Intercultural Communication in the Japanese Language Classroom in Singapore:

A Comparison of Students' and Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract

Exploring the communicative behavior of teachers and students in the Japanese language classroom in Singapore is one important way of looking at intercultural communication between Japanese and Singaporeans. Ease in effective communication is often hindered by differences in expectations resulting in communication gaps. In this study, attempts were made to explore the differences in perceptions held by students and Japanese teachers of (i) a good teacher versus a Japanese teacher; and (ii) a good student versus a university student. A questionnaire based on previous findings was constructed using a 5-point semantic differential scale for this purpose. A comparison of results showed that there were significant differences in students' and teachers' perception of a good teacher/student versus the teacher/student in reality.

Keywords: Intercultural, Communication, Japanese Language, Classroom, Perceptions

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1. Introduction

Exploring the communicative behavior of teachers and students in the Japanese Language (JL) classroom in Singapore is one important way of looking at intercultural communication (IC) between Japanese and Singaporeans. Many researches maintain that foreign language classrooms are treasure houses of IC that reflect the ways learners use the language in society and represent how intercultural (mis)communication arise between native speakers and learners of that language (Tokui 2002, Savignon 1983, and Anderson 1993).

According to Cooper and Simonds (2007:8), classroom communication "consists of the verbal and nonverbal transactions between teachers and students and between or among students," and the basis of communication is the perception process. In this process, "we select, organize, and interpret the stimuli we receive through our senses into a meaningful picture of the world around us" (p.74). However, what we perceive may not be reality as our perception is heavily influenced by our senses, our internal states (e.g. our past experience, our values and beliefs) and differing environment (e.g. differences in gender, race or culture). These perceptions are translated into expectations of others which in turn affect our behavior or attitude towards others. In the language classroom, if either students or teachers misperceive or interpret reality, communication problems may result.

Based on these considerations, the present study aims to explore IC in the JL classroom in Singapore from the teachers and students' perception of a good teacher/student and the teacher and student in reality based on character, professionalism (of a teacher), attitude towards studies (for the student), and attitude or behavior. A student's perception of a good teacher will show us the positive qualities he/she would like to see in his/her teacher. Similarly, a teacher's perception of a good student tells us his/her expectations of a student. As mentioned, one's perception is often different from reality. Hence, it is important to examine what these perceptions are and how different they are from reality to give a true picture of classroom communication. However, few attempts have been made to show what the teachers themselves would like to see in a good teacher. Similarly, few attempts have been made to show what perception students have of a good student (or themselves). A study into such perception or image gaps will help us in identifying the underlying communication problems in the language classroom.

2. Literature Review

According to Nash (1976), findings from investigation into the qualities that students would like to see in their teacher are not merely descriptions of students' perception or image of a teacher. He believed that those perceptions would translate themselves into rules of conduct or norms of how a teacher should behave. Teachers who were unable to behave as perceived faced more problems with the students than those who did. Similarly, in the study of Hurt, Scott and McCroskey (1978), students' perceptions seem to have a major impact on communication in the classroom, such as the degree of student's willingness in communicating with the teacher and the students' cognitive learning process.

Durham & Ryan (1992) shared similar views concerning differences in perception between teachers and students that could create difficulties in smooth communication in the classroom. In their research, a sample of Australian and Japanese tertiary students was asked to respond to an open-ended question, "What is a good teacher?" The responses were assessed to find the most frequently mentioned characteristics or actions, which were developed into descriptors. 20 descriptors of a good teacher were used in a subsequent questionnaire administered to 83 Australian university students and 139 Japanese university students, who had foreigners as teachers in their classes. The students were asked to rank the descriptors in order of importance to describe a good teacher's personality, behavior and competence. In another study similar to the one by Durham & Ryan, Makarova & Ryan (1997) investigated into the image, characteristics and behaviors of a good foreign language teacher, as seen by the university students in Japan and Russia. A questionnaire with an open-ended question that asked for the students' opinion about the qualities of a good language teacher was distributed to 179 Japanese university students and 165 Russian university students. The responses were analyzed by tabulating the frequency scores of keywords used by students to describe a good teacher. Both studies concluded that such findings are valuable to the teacher, especially if he/she is a foreigner, in understanding the perceptions that their students have of a good teacher to become more sensitive to cultural differences within the classroom, and to develop more successful learning experiences for students.

