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Brian Quinn

One of the major functions of language is to allow people to communicate with each other. This is true of all languages and all cultures. Even Japanese speakers use their own language to communicate among each other. However, for a Japanese speaker using his own native language to speak to another Japanese, the customs and conventions of speech communication are usually clear and well understood by both parties. As a result, due to the modernization of Japan, its comprehensive education system and the establishment of a standardized language, primarily through the popularity of the language used by the mass media, the difficulties of communicating successfully among two parties is greatly diminished. Nevertheless, some communication problems still exist even among Japanese speakers due to generational differences, regional differences and situational differences. Such problems are greatly magnified when communication is attempted across cultures and when using a different language. In addition to being a means of communication, language also serves a second important function. Language provides people with a sense of identity. This sense of identity plays an extremely important role when trying to communicate with another person. If an individual feels secure in his identity, then communication can be carried out smoothly. On the other hand, if a person feels lost or insecure regarding his sense of identity, then communication will often become difficult and ineffective. As a result, even when speaking English, the generally accepted international language of both Asia and the world, it is essential that Japanese university students have a strong and secure sense of identity when trying to communicate across cultures. Japanese students need to feel comfortable when using English, not necessarily as a fluent speaker but as a Japanese who is able to maintain his sense of culture and identity while at the same time communicating in English.

In the 1970s the tendency for English language teaching (ELT) was to try and teach language that was neutral and not culturally specific but an international language medium. Pulverness says: "English was seen as a means of communication which should not be bound to culturally-specific conditions of use, but should be easily transferable to any cultural setting. Authenticity was a key quality, but only insofar as

it provided reliable models of language in use. Content was important as a source of motivation, but it was seen as equally important to avoid material which might be regarded as 'culture bound'. Throughout the 1970s and much of the 1980s, syllabus design and materials writing were driven by needs analysis, and culture was subordinated to performance objectives". (Pulverness, p. 7) In contrast to the 1970s and 1980s, culture has recently been found to play an important role English and the 1990s saw an explosion of culturally specific teaching materials. Language and content is now generally more culture specific. As a result, Japanese language learners can focus a lot more on the type of English that they would like to study. In addition, Japanese language learners can get more cultural background information about the target culture of a native speaker before meeting them in person.

When communicating across cultures it is important to also carefully consider the culture and circumstances of the other individual in order to make communication as successful as possible. As a result, when native English speakers use English to communicate with a non-native English speaker, they will slow down their speed, soften their accent and avoid idioms and colloquial phrases to make sure that they can be understood. The same phenomenon occurs among native English speakers as well. When Australians speak with Americans they will not sound as Australian as they do when they are home in Australia. Kirkpatrick notes: "In the case of Australian English, there are three speech styles. These are called 'cultivated', 'general' and 'broad'. The cultivated and general styles are used for international communication, while the broad style is used for communicating with close friends and fellow Australians and represents a marker of Australian identity. This explains why international students coming to Australia to study may find that, when their Australian classmates are talking to each other, they are very difficult to understand." (Kirkpatrick, pp. 14-15) Therefore, Japanese students should not worry that their English may not be sufficiently colloquial since, as a 'lingua franca', English should become a neutral medium for communication while Japanese students should be able to confidently maintain their identity as Japanese. The main goal for Japanese learners of English should be to achieve a level competence that allows them to function in English while not requiring native fluency. Corbett describes this objective as follows: "The ultimate goal of an intercultural approach to language education is not so much 'native speaker competence' but rather 'intercultural communicative competence'. Intercultural communicative competence includes the ability to understand the language and behavior of the target community, and explain it to members of the 'home' community ---and vice versa. In other words, an intercultural approach trains learners to be

'diplomats', able to view different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding. This aim effectively displaces the long-standing, if seldom achieved, objective of teaching learners to attain 'native speaker proficiency'. Obviously, one key goal of an intercultural approach remains language development and improvement; however, this goal is wedded to the equally important aim of intercultural understanding and mediation." (Corbett, p. 2). Therefore, Japanese learners should not worry too much about attaining native speaker level fluency and instead just try to become comfortable with using English in their own way and on their own terms.

