



## Japanese and Overseas Employees' Perceptions of Intercultural Communication : Insights for Designing an Educational Programme

Yoko Yamada    Yasuyuki Kishi

**Abstract:** This study examines Japanese and overseas employees' perceptions of intercultural communication in multicultural workplaces. This study focuses on local government offices and local government-related organisations in a rural area in Japan. The results obtained from conducted semi-structured interviews provided us with some insights into what conceptualisation of culture we should adopt in intercultural education and which cultural characteristics Japanese students should focus on to develop a critical awareness of their own culture. The results also provided us with insights into how students should view the adaptation to cultural differences. These insights help us design an educational programme for developing Japanese students' intercultural competence for working in multicultural workplaces in Japan's rural areas.

**Key words:** multicultural workplaces, Japan's rural areas, intercultural competence, communication styles, perceptions

### 1. Introduction

This study is part of our research project for designing an educational programme that develops Japanese students' competence for working in multicultural workplaces in Japan's rural areas. Due to population decline, employing people from overseas has become inevitable in various parts of Japan, which has led even rural workplaces to become multicultural. Under these circumstances, it implies that after graduating, Japanese students will have more opportunities to work in multicultural workplaces even in rural areas, which encourages us to develop their competence for working in multicultural workplaces in Japan's rural areas.

Our behaviour patterns (e.g. ways of thinking and speaking), which are based on values, norms and assumptions that deeply lie in our culture, differ in many ways from those in other cultures. However, we are generally relatively unconscious with regard to which aspects of our behaviour patterns are different from those in other cultures and may be misunderstood

when working in a multicultural workplace.

Previous studies (Tokunaga 2009; Yokosuka 2015) have reported the difficulties faced by overseas employees in Japanese workplaces: some are related to the Japanese language (e.g. Japanese *keigo*), others are caused by differences in business conventions between Japan and other countries and several others are caused by differences in cultural values between the Japanese and overseas employees.

In Tokunaga's (2009) Web survey, the participants were overseas employees who worked in Japan. In Yokosuka's (2015) Web survey, the participants were overseas employees who graduated from Japanese universities; 58.3% of them worked in Tokyo and 30.4% of them worked in the Kanto area excluding Tokyo. However, previous research has rarely focused on rural areas in Japan.

Additionally, previous studies have often focused exclusively on companies as workplaces when, in fact, multicultural workplaces where Japanese graduates will work are not restricted to companies.

The purpose of this study is to examine Japanese and overseas employees' perceptions of intercultural communication in multicultural workplaces in a rural area's local government offices and local government-related organisations, in order to provide insights for designing an educational programme for college students. One of the characteristics of employees' work in local government offices and local government-related organisations is that their work requires them to interact not only with their colleagues in the offices/organisations but also with people in the local community. By considering the possible difficulties the Japanese and overseas employees are confronted with when working in a multicultural workplace, we hope to gain some insight into behaviour patterns of Japanese people in that area which could affect intercultural interaction.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we explain the research method. In Section 3, we examine the research results. In Section 4, we discuss implications of the results. In Section 5, we summarise the study conclusions.

## 2. Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at local government offices and local government-related organisations in a rural area in Japan. Through semi-structured interviews, this study expects to acquire in-depth descriptions of what Japanese/overseas employees experienced in multicultural workplaces. In-depth descriptions of employees' experiences in multicultural workplaces might throw light on not only what they experienced but also how they

recognise these experiences.

Request letters for research were distributed to offices/organisations in the area to request permission to conduct interviews. The letters explained the aim of the interview, the potential participants, the duration of the interview, the main questions which will be asked, and the plan to protect the interview data.

There were 21 study participants in total: 13 overseas employees and their eight Japanese supervisors. The interviews were conducted in June, July and October 2018.

Questions to overseas employees included the following: 1) What do you keep in mind when working with Japanese employees? 2) What difficulties do you face when working with Japanese employees? and 3) How do you cope with the difficulties?

Questions to Japanese supervisors included the following: 1) What do you keep in mind as the supervisor of an overseas employee? 2) What difficulties do you face as the supervisor of an overseas employee? 3) How do you cope with the difficulties? 4) What are the problems a multicultural workplace is faced with? and 5) How does the office/organisation cope with these problems? Questions following up on interviewees' comments were also asked during the interviews.

In many cases, group interviews were conducted and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Japanese language.

### **3. Results**

This section reviews the answers/comments of overseas employees and Japanese supervisors. They will be examined in that order.

#### **3.1. Difficulties that overseas employees faced**

The main language used in the multicultural workplaces is Japanese. The proficiency level of overseas employees' Japanese language is high, according to Japanese supervisors.

The main difficulties when working in the multicultural workplaces reported by overseas employees can be divided into four types: difficulties caused by (a) Japanese language and conversation patterns; (b) different value systems; (c) Japanese business conventions and (d) Japanese people's view of different cultures. In the following, the causes of each difficulty will be examined.

##### **3.1.1. Difficulties caused by Japanese language and conversation patterns**

Overseas employees described having various difficulties with the Japanese language

and conversation patterns. Their difficulties can be divided into three types: difficulties caused by 1) the Japanese *keigo* system, 2) distinctive features of *aizuchi* or 3) Japanese communication style. Below, we will examine these three types of difficulties.

#### Difficulties caused by Japanese *keigo* system

Japanese language has a rich *keigo* system to emphasise any hierarchical relationships. Some overseas employees noted that it was difficult to use Japanese *keigo* appropriately. There are two factors that could contribute to this; the first is related to the complicated formation of Japanese *keigo*. In Japanese language, some verbs have regular honorific forms; others have irregular honorific forms while some others have both regular honorific and irregular honorific forms. The second factor is that one is expected to use *keigo* appropriately, according to ‘social distance’. Social distance is a critical concept in this context. Social distance has ‘[v]ertical distance’ (Tsukuba Language Group 1995: 20) and ‘[h]orizontal distance’ (Tsukuba Language Group 1995: 22). According to Tsukuba Language Group (1995: 20–22), vertical distance is ‘social status based on seniority and rank’ (p. 20) and horizontal distance is the in-group/out-group relationship. As such, the way we perceive social distance between interlocutors in conversation and to what extent we make status differences explicit will differ from one culture to another. Differences in these aspects may make it difficult for overseas employees to decide when they should use which form.<sup>1</sup>

#### Difficulties caused by distinctive features of *aizuchi*

Some overseas employees mentioned having difficulties being able to completely understand Japanese utterances with so much *aizuchi*. Their comment is understandable, considering differences in the use of so-called backchannels (e.g. ‘uh-huh’ in English) across languages. Backchannels are verbal and non-verbal signals that do not carry any referential meaning. In Japanese, backchannels are called *aizuchi*.

Previous studies on backchannels have demonstrated several distinctive features of *aizuchi* in Japanese conversation. Here we focus on two features of *aizuchi*. One feature is the frequency of *aizuchi* in Japanese conversation (Clancy et al. 1996; Maynard 1997). Clancy et al.

---

<sup>1</sup> The results of recent research on Japanese *keigo* add to the complexity of using Japanese *keigo* appropriately. Recent research demonstrates that even in a context where a workplace hierarchy exists, the lower-status person does not necessarily use polite forms (i.e. *desu/masu* forms) for the higher-status person but rather that the lower-status person adopts a mixed use of polite and plain forms (Saito 2010). According to Saito’s (2010) empirical study, even in a context where workplace hierarchy exists and polite forms are the main linguistic forms for the lower-status person, the lower-status person occasionally uses plain forms e.g. to express his/her inner thoughts and to highlight information.

