

English as an Intercultural Communication:
—preliminary study of cross-cultural problems
of Japanese students—

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Introduction

Various problems included in English language teaching in Japan have widely discussed by Japanese teachers of English and also foreign teachers in Japan. The main problem is that “English is generally taught not as a functional tool for cross-cultural communication in international settings, but a codified system representing the linguistic characteristics of idealized American or Briton.”¹⁾ As a result, most students generally show little ability to express themselves verbally in English. Especially the Japanese language is used so exclusively in every aspect of their lives and the people, and so thoroughly conditioned by Japanese communication patterns that these patterns naturally have a great influence on their use of English. This often causes misunderstanding between Japanese and Americans. Therefore an intercultural communication approach to English language teaching is indispensable, especially for the Japanese. The present paper is an attempt to find out some of the cross-cultural problems that students have when they are talking with Americans. The questionnaire “Communicating with English speaking people” is analyzed.

Literature Review

In this chapter, the literature related to the general theories of intercultural communication and predominant value assumptions held by the Japanese and the Americans is reviewed.

The study of intercultural communication has developed in the U.S. from such academic fields as communication, sociology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology. Many researchers defined intercultural communication in many ways. Prosser (1978) defined intercultural communication on the individual level between members of distinctly different cultural groups.²⁾ Porter and Samovar (1976) defined it as "intercultural communication which occurs whenever a member of the culture and a message receiver is a member of another."³⁾ Other definitions include; "intercultural communication is communication under conditions of cultural differences"⁴⁾; "that interaction which occurs between communicators from different nations—deals primarily with face-to-face interaction between persons from different nations and directs focus on the processes and problems of international communication at the interpersonal level between peoples of different cultures."⁵⁾ Gudykunst (1977) defined intercultural communication as involving "an international, transactional symbolic process that takes place between people from different cultures."⁶⁾

He contended that there is no message if there is no intent. "The intent to send a message may be perceived by the person receiving the message, an outside observer, or the person who sent the message."⁷⁾

Porter and Samovar recognized variables that alter the meaning in an intercultural communication; 1) attitudes, 2) social organizations, 3) patterns of thought, 4) roles and role prescription, 5) language, 6) use and organization of space, 7) time conceptualization, and 8) non-verbal expression.⁸⁾

Sarbaugh has combined four key variables that emphasize the different degrees of similarity and dissimilarity of the participants: 1) perceived intent, 2) code systems, 3) normative belief and overt behaviors, and 4) world view.⁹⁾

Porter and Samovar (1976) think of cultural differences varying along a minimal-maximal dimension. They also say that differences between Asian and Western cultures are maximal.

Values concerning the nature of society and culture

There are two key concepts for understanding the nature of Japanese society and culture: homogeneity and verticality, whereas heterogeneity in race, language, habit and mores is predominant in America. Closely related to this dual concepts of homogeneity and heterogeneity is that of verticality and horizontality. Chie Nakane observes "the essential types of human relations can be divided into two categories: vertical and horizontal."¹⁰⁾ She then attempts to explain through the vertical principle the unique structure of Japanese society, which contrasts with the more horizontal nature of American society.¹¹⁾

A horizontal society, typically, is one based on the principle of assumed equality or egalitarian. Edward C. Stewart says that running through the American's social relationships with others is the theme of equality—interpersonal relations are typically horizontal, conducted between presumed equals.¹²⁾ On the other hand, the Japanese put emphasis on hierarchy. Japanese society is divided into numerous groupings, each structured along multiple status layers.

Values Concerning Interpersonal Relationships

The value of independence is predominant in the horizontal culture of the United States. The independent "I" and "you" clash in argument and try to persuade each other. Each individual is solely responsible for his or her fate. What others think and say is of little significance.¹³⁾ In contrast, it is the value assumption of his interdependence that dominates the stratified, vertical culture of Japan. Generally, "we" dominates over "I" in Japanese interpersonal relations. What others think and say is of greater importance than what the individual does.¹⁴⁾ This value of interdependence, if taken to the extreme, turns to that *amae*, namely "dependence", the desire to be passively loved, the unwillingness to be separated from the mother-child circle and cast into a world of objective reality."

