

Communicative Glaze(d Frost): The Problem of Clearly Communicating One's Own Opinion

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Some of the major problems of language teaching in Japan may be found in the field of communication. In this paper, the author proposes pro- and con-discussions (discussions between two opposing points of view) as one of the most effective ways to solve some of the problems that arise in communication.

After discussing some of the extant explanations for the way Japanese communicate and express their own opinion in general (1), the situation of present-day university foreign language students, their expectations and their motivation are evaluated (2). In practicing pro- and con-discussions, students are able to pioneer ways to express their own opinions, often for the first time ever (3). In deepening these new skills, students can even establish—with the help of their teacher(s)—special conversation circles, engage students from other universities and even conduct university events (4). Thus, while at the same time solving some of their communication problems, students finally find ways to study abroad and to receive scholarships (5). The communicative “glaze” will turn into a communicative “base”.

日本における外国語の授業の主要な問題はコミュニケーションの分野にみられるが、作者はこれらの問題に注目した。日本人が意見を伝えるための表現方法を分析した後（１）、大学の授業での個々の状況に応じるため外国語を学ぶ学生の状況や彼らの要望、目的を調査する（２）。

多くの場合学生達が初めて体験することになる、賛成と反対の両方の意見が存在する討論を練習する。これにより、学生は自分自身の意見を表現するパイオニアになる(3)。このような技術を磨き上げることによって学生は教師の助けを借りて会話サークルをつくるようになる。そしてそれを大学内の他のサークルとも関連を持たせ、大学行事を催すようになるであろう(4)。

コミュニケーション上の問題を解決することで、学生たちは最終的に海外留学をしたり、そのための奨学金を受ける方法を見つける(5)。コミュニケーション時にあった滑りやすい氷はコミュニケーションのための基礎と変化するであろう。

After observing and researching communicative characteristics of Japanese (second foreign) language students, the author, after providing some socio-linguistic background, offers a solution to some of their problems by proposing pro- and con-discussions during lessons, and conversation circles as established language cell-groups on the university campus. All points will be demonstrated from students' voices and case studies of the author.

Cultural contrasts and sociolinguistic difficulties of Japanese foreign language students

“The most fundamental difference between Japanese and Germans seems to be in their basically different relation to language and to human language proficiency.” (Ezawa 1975: 276). In this statement, the Japanese Germanist

Kennosuke Ezawa hints at a Japanese “fundamental skepticism about the possibility to express objects and facts of the world through the use of language”, whereas to Germans (and to other “Westerners”) the world seems to be “basically verbalizable”. Whereas Japanese “live through a matter”, Germans get hold of matters “through ideas/conceptions”. Instead of the Western “lingual and discursive” the “emotional” aspect is taken to dominate among Japanese.

Essentially, the tendency to focus on harmony may lead to misunderstandings and other communication problems. Not only on the primary school level—and in high schools and universities, but also especially in everyday contexts, conflicts between participants are avoided as often as possible. R. Benedict is instructive: “The Japanese have always been inventive in devising ways of avoiding direct competition” (cited from Schuemer 1979: 185). Similarly, Nakane Chie notes in her research “Human Relations in Japan” that the “man on the top” does not decide, he “only formulates the consensus of the opinions brought to him” (Schuemer 1979: 182/3). To say “yes” or “no” decisively, to state one’s own position clearly is very difficult, even in present-day Japan. Another fact leads to an even more disturbing communication problem, which is the disturbing possibility that “yes” may mean “no”, and “no” may mean “yes”. This communicative ambivalence causes troubles not only to non-Japanese,

but to Japanese as well. Of course, similar problems arise in other languages (cf. German “Auf Wiedersehen” (“See you again”) vs. “Auf Wiederhoeren” (lit. “Talk to you again”) at the end of a phone-call: To correct such a mistake would be very impolite, as doing so may endanger the whole conversation.)

Ways to solve the problems

As everywhere, to become a master in teaching a foreign language, in our case German, in Japan first requires one to become a master in understanding the Japanese themselves. Whoever teaches 5 first-year classes 5 times in the same way is prone to fail in the same way, too. Every class—and one should say more precisely—every student needs a different approach, even in using the same textbook.

Accordingly, my preparations in the beginning of a year include a name-sheet with a brief personal questionnaire for every student, and included in it an evaluation-sheet of the students’ expectations concerning the content and structure of the lessons. This stimulates students to become more actively engaged in the subject. After evaluating 150 first-year students’ replies to an inquiry conducted in the beginning of the 2001 summer term at Kansai and Kansai Gakuin universities, it is difficult for me to agree with the highly praised “Goethe method”, used by the Goethe institute in which German language students all over the world, be

that in Sao Paulo, in Cairo, in New Delhi, in Jakarta, or in Tokyo are taught similarly regardless of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds. On the contrary, we need a language student who can communicate (in our case) in German without denying his/her cultural background.

