

# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND THE EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING LANGUAGES IN JAPAN

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## ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the author's experience in teaching a foreign language in Japan. It points at the problems first encountered and the research made in Japanese culture and the Japanese education system to overcome these difficulties: first by exploring the Japanese cultural background and second by questioning the imposition of Western (mainly Anglo-Saxon) attitudes on Education on Japanese students.

When dealing with the teaching of a foreign language one is always faced with the dilemma of deciding about the method to use for a particular class. Lately the methods used by all teachers of languages are those based on the communicative approach which highlights the learning and use of the *functions* and *notions* of the language<sup>(1)</sup>. In acquiring those skills the student is supposed to be able to communicate, no matter whether at the beginning the grammatical structures are the adequate ones. The emphasis nowadays is placed on communication rather than on grammatical correctness. In order to achieve that ideal most methods contain exercises

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(1) The communicative approach is based on the linguistic functional model developed by Simon C. Dik and M.A.K. Halliday. In his book *An introduction to Functional Grammar* (1985), Halliday clearly explains that the term *functional* is designed to account for how the language is used and not for the formal aspects of the language.

that develop the communicative skills of the student in a language different from his own. Those exercises have been conceived in a manner so that both the student and the teacher have to interact in class participating actively, using the language.

Obviously the emphasis of these methods is on the spoken language rather than on the written one. The reason is that we learn in order to understand what people say and to make ourselves understood in a particular language which is not our mother tongue. In our society speech seems to be mightier than writing because it is immediate and spontaneous, and communication can easily flow.

In my personal experience teaching English to Spanish students and Spanish to British and American students I have been using the methods based on the communicative approach the market offered, and have had no particular problems in developing communicative skills in either English or Spanish, although I am aware of the weak points the method bears. One of the weakest points of the method is that for many people *communicative* means just chatting, playing, watching video tapes and listening to songs. By implication this has been considered as the ideal of learning a language which meant no effort on the part of the learner and a clown-like behaviour on the part of the teacher. Learning a language became synonym of having a good time in class. The funnier the teacher the better. The word grammar was discarded because it meant boredom and a language should be something lively and entertaining<sup>(2)</sup>.

But trying to disentangle this particular misconception and concentrating on what I thought was best for the learning of a language the students succeeded in conveying their ideas, feelings, opinions, wishes and so on. Therefore when I first arrived in Japan I was ready to use the same methodology I had been using when teaching a foreign language, that was based on the concept of language as communication. But to my surprise this did not work at all. After a whole week of disappointments and feeling absolutely useless I sat down in my office and began to analyse the situation. Why was the method not working here? The first plausible answer was that my Japanese was too poor to explain the students what the activities consisted of. And likewise my students' level of Spanish was not good enough to understand anything that was explained to them. But this answer was not the root of the problem for I tried body language, gestures, mimicry and all kinds of resources to create an interaction with the students, but the answer I received on the part of the students was always the same: silence.

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(2) In his introduction to Functional Grammar Halliday never said that the spoken language followed no grammar. On the contrary he said that speech is important because spoken language immediately responds to the changes in the environment and in so doing it exhibits a grammatical variation richer than the written language. And he adds that what the spoken language achieves is through grammar while the written language does it lexically. The complexity of spoken language precisely lies in the complexity of its grammar.

Then it occurred to me that my failure lay in something broader and more difficult to cope with. It was based on cultural differences. I was aware that I had to become familiar with the students' background on education for I needed to understand how students were taught in Japan and in what way their mind was ready to process the information I was giving them, in sum I tried to achieve intercultural communication<sup>(3)</sup>.

The first step was to try and define the term *culture* and all that this implied, an Herculean task for it is a very broad and slippery term that is applied to a wide spectrum of concepts. According to the dictionary, *American Heritage*, culture covers two areas:

1. *The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.*
2. *Intellectual and artistic activity, and the works produced by it.*

If we just stick to the first explanation we may come up with certain generalizations about what we consider typically Japanese. For example we may say that the following things are essentially Japanese:

- tea ceremony (cha no yu),
- Shinto (indigenous Japanese religion)
- flower arrangement (ikebana)

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(3) I did not lose courage and continue teaching and thinking about possible solutions to my teaching problem by consulting with my colleagues of the English Department, who to my relief, had the same problems I had and who gave me useful advice based on their personal experience. I also made some research on former teachers who came to Japan to teach languages and found out that they faced exactly the same problems I was facing when trying to work with communication. As a sample of my research here is the account of Major R.V.C. Bodley who came to teach in Japan in the 30s:

*"A friend of mine who taught English at Keio University in Tokyo asked me to stand in for him. Keio is the oldest of its kind in Japan and at first sight suggests architecturally a college at Oxford or Cambridge. Founded by Yukichi Fukuzawa one of the Japanese to advocate the teaching of foreign languages. Born in 1835 under the Shogunate he began to learn Dutch in 1854 but changed into English as a more practical language. He persevered and in 1871 the main building was built. This university believes in the importance of languages. The Japanese do not feel it necessary to speak to the few foreigners that come to Japan so their skills at conversation are null. They have a high interest in literature though but not the language itself. The Japanese boy is determined to learn and with that power of memorizing, intelligently applied, could achieve anything, but he cannot expect to excel if so many subjects are ground into his head before he is twenty. They learn a language by heart and are incapable of dealing with the problem in a different way than the one already memorised". Major R.V.C. Bodley (1933) *A Japanese Omelette, A British Writer's Impressions on the Japanese Empire*, The Hokuseido Press, Tokyo.*

- cherry-blossom viewing (hanami)
- karaoke.