In two previous studies on students' image of a good teacher and its implications on communication gaps in the Japanese language classroom in Singapore (Lai, 2002; 2004), there were clear indicators of what the image of a good teacher was as constructed by Singaporean students. The first study was a small-scale one that was conducted through classroom observations, questionnaires and interviews with Singaporean Japanese language learners and their Japanese teachers in six different classes of different language institutions. In the questionnaires, students were asked open-ended questions on what were the qualities they would use or would not use to describe a good teacher. Being 'intelligent', 'knowledgeable', 'well informed', 'worthy of respect', 'dedicated', and 'serious' are important qualities that a good teacher should possess, as indicated by the answers to the open-ended questions. Interviews with the students further confirmed these 30 qualities as essential in a good teacher as perceived by the students. A preceding research was carried out to investigate into the association between the students' value orientation and their image of a good teacher. Relevant to this current paper is the study conducted on the perception of a good teacher. Students were asked to score against 30 items on a 5-point Likert scale to indicate their perception of a good teacher and to provide additional qualities they thought essential in a good teacher that did not appear in the 30 items list. Besides items such as 'being intelligent', 'knowledgeable', etc, that were mentioned above, items such as 'friendliness', 'open-mindedness', 'confidence' and 'worthy of respect' scored high on the scale, too, while items such as 'conservatism' and 'strictness' scored low in the questionnaire. The Singaporean students' perception of a good teacher is clearly demonstrated in both the studies.

Besides looking into a good teacher image, it is also necessary to explore into a good student image. According to Simanek (1997), examples of qualities of a good student include the willingness to work hard, to be creative, to have self-discipline, to have an open mind and to be humble. These qualities make a student 'stand out from the rest of the class'. In addition, from the viewpoint of Singaporean students gathered from a survey by the National University of Singapore (CDTL, 1998), a good student is one who has an open-mind in learning, is responsive and eager, is unafraid to ask questions in class, is creative, is vocal, is willing to make mistakes, and to be consistent and confident. Further research into the perception of a good student from the standpoint of both teachers and students in the Japanese language classroom will enhance our understanding of the dynamics of classroom and intercultural communication between Japanese teachers and Singaporean students.

3. Methods and Procedures

The following research questions were proposed to investigate into the perceptions of a good teacher and a good student from the viewpoint of participants in the Japanese language classroom, and the implications on classroom communication.

1. Is there a difference in students' perception of a good teacher and a Japanese (native) teacher?

2. Is there a difference in teachers' perception of self and a good teacher?

3. Is there a difference in students' perception of self and a good student?

4. Is there a difference in teachers' perception of a good student and their students in the Japanese language program in NUS?

3.1 Subjects

All subjects in this study are teachers (N=13) and students (n=210) of the Japanese Language Program (Level One Module) in the Centre for Language Studies, National University of Singapore (NUS). All the teachers are Japanese native speakers, and all the students are learners with no background knowledge of the language.

