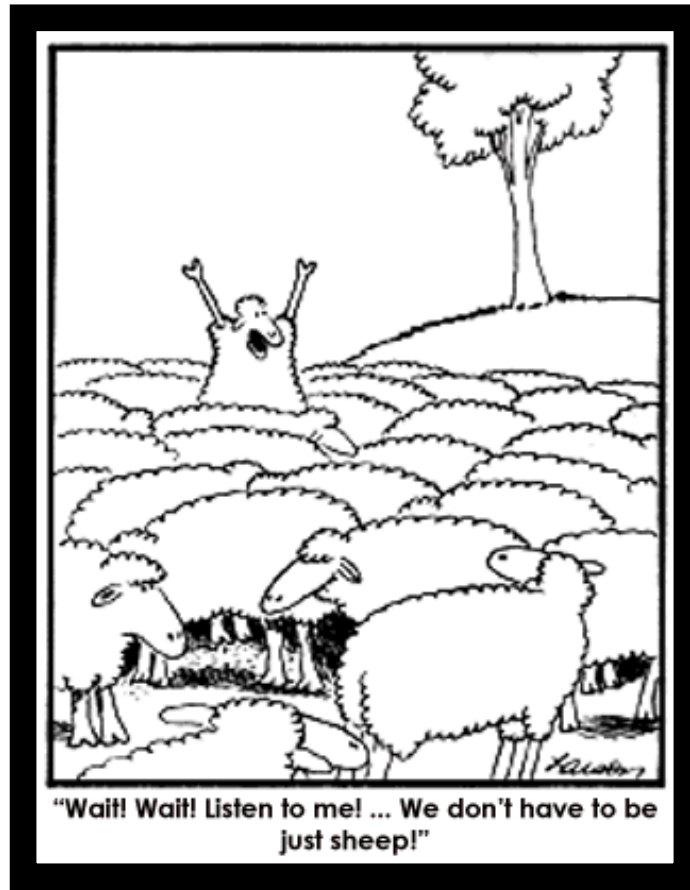


# What Are You Talking About? - Japanese EFL Learners Lacking Background Knowledge



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# Perceptions of Learners

The Myth of the Native Speaker perpetuates non-native speakers (including Japanese EFL learners) and their cultures as:

“‘collectivist’, ‘reticent’, ‘indirect’, ‘passive’, ‘docile’, ‘lacking in self-esteem’ ‘reluctant to challenge authority’, ‘easily dominated’, ‘undemocratic’, or ‘traditional’ and, ‘uncritical and unthinking’” (Holliday, 2005, p. 385)



# How Japanese Learners are Perceived

## Attributed to manifestations of their culture

Ellis (1991, p. 116)

- ▶ Lacking the politeness strategies especially in face-threatening speech acts such as invitations and requests.
- ▶ Less explicit in giving reasons for their verbal behavior.
- ▶ More formal, more direct and use more back-channelling devices.
- ▶ recognizing status relationships between speakers rather than to level of familiarity.
- ▶ Less verbal, more inclined to use silence in intercultural interactions

Fox (1994)

- Japanese learners favor indirectness, vagueness, politeness, and lacking critical thinking

# Problems Reported

## Topics (9 Japanese Participants- Interaction Interviews)

- ▶ 8 of 9 noted that the topics that they found themselves discussing were often initiated by their non-Japanese participants,
- ▶ Only JF2 noting that she regularly initiated some conversation topics.

JF1- life in Canada and the differences between Japan and Canada,

JF2- marijuana legalization, Australian teachers strikes,

JF3- work, job interviews in Japan, health issues

JF4- American high school ceremonies and proms, school life in Japan

JM5- approaches to romantic relationships and the differences between Americans and Japanese,

JF6- politics in America, school life in Japan

JF7- historical knowledge of and the differences between Japanese /Australian cultures,

JM8- music from the 1970's and 80's, politics, and travelling

JM9- politics and immigration issues, and travelling.