Numerous Japanese have the impression that possessing good communication skills is a type of inborn talent that some people have while others do not. They frequently assume that the ability to communicate well in various situations depends entirely on an individual's unique personality. In fact, however, good communication skills can be learned and taught in school. Unfortunately, the teaching of good communication skills has been almost completely ignored by the traditional Japanese education system. As a result, the majority of Japanese university students are not only poor communicators in English but are often extremely poor communicators in Japanese as well. Most Japanese tend to believe that the accumulation of vast quantities of knowledge is the best foundation for young students. After graduating from the university, such students are thereafter expected to gradually learn how to become effective communicators by watching and learning from their seniors and superiors at work. In contrast, most Western societies actively teach a wide range of speech communication skills on both the secondary and tertiary educational levels.

The challenge facing teaching of English as a Foreign Language at Japanese universities is therefore far more complicated than when teaching English to Germans, Frenchmen or Italians. In addition to teaching the basic English skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, Japanese students need extensive training in order to achieve "communicative competence". Foreman-Takano describes this essential skill as follows: "Since human communication involves shared meaning, it is divided into senders and receivers of messages. To be competent communicators, it is important for us to realize the role of feedback in giving us useful clues to our audience's moods and reactions, so that we can adapt our messages accordingly. To be successful at sending messages, we must be skilled also at receiving and acting on the feedback of our communication partners. Being able to maintain good relationships through appropriate communication of messages is known as communicative competence" (Foreman-Takano, pp. 2-3). Therefore, in order to help Japanese students become more effective communicators in English, we have to first help them understand how

communication works in any language. As a result, a standard introductory course in Speech Communication should be established in all English departments at Japanese universities to help students learn both the theory and practice of communication which will greatly help them to improve both their communication across cultures as well as their own interpersonal relationships in Japan.

Making Intercultural Encounters Successful

With the increasing trend towards globalization in business, politics, academics and entertainment, the opportunities for Japanese to encounter non-Japanese are steadily increasing. Whether such meetings are formal or informal, it is important to make such exchanges as successful as possible. Regardless of a person's English ability, one of the most important principles when trying to successfully communicate with a person from another culture is succinctly stated by Sabath as follows: "Make the individual with whom you're dealing with feel as though he or she were the most important person in the world." (Sabath, p. 8) As Sabath suggests, if you can empathize with the person you are trying to communicate with and do everything possible to make that individual feel comfortable and important, then you will have a much better chance of communicating successfully. Of course, it is much easier said than done and such skills do indeed need practice. Good listening skills are essential to good communication since you have to be able to continually listen to your conversation partner in order to follow his conversation cues and focus on his topics of discussion. However, if you can focus your energy on your partner's conversation and make his comments seem highly interesting to you, then you will have an excellent chance to communicate well together.

Despite the popular belief that a good vocabulary and sufficient listening and speaking skills are enough for a person to converse successfully across cultures when using English, the greatest barrier to successful communication remains the barrier created by culture. Hall notes: "Each culture has a hidden code of behavior that can rarely be understood without a code breaker. Even though every culture is experienced personally—indeed, few individuals see its commonality—it is nonetheless a shared system. Members of a common culture not only share information, they share methods of coding, storing, and retrieving that information. Some 80 to 90 percent of the significant features of a culture are reflected in its nonverbal messages. These are usually taken for granted and transmitted unconsciously. Nonverbal messages are highly situational in character. Furthermore, The meanings of such messages are

unique to each culture and often are charged with emotion.” (Hall, p. xvii) As Hall clearly describes, it is essential to “be all ears” when trying to communicate across cultures and to not only hear everything that is said but to always feel and try and pick up as many of the nonverbal messages as possible. Such nonverbal communication can often only be deciphered later with the help of a ‘code breaker’ or another native speaker of the target language.

