

Overcoming Communication Anxiety: Observations of Japanese Students During Intensive Communication and Culture Studies Programmes in New Zealand

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Abstract

Massey University has enjoyed a relationship with Edogawa University for over 25 years. The university is known for its intensive English programmes and innovative teaching techniques, which focus on meaningful communication both in and out of the classroom. This paper compares in-class observations of Japanese students at Massey University with research on communication anxiety and the methodologies used to combat it. The paper suggests that communication anxiety for Japanese students can be situational rather than cultural and presents various classroom solutions, as employed during the Massey Communication and Culture Studies Programmes, to overcome this.

Overcoming Communication Difficulties:

Observations of Japanese Students During Intensive Communication and Culture Studies Programmes in New Zealand

Massey University has been teaching English language programmes to Japanese students for over 25 years. The duration and immersive nature of the courses mean that the students' spoken competence often improves rapidly as they experience life and study in New Zealand to the fullest. It is challenging but very rewarding to work with these students as they apply academic knowledge of English to 'real world' situations.

Observations in the Classroom and Authentic Encounters

As a language teacher, I have found Japanese students tend to be respectful, diligent and willing

to learn. However, they face challenges brought about by adjusting to an unfamiliar environment. These challenges manifest themselves in a wide range of behaviours.

The reticence and "shyness" of Japanese students when speaking has been well documented (Braddock et al., 1995; Tsui, 1996; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Saito and Eisenstein (2004) state that Japanese students are often perceived by educators as being passive and non-participatory.

While teaching, I have encountered these behaviours but I have also found far greater variation in Japanese students' responses to immersive classrooms than has been reported in the studies above. I would include the following observations:

- Inappropriate over-involvement. Interrupting using known language at inappropriate times or the language attempted does not relate to the context. This causes confusion for the teacher and student's peers, reducing communication risk-taking in the future.

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- “Rowdiness” and humour to deflect feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. Often manifested through over-exaggeration of English intonation, task distortion for comic effect and exaggerated use of gesture to save face.
- Initial explicit refusal to attempt tasks even with teacher or peer support.
- During informal encounters I observed:
- The “freeze” effect (Howitz, Howitz, & Cope, 1986). The student is paralysed with anxiety and is unable to communicate outside the familiar and ‘safe’ area of the classroom despite proven language achievement in formal academic environment. This is very damaging to a student’s confidence, making future attempts at communication less likely.
- The tendency to attempt all known English in one encounter, regardless of context. The result is a one-sided conversation in which the native speaker has difficulty keeping up or remaining involved.
- A tendency to apologise and withdraw the question or statement if they are not immediately understood.

It can be surprising and disheartening to see these behaviours in students which, unfortunately, are also easily mistaken for disrespect or a lack of perseverance, especially in a Western context (Rohlen, 1996; Wadden, 1993; Saito & Eisenstein 2004). It may be helpful for educators and home-stay parents to look at these behaviours as a by-product of communication anxiety (CA).

Communication Anxiety as a Phenomenon

The fear a student experiences when they are asked to communicate in a language they feel they are not competent in is easy to relate to. The negative effects of anxiety on communication have been discussed in many papers. A landmark study by Horowitz, Horowitz and Cope (1986) into CA conceptualised it as a collection of negative self-per-

ceptions, beliefs and behaviours that are specifically caused by the unique environment that arises from learning a foreign language. The student may or may not experience anxiety when communicating in their own language but will grow increasingly fearful when expected to interact in a foreign language (McCronsky, Gundykunst, & Nishida, 1985).

The danger of CA is that it inhibits the learning of a second language because the learner, overcome by anxiety, is unwilling to practice the oral output necessary to obtain competency (McCronsky et al., 1985). Through surveys and testing, McCronsky et al. discovered that Japanese students had a far higher rate of CA than other nationalities and that is primarily manifested in behaviours such as reticence, shyness and fear of participation. They argued that this is a result of various culturally conditioned factors such as high levels of CA in their native tongue (L1), valuing reticence over talkativeness, vastly differing social pragmatics and desire to maintain identity (McCronsky et al., 1985). It has also been suggested by Lucas (1984) that Japanese students are shy in the classroom because Japanese culture encourages shyness and discourages confidence. If this is true, it is very unfortunate news for the educator because it is nearly impossible, as well as ethically dubious, to deconstruct cultural norms in a short-term 2 to 4-week study programme.

