

Helping Japanese ESL/EFL Learners Overcome Difficulties in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

This paper examines some of the potential difficulties Japanese ESL/EFL speakers experience when conversing across cultures. This paper explores how some of the characteristics researchers have ascribed to the Japanese communication style may influence spoken encounters in English. Considering some of the fundamental issues underpinning cross-cultural misunderstandings, this paper offers foreign EFL/ESL teachers of Japanese students some practical suggestions and activities designed to help their learners achieve more fruitful cross-cultural conversations.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, Misunderstanding, Backchannel, *Wa*, Reticence

Introduction

In my experiences teaching EFL and living in Japan, I have experienced firsthand how culture plays such a vital role in intercultural communication (ICC) and language learning. Following Haslett's (1989: 20-21) definition, culture is defined in broad terms as a 'shared, consensual way of life' which 'provides the shared tacit knowledge that enables members to understand and communicate with each other'. In this way, this paper deals with certain aspects of Japanese culture that may influence Japanese EFL/ESL speakers (JESs) to varying degrees. When I asked seventeen students at my school if they are ever uncomfortable when speaking English to native English speakers (NESs), fifteen of them said that they were. When I asked them why, the most cited reason (fourteen times) was something to the effect that they felt incompetent because they were unsure of how to behave in situations unfamiliar to them. Although many of these learners may have the linguistic competence necessary to communicate, many are uncomfortable and unable to communicate with people from cultures very different from their own. This dilemma provides the impetus for writing this paper.

This paper will be divided into three parts. In the first part, I provide a brief review of some of the research which has studied the sociolinguistic competence of JESs. In the second part, I describe how some of the difficulties JESs experience when speaking English may be due to an instinct to adhere to the Japanese cultural concept *Wa* (harmony) in conversations. Some of the specific areas which researchers have reported to cause misunderstandings in ICC involve the

Japanese tendency to avoid plain and direct statements, an inclination to reticent behavior, and the differing use of backchannels in conversations. Consequently, in the third part of this paper, I offer some suggestions which may help teachers to better prepare Japanese EFL students for ICC.

Part 1: A Review of the Literature

In my review of the research, I address two main questions: (1) what are the main differences between the Japanese communication style from that of NESs, and (2) how can these differences (as they pertain to JESs) be explained? Much of the research centers on particular speech acts and is cross-sectional in design. In an article in which he discusses Japanese learners' failure to acquire sociolinguistic competence in English, Ellis (1991) provides us with a starting point. By drawing on considerable research (Clancy 1990; Graham 1990; Hill 1990; Beebe et al. 1990; Beebe and Takahashi 1989; Wolfson 1989; Tanaka 1988; Locastro 1987; Takahashi and Beebe 1987; Fukushima and Iwata 1985; Wolfson 1983; Loveday 1982; and Barnlund 1974), Ellis (1991: 116) offers the following generalizations of the Japanese communication style as compared to NESs (Australian and American):

1. Japanese are less verbal, more inclined to use silence in intercultural interactions.
2. Japanese are inclined to use more back-channelling devices.
3. Japanese can be more direct in some situations, in particular those where a lower-status person is being addressed, and less direct in others.
4. Japanese may lack the politeness strategies needed to successfully perform face-threatening speech acts such as invitations and requests.
5. Japanese are less explicit in giving reasons for their verbal behavior.
6. Japanese tend to be more formal.
7. Japanese tend to give recognition to status relationships between speakers rather than to level of familiarity. (Ellis 1991: 116)

From this list, it is plain to see that many differences exist between the communications styles of Japanese people and native speakers of English from the west. Several of the differences in Ellis' list are consistent with my own observations of the Japanese communicative style; however, it is imperative that any researcher and/or teacher proceed with extreme caution in arriving at any conclusions and/or generalizations where culture is concerned, so as to not fall into the culturist trap of reducing individuals to less than they are. Clearly, even within cultural parameters, there will be a great deal of individual variation caused by such factors as the speakers' personality, age, the context of the conversation, status of interlocutor, etc. This paper is not meant to simplify the complex dynamics involved in human communication. Rather, it has the minimal goal of raising teachers' consciousness towards potential origins of cross-cultural miscommunication, so as to give them an increased tolerance and acceptance of behaviour that may be different from what they are used to, as well as a better understanding of how they might approach instruction related to these areas.