3.2 Method of Survey

3.2.1 The Survey

A questionnaire consisting of four sections (perception of (1) a good teacher, (2) a Japanese (native) teacher, (3) a good student, (4) an NUS student (or yourself)) was designed with reference to the first author's previous studies (Lai, 2002; 2003), and works of Nash, Hurt et al., Ryan & Durham (1996), Simanek (1997), and CDTLink (1998). Section (1) and (2) each comprised 38 descriptors and section (3) and (4) each comprised 32 descriptors. The respondents in the survey were asked to score each descriptor in terms of its importance on a 5-point semantic differential scale, to determine their perceptions. In previous studies, to facilitate analyses, the descriptors were categorized into three dimensions, namely, 'character/disposition', 'professionalism' and 'attitude/behavior' in Section (1) and (2) which determined the perception of teacher. In section (3) and (4) which determined the perception of student, descriptors were also categorized into three dimensions, which were, 'character/disposition', 'attitude towards studies' and 'attitude/behavior towards the teacher or in class'. Similar steps were taken in the categorization of descriptors in this paper.

Table 1 clarifies the nature of the questionnaire by providing sample descriptors and their categorization in each dimension for the four different perceptions.

Table 1: Description of sample descriptors in each dimension for different perceptions in the questionnaire.

Section (1) : Perception of a good teacher		
Section (2) : Perception of a Japanese teacher		
Dimension	**No. of Items**	**Sample Descriptors**
Character/ Disposition	20	• Intelligent-Unintelligent • Open-minded-Conservative
Professionalism	13	• Highly qualified-Lowly qualified

		• Dedicated-Indifferent
Attitude/ Behavior	5	• One who praises students-One who criticizes students • One who is sympathetic-One who is unsympathetic

Section (3) : Perception of a good student

Section (4) : Perception of an NUS student (or yourself if you are a student of NUS)

Dimension	No. of Items	Sample Items
Character/ Disposition	14	• Creative-Uncreative • Competitive-Passive
Attitude towards studies	9	• Serious-Uninterested • Hardworking-Lazy
Attitude/Behavior towards the teacher/in class	9	• Polite-Discourteous • Responsive-Unresponsive

The questionnaires (English version) distributed to 210 students were completed and returned immediately to the authors in the present study upon completion. The Japanese version (the equivalence is being assured by means of Werner-Campbell (1970) back-translation method) of the questionnaires administered to 13 Japanese native teachers were completed and returned a week later.

3.2.2 Scale Relevance

The relevance of the scales used in the survey above was checked in the two previous studies conducted by Lai as mentioned in section 2 of this paper. Descriptors that were found to be important indicators of a good teacher image were used in this survey, and descriptors that did not show any relevance were omitted.

3.3 Method of Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using the SPSS (Statistic Package for Social Sciences, Version 14.0). The data were analyzed by comparing the average group means and standard deviations of each scale for each dimension and for each category of perception.

3.4 Results

3.4.1 Perception of a good teacher versus a Japanese (native) teacher

The results of the study into students and teachers' perception of a good teacher and a Japanese teacher are demonstrated in the graphs below.
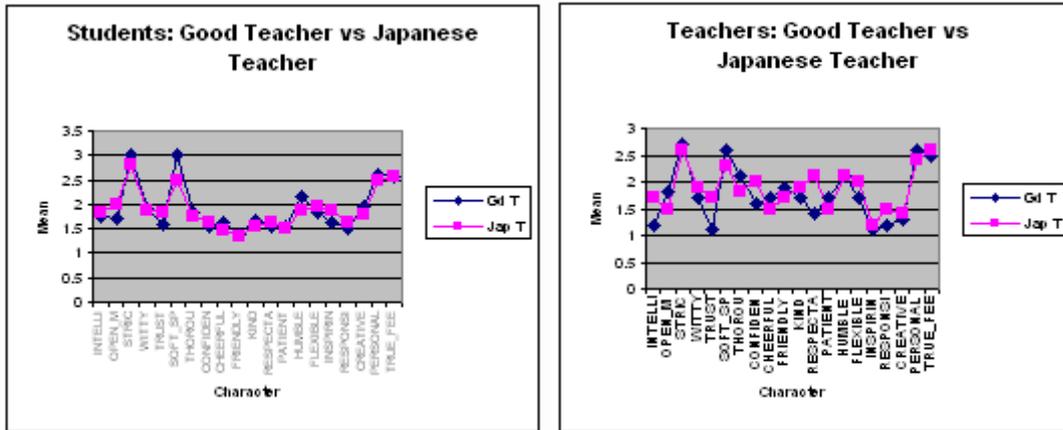
Fig.1 Fig.2