First of All, Know Thyself

I am often asked my Japanese students who are preparing to study overseas in the USA, Europe or Australia about what books, dictionaries and or other essential materials that they should bring with them during their study program. They are almost always shocked and surprised when I tell them that they will not really need grammar books or even many dictionaries. I, instead, tell them that they will need a few good books on Japan, especially regarding Japanese culture, history, politics and traditions. I then suggest that the best books on these subjects to take along are bilingual books in which the left page is written in English and the right page is written in Japanese. Luckily, a large number of excellent bilingual books have been published in Japan over the past 10 years on Japanese culture and traditions. The reason that such books are vital to a Japanese student’s ‘intercultural competence’ is that as soon as a Japanese student arrives in the USA or England, they will be bombarded on almost a daily basis with numerous questions about Japan’s political system, history, traditions and popular culture. The easiest topics to converse about will, of course, be to describe their favorite Japanese singers or actors in the entertainment world. However, most young Japanese are quite shocked when they realize that they have great trouble explaining the political situation in Japan, explaining recent history or even describing daily life for a Japanese family in a contrastive manner in regard to the situation they encounter abroad.

Therefore, to be truly competent in ‘international English’, Japanese students must be able to describe their own culture in simple and easy to understand terminology. In fact, numerous Americans are quite fascinated with Japanese culture and history. As a result, most Americans will expect Japanese students to be able to explain many things about Japanese modern and ancient society. In addition, Japanese students should also be prepared to, on occasion, to even give brief lectures at elementary schools or civic meetings since a large number of Americans are highly interested in Japanese society. It can be said, with no exaggeration whatsoever, that first and foremost, Japanese students who go abroad to study English tend to learn more about Japan during their

stay than about the foreign country that they are staying in because they have to continually explain and teach English speakers about their own culture and traditions. In this way, to be a successful communicator of 'international English' a Japanese individual must be an excellent Ambassador of Japan. English speakers will greatly respect and admire a person who can clearly and concisely explain their culture to them. Sharing knowledge about Japan with others is also a wonderful way to make new friends when visiting a foreign country.

Be Sensitive to Different Varieties of English

When traveling around Asia, Japanese businessmen quickly grasp that English has several varieties depending on the country. Generally speaking, English, of course, has two main branches, namely American and British English. Due to various historical factors and influences, modern Japan tends to use the American variant while numerous other Asian countries tend to use the British variant, such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Malasia and India. Even Australians and New Zealanders tend to use a more British variant. As a result of this situation, it is important for young Japanese to be sensitive to this situation and thus be flexible in their English usage. Many nations prefer their own English style to American English and some people actually dislike people who speak with an American accent since American English is often associated with an image of American Imperialism and world domination regarding business, politics and entertainment. It is therefore highly desirable to cultivate a type of neutral English accent and style that can be used anywhere without worry. It is extremely important to avoid using overly Americanized English when traveling and doing business with Asians in order to avoid any negative feelings that might be generated due to political and emotional feelings. In addition, Japanese should also avoid lumping all foreigners together as 'Americans' since a large number of Europeans, Australians and even Canadians will feel insulted if you assume they are Americans without first asking their identities.

Since English is no longer a colonial language in Asian and Africa, it has indeed become a part of each country where it is used. It has become the way that most Asians communicate with on another. Japanese should therefore not worry about their own accent or even be afraid of using 'Japanese-English' since all Asian countries have their own traditions and variations regarding the use of English. All such variants of English should be given equal respect to ensure that successful communication takes place.

Politeness

It is always important to be polite to create a positive atmosphere for successful communication. Unfortunately, what is polite in one culture may be impolite in another.

Japan has strict traditions regarding the use of names and titles when people address one another. In addition, seniority also plays a big role in how people are addressed in Japan depending on whether one's position or status is above or below a person's counterpart. In contrast, Americans tend to be extremely informal, even in situations that call for some formality in the Japanese context. Japanese must therefore be flexible in their approach with Americans. It is generally better to do things the American way since Americans are less sensitive to such cultural differences than most Europeans, for example, due to America's monolingual and monocultural upbringing. As a result, Japanese should expect to be called by their first names and to address most Americans by their first names as well. It is considered to be a cultural fauxpas to continue using a person's last name and title (i.e. Mr. Smith) after having already once been told to: "Call me Bob!". Despite the cultural differences, it is always better for Japanese to err on the side of politeness than to be too informal.

It is therefore important that Japanese be more sensitive to American culture than the Americans are to Japanese culture and traditions since Americans tend to be far less sensitive to cultural differences. However, it is best to inform an American counterpart of some of these basic differences when communicating in Japan on Japanese soil, since the customs of the home culture should take precedence. Kirkpatrick echoes this sentiment: "So it is not unusual for people from one culture to feel uncomfortable when having to operate in another. This helps explain why, in multinational firms in Japan where English is the language of communication, people still address their superiors as 'last name + san', even when they are speaking in English." (Kirkpatrick, p. 27) Therefore, when communicating in English it is important to both be as polite as possible while still maintaining your own set of standards for politeness in order to not lose your own cultural bearings. You will rarely offend someone by being too polite or too reserved, however, being too relaxed and informal can result in some very unpleasant experiences. In this regard, Japanese have many advantages over Americans when trying to communicate interculturally. In contrast to what most Japanese assume, Japanese are indeed generally 'more international' than most Americans. Some excellent examples of Japan's international perspective is the fact that every year 23 or 24 of the top 25 most popular movies shown at movie theaters in Japan are American movies. On the other hand, in the USA every year 24 or 25 of the top 25 movies are American movies, with an occasional

British movie making the list. In addition, there are numerous broadcasts of US and European sporting events on TV in Japan. Regarding international news, Japan's satellite station (BS 1) shows English and European news programs throughout the day broadcast in their native languages while the other satellite stations (BS 2) shows 2 or 3 English or European movies daily in the original language with subtitles. As a result of such exposure, the average Japanese has extensive knowledge of both American and Western culture and society while the typical American knows next to nothing about Asia and Europe.

For these above reasons, Japanese students have no need whatsoever to have any type of inferiority complex when communicating with Americans in less than fluent English. A general level of competence is usually more than enough to become a good intercultural communicator.

Commands Across Cultures

One mistake that many Asians tend to make in using English is in the way that they form commands and requests. In languages such as Chinese and Korean, commands can often be quite direct. When such commands are directly translated into English the results can be both shocking and quite insulting to native English speakers. As a result,

Korean or Chinese policemen tend to say such things to tourists as: "Open that bag!" or "Show me your ticket!" In contrast, native Americans would always try to make such requests in a more indirect way. Kirkpatrick explains: "One reason that commands are rare in Australian and certain other varieties of English is that people respect the autonomy and independence of other people. This means that they feel that they cannot speak to them as though they were ordering them about. Instead they use question-like forms as though they were giving the other person the choice to make a decision. A good example of this is a father at the dining table who wanted his young son to pass him the salt might say 'Could you pass the salt, please?', or 'Pass the salt, please', but never just 'Pass the salt'. (Kirkpatrick, p.38) Therefore, most English speaking nations tend to be quite indirect about making commands and requests and Japanese students of English must be extremely careful when making requests or commands in English. India and Pakistan, however, are quite different in this regard, most likely since they are both Asian countries and use English as its common but not quite native language.