The concept of *amae* also underlines the Japanese emphasis on the

group over the individual. On the other hand, Americans emphasize individualism, the "to be free" idea. The value of individualism encourages self-assertion and frank expression of opinions and shows up in the American propensity to argue when challenged.¹⁵⁾ In the vertical society of Japan, on the other hand, the dominant value is conformity to or identity with the group: The Japanese insist upon the insignificance of the individual.¹⁶⁾ The group emphasis has affected interpersonal relationships in Japan. As the old saying goes, the nail that sticks out banged down. Therefore, the Japanese display great cautiousness in expressing personal opinions and in modifying their opinions to be consistent with those of others around them.¹⁷⁾

Another difference between Americans and Japanese is found in the dual concept of symmetry and complement. John Condon summarizes the key difference between the two cultures as follows;¹⁸⁾

As a culture, Americans place great value on symmetrical relationships, minimizing differences that might suggest inequality. Americans tend not to like titles or honorifics that suggest some superior/subordinate relationship

Symmetrical relationships maximize similarities of age, sex, role, or status and serve to encourage the apparent differences of each individual as an individual

Complementary relationships [in a culture like that of Japan] maximize differences in age, sex, role, or status and serve to encourage the mutuality of the relationship, the interdependence.

Because they are presumed to be equal and symmetrical in their relationships, the Americans tend to maximize their "public self", that is, to expose more of themselves than the Japanese, who are apt to keep their "private self" to a maximum in their interaction with others. As a result, Americans are likely to express their inner feelings and emotions openly, while Japanese tend to conceal them in an effort to maintain harmonious relations with the people around them.¹⁹⁾

Values Concerning Thinking (or Thought) Patterns

Analytical thinking, characterizes the thought pattern of Americans. They tend to analyze and dissect things into elements in order to understand them properly. Their emphasis is upon the parts rather than the whole of things.²⁰⁾ In sharp contrast, the Japanese are likely to employ synthetic thinking patterns—synthetic in that they try to “grasp reality in its suchness or isness, or in its totality, seeing things as they are in themselves”²¹⁾ Their emphasis is upon the whole.

Another set of thinking patterns are realism and idealism. Realism is factual. It puts its focus on objective facts. This is predominately the thinking pattern of Americans, who value objectivity, specificity and precision.²²⁾ In contrast, Japanese thinking is predominantly that of idealism. It puts emphasis on subjective ideas than on objective facts.

Another cultural difference in thinking patterns may be found in one typology — that of “line” versus “point/dot/space.” In American culture communication is not established unless the words follow a certain route.²³⁾ The logicity of the English language may be thought of as a line. The Japanese language, on the other hand, tends to make for a pointlike, dotlike, spacelike thinking. The speaker organizes his or her ideas and thoughts in a stepping-stone mode. The listener is supposed to supply what is left unsaid.²⁴⁾

Characteristics of Rhetoric and Communication

Rhetoric, in the Western sense of the word is concerned with persuasion pursued at public forums. An American speaker consciously uses symbols to create an understanding and to form, strengthen, or challenge an attitude on the part of his or her listeners. American rhetoric is basically argumentative and logical in nature.²⁵⁾ Confrontation carries a positive connotation in American rhetoric. The Japanese, on the other hand, value harmony and view harmony-establishing and/or harmony-maintaining as a dominant function of communication. Japanese rhetoric

functions as a means of disseminating information or of speaking consensus.²⁶⁾

There are at least two completely different systems of communication: dialogue and monologue. Dialogue, in the Western sense of the word, aims to clarify the points of disagreement. It is an effective means of resolving differences between two parties with diverse interests or backgrounds. Japanese communication tends to be monologic, since the Japanese language is basically a "chamber", not suitable for public discussion or speech in a big hall.²⁷⁾

Subjects

The subjects of this study were drawn from Speech Classes at this Junior College and College. 73 freshmen and 77 sophomores were selected as subjects. They are taking Aural English Class taught by an American instructor. In each class they are divided into small groups and the average number per class is 25—30 students. Most of the students didn't have a chance of learning English from native speakers when they were in high school. They were asked to answer the questionnaire in the classroom and were told that they did not need to mention their names.

