

Decoding Classroom Behaviors with Self Determination Theory

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Abstract

When teachers of English as second language begin teaching in a different cultural context from their own, the initial experience can be confusing and frustrating. Student behavior and ways of thinking in the new cultural context can appear to be quite different from the teacher's and until the teacher starts to understand these behaviors and ways of thinking their student behavior can appear odd, inconsistent and contradictory. It is important therefore to explore avenues to analyze, understand and classify such behaviors. The psychological macro-theory Self Determination Theory (SDT) considers human motivation and behavior to be based on three universal needs, competence, autonomy and relatedness. For language teachers working in new cultures, it thus offers a framework to analyze and categorize local behaviors through a global theory. This article aims to apply SDT to examine and understand *amae*, a power sharing social construct that influences Japanese social behavior and communication. *Amae* can often be misinterpreted by teachers new to Japan as immature and dependent behavior. The article looks at the teacher-student relationship in exploring how *amae* can be understood through the SDT framework. If *amae* can be explained and understood through a common lens it will assist future language teachers coming to Japan in more quickly grasping the cultural influence of *amae*, how to respond to related student behavior and facilitate a more successful learning environment.

SDT and Decoding Classroom Behavior

Self Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985; 2002) is an organismic theory seeking to understand and explain processes of personality, motivation, and wellbeing. It posits 3 basic psychological needs, the need for competence (the perception of being effective), the need for relatedness (the perception of belonging to social groups), and the need for autonomy (the perception that our decisions are our own). SDT advances the idea that the degree to which these three basic needs are supported by our environment impacts on our levels of wellbeing. In SDT, while expressions of autonomy, competence and relatedness may be articulated and satisfied in distinctive ways and through different styles of expression, SDT views the satisfaction of the basic needs in regard to motivation and well-being as being universal and applicable across the human spectrum. SDT founders Edward Deci and Richard Ryan state, “Subsequent research in a variety of countries, including some cultures with collectivist, traditional values and others with individualist, equalitarian values, have confirmed that satisfaction of the needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness do indeed predict psychological well-being in all cultures.” (2008, p. 183).

SDT has been researched in a large number of situations including relationships (Legate, DeHaan, Weinstein, & Ryan, 2013), work (Guntert, 2015), and in cross cultural settings (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2003). A visit to the University of Rochester Self Determination Theory website offers the reader a comprehensive range of studies looking at research into, and applications of, SDT in a wide array of cultures, situations and settings. The body of research and support for the theories and applicability of SDT across such cultural, social and physical settings continues to grow and gain in empirical evidence. Within Japan, research related to SDT has been conducted on volunteer motivation (Sakai & Koike, 2008), intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Honda & Sakyu, 2006), Japanese students and self-regulated learning (Tanaka & Yamauchi, 2000), and in exploring motivation, anxiety, and gender (Yashima et al., 2009). However, research into, and discussion of applications of SDT in Japan has not yet been done to the extent that can be seen in western contexts.

Through looking at how SDT concepts can be tied to Japanese culture and styles of expression we can anticipate this helping teachers to classify resident student behaviors and actions within the universal theory. Rather than just assigning them to local phenomenon, the teacher applying SDT to identifying and understanding these conceptual and behavioral manifestations can articulate and classify them in concepts from SDT that other teachers will also quickly grasp. This is because the universal concepts will allow the teacher to place the local behavior within a framework and analyze it. This article looks at one such facet of local cultural behavior which emerges in the expression of Japanese social power relations, the social construct *amae*. *Amae* is little understood and is often misinterpreted even by language teachers with considerable experience in Japan. *Amae* can be examined and understood through the lens of SDT relatedness and one of its subgroups, emotional reliance (ER).

Relationship Forming, Culture, and Emotional Reliance

How we react to others when they attempt to form a relationship with us and make emotional approaches, for example when someone reaches out to us for understanding or support, can often be a determining factor in the relation to which the degree of attachment (or relatedness) the relationship expresses is strengthened, or conversely weakened (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci, 2000). We may, depending on our mood or for some

other personal reason, react coldly or indifferently to someone emotionally opening up to us, and in doing so, perhaps reduce the amount of trust and security embodied by the relationship. In the future, that individual may become less likely to reach out to us in seeking our understanding, indulgence or support, and also, in turn, be less responsive to our requests for their cooperation. This can be particularly true of those we perceive as significant social others in our surroundings such as parents, close friends, mentors and teachers explained by Mikulicer, Shaver and Pereg, "... when significant others are unavailable or unresponsive to ones needs, proximity seeking fails to relieve distress, and a sense of attachment security is not attained. As a result, negative representations of self and others are formed." (2003, p.79). The importance of recognizing and responding appropriately to emotional approaches cannot be underestimated in the process of building and maintaining good relationships within a social, cultural or ethnic group (our SDT relatedness).

