

**“HERE THERE IS NO SUCH KIND OF STRING”  
THE CROSS-CULTURAL PERCEPTIONS OF  
RECENTLY-ARRIVED VERSUS LONGER-TERM  
JAPANESE STUDENTS IN THE U.S.**

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*Abstract*

On the basis of interviews with some recently-arrived and some longer-term Japanese students in the U.S., we found some similarities and some major differences between the perceptions of the groups on a number of questions concerning their experiences in the U.S. While perceived social constraints (“invisible string”) were felt to be much less, by both groups, and their absence considered a good thing; a corollary sense of isolation or distance between people was also reported, by the longer-term group, as a negative factor. While the newly-arrived group felt that they would not change as a result of living in America, the longer-term group almost unanimously pointed to ways in which they had changed and the problems they might have in readjusting to life in Japan. The casual friendliness of Americans led the newly-arrived to believe that it was easy to make good friends with Americans, despite some encounters with prejudice, while the longer-term group had developed more complex perspectives. The study represents an explora-

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tion of cross-cultural issues, not as objective differences between cultural environments, but in terms of the subjective and variable experiences of individuals.

### Introduction

Traditionally, the investigation of how Japanese students cope with the use of English as a second language is fairly narrowly focused on cross-linguistic issues related to problems in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. More recently, we have seen an increased awareness of cross-cultural issues (e.g. Krasnick, 1985; Mizuno, 1984) and the problems associated with coping, not only with a second language, but also with a second culture. Quite often, however, the focus of larger cross-cultural studies (e.g. Barnlund, 1975; Goldstein & Tamura, 1975) tends to be on the salient, broadly-defined differences which make two countries like Japan and America such distinct cultural environments. While these objective studies provide a number of insights into the potential difficulties which Japanese students might encounter when they go to study in the United States, they do not capture many of the highly subjective and frequently variable perceptions which individual students have of the cross-cultural experience.

In the course of informal discussions with Japanese students, we had noted a wide range of different opinions about the experience of being a Japanese student at an American university. In an attempt to document some of these divergent perceptions, and also to identify what might be the major factors causing the perceived differences, we conducted a series of face-to-face interviews, using exactly the same questions each time, with a number of Japanese students studying at Louisiana State University. The most obvious differentiating factor within this group turned out to be length of stay in the U.S. We found no major differences between the perspectives of males versus females or, quite surprisingly, between

those who had spent many versus few years studying English in Japan. Also, in terms of motivation, we found that all individuals expressed what Gardner & Lambert (1972) defined as instrumental motivation, that is, the perception of acquiring the second language for purposes such as getting a better job (in Japan), to meet new requirements for a currently held job (in Japan), or for travelling to more places because "English is a useful language". None of those interviewed gave any indication of having Gardner & Lambert's integrative motivation, that is, the desire to acquire the second language as a means of becoming a member of American society or adopting American ways and values. Consequently, to present our findings, we shall divide our population into those who were relatively recent arrivals in the U.S., whose average length of stay was 5 weeks (Group A), and those who had been in the U.S. for more than one year, with an average stay of 2½ years (Group B).

### The Survey

We conducted the survey by asking, in individual face-to-face interviews, in English, a set of twelve questions. All interviews were taperecorded. The initial questions were factual, followed by questions which attempted to elicit the students' opinions. To organize our report, we summarize responses to the factual questions in Table 1 and then present each of the other questions individually, with examples of responses and some discussion.

There are, of course, some well-known difficulties associated with surveys of this type. For example, those individuals who feel that their spoken English is rather limited may choose simply to respond with something they *can* say, rather than with something they actually *want* to say. We should also remain aware of the fact, pointed out by Oller (1981), that some individuals may respond in an interview by giving answers they think the interviewer wants to hear rather

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than expressing their own personal views. To help minimize these effects, we took the set of interview questions, translated them into Japanese, and asked all interviewees (some time after the oral interview) to provide written answers, in Japanese, to the written questions. Interestingly, the written responses were always much shorter than the spoken responses. While there is still no guarantee that the written responses provide totally reliable versions of what these individuals' views really were, we feel that, by only taking those spoken responses which were confirmed via the written responses, we have gone some way toward ensuring that we have, at least, consistency of expressed views.

### Results

The interview began with some basic questions on length of stay, number of years spent studying English in Japan, whether they were currently attending English classes and whether they enjoyed being in America. This information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

	Time in U.S. (Average)	Time Studying English in Japan (Average)	Attending English Classes Now?	Enjoy Being in America?	Male	Female	Total Number
Group A	5 weeks	7.5 years	Yes (all)	Yes (all)	3	3	6
Group B	2½ years	7.6 years	No (all)	Yes (all)	5	3	8

The remaining questions were introduced by a Yes/No question, immediately followed by a Wh- question designed to elicit an explanation of the 'yes' or 'no' answer. So, for example, we first asked: *Do you enjoy being in America?* which inevitably elicited a 'yes' or 'of course' answer, and we followed up with the next two questions.

*What do you like about America?*

Individuals in group A responded to this question by mentioning that the country was very big, the university was

big, and that there were good opportunities for sports. Individuals in group B also mentioned sports, a casual lifestyle and the fact that they felt places were not crowded. However, the majority of answers to this question from both groups contained references to freedom. For group A, this was expressed in terms of having a lot of *free time*, *American student very freedom* and *free mind*. For group B, this question elicited quite extended accounts of different perceptions of the freedom they experienced while being in America. For one student, this freedom was described in the following way:

(S12) I don't have to worry what other people think of me  
– that's the best thing – I can do whatever I want  
to do.

Three other students explicitly referred to the concept of not being tied and one of them eloquently elaborated on this perception, as follows:

(S9) Compared with Japan em – the relationship between people and people are not so tight – and – ah this is my opinion – ah among the Japanese people there is a – just suppose there is a string – invisible string – some are very strong some are very weak or some are very thick or some are very thin and from our experience we can recognize what kind of string – ah – there among among people and em – understanding those kind of string we have to ah – do our – what we want to do – what we want in Japanese society – but here there is no such kind of string – for me it seems to be – so – here do things positively.

Thus, while some students comment on physical differences, the majority talk of their experience in America as one in which certain perceived constraints are missing. Interestingly, the responses to the following question show that these students are also aware of other repercussions of this 'freedom'.

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### *What don't you like about America?*

For those in group A, the most common response to this question concerned problems with the language, with understanding others, and the fact that *American people speak rapidly*. One individual focused on transportation problems: *I don't have car – everyday walking walking – I'm very tired every day*, while two students recounted experiences with prejudice, one saying: *some Americans not polite for foreign students*, and the other reporting that, at a party, someone had said to her: *Japanese girl is not good*.

The responses of group B were really different. Two individuals said they really didn't like the food, but the majority commented on a perceived lack of caring and the distance between people. This was expressed as *people too casual – don't care* and as *people don't care about other people very much – people are more independent*. One student commented on the connection between the good side, that he didn't feel so tied by others' opinions, and the bad side, that others didn't care about him, noting that *students here just push and push and don't think of other people*. This awareness of the two aspects of the one experience, freedom yet isolation, was only expressed by members of the long-term group and provides some clue to the different perspectives elicited from groups A and B when responding to a later question concerning making friends with Americans.

### *Do you like America more than Japan?*

This was the next question and it elicited an overwhelming negative response, except for one individual from group B who preferred to say: *you can't really compare*. The follow-up question here was:

### *Why? What is the difference?*

This question more than any other elicited a variety of

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highly personal reactions among those in group A. There were individual mentions of the fact that the dormitory toilets had no doors, that baths were never deep enough, that one couldn't get good rice at all, that American students didn't study and that lifestyle differences – wearing shoes inside the house, for example – were difficult to get used to. Among group B, there were more uniform reactions, concentrating on customs in general (*more comfortable among Japanese*) and on food (*food is a major thing – I miss Japanese food*).

This question elicited very favorable comments on Japan and Japanese ways, with only one exception and that came from the individual who had spent the longest time (4½ years) in the U.S. She noted that, in some ways, it had been better for her personally in America because there was *not as much social pressure* and, being able to talk to anyone, she had become less nervous and shy. This type of personal response presaged our next question.