# Problems: What are you talking about?

## Lack of Background Knowledge

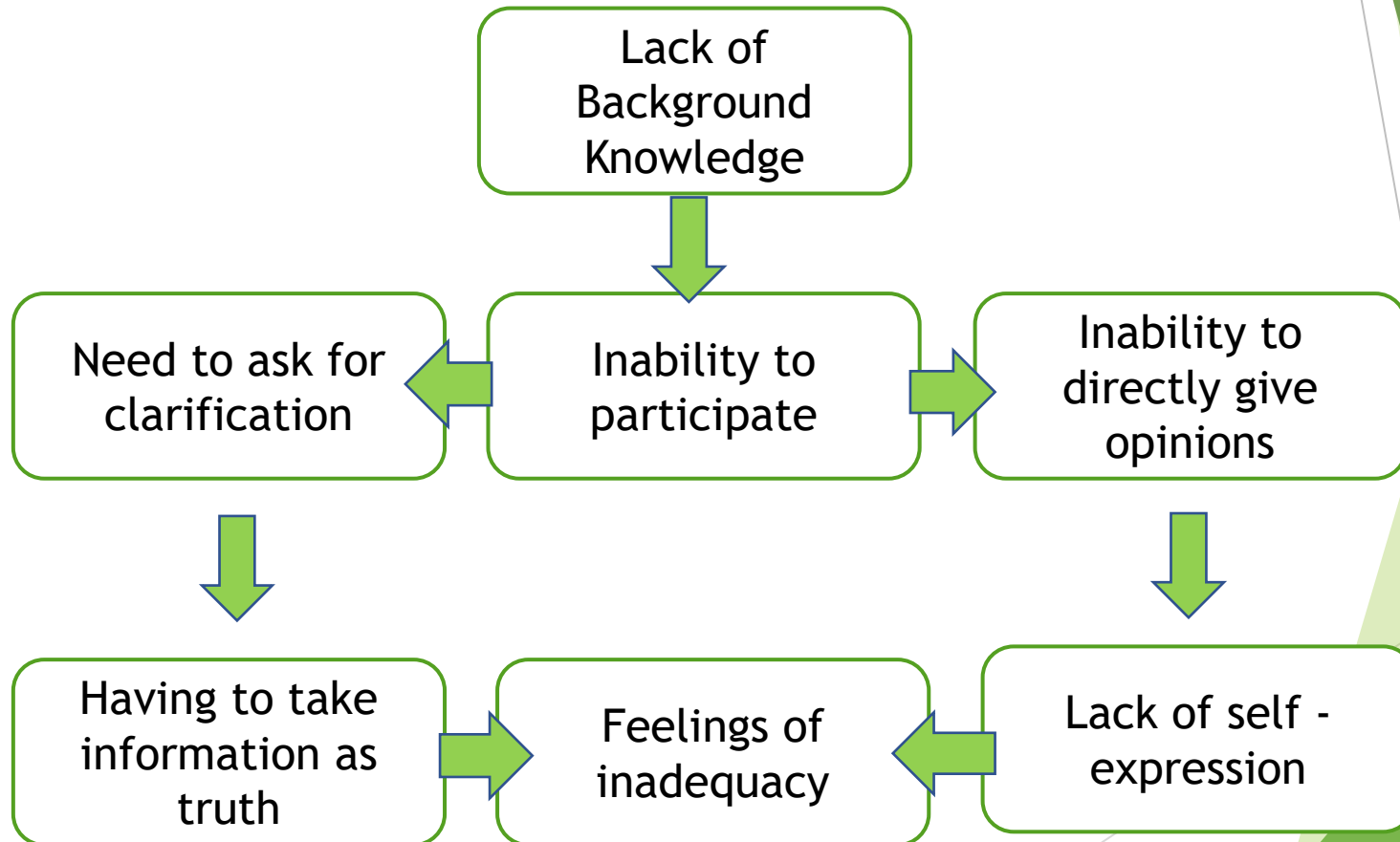
- ▶ not possessing enough, if any, cultural or historical information to fully understand what was being discussed

*JF2 "I was, "What are they talking about?" I remember that there debate afterwards about legalizing marijuana. I remember thinking legalizing marijuana is a topic everyone [wants] to talk about. I have never thought about it. That's why when one of my friends or someone asked me if it was legal in Japan, I thought NO WAY."*

*JM8 "We feel that we are kind of less knowledgeable than English speakers. They know a lot about things, because English is a great communicative tool to gather information around the world. So, I think that one of the obstacles is that frustration. If I was a native, I can know more information."*

# Lack of Background Knowledge

Figure 1.1: Problems Noted During interaction



# Problems: I can't say it the same way!

## Opinions

- ▶ directness and strength of opinions of their NJES friends influence their behaviour in interactions

*JM8 “They [NJES] always talk about their opinions. Japanese synchronize themselves with other people. So, one of the things I'm surprised by is that immigration should be acceptable in Japan, but the Austrian guy said that it's not good for the country, because they just eat our incomes. So, it is very direct, kind of oppressive for us to think about that policy. So, I think it's kind of direct communication. Opinion orientated communication is really kind of one of the characteristic for someone.”*

*JF4 “When I hear a strong opinion. Firstly, I ask them to explain more. Then I explain my way of thinking. Sometimes we can't reach [agreement]. But, it is not a bad thing. The important thing is to accept each other. Have [an] open mind. I like talking about political issues and hear[ing] their [my NJES friends] opinions. When we share opinions, I feel very close.”*

# How They Responded: Background Information


## Researching Topics/Information

- ▶ Either during or after interactions, participants researched information.

