

《Treatise》

# **Education for Cross-cultural Understanding (1)**

## **How to teach Japanese as a Foreign Language in English**

### **Shoji Mitarai and Helena Kelava**

#### ***Abstract***

This paper is loaded not only with ideas the reader can implement when teaching Japanese to non-Japanese learners in English, but also with hints which can be applicable. How to incorporate intercultural communication theories and examples into the Japanese language teaching is examined and introduced. Some are familiar, some are new and most are applicable.

#### ***Introduction***

In view of the deepening of economic, business, and cultural relationships between Japan and other countries with every passing year, a large number of people in the world have been keeping their eyes on Japan. They also select Japan as a safe country or place to live in hopes not only of coming into contact with Japanese people and but also of getting to know business entrepreneurs for business purposes. However, the point is that on the one hand, we have witnessed an increase in number of Japanese who teach the Japanese language in Japanese. But on the other hand, there is a shortage of teachers who can teach Japanese through English within a framework of Intercultural Communication.

This paper explores : 1) some of the pitfalls many learners are likely to face and encounter when learning the Japanese language ; and 2) provides practical tips as an aide memoire helping learners understand and manage the process of cross-cultural interactions.

### ***Basic Levels of Japanese***

For those who study the Japanese language, special attentions must be paid to the followings:

First, learners must know that there are three basic levels of the Japanese language: the low level used when addressing subordinates and some categories of younger people; the intimate level used when communicating with talking with family members and close friends; and an honorific or high level used when addressing superiors and respectable elders.

Second Japanese manner demands that the proper level of language be used for every situation—using either the common or low level of language to a superior is the worst possible breach of this deeply embedded social rule.

The tri-level character of the Japanese language, grew out of their vertically structured social system, is one of the reasons why it is so hard for Japanese to talk to strangers. Until they discover the other person's social / business status, the Japanese are very tongue-tied. The Japanese can approach and communicate with non-Japanese easier than they can to other Japanese, if they know a foreign language. This is because they do not have to be concerned about the social level of the language they use.

### ***The Concept of Status in Japan***

The concept of status pervades the lives of Japanese, wherever they may be because no Japanese regards himself/herself as the exact equal of any other person in interpersonal interactions. From a linguistic point of view, the Japanese language does not allow any Japanese to consider so as there are only word forms that refer to superiors and inferiors. It is for this reason that a Japanese almost always relates to another person's status to his/her own by his/her choice of words. That is, a person of equal status is looked upon as superior, and the speaker humbles him/herself.

### **Verb Conjugations**

Verb conjugations also give non-Japanese difficulties. Because there are roughly six directional verbs in Japanese-equivalent to the English words “give” and “receive.” These verbs are used in pairs; one showing that the speaker is a subordinate to the other person in the action, and the other verb forms putting the speaker both in a superior and in an inferior position. And when the other person(in the action) is a third person, the verb selected will define his/her position, whereas the position and relative closeness of the addressee is shown by the formality of the ending suffix. The directional verbs are “*kureru*” and “*kuremasu*” meaning—gives (to me/us), “*ageru*” and “*yaru*” signifying—I/We give to...., and “*itadaku*” and “*morau*” indicating *itadakimashita*)—I/We receive or get from; “*kudasaru*,” “*ageru*,” and “*itadaku*.”

The followings show the use of the directional verbs:

You gave me this dictionary. —(*Anata-ga kudasatta jisho desu.* (informal)

I will give you a dictionary.—*Jisho o agemashoo.* (semi-formal)

I received your letter. —(*Anata-kara-no) Tegami o itadakimashita.* (semi-formal)

He gave me a book—*Kare-ga watashi ni hon o kudasaimashita.* (formal)

I gave the meat the dog. — *I nu ni niku o yarimashita.* (formal)

[*Yaru* is used only with children and pets.]

I received (got) a letter from my friend. — *Tomodachi kara tegami o moratta.* (informal)

Mr. Tanaka gave my son a present.—*Tanaka-san ga musuko ni purezento o kudasatta.*

### **Suffix**

Let us turn our attention to the address title suffix. The address title suffix “*san*,” or “*sama*” which is more formal corresponds to the “Mr.,” “Mrs.,”

“Miss,” or “Ms.” Found in English, but might be used with either surname or given name. What intrigues learners of Japanese is the fact that it is very often omitted with the name of inferiors and never used with the members of one’s family or oneself. Men may also use the title suffix “*kun*” in reference to inferiors, including younger persons on an informal and casual basis or with members of a close friend or a close school group. Chie Nakane, a cultural sociologist enlarges on the use of “*san*” and “*kun*” in her book *Japanese Society*:

*San* is used for *senpai* (One’s seniors), *kun* for *kohai* (one’s juniors) and the name without suffix is reserved for *doryo* (colleagues). Even among *doryo*, *san* is used toward those with whom one is Not sufficiently familiar, while *kun* is used between those closer than those addressed by *san*, former class-mates.<sup>(14,p.27)</sup>

According to John Condon, intercultural communication researcher, the Japanese are very conscious of who is “*senpai*” and who is “*kohai*,” which speaking in English doesn’t require. These pronouns may create some problems when native speakers of English—who place great value on symmetrical interpersonal relationships—initiate study of Japanese.

