

論 文

# The American Communicative Style

## Experience in Diversity for Japanese Students

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### Abstract

Increasingly large numbers of Japanese students are opting to study overseas. Many of these students will study in the United States, a diverse country with a population representing many regional, ethnic, religious, political, and lifestyle differences. In addition to dealing with these variations on mainstream American culture, Japanese students also face the challenge of a very different communicative style. (Barnlund, 1989; Hall, 1988; Condon, 1984). This paper discusses various types of student reactions to such a diverse culture and to a communicative style that has been characterized as problem-oriented, direct, explicit, informal, and personal. (Stewart and Bennett, 1991) Finally, successful interaction strategies are discussed, including broadening self-awareness (Mantle, 1992) and developing language and observational skills (Althen, 1988).

### Introduction

When people think of the United States, the image of diversity often flashes through their minds. This diversity not only encompasses regional accents and customs, geographical areas, political preferences, religious beliefs, ethnic subcultures, and socioeconomic groups, but it also involves individual lifestyles and personalities. Of course, this individual variation exists in every culture to a greater or lesser degree. One Japanese student, however, when staying in the United States at a midwestern university said that in his interactions with Americans, he found that “each person is very

different". He felt the burden of constantly adapting to different individuals.

What could explain this feeling? First, of course, one could say that he was still getting used to the culture, in his third week of a five-week stay, really just getting a taste of the culture anyway. Secondly, the diversity found in the States may have seemed much more obvious than the diversity in his own culture in Japan. Another source of the feeling of fatigue could also be the very nature of the American communicative style, which encourages individualism and requires much more personal interaction, even with strangers. Possibly, too, his own language limitations gave him a smaller range of conversational expressions and vocabulary. This paper will focus on the challenges posed by the types of diversity students face in the United States in combination with the major aspects of the American communicative style. Specific suggestions will be made for both linguistic and cultural adjustments that can facilitate successful interaction with Americans.

## Diversity in the United States

### **Ethnic differences and cultural subgroups**

According to the 1990 census, the United States has a population of 248, 709, 873. (*World Almanac and Book of Facts*, 1993) Although many recent media stories have focused on racial diversity and rising immigration, the population of the U.S. is still mostly white, 80.3% in fact. Other races include blacks, or African Americans, with 12.1%; Native Americans, Eskimos or Aleut with .8%; Asian or Pacific Islanders with 2.9 percent and people of other races comprising another 3.9%. In addition, when filling out census papers, people of any race can also list Hispanic origins from Mexico, Cuba, South American and other Spanish-speaking countries and in 1990, 9% of the population did. In some states, there are pockets of great diversity in population, concentrations of these various minorities. In rank order, the following 18 states have a minority (African American, Native American, Asian, Hispanic or other race) population of more than 1 million: California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, Georgia, North Car

olina, Michigan, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Louisiana, Ohio, South Carolina, Alabama, Arizona, and Mississippi. Students going to these states may find more opportunities for meeting different types of Americans while also facing the challenge of understanding people from an ethnic minority or subculture with very different customs and attitudes from those of the majority of white Americans.

Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (1992) criticizes the current emphasis on ethnicity in the United States. In particular he warns against the switch from a Eurocentric curriculum to a multi-cultural one in some of the states mentioned above with large numbers of minority students.

They have made a certain progress in transforming the United States into a more segregated society. They have done their best to turn a college generation against Europe and the Western tradition. They have imposed ethnocentric, Afrocentric, and bilingual curricula on public schools, well designed to hold minority children out of American society. (130)

What he means is that if minority students are going to be able to function in mainstream American culture someday, they should not be denied access to learning about it. Foreign students staying in the United States may encounter some people espousing very strong ideas about one ethnic group or another. If students have little familiarity with any of these ethnic subcultures, they may feel uncomfortable and ill prepared. It is only recently that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) texts have focused on multiculturalism. Generally, the focus used to be on the “target” culture, the mainstream culture of the native speakers of English. One important caveat here is that most scholars when describing “American culture”, are referring to white, middle class culture. Long-time foreign student adviser Gary Althen (1988) observes that “people in that category have long...been the political and business leaders, the university presidents, scientists, journalists and novelists who have successfully exerted influence on society.” (xiii) This may be true,

but the situation is slowly changing, evidenced by the increased number of minority politicians, women, blacks, and Hispanics, who have been recently elected to office in the United States.

