

# Cultural Differences in Conversational Strategies

## - Japanese and American University Students -

*Linda Viswat*

Otemon Gakuin University, Japan

*Junko Kobayashi*

Kansai Gaidai University, Japan

### **Abstract**

This paper deals with cultural differences in conversational strategies between Japanese and American university students. Based upon a questionnaire distributed to 106 Japanese students with intermediate English proficiency and 97 American students, the paper examines specific problems caused by the differences in expectations, and identifies several culturally held values. At the same time, it also mentions individual differences in empathic ability, and suggests that people with intercultural or life experiences pass through perceptual changes over time. Then, it explores possible educational programs to help both Japanese and American students become aware of each other's differing views and make adjustments to their conversational strategies so as to meet the other person's expectations.

**Keywords:** cultural differences, conversational strategies, expectations in conversation, empathic ability, differing views

---

### **Introduction**

Conversational strategies vary significantly from culture to culture and from context to context. In intercultural interactions inattention to such differences in conversational patterns can have dire consequences for participants. The participants tend to be seen in attitudinal terms; that is, unfriendly, impertinent, rude and uncooperative (Gumperz 1982). This tendency was also identified in an earlier study (Kobayashi and Viswat 2007) which indicated that one possible reason for Japanese students losing their motivation to learn English was their reaction to remarks made by native English speakers. Both parties misinterpreted each other because they had culturally defined expectations about how conversational patterns should proceed.

Many EFL articles and books deal with conversational strategies (for instance, Loveday 1983; Blight and Stephens 2006). Second-language speakers may have good functional control of the grammar and lexicon of their new language, but may contextualize their talk by relying on the rhetorical strategies of their first language (Gumperz 1996). It is not easy for second-language speakers to understand contextualization cues of their new language; that is, verbal and non-verbal metalinguistic signs that serve to retrieve the context-bound presuppositions in terms of which component messages are interpreted (Gumperz 1992).

The purpose of this research is to identify how expectations Japanese students with intermediate English proficiency and American students differ with regard to conversational strategies, and to suggest possible educational programs to help both Japanese and American students recognize and adjust to each other's expectations.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do Japanese university students with intermediate level English proficiency and American university students differ with regard to their expectations about conversational strategies in reaction to silence, to show interest, and to show disagreement?

2. Have the Japanese students adopted some American conversational strategies given that they mention that conversation differs greatly depending on the other person?
3. Are differences in conversational strategies related to culturally held values?

### **Questionnaire**

A questionnaire was created in Japanese, translated into English and then backtranslated into Japanese to ensure that the questions were consistent in both languages (See appendix). Because a good number of Japanese students mentioned that conversation differs greatly depending on whether the interlocutor is a native English speaker or another Japanese, instructions in the Japanese version asked students to focus on conversations with native English speakers.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part included five statements ( $\alpha = .60$ ) focusing on general conversational strategies: expressing disagreement (1 item), expressing one's feelings/opinions spontaneously (1 item), actively participating in a conversation by asking questions (1 item), developing the topic rather than just answering questions (1 item) and avoiding silence (1 item). Students were asked to respond on a 4-point Likert scale with 1 indicating strong agreement and 4 indicating strong disagreement. A neutral response was eliminated in order to force students to make a choice (Gillham 2000). In addition students were asked to explain why they had either agreed or disagreed with the statement. The second part included seven items ( $\alpha = .61$ ) focusing on conversational responses in specific situations. Students were asked to choose from 4 responses which became increasingly expansive. They were also given the option of writing their own responses.

### **Respondents**

The respondents included 106 Japanese university students (50 male and 56 female) and 97 American university students (53 male and 44 female). The average age of the Japanese students was 19 and the average age of the American students was 24. The two universities were comparable in size and academic standing. The Japanese students had all attained an intermediate level of English proficiency as determined by TOEFL scores (more than 430). 42 of the Japanese respondents indicated that they had spent some time in an English-speaking country (34 less than a month) whereas only 3 of the American students had visited Japan.

### **Results and Analysis of Quantitative Data**

One-way Anova was conducted using SPSS 13.0 to determine whether differences between the two groups were significant.