Fig.1 and Fig.2 above show the students and teachers' perception of the character of a good teacher versus a Japanese teacher respectively. From the students' perspective, in terms of character, the Japanese teachers in the JL classrooms in NUS were rather similar to that of a good teacher. However, one noticeable difference was that students would prefer a teacher who should neither be neither soft-spoken nor aggressive and they thought their Japanese teachers rather soft-spoken (descriptor: SOFT_SP in Fig.1) in comparison.

In comparison, the teachers' perspective of a good teacher and a Japanese teacher in Fig.2 showed more variability. The most significant difference could be found in the descriptor 'RESPECTA' ('worthy of respect' with 'disreputable' as its opposite concept). The Japanese teachers gave a lower score to themselves in average in comparison to that of a good teacher. Furthermore, noteworthy were also differences in the descriptors 'TRUST' (trustworthy-untrustworthy), 'INTELL' (intelligent-unintelligent), and 'CONFIDEN' (confident-unconfident) where Japanese teachers gave themselves a lower score as compared to that of a good teacher.
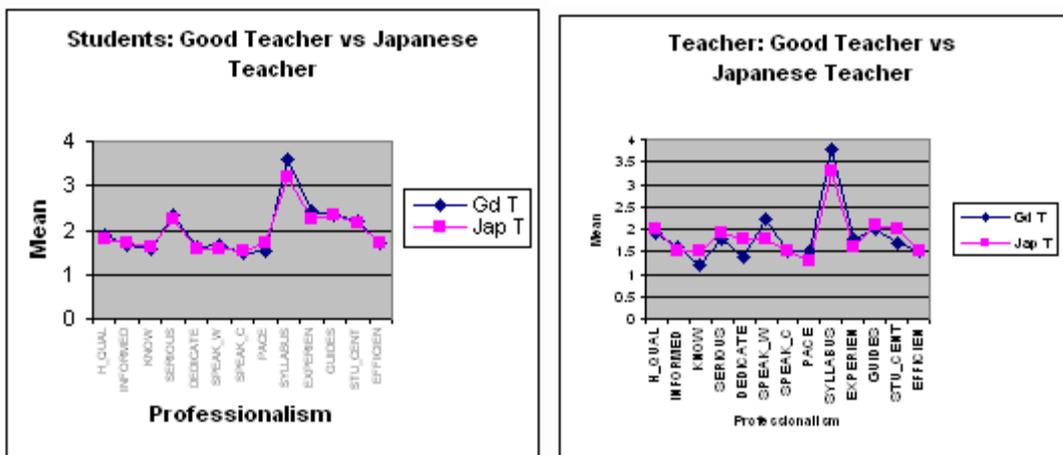

Fig.3 Fig.4

In Fig.3 and Fig.4, the result of students and teachers' perception of professionalism of a good teacher versus a Japanese teacher was displayed. From the students' perspective, the Japanese teachers seemed to be as professional as what they would have expected of a good teacher. One difference laid in the descriptor 'SYLLABUS' (one who teaches only within the syllabus - one who teaches outside the syllabus, too). The results showed that students would prefer a teacher who could teach outside the syllabus.