Q 1 When did you first talk with an English speaking person?

	freshmen(73)	sophomores(77)	Total
age 18—19	11 (15%)	24 (31%)	35 (23%)
16—17	22 (30%)	15 (19%)	37 (25%)
13—15	14 (19%)	17 (22%)	31 (21%)
7—12	14 (19%)	12 (16%)	26 (17%)
0—6	3 (4%)	2 (3%)	5 (3%)
no reply	4 (6%)	3 (4%)	7 (5%)
irrelevant answer	5 (7%)	4 (5%)	9 (6%)

Analysis :

The percentage of the respondents is high for the age 16—17. The

largest percentage of freshmen (30%) are when they are 16 to 17 years old, while that of sophomores (31%) are when they are 18 to 19 years old.

Q 2 Have you ever been abroad?

	freshmen	sophomores	Total
Yes	9 (12%)	10 (13%)	19 (13%)
No	64 (88%)	67 (87%)	131 (87%)

Analysis :

Only 13% of all respondents had been abroad. They stayed in the U.S. and South Korea for a short period as an exchange student or on a home stay program or for sightseeing. It may be significant that a majority of the students (87%) had not come into direct contact with foreign culture. This seems that the awareness of cultural differences is low.

Q 3 How do you feel before you talk with foreigners in English (for example, before class)?

	freshmen	sophomores	Total
very excited	38 (52%)	10 (13%)	48 (32%)
happy	18 (25%)	18 (23%)	36 (24%)
no feeling	3 (4%)	18 (23%)	21 (14%)
uneasy	6 (8%)	17 (22%)	23 (16%)
Others :	8 (11%)	14 (19%)	22 (14%)
anxious	5	2	
nervous	3	7	
fearful		5	

Analysis :

The large percentage of all respondents (32%) show that they are very excited. It may be significant that the percentage of those who feel very excited is 52% (freshmen) and 13% (sophomores). This is probably

due to the fact that it is the first time for most of the freshmen to learn English from a native speaker. It should be noted that 22% of sophomores feel uneasy.

Q 4 How much do you understand English in the class taught by an American teacher?

		freshmen	sophomores	Total
above	80%	10 (14%)	11 (14%)	21 (14%)
	79—60%	29 (40%)	19 (25%)	48 (32%)
	59—50%	30 (41%)	28 (36%)	58 (39%)
	49—30%	4 (5%)	15 (20%)	19 (13%)
below	29%	0 (0%)	4 (5%)	4 (2%)

Analysis :

Only 14% of the respondents understand English (above 80%) spoken by an American teacher. It is very important to know that 46% of freshmen cannot understand above 60% of English, while 56% of the sophomores can't understand above 60% of English. In a face-to-face communication, the meaning can be obtained from not only verbal but also non-verbal cues. Nevertheless the percentage of those who understand most of English (above 80%) is low. This shows that they have difficulty in understanding non-verbal behavior in addition to the lack of listening ability.

Q 5 How do you evaluate your speaking ability?

	freshmen	sophomores	Total
excellent	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
good	8 (11%)	16 (21%)	24 (16%)
below average or fair	39 (53%)	30 (39%)	69 (46%)
unsatisfactory or poor	26 (36%)	31 (40%)	57 (38%)

Analysis :

The highest percentage of the respondents (46%) said that their speaking ability is below average, and 38% of them said that their speaking ability is poor. This is probably due not only to the insufficiency of their speaking ability, but also the cultural difference between Japanese and American communication pattern. A more detailed analysis is shown later.

Q 6 Are you willing to ask questions in the class conducted by an American teacher?

	freshmen	sophomores	Total
Yes	33 (45%)	11 (14%)	44 (29%)
No	40 (55%)	66 (86%)	106 (71%)

Analysis :

Only 29% of the respondents showed that they are willing to ask questions. It should be noted that 55% of the freshmen and 86% of the sophomores are not willing to ask questions. This reflects Japanese communication pattern. A more detailed analysis is shown later.