There has been some reaction against the idea of Asian reticence and against a solely cultural explanation for the behaviour of Japanese students in English-speaking classrooms. Xiaoteng Cheng’s (2000) detailed study into the passivity of Asian students found an abundance of evidence that contradicted the perception of the “silent student”. He observed that many students strongly wanted to participate and that the educators with whom he discussed the issue continually challenged the stereotypes of Asian learners (Cheng 2000). As dis-

cussed above, my experience of Japanese students matches these findings.

Cheng (2000) argues that the influences of cultural attributes as the hidden causes of perceived reticence and passivity may be based on Western interpretations of Confucian ideals and overgeneralisations of East Asian cultures. Furthermore, he states that when reticence and passivity are perceived, the causes are situational rather than cultural. The students have a strong desire to participate but experience CA because they have difficulty connecting to the teaching methodology of the current classroom environment and are unsure of the discourse conventions of the situations they are faced with (Cheng, 2000).

If we consider the environment the students are thrust into, this argument holds its ground. From the minute students step off the plane, they encounter overwhelming amounts of new information. They are constantly exposed to new accents and styles of speech and the normal frame of reference for daily interactions has been replaced with something unfamiliar. They are also most likely experiencing instruction in full immersion English for the first time. Furthermore, feelings of inadequacy are compounded by the disappointment experienced when they find themselves unable to communicate even after many years of studying the necessary language. It is easy to understand why in this situation a student would experience anxiety when communicating and how this would manifest in a wide range of behaviours in the classroom.

Research has shown that “Japanese students have complex attitudes and perceptions that belie simplistic stereotypes” (Saito & Eisenstein, 2004, p.119). Therefore, although explanations of cultural conditioning may provide a helpful frame of reference for the educator, they do not solve the challenges presented by Japanese students during short-term programmes. By approaching these

challenges as situational rather than solely cultural, the students can be provided with practical structures to help them acclimatise to their new classroom and social environment and increase their confidence when communicating in English. In my experience, the classroom also becomes a less daunting place for the educator.

Overcoming Communication Anxiety:

Exploiting the predictability of English social conventions

The self-introduction carousel.

Massey University strives to provide as many opportunities as possible for the students to interact with native speakers. This includes living in a homestay and experiencing a range of afternoon activities that expose the students to everyday life in New Zealand. The majority of interactions the students have are with new people and are often repetitive. This results in a certain amount of predictability, which can be exploited in the classroom. From observing student interactions, I compiled seven questions the students will most likely be asked during a first interaction:

1. What is your name?
2. Where are you from?
3. How long have you been in New Zealand?
4. What brings you to New Zealand?
5. (The difference between “what brings you” and “what did you bring to” needed to be explained)
6. Where are you studying?
7. Where/What do you study in Japan?
8. How are you enjoying New Zealand?

These questions can be used in the following carousel activity.

The students are taught one question and one answer from the self-introduction a day. This is initially drilled to the whole class and students are

given the opportunity to record the information.

On the first day, the students stand in two lines (A/B) facing each other. Line A begins, saying the first line of the self-introduction while B replies and then vice versa. When the majority of the students have finished, line B remains stationary and the first person from line A moves to the back of the line. The other students in line A move up and the self-introduction begins again with a new partner. This continues until the first student returns to their starting partner.

Each day a new line of content is added to the self-introduction and the process begins again. It takes some time for the students to get accustomed to this daily activity but once it is established it goes quite smoothly.