(JF2, JF3, JF4, JM5, JF6, JM8, and JM9)

JM8 “Later, I will read some magazines. Think about it and then, I want to discuss it with [my NJES friends]. That’s the kind of thing I do all of the time.”

JM9 “If I don’t know something [like facts]. I just Google it. Or [if I don’t know a word], I look up the word in a dictionary.”

  
Google It!



# How They Responded: Opinions

## Asking for clarification

- ▶ During interactions, participants queried their interlocutors.

(All)

*JF2 “One of my friends talked about strike by teachers and I remember. But he was talking about striking teacher or you know teachers’ protest against local government and I didn’t have any background knowledge so I couldn’t follow what [he]was talking about, but later [I asked my other Australian friend and she] explained to me how teachers’ organization is strong in Australia.”*

*JF4 “The only thing I could do was accept it and [focus on] making a close friendship with my friend. I didn’t give any details. I believe our bond is strong because sharing opinions is a very effective way to know each other. With her, I don’t worry about giving my opinion.”*

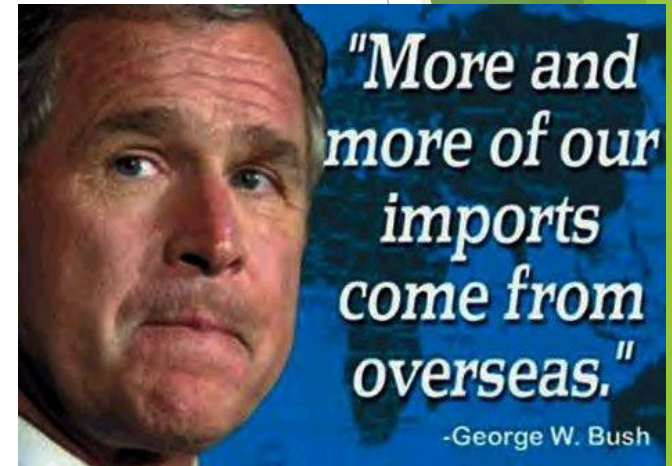
# How the dealt with the Problems

- ▶ Not always able to articulate their own opinion in manner that was satisfactory
- ▶ Simply having to accepting opinions and information as fact was troubling for them.
- ▶ Sometimes compensated by using their smartphones to check facts
- ▶ Sometimes compensated by directly asking for clarification.

They wanted to focus on more communicating their own ideas, thoughts, and opinions, rather than just being passive in the conversations.

# Implications

- ▶ Not possessing the necessary background information,
  - ▶ Feelings of having to accept NJES opinions as fact,
  - ▶ Feelings of not being able to articulate their own ideas,
- Contribute to the continuing hegemonic position of English in Japan,
  - Contribute to the perceived superiority of the 'native speaker' (Holliday, 2006).
  - Japanese EFL learners' perceptions of 'native' speakers
    - Authorities on language - Fluency equals authority (Holliday, 2006)
    - Have perfect knowledge of their own cultures, history, current events and contemporary issues (Devitte, 2016a).



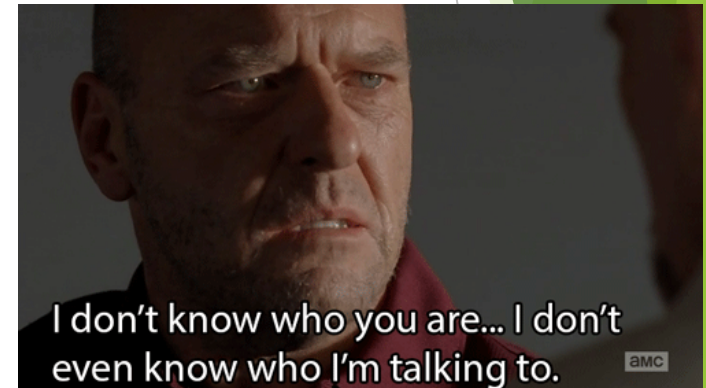
# Problems With This Perception

Generalizations of complex behaviours that vary depending on:

- ▶ Interlocutors, their familiarity with their conversation partners,
- ▶ Feelings of closeness,
- ▶ Individual communication preferences.