Q 7 You are called by an American teacher to answer a question, but you don't know the answer. Then what do you do? Choose the possible answers.

	freshmen	sophomores	Total
say "I don't know"	29 (40%)	23 (29%)	52 (35%)
say "Pardon or give me a hint," and try to communicate	39 (53%)	31 (40%)	70 (47%)
say nothing and keep your eyes down	19 (26%)	2 (3%)	21 (14%)
whisper to your neighbor for help	4 (5%)	26 (34%)	30 (20%)
smile and keep silent	1 (1%)	7 (9%)	8 (5%)

Others: 1 (1%) 1 (1%) 2 (1%)

Analysis :

The high percentage of all respondents (47%) indicate that they say something and try to communicate with an American teacher. It is followed by say "I don't know" (35%) and "whisper to your neighbor for help" (20%). It is very important that "whisper to your neighbor for help" is taken as a negative attitude by Americans who are based on individuality. It should be noted that the percentage of the freshmen in "say nothing and keep your eyes down" is larger than that of the sophomores. This shows that freshmen who are not assimilated into Western culture, try to transmit the message to an American teacher that they don't know by saying nothing and keeping their eyes down which is a typical Japanese way of non-verbal communication.

Q 8 You happen to meet an American teacher outside the class. He is coming to you. What do you do? Select the probable answers.

	freshmen	sophomores	Total
bow	44 (60%)	41 (56%)	85 (57%)
say "Hi!, How are you?, Good morning and so on."	21 (29%)	23 (29%)	44 (29%)
talk about daily life	2 (3%)	2 (3%)	4 (3%)
smile and say nothing	15 (21%)	20 (26%)	35 (23%)
keeping your eyes down, out of respect	1 (1%)	2 (3%)	3 (3%)
Others:	1 (1%)	5 (6%)	6 (4%)
ignore			

Analysis :

The high percentage of all respondents (57%) show that they bow. It is followed by "say, Hi !, How are you? Good morning and so on" (29%), "smile and say nothing" (23%). This shows that they are communicating nonverbally with an American who puts emphasis on verbal

acts. It should be noted that the percentage of students who develop conversation by using English (3%) is small.

Q 9 Do you have a chance of speaking English outside class ?

	freshmen	sophomores	Total
Yes	9 (12%)	12 (16%)	21 (14%)
No	64 (88%)	65 (84%)	129 (86%)

Analysis :

Only 14% of the respondents said that they have a chance of using English outside class. It should be noted that an overwhelming majority of freshmen (88%) and sophomores (84%) have no chance of speaking English.

Q 10 What feeling do you have when you talk with Americans?

	freshmen	sophomores	Total
think that are the same as Japanese	4 (5%)	4 (5%)	8 (5%)
think that they are different from Japanese	36 (49%)	36 (47%)	72 (48%)
think that they are all humans	27 (38%)	32 (42%)	59 (40%)
Other:			
no feeling	5 (7%)	4 (5%)	9 (6%)
no reply	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	2 (1%)

Analysis :

About half of the respondents felt that Americans are different from Japanese. It may be significant that the percentage of sophomores who think that they are all humans is higher than of freshmen. This suggests that the way of perceiving Americans as humans has improved as they study foreign language.

Q 11 How do you feel that Americans are different from Japanese people?

(The following refers to Americans.)

	Total
gestures and body movement	40 (27%)
facial expression	25 (17%)
cheerful	22 (15%)
articulate	22 (15%)
self-assertive	16 (11%)
look at your eyes when they talk (eye [↑] contact)	16 (11%)

Analysis :

The above are the most frequently mentioned traits that students have mentioned. It should be noted that non-verbal acts such as gestures, body movement, facial expression, and eye contact, and positive attitudes such as "articulate" and "self-assertive" are pointed out.

Q 12 What are the most difficult things that you face when you speak English?

	freshmen	sophomores	Total
lack of oral and listening proficiency	63 (86%)	77 (100%)	140 (93%)
cultural differences such as way of thinking, values and so on	16 (22%)	11 (14%)	27 (18%)
non-verbal behaviors such as facial expressions, hand and arm, gestures, posture, and so on	12 (16%)	4 (5%)	16 (11%)
personal differences that came from surroundings	0 (0%)	3 (3%)	3 (2%)

Analysis :

An overwhelming majority of respondents (93%) said that they lack English oral and listening proficiency. It is also followed by cultural differences (18%). The lowest answer (2%) is personal differences that came from surroundings.