Talking Across or within Cultures

When Japanese students converse in English numerous misunderstandings may arise due to differences in nuances or impressions. There are countless stories of how Japanese students broke up with American lovers over extremely minor cultural mistakes which eventually led to such couples breaking up. For example, an American male called a Japanese foreign student that he had been friendly with on the phone on a Friday night and invited her to go see a movie and then have pizza afterwards. The Japanese female student said: "No!" followed by a long silence. The boy said good-bye and never called her again. What the Japanese student meant to say was that she could not go tonight because she was going to a class party with her professor. The harsh "No!" followed by silence indicated to the boy that she did not like him and thus he never asked her out again. The Japanese student should have said: "Gee, I'd love to go, but my French class is having a wine party at our professor's house. I'm really sorry. How about going tomorrow or another night?" It is very easy to make such cultural mistakes when conversing in English. Japanese students should thus be careful to try and explain things more clearly in English than they would normally do in Japanese. Japanese communication traditions tend to infer many things that the listener is expected to understand based on the context of the situation. In contrast, America is a nation of immigrants and since Americans are continually talking with people from various cultures and backgrounds, they tend to explain things in detail to avoid confusion or, even worse, to prevent people from jumping to conclusions (often the wrong ones). In addition, in the above "correct" version of the telephone conversation, please note that the Japanese girl has actually made a counter proposal to have the date either tomorrow or another day. This is commonly done in the USA. In contrast, in many Asian societies it may be considered too forward for a girl to ask the boy out in such a manner. Such nuances must be mastered in order to avoid fatal errors which could result in the breakup of friendships or even romance.

Appropriate Topics

Both Japan and America have their own traditions for small talk among acquaintances but Japanese students must be careful to avoid certain topics that are considered to be social taboos in the USA. As a matter of fact, Japanese tend to ask too many personal questions when they meet a Westerner for the first time. The following questions should never, under any circumstances, be asked of an American for example:

1. How old are you? (you may only ask this of children up to about age 12)
2. How much do you weigh?

3. What is your marital status? (too many divorces...a messy topic)
4. Do you have any children? (see question #3)
5. What is your sexual preference? (I was asked this question regularly by numerous Japanese until I was married)
6. What is your salary?

Interestingly, many of these above questions are not considered impolite in Japan. On the contrary, asking such questions shows that person's interest in getting to know you better. The safest types of small talk are usually about sports, entertainment, weather or travel. Therefore, it is good to prepare beforehand about such topics in order to safely converse with your American counterpart.

Language and Sport

Sports are very popular in Japan, The USA, England and Australia, however, there are certain subtle differences regarding sports and communicating in English. Japan is crazy about Baseball, sumo and soccer. America loves baseball, football and basketball. English loves football (American English = soccer) cricket and rugby. Sports are a great topic of conversation when meeting people for the first time. It is best not to mention your favorite athletes since Western sports fans are extremely loyal and sometimes emotional about teams and athletes they love and hate. Therefore, a Japanese female student should never blurt out: "I love Beckham and Manchester United!" to an Englishman because the person she is talking to may be an avid Arsenal fan and loathe both Beckham and Manchester United with a passion. It may even be difficult to recover from such a situation if the Englishman feels insulted by your comments. Therefore, try to always be neutral about sports and athletes. Japanese students should feel free to express their favorite sports and favorite athletes in Japan, however, it is always best to ask your Western counterpart extensively about their favorite sport, favorite athletes and favorite teams in detail before commenting on how wonderful Barry Bonds is, for example, since the American you are talking to may hate Barry Bonds and then go on to explain why for the next 15 minutes.

Another problem with sports and English is the tendency for Americans and Englishmen to use countless idiomatic phrases based on sports. For a example some common American sports related idioms are: "I really hit a home run on that deal!" (I met all of my wildest expectations regarding the deal), "I couldn't get to first base regarding my proposal." (I could not even get the chance to present my proposal), "I gave him a ball park figure for our estimate." (I made a very rough estimate) , or British English: "That's just not cricket!" (That is just not fair). When Japanese students

encounter such idiomatic phrases, they should not hesitate to ask for clarification and most Westerners actually enjoy explaining such idioms based on their specific sports culture and traditions.

Studying Abroad

An increasing number of Japanese university students are studying abroad in the USA, England and Australia every year. In addition, many Japanese universities are dramatically expanding student exchange programs with Western universities. Some Japanese students go overseas for their entire degree (4 or 5 years) while others go for one or two semesters as part of their degree requirements at their Japanese university. Such students face many challenges and difficulties. The problems that such students face generally fall into three categories, namely: social, cultural and linguistic.

The most obvious social problem is usually associated with a lack of friends when first starting to reside in their new country. When living in a dormitory and taking classes with Americans, for example, it is often difficult to make friends with any local people for the first few months. This problem is compounded by the fact that most foreign students have left their close friends behind in Japan, thus resulting in a strong sense of loneliness. This problem is usually easily solved when one or 2 good friends are found but until that time it can be very rough going for most Japanese students.

Numerous cultural problems also exist for Japanese students. The greatest cultural problem is of course food and the local diet. Americans tend to eat greasy and heavy food for lunch while Japanese like to eat rice or noodles for lunch. The food problem tends to be extremely difficult for Japanese males but less so for Japanese females. In fact, many Japanese male exchange students tend to lose weight while living in the USA for 1 year. In contrast, most Japanese girls gain weight during their one year stay (as much as 4 or 5 kilograms in one year!).

These above social and cultural problems can all be magnified if the student does not have a good enough command of the English. In addition to English itself, the way students "discuss" in class can be a cause for great stress for Japanese students since it is very difficult to know how and when to speak out during seminars and discussion based lectures. Even though a student's English ability may dramatically improve during the one year period in the USA it usually takes 2 or 3 years to learn how to discuss and/or debate on equal footing with American classmates.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of Japanese students who study abroad in the USA or England for 1 year indeed return to Japan as highly competent intercultural

communicators. They return with increased confidence in not only their linguistic ability but in their thinking and social skills as well. Kirkpatrick notes: "Despite these initial difficulties, the great majority of international students really enjoy and benefit from their time overseas. They are also valuable 'commodities' in today's globalizing world. Most employers are interested in people who speak more than one language and who have lived successfully in more than one culture. (Kirkpatrick, p. 81) Therefore, Japanese universities should greatly increase their efforts to enable more students to study abroad in the USA, England and Australia for at least 1 year on exchange programs. More than anything else, these programs offer the key to making Japanese university students better intercultural communicators.

Presently, the largest barrier to preventing more Japanese students from studying abroad is the almost universal requirement that to be accepted for such 1 year abroad programs, students must attain at least a score of 550 on the TOEFL paper based test (213 on the computer based test). Unfortunately, due to the grammar/translation methods used in all junior and senior high schools in Japan, less than 5% of Japanese students can achieve such a qualifying score. Universities must greatly increase their support of TOEFL preparation courses while also changing their own entrance examinations to closely reflect the test taking skills required to obtain a good TOEFL score. One simple solution to this problem would be for all Japanese universities to make an official TOEFL score a mandatory requirement for all university applicants, in addition to the regular university entrance exam. Each university could choose their own target scores for incoming freshmen such as 450, 470, 500 or even 520. If all Japanese high school students included TOEFL test preparation into their present curriculum then within 5 or 10 years the number of Japanese students who could obtain a score of 550 on the TOEFL exam would dramatically increase to as high as 50% of all university students. Making TOEFL scores a mandatory requirement of all university applicants would lead to a revolutionizing of Japanese English education and result in a sharp increase in the number of Japanese students studying abroad and later returning as competent intercultural communicators.

Conclusion

Japan is the leading industrial nation in Asia. It is both the cultural and economic leader of Asia today. Japan has made tremendous strides both socially and culturally since the end of World War II. Today every person in Japan studies English for at least 6 years while all who continue on to higher education study English for another 2 to 4 years.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of Japanese university students are poor intercultural communicators both linguistically and intellectually. It is essential that Japan continue to develop as an economic and social leader of Asia in the 21st Century. However, in order to continue to improve both economically and socially, Japan will have to look outward to America, Europe and other Asian countries and also play a bigger role in international affairs. To successfully meet the growing needs of Japanese society in the 21st Century, Japan needs a new generation of young people who are excellent intercultural communicators with a high degree of competence in discussing all kinds of subjects in the international arena of ideas. Japan needs students who are more flexible in their thinking, have more thorough knowledge of world affairs and who are not afraid to discuss, debate and challenge westerners on any topic.

To raise such a generation of “interculturally competent” students, Japan will have to reevaluate its present English education system on every level and not be afraid to discard old traditions and customs in order to ensure a better and brighter future for the coming generations.

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