- Maintains a dichotomy between eastern and western cultures,
- Exoticizes images of culture,
- Perpetuates the attitude that learners are only a product of their cultures

(Kubota, 1998).



# Why Teach Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking can serve to enhance their experiences in contact situations as it:

- Allows learners to negotiate their own cultural values and identity in relation to those of their interlocutors,
- Improves their critical cultural awareness
- Assist them to become ‘intercultural speakers’.

(Byram, 1997, 2008).

Lacking background information makes it difficult to participate conversations so, CT helps:

- Learners to determine the validity and authenticity of sources, especially in their L2.
- Gives them tools to question what ‘native’ speakers say and not always take them as an authority on topics.

# Why Teach Critical Thinking?

This is important for two reasons

1. If they research in their L2, are they potentially likely to focus more on the lexical information and less on the actual content and its validity?
2. If they research in their L1, will they receive the necessary cultural or historical context to understand the opinions of their interlocutors?

Critical thinking skills, in regards to both language and information, play a vital role in their intercultural communicative development (Kubota, 1998),

Learners focus on meaning and socially contextualize conversations with NJES (Devitte, 2016a).

“Critical thinking skills are procedures that allow deeper understanding of information as well as the more complete use of the information presented or gained through critical thinking skills (Dunn, 2015, pp. 31-32).

# Why Teach Critical Thinking?

## Is Critical Thinking a Cultural Phenomenon?

Not imposing cultural values on learners and respecting their individual communication preferences is important (Atkinson, 1996; Cutrone, 2010)

Critical thinking skills- such as analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing help teach learners how to:

- Better facilitate their conversations,
- Acquire necessary information to maintain conversations,
- Critically evaluate the information being presented to them.

# Idea for Developing CT Skills

## Comparison of Content of Texts

Select 2-3 “texts” from different sources (i.e., CNN/BBC/FOX/NHK or textbook articles + internet stories etc.)

1. Have learners watch/read and take notes on the content of what is being discussed,
2. Have learners identify information where they lack the necessary background information,
3. Have learners compare with others in the class what they didn't know,
4. Have learners research in their L1 and L2 the necessary background information,
5. Have learners compare and “present” what they learned with others.
6. Have learners choose one of the texts and give their opinion (in writing or orally).

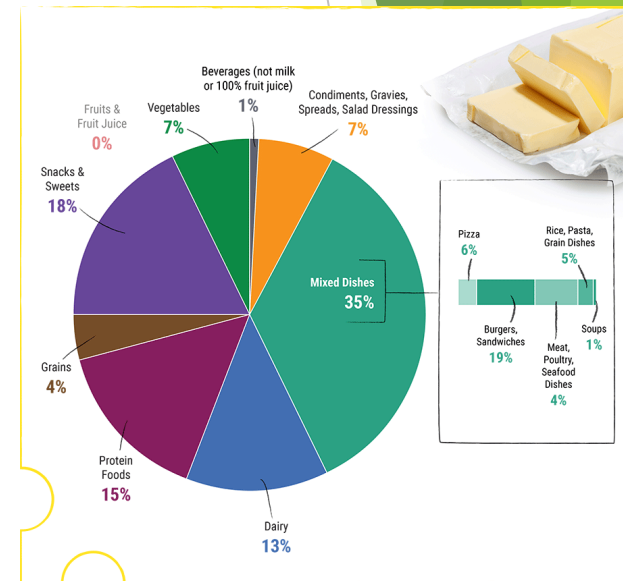




# Ideas

Some topics which I have covered in my classes:

1. John McCain and Donald Trump (comments about his being a War Hero- NHK vs. Fox News vs. CNN news clips)  
(High-intermediate)
2. Differences between public attitudes and usage of bicycles in Japan, Denmark and Canada (research project involving Internet and university textbook)  
(Intermediate)
3. Gender roles (textbook vs. Internet news (Japan times article on declining marriage rates for women in Japan))  
(Low-intermediate)
4. Eating Healthfully- Textbook quiz vs. online quiz with Japanese and American guidelines  
(Beginner)
5. Having fun with no money- Textbook vs. online research (focused on Tokyo)  
(Beginner)



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