, 2002:180) The majority of Japanese fall into this category. "In contrast, digital attributes of persons are comprised of discontinuous, analytical perception of reality with definitional, categorical boundary between figure and ground as well as between the observer and the observed; are comprised of low-contextual, objective, verbal communication; and are comprised of explicit, stipulatory social systems."(Hayashi-Jolley 2002:180) The majority of people with a Western cultural background, and hence the majority of native English teachers, fall into this category.

Communication, too, is governed by analogue and digital orientation, which leads to the difference in communication behaviour. The difference in analogue and digital thinking seems to be most demonstrative in giving instructions, in describing, explaining and elaborating certain phenomena, in presenting information, in developing debate and argumentation, in negotiating meaning - which is actually communication itself. If this theory is applied to the teaching/learning processes and practices as seen in English classrooms across Japan, then one might conclude that the core-difficulties can be attributed to the difference in the mental programming of Japanese students and of English native teachers. Whereas the former follow an analogue worldview – because they were socialized in such a way -, the latter follow a digital worldview, because that is how they learned to see and understand the world. The Western mental programming follows the mental software developed originally by the ancient Greek thinkers – Plato, Aristotle and Socrates. Dialogue is the essence of the Socratic method: one has to figure out what is being asked and has to be able to respond in the most effective way possible in a reasonable time. Often this is carried out in question-and-answer sequences. People get used to developing dialectic skills in private life, and rhetoric skills (the art of convincing your audience) in public settings. In Japan, however, the Confucian model is at work. The teacher – as an external authority - often uses rhetorical questions in giving counsel. Students expect their teacher to answer his own questions. The teacher responds with wisdom. He transmits the wisdom of his discipline to the student. The teacher serves as a role model "to evoke" knowledge rather than to bring forth something new. (see also Scollon 1999) As a result, the type of interaction between the teacher and the students is essentially different from the Western model. Instead of developing understanding through an interactive dialogue, understanding is expected to develop internally under the impetus of the dutiful observation and imitation of transmitted knowledge.

"Learning language is essentially a socially oriented process…(it) is also linked with the wider cultural and cognitive processes" Foley & Thompson (2003:62). The English language, and Western (English) language learning itself are digitally processed and used, as pointed out by Hayashi and Jolley (2002:185-188). The Japanese however are socialized on analogue-dominant language acquisition. Native teachers of English – as a matter of course – demand that students follow their digital mode of language processing and language teaching. But in the case of

Japanese learners who are predominantly analogue, students have to cope not only with English as a foreign (digital) language, but also with understanding and following a different teaching paradigm – that of the digitaldominant teacher. (Hidasi: 2003) When people of different orientation and, for that matter, of different communication styles meet, difficulties can occur. As they in fact do.

7. How to overcome the "cultural programming gap"?

As long as native teachers of English try to operate in the classrooms applying their own (digital) communication strategies, and hence demand from learners to apply learning strategies different from what they have been socialized to, the performance of (analogue) learners cannot be expected to improve considerably, since their energies get wasted more on coping with the comprehension and learning of new strategies, than on the language learning proper. Learners are expected to follow a "mental software" that they in fact are unfamiliar with. And accordingly, their performance is well below the expected norm. This problem affects tens of millions of learners in Japan, not to mention the material consequences on the level of both the individual and the educational budget.

As stated by Powell and Andersen (1994: 322), "culture provides us with a heritage and a set of expectations about educational settings". If these expectations – not only concerning settings, but - concerning the whole educational process itself are not met, then those affected become disappointed or frustrated. Disorientation comes from a feeling of loss – why not do it the way we always have? But ways that function well in one particular setting might prove less effective in a different setting. Awareness should be raised with respect to the ways in which people's worldviews affect their learning, understanding, production, and interaction. Neglecting differences in mental programming – and for that matter in communication – might lead to low effectiveness. A better understanding of the differences might also help to avoid frustrations arising from misunderstandings. Thus it is highly recommended for native teachers of foreign languages targeting a Japanese audience to study more thoroughly the communication and teaching ~ learning strategies of the host culture.

The same applies vice versa, of course, to native teachers of Japanese. Communication and interaction practices of Western learners often irritate them: too much directness, too much straight-forwardness in interaction and in language usage gives them the feeling of lack of respect, lack of considerateness, lack of refinement. They also often find learners too demanding, too aggressive. The never ceasing "why" of the learners is often evaluated as a sign of intolerance, a sign of impatience. Raising the awareness of teachers on differences between communication styles and language behaviour might help avoid misunderstandings and stereotyping.

The issues connected with foreign language acquisition and communication are gaining importance within the process of internationalisation and globalisation. Still, we are left with the question of discovering the ways and means of mental programming and reprogramming. It is only hoped that by mobilizing achievements of many other disciplines - like neurology, psychology, sociology, etc. - a better understanding of the mental processes in language acquisition would contribute to the improvement of efficiency in language teaching in general, and in Japan in particular.

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