There are two informal pronouns, “*Boku* (I)” and “*Kimi* (You),” the use of which shows relative closeness, proximity, and informality ; as with “*kun*,” they are not normally and commonly used by women and girls. Another informal usage which confuses people learning Japanese is the affectionate suffix called “*chan*,” used with the titles of members of one’s family, and with names of children and pets, where it acts as a diminutive. When it comes to family members (members of one’s own family), simple and often humble forms are used. Yet in direct address, or referring to members of another’s family, and honorific form is used.

Father	Mother	Elder brother	Elder sister
Humble— <i>chichi</i>	<i>haha</i>	<i>ani</i>	<i>ane</i>
Honorific— <i>otoosan</i>	<i>okaasan</i>	<i>oniisan</i>	<i>oneesan</i>

Additionally, the use of the first name in Japanese is limited to children. Among adults the first name is only used in relation to those who maintain (have maintained) very close relations in childhood. An individual is addressed by the first name by his or her parents, siblings, close relatives, and childhood acquaintances or friends in interpersonal communication.

Third, it is significant to know that the Japanese language owes its most distinctive characteristics to the fact that those using it has to take the most extreme care not to insult or embarrass anyone. This explains the remarkably polite manners of the Japanese in all their ordinal social contacts with each other and in most cases with foreigners—discounting boarding crowded trains and subways, shopping in department store as normal contact.

### ***Syllabic Length, Accent & Intonation***

Edwin O. Reischauer, Professor Emeritus at Harvard University and the former American ambassador to Japan under the Kennedy administration once asserted the major problem area in English language teaching in Japan. In view of a usable facility of communication, Reischauer who is a polyglot put it this way:

The chief problem area, however, has been in the area of communication. Of the many, many thousands, now really millions of students who have gone through the English language learning process in this country, only very few have emerged what a usable facility of communication in the English language, an ability to express their

thoughts and make themselves clearly understood in English. I think that would all agree that this aspect of English language teaching has been the least satisfactory, although in the present world, this has perhaps become the most important aspect of English language learning.<sup>(17)</sup>

Concerning issues associated with phonetics for the Japanese learners of English, he also aptly pointed out the following issues:

Japanese learners of English normally face — “English phonetics.” Actually phonetics must be learned early. What one learns in the first stages often determines what one will always do after that. It is extremely difficult to learn the sounds of a language incorrectly at first and then learn them better later on. One should learn correct phonetics from the beginning, and therefore, I believe Japan has to put more emphasis on correct pronunciation from the very beginning if students are going to achieve a mastery of spoken English. The very different syntax of English, also, I think, poses a similar problem. There has to be a strong effort from the very beginning to try to get students to express themselves in English so that they acquire a mastery of this very different type of organization of their thoughts. What often happens in Japanese education, I am afraid, is just the opposite.<sup>(17)</sup>

### ***Syllabic length***

One of the most interesting characteristics in pronouncing Japanese is its syllabic length. A Japanese learner of English has unconsciously internalized that a phrase or a sentence would be pronounced with an even and regular rhythm consisting of many beats, uttered with the same length.

But these beats called syllables often give trouble to the Japanese learners of English. Because they also have unconsciously learned the same amount of

time must be spent for each Japanese syllable.

As far as accent goes, in English, if a syllable is accented, it reveals that accented syllable is pronounced with a strong stress like “*Tokyo*”—not “Tokyo.” Thus English accent is called *stress accent*.

By the same token, English vowels in a phrase or a sentence are not pronounced with the same duration the stressed syllable is much more clearly uttered than others. It is longer in time durations. This gives the Japanese learner of English another difficulty.

A case in point is “MacDonald.” Since Japanese syllables are pronounced with more or less equal length and stress like “*Makudonarudo*.” While some syllables are given more prominence, this is tied more in with pitch than with stress. It is for this reason that Japanese accent is called *pitch accent*—which differs entirely from English.

