

Cultural Expectations in Expressing Disagreement: Differences between Japan and the United States

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Abstract

The article identifies problems between Japanese students with intermediate English proficiency and native English speakers in the United States when expressing disagreement. The survey results indicate that common ways by which Japanese students express disagreement are likely to be either misinterpreted or viewed negatively by Americans. For English education aimed at promoting intercultural understanding, it is not sufficient just to introduce Japanese students to formulaic patterns for expressing disagreement. The article explores the kind of instruction that is necessary to alleviate intercultural misunderstandings caused by differences in how disagreement is expressed. While the subjects of the article are Japanese students, the recommendations are applicable to other Asian students as well.

Keywords: Expressing disagreement, silence, ambiguity, clarity, alleviating intercultural misunderstandings.

Introduction

Language learners are expected to become intermediaries, mediating between potentially conflicting behaviors and belief systems in their own and other's social lives (Byram & Zarate, 1994). One behavior and belief system is the way in which we express disagreement. While in American culture expressing one's opinions openly and assertively is usually

considered an admirable trait (Samovar & Porter, 2001), in Japanese culture conveying one's disagreement with another person indirectly is necessary for maintaining good human relationships (Nakayama, 1989). As such, it is important to determine the kinds of problems these cultural differences cause when Japanese students learn English.

Literature Review

A limited number of research studies (e.g. Beebe & Takahashi, 1989a, 1989b; Kreutel, 2007) have been conducted on how disagreement is expressed by Japanese staying in the United States or non-native speakers learning English. The study, carried out by Beebe and Takahashi (1989a, 1989b) based on responses to surveys completed by 15 Japanese staying in the United States and 15 Americans, concluded that Americans were not always more direct or explicit than Japanese. However, the sample was small with only 15 Japanese and 15 Americans. Also, communication styles employed by Japanese staying in the United States may differ greatly from those of Japanese living in Japan, and therefore, the Japanese sample is not generalizable to the general Japanese population. Moreover, hypothetical situations were included which might not be familiar to university-aged students. For example, a case was provided where the respondent was a corporate executive who disagreed with an assistant's proposal. It was probable that students without experience working as a corporate executive found it difficult to relate to the situation.

The other study (Kreutel, 2007), based on a survey of 27 native speakers of American English and 27 non-native speakers learning English, reported that non-native speakers used mitigational devices, such as hedges or explanations, less frequently than native speakers. However, the focus of the research was not specifically on how Japanese expressed disagreement as there were only 6 Japanese respondents among the 27 non-native speakers.

Methodology

The question we raise here is: What specific difficulties do ordinary Japanese students in Japan have when expressing disagreement with native English speakers? To identify difficulties that occur in classroom settings, a questionnaire was administered, and distributed to 97 Japanese university students with intermediate English proficiency. Respondents were asked to fill out the following questionnaire at home and return it to the instructor within a few days: "Have you ever experienced any communication problems when expressing disagreement with native English speakers? If you have, please describe specifically the situations and the words you (or another Japanese) used. Please describe how the native

English speakers' response made you realize that the communication exchange had not been satisfactory." After analysis of the students' responses, 12 representative patterns, such as keeping silent and using euphemisms, emerged. A follow-up interview was conducted with some students to have them further clarify their responses and explain how they regarded their interactions with native English speakers.

Another questionnaire was organized based upon the results of the above survey, and was distributed to 90 students studying in a mid-Western college in the United States with or without experience learning a foreign language. They were asked to judge whether communication devices employed by Japanese to express disagreements were effective or ineffective. (For instance, an American teacher said, "Electronic dictionaries are useful because we can quickly examine words that we don't know. Also, we can carry electronic dictionaries with us." To express disagreement a Japanese student answered, "Probably.") They were also asked to briefly give reasons for their judgment, and explain how they would have responded in the same situation. In the last section, they were encouraged to share their own views on expressing disagreement in general.

The purpose of this paper is first to identify problems between Japanese students with intermediate English proficiency and native English speakers in the United States when expressing disagreement. A second purpose is to explore the kind of instruction that is necessary to alleviate intercultural misunderstandings caused by differences in how disagreement is expressed.

Differences in Cultural Expectations

Disagreement in General

American responses to Japanese students' expressions of disagreement in general contrasted sharply with Japanese cultural values. Specific examples from the perspective of American culture included: "I think that most of these answers are pretty ineffective. Answers should be direct and to the point. You either agree or disagree;" and "If this is how they really talk, they need to learn to be more open, honest and straightforward." These American comments coincided with the main reasons why Japanese students judged their communication with native English speakers not to work well: The students were told by native English speakers, "Don't you have any opinions?" and "You agree with me, right?" Japanese students mentioned: "When I was thinking about how to express disagreement in English, I was told, 'Don't you have any opinions?' and I lost my motivation to learn;" and "I didn't agree with what the teacher said, and so I said, 'Probably.' However, the teacher misinterpreted my

message.” Even when the Japanese students used euphemisms so as not to offend another person, Americans did not appreciate such consideration for the other person. On the contrary, many Americans found the communication styles ineffective because they regarded the styles as lacking a clear opinion. On the other hand, some Americans did convey understanding of Japanese culture by saying, “Japanese don’t speak out if they don’t agree;” and “The Japanese student is deferring to the opinion of his teacher.”