Culture, a dynamic process involving all aspects of behavior, requires many levels of observation and knowledge for understanding. Roger Bowers, Director of the British Council's English Language Division, observes that

'Culture' is an inherited wealth in which all can share, but it is passed on to us from different sources, and we share it in different parts with different groups to which we belong. (1992,31)

Bowers' observation has inspired some classroom English teachers in Japan to work on consciousness-raising with their students. Garrott encourages students to think of themselves as representatives of the many cultures that exist within any society. In order to understand themselves as members of a variety of subcultures within Japan, her students make lists that may include such things as "global culture, Japanese culture, daughter culture, nineteen-year old culture, Fukuoka culture, part-time job culture, apartment culture, comparing traditional customs with modern customs culture, basketball club culture, peace-keeping culture, friends culture". (1993,2) From this starting point, students then interview someone from a different subculture such as a "Chinese married student, grandmother, dental college student, president of a small company, acupuncturist, fisherman, potter, or retired man." (1993,3) By analyzing the information from the interviews and what they learn about themselves, these Japanese university students can be more open to a variety of culture groups. This seems like a very practical place to start, with what students already know.

Other language teachers and cross-cultural trainers have found that lessons that explore the complexities of cultural assumptions, stereotypes and subcultures can significantly improve attitudes towards not only the

new language, but also towards speakers of that language. (Mantle-Bromley, 1992; Kohls, 1981; Althen, 1988; LaBrack and Pusch, 1993) In general, students are urged to examine commonly held stereotypes and try to recognize the role an individual's behavior might have in modifying, if not exploding such a stereotype. For example, one common stereotype is that all Americans are extravagant and wasteful. If a student believes this, when staying in the United States, he may be surprised to see very successful recycling programs, people carrying their own canvas bags to the grocery store, or other conservation-oriented sides of American consumerism. Other trainers warn that a lengthy discussion of stereotypes may only reinforce these ideas and limit a student's experience when in the United States. (McCaffery, 1986) As far as this stereotype of extravagance is concerned, discussion might encourage the student to look for evidence of wastefulness, and complete ignore any conservation efforts that might exist.

In other words, students are asked to become keen observers while they experience another culture, watching to see how people behave as individuals and as part of some group, a group that could be as disparate as older people, college students, wealthy college students, blue-collar workers, businessmen, bluegrass music fans, baseball fans, drivers, or children. Students may also make observations about the behavior and customs of people from a particular ethnic background, blacks, Hispanics, Chinese-Americans, Jews, or Navajos.

In his essay on multiculturalism, Schlesinger notes that Americans actually seek out their own ethnicity in varying degrees, but generally the "desire for achievement and success in American society remains a potent force for assimilation." (132) Depending on a person's ethnic group and family background, there may be many or very few traces of ethnic origin left in everyday life. Special holiday customs or old family recipes for ethnic food may be some evidence. However, in other cases, with blacks, for example, Schlesinger points out, that racial problems experienced in the United States may have had the bonding effect on people that has caused

them to retain a more active interest in their cultural heritage. (1992, 132)

### Regional differences

Another distinguishing factor, in addition to ethnicity, is the geographical area in which one lives. The total land area of the 50 states and the District of Columbia encompasses 3,618,770 square miles or 9,408,802 square kilometers. Mountain ranges such as the Rockies and the Appalachian Mountains have created distinct regions. Coupled with the basic geographic features and climatic changes, historical and commercial factors have determined the character of many regions in the United States. People who travel to different parts of the United States or who meet people from these different areas on university campuses may sense some marked differences, seeing different pieces of the American culture puzzle.

The “East Coast” or “New England” includes such states as New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Virginia, states densely populated. New Jersey, has 1,084 people per square mile; Japan has 850 per square mile. With a rich revolutionary his-



tory, people from these states often place high importance on the rights the individual, remembering their states as the site of the birth of democracy. This area also includes New York City, the most populous metropolis in the United States, with over 7 million people, 24,327 per square mile and the most racially diverse county in the U.S., Queens. Students going to New York City might hear foreign languages more often than English in some areas.

The "South" including the states of Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana has a history not only filled with the Civil War and the Mississippi River trade history but also with the civil rights demonstrations of the 1960's. Students going to these states may experience some of the racial tensions so often noted by the media. Students who have many African-American friends may not experience as much of mainstream "culture". Initially, at least, students may have trouble understanding "black English", a dialect with shortened forms and in-group expressions such as "man, bro, sister, and the hood" to show membership in a group. Of course, not all blacks speak "Black English", either, and so it depends on the individual.

Students can evaluate the different accents of English that they hear. In a study with foreign students in the United States, it was shown that they could distinguish southern, northern, and midwestern regional accents. Their attitude toward the speakers with these different accents varied from native speaker attitudes, but some of the difference was attributed to the evaluation of male and female speakers in the students' home countries. (Alford and Strother, 1990.)

In the middle of the United States, there are several regions, often determined by the type of terrain or industry. The "Midwest" includes Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Wisconsin, and Iowa, states noted for agricultural and dairy products. The range of population density in these states is 50-200 people per square mile. The "Great Lakes" region includes

Minnesota, Michigan, Illinois again, and Ohio, states noted for manufacturing, states very hard hit by the decline of the American auto industry. In this part of the country, Japanese students may experience some resentment from people who see them as symbols of Japan's economic success. This success is often seen as a reason for Americans' economic problems. Bumper stickers and storefront signs urging people to "buy American" may abound. (*Time*, 1992) Moving west, the "Plains" states including Kansas, Nebraska, and North and South Dakota produce grain and cattle. Here, one thinks of wide, open spaces in these states which have a population density of only 20-40 persons per square mile. These states also have almost exclusively white populations, too. (*World Almanac*) This fact may help or hinder Japanese students' interaction with Americans there. On the one hand, they may feel very conspicuous, as if they are being stared at. On the other hand, there may be more opportunities for friendships to develop with Americans who have not been overwhelmed with large numbers of foreign students.