Again, as can be seen from Fig.4, the results of teachers' perception of a good teacher and a Japanese teacher was less homogeneous. Significant differences could be seen in the descriptors 'SYLLABUS', 'SPEAK_W' (one who speaks well - one who does not speak well) and 'DEDICATE' (dedicated - indifferent). Similar to the students, the teachers too felt that a good teacher should be one who taught

outside the syllabus, although they scored lower in this descriptor as compared to a good teacher. However, in terms of speaking well and dedication, the scores were higher than that of a good teacher.
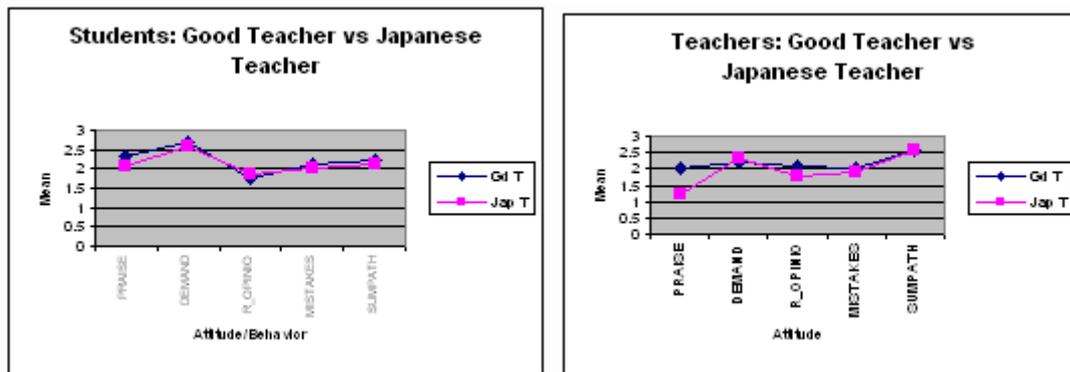

Fig.5 Fig.6

Interesting results could also be seen in Fig.5 and Fig.6 which showed the teacher's attitude or behavior towards students in class. There seemed to be no considerable differences in the students' perception of a good teacher and their Japanese teachers. In Fig.6, one major difference could be seen in the descriptor 'PRAISE' (one who praises students - one who criticizes students). The teachers felt that they would praise students more than what they felt a good teacher should be doing.

3.4.2 Perception of a good student versus an NUS student

The results of the study into students and teachers' perception of a good student and a NUS student are demonstrated in the graphs below. Both students and teachers demonstrated considerable differences in their perception of a good student versus a NUS student.
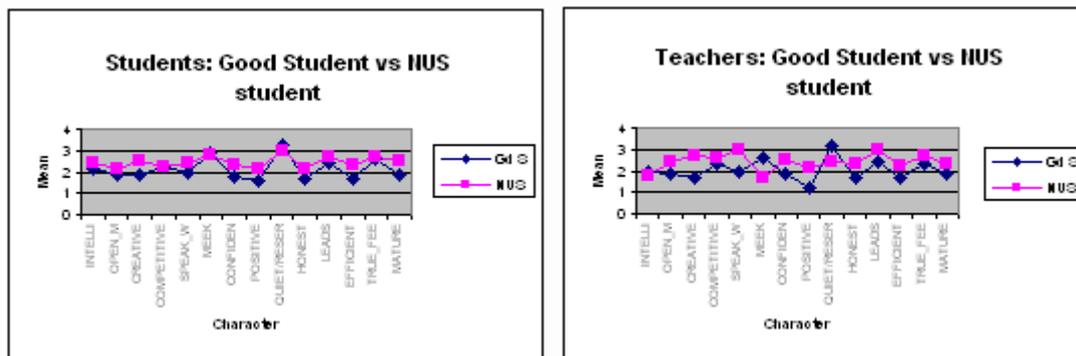

Fig.7 Fig.8

Fig.7 and Fig.8 show students and teachers perception of a good student in terms of the student's character. Generally, the students saw themselves as less than ideal in comparison to the image of a good student. The differences were especially prominent in the following descriptors, namely, 'CREATIVE' (creative - uncreative), 'SPEAK_W' (one who speaks well - one who does not speak well), 'CONFIDEN' (confident - unconfident), 'POSITIVE' (positive - negative), 'HONEST' (honest - dishonest), 'EFFICIENT' (efficient - inefficient), and 'MATURE' (mature - naive).