Summary of the Questionnaire

1 Contact with English speaking people

The data show that 66% of the respondents had a chance to speak English with English speaking people before entering college. Most of the foreigners that students talked with were American. However, their contact is on a temporary basis. They meet Americans on a school excursion in Kyoto or when they visit the base in Sasebo and Iwakuni. On the other hand, the percentage of students who had direct contact with foreign culture by going abroad (13%) is small. This shows that the awareness of cultural differences is low.

2 Psychological feeling before they speak English

In this college, students are taught Aural English by a native speaker at least once a week. As of August, 1986, freshmen have studied English at least for four months and sophomores for one year and four months. The data show that 32% of the respondents are very excited and 24% of them are happy. Especially the percentage of freshmen who feel very excited (52%) is larger than that of sophomores (13%). However, it may be significant that 22% of sophomores feel uneasy. This is probably due to the fact that they are suffering from cultural conflict between Japanese and American in speaking English, in addition to the insufficiency of English language.

3 The culture gap

1) Communication passive or active

A majority of respondents (84%) said that their speaking ability is below average or poor. This reflects not only English language problem but also Japanese communication pattern.

The Japanese culture tends to view the verbal as only *a* means of communication, not *the* means of communication as it often is in the case of English.²⁸⁾ The reason is that "with such a high degree of natural unity and singleness, the degree of mutual understanding among the society, too, is extremely high."²⁹⁾ They place comparatively little emphasis on verbal discourse and they value silence . . . *i-shin-den-shin*, "the heart is conveyed by the heart". The general attitude is that talk is cheap and that words tend to distort reality.³⁰⁾ A person who says only a few words is considered to be a wise and reliable man.³¹⁾ And the leader in Japanese society tends to be a silent person. The value of silence is reflected in the proverbs: to say nothing is a flower, mouths are to eat with, not to speak with; a hundred listenings do not equal one seeing.³²⁾ This is in sharp contrast to the view of Western rhetoric like the United States that the verbal, especially, is the dominant means of expression.

In America, greater cultural diversity and heterogeneity are likely to make verbal skills more necessary and, therefore, more highly valued. The goal of Western societies is the cultivation of dialogue and public speaking. The spirit of Western civilization is the spirit of inquiry.³³⁾ The *logos* is a dominant theme. Nothing is to remain undiscussed. Everybody speaks his mind eloquently and persuasively. America is a communication-active society.

2) Vertical or horizontal

The data show that a large number of students (71%) are not willing to ask questions in English in front of a teacher. It relates to the vertical structure of Japanese society, and the group.

In Japan a greater degree of power comes from age and occupation than it does in American society. This means that in Japanese conversational interaction, for the dyads older person, younger person, professor/

student, or doctor/clerk, the first member of each pair holds a relatively greater degree of power than he or she would hold in American society.³⁴⁾ In Japanese, a formal style would be expected in encounters between such pairs. They tend to be reserved and cautious in expressing themselves, and prefer to be evasive and silent rather than open and frank.

On the other hand, in America, interpersonal relations are presumed to be horizontal and the involved individuals are assumed to be equals. A less formal style could be used in interaction. American students, for example, sometimes call professors by their first names, a situation which would be unheard in Japan.³⁵⁾

Another difference is that Japanese value self-depreciation and hesitate to show off their special ability. Even if a Japanese may have a question, he is seldom outspoken because he knows that if he is, other Japanese will think him too forward and conspicuous. That is, Japanese is always seen *not* as alone but a part of a supporting group.³⁶⁾

In contrast, Americans value self-assertion because since group activity is seen in terms of the independent efforts of individual, it is important for each individual to show off or display his abilities in public.³⁷⁾ They appear to be more spontaneous and talkative, and to be more open and frank in revealing themselves. In first encounters, interviews etc., they display themselves in the best light possible without, however, overstating or understating the picture they present.³⁸⁾ They think that "fluent self-expression at all times is a proof of maturity."³⁹⁾

Therefore a person who does not ask questions or express his opinion is looked down on as "being unintelligent or mentally lazy by Americans."⁴⁰⁾

3) Non-verbal behavior

In its narrow and more accurate sense, "non-verbal behavior" refers to actions as distinct from speech. It thus includes facial expressions, hand and arm gestures, postures, positions, and various movements of the body or the legs and feet.⁴¹⁾

Japanese non-verbal behaviors such as "silence," "smiling", "keeping

your eyes down", "whispering to your neighbor for help" are often found in the data (Q 7 & Q 8). However, they create communication gap between Japanese and Americans.

