

[Images are not available in online version.]

## **Awareness of Culture-Specific Connotations: Suggestions for Improvements in ESL Training**

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During the 1996 presidential election, the political pundits generally concluded that President Clinton's debate negotiation team prevailed over the Dole counterpart over the format, dates, and number of presidential debates. All of these appeared to favor Clinton. The President's senior debate negotiator, Mickey Kantor, attributed this success to all the negotiating that he had done with the Japanese. I suppose this was a nice benefit that Kantor had gained as the administration's trade ambassador. Kantor's comment appeared to be intended as a compliment, telling the Japanese how skilled they are at negotiating and how much he learned from them during his four years as Clinton's trade ambassador.

In general, trade negotiators — like ESL instructors — can look at all the differences they encounter with the Japanese and either feel frustrated and even overwhelmed or, as Kantor may have done, they can approach their jobs as a fascinating and unique challenge from which they can learn a great deal.

The fact remains that many negotiators encounter the same problem that many ESL instructors do: They are either ignorant of or overlook some of the fundamental cross-cultural differences when doing their jobs. Without some basic knowledge in cross-cultural communication, chances are that an ESL instructor will feel frustrated

and overwhelmed.

In ESL textbooks and college classes, teaching and learning styles are highly emphasized, but the impact of the native culture in learning a foreign language has only recently begun to be given adequate attention. As Robert Politzer concluded in the Georgetown University Report of the Fifth Annual Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Training back in 1959,

If we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning; for unless he is warned, unless he receives cultural instruction, he will associate American concepts or objects with foreign symbols. (1959: 100-1)

Joyce Merrill Valdes adds that

The most successful language learners are able to take on the “mindset” of the speakers of the second language, assuming the culture along with the language (though not, of course, without reservations that are consistent with their own mindsets) (1986: 2).

During the next several pages, I hope to show the interdependence of language and culture. My research concentrates on Japanese students learning English.

My paper will be divided into four parts. The first part deals with the cultural connotation of pictures; the second part will focus on the cultural connotation of basic words; the third part touches on the concept of silence; and the fourth and final part deals with the peculiarities of Japanese English.

## I. Pictures

No picture or word can be assumed to be culturally neutral. Pictures that to most people appear to be universal are often nothing of this sort. A language instructor should never take anything for granted. Even objects as basic as cups and glasses for tea or coffee can be quite different. Angela Heidemann, a doctoral candidate from Germany studying in England, made a wonderful presentation at the 1996 symposium on “The Cultural Context in Foreign Language Learning” at the University of Duisburg in Germany. She was kind enough to permit me to use her illustrations. I selected two from her many illustrations to present here. As you can see from the six drinking containers in Appendix A, tea and coffee containers vary among cultures. And these containers are only from different countries in Europe. So much for European unity! American and Japanese tea containers look quite different. (See Appendix B). The American container is commonly used in restaurants for iced tea. It is wide and tall and looks more like a bucket than a glass. And just in case you did not get enough, you can almost always have free refills.

Ms. Heidemann suggested placing additional clues to a picture; in this case, having a tea bag hanging out of the cup and a picture of tea leaves or coffee beans on the side of the cup. (See Appendix C). As she pointed out, pictures need to be “pregnant” or rich in meaning as no picture is neutral. At the symposium, an audience member asked whether it would not be best to simply use the one picture that represents the culture of the target language. I, however, marveled at the wide variety of pictures she showed of tea and coffee cups and believe it would be wasteful not to take advantage of all of them. In fact, introducing all these pictures lends itself to a number of ideal cooperative learning/communicative activities.

It is said that a picture tells a thousand words. However, those thousand words can be quite different, depending on the cultural interpretation of that picture. We sometimes forget that “English is an international language, but definitely is not an international culture” (Zoghoul 1986, as quoted in Celce-Murcia, 1991: 434). Let’s take the

game of baseball. It is a relatively simple game for which both Japanese and Americans share a love, but there are so many differences in the way the game is played in these two countries. I would like for you to take a few seconds and look at the illustration in Appendix D. What are some things that would be highly unusual or impossible if this were a professional baseball game played in Japan? If you're not a baseball aficionado, use your knowledge of Japanese and American cultures to try to guess at some differences. Some noticeable differences: Spitting is frowned upon in Japanese professional baseball; Japanese games can and do sometimes finish in ties (and serve as a wonderful face-saving device), something unheard of in the U.S.; Japanese baseball has a rule that all games must end at a specified time; and the pitcher is overweight, which is not that uncommon in the States. Appendix E (Baker, Mercer, & Bittinger 1993: 24) shows an illustration of a former American baseball star. Such an unorthodox batting stance (the way that the someone holds the bat) is fine in the U.S. so long as you are successful, but in Japan, all players are taught to hold the bat in the same way. If this player were Japanese playing in Japan, his awkward stance would be considered too individualistic and too disruptive to the team's harmony.