As we have seen, relatedness in building relationships is seen as a universal need across cultures and groups. However, how is that universal need expressed? The cultures of societies and groups can on one hand be seen as an expression of the idea that "culture is a dynamic organism" (Kubota, 1999, p.9), and that in our age of multiculturalism and massive global information flow individual and group cultural identity is often constructed through not just one identity but multiple and interpretive ones (Hong, Morris, Chiu, Benet-Martinez, 2000), and on the other that any particular cultural identity also has durable characteristics that resonate from the cultural setting. These particular characteristics usually make cultural identities recognizable as unique and distinctive to an outsider on both perceptual and observable levels. As an example, individuals coming from either an interdependent (such as those often found in Asia or Latin America) or independent (e.g. The U.S.A.) orientated culture may adopt quite different behaviors in similar social situations (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). In *Clash! 8 Cultural Conflicts that Make Us Who We Are* the authors describe a range of dissimilarities exhibited by such individuals from different cultures including differences in fundamental views on education, approaches to gender issues, and the workplace (Markus & Conner, 2013). Thus, while all people need to express their need to relate to, and form emotional relationships with others, people may express and cultivate this common universal need in their own particular cultural and ethnic group style.

One way of forming emotional relationships is to look for support or encouragement from others around us. In the research body of SDT, emotional reliance (ER) is an expression of this and is "a motivational construct reflecting the willingness to seek interpersonal support" (Lynch, 2013, p. 301). In other words, ER is to freely look for recognition and acceptance from others around us, thus representing an autonomous process. An environment that allows expression of ER will also facilitate feelings of autonomy. ER and its significance in autonomy support was investigated by SDT researchers (Ryan, La Guardia, Solky-Butzel, Chirkov, Kim, 2005) in a study involving a cross-cultural selection of 4 groups, American, Korean, Turkish, and Russian. The study thus has salience covering a diverse spectrum of ethnic, cultural and social groups. In this cross cultural SDT ER study, it was hypothesized that the willingness to express ER through an active choice of seeking support from others would in reality result in greater well-being and articulate an autonomous process. In fact, the study found that, "the willingness to turn to others for needed emotional supports, or emotional reliance, was associated with greater well-being." (p. 301).

The study concluded:

- a) Emotional reliance seems to be positively related to positive well-being when the decision to seek it is self-motivated and through self-choice.
- b) Gender and culture have an influence on levels of ER, with the effect of gender being more significant.
- c) ER appears to be important across cultures, both those noted for individualistic propensities and those more collectivist in nature.
- d) A willingness to seek support from a person is associated with the proportion to which we perceive that person supports our needs (such as autonomy support).

(Ryan, La Guardia, Solky-Butzel, Chirkov, Kim, 2005)

As we will see in the next section, *amae* can be considered to be an important part of how Japanese form successful relationships and it also reflects (similar to SDT ER) a volitional and autonomous act in reaching out to others for recognition and support.

***Amae* in Japanese Power Relationships as an Expression of ER**

The role of *amae* in Japanese society was comprehensively explored by Takeo Doi in his classic *The Anatomy of Dependence* (1973). Doi describes *amae* as being expressed when individuals “depend upon or presume on another’s benevolence” (Doi, 1962). A more recent description from Yamaguchi (2004) is “*amae* involves the presumption that one’s inappropriate request or behavior is accepted” (p. 30). Yamaguchi explains that *amae* signifies a secure attachment, and may even signal an expression of autonomy, “...with successful *amae*, less powerful people can exert control over the environment without disrupting interpersonal harmony.” (p. 31). In *The Japanese Mind* by Davies and Ikeno, *amae* is described as, “...vital for getting along with others in Japan and is the basis for maintaining harmonious relationships.” (2002, p.17). Further, Miike (2003) in exploring the role of *amae* in Japanese communication considers it to underlie the Japanese communication style, emerging as assertive or non-assertive depending on the extent to which the *amae* relationship is realized between the communicators, also being partly dependent on whether the other, and to what extent, is considered to be part of the in-group or not.