The "Rocky Mountain" states of Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana share not only great natural beauty and a history of mining and ranching, but severe weather which creates rugged individuals. Skiing and outdoor activities attract people to these states. Population density in these states ranges from 5-33 persons per square mile.

In the western part of the United States, we often refer to the "Southwest" and the "Northwest" regions, and to California, as a region by itself, since it is the most populous of the 50 states. The area that includes New Mexico and Arizona, often called the "Southwest", is famous for the Grand Canyon, the desert, and the rich Native American and Hispanic cultures. Population density here ranges from 13-33 people per square mile. In the "Northwest", Washington and Oregon, aerospace, forestry and agriculture are the main industries. The population density in Washington is 75 people per square mile and in Oregon, only 30 per square mile. In recent years, Oregon has attracted many Americans wishing to resettle in a healthier en

vironment away from crowded, urban areas.

The climate and the cultural diversity of California together with the lure of Hollywood and Disneyland, have drawn Japanese students for years. According to the 1990 Census, (*World Almanac*), the racial distribution in California is 69% white, 7.4% black, 9.6% Asian, and 25.8% Hispanic. When some Japanese go to California they are mistaken for Asian Americans. One woman said, "They thought I was an American." After the L.A. riots, some students, afraid to go there, asked "Will they think I'm a Korean?" They did not want to be victims of violence. Other students complained that "People only spoke Japanese to me in stores in San Francisco." This reduced their chances to speak English. Other students feel more comfortable surrounded by many Asian faces.

The point of this brief, very general sampling of the regions in the United States is to show the wide range of experiences that students may have when they choose to study in the United States. More importantly, these regional differences are only one facet of the culture they will encounter.

### Lifestyle differences

The variety of lifestyles, the changing American family and the focus on personal choice are topics that have received much attention. A recent publication about the life of today's American teenagers has highlighted many of the stresses and current changes they experience. The topics covered give us an indication of how life is changing in the United States: riskier passage into adulthood because of less time spent with adults; younger dating ages; greater number of 16 and 17-year-olds working; academic success despite the odds; single mother students needing day care for their children; homosexuality; student volunteers; pressure to achieve; support programs for inner city students; drinking and drugs; teen heroes; and teen consumers and fads. (*Newsweek*, 1990) Basically, American high school students face many choices very early and they are learning to cope with them.

By considering the ethnic, regional, and lifestyle differences that Americans may exhibit, we can see how unpredictable communication may be for foreigners who do not share this background. In addition, the style of conversation in the United States is often very personal and direct, demanding perhaps a different kind of interaction from in many Japanese conversations.

### The American Communicative Style

To briefly describe the American communicative style, we can draw on the research of experts from the fields of psychology, communication, anthropology, and philosophy. In their classic *American Cultural Patterns*, (1991) psychologist Edward C. Stewart and communications expert Milton J. Bennett describe the underlying psychology of the American way of thinking as motivation to succeed and pursuit of individuality. In this work, Stewart and Bennett cite the work of Bellah et al. to illustrate that some of the individualism in the United States, some of the self-reliance, is really mythic.

Clearly, the meaning of one's life for most Americans is to become one's own person, almost to give birth to oneself. Much of this process... is negative. It involves breaking free from family, community, and inherited ideas. (82)

It is as if the myth says you can be a truly good person, worthy of admiration and love, only if you resist fully joining the group (145).  
(in Stewart and Bennett, 137)

Although Americans may have mixed feelings about belonging to groups or keeping strong connections to families, for mainstream American culture, the dominant attitude still favors the individual. An orientation towards action, freedom of personal choice, belief in the equality of individuals and independence from prescribed systems of thought are hallmarks of this way of thinking. (Stewart and Bennett, 1991, 138-143)

The American communicative style reflecting this way of thinking, has been described as problem-oriented, direct, explicit, informal, and personal. (Stewart and Bennett, 1991, 155-161) Another parallel explanation of the underlying framework of conversation comes from the philosopher H.P. Grice who has written about the "cooperative principle" which involves the need for speakers to follow certain basic expectations or maxims. Be relevant, be brief and concise, be clear and unambiguous, and be truthful. He admits that, of course, people break these maxims, but that the violations may have some implicit meaning in the conversation, an intention to hide something, to mislead someone, or to avoid hurting someone's feelings. (in Wardhaugh, 63-66) Let us examine these two descriