

# UNDERSTANDING AND MISUNDERSTANDING HOW TO EXPLAIN A CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION PROBLEM: A JAPANESE PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

Japanese university EFL students exhibit various misunderstandings throughout sequential, multi-skill assessment tasks to explain a cross-cultural communication problem from their experience. Compiled from more than one thousand presentations in recent years, ten types of learner misunderstandings reflect a lack of student awareness of cross-cultural communication. Such generalised deficiencies allow teachers to hone methodology to better plan, teach and assess tasks focused on aspects of cross-cultural communication. There is various advice to support learning prior to and throughout the assessment tasks. The overall task aims are for learners to improve their English language proficiency in the context of raising awareness of their own communication skills when interacting with people from other cultures.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural, communication, drawings, nonverbal, Japan

## Introduction

This paper provides suggested aims, content, learning outcomes and assessment specifically relating to cross-cultural communication by Japanese EFL university students. Language learners should acquire skills that increase not only their linguistic, but also their (cross-) cultural competence. In order to help them achieve this, teachers can structure tasks that focus learner attention on effective communication skills. One way to approach this is for learners to describe their experiences and to analyse problems they have encountered when communicating. By engaging in higher-level cognitive processing, they can better understand features of their communication with

people from different cultures. This includes aspects of pragmatics such as appropriate contexts of language use. Furthermore, focused tasks can help learners to develop the awareness, sensitivity and associated skills to avoid or repair communication breakdown. The sequential assessment tasks featured in this article aim to help learners express their experiences and feelings and to offer advice in English. The culmination of the tasks is a speaking exercise, where students show large pictures they have drawn as props to help explain their experience of a communication problem. Learners often misunderstand the assessment tasks and a result can be a lack of clear expression of their problem in English. This article features ten types of misunderstandings, with advice for teachers to help learners understand the nature of the assessment tasks so that they can more effectively discuss their experience in English and also provide advice for improved communication to their peers.

### **Cross-cultural competence**

The components of intercultural sensitivity, cultural competence and world-mindedness are discussed by Schuerholz-Lehr (2007) and are extensions of the guiding principles of 'Global Education' by UNESCO, which include respect, awareness, tolerance, sensitivity and proficiency (Classen-Bauer in Gnutzmann 1999, p 98). An outline of such terms used by various scholars is provided by Blasco and Zolmer (2009). In addition, Byram (2000) believes that learners should be encouraged to engage in more complex thinking skills in order to explore elements of culture along with developing paralinguistic and pragmatic communicative competence. In consideration of these aims, there is a writing and speaking assessment task presented that requires learners to think about the way they communicate in English with someone from a different culture.

### **Expressing emotion in English**

Despite a general acceptance of particular emotion universals, their expression is significantly affected by socio-cultural factors evident in beliefs, attitudes, paralinguistic cues and linguistic forms. It is difficult to accurately explain ways that people from other cultures perceive and express emotions through the filters of their own cultural conditioning, as detailed by Wierzbicka (1994). However, from a cognitive-linguistic and first language perspective, Evans (2009) explains in great detail how primary and secondary cognitive models invoke the connotative, emotional semantic potential of lexical concepts. With influence of the explication style of Wierzbicka (1994), three featured examples of lexical concepts [DISAPPOINTED],

[ANNOYED] and [CONFUSED], demonstrate how utterances are inextricably expressed within an emotional context.

In these situations, you would probably feel what in English is expressed by the lexical concept [DISAPPOINTED]:

- (1) I studied hard, but did not pass the test.
- (2) My team trained so much, but we lost the game.
- (3) My parents could not come to my graduation.
- (4) I wanted to travel with my friends, but I did not have the money to do so.
- (5) My best friends forgot to say 'Happy Birthday' to me.

In situations 1~5, primary emotive responses can express the lexical concept [DISAPPOINTED] in English in one or more of the following ways:

'I felt disappointed because...'

- (a) I expected a better result;
- (b) I missed the chance to do something I wanted to;
- (c) I felt a sense of personal failure.

As a second example, in these situations you would probably feel what in English is expressed by the lexical concept [ANNOYED]:

- (6) Another person says or does something that you think is unfair, incorrect or impolite;
- (7) Another person continues to express an action or attitude that has displeased you before.

In situations 6~7, the lexical concept [ANNOYED] in English can express a primary emotive response in one or more of the following situations:

'I felt annoyed because...'

- (d) I thought the other person was rude (to me);
- (e) although I've told the other person before that what they say or do makes me feel bad,  
they continue(d) to say and do the same thing to me;
- (f) I thought that the information, attitude or behaviour of the other person was inappropriate.

A third example includes situations where you would probably feel what in English is expressed by the lexical concept [CONFUSED]:

- (8) There was too much, or not enough information and so I did not understand the purpose of the other speaker's communication;
- (9) I could not interpret the intended meaning of the other speaker;
- (10) the information I received was contrary to my experience or expectation.

In situations 8~10, the lexical concept [CONFUSED] in English can express a primary emotive response in one or more of the following situations:

'I felt confused because...'

- (g) I did not understand the reason/s for another person's actions;
- (h) what I assumed would happen in a particular situation was (quite) different to what actually happened;
- (i) I did not know what to say or do in a particular situation.

It is not accurate to assume that the linguistic tags assigned to emotions in one language, translate well, if at all in another language. By studying different contexts of emotion, students can increase their cross-cultural proficiency with explicit comparison between culturally familiar expression and the way it is expressed in another language. The three lexical concept examples show how the expression of emotion reflects personal feelings, such as using adjectives ending in 'ed' spelling. In contrast, commenting on a situation uses adjectives that end with 'ing' spelling. However, the subject of an utterance is not so apparent in Japanese expression.

In addition, it is useful for learners to study expressions and idioms so that they can express themselves in conventional English styles. An important focus of saying such expressions is how intonation expresses emotion. Examples can include: I [just] love it when ...; I'm tired of hearing [about it]; I couldn't believe it! (in the context of explaining a lottery win vs hearing about a death).

It is also vital that learners understand the role of nonverbal communication to effectively convey intended meaning. A prime example of this is the function and interpretation of laughter, which varies considerably across cultures. In Japan, for example, laughter often signifies an expression of embarrassment and not humour. Conversely, people from other cultures who deal with Japanese, especially in business settings, need to understand that laughter can be quite an inappropriate emotional expression (see Nishihara, 1993).

### Pre-assessment activities

Prior to the initial writing phase of assessment, a range of exercises can assist learner understanding of the overall theme and variety of tasks, from writing through to speaking. This includes student awareness of variations between written and spoken styles. Students might worry that they cannot memorize the entire content of their writing for the speaking exercise. However, this is not necessary for interesting and successful speaking. It is advisable to provide written instructions, such as change first language words into English if possible, or if such words cannot be translated easily, to explain them in English.

The overall purpose of the assessment tasks is for students to analyse the way they communicate (d) with someone from another culture. Prior to the tasks, learners can complete one or more of the following five activities to help them better understand the nature of their assessment.

1. Discuss various types of cross-cultural communication problems. Teachers can provide a worksheet with key words that students can then translate to aid comprehension.  
Problems can be shown in broad categories such as:  
Language; pronunciation, vocabulary, what (not) to say.  
Customs; sequences such as giving and opening presents, how to pay for meals in restaurants.  
Paralinguistic; gestures, eye contact, leaving a tip, giving items with two hands.
2. Give examples of different types of advice to manage communication problems.  
For instance, students can rearrange words to form sentences that offer communication advice. These sentences could then be translated into the learner's first language to aid student comprehension.
3. Students check a range of situations to focus their attention on the assessment theme of communication problems. This highlights the contrast with a different theme of culture differences, as shown in the following example:  
  
Which one of these situations is an example of a cross-cultural communication problem?  
  
(a) In Japan, people eat with chopsticks, but in a lot of other cultures, people use a knife and fork.

- (b) A foreign man and lady were not allowed to join a local fitness club in Japan because they both had a small tattoo on their arm.
- (c) Some people from other cultures think it is strange that Japanese usually make peace signs when they have their photographs taken.
- (d) The first time they met, a Japanese asked an Australian, 'How old are you?' The Australian felt embarrassed and didn't want to reply.

Although the cross-cultural communication problem is situation (d), certainly a culture difference itself, as indicated in situations (a)~(c) can be a source of a problem. Learners should discuss the cause of communication problems in the final section (part 4) of the writing and speaking assessment tasks.

4. Provide examples of vocabulary, especially adjectives to show the expression of emotion in English. This also allows students to focus on 'person' versus 'situation' and its influence on spelling ('ed' or 'ing'). Common adjectives used when discussing a communication problem include: annoyed; confused; disappointed; disgusted; embarrassed; frustrated; relieved; shocked; surprised; and upset. Furthermore, examples of syntax show how such vocabulary is used in usual English expression. Students could write a sentence to describe their feelings from a list of situations provided. These can be similar to the examples shown in the previous section about expressing emotions in English. For instance: I was (adjective) to hear that; I was/felt (adjective) when she said that/when that happened.
5. Provide full written models of approximately 250 words with examples of cross-cultural communication problems, so that students can see the type of content, vocabulary and sentence styles they could write. Such models also help students to think about coherency and flow.

### **Sequential Assessment Tasks**

The sequence of activities presented here engages students in a number of ways via verbal and nonverbal channels. These activities vary from those discussed by Apple & Kikuchi (2007) because they are completed by individuals, not pairs or groups. They also do not involve the use of

technology. However, it would be possible for students to complete the speaking task by using a projected slide presentation. The nature of the tasks is to explain a cross-cultural communication problem based on learner experience. Students who have never met or talked with a person from another culture could explain a situation they witnessed in public or from a television program, for example. There is naturally a significant range of possible topics for communication problems. Storti (1994) offers seven points of advice for intercultural consciousness-raising and sensitivity that learners could discuss from their experience: 1. Don't assume sameness; 2. Be aware of 'cultural behaviour'; 3. Familiar behaviours may have different meanings; 4. Don't assume that your meaning is understood; 5. Don't assume that what you understood is what was meant; 6. Try to understand reasons why people say and do things in particular ways; and 7. Recognise the legitimacy of unfamiliar beliefs and behaviours. These points are explained with examples by Author (2011).

The assessment tasks require a focus on identifying and suggesting strategies to overcome communication difficulties. In order to express themselves well in English, learners also need to practice prosodic elements of speech and these can form the basis of assessment for the speaking activity. Here is a suggested sequence of phases culminating in a three-minute spoken explanation of a communication problem between people from different cultures.

Phase	Skill/Medium	Activity	Assessment
1	Writing	A cross cultural communication problem from the student's experience.	Yes
2	Drawing	Small pictures to show the key points of their problem.	No
3	Drawing	Large pictures in pencil.	No
4	Drawing	Large pictures in thick pen.	Yes
5	Speaking	Show the pictures and by using some gesture, students talk about their experience and give advice how to prevent or manage their problem.	Yes

First, students write about their experience. Then, with teacher assistance in successive phases to review and refine content, coherence and clarity, students finally show their large pictures and talk about their experience, giving advice. Using picture cards, learners recount a communication problem they experienced. Their narrative comprises the setting, who it involved, what was or wasn't said or done, the sequence of interactions

including how the speakers felt, the outcome and also analytical statements about the communication. To do this requires some aspects of discourse analysis (see Hall, 2005) such as: who speaks; when and where we speak; what we say and how we say it, comparative or unique communicative situations and experiences. In successive phases of the assessment tasks, learners can also draw and discuss nonverbal communication. The format of the writing exercise has elements similar to that of the IELTS speaking test. Here is a suggested sequence for an initial writing exercise to explain a communication problem between people from different cultures.

**Theme: A cross-cultural communication problem.**

Talk about a communication problem between you and someone from another culture. This problem could be something you experienced or saw.	Suggested number of words	Suggested number of pictures
<p><b>Part 1:</b> What was the setting of the cross-cultural communication problem? You should explain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ where and when it happened;</li> <li>➤ who was communicating.</li> </ul>	60	1~2
<p><b>Part 2:</b> What was the cross-cultural communication problem? You should explain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ what happened;</li> <li>➤ what you said/did;</li> <li>➤ our feelings/emotions;</li> <li>➤ what the other person said or did;</li> <li>➤ how you think he/she felt.</li> </ul>	60	1~2



<p><b>Part 3:</b> What was the outcome of the cross-cultural communication problem?          You should explain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ whether this communication problem was solved or not. If so, how? If not, why not?</li> <li>➤ what you said/did;</li> <li>➤ our feelings/emotions;</li> <li>➤ what the other person said or did;</li> <li>➤ how you think he/she felt.</li> </ul>	60	1~2
<p><b>Part 4:</b> Why did this problem occur?</p> <p>You should explain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ if there was a particular difference in culture that caused the problem;</li> <li>➤ what advice can you give to avoid or stop this communication problem;</li> <li>➤ the most important thing/s you learned from this cross-cultural communication experience;</li> <li>➤ other examples of similar problems (pronunciation, vocabulary, or gesture, for example).</li> </ul>	more than 90	3~4

### Assessing intercultural competence

Teachers might be concerned how to plan tasks for learners to express cultural competency and how to assess these. Byram (2000) suggests that learners create a portfolio based on their thoughts, feelings and experiences. A variation of this, as presented in this article, could be for learners to make picture card presentations to explain their intercultural experiences. This type of activity supports another suggestion of Byram (2000) that learners engage in reflective communication analysis. An important element of assessment can be how well learners express their experiences with evidence of higher-level cognitive skills, including evaluating and concluding. Through writing, drawing and speaking, learners can explain the way that a communication

problem was negotiated and was (or could have been) overcome. To demonstrate affective task aims, students should also explain how they felt at various stages in the sequence of communication and also how they felt about the event in reflection.

Assessment of the initial writing task can include criteria such as lexical choice, lexical range, syntax and coherency. Assessment can also include the type of communication problem explained. For example, students should be encouraged to think of problems that have some cultural focus, as opposed to one simply based on mishearing what another speaker said.

Suggestions for assessing the speaking activity include prosodic elements of speech, namely pronunciation, stress and intonation. Other possible criteria can involve eye contact and the use of gesture to help explain the pictures. Overall effective use of pictures can also be considered, such as timing, relevance of the pictures to the spoken content, their clarity and use of colour to highlight key points. These represent fairly flexible and subjective criteria. Importantly, the teacher is not assessing the attitudes, feelings and beliefs of learners per se. The focus is on providing constructive feedback on their ability to analyse communication and also their language proficiency.

### **Common student misunderstandings when explaining a communication problem**

In this section, ten types of learner misunderstandings are explained. Although these have been compiled from more than one thousand presentations by Japanese university students, similar generalisations might be made about speakers from other cultural contexts. There is also some advice for teachers to preempt or manage these misunderstandings for improved learning outcomes.

#### **The temporal boundaries of a chosen communicative event**

Students frequently express events that occurred long after their communication problem in such ways as 'When I came back to Japan, ...', 'Later, I asked my mother...', 'After that, I checked the internet...'. One of the primary aims of the explanation in part 4 is for students to give advice how to avoid or manage a similar problem. Students should explain how to deal with their type of problem either before, or at the time of its occurrence in order to suggest some way/s that can allow a resolution satisfactory to both interlocutors. Their initial reaction is often that they don't know what

to say or to write. The part 4 task requires an initial stimulation of higher-level cognitive skills and a subsequent expression of cultural awareness so that students can suggest conversation strategies that facilitate more effective communication in English. Consequently, overall aims of the part 4 task are to help students to develop not only their linguistic skills, but also their pragmatic proficiency. Some useful advice that students could suggest includes how to ask other speakers to repeat, clarify or explain what they mean. In addition, students could suggest how to paraphrase the meaning they wish to communicate.