Nevertheless all these can be guessed even if someone has never been to Japan for there are certain unavoidable stereotypes that attach certain labels to nationalities. But there are other characteristics that, although also belong to the Japanese culture, need to be experienced in the country. For example, there is the extended idea that Japanese love nature but this does not mean that everything is natural. Walking by Japanese rivers one can notice that most of them have concrete borders to re-conduct their course. Even visiting Japanese gardens one can notice that they are not natural but suggest nature, just like bonsais are not natural trees but a miniature imitation of a tree.

These simple facts of daily life made me aware of the real difficulty I was having trying to teach a foreign language to Japanese students: we could not communicate because we had different *background assumptions*. The example of the Japanese garden and its relation to nature triggered that idea in my mind: the assumptions I was making were the wrong ones. In any communicative process there are four important elements to be taken into account: *the source, the receiver, the message and the channel*. In my case the message could not be conveyed and the communicative process was biunivocally interrupted because the source and the receiver did not share the same assumptions.

An example of this misunderstanding —that almost drove me into insanity— was that every time I asked students in class the answer I received was silence, nothing more than silence which I perceived as a disturbing sign. But my assumption was based on what silence, in this particular situation, means for a Western mind: it denotes boredom, lack of interest or annoyance. But for the Japanese that was the usual answer to a question in class. They take in whatever is said to them in class but they are not used to expressing their opinion aloud. Even in conversation classes, where everything is based on oral communication, silence would persist. But silent communication is perceived in Japan as the highest sort of communication. Spoken language is not their priority because for them talking for the sake of talking about ordinary things is a waste of time and a sign of stupidity. They can communicate their emotions with their eyes, their facial expression and with non-verbal signs (*haragei*) which is a more sophisticated sort of communication which avoids the objectivization of their feelings and consequently their underestimation.

According to a traditional Japanese saying —“the silent pheasant avoids slaughter” (*kiji mo nakazuba utaremai*)— silence is the safest path to follow<sup>(4)</sup>. Once I

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(4) In fact we could say that while in the Western cultures language is the means of communication par excellence in Japan it is only one of many. In the Western world heroes excell in

understood the meaning of my students' silence I felt relieved because they were not judging my teaching, they were just naturally responding to the situation. This has not solved the problem of my conversation classes but at least it has smoothed my relationships with the students and we begin to understand each other's assumptions.

When I compared Japanese students with Spanish students I could not help noticing that they had something in common which was their reluctance to speak in front of the group, but the reason behind this is different. Spanish students are afraid of being laughed at if they speak their own opinions, they are self-conscious, while the Japanese students have been taught to behave as a group, not as an individual. The aim of Japanese education is not self-development, but self-limitation. Spontaneity is not expected from the individual but self-control. Each member has its own position in a highly structured hierarchy and has to act and behave for the benefit of the group (whether this be the family, the community, the university or the company). Another traditional Japanese saying that refers to this idea reads as follows: "the spike that sticks out is likely to be hit" (*deku kui utareru*). That is another reason why the students did not participate in any activity that involved talking from a personal point of view even if the exercise was a simple role-play.

Related to this idea of the prevalence of the development of the group over that of the individual is the Japanese concept of (*honne*) on one hand, what the person really thinks but should never be said aloud and (*tatamae*) on the other, the opinion sustained by the group or by the one considered the head of the group (the teacher in class, the boss in the office). This is why Japanese students prefer to memorize data than to express what each of them thinks. We have to bear in mind the fact that reasoning in human beings is influenced by the culture we grow up in. Reasoning refers to the process used to form conclusions, inferences or judgements and it requires an active mind which follows certain rules, influenced by culture, and the Japanese cultural environment is the perfect soil for the development of the group.

The memorizing of data is also part of their learning their own language because they do not have an alphabet with a limited number of letters but two

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their oratory while many Japanese heroes did never say a word. In Japan no politician excels because of his oratory for in Japan the overuse of the spoken word is a sign of immaturity and dishonesty. Those who have good oratory should pursue the entertainment arena not politics. Their distrust in language also comes from a certain Japanese idiosyncrasy: words are rapidly substituted by new ones with the same meaning, and the old ones are discarded. This is because for the Japanese words by themselves do not convey meaning, they are just boxes that are used to carry feelings and emotions that cannot possibly be expressed with words. When the box has been used too much, it can no longer carry those emotions and has to be substituted for a new one.

syllabaries (hiragana, used to write words of Japanese origin and katakana used to write borrowings from other languages) and at least 2000 ideograms for daily use based on the Chinese characters. So the average Japanese student takes longer to learn how to read and write his own language because he has to learn by heart all the different characters that will enable him to read newspapers, books... and write essays. Their brain processes language intake in a different way, specially developing their graphic memory. It is usual that on Japanese television most children programmes are subtitled in Japanese so that they become familiar with the written characters. That is another reason why when they learn a foreign language they use the same type of cognition. They try to memorize anything that is written and only feel at ease when everything that is said is also written.

