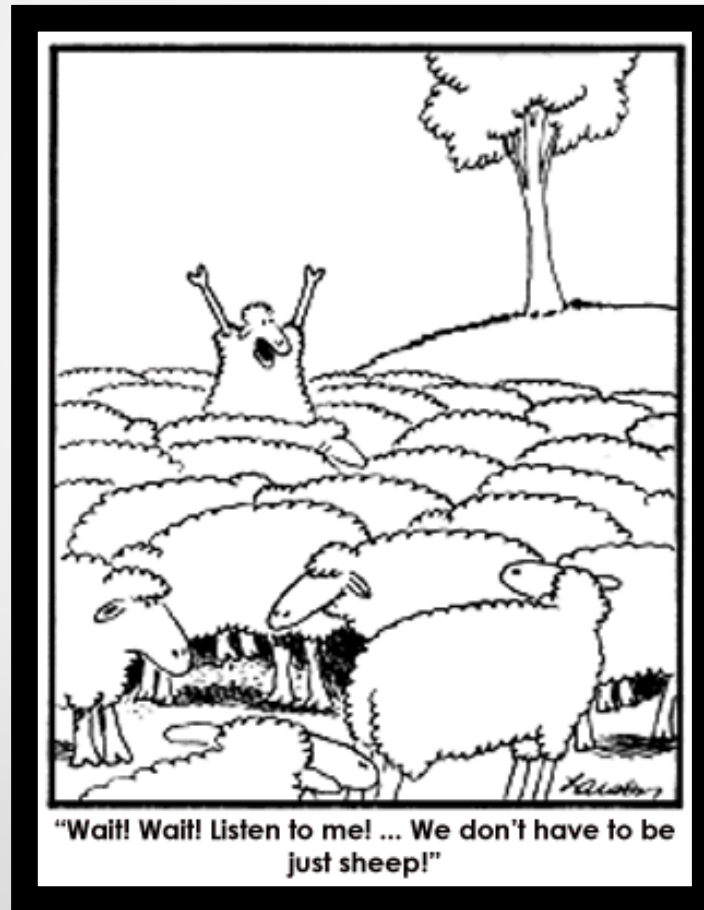


What Are You Talking About? – Japanese EFL Learners Lacking Background Knowledge



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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

Rationale for Study

Original purpose of the research:

Examine the development of Japanese English language learners' social and friendship networks in a Japanese EFL context.

Japanese learners:

- Have invested considerable time and money in their language education,
- Have had varying degrees of success establishing and maintaining personal connections with English speakers,
- Desire to improve their English language skills,
- Seek to understand and enjoy interactions with speakers of English,
- Have requested advice as to how they might interpret and handle the situations in which they find themselves.
- Previous studies on social and friendship networks have focused on study abroad contexts.

Methodology: Data Collection

Interaction Interviews (Neustupný, 2003)

- Recall interviews have inherent limitations that may impact the collection of the data.
 - Memory limitations on the part of the participants,
 - Interference of attitudes and aims of the participants,
 - Limitations of the participants' speech system (idiosyncratic style): topical constraints and restrictions on terminology.
 - Each interview lasted between 40-60 minutes
- Divided into three stages
 - Stage One: participants reconstruct their schedule by recalling from memory and reporting on situations which they experienced.
 - Stage Two: participants explain and/or describe the purpose, content, participants and any other relevant information for each situation.
 - Stage Three: participants report their entirety of their awareness of situation at the time of the situation

Methodology: Analysis

Language Management Theory (Jernudd and Neustupný, 1987), (Neustupný, 2005)

Data analyzed using the following Communication Rules (Neustupný, 1997)

- **Content rules** - what is communicated, such as themes, topics, functions, word meanings, politeness, and humor,

Language Management Theory: Deviations

Norms – expectations (socially-shared or individual) of appropriate and expected behavior

- **Problem** – behaviour which participants felt was an issue
- **Strategy** – what they did about it

Participants

Table 1.1 Japanese Participants: Demographic Background

	Gender	Nationality	Age	Occupation	English L2 Experience	English proficiency
JF1	F	Japanese	Late 20's	Office worker	9 years in Japan + 1-month study abroad: England	Low-Intermediate
JF2	F	Japanese	Mid 20's	Graduate Student	11 years in Japan + 1-year study abroad: New Zealand	Advanced
JF3	F	Japanese	Early 40's	Teacher	12+ years	Advanced
JF4	F	Japanese	Early 20's	University Student (1 st year)	8 years in Japan + travel	Intermediate
JM5	M	Japanese	Mid 20's	Office worker	10 years in Japan + 1 year working Australia	High-Intermediate
JF6	F	Japanese	Mid 20's	University Student (1 st year)	7 years in Japan + travel	Intermediate
JF7	F	Japanese	Late 20's	Office worker	9 years in Japan	Low-Intermediate
JM8	M	Japanese	Mid 20's	Office worker	9 years + travel	High-Intermediate
JM9	M	Japanese	Early 20's	University Student (4 th year)	9 years + 1-year study abroad: Ireland	High-Intermediate