1.1 Harmony in Japanese Society

One of the common descriptions of the Japanese communication style involves a need to keep conversations harmonious and avoid confrontations. This concept is referred to as *Wa* or *Omoiyari* in Japanese, and like so many other of Japan's cultural concepts, it is especially difficult for Westerners to grasp because it does not have an English equivalent. According to Lebra (1976, referred to in White 1989: 67) and Matsumoto and Boye Lafayette (2000: 193), this is a key concept to understanding Japanese people. In a study in which he used questionnaires to elicit students' views, Barnlund (1974, cited in Ellis 1991: 112) confirms that the participants in his study emphasize the need to keep a conversation pleasant by avoiding disagreement and making concessions to ensure smooth communication.

Loveday (1982: 12) and Hill (1990: 70) report on the Japanese tendency to favor indirect and suggestive comments, rather than direct and plain statements. According to Elwood (2001: 20) and Matsumoto and Boye Lafayette (2000, 23), Japanese do this to avoid hurting someone's feelings, as well as to maintain harmony. Similarly, Matsumoto and Boye Lafayette (2000: 13) contend that Japanese are inclined to silence because they are afraid that their words may hurt someone's feelings. In addition, the Japanese also use backchannelling devices to maintain harmony (Kenna and Lacy 1994: 19). White (1989: 73) and Locastro (1987: 112) report that JESs tend to use backchannelling devices more frequently than NESs, and often feel uncomfortable speaking in English because they are unable to use the appropriate backchannelling devices.

Part 2: Examining some of the Difficulties JESs Experience in ICC

This section attempts to describe how various manifestations of the Japanese culture concept *Wa* can possibly influence intercultural communication in English. These manifestations include a communication style that has sometimes been described by NESs as indirect or ambiguous, reticent, and containing backchannel behaviour that may sometimes be deemed unconventional or awkward in English.

2.1 Ambiguity

There has been much written regarding the Japanese tendency towards favoring vague and subjective statements in their conversations as a way to maintain harmony. This concept is called *Aimai* in Japanese and does not have an equivalent in English. According to Kagawa (1997: 59), Japanese tend to view ambiguous behavior as savvy and intelligent, while in stark contrast, NESs generally view ambiguity as illogical, irrational, and even dishonest or unintelligent. Although Kagawa's (1997) analysis seems to run the risk of falling under the culturist trap described above, it does provide readers with a sense of where miscommunication could possibly occur.

An example of a misunderstanding occurring due to *Aimai* may be shown in my conversation with a proficient JES (Mr. X) several years ago. When Mr. X said he did not like big cities, I asked him *Why?* I could see by the stressed look on Mr. X's face that this question made

him uncomfortable. Pausing for several anxious moments before speaking, Mr. X went on to discuss his aspirations of visiting many large cities in the world. While I wanted to ask him why he wanted to visit large cities when he said earlier that he did not like large cities, I chose not to because of what happened the last time I asked him to explain his answer. Instead, I withdrew from the conversation feeling bewildered. I have since learned that some JESs, when confronted with the *Why* question, may become ambiguous if they feel that their interlocutor is disagreeing with them (Kagawa 1997: 71).

2.2 Silence is Golden

Much has been written about the Japanese EFL learners' disposition towards taciturn behavior (Greer 2000; Townsend and Danling 1998; Anderson 1993; Nozaki 1993; Ellis 1991). There seems to be two primary reasons for this. First, it appears that Japanese culture has a greater acceptance of silence as it is generally considered an admirable trait in Japanese society (Townsend and Danling 1998; Kenna and Lacy 1994). This can be attested to by the widely acclaimed Japanese proverb *chinmoku wa kin nari* (silence is golden), which conveys a Japanese tendency to be suspicious of words because words have the power to hurt people's feelings.