The Japanese have developed "aesthetics of silence" in place of rhetoric and logic.⁴²⁾ Silence in conversation has a positive meaning: It is essential to self-fulfillment and to an awareness of the here and now.⁴³⁾ This is diametrically opposed to the American way of looking at silence as symptomatic of a problem. They tend to regard silence as an absence of words, a waste of time, a period when "nothing is doing."⁴⁴⁾ Therefore Americans try to fill silence in their conversation when it occurs.

The Japanese smile or laugh may be regarded ambivalently... a sign of friendliness but sometimes an expression of reserve; an open display of emotions but sometimes an indication of embarrassed self-consciousness; a smile that say "I understand" — or, sometimes, "I don't understand".⁴⁵⁾ Especially a smile to hide their embarrassment is puzzling to Americans. A smile means the expression of amusement, mere recognition or friendliness in the U.S.A.⁴⁶⁾

Another non-verbal behavior is eye contact. Japanese culture consider eye contact with parents, teachers, or superiors improper, impolite, and disrespectful.⁴⁷⁾ Then, when people talk with superiors, they cast their eyes downward as a sign of respect. Besides, they avoid eye contact when they felt they have done something wrong or something that should not have been said. This is in contrast with American way of looking at eye contact.

Americans look at other's eyes whenever they talk. Therefore, if one casts his or her eyes downward, the person will be considered shifty or suspicious.⁴⁸⁾ Establishing and maintaining direct eye contact with the teacher is considered positive, honest, and straightforward behavior in American culture.⁴⁹⁾

"Whispering to your neighbor for help" is also a stumbling block in intercultural communication. In the vertical culture like Japan, the value of interdependence is prominent. Japanese emphasize the group over the individual. Generally, "we" dominates over "I" is of great importance than what the individual does.⁵⁰⁾

However, the Japanese group-consensus method causes an emotional reaction to Americans who are based on individuality. They state that they found it "insulting" or unfriendly when Japanese tend to discuss the American's question among themselves rather than including the American in their discussion.⁵¹⁾

Implications for Education

In this paper I have attempted to discuss some of the problems which emerged in the process of analyzing the questionnaire "Communicating with English speaking people". The data show that the interference of Japanese language and culture often causes misunderstanding between Japanese and Americans. Therefore intercultural communication approach to English language teaching is very important for Japanese students.

However, the main focus of English language teaching in intercultural communication both for teachers and for learners, has been on the acquisition of basic skills in the English language. Yet, linguistic competence is not sufficient for successful communication. In face-to-face communication, the quantitative role of language may be relatively modest. Birdwhistell estimates that "probably no more than 30 to 35 percent of the social meaning of a conversation or an interaction is carried by the words."⁵²⁾ Communication requires the use of verbal and non-verbal means to express oneself and understand others. Especially non-verbal behavior becomes an essential part of intercultural communication.

Non-verbal communication also shifts from culture to culture and non-verbal differences are often subtle. Yet, non-verbal actions usually offer insight into what is being communicated and at the same time they also offer a glimpse into the deep structure of the culture.⁵³⁾ Edward says that in situations where no formal attention is paid non-verbal communication in a second/foreign language classroom, individual learners may develop second-language competence in a strictly verbal, linguistic sense, but largely retain the non-verbal characteristics of their first language.⁵⁴⁾ Therefore the study of non-verbal communication should

be incorporated into English language teaching.

Another importance is that basic differences in thought and behavior create a more insurmountable barrier to intercultural communication than language differences do. However, English courses in Japan, have little emphasis on English-speaking cultures. Therefore the teacher of a foreign language must prepare students to overcome culture barriers as well as language barriers. Better intercultural communication can only be achieved through training in the target culture (American culture).⁵⁵⁾ Beginning to understand the differences and increasing cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity will help one recognize the problems if he encounters them and understands what causes them.

There is much that remains to be investigated and experienced with in the area of teaching English as intercultural communication. It is hoped that this study, together with more empirical research in the future, will further contribute to a better understanding of Japanese interpersonal relations and intercultural communication.

Notes

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