The next picture, Appendix F, consists of a gift-giving situation, specifically a best friend presenting his gift at a wedding. Again, please take a few seconds and look for some things that would be highly unusual or impossible to occur if this were a Japanese wedding reception. Highly unusual or impossible occurrences:

Such a dialogue would be impossible. In Japanese culture, humility is essential at all times.

In Japan, the present would be handed to an attendant at a table and not given directly to the groom.

In Japan, a family member or very close friend would wear a black suit and a white tie.

In Japan, it is rare to present a large gift. Money is often wrapped in a beautiful envelope.

Even if a gift other than money were given by a best friend, it would be wrapped extra nicely with at least one bow.

## II. Cultural Connotation of Words

Everywhere I have taught ESL, in the US and other countries, students always seem to greatly enjoy learning idioms. I think that we are all aware of how idioms can really throw off even very advanced English language learners, but we tend to overlook how many very basic words can have quite different connotations in other countries. One of the first lessons that someone learning about the Japanese culture – and certainly an ESL teacher – need to know are the differences in “yes” and “no”; how yes in Japanese can mean yes, I understand or yes, I agree and that there are 20 different ways to say no. Dave Barry in his book *Dave Barry Does Japan* (1994) points this out in his usual humorous fashion. He uses a chart to illustrate the differences between yes and no in the two cultures. (See Appendix G.) The next illustration shows the results of a survey taken of Japanese, Americans, and French people as presented by Binon and Claes (1996), also at the aforementioned meeting in Duisburg. (See Appendix H.)

In the classroom, we must differentiate between the denotation of a word, which is the definition, without emotion, and the connotation, which is how something is interpreted, the emotions that a word evokes. To pass a test like the TOEFL or an exam for an ESL class, knowing the denotation of the word will probably be sufficient, but to be proficient in a real language situation, it is essential that the student understand the word’s connotation.

Here are several more words that appear very basic on the surface, but conjure up quite different images to the Japanese and to the Americans. For their students to have a good grasp of the way these terms are used in our culture, an ESL instructor will need to do more than merely teach the dictionary definition. But, first and foremost, the instructor must be aware that indeed there can be a

fundamental difference in such basic words.

**Presentation** - Here the cultural differences are enormous and can lead to severe misunderstandings. Right at the start, there can be a breakdown in cross-cultural communication. The classic ingredient to a successful presentation in the U.S. is to be entertaining, and this includes starting off with a joke. Other basic ingredients are never apologizing or being too humble and always showing that you are on top of your subject matter even if you may not know what you are talking about. It is also considered vital to establish eye-contact with the audience. In Japan a presentation which follows this recipe would be considered a failure. There, beginning a presentation with a comment like "I don't know the subject matter very well, but I'll do my best" or "I hope to do my best, but am only mildly qualified" is not unusual because it shows humility on the part of the speaker. To such a statement an American audience would react quite negatively: "Well, if you're barely qualified, then why are you wasting our time giving a speech?"

Roger Axtell writes about a U.S. governor who thought his important presentation to Japanese officials was a disaster because many in the Japanese audience looked asleep and were even nodding their heads. Fortunately, an American lawyer in Japan explained to him that

among the Japanese a common way to show concentration and attentiveness was to close the eyes in contemplation and nod the head slightly, up and down. What the governor read as boredom was actually a signal of respect and attention (1991: 13).

It would be very unfortunate if Japanese students expected to make some presentations in the U.S. are taught by an ESL instructor who is unaware of such a profound difference. Further examples of basic differences are the following:

**Power** - As David Victor (1996) noted at the conference mentioned before, to an American power is indicated by giving an order in direct fashion. For a Japanese, power is demonstrated by one's employee

doing what is expected of him/her before the superior gives the order.

**Well Educated** - implies refined manners in Japan, how well you were raised, as it does in quite a few other cultures too, but for an American, it implies a college degree, and whether the graduate has manners or not is largely irrelevant.

**Politician** - Though most Americans have had enough of this word for a while, I just had to throw it in. My in-laws in Japan had several people over, and my wife explained that this one man sitting next to us was a local councilman. I made a remark to her in English that he “looks and sounds like a politician.” She immediately told me to “tell him. It’s a real compliment.” Though feeling a bit awkward, I told him this, and sure enough, he took it as a compliment.” If I made a top 10 list of bizarre moments in my life, this one would have to be near the top. In Japan, being a politician is similar to being a doctor, lawyer, teacher, and so on. That is, it is a professional occupation, and generally if you do a good job at it, you’re respected. The word “politician” per se has no negative connotation, unlike in America, where it connotes untrustworthiness. In the U.S., to say that a person looks like a politician is never a compliment.

**Mansion** - In Japan, this English word is used to refer to an apartment building that is often at least five floors high and usually pretty nice, though I lived in a mediocre three-story apartment building and felt quite pretentious writing my friends in the States with a return address of Mansion Torii 304. I guess some of my friends were thinking that the rumors about making a fortune teaching English in Japan were true. Needless to say, a number of friends back in the States teased me about my address.