For our teaching, this means that students have to be encouraged to utter their own opinion. In the rest of this paper, I want to show that, by using worksheets and several other tools and methods, applying language and speech intentions and strategies is not a privilege of second- or third-year students, but can (!) be introduced and practiced from the very beginning. Accordingly, the students will soon develop more interest in learning the foreign language. Students need their own “success story”, not that of their teachers.

In a teacher training, I heard that a teacher should fulfill the role of an entertainer in several areas. At first, this sounded very plausible to me, but soon, I had to change my mind. It is not the teacher who should be on stage, but the students. This leads us to the concept of pro- and con- discussions.

Pro- and Con- Discussions

“Pro- and con-discussions”—except for those in staged English Speaking Contests— seem to be unknown to most Japanese students. Actually, almost none have ever practiced such a controversy raising communication style, neither in Japanese nor in English.

In my classes, students usually choose a topic by themselves, and after deciding their respective roles (“pro”, or “contra”, or a third role of “interviewer”), they develop strategies on how to argue for their own position from several points of view. Since my students have already learnt several discussion strategies and a dialectic way of thinking in preceding lessons, so these students are very successful in being controversial until right before the end. Here, what I call the ‘communicative glaze(d frost)’ awaits the students, as they usually tend to find a harmonious compromise—a harmony between “pro” and “con.” In fact, sometimes between water and fire. Communicative fog and smog would be the result, if I had not warned them beforehand.

The most important problem seems to being able to ‘agree to disagree.’

I learnt after many discussions that Japanese usually need a reassurance that their mutual relationship is still intact. By practicing pro- and con- discussions, Japanese students made great progress in stating, insisting and even defending their own opinion in the foreign language, holding those opinions until the end. In fact, they expressed not only their own points of view, but they also learnt how to discriminate between the personal and the case levels, and in understanding the strategy of objective discussions, a considerable number of students grew in their way of thinking and

in their personality—one important step on their way to successfully stay overseas and to scientific discussions both in their mother tongue and in the foreign language.

Conducting at least one pro- and con- discussion by oneself (together with one’s partner), or listening to and continuing other pro- and con- discussions in the target language is not only pioneering. It is crucial in learning a new language. However, this is still not enough. To move to the next level, one needs the challenge of conversation circles.

“Controversation” circles and discussions therein

To establish a weekly (second) foreign language conversation circle is an absolute “must” for every university, and it isn’t even difficult at all! These circles also benefit the students in other ways. For example, there are several universities where students earned scholarships and study tours because of their active participation in conversation circles. Unfortunately, the rule is that most universities totally neglect these important cell-groups.

However, conversation—i.e. “chatting”—in the foreign language is not enough. Of course, joy and fun in conversation circles are very important, and thus, the leader(s) should find a very good balance between “chatting” and expressing one’s own ideas, opinions, etc.—especially in a controversial way—without causing

tension. Such a “controversation” should be stressed much more. In becoming “controversation circles,” conversation circles become ever more interesting.

A first form of easy, but nevertheless interesting discussion could be a start in a contrastive way (e.g. “XY in Japan - XY in Germany/ overseas,” “women’s view—men’s view,” “standard of living—standard of ecology,” etc.). Soon after that students will be encouraged to form, state, insist on and even defend their own opinions in the foreign language at the case level without touching the personal level. From time to time—maybe once a month --, the leader(s) prepare(s) a special seminar-like circle-meeting to prepare students for scientific discussions not only at universities abroad, but also in other areas such as sociology, journalism, etc.

“Controversation circles” can also become an excellent platform to organize a university event or even a symposium about current topics (cf. the series of academic university events “academia kamihara” at Mie University). They are also very suitable to promote exchange with other university foreign (language) circles about students, universities, bi-/international or even global issues.

Successful communication in German-speaking countries

For some Japanese students, the “language shock” seems to cause more troubles than the “culture shock”.

Thus, to soften the former shock, our students should understand the “German way” of discussing, especially among students, room-mates, with the host-family or members of students and university circles. Here, again the leader(s) of conversation circles in Japan may explain or demonstrate the most important techniques and e.g. ways of international vs. German communication and conversation.

Communicative misunderstandings cause the main problems in mutual exchanges. They rarely have their roots in low language levels. Often, their causes lie in vague communication, i.e. communicative glaze(d frost). If this occurs a few times, and causes even serious troubles, the communicative glaze(d frost) becomes even more slippery. Uncertainties on both sides, inconvenience, and even fear of making mistakes and of causing new misunderstandings or troubles may even endanger relations between acquaintances.

As communicating in a foreign language is often connected to a psychological barrier—especially among Japanese students --, language teachers in Japan are challenged and even obliged to relieve their students from this bondage. Encouraging students to allow for an open-ended communication and to neglect their tendency to talk in grammatically perfect sentences is a first “must” on the way towards a successful conversation. A second step is to encourage the students to state their own opinions in the same

way native speakers do—i.e. to make themselves clearly understandable to these—this may be the best precondition not only for a successful everyday communication in the foreign language, but also for university studies and discussions in other areas of science and society.

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