In comparison to the character of an ideal student, the teachers also perceived the NUS students as less than ideal. However, the teachers displayed greater degree of divergence in their perception. The greatest discrepancy could be found in 'CREATIVE' (creative - uncreative) and 'SPEAK_W'. The teachers felt that NUS students were less creative and less eloquent than an ideal student should have been. In addition, the students were seen as meek and less positive. Furthermore, the teachers felt that the NUS student should be more outspoken.
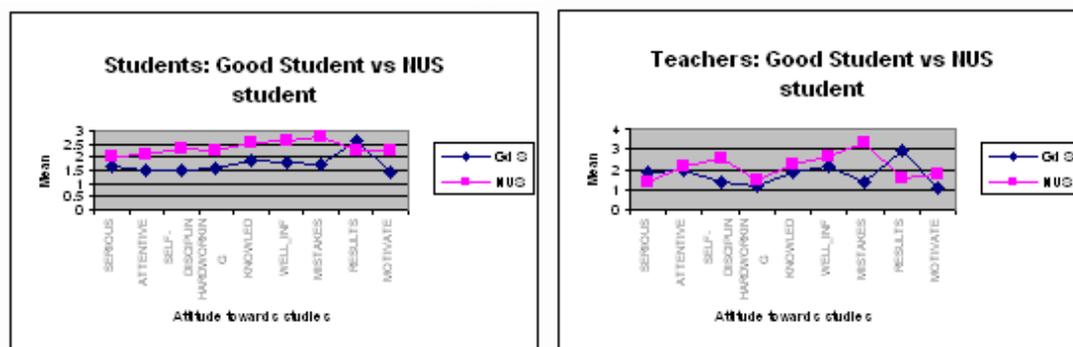
Fig.9 Fig.10

Significant differences could also be seen in Fig.9 and Fig.10, which displayed the students and teachers' perception of a good student versus a NUS student in terms of the attitude towards studies. Again, the students saw themselves as less than ideal, especially in the descriptor 'MISTAKES' (one who is unafraid of making mistakes in class - one who is afraid of making mistakes in class). This is similar to the teachers' perception, as shown in Fig.10. One interesting result could be seen in the descriptor 'RESULTS' (results-oriented/merit conscious - unconcerned about results/merits, the teachers perceived that the NUS students were much more concerned about results. Another major difference in teachers' perception could be found in the descriptor 'SELF-DISCIPLIN' (self-disciplined - lack of discipline) where NUS students were viewed as being less self-disciplined in comparison to their image of a good student.
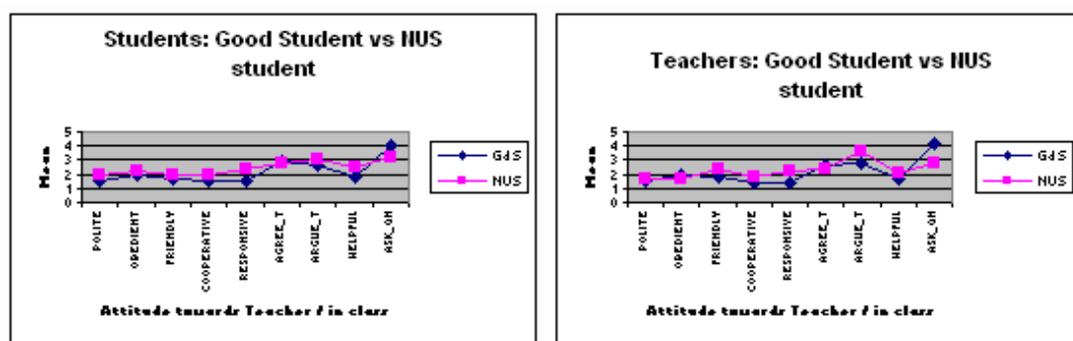