**Drive-in** - The Japanese also use this word in English. However, if you are invited by a Japanese to a drive-in, don’t ask what movie is playing because you will get dinner at a roadside restaurant rather than look at a movie.

**Thank You** - Even an expression as widespread as “Thank you” should not be taken for granted. At the aforementioned conference in Duisburg, Ignacio Vazquez Orta (1996) of Spain pointed out how a

basic and seemingly positive expression such as “Thank you” can lead to irritation. He referred to Dutch tourists in Spain who know how but not when to express thanks. Waiters in Spain, he said, know that they are doing their job, so rather than appreciating frequent words of thanks, they tend to get angry. In Japan, whenever I said thank you to department store clerks, my wife got upset with me. I was not irritating, but I just sounded stupid. After all, the buying customer is doing a favor, not the other way around. This is the type of thing that students of a foreign language need to be alerted to.

It is not only pictures and words that conjure up different connotations. ESL instructors certainly need to be aware of the different ideas about silence, the waiting time allotted between sentences. In the U.S., silence within the conversational context is not golden but has a negative connotation; we speak of “dead silence.” In Japan intersentential silence has a positive connotation. In a presentation, it is regarded as thoughtful because silence gives the listener a moment to contemplate; it is a form of courtesy to the listener. In the US, when students delay answering a question, the teacher can assume that they don’t know the correct answer. This, however, is not necessarily the case with Japanese students. Such a situation can really throw an American teacher off. I can think of no better example than that of an ESL scholar who conducted a study that tested the English language proficiency of students from a variety of countries. When discussing a question that was asked of a Japanese student, this researcher nonchalantly stated that after three seconds had elapsed, it was apparent that the Japanese student could not answer the question; so the interviewer moved on to the next question. Little did he know that three seconds of silence in the U.S. may feel like an eternity, but three seconds to a Japanese, not to mention a Japanese learner of English, is not much time at all to pause before answering a question. The Japanese may also be considering not only what would be the correct answer but also what is the appropriate, polite manner to state it. As so well stated by Honna and Hoffer (1989, p. 226), “The Japanese are very cautious not to hurt the feelings of



others.”

In addition to the cultural connotation of pictures, words, and silence, the ESL instructor teaching Japanese students must also be aware of words that have neither connotation nor denotation to Americans, i.e., they are meaningless. But these words are fully understandable and can be used quite frequently by the Japanese. This is known as “Japanese-English” or “Japanglish.” There is a lot of confusion with Japanese students over what is real English and what is Japanese English. Many Japanese learners of English could read the following two sentences and not realize anything unusual about any of the words: Seiji took a two-shot picture of Junko and Kenji by a campfire. Junko was wearing a trainer and covered by a towel ket, and Kenji was wearing new g-pants and riding a bicycle but had a handle miss. The word “two-shot picture” means a picture taken of two people together, usually of a boyfriend and girlfriend; trainer means sweatshirt; towel ket refers to a cotton blanket; g-pants are blue jeans; and a handle miss is an accident caused by a mistake in steering. Obviously, an instructor cannot be expected to be familiar with all the Japanese-English words, but just being aware that there are quite a few such words and being alert to hearing them can go a long way.

Knowledge about cross-cultural communication should become an integral and systematic part of the training of foreign language teachers. It is not enough to know the basics about the culture of the people speaking the target language. Careful consideration must be given to the potential for misunderstanding that may result from the interaction of source and target culture. And no word or picture should be assumed to be culturally neutral.

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The following references are all papers presented at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Symposium of the Linguistic Agency of the University of Duisburg in Duisburg, Germany, in 1996. The topics of the double symposium were The Cultural Context in Business Communication and The Cultural Context in Foreign Language Learning.

- Binon, Jean and Claes, Marie Therese  
 'Intercultural communication and negotiation in the Business environment'
- Heidemann, Angela  
 'Not everyone's cup of tea: The problem of interculturality in

foreign language teaching materials'

Vasquez Orta, Ignacio

'Interpersonal communication in England'

Victor, David

'The cultural context in international business communication:  
The LESCANT approach to evaluating cross-cultural  
differences in the workplace'

**APPENDIX G**

Table 1. Dave Barry's Yes/No Table

ENGLISH STATEMENT MADE BY JAPANESE PERSON	ACTUAL MEANING IN AMERICAN ENGLISH
I see	No.
Ah.	No.
Ah-hah.	No.
Yes.	No.
That is difficult.	That is completely impossible.
That is very interesting.	That is the stupidest thing that I ever heard.
We will study your proposal will feed your proposal to	We a goat

Barry, Dave (1994)

**Appendix H**

<u>Stimulus</u>	<u>American</u>	<u>Japanese</u>	<u>French</u>
friendship	affection	same sex	fondness
affection	love	trust	love
work	one's interest	effort	creativity
foreigner nationality	from another country		tall person