Why so different? This is because English words are normally formed with a lot of consonants (or with a consonant, then a consonant and a consonant, or with a consonant, a consonant, and a vowel and a consonant, and a vowel and a consonant— for instance like “*try*,” “*drink*,” and “*train*.” This creates another difficulty for Japanese-speaking people as they are so accustomed to pronouncing these words in such a way like “*torai*,” “*dorinku*,” and “*torein*” that they have a lot of trouble pronouncing English words which are formulated with a number of consonants—English can be called “*consonant-oriented language*” while Japanese is “*vowel-oriented language*.”

Fourth, as both the language and manners, intertwined are a reflection of the inherent desire of the Japanese to obviate shame-causing situations; to prevent insults. The language is almost bare of curse words. The speaker who wants to flay someone must depend on manner of delivery rather than word-meaning. The only “curse words” that do exist are heard on radio and television.

### *Japanese and English phonetic features*

The phonetic system comprises two main components: suprasegmentals [A synonym for prosody], and segmentals (phonetic features). Suprasegmentals which “extend over more than one sound segment in an utterance, over longer stretches of speech”<sup>(7, p.3)</sup> generally refer to elements of prosody including pitch, intonation, loudness, stress, duration and rhythm<sup>(8,16 &19)</sup>, whereas segmentals refer to individual sounds such as consonants and vowels.

### *Suprasegmentals*

One of the most interesting characteristics of suprasegmental differences between Japanese and English is the amount of time to say a sentence. The time differs in Japanese depending on the number of syllables instead of the number of stressed vowels the sentence contains. Consequently, Japanese people may unconsciously know that the same amount of time must be spent for each Japanese syllable regardless of whether the syllable is stressed or unstressed (i.e., mora-timed language or syllable-timed language).

Japanese is also a pitch accent language in which words differ in pitch patterns.<sup>(11&20)</sup>

English is, in contrast, categorized as a stress-timed language and is also a stress-accent language where the accent is expressed by a combination of pitch, duration, intensity and vowel quality.

As mentioned before, “MacDonald as “*Makudonarudo*” (マクドナルド) with more or less equal length and stress. This indicates that Japanese accent is manifested solely by pitch. When some syllables are given more prominence, Japanese is tied more in with pitch than stress. On the other hand, in English, the accented syllable is pronounced with a strong stress, such as “Mickle”—not “Mikkuru” (ミックル). The stressed syllables are marked by making vowels louder than other relatively not important sounds. In addition, English vowels in a phrase or a sentence are not pronounced with the same duration and



stressed syllables are pronounced longer.

Three main differences between the two types of languages are syllable structure, vowel reduction and lexical stress . Firstly, stress-timed language allows several patterns of consonants (C) and vowels (V) : VC, V, CCV, CV and CVC, both open and closed syllable types including complex clusters. (Some examples of English open and closed syllables are : sea (CV) , sit (CVC), spin (CCVC), spill (CCVCC), spring (CCCVCC)) In such system, a word can end with a consonant as well as initial and final consonant clusters such as: twin (CCVC), stress (CCCVCC), past (CVCC). Japanese, syllable-timed language, in contrast, permits open syllables only [Some examples of Japanese open syllables are : 蚊 ka (CV), 彼 kare (CVCV), 枯れる kareru (CVCVCV)] indicating that it basically permits syllables of the forms CV and V, as well as CVC .<sup>(9)</sup> The consequences of such cross-linguistic differences are likely to cause a problem that Japanese tend to insert a vowel between consonants, and end up saying “torai,” “dorinku,” and “torein” instead of “try,” “drink,” and “train.” Secondly, “stress-timed languages are more likely to use centralized vowels in unstressed syllables and vowels may be shortened or omitted” (i.e. vowel reduction) , such as unstressed /ə/, in “pizza” (i.e., pitsə) or “Brazil” (i.e., brəzil). Thirdly, stress-timed languages usually have word level stress (i.e. lexical stress)”<sup>(9)</sup>, which is a phonemic realization of the stress. Some examples are: “PREsent” used as a noun (i.e., gift) VS. “preSENT” used as a verb (i.e., to show or give something formally), “Address” used as a noun (i.e., the location of a building ) VS. “adDRESS” used as a verb (e.g., to speak to a group of people ). These sets of words have the same spelling but different syllable stress.

Kondo examined the difference in vowel reduction between eight Japanese and four American English speakers. The result showed that native English speakers reduced vowel duration significantly more than the Japanese speakers in unstressed vowels and native English speakers’ unstressed

vowel were centralized. Meng et al. <sup>(13)</sup> demonstrated that Japanese also have problems in learning English lexical stress. A reason for these possibly lies in lack of lexical stress as well as vowel reduction in Japanese.

As related to the differences above, Smith analyzed a sample dialogue between two Japanese and it was compared with the one produced with General American (GA) accent. The study showed that Japanese speakers tend to employ word stress differently in words consisting of two or more syllables in length, such as “Manchester,” “happening,” and “kettle.” Regarding sentence stress, they produced “Oh, let me put the kettle on” with a very flat-sounding. It is possibly because how to employ word and sentence stress differs. More specifically, Japanese does not have a secondary stress unlike English. In addition, Japanese exhibits a large number of words without accent in contrast to English which all content words have at least one stress to indicate the prominence of the words.

## ***Segmentals***

### **1. Vowels**

Apparently, there are more vowels present in English than in Japanese. Japanese contains only five monophthongal vowels (/i/, /e/, /a/, /u/, /ɔ/) [Japanese /ɔ/ is not the same as English sound /ɔ/. Each of Japanese vowels has a greater range of variations than English vowels.]

In contrast, American English (AE) contains twelve vowels [Phoneme inventory varies depending on classification and some contains other sounds (e.g., /ɜ:/). In England and in certain parts of the United States, including New York City, sixteen distinct vowels and diphthongs exist. However, in other areas of the United States, fewer distinct vowel sounds exist because no distinction is made between the vowels of bought VS. pot or caught VS. cot or hawk VS. hock. In addition, there are other ways of transcribing diphthongs.] <sup>(9,p.96)</sup>

(i.e., /i/, /ɪ/, /e/, /ɛ/, /æ/, /ə/, /ʌ/, /u/, /ʊ/, /o/, /ɔ/, /a/) or thirteen vowels(i.e.,

/i/, /ɪ/, /e/, /ɛ/, /æ/, /ə/, /ʌ/, /u/, /ʊ/, /o/, /ɔ/, /ɑ/, /a/) and three diphthongs (i.e., /aw/, /əj/, /ɔj/).

In order to differentiate each vowel, articulatory features including tongue height, tongue frontness, tenseness, rounding, lengthening, nasalization and tone play an important role in pronunciation .

Regarding frontness, in English, there are five front vowels (i.e., /i/, /ɪ/, /e/, /ɛ/, /æ/), two central vowels (i.e., /ə/, /ʌ/), and five back vowels (i.e., /u/, /ʊ/, /o/, /ɔ/, /ɑ/), while in Japanese there are only two front vowel (i.e., /i/, /ɛ/), one central vowel (i.e., /a/) and two back vowels (i.e., /u/, /ɔ/).

Tenseness is another articulatory feature and it is characterized as tense (i.e., /i/, /ɛ/, /u/, /o/, /ɑ/) and lax (i.e., /ɪ/, /ɛ/, /ʊ/, /ɔ/, /ə/, /æ/, /ʌ/) monophthong distinctions. Linguists clarify that tenseness represents how much muscle tension or movement in the mouth is involved in producing vowels. Compared to tense vowels, lax vowels tend to be shorter in duration, do not occur at the end of stressed syllable, and the approximate positions of the tongue during their articulation include center other than front and back. Moreover, pronouncing lax vowels doesn't as much muscle tension as tense vowels. Some examples of lax vowels are: /ɪ/ (e.g., “bit”, “pig”), /ɛ/ (e.g., “pet”, “bet”), /ʊ/ (e.g., “put”, “foot”) /æ/ (e.g., “pat”, “bat”), /ʌ/ (e.g., (“put”, “but”), /ɔ/ (e.g., “port”, “bought”) and /ə/ (e.g., “about”, “sofa”). Likewise some examples of tense vowels are: /i/ (e.g., “bee”, “beat”), /e/ (e.g., “bait”, “late”), /u/ (e.g., “pool”, “boot”), /o/ (e.g., “poke”, “boat”) and /ɑ/ (e.g., “pot”, “father”) . There is no such differentiation exists in Japanese vowel inventory and thus, such distinction tends to be one of the most problematic areas for Japanese learners of English. It is revealed that AE /æ/, /ʌ/, /ɑ/ are assimilated to Japanese /a/ and AE /ɔ/ is assimilated to Japanese /ɔ/. As a result, Japanese learners of English tend to have difficulty making distinctions of “hut” VS. “hat”, and “pat” VS. “pot.”