Second, the use of silence by JESs in conversations is sometimes the result of rule-conflict in English and Japanese conversations. That is, JESs, when confronted with questions which they cannot answer (for any number of reasons) may resort to silence as a face-saving measure. They do this because saying *I don't know X* does not connote the same things to a Japanese person that it does to a NES. Noguchi (1987: 22) provides us with a useful example when he describes a common scenario of a Japanese speaker (called Mr. Suzuki) who is proficient in English and some of his friends engaged in a conversation with a visiting American businessman (called Mr. Jones) who speaks no Japanese. During the conversation, Mr. Jones asks Mr. Suzuki what his occupation is and Mr. Suzuki discovers that he cannot answer the questions because he does not remember the words *quality control*. Instead of answering *I don't know X* or *I don't know how to say X*, a long silence ensues with everyone growing more uncomfortable with every passing moment until Mr. Jones changes the topic. Noguchi (1987) describes the possible interplay in the mind process of Mr. Suzuki:

From his Japanese language experience, he knows the conversational rule that if an appropriate question is addressed to him, he must provide an appropriate answer in the next speaking turn. Yet, try as he might, he can not (sic) recollect the needed English words. At the same time, he realizes that he cannot admit this lapse of memory in front of the group, for he fears his Japanese friends and Mr. Jones may belittle his intelligence or, perhaps, even begin to think that he really does no work at all on his job. Thus, the face-protecting rule takes effect on Mr. Suzuki. (Noguchi 1987: 22)

This example seems to indicate that, in Japanese, *I don't know X* often presupposes that the speaker lacks knowledge of X because of a lack of intelligence or lack of interest in X.

In contrast, the expression *I don't know X* in English would seem to carry the presupposition

that the speaker lacks knowledge of X but does not presuppose that the speaker lacks the intelligence to acquire knowledge of X. Further, the expression is neutral with regards to the speaker's interest in X as a topic. The dynamics of rule-conflict in English and Japanese conversations leading to uncomfortable silences as shown by the example above are common in EFL teachers' everyday interactions with their Japanese learners. While this paper focuses on JESs, it is important to note that these types of miscommunications and misunderstandings are not limited to this context, and can even occur in conversations between NESs.

2.3 Backchannel Functions across Cultures

The functions of backchannels are somewhat different in Japanese and English. According to White (1989: 59), Locastro (1987), Blundell et al. (1986: 222), and Yngve (1970: 574), backchannels in English such as *Mmm*, *Yeah*, and *Uh huh*, as well as non-verbal backchannels such as *head nods* are indications that the listener agrees with what the speaker is saying and that the speaker may continue his speaking turn. Comparatively, Schegloff (1982: 80), Locastro (1987: 105), and White (1989: 63) report that backchannels by Japanese people (or *Aizuchi* as it is referred to in Japanese) are not only used to confirm agreement, but have a more important function of showing empathy to the primary speaker. Japanese EFL speakers, in an effort to be polite, have been shown to be more likely to use backchannels even if they disagree with or cannot understand their interlocutor (Cutrone 2005). Furthermore, as indicated above, Japanese speakers tend to use frequent backchannels because it is considered polite in Japanese culture to actively show interest in what their interlocutor is saying (White 1989; Locastro 1987).

Concerning the functional differences in backchannels across cultures, there are several situations in which miscommunication could occur. For instance, Blanche (1987) and Cutrone (2005) have shown that misunderstandings due to differing uses of backchannels across cultures can have a detrimental effect on the EFL classroom in Japan. In a commonly described scenario, native English speaking teachers sometimes have reported misinterpreting students' nods coupled with vocalizations of *Yes* and *Mhm* at seemingly appropriate times as displays of understanding, rather than simply polite expressions of attending. When teachers discover much later on that students have not understood them, they have reported feeling perplexed and/or even slightly annoyed by what they perceive to be mixed signals, or in extreme cases, deceptive messages, resulting in the squandering of valuable class time.

Sometimes these misunderstandings can have dire consequences as was the case in the Hitachi-Mitsubishi trial (The Japan Times 1983). One of the defendants in the case, Mr. Ishida of Mitsubishi claimed that he had not agreed with the FBI undercover agents when they told him he had to steal some information/documents. His defense counselor argued that Mr. Ishida's responses of *Yeah* and *Uhuh* were not to show agreement, but rather to indicate he was listening and to allow the other person to continue. Another potential misunderstanding involving backchannels in ICC is the more frequent use of backchannels by JESs. JESs, consistent with their native linguistic environs, tend to backchannel three to four times more than NESs, and many of these backchannels are sent while their interlocutor is engaged in a primary speaking

turn at talk creating simultaneous speech (Cutrone 2005; Maynard 1997; White 1989). While the JESs frequent use of backchannels are, by all accounts, intended to show support and interest in the conversation, it is conceivable that some NESs may take such interjections as a sign of the listener's impatience and demand for a quick completion of the statement (Cutrone 2005; White 1989).