**Table 1: Results of One-Way ANOVA**

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Question 1 Section 1	Between Groups	9.349	1	9.349	8.036	.005
	Within Groups	360.648	310	1.163		
	Total	369.997	311			
Question 2 Section 1	Between Groups	32.834	1	32.834	24.665	.000
	Within Groups	412.676	310	1.331		
	Total	445.510	311			
Question 3 Section 1	Between Groups	1.361	1	1.361	.822	.365
	Within Groups	513.712	310	1.657		
	Total	515.074	311			
Question 4 Section1	Between Groups	11.338	1	11.338	6.823	.009
	Within Groups	515.111	310	1.662		

	Total	526.449	311			
Question 5	Between Groups	27.866	1	27.866	21.085	.000
Section 1	Within Groups	407.053	308	1.322		
	Total	434.919	309			
Question 6	Between Groups	4.132	1	4.132	3.846	.051
Section 1	Within Groups	330.865	308	1.074		
	Total	334.997	309			
Question 7	Between Groups	.004	1	.004	.002	.964
Section 1	Within Groups	601.176	310	1.939		
	Total	601.179	311			
Question 1	Between Groups	52.377	1	52.377	44.586	.000
Section 2	Within Groups	361.820	308	1.175		
	Total	414.197	309			
Question 2	Between Groups	1.158	1	1.158	1.279	.259
Section 2	Within Groups	277.988	307	.905		
	Total	279.146	308			
Question 3	Between Groups	139.711	1	139.711	99.037	.000
Section 2	Within Groups	435.903	309	1.411		
	Total	575.614	310			
Question 4	Between Groups	.048	1	.048	.041	.839
Section 2	Within Groups	359.861	307	1.172		
	Total	359.909	308			
Question 5	Between Groups	2.500	1	2.500	2.116	.147
Section 2	Within Groups	362.729	307	1.182		
	Total	365.230	308			
Question 6	Between Groups	44.776	1	44.776	27.472	.000
Section 2	Within Groups	501.998	308	1.630		
	Total	546.774	309			
Question 7	Between Groups	73.749	1	73.749	72.251	.000
Section 2	Within Groups	313.364	307	1.021		
	Total	387.113	308			

In the first section four items attained a level of statistical significance and in the second section five items attained a level of significance ( $p < .05$ ). However in all cases, with the exception of the question on expressing disagreement, the differences were more a matter of degree (strongly agree vs. agree) than direction (agree vs. disagree). This leads us to suspect that students at the intermediate level have begun to recognize some communication patterns in English (such as, avoiding silence and actively participating in the conversation) but will follow the dictates of the culture when a core value is at stake (maintaining harmony over expressing disagreement which may lead to confrontation).

### **Results and Analysis of Qualitative Data**

Written comments on the questionnaire were organized using the KJ-method. The KJ method, developed by Kawakita (1967, 1970), is a creative technique for organizing qualitative data. The focus is on formulating meaning of statements made by respondents by combining separate concepts through card making, grouping, naming and chart making.

In the process of analyzing qualitative data, notable cultural differences in conversational strategies were identified between Japanese and American students. Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975:45) says: "Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange)." Many Japanese students did not have a fixed policy toward contributing to a conversation while the majority of American students always had contribution to conversation in mind.

### 1. Conversational strategies to react to silence and to show interest

The Japanese position was described as: "If you have something to say, go ahead. However, you don't have to force yourself to speak;" "If the other person feels uncomfortable in silence, you should speak;" "If you are interested in the present topic, you should develop it;" and "That depends on the human relationship and the topic." On the other hand, the American position was expressed as: "Silence makes people uncomfortable;" "Silence creates awkward moments;" "Conversation seems rude or boring if you are just giving or receiving answers;" and "Asking questions builds rapport, interest and respect." These differences reflect different cultural values toward silence; that is, silence is positively regarded in Japanese culture, but negatively regarded in English-speaking communities (for instance, Kindaichi 1998; Samovar and Porter 2001).

Regarding Grice's Maxim of Quantity (1975); that is, the right amount of information, Japanese students tended to choose shorter answers while American students had a marked tendency to choose longer responses and state their own opinions by using their own words. Also, some Japanese students did mention that although they chose shorter answers, they thought it more desirable to give longer replies if they could. This suggests that with more intercultural experiences, the students became more aware of the cultural differences in the right amount of information; nevertheless, it was difficult for them to put it into practice.

### 2. Conversational strategies to show disagreement

Also, in spontaneous responses and disagreement, distinct cultural differences were seen. In Japanese conversation, confrontation is generally not acceptable because of the primary value placed on harmony (Nakayama 1989) while in American culture confrontation is tolerated (Stewart and Bennett 1991). The way conversations were developed clearly reflected these differences. Many Japanese students viewed the spontaneous expression of one's feelings/opinions unfavorably: "It would be better to answer after contemplation rather than talk nonsense;" and "Answering without giving it enough thought would cause misunderstanding." On the other hand, a good number of American students were favorable toward making spontaneous responses with comments such as: "You don't want someone to think you are ignoring them;" and "You should always answer the question."