### **Simply comparing cultural differences, rather than explaining a communication problem.**

One example could be: 'I went to [a foreign country] and I was surprised to see people eating while they walked in the street. In Japan, we don't eat while walking in the street'. To simply compare cultural differences does not fulfill the overall purpose of the assessment tasks to focus on an interpersonal communication problem. Other primary elements also need to be explained, such as what the various participants said and did and also how they felt at various stages of the communicative event.

### **Explaining a communication problem between children**

Although the focus might be a communication problem, there is little opportunity for meaningful reflective analysis, for example a lack of cooperation between children who want to play with the same ball. The assessment tasks are designed to recount a communicative event between adults, or speakers with enough maturity to identify a particular difference in language or culture that caused a communication problem.

### **Overgeneralising advice**

Students often make (over) generalisations such as 'We should study (English/culture) more', 'We should be friendly to each other', or 'We should learn about many culture differences in the world'. Students should be encouraged to make specific suggestions how to prevent or manage their type of communication problem. Furthermore, they could provide similar examples of their type of problem, for instance, various pronunciation examples. The teacher can suggest ways that learners can express their ideas in English, the goal being to provide advice to their peers how to improve their English communication skills.

### **Vague or inadequate English expression of emotion**

As a first language influence, Japanese often use single adjective or (past tense) verbs to convey feelings that in English are expressed in longer lexical sequences. Because of this, learners often make utterances such as 'I was happy' or 'I was sad'. The use of single-word utterances in Japanese can represent a speaker or listener's feeling, or their reaction to an overall scenario. For example, the past tense verb utterance *komatta*, indicates the feeling of experiencing some kind of troublesome situation. Lexical choice can vary as well between conventional English styles and the translated style of 'Japanese English'. Learners might make a generalised reference to a reaction, rather than to an emotion. It is difficult, for instance, to understand an emotion from the utterance 'to make an unpleasant face', whereas meaning is clear when a specific feeling is stated, such as being upset, annoyed, or angry. Moreover, the common Japanese utterance 'I was surprised' can be a vague expression in English that can indicate positive or negative emotion. This therefore requires additional information to understand its context as an emotional response.

### **Use of first language vocabulary or loan words**

As mentioned, teachers should guide students to translate key words or explain them in English if translation equivalents do not exist. A significant issue with the use of loan words in Japanese is the lack of student awareness that their meaning, forms and pronunciation differ from the source language. Japanese often assume that native English speakers understand loan words as they are used in Japanese. They also lack awareness that common words used in Japanese come from languages other than English, such as these examples: *arubaito*, part-time job (from *arbeit*, German), *pan*, bread (from *pão*, Portuguese) and *ankēto*, questionnaire (from *enquête*, French). The topic of loan words is an excellent one to discuss cross-cultural communication problems, as it allows students to provide comparative examples of vocabulary usage in Japanese and in English (or in other languages). Students can discuss spelling, pronunciation, meaning and suggest strategies for learning English vocabulary and skills for dealing with loan words when communicating in English.

### **Lack of overall understanding of what constitutes cross-cultural communication**

Japanese university students sometimes demonstrate little awareness of communication with and between people from other cultures. Problems

include a pervasive attitude of 'us' and 'them'. In an extreme case, a student stated that her tour guide in Singapore was foreign, when in fact, the guide was Singaporean. When it was brought to the student's attention that as a tourist she was in fact a foreigner in Singapore, she was shocked to be branded with such a label and insisted that she was not 'foreign', but 'Japanese'. Things that Japanese find culturally unfamiliar are often viewed as (negatively) strange, scary, inappropriate, or incorrect. The concept of 'foreigners' is often limited in scope to 'Americans'. The concept of 'culture' is often defined by nationality and is considered limited to stereotypical things such as food, festivals, traditional clothes and such things. Students might claim that a British person will not understand if an American asks where the 'elevator' is because American English vocabulary is different from 'lift' used in the UK. Alternatively, another claim might be that someone from the UK will not understand what 'french fries' are because the term used in the UK is 'chips'.