Silence

Next, individual cases were examined. What Americans regarded most negatively was the situation where Japanese students kept silent when they did not agree with an American teacher’s opinion regarding the issue of high school students’ part-time jobs. The specific example was: An American teacher said, “Some high school students work part-time. I’m against this because high school students should concentrate on their studies. Also, they should enjoy their school life by taking part in club activities. To express their disagreement, Japanese students kept silent.” The main reasons why Americans judged maintaining silence as an ineffective means of expressing disagreement were: “Keeping silent sounds like there is no opinion on the topic;” and “Neither disagrees nor agrees—indifferent.”

Also, the Americans surveyed frequently replied that if they were put in the same situation, they would mention the merits of part-time jobs by saying something like: “I do not agree with that because working part-time during high school gives a good sense of responsibility;” and “I disagree because some students would like to make connections in the working world.” This attitude contrasted sharply with that of most Japanese students. The Japanese students mentioned: “It’s rude to express disagreement openly to the teacher’s opinion in public;” and “I don’t want to make the teacher feel uncomfortable.” These ideas arise from Confucianism where interlocutors are expected to pay special attention to their social status, and not take a defiant attitude toward their superiors. Therefore, in this case it is necessary for Japanese students to understand a different American cultural value where knowledge is considered to be relative and negotiable even in teacher-student relationships (Powell & Andersen, 1994).

Ambiguity

Other situations in which Americans passed negative judgments were when Japanese students used “Probably,” “Maybe so,” or “Maybe, I think so,” for expressing disagreement. Many Americans stated: “Very indecisive,” “Very confusing,” and “Sounds like the student is not

familiar with the topic.” The remark, “Maybe you’re right,” also was negatively rated by Americans: “To me, that is submissive and sounds like agreement;” and “Agreement, but I don’t think the student fully understands.” In other words, Americans generally regarded Japanese ambiguity as a lack of knowledge, understanding and confidence.

A markedly clear difference was displayed in reaction to a situation in which a Japanese student responded, “Yes, I’ll think about it.” This reply was given when an American student said, “This project will be beneficial for both of us.” Japanese students mentioned: “When I don’t agree with the other person’s suggestion, I usually say, ‘I’ll think about it.’ The other person should know what I mean;” and “When declining someone’s suggestion, I think it’s a refined way to say, ‘I’ll think about it.’” That is, these words were used to hedge their negative response to a proposal in order to show respect for the other person’s feelings and avoid confrontation. On the other hand, Americans showed a tendency to react negatively to the response by making statements such as: “Think about what?” and “There is nothing to think about plus he didn’t say how he felt.” Other American students misinterpreted the statement of “Yes, I’ll think about it” to mean that “The Japanese student agrees that the project will be beneficial and will think about how to do it;” and “Agree, but I do not know how firmly.” Put in the same situation, Americans generally replied that they would immediately try to communicate their lack of enthusiasm for engaging in the project with words like, “No, I don’t want to do it;” “It will only benefit you;” and “Will it be beneficial for me?”

Both Japanese and Americans had difficulty understanding views that were vastly different from their own. Therefore, it is important to help them become more aware of cultural differences regarding how they value clarity vs. ambiguity.

Some Unexpected Responses from Americans

Some Americans’ responses were significantly different from what had been expected. A situation was presented in which an Australian said, “Most Japanese work too hard. They only live to work. I feel sorry for them,” and a Japanese answered, “You may feel that way.” Some positive responses were identified: “This is obvious disagreement, but it is softer than the typical American, ‘You’re wrong;’” “This one shows disagreement, but in a polite way. I like this;” and “They [Japanese] are acknowledging that the Australian has a right to their opinion, but they may not feel the same way.” However, more common answers from Americans were ones adding their own words to “You may feel that way,” + “...but I think we need to work more;” or “...that’s the way our culture is.” There were some other

variations: “I don’t feel like that;” and “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

Unexpected responses were also observed in situations such as when an American student said, “I really don’t like this class,” and a Japanese replied, “Yes, I understand.” Some positive comments from Americans were: “That is a good response. You shouldn’t force your own opinion on others. After all, everyone has their own opinions;” and “It shows disagreement without obvious expressions of disagreeing.” On the other hand, some Americans stated that the Japanese answer left something to be desired by saying: “This is like an agreement, but the student does not want to give his/her real opinion;” and “They [Japanese] understand how the person feels, but they do not share their feelings.” The latter coincides with common responses from Americans; that is, if they were in the same situation, they would ask “Why don’t you like it?” or “Oh, really? Why is that so?”