Part 3: Strategies for Teaching Culture in ELT

In an attempt to relate the discussion above to the language classroom, this part considers pedagogical strategies. First, Section 3.1 deals with the sensitive nature of addressing cultural issues in the language classroom. Subsequently, in Section 3.2, practical suggestions and activities to assist teachers are provided.

3.1 How to Approach the Teaching of Culture in EFL Classrooms

(i) Exercise Caution When Teaching Culture in ELT

I begin my recommendations section of this paper with some ideas on how to approach the teaching of culture in EFL classrooms. Native English speaking teacher's pedagogical attempts to modify the cognitive and affective behavior of their students with a view toward making their students bicultural are often met with reluctance by their students (Alpetkin and Alptekin 1984; Brumfit 1980). Kramsch (1998: 65) explains that this may be due to the strong and inextricable link between culture and identity. People forge their identities and beliefs through their culture; hence, any attempts by teachers to disrupt this relationship may be met with resistance. L2 learners may feel that by embracing the target culture, they are in effect renouncing their own culture (Ellis 1994: 234).

Due to these complexities, EFL teachers have to exercise great caution when teaching culture in Japan or any other country for that matter. They would be well served in not pushing or forcing their students to conform to the target culture if they do not want to. Moreover, teachers would also be well served to remember that English is representative of many different countries and cultures; therefore, teachers should be aware of their own *cultural baggage* and not impose their cultural values on their students. In Japan, as there is evidence showing that Japanese people may be quieter than other cultures by nature (Zimbardo 1977, referred to in Doyon 2000), there is always the danger of Westerners trying to force their students to be more outspoken. Teachers would be well advised to extend their own tolerance of silence, and not show annoyance when students do not speak as this will only exacerbate the problem by adding to the students' apprehension. Besides creating a comfortable atmosphere and offering positive encouragement, there are only a limited number of things that teachers can do to help students overcome silence when they do not know the cause of the silence. However, in cases like the one Mr. Suzuki experienced where he did not know what to say in a particular situation, there are some things, as we will discuss below, that teachers can do to help their students.

(ii) The Failings of EFL Teachers

In some cases, foreign EFL teachers in Japan may not have the impetus to affiliate with their hosts linguistically and culturally. This may be because they are conscious of the temporary nature of their sojourn to Japan, and also because Japanese language will unlikely be useful to them when they return home. EFL teachers would be well advised to show interest and learn as much as they can about their students' language and culture. This would accomplish two goals. First, it would facilitate ICC in the language classroom, and second it would offer students a successful example of acculturation and thus provide encouragement for L2 learners in acculturating to the target culture.

3.2 Practical Suggestions

(i) Using Video Techniques

In this subsection, some practical suggestions that may help Japanese EFL learners become more aware of these issues affecting IC. Due to the complex nature of these areas, activities designed with them in mind may best be suited to intermediate and advanced level students. One of the ways which EFL teachers can improve their learners' English in these areas is by using video techniques (Cullen 2000; Murphy and Woo 1998). For instance, a teacher can raise learners' awareness by having students watch videos and observe particular features. Teachers can then engage their students in discussions comparing how the observed features are used differently in Japanese and English. Video techniques can also serve as a means for students to self-evaluate (Murphy and Woo 1998). This has two main benefits. First, students and teachers can pinpoint areas to be worked on by going over the students' videotaped performance several times and comparing it to models of the target language, and second, students are able to see themselves improving in the target language.

(ii) Explaining Oneself More Clearly

While using video techniques is also useful in helping students explain themselves more clearly, students can practice this in any activity in which they disagree and have to persuade each other into agreeing with their opinion (such as ranking and rating activities). One of the activities I use is called *Time Capsule* (Nolasco and Arthur 1987: 99). For this activity, I explain to students that they must choose five objects to be buried in a time capsule, which will represent everyday life today when it is opened in five hundred years time. Once the students have done that, I divide them into pairs, then fours, and then eights (depending on the size of the class). At each stage they should reach a consensus about which five items should be included in the time capsule. By making them reach a consensus each time, students are encouraged to justify and explain their choices explicitly in efforts to persuade others to agree with them.