Fig.11 Fig.12

Lastly, Fig.11 and Fig.12 showed the perceptions of a good student versus an NUS student in terms of the attitude towards the teacher or in class. There were no major discrepancies in the students' perception of themselves and a good student except for the descriptors 'RESPONSIVE' (responsive - unresponsive) and 'ASK_QN' (one who is afraid of asking questions in class - one who is unafraid of asking questions). As could be seen in Fig.11, students viewed themselves as less responsive and were more afraid to ask questions in class. The teachers showed similar response concerning these two descriptors. In addition, the teachers felt that a good student should be 'one who argues with the teacher in disagreement' as represented by the descriptor 'ARGUE_T', and NUS students had a tendency to be students 'who keeps silent even if one disagrees with the teacher'.

4. Discussion

In response to research question 1, the results did not show significant difference in the students' perception of a good teacher and a Japanese teacher except in two aspects. Firstly, in terms of character, the students felt that their Japanese teachers were rather soft-spoken. This aspect of the teachers could be explained by Klopf, Ishii and Cambra (1995) in their exploration of Japanese communicative behavior, where Japanese "lack verbal aggressiveness" (p.79). Secondly, in terms of professionalism, the students felt that their Japanese teachers had a tendency to teach within the syllabus only as compared to their image of a good teacher. This result could be understood as the students' passion for learning more about the language, which could serve as a useful guideline to teachers. A good teacher in their image should be less soft-spoken and should teach outside the syllabus. However, in general, the students' image of a

good teacher and a Japanese teacher is similar. Hence, it is sufficed to say that the Japanese teachers are good teachers, from the students' point of view.

In response to research question 2, there were significant differences in teachers' perception of self and a good teacher. Firstly, in terms of a teacher's character, the most prominent difference was found in the teachers' view of 'RESPECTA' (worthy of respect - disreputable). The Japanese teachers gave a lower score to themselves in average in comparison to that of a good teacher with respect to this descriptor. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, noteworthy were also differences in the descriptors 'INTELL' (intelligent-unintelligent), and 'CONFIDEN' (confident-unconfident) where Japanese teachers, too, gave themselves a lower score as compared to that of a good teacher. In research pertaining to self-evaluations, Japanese, in comparison to other nationals, are more self-critical (Heine & Lehman, 1999; Heine, Kitayama & Lehman, 2001). Hence, this could explain why the Japanese teachers gave themselves a lower score as compared to their image of a good teacher. In addition, there was also significant difference in the descriptor 'TRUST' (trustworthy-untrustworthy). In her research into the role of cultural influences on Japanese communication, Nakai (2002) discussed the concept of *honne* (true intention) and *tatemae* as the opposite concept, which explained the lack of self-disclosure in the Japanese. According to Nakai, this cultural aspect is deeply embedded in the communication system and highly influences the way Japanese communicate. Hence, this could explain the lower score of the Japanese teachers in the descriptor, 'TRUST'.

Secondly, in terms of professionalism, there was only one significant difference from the student's perspective in the descriptor 'SYLLABUS', where Japanese teachers were given a lower score. This result suggested that students were enthusiastic and passionate about learning more of the language than what had been taught in class. This is an important point for teachers to note in future curriculum planning. The Japanese teachers seemed to share similar sentiments with the students concerning this aspect. From the teachers' perspective, noteworthy differences were also found in 'SPEAK_W' and 'DEDICATE'. In a language classroom environment, it is crucial for teachers to speak well in order to teach well. Therefore, as compared to a good teacher in general, language teachers should do better, and this was reflected in the results of the present survey. In the Japanese culture, the notion of loyalty extends beyond the family to encompass the workplace, and this serves as a motivation for them to excel themselves in their occupational role (Chew & Putti, 1995). From this viewpoint, we can understand the reason for the Japanese teachers' perception of themselves as being more dedicated than a good teacher.