Individual Differences

In contrast to the above cultural differences, some differences were identified depending on the individual’s degree of understanding of Japanese cultural values, the individual’s personality, and life experiences. A few Americans who were familiar with Japanese culture had a more objective understanding of both cultures, such as, “The Japanese may believe it rude to answer in a negative way directly, but for Americans, to answer indirectly when you mean ‘no’ is considered very rude.” Also, regarding individual cases, there were such responses as “This could be sufficient for some Americans. A better answer as an American is: ‘I don’t really agree.’” In addition, a few Americans who appeared to identify strongly with Japanese cultural values stated: “I often find myself answering in a similar way [to the Japanese] because I’d prefer to not argue over things that really don’t matter.” These Americans also gave positive comments such as: “Silence sometimes says more than word does;” and “This seems like a non-conflicting disagreement.” Furthermore, Americans with more life experiences tended to consider many possibilities when interpreting the situations. When interpreting Japanese silence, for instance, they commented: “Either disagreement, no opinion either way or no comment out of respect for the teacher.”

Applying the Survey Results to English Education

The above survey results indicate that common ways by which Japanese students express disagreement are likely to either be misinterpreted or viewed negatively by Americans. Although most Japanese students understood that their intended meanings had not been conveyed accurately from observing the reactions of native English speakers, they did not

know how to express their disagreements effectively.

Then, what kind of instruction is necessary for Japanese students to overcome these intercultural problems? First, it is important for teachers to help Japanese students recognize that “understanding cultural meanings is a process of recognizing the interaction between one’s own ways of meaning and one’s understanding of others” (Roberts, etc., 2001, p.120). In order to implement this, teachers themselves have to be familiar with both cultural meanings. For example, keeping silent to express disagreement is usually viewed negatively by Americans in general as silence indicates that one either has no opinion or disrespects the other person. When teachers know only their own ways of meaning, they are apt to say, “Don’t you have any opinions?” which will end up demotivating Japanese students. American teachers who are well versed in Japanese culture can comprehend accurately the cultural implication of silence, or devise ways of asking different questions so that they can elicit responses from Japanese students.

Similarly, using euphemisms is viewed negatively by most Americans, as such indirect responses convey indecisiveness and are easily misunderstood. When communicating with Americans who can figure out what the euphemism means, however, Japanese students can avoid intercultural misunderstandings, and learn how to give replies that are direct and to the point. Japanese students will be able to view these situations where there is a disagreement as positive opportunities for exchanging and discussing ideas. In order to get good educational results, mutual understanding is indispensable.

On the other hand, the survey results also indicate, Americans use different degrees of directness to express disagreement, and Japanese students do not have to employ communication styles that the majority of Americans use. Take the above-mentioned situation, for instance. When expressing disagreement to an American student’s opinion, “This project will be beneficial for both of us,” many Americans replied, “No, I don’t want to do it;” and “It will only benefit you.” Japanese students who find these remarks to be overly direct or showing disregard for the other person’s intention would benefit from learning other expressions with a less confrontational tone: “It may or may not be beneficial. I need time to think about it;” or “I’m not sure if it will benefit everyone.”

Also, in the situation where an American student said, “When we do our homework, we should use the Internet. The Internet is a better source of information than any other source because we can find much information easily and quickly,” many Americans expressed conflicting opinions. Such a position was expressed by words like: “I disagree because books are a more reliable source than the Internet;” and “I believe books, encyclopedias, databases

are more accurate sources.” However, some Americans expressed partial disagreement: “The Internet is not always the best source because anyone can put anything on there.” Others argued back after acknowledging the other person’s opinion: “The Internet may be a good source, but sometimes you have to go to good textbooks for more solid information.” Japanese students would find such remarks with a less confrontational tone to be useful.

For English education aimed at promoting intercultural understanding, it is not sufficient just to introduce Japanese students to formulaic patterns for expressing disagreement such as: “I do not agree,” “I disagree” or “I partially agree with you, but...” First, it is indispensable to help Japanese students identify ways in which disagreement is expressed in their own culture and in the target culture, and understand how misunderstandings are likely to occur because of cultural differences. Second, it is important to help Japanese students become aware of various expressions for indicating disagreement. There are expressions that they should avoid using in interactions with Americans, expressions that the majority of Americans use, and expressions used by Americans who prefer a less confrontational tone. After helping Japanese students become familiar with a broad range of communication options, it is necessary to give Japanese students opportunities to practice using them in the classroom so that they are prepared in actual interactions with native English speakers. While the target subjects of the article are Japanese students and the sample of the subjects is limited, the suggestions are extendable to other Asian students as well since Asian students share similar cultural values arising from Confucianism.

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