(iii) Overcoming Problems with Silence

As I alluded to above, there are some situations that a teacher can help learners overcome problems with silence. These situations are mainly when the students do not speak because they do not know what to say. I believe that a good way to prevent communication breakdown is to teach conversational repair strategies from the start (see appendices, part 1). Students, upon using

phrases like *Pardon me, I don't know, and What does X mean?* naturally in the classroom, subsequently realize for themselves that these repair strategies are beneficial in allowing the conversation to resume with no harm done (or no face lost to anyone).

(iii) Backchannels

As I described in Section 2.3, Japanese English speakers tend to use backchannels differently than native speakers of English. In most cases, they are not consciously aware of this, and it may need to be brought to their attention. One of the ways I demonstrate this is through a role-play with another teacher or a dialogue focusing on this feature. I give my students a list of expressions and actions, which feature backchannels and other paralinguistic devices and ask them to check which ones they heard (see appendices, part 2). Once they have completed this we discuss their answers and the possible functions of these devices.

Another issue, which needs to be addressed concerning backchannels, is that JESs often use them when they do not understand or when they disagree with their interlocutor. In order to assist our learners in communicating more effectively, we need to help them develop alternative strategies in these situations such as *how to interrupt, how to disagree, and how to ask for help*. Some of the alternative *conversational repair phrases*, which can be pointed out to students, are included on the help sheet in the appendices (part 1).

Conclusion

Clearly, the relationship between English language and Japanese culture is complex and multifaceted and cannot be sufficiently outlined and described in a paper of this size. In my discussion, I have focused mainly on the skill of speaking in ICC, and, in particular, how JESs may experience difficulties due to their predisposition to adhere to the Japanese cultural concept *Wa*. Attempting to describe the effects of *Wa* on JESs is also a broad and diverse task, and it too is an issue worthy of more extensive investigation. In my paper, I ascertained three areas from the research, as well as from my own personal observations which seemed to indicate how *Wa* may affect JESs. These areas include the Japanese tendency to avoid direct and plain statements, their inclination to silence, and the different way they use backchannels in conversation. I have provided explanations and examples to support my claims and illustrate potential pitfalls in ICC. I feel the information presented in this paper demonstrates the need for teaching these aspects of culture to JESs. With this in mind, I have included some suggestions and activities that I hope will help EFL teachers in Japan raise their learners' awareness regarding some of the cultural differences that can exist in ICC, as well as make them feel more comfortable when they are speaking to NESs. However, activities alone are not the answer. More importantly, teachers have to work to create an atmosphere in which learners feel comfortable and uninhibited when they take that great leap into the unknown.

Appendices

Part 1

Help Sheet

Finding out about meaning

What does _____ mean?

What's another word for _____?

What's the opposite of _____?

What's the difference between _____ and _____?

Does _____ mean _____?

Finding out about appropriateness

What should I say when _____?

When can say _____?

In what situation could I _____?

Asking someone to repeat something

Could you repeat that more slowly please?

I beg your pardon.

Pardon me.

Saying you don't know

I'm sorry I don't know.

I'm not sure.

I have no idea.

Saying You don't Understand

I can't understand. (Could you give me an example?)

I'm not sure what you mean.

I'm not quite with you.

Asking about Pronunciation

How do you say _____ (in English)?

How do you pronounce _____?

Asking for the written form

Could you write _____ down please?

How do you spell _____ please?

Finding about the correctness

Is it correct to say _____?

Can I say _____?

Is this sentence correct: _____?

Which sentence is correct _____ or _____?

Giving yourself time to think

Just a moment please.

May I think about it for a moment.

Part 2

Listen to the conversation. Please mark the actions/expressions you see/hear whenever you see/hear them in the conversation. N.B. Actions shown in (brackets).

(Nod)

Really?

Does he?

I'm not really sure about that.

Yeah.

(Shakes his head)

Uh huh.

That's nice.

Do you really think so?

Is it?

Mmmm.

I see.

But what about Bob?

How interesting.

Is that right?

Listen to the conversation again and mark off which expressions encourage the speakers to continue speaking. Please consider what the other expressions do to the conversation.

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