Participants

	# of NJES Friends	NJES Friends' Nationalities and Number in Prior Interaction	Average Frequency of Contact	Interaction Type	Duration of Prior Interaction
JF1	5+	CA (1)	2-3 times a month	One-on-one	~ 2 hours
JF2	10+	US (1)/AUS (2) /CA (1)/UA (1)	3-4 times a month	Small group	~ 3 hours
JF3	5	UK (1)	Once a week	One-on-one	~ 30 minutes
JF4	15+	USA (3)	6-7 times a month	Small group	~ 2 hours
JM5	5+	USA (2)	Once a week	Small group	~ 4 hours
JF6	10+	USA (1)/UK (1)	5-7 times a month	Small group	~ 3 hours
JF7	2	AUS (1)	1-2 times a month	One-on-one	~ 1 hour
JM8	4+	AU (1)	2-4 times a month	One-on-one	~ 2 hours
JM9	15+	IRE (2)/USA (3)	About 7 times a month	Small group	~ 4 hours

Table 1.2 Japanese Participants: Interaction Type Details

Research Questions

- What problems do Japanese EFL learners feel they encounter when interacting with their NJES friends?
- How do Japanese EFL learners make adjustments to their own behaviour to mitigate problems in their interactions with their NJES friends?

Results: Problems

Topics

- 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

Results: Problems

Lack of Background Knowledge

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

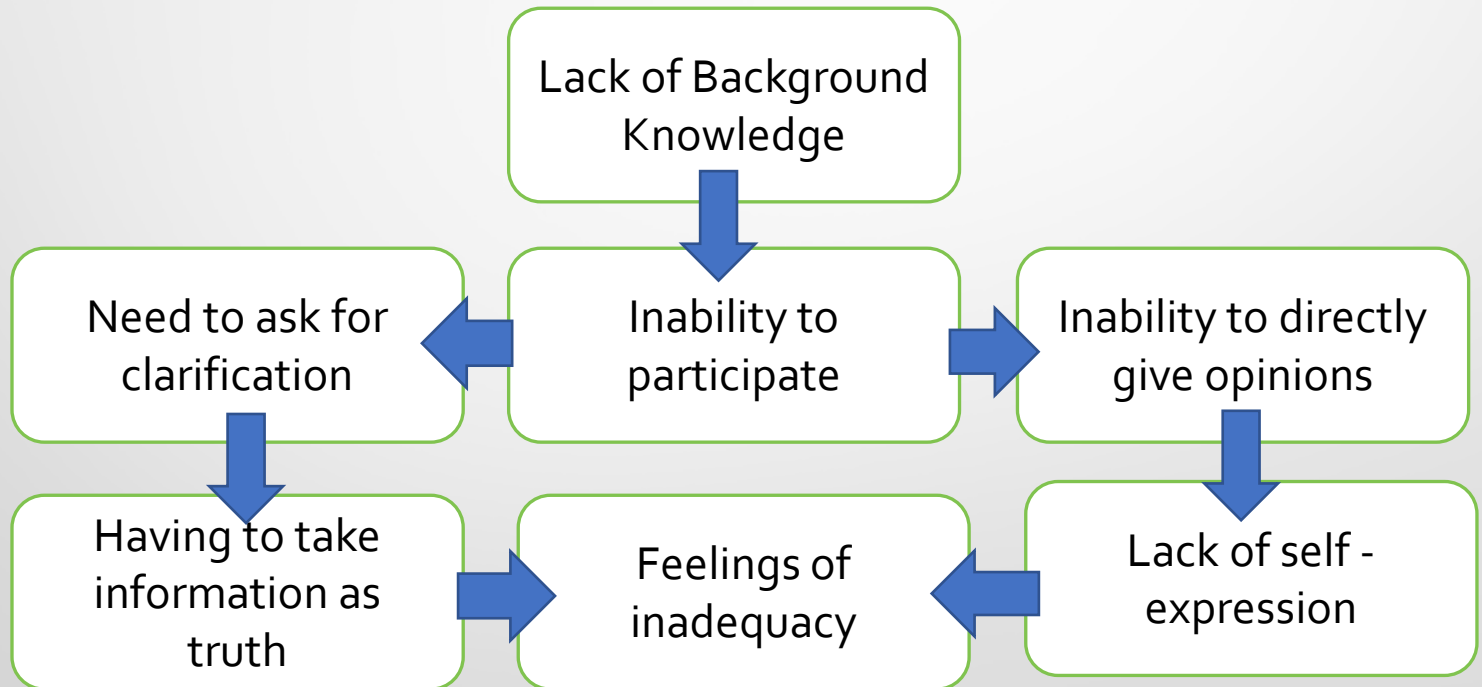
JF2 "I was, "What are they talking about?" I remember that there debate afterwards about legalizing marijuana. I remember thinking legalizing marijuana is a topic everyone [wants] to talk about. I have never thought about it. That's why when one of my friends or someone asked me if it was legal in Japan, 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."