### **Incongruous drawing of nonverbal communication**

One of the main issues with drawing nonverbal communication is whether such pictures add to or detract from the comprehension of English by a Japanese audience. The pictures should be used primarily as props so that the main focus is on listening for information in English. Students sometimes think they should draw colourful, comic book style pictures, but this is not necessary. Simple black and white drawings are quite sufficient. Drawings often lack a clear 'key point' focus. For example, learners often draw people walking to a shop, school, and restaurant or homestay family's home. However, the advice is to draw the speakers engaging in communication when they order food or drinks from staff, talk with teachers or meet their homestay family.

In terms of understanding the visual components of pictures, if gestures represent those used in non-Japanese cultures, there is more onus on comprehending spoken English content, rather than visual cues. The opinion expressed here is that this is also a more accurate way to represent nonverbal communication, in preference to drawing culturally familiar images. Students often draw Japanese gestures, such as placing their hand behind their head to indicate embarrassment, shame or, *komatta*, to be in trouble. This is an accurate representation for the actions of a Japanese speaker. However, it is incongruous to draw someone from another culture making the same gesture. Teacher guidance might be necessary to raise learner awareness of the way they portray the nonverbal actions of people from other cultures.

### **Attempting to engage the audience in dialogue**

The intended style of the speaking task is for students to recount their experience, showing up to a dozen pictures to guide audience comprehension within a suggested time limit of three minutes. Sometimes, students begin speaking by trying to interact with the audience, asking questions and expecting responses. For instance, a speaker might say 'I had a communication problem in a restaurant. Have you ever had this problem? What did you do?' For this speaking assessment, learners should talk about their experience and give their peers advice without attempting to engage in audience interaction. The other students will have an equal opportunity to recount their experiences during their own presentations. Students need to practice the timing of showing their pictures in direct association with their own spoken content.

### **Intentional and unintentional inappropriate content**

In spite of teacher supervision and advice, learners might include inappropriate language or drawings in their presentation. One reason they might do this is to attempt humour. For example, instead of contrasting 'l' and 'r' pronunciation in 'liver' and 'river', they might choose 'election' and 'erection'. In another case, students might advise not to use particular gestures in some other countries because they mean 'f\*\*k you'. Alternatively, learners might not realise that their content is presented in a way that can seem inappropriate in English. A young lady referred to her dog: 'My dog is a bitch. I love the little bitch. One day, I was taking the bitch for a walk...' This provides an opportunity for the teacher to explain the (un)suitability of particular lexical choices so that students can (ideally) increase their English pragmatic competence.

### **Post assessment comments**

Regardless of the time spent and focus on clarifying the purpose of assessment activities, students invariably communicate in their own style, which makes all writing, drawing and speaking unique and valuable. Despite written and spoken advice from the teacher about keeping pictures simple and effective as props, learners often feel the need to include excessive and superfluous labels such as (continually) naming speakers and drawing large arrows pointing to things which should all be obvious from their spoken explanation. Yet even if learners still misunderstand the assessment theme and simply make cultural comparisons, they nevertheless make their

presentation in English and can be assessed by the same criteria as other students.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented writing and speaking task designed for English language learners to explain a cross-cultural communication problem from their experience. There were suggestions how these tasks can assess a learner's English proficiency and awareness of cultural factors that affect communication. Higher-level cognitive processes stimulated before, during and following assessment tasks require learners to actively engage in analysing communicative acts. Aspects of communication can be taught and learned with the aid of large pictures drawn by the students. There was an explanation of ten general misunderstandings that Japanese learners have reflected when completing the writing and speaking tasks. Despite these, overall the assessment tasks described promote self and also peer awareness of how to better communicate with people from other cultures. There are a number of desired learning outcomes for the assessment activities explained in this paper. One of these is for learners to suggest how they can avoid communication problems. Another aim is for learners to improve strategies for managing communication problems as they might occur during communicative acts. This requires a flexible approach to English language use and this can contrast greatly with the conversation style of a learner's culture. For instance, Japanese includes many fixed expressions that cover a range of communicative functions. Even if assessment tasks do not result in a positive change of attitudes towards studying English or communicating with people from other cultures, ultimately learners think about how to more effectively negotiate communication in order to achieve a satisfactory outcome to their needs while speaking in English.

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