In a similar fashion, Japanese listeners tend to assimilate more than one

AE vowel to a Japanese category using primarily spectral cues (e.g., vowel height, vowel frontness, tenseness, rounding). When duration differences are large, Japanese listeners seem to be able to differentiate the differences (e.g., /i/, /ɪ/), however when spectral (e.g., F3) and temporal (e.g., transition duration) differences are very small (e.g., /u/, /ʊ/), they have difficulty telling the differences. Nishi pointed out that “the accuracy of discrimination between contrasting L2 sounds depends on the similarity of their assimilation patterns into L1 categories.”<sup>(15)</sup>

### Consonants

Japanese contains mainly fifteen consonants [Phoneme inventory varies depending on classification and some contains other sounds (e.g., /ɸ/, /ɥ/ )] --- (/p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/, /m/, /n/, /s/, /z/, /h/, /r/, /j/, /Φ/, /Ç/) <sup>(9&16)</sup>, whereas North American English contains twenty four or twenty five consonants (/b/, /p/, /m/, /w/, /f/, /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /t/, /d/, /n/, /s/, /z/, /r/, /l/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, /j/, /k/, /g/, /ŋ/, /h/, /ʔ/)---depending on classification, phonetic representations are varied as to exactly which, and how many, symbols are used. <sup>(9)</sup> Both languages have unique distribution patterns of consonants. Such critical differences tend to make Japanese difficult to produce some sounds which do not exist or are not distinguished in Japanese and likely transfer their L1 (first language) phonological knowledge into English.

A particularly troublesome case is the discrimination of /r/ and /l/, which are not included in the Japanese phonetic system. Many studies have examined the pronunciation attainment of Japanese learners of English with respect to /r/ and /l/. It is widely notable that Japanese learners tend to substitute Japanese alveolar flap /ɾ/ for both of the phonemes because that is the similar L1 counterpart, resulting in pronouncing /l/ and /r/ identically (e.g., “light” VS. “right” or “late” VS. “rate”). That is, native speakers of English perceive the auditory flap /ɾ/ as English /l/.

In fact, acoustic properties of Japanese counterpart /ɾ/ are substantially similar to English /l/. Moriyoshi's acoustic analysis revealed that there were differences among English /ɾ/, /l/ and Japanese flap /ɾ/ in terms of acoustic domains (e.g., F3, F2, F1 and transition duration (td)). Approximate frequency range and transition duration range is shown in *Table 1*---- American English /ɾ/ can be characterized along multiple dimensions, such as (a) third formant (F3) which involves in the differentiation of roundedness, (b) second formant (F2) which is associated with tongue advancement, (c) first formant (F1) which is associated with tongue height, and (d) transitional duration of F1 and F3.

Table 1. The result of acoustic analysis of English /ɾ/, /l/ and Japanese flap /ɾ/ by Iverson

	<b>English /ɾ/</b>	<b>English /l/</b>	<b>Japanese flap /ɾ/</b>
<b>F1</b>	250-350 Hz	300-400 Hz	300-350 Hz
<b>F2</b>	1100-1300 Hz	1100-1300 Hz	1500-2000 Hz
<b>F3</b>	1600-2000 Hz	3300-3700 Hz	2600-3100 Hz
<b>td</b>	50-100ms	10-20 ms	5-20ms

F1 associated with tongue height	F2 associated with tongue advancement
/i/ & /u/ (high vowels) : Low F1 /æ/ & /a/ (low vowels) : High F1	/u/ & /a/ (back vowels) : Low F2 /i/ & /æ/ (front vowels) : High F2

The result showed that there was no significant difference for F1; however, significant differences were found for F2 and F3. More specifically, significant differences were observed between English /ɾ/ and Japanese flap /ɾ/ for F3. <sup>(10)</sup>

English /ɾ/ articulatory features are related to F3 which is “a front cavity resonance where the front cavity includes a lip constriction formed by the tapering gradient of the teeth and lips (with or without rounding) and a large

volume cavity behind it that includes the sublingual space.” In a perception study, American listeners were sensitive to distinguish differences between English /r/ and /l/. In contrast, Japanese adults typically had difficulty hearing F3 variation and were likely to weight the onset frequency of F2 heavily . Considering Japanese phonetic system, it is somewhat reasonable that F3 is not used as essential information to differentiate any consonantal or vocalic sounds. F2 is used to distinguish the Japanese approximant categories (i.e., /j/, /w/) and it is more familiar to Japanese.

Other crucial articulatory complex segmental elements are inter-dental and labio-dental consonants: /ð, θ, v/. Japanese learners of English tend to substitute /ð, θ, v/ for /z, s, b/ sound. Given that there are no inter-dental or labio-dental fricatives in Japanese, Japanese learners tend to have difficulty pronouncing or discriminating the differences. In this way, “then,” “think,” “very” tend to be confusing distinctions for Japanese to pronounce properly and their pronunciation might be wrongly perceived as “zen,” “sink,” and “berry” by native speakers of English.

### Notes

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