Results: Problems

Lack of Background Knowledge

Figure 1.1: Problems Noted During interaction



Results: Problems

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."

Results: Adjustments

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."



Results: Adjustments

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."

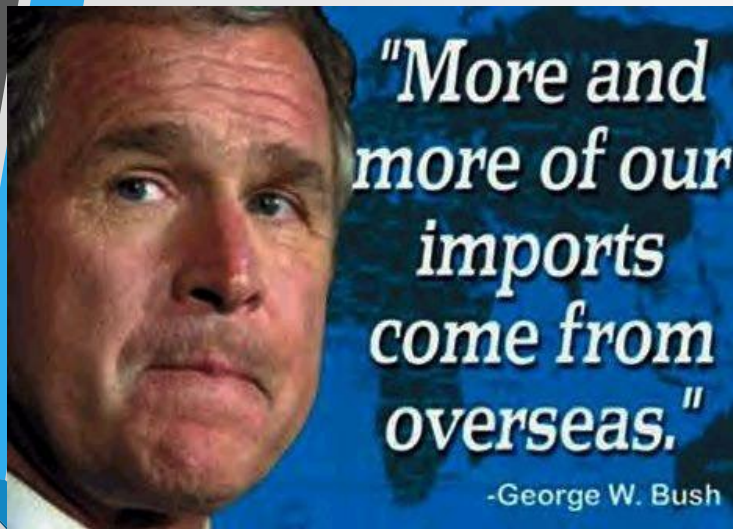
Results: Adjustments

- 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

- 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.

Limitations

Exploratory qualitative study

- Small sample of participants (9 Japanese nationals)
- All participants have extended social networks with NJES
- Most of the participants have been friends with NJES for extended period of time (more than 6 month)
- Participants did not report problems with 'familiar' topics

Future research:

Examine impact of methods designed to help learners develop their background knowledge for both unfamiliar and familiar topics

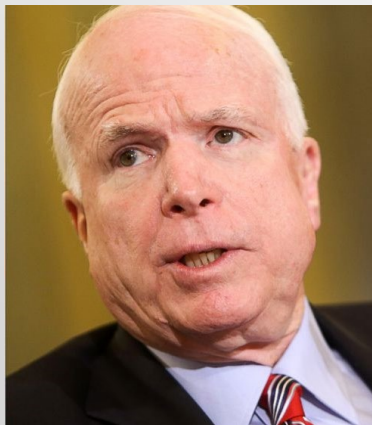
How learners discriminate the validity of sources and is there a difference between L1 and L2.

Qualitative study focusing on the frequency of "lack of background information" and differences in "opinion giving"

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.)

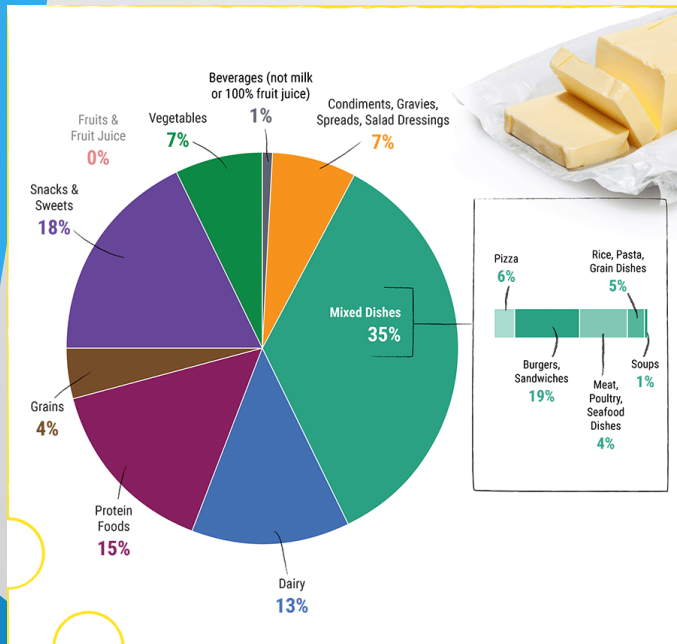


1. Have learners watch/read and take notes on the content of what is being discussed,
2. Have learners highlight information where they lack the necessary background information,
3. Have learners compare with others in the class what they didn't know,
4. Have learners research in their L1 and L2 the 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).

Idea for Intermediate + Learners

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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