Thus, through *amae*, weaker actors in Japan’s hierarchical societal arrangement are given some access to power (self-expression and a voice) by the indulgence of more powerful actors and in this way interpersonal harmony is enhanced. When *amae* is successfully expressed between individuals in Japanese society, group harmony is facilitated and maintained. We can further speculate that successful articulations of *amae* would lead to greater well-being (in the perception of increased autonomy) just as the successful expression of ER does, and that it is more likely to happen when we feel the other person is supporting our emotional needs.

It should be noted that while *amae* has been written on extensively in Japan, *amae* should not in any way be considered as solely exclusive to Japanese culture. Sugimoto (1999) described a range of Japanese traits, including *amae*, as by no means being unique to the Japanese but as being able to be applied to, and observed in other cultural and ethnic contexts

to different extents. However, from the work of Japanese researchers, *amae* does seem to play a more fundamental and crucial role in relationship building amongst the Japanese than in many other cultures.

Teachers, Students and *Amae* in the Japanese Classroom

In a child's immediate world, their teachers represent significant adult social others. The importance of this relationship can be captured in this description by Kesner in a study examining the quality of child-teacher relationships, "Perhaps there is no other adult from outside the family circle that is more significant in a child's life than his or her teacher." (2000, p. 134). Kesner reminds us that in the modern society organized around school life and with the substantial amounts of time spent with teachers, the potential impact of a teacher as an adult figure of support and encouragement for a child assumes an importance second only to that of the parents. In Japan, the role of teacher takes on a deep and pervasive role in the student's life. Acts outside of school, such as social conduct, which in Western contexts would often be in the domain of parenting, often fall within the responsibility of the educational institution, and particularly the homeroom teacher of the student.

In Japanese classrooms, *amae* is also one of the ways in which students strive to build and express a deep and sincere bond with their teacher. To a teacher from a western background *amae* can often appear to be behavior that is immature, and inappropriate. Many of the language teachers in Japan from a background with western cultural values and communication styles will recognize the following situation, often baffling and frustrating for them. An instructor may ask a Japanese student a relatively simple question, the student hesitates to answer and turns to a classmate and confers with them, in turn yet another student may be conferred with. To the instructor, as precious class time ticks past, it may appear as if the student is unable to assert themselves. However from the viewpoint of *amae* and the ramifications of this, another view of the power relationship able to be seen here is that of the student *asserting themselves* by consulting with a member of their inner circle, their peers and friends. The student expects the teacher to understand and sympathize with the process, and despite his or her superior position of power, to sanction the student assuming temporary control. I have seen on many occasions when I was working as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) Japanese teachers watching this kind of situation play out without any particular emotion. On the other hand, I have spoken with a number of ALTs who expressed strong irritation at this behavior. From the viewpoint of *amae*, we can guess that the Japanese teachers tend to instinctively understand that the situation may represent an expression of *amae*, and consent to this balancing of levels of power in the classroom, while the ALTs expect the students to "get on with it". In English we talk about "building a relationship of trust". When working with Japanese learners this may mean partly the extent to which a teacher can achieve a relationship in which the student feels they are able to articulate the relationship of *amae*. From the discussion so far it can be suggested that when Japanese students feel that *amae* is being fulfilled they will be more likely to be cooperative and attentive in the classroom. Thus, teachers from a western background should be cautious in their responses to student behavior to ensure that they not actually rebuffing attempts by Japanese students to build and express a secure attachment, albeit in a different fashion from what they may expect from their own background. If a western teacher has an understanding

of SDT relatedness and ER, along with autonomy, they will become more able to quickly grasp an explanation of *amae* from someone using these terms.

Discussion

The intent of this exploratory article is to look at how universal SDT principles could be interpreted in the Japanese cultural context, looking at one example of Japanese behavior, *amae*. I have tried to analyze an manifestation (in my opinion) of *amae* in the classroom and then looked at how this behavior could be understood through, and connected to, the SDT concepts of ER and autonomy. By examining cultural behaviors through a universal theory, these behaviors can be somewhat demystified for future teachers in Japan. This will make adjustment to the new culture and the working environment easier and help language teachers understand and accept what can often be on the surface confusing and frustrating classroom behaviors. It will also assist teachers in Japan in understanding how to more quickly develop successful relationships with their students. The author hopes the discussion outlined here will lead to other writers, teachers, and action researchers to consider using the universal application of SDT to look into exploring ways various behaviors in Japan (and perhaps other cultures as well) can be understood within the universal framework of SDT.

As SDT is an organismic theory focused on understanding personal growth, motivation and well-being, we can look forward to the expectation that applying the SDT lens to Japanese cultural behaviors will also lead language teachers in Japan to an understanding of how to better manage their learning contexts to promote well-being and implement improved motivational classroom practices.

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