(1996) examined what is referred to as *reactive tokens* in Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and American English. Reactive tokens, according to Clancy et al. (1996), include backchannels, reactive expressions (e.g. 'oh really' in English) and collaborative finishes (i.e. listener can finish the speaker's utterance). By examining their data collected during face-to-face conversations in all three languages, Clancy et al. (1996) showed that Japanese conversation contained more backchannels compared to American English or Mandarin Chinese. Based on her conversation data, Maynard (1997: 144) claimed that '[b]ack channels are almost like background music accompanying the speaker's utterance' in Japanese conversation, whereas 'American listeners are more silent while listening to the speaker'. Maynard (1997) suggests that the way conversation is managed differs between Japanese and American conversations.

The other feature is the placement of *aizuchi*. In a Japanese conversation, the listener often uses *aizuchi* at non-transition relevant places (Clancy et al. 1996; Kita and Ide 2007; Miyata and Nisisawa 2007). According to Miyata and Nisisawa (2007), *aizuchi* occurring at transition relevant places is equivalent to English backchannels, whereas *aizuchi* occurring at non-transition relevant places is not. Moreover, although many studies on backchannels regard them as verbal and non-verbal signals produced by the person who plays the listener's role in the conversation, Kita and Ide (2007) suggest that *aizuchi* is used not only by the listener but also by the speaker as he/she can sometimes add *aizuchi* at the end of his/her utterance. English forms such as 'uh-huh' cannot be used in that context.

The distinctive features of *aizuchi* lead us to predict that non-native Japanese speakers have difficulties acquiring *aizuchi* used in Japanese conversation. A few previous studies confirm this prediction. For example, Ishida (2006) noted a few qualitative differences between native speakers of Japanese and learners of Japanese with respect to the interpretation of *aizuchi* and the social context where *aizuchi* is used.

From what has been mentioned so far, the distinctive features of *aizuchi* (e.g. frequency and placement) may prevent overseas employees from fully understanding what was said.

#### Difficulties caused by Japanese communication style

Some overseas employees' comments were related to the Japanese communication style. An overseas employee, for instance, described that it was truly difficult to understand what was being said when it was being said in a foreign language with a non-linear communication style. Overseas employees' comments highlighted three aspects of Japanese communication style: (i) evasiveness; (ii) requiring the listener to sense the tone; (iii) non-linear and digressive style. These three aspects of communication style can be characteristics of a high-context

communication according to Hall's (1976) concept of high-context and low-context cultures. However, this is a matter of degree. Hooker (2012: 390), for instance, points out that '[c]ommunication within a family or close-knit group is high-context in almost any part of the world' and that 'low-context communication is becoming more common in high-context cultures, due to Western influences and a desire to accommodate travelers and expatriates'. Additionally, diversity among members within the same cultural group exists (Noels et al. 2012). However, given that comments (i)–(iii) above were made by various overseas employees who interacted with Japanese people in a wide range of circumstances, it is arguable to state that Japanese communication style is basically a high-context communication.

### **3.1.2. Difficulties caused by different value systems**

An overseas employee commented that it was difficult to observe in what situation the employee could use casual forms of language when talking to higher-status persons in the workplace. Another overseas employee suggested that employees from cultures without the concept of seniority might have difficulties accepting suggestions and comments even if they were given by someone with higher status in the workplace. These comments highlight the existence of a gap between overseas employees' values and those of Japanese.

### **3.1.3. Difficulties caused by Japanese business conventions**

Some overseas employees commented on decision-making processes in the Japanese workplace, such as *hou-ren-sou* ('reporting, contacting and discussing'). These comments reflect differences in business conventions from one country to another. Such differences have been pointed out by previous studies on multicultural workplaces. Holmes' (2015) research on the experiences of immigrants entering the workforce in New Zealand showed the difference between immigrants and their employers in that one should work autonomously or seek affirmation from co-workers.

One overseas employee described having difficulties due to Japanese business manners. The employee in question answered the phone in the workplace by saying *moshimoshi* ('hello?'), which was not the expected response in the Japanese workplace. Instead, in Japanese workplaces, responding with a self-identification is the preferred manner when answering the phone and so, it is what is expected of employees.