Finally when I began to overcome all these cultural differences in learning and understanding the Japanese way of processing language input, I came across another obstacle. Every time I asked a direct question to students they would never reply with a straight forward answer. For example, if I asked them, "what is your favourite book?" I was expecting something like: "*I am a cat* by Soseki Natsume because when I read it I thought it was original that the author took the point of view of a cat to criticize human beings". That would be a typical straight forward answer that entails a deductive rhetoric convention. But the Japanese students did not react in that way. The answer I would receive would be something of the kind that reads as follows: "When I was a child I entered my father's library room and I saw an open book on the floor. I took it and looked at the pictures which showed a cat talking. This intrigued me and began to read the book. I liked it a lot. Then I learnt that the book was *I am a cat* by Soseki Natsume". This kind of answer corresponds to the opposite rhetorical convention: the inductive one. For me it was very difficult to understand why they would beat around the bush instead of giving a straight forward answer to what I considered was a simple question. But they were not avoiding the subject, they were just reacting according to the way they had been educated.

All these particular problems I was encountering in teaching a foreign language are, in fact, a big issue in the agenda of the Japanese Ministry of Education and a national concern. Everyday there is information in the Japanese Press about the problem of teaching and learning a foreign language, mainly English. In any international contest Japanese students score very high in mathematics and science but very poor in languages. In 1993 a commission was set up to conduct an investigation about this problem and the outcome was the launching of a campaign in favour of the internationalization (kokusaika) of Japan. Nevertheless, nowadays, the campaign has not got the results expected by the commission. There is still an ambivalent attitude between internationalization (kokusaika) and the uniqueness of the Japanese (nihonjinron) which reflects a desire to strengthen Japanese identity and combat Western hegemony. This is particularly poignant

regarding the cultural assault began by the Anglo-Saxon culture on Japan long before World War II, as is reflected in various “eruptions” such as proposals to adopt English as the national language, by the 19th century first Minister of Education, Arinori Mori <sup>(5)</sup>; these proposals were repeated again, in 1947 and 1950, by the politician Gakudo Ozaki and resurface intermittently to this day, with the debate to institute English as the official second language in Japan.

What is very surprising about Japan is that despite its status as the world’s number two economic power, for obvious historic reasons such as isolationism and the aftermath of World War II, the country has been a consumer of English, and lately of other languages like Spanish, rather than a purveyor of its own language and culture. It has not needed English to become a major exporter and people do not feel the need to learn a foreign language; there is absolute lack of motivation in learning a language <sup>(6)</sup>. Even if Japan has been the great importer and imitator of other cultures this has been done by adapting them to their own way and customs.

We may conclude by saying that, although there is a reluctant attitude on the part of the Japanese to speak a foreign language and to mingle with foreigners, this is not due to any lack of skills in speaking languages or to a xenophobic attitude towards foreigners <sup>(7)</sup>, it is something culturally rooted and difficult to come to terms with. But the conclusion we have to derive from this experience is that we need to encourage intercultural communication by understanding each other’s cultural assumptions and by questioning our Western points of view regarding languages. May be it is time to revise the question of the supremacy of the spoken language when teaching languages and start valuing silence. May be it is time to think about the cultural colonization of the Anglo-Saxon world and start estimating and studying other’s peoples points of view. May be we would need to stress less individual self-development, which is leading us to pure individual isolation, and put the emphasis on the development of the group and the

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(5) Arinori Mori (1847-1889) came out with the proposal in 1872 when he was the Ambassador of the United States and was encouraged to do that by American linguist William D. Whitney, a Yale professor and expert in Sanscrit and Indoeuropean philosophy. He was murdered by an extremist samurai in 1889, the day Japanese Constitution was promulgated.

(6) An American Professor, R. Powell, who has lived in Japan for some years, observes: “In countries such as Japan educationalists often stress the benefits of English proficiency without providing evidence of its benefits, beyond cultural ones. Bilingualism may as well increase the chances of promotion to the international department of an enterprise, but it may also lead to a lot of low-paid, low-prestige translation work while monolingual superiors make key decisions” (Powell 1998).

(7) Professor Takao Suzuki from Keio University says that the Japanese do not hate foreigners (xenophobia) but avoid foreigners (xenophygia), and not out of distrust but out of respect and admiration, that is what this professor calls (mirage effect).

working of the team. Likewise the Japanese might need to stop imitating Western attitudes and importing them in order to export their own. In sum what both the Eastern world and the Western world need is an intercultural exchange that can provide solutions to educational problems, in our case, the teaching of languages.

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