Thirdly, in terms of teacher's attitude towards the students, there was no significant difference in the students' perception. As for the teachers, they felt that it was very important for them to praise the students. According to Sanders & Wiseman (1990), praising the students' work is one of the major positive contributors to students' learning. Being dedicated in their roles as a teacher, it would not be surprising to find this aspect of the teachers' immediacy behaviors in the classroom.

Research question 3 in this paper was an intention to explore into the students' perception of self and a good student. The results showed that the NUS students overall viewed themselves as less than ideal as compared to the image that they had of a good student. This could suggest that NUS students were rather self-critical. According to Kau, Tan & Wirtz (1998) in their research on Singaporeans, it was found that they were self-critical and they thought of themselves as not having more good qualities than others. As 68% of the student sample was Singaporeans, this could be a major contributor to the result that NUS students perceived themselves as less than that of a good student.

The last research question dealt with the difference in teachers' perception of a good student and their students in the Japanese language program in NUS. Results showed there were significant differences in the teachers' perception. Firstly, in terms of students' character, the teacher felt that NUS students were less creative and less eloquent than an ideal student should have been. In addition, the students were seen as meek and less positive. Furthermore, the teachers felt that the NUS student should be more outspoken. These findings seemed to coincide with the research on teachers' perception of NUS students by Lim, Oh & Wohland (2003). Students were also found to be not particularly creative. In addition, they were more passive and were unwilling to ask questions in class. Understanding such attributes of the students helps teachers in creating an environment conducive to students' active participation in class and hence enhancing their learning.

Secondly, in terms of attitude towards studies, the teachers perceived that the NUS students were 'afraid of making mistakes in class'. Furthermore, they were much more result-oriented or merit conscious. In addition, NUS students were viewed as being less self-disciplined in comparison to their image of a good student. In the study of Lim et al., the NUS students were also perceived to be 'too examination and grade-oriented' (p.2). In addition, they were perceived as students who liked to be spoon-fed and needed encouragement to be independent and take initiative. In this study, the students also seemed to have similar traits, as could be seen from their lack of self-discipline in their attitude towards studies.

Thirdly, in terms of the students' attitude towards teachers or in class, the teachers felt that NUS students were less responsive and were afraid to ask questions in class. In addition, the teachers felt that a good student should be 'one who argues with the teacher in disagreement' as represented by the descriptor 'ARGUE_T' and NUS students were apt to 'keep silent even if one disagrees with the teacher'. These observations were also reflected in the study of Lim et al. where students had to be encouraged to "take initiative and disagree".

4.3 Limitations of this study

The sample size of teachers was too small. However, there was not much alternative in this because there were only a total of 15 teachers teaching 400 students (of Level 1 module) of which 210 participated in the survey.

5. Conclusion

In this study, IC in the Japanese language classroom is explored from the teachers and students' perception of an ideal teacher/student, and the teacher and student in reality, as it is believed that effective communication and learning is often hindered by differences in expectations or perceptions held by teachers and students, resulting in much misunderstandings or communication gaps. The results of this study show that there are differences in both the students and the teachers' perception of a good teacher/student versus the teacher/student in reality and these differences can be analyzed from both the pedagogy perspective and the IC perspective.

From a pedagogy perspective, both students and teachers carried the same opinion that teachers should teach outside the syllabus. This remains a challenge for future curriculum planning. It may be possible for teachers and students to discuss and explore into what more can be included into the current syllabus. From the IC perspective, the results show that students feel that Japanese teachers have a less aggressive way of speaking. However, the Japanese teachers do not have the same view as the students in this regards. This is an interesting result as it reflects the differences in communication style of Japanese and Singaporeans.

Understanding such differences in perceptions is useful for effective teaching and learning practices in the Japanese language classroom, and is also important for enhancing the communication between the Japanese and the Singaporean. From these results, it is feasible to conduct further studies by comparing these perceptions with actual communicative behavior of both teachers and students in the classroom. Such studies can highlight the underlying processes such as attitudes, values or perceptions that manipulate the communicative behaviors of participants in the classroom.

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