### **3.1.4. Difficulties caused by Japanese people's view of different cultures**

Some overseas employees noted that some Japanese people are likely to have a stereotyped view of different cultures, which caused embarrassment to overseas employees.

**3.2. Steps taken by overseas employees to overcome difficulties**

What steps do overseas employees take to overcome the difficulties presented in Section 3.1? Table 1 below describes the main strategies used by the overseas employees.

Table 1 *Steps overseas employees take to overcome difficulties*

Steps taken by overseas employees	Examples
What they do to understand what was said	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asking Japanese colleagues without hesitation when they have questions/problems</li> <li>• Confirming what was said</li> <li>• Paying attention not only to what was said but also to how it was said (i.e. tone of voice)</li> </ul>
What they do to make themselves/their cultures understood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeating themselves using different Japanese expressions when they are having difficulty in making themselves understood in Japanese</li> <li>• Explaining their cultures so that their behaviours are not misunderstood negatively</li> <li>• Explaining their cultures so that Japanese people can get a deeper understanding of overseas employees' cultures</li> </ul>
Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working harmoniously</li> <li>• Learning Japanese business conventions by paying attention to the patterns of Japanese people's behaviour</li> <li>• Managing stress</li> </ul>

Overseas employees adopt strategies illustrated in Table 1, which reflects the view that '[c]ommunication is fundamental in business, because business is a collaborative activity' (Hooker 2012: 389).

### 3.3. Japanese supervisors' comments

The Japanese supervisors, who pointed out few difficulties, made various comments on their experiences during intercultural interaction. An analysis of Japanese supervisors' comments revealed the following three points. The first point was the importance of communication with others in the workplace. The strategies Japanese supervisors used to effectively communicate with others, whether they were Japanese or overseas employees, varied from one supervisor to another.

The second point was related to the way Japanese supervisors dealt with overseas employees. Some Japanese supervisors said that they regarded overseas employees as their in-group members.

The third point highlighted the importance of negotiating over cultural differences and adapting to the differences. Some Japanese supervisors emphasised that it was important to listen to what overseas employees said and to acknowledge and respect their opinions, and therefore, described the importance of creating working environments where this was possible. With regard to the importance of adapting to cultural differences, one Japanese supervisor stated that Japanese people could not expect the addressee to sense the tone during an intercultural interaction. The supervisor also added that Japanese people should retain their positive aspects, such as sensitivity, while simultaneously cultivating other abilities, such as the ability to think and explain thoughts logically.

## 4. Discussion

Multicultural workplaces are where different cultures and, thereby, values and behaviour patterns (e.g. communication styles, business conventions) co-exist. In multicultural workplaces, people working together are required to recognise and negotiate differences that may cause difficulties in the workplace. Then, through trial and error, they are required to adapt to each other.

Several implications emerged from the analysis of our interview data. First, recent studies on intercultural communication criticise viewing culture on a limited set of dichotomous dimensions (e.g. Hall's 1976 high/low-context communication) as it gives an oversimplified view and that models constructed on the basis of 'national culture often lead to overgeneralizations and stereotypes that are counterproductive in intercultural training' (Sorrells 2012: 377). Recent studies, according to Ladegaard and Jenks (2015: 5), argue that "culture" should be seen as a

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Piller (2017), Dervin (2017) and Sorrells (2012).



fluid, flexible and multifaceted phenomenon, which is created, negotiated and recreated *in situ* as people engage in talk and other forms of social interaction'.<sup>2</sup>

The analysis of the overseas employees' perceptions revealed that the high-context communication was responsible for many difficulties they experienced in the workplace. More interestingly is why this national cultural characteristic emerged. One possible explanation is that despite accelerating globalization, multidirectional movement of people across the globe occurs less frequently in rural areas than in urban areas such as the Tokyo metropolitan area and that, as a result, national cultural characteristics such as high-context communication have not changed or changed very little. Another plausible explanation is that some national cultural characteristics are less changeable than others and that communication style may be one that is less changeable. Whatever the reason may be, it is important to notice that negotiation and adaptation to differences are crucial for successful intercultural interactions.