Once line three or four of the introduction is reached and the routine is familiar, the students are given a new line of speech and one additional aspect of English to study, for example, intonation, pronunciation, the structure of questions or verbal feedback. After line seven/day seven, the students are no longer allowed to use their notes. After one or two days without notes, the students watch a role-play of a student and the teacher using their self-introduction as they meet at the bus stop for the first time. The purpose of this role-play is to demonstrate how the activity can result in successful communication in authentic situations. As the students become comfortable with repeating the full self-introduction, the importance of social pragmatics is stressed. Although Japanese students use a lot of verbal feedback in their own language, it seems to be underutilised when speaking English. Verbal feedback should be taught explicitly as along with turn-taking devices (“and you?”/“how about you?”) as ways to maintain dialogue, avoid inappropriate over-involvement and transfer the burden of communication onto others.

This activity has been motivating and engaging because it is simple, easy to teach and provides the

learners with structure when communicating. The students seem to be relieved to have a scaffold on which to base their interactions. Furthermore, it appears that when they have a successful interaction, communication anxiety is less evident and the chances of the student risking communication in the future increase.

There is an obvious drawback: first time interactions are very predictable but, as with many language drills, one unexpected question can “throw a spanner in the works”. This is why it is crucial to role-play follow-up and unexpected questions in the classroom. My observations revealed that the students can become too reliant on the order of the questions being asked or the way they are asked. Therefore, I often join the activity and add similar questions worded in different ways or provide unexpected answers. This needs to be role-played until the students are comfortable with more authentic conversation. The whole process takes about 10 days to complete, with around 20 minutes spent a day.

The basic structure of this activity can also be used to communicate with English speakers in Japan. By changing the end of the questions to “What brings you to Japan?” the student can become the initiator of conversation in their own country, adding further to their communication confidence.

Limited use of L1 in the classroom

Use of the students’ native tongue (L1) in the classroom has been hotly debated recently and there have always been contradicting views about whether to use the students’ mother tongue in the foreign language classroom (Tang, 2002).

The currently held monolingual approach suggests that the target language ought to be the sole medium of communication as prohibiting the native language maximises the effectiveness of learning the target language (Tang 2002). However, this approach is being challenged by other educators and focus is moving towards a more inclusive ap-

proach (Harbord 1992; Turnbull 2001; Cook 2001; Tang 2002; Wells 1999).

Research shows there is “a growing body of evidence indicating that L1 and/or bilingual options are not only effective but necessary (...) and that use of students’ linguistic resources can be beneficial at all levels of ESL” (Auerbach, 1993, p.9). Research has also shown that native language support is particularly helpful at the early stages of proficiency (Schweers, 1999). In spite of this, in my experience some schools still prohibit the use of L1 and prefer teachers who cannot speak the native language of the student. I find this disappointing as in my experience it can be of great benefit in overcoming CA.

Auerbach (1993) suggested that starting with L1 in the classroom provides a sense of security, allowing learners to express themselves. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English. From my observations only a small amount of Japanese is required to provide this kind of familiarity and it contributes greatly to a positive and inclusive classroom environment.

As a teacher who is also a student of the Japanese language, I use L1 to model positive classroom behaviour. As the students observe me speaking Japanese and making frequent mistakes, they recognise that it is acceptable to do so. It also eases tension in the classroom, as my attempts are often humorous. The results of quantitative analysis on Japanese students show that students view their learning experience more positively if a teacher creates a relaxed atmosphere through the use of humour and by admitting that he or she also made mistakes (Saito & Eisenstein 2000)

Use of L1 also puts the teacher the position of student. Calling on the students’ expertise of their own language when they feel inadequate and self-conscious about English can put them on back on familiar ground. Furthermore, the students tend to watch me ask until I understand rather than with-

draw the question or statement. According to Cope et al. (1986), one of the key factors in alleviating CA among students is the ability to see that language learning is difficult for the majority of people. Having a supportive teacher who acknowledges their feelings of isolation and helplessness is also important.

The Japanese students taught on short-term immersive programmes generally have low levels of English. Students with limited English often have trouble grasping the subtle differences in meaning that grammatical structures carry. When the instruction is also in English it compounds the problem and leads to further anxiety. Limited use of L1 provides one possible solution to this problem. One such example is the difference between “can I please have” and “can I please use”. I found that students were often saying “can I please have the microwave” rather than “can I please use the microwave”. It was very difficult to explain the difference in English. The students would get frustrated at their inability to understand repeated explanations and tended to try and withdraw rather than seeking further clarification. When it was explained to the students using L1 equivalents (“can I please use” is a little like “onigaishimasu” whereas “kudasai” is like “can I please have”, the students immediately understood the inappropriateness of using “kudasai” when asking about a microwave. Understanding this concept was a small victory but a crucial one as it encouraged students to ask in English about other grammar points.