*Do you think that living in America will change you?*

Responses to this question were sharply different between the two groups. All of group A answered in the negative, and a clue to why these short-term residents held this perspective may be found in the response of the only member of group B who did not answer this question strongly in the affirmative. This one student said there would be *a little bit change* because of her experiences in America and because *I didn't have much information when I was in Japan*. It may be that the recently arrived Japanese students simply do not yet have any sense of the impact that living for an extended period in a different culture will have on them personally and that, having been focused, in Japan, on learning the language in isolation from its everyday contexts of use, they may continue to view the process of learning to use the language in America as an activity which is somehow limited in its repercussions.

The longer-term residents in group B have a quite different

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perspective. They almost all answered with a strong 'Yes' to the question above and were then asked:

*In what ways have you changed?*

The most general response was that they had become much more independent, less shy, more open-minded, and that they would be different, or would have to readjust, when they returned to Japan. In one student's perspective:

(S11) I've become more individualistic – and well – if you get a degree in America people in Japan respect you – you know – and I am regarded as outside Japanese custom – except for my parents maybe – I am always a kid in front of my parents' eyes.

Another student emphasized his personal expectation that he would have to make a large readjustment to life in Japan and it would be a problem because, in his words, *Japanese society is still stubborn.*

Our final pair of questions also elicited generally different perspectives from the two groups.

*Do you think it's easy to make good friends with Americans?  
Why do you think that is?*

For the majority of group A, it was perceived as easy and the reasons given were all connected with the general friendliness of Americans. Some examples:

(S1) American people not shy – all the time hello hello – nice to meet you.

(S3) All American people speak – but Japanese people doesn't speak – only look.

The one member of group A who did not say it was easy said that it was easier to make friends with foreign students from other countries because those were the people she had met in her English language classes. This is an interesting observation



and one which we had heard informally on other occasions. It is worth remembering that, for many ESL students entering study programs in the U.S., the first sustained encounters and possible friendships will involve other non-native English speakers in language classes rather than American students.

For the majority of those in group B, the answer to this question was in the negative and the reasons given included the following:

- (S9) Usually Americans are not interested in foreign people – not all Americans are so friendly – it's not easy.
- (S7) Different custom I think – for example in the morning when I wake up I try to do very quietly but my American roommate doesn't care about that – very noisy – even at 6 o'clock in the morning – dry her hair – and em – just little things very very different – little by little big problem.

The three members of group B who gave a more positive answer to this question were those who had been in the U.S. the longest. Their responses indicated an awareness of a difference between casual friendliness and strong friendship.

- (S12) It's easy to talk to American people but – in Japan that's not very easy – for example in the cafeteria – but in terms of the very good friends it's difficult.
- (S14) Sometimes easier – in Japan I get more nervous when I talk to someone who is just older than me but here I don't have to feel that way – talk to anybody.
- (S10) Easier than Japan because casual – easy to talk to strangers – I don't know – depends on the people – some people yes – but not because of nationality.

### Conclusion

As we stated in the introduction, this investigation was conducted in order to get some insight into the subjective experiences of individual Japanese students coping with life in

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the U.S. Like many such studies, it raises as many questions as it answers. For example, if there is a shift in perspective from the recently-arrived period to the later period, exactly when does that shift occur and what might trigger it? Should we try to inform students better about the kind of interpersonal encounters they may experience in the U.S. prior to leaving Japan? Or, are possible encounters with prejudice and the double-edged sword of greater freedom yet greater isolation unlikely to be really understood until personally experienced? Although we cannot answer these questions, we hope that, by presenting our data and our discussion, we have provided some insight into how some Japanese students in the U.S. personally perceive their cross-cultural experiences.

In the language teaching profession, we are typically concerned with fostering our students' ability to cope with aspects of the second language and often encourage them to develop their skills by going on to study in the U.S. While doing so, we may neglect to prepare them for the different cultural environment they will experience and for the fact that there will be socio-cultural effects which may change them as individuals. We hope that this relatively informal study of some Japanese students' personal perspectives will make a small, but worthwhile contribution to our understanding of, and greater sensitivity to, the experiences of our students as they try to cope with not only two different languages, but the effects of two different cultures.

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