Considering that our interview data contains Japanese supervisors' comments that point towards the necessity of adapting the Japanese communication style to other cultures' communication styles, current communication styles in their workplaces may start changing slowly.

From what has been mentioned so far, Ladegaard and Jenks's (2015: 9) suggestion that "[c]ulture" is conceptualised not only as an ever-present influence on our communication and social interaction at work but also as an ever-changing fussy concept, which is constantly being (re)created and negotiated as we communicate with cultural "others" seems to be an appropriate and feasible conceptualisation of culture in the context of intercultural education.

Secondly, as the literature on intercultural communication (e.g. Bennett 2009) has pointed out, it is essential to develop a critical awareness of our own culture in order to develop an intercultural competence, i.e. a competence to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds appropriately and effectively.<sup>3</sup> When talking about culture here, we focus on cultural aspects that have an ever-present influence on our social interaction. To develop a critical awareness of our own culture, it is necessary to closely examine our culture by comparing it with other cultures. Observing only our own culture would reveal nothing about cultural characteristics. It is through the close examination of our own culture and by comparing it with other cultures that we can identify cultural characteristics, which leads to our understanding of similarities and differences between different cultures. Pertaining to this, the

---

<sup>3</sup> So far, various models and theories of intercultural competence have been proposed (see Spitzberg and Changnon 2009 for a review of the literature of models and theories of intercultural competence). Our definition of intercultural competence is a rather general definition but covers basic idea of intercultural competence proposed by the literature on intercultural competence.

question asking which cultural characteristics Japanese students should focus on is important. Based on the results of this study, communication styles and values, such as the concept of seniority, are two important points that are also pertinent to the students' life, while business conventions, for example, are not directly related to students' everyday life, and therefore, should not be the students' immediate focus.

Thirdly, effective intercultural interactions require a certain degree of adaptation to cultural differences from all the individuals engaged in the interaction. Adaptation does not mean that the individual must surrender his/her culture to accept that of another person's but rather, according to Bennett (2009: 127), adaptation is 'an additive process; not only do we remain intact, but we have added more skills to our repertoire of behaviors'. This view of adaptation is consistent with our interview data. In this study, one Japanese supervisor mentioned that Japanese people should retain their positive aspects, such as sensitivity, while simultaneously developing other abilities such as the ability to think and explain thoughts logically (see Section 3.3).

## 5. Conclusion

This study has examined Japanese and overseas employees' perceptions of intercultural communication in multicultural workplaces, focusing on local government offices and local government-related organisations in Japan's rural areas. The results gained from the semi-structured interviews conducted in local government offices and local government-related organisations in one rural area provided us with some insights into what conceptualisation of culture we should adopt in intercultural education and which cultural characteristics Japanese students should focus on to develop a critical awareness of their own culture. The results also provided us with insights into how students should see the adaptation to cultural differences.

This study was a small-scale study but provided us with significant insights on how to design an educational programme that enables Japanese students to develop their intercultural competence to work in multicultural workplaces in Japan's rural areas. Future research is needed to address other pertinent questions such as how to design students' intercultural learning in classroom or to understand how students' experience of learning foreign languages and their knowledge of foreign languages will influence their intercultural learning.

## Acknowledgements

This study is supported by the JSPS KAKENHI grants (Grant Number 16K13257). We would like to thank all those who participated in this study.