Although I believe that full immersion is beneficial to rapid language gain and that students should be encouraged to speak English at every opportunity, research suggests, and my observations confirm, that a small amount of L1 goes a long way to alleviating CA.

Utilising live media.

Finding ways to engage students and encourage

participation in class are some of the most challenging aspects of teaching English. Group work and projects are often successful because they take the onus off the individual students to speak in front of their peers. Live media such as a radio visit can combine group cooperation with encouraging individual speech output.

Radio visits need to be well prepared in advance, especially with larger classes. The activity described below is designed to provide the students with adequate structure while preventing rote learning.

Visiting a Radio Station:

The idea of a radio visit is explained and the students are given the choice between two topics, preferably ones that have been studied previously in class. (Music and hobbies for example, have worked well as topics.) They then need to prepare in their groups very short individual speeches and a group dialogue on these topics to present live on air. This is aided by a detailed template prepared by the teacher and an example of what is expected on the board.

The students may seem shy at first but it is important that adequate time is given before teacher intervention. The students need to rely on each other to work out how to complete the task in order to gain a feeling of ownership and achievement at a later stage. When the students have some kind of written output, the teacher can then spend one-to-one time helping with vocabulary and structure. The students are given plenty of time to practise both their individual speeches and their group dialogues. The students who choose music are asked to write down their favourite songs, which the radio station will download and intersperse with their speaking excerpts.

Ideally, the initial preparation would take place several days in advance, allowing further practice opportunities over the next few days. During these sessions, the teacher should focus on presentation

aspects such as clarity, pronunciation and intonation. It is also important for the students to take part in roleplaying studio scenarios, explaining the rules of the studio and possible instructions the DJ may give to ensure they are as comfortable as possible when they face the real situation. The goal is to remove any situational triggers, such as confusion over social conventions, lack of language or fear of being judged, that would prevent students from participating normally in a classroom or authentic setting.

CA is partly eased because the conventions of a radio show are widely understood in Japan. The students who are taking the lead in the studio are able to use the familiar patterns of radio interactions they have been exposed to many times before to shape the situation to be as comfortable as possible for them. In addition to this, students may experience a sense of anonymity within the radio booth. Studies (Beauvois, 1998; Freiermuth, 1998; Kelm, 1992) show that live media are successful in reducing CA as it “provides an unusual social and communicative space, where many learners feel less inhibited” (Arnold, 2007, p.470). I have observed this phenomenon myself. It seems that given a microphone and a private booth, even the students with the lowest level of language feel confident enough to participate and may even mimic the distinctive vocal styles of a radio host.

The other benefits of a radio visit are that it provides an opportunity for the students to see “English in action” rather than as a purely academic pursuit. The students experience a sense of achievement and ownership of their learning after completing the project. They have a tangible reward for taking the risk; a professional radio programme with their music and their voices demonstrating their ability to communicate successfully

1 *Samples of student radio programmes can be found on the following website:*
English Radio 24 Seven: <http://www.englishradio24seven.com/>

in English. This activity relies heavily on radio stations that are familiar with foreign students¹. Massey University has built up relationships with several stations such as 24/7 English Radio and Radio Access, which specialise in accommodating this kind of group. However, with the advent of internet radio broadcasting and high quality digital recording devices, a private studio can now be set up anywhere in the world. Recordings can then be sent to radio stations for processing.

Conclusion

Teaching students as much language as possible during a short course is undoubtedly important, but the ability to use that language in a meaningful way inside and outside of the classroom is even more so. CA is a natural response to unfamiliar situations but a barrier to effective communication. If we are to be effective teachers, we need to recognise and help our students to eventually overcome it. It is my hope that the solutions I have provided go some way toward doing this.

Author Note

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