Moreover, the majority of Japanese students were critical of expressing disagreement immediately with reasons such as: "Immediate disagreement will displease the other person:" and "You should let the other person have his/her say." In contrast, most Americans seemed to favor stating their disagreement immediately with assertions such as: "Don't ever disagree later, people forget, and just don't care about it anymore;" and "I believe that all agreements and disagreements should be addressed right away. This way, everyone is on the same page and no one has time to get upset about things that may have been misunderstood."

### 3. Individual differences in empathic ability

Besides the above cultural differences, individual differences in empathic ability were identified. Empathy is the ability to put yourself into another person's shoes. Textbooks on communication generally state that empathic ability is important in communication. In reality however, as Howell (1982) points out, "Empathy does not transcend the limits imposed by culture and knowledge and has no magic power to overcome differences in personality and background" (p.108). This survey

verified the fact that people are unable to perceive many things until they have actually experienced them. For instance, Japanese students with experience staying in English-speaking countries recognized the importance of active participation in conversation. They commented: "When I didn't develop the topic, native English speakers misinterpreted it to mean that I was not interested in the topic. Since then, they haven't spoken to me any longer;" and "If you don't advance your opinions, native English speakers will conclude that you don't have any personal opinions." On the other hand, American students with experience staying in Japan stated: "Need to be able to listen;" and "Let the person finish what they have to say before you jump in and argue your point."

Also, some American students who were in their thirties, forties and fifties made comments based on their life experiences: "There needs to be time to digest and reflect;" "I look at the scenario, and figure whether some constructive outcome could be attained through argument. If so, disagreement on the spot is preferred;" and "I wouldn't recommend expressing disagreement in places that can be misconstrued."

Further, some people seemed to have an innate understanding of or appreciation for characteristics generally associated with the other culture. For example, some Japanese students responded: "When I just talk with someone without developing the topic, I get bored regardless of who the other person is;" and "It is more fun if I develop the topic." On the other hand, some Americans commented: "Silence gives the other person a chance to talk;" and "There is much peace in silence; the better the friend, the more silence is accepted and appreciated."

### **Implications of the Research and Educational Programs for the Future**

The results of the survey demonstrated that Japanese and American students had somewhat different expectations of conversation. First of all, many Japanese students were not ready to contribute to all conversations, and the amount of the contribution depended on the topic and the human relationship. On the other hand, the majority of American students were determined to actively participate in any conversation. Also, there was a huge gap between Japanese and American students in terms of what they judged to be the right amount of information to convey in conversation. Japanese students tended to increase the amount only when they were interested in the topic while American students had a notable tendency to aim at offering longer responses and contributing to conversation by using their own words. Regarding speaking with clarity, the majority of Japanese students valued consideration for the other person's feelings more than clarity when expressing disagreement. The position was expressed: "You should consider how to express disagreement softly and tactfully;" and "It isn't desirable if you obviously disagree with the other person." On the other hand, most Americans valued clarity, and insisted: "It is important to take a stand on something you strongly disagree with and not lead the other person on that you agree with what they're saying;" and "Always stand up for your opinions."

Given the above cultural differences, what educational programs for the future should be offered? First, it is essential to explain how different people view incidents differently by giving specific examples. Take one situation, for instance: "Suppose that you had experience staying in the United States. How would you respond to the following question: 'Have you even been to the United States?'" Some Japanese students chose "Yes," and mentioned: "Native English speakers then usually ask, 'When?' and 'Where?' and I answer." Even if they thought that they could have contributed to the conversation, they didn't. Students need to be aware that in English responsibility for developing a conversation is shared, and by merely responding to questions without adding any additional information they are placing too much of a burden on their conversational partner. Similarly, when Americans were asked if they had ever been to Japan, many American students replied that they would develop the topic in some way or another. However, they continued talking too long and were judged from the Japanese perspective as being self-absorbed. They need to know that Japanese people might withdraw emotionally by being overwhelmed by the talk, as some Japanese students' comments indicated.

Similarly, it is indispensable to explain the different perceptions on disagreement between Japanese and Americans. When Americans express their personal opinions, even if Japanese people refrain from stating disagreement out of consideration for Americans' feelings, Americans have a strong tendency to misinterpret a lack of response as meaning that they have no personal opinions or that they are expressing

agreement. In contrast, when Japanese people do express their opinions, Americans sometimes spontaneously express their disagreement. In such cases, Japanese people are likely to feel offended because the Americans don't appear to be listening respectfully. Both parties need to understand the others' viewpoint and adjust their timing and words to the other culture when expressing disagreement.

Further, it is crucial to help Japanese students recognize the need for active participation in conversation when communicating with native English speakers. Regarding conversation in general, the majority of Japanese students stated that they would develop the topic if they were interested. This tendency was seen in their responses to the following situation: "When told, 'Teenagers have bad manners, for example, they use cellular phones in the train and talk loudly with their friends.' If you disagreed, how would you answer?" Japanese students had a striking tendency to express their own opinions by using their own words because this topic was directly related to them. The responses were: "People around the teenagers with bad manners never warn them against their bad manners, so teenagers behave more badly because they don't have any opportunities to become aware of their bad manners;" and "People who have bad manners are not necessarily teenagers. Recently, I have often seen adults who aren't a good model for teenagers." Japanese students can develop a topic when it is of immediate concern or interest to them. If teachers begin by helping their students express their personal opinions about such topics, students may come to recognize how enjoyable it is to express their ideas by using their own words and then expand the range of topics.

In contrast, it is vital to help American students recognize the need for making appropriate poses when communicating with Japanese people. Even if a Japanese intends to give a reply, it may take some time to construct statements or finish speaking. Americans need to be encouraged to wait patiently until the Japanese begins to speak or finishes speaking.

As this survey indicates, people with intercultural or life experiences pass through their perceptual changes over time. People who have expanded their views through intercultural or life experiences have developed their empathic ability and tried to interpret incidents from the other person's perspective.

The process of making meaning is a joint accomplishment between speaker and listener (Thomas 1995); and therefore, it is important for teachers in classroom situations to teach students conversational strategies as different repertoires of communication, rather than one right strategy. (Davis and Henze 1998). Becoming aware of each other's differing views makes it possible to acquire the right timing, amount of information and words in each situation in order to live up to the other person's expectations.

### Acknowledgments

First of all, we wish to convey our appreciation to informants for their willingness to share their views in the questionnaires and to Professor Linda Laughlin for her assistance in collecting data. We also would like to express our gratitude to the reviewers of *Journal of Intercultural Communication* for their constructive suggestions.

### **References**

Blight, R. & Stephens, M.(2006). Discourse strategies involving topic nomination in English and Japanese language usage. Ehime University, *English Education Center Journal*, 4, 41-53.

Davis, K.A. & Henze, R.C.(1998). Applying ethnographic perspectives to issues in cross-cultural pragmatics. *Journal of Pragmatics* 30, 399-419.

Gillham, B.(2000). *Developing a questionnaire*. London: Continuum.

Grice, H.P.(1975). Logic and conversation. In Cole, P. & Morgan, J.L.(Eds.). *Syntax and semantics 3: Speech acts*(pp.41-58). New York: Academic.

Gumperz, J.J.(1982). *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gumperz, J.J.(1992). Contextualization and understanding. In A. Duranti & C. Goodwin (Eds.), *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon* (pp.229-252). Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press.

Gumperz, J.J.(1996). The linguistic and cultural relativity of conversational inference. In J.J. Gumperz & S.C. Levinson (Eds.), *Rethinking linguistic relativity* (pp.374-406). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Howell, W.S.(1982). *The empathic communicator*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Kawakita, J. (1967). *Hasso hou* [Creativity techniques]. Tokyo: Chukoshinsho.

Kawakita, J.(1970). *Zoku hasso hou* [The second series of creativity techniques]. Tokyo:Chukoshinsho.

Kindaichi, H.(1988). *Nihongo* [The Japanese Language]. Tokyo: Iwanami.

Kobayashi, J. & Viswat, L. (2007). Cultural differences in motivation to learn. *Internet TESL Journal*, 8, 11.

Loveday, L. (1983). Rhetoric patterns in conflict: The sociocultural relativity of discourse-organizing processes. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 7, 169-190.

Nakayama, O.(1989). *Bokashi no shinri* [Psychology of fuzzy thinking]. Tokyo: Sogensha.

Samovar, L.A. & Porter, R.E.(2001). *Communication between cultures* (4<sup>th</sup> ed). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Stewart, E.C. & Bennett, M.(1991). *American cultural patterns: A cross- cultural perspective* (Rev. ed). Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.

Thomas, J.(1995). *Meaning in interaction: An introduction to pragmatics*. London: New York.

## Appendix

### Questionnaire

We are conducting a survey on similarities and differences between Americans and Japanese regarding conversation. Your answers will be treated confidentially, so we would appreciate your answering each question frankly. Thank you very much for your participation in this survey.

Gender: M F Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Experience staying in Japan: Yes (length of stay: \_\_\_\_\_) No

Part I: Please choose the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement. Then, briefly explain your reason.

1 = strongly agree 2 = somewhat agree 3 = somewhat disagree 4 = strongly disagree

1. In conversation silence should be avoided as much as possible.

1 2 3 4

Reason:

2. In conversation you should develop the topic, not just answer the question.

1 2 3 4

Reason:

3. It would be better to say something rather than keep silent even if you are asked a question that you find difficult to answer right away.

1 2 3 4

Reason:

4. In conversation active participation such as asking questions is desirable.

1 2 3 4

Reason:

5. It would be better to express disagreement immediately if you don't agree with another person's opinion.

1 2 3 4

Reason:

Part II: Please circle the response that most closely corresponds to the response you would give for each situation. If you find another response that you think would be better than the one you would normally give, please double circle the answer. If you have a different response in mind, please feel free to write it.

1. Suppose that you had experience staying in Japan. How would you respond to the following question: "Have you ever been to Japan?"

- (1) "Yes."
- (2) "Yes, I've been to Japan."
- (3) "Yes, when I was in high school, I went to Japan."
- (4) "Yes, when I was in high school, I went to Japan as an exchange student. I had lots of new experiences such as trying sushi, visiting Japanese shrines, and going to a festival. It was great!"

Different answer:

2. Suppose that you wanted to visit England. How would you respond to the following question: "Which country would you like to visit?"

- (1) "England."
- (2) "England because it's interesting."
- (3) "England because I'm interested in the culture."
- (4) "England because I saw some historical buildings on TV, and I would like to see them with my own eyes. How about you?"

Different answer:

3. When asked how your weekend was when you hadn't done anything special, how would you respond?

- (1) "So-so."
- (2) "It was so-so because I couldn't do what I wanted to do."
- (3) "It was a pity that it wasn't fine."
- (4) "I wish it had been fine so that I could have gone on a picnic. I was really looking forward to getting outside."

Different answer:

4. When asked what you know about Australia, how would you answer?

- (1) "Nothing much."
- (2) "Australia has koalas."
- (3) "Australia has a vast land and many unusual animals."
- (4) "Australia is a peaceful country with a vast land and rich natural resources. I'd really like to go there someday."

Different answer:

5. When asked about deforestation, how would you answer?

- (1) "I think it's bad."
- (2) "I feel that air pollution is getting worse."
- (3) "It has caused serious problems in various parts of the world."
- (4) "People in developing countries have no other choice but to cut trees for a living, so people in developed countries should think out ways to avoid deforestation, for example, by recycling paper."

Different answer:

6. When told, "Teenagers have bad manners, for example, they use cellular phones in the train and talk loudly with their friends," if you disagreed, how would you answer?

- (1) "That may be true."
- (2) "That may be true of some people."
- (3) "Aren't there some teenagers who have polite manners?"
- (4) "Not all teenagers have bad manners. It's just that people with bad manners are so conspicuous."

Different answer:

7. Regarding the comment, "I think it's good that the Internet has come into wide use. We can do lots of things with it, such as shopping, watching TV or movies, sending e-mails to our friends who live all over the world," if you wanted to state disagreement, how would you answer?

- (1) "That may be true."
- (2) "Most things have positive and negative aspects."
- (3) "Hasn't the Internet also influenced people negatively?"
- (4) "The Internet has also influenced people negatively. Those people who are hooked on it have little communication with their family. Moreover, children with little knowledge of the Internet are involved in crimes."

Different answer:

8. Besides the above, if you have some other things that you pay special attention to in conversation, please feel free to share them.

---

### About the Authors

**Linda Viswat** is a professor at Otemon Gakuin University where she teaches courses in intercultural communication. Her research has focused on sojourner adjustment, learning strategies of Japanese university students, motivation, and the development of a learning community.

**Junko Kobayashi** is an associate professor at Kansai Gaidai University, Japan. She is the author of six English textbooks on intercultural communication.

### Authors' Addresses

#### **Linda Viswat**

Otemon Gakuin University

2-1-15 Nishiai

Ibaraki Osaka

567-8502 JAPAN

Email address: [viswat@res.otemon.ac.jp](mailto:viswat@res.otemon.ac.jp)

#### **Junko Kobayashi**

Kansai Gaidai University

16-1 Nakamiyahigashino-cho  
Hirakata Osaka  
573-1001 JAPAN  
Email address: [kjunko@kansai-gaidai.ac.jp](mailto:kjunko@kansai-gaidai.ac.jp)

---

Journal of Intercultural Communication, ISSN 1404-1634, issue 18, October 2008.  
Editor: Prof. Jens Allwood  
URL: <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/>.