## References

- Bennett, Janet M. (2009) Cultivating intercultural competence: A process perspective. In: Darla K. Deardorff (ed.), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence*, 121-140. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Clancy, Patricia M., Sandra A. Thompson, Ryoko Suzuki and Hongyin Tao (1996) The conversational use of reactive tokens in English, Japanese, and Mandarin. *Journal of Pragmatics* 26: 355-387.
- Dervin, Fred (2017) Critical turns in language and intercultural communication pedagogy: The simple-complex continuum (*simplicity*) as a new perspective. In: Maria Dasli and Adriana Raquel Díaz (eds.), *The critical turn in language and intercultural communication pedagogy: Theory, research and practice*, 58-72. New York: Routledge.
- Hall, Edward T. (1976) *Beyond culture*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Holmes, Prue (2015) 'The cultural stuff around how to talk to people': Immigrants' intercultural communication during a pre-employment work-placement. *Language and Intercultural Communication* 15(1): 109-124.
- Hooker, John (2012) Cultural differences in business communication. In: Christina Bratt Paulston, Scott F. Kiesling, and Elizabeth S. Rangel (eds.), *The handbook of intercultural discourse and communication*, 389-407. West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell.
- Ishida, Hiroji (2006) Learners' perception and interpretation of contextualization cues in spontaneous Japanese conversation: Back-channel cue *Uun*. *Journal of Pragmatics* 38: 1943-1981.
- Kita, Sotaro and Sachiko Ide (2007) Nodding, *aizuchi*, and final particles in Japanese conversation: How conversation reflects the ideology of communication and social relationships. *Journal of Pragmatics* 39: 1242-1254.
- Ladegaard, Hans J. and Christopher J. Jenks (2015) Introduction: Language and intercultural communication in the workplace: critical approaches to theory and practice. *Language and Intercultural communication* 15 (1): 1-12.
- Maynard, Senko K. (1997) *Japanese communication: Language and thought in context*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Miyata, Susanne and Hiro Yuki Nisisawa (2007) The acquisition of Japanese backchanneling behavior: Observing the emergence of *aizuchi* in a Japanese boy. *Journal of Pragmatics* 39: 1255-1274.
- Noels, Kimberly A., Tomoko Yashima and Rui Zhang (2012) Language, identity and intercultural communication. In: Jane Jackson (ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language and intercultural communication*, 52-66. London: Routledge.
- Piller, Ingrid (2017) *Intercultural communication: A critical introduction* (second edition). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Saito, Junko (2010) Subordinates' use of Japanese plain forms: An examination of superior-subordinate interactions in the workplace. *Journal of Pragmatics* 42: 3271-3282.
- Sorrells, Kathryn (2012) Intercultural training in the global context. In: Jane Jackson (ed.), *The*

- Routledge handbook of language and intercultural communication*, 372-389. London: Routledge.
- Spitzberg, Brian H. and Gabrielle Changhon (2009) Conceptualizing intercultural competence. In: Darla K. Deardorff (ed.), *The SAGE handbook of intercultural competence*, 2-52. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Tokunaga, Eiko (2009) Nihonjinshuugyosha to gaikokujinshuugyosha tono gyappu wanani ka: Shigotojo deno 'teikokan' kara saguru [The gap between Japanese employees and foreign employees: Exploring 'hesitation' in the workplace]. *Works Review* 4: 34-47. Retrieved 24 November, 2018, from [http://www.works-i.com/pdf/090601\\_WR04\\_05.pdf](http://www.works-i.com/pdf/090601_WR04_05.pdf)
- Tsukuba Language Group (1995) *Situational functional Japanese volume 1: notes* (second edition). Tokyo: Bonjinsha Co., Ltd.
- Yokosuka, Ryuko (2015) Moto ryugakuseigaikokujinshain no shuugyo no genjo to kadai: 2014nendo chosachuukanhokoku wo chuushin ni [Current trends and agendas regarding working situation for non-Japanese employees who graduated from Japanese universities: An interim report of 2014 survey]. Web Magazine 'Ryugakukoryu' [Student Exchanges] 48: 8-21. Retrieved 1 June, 2018, from [https://www.jasso.go.jp/ryugaku/related/kouryu/2014/\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2015/10/23/201503yokosukaryuko.pdf](https://www.jasso.go.jp/ryugaku/related/kouryu/2014/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2015/10/23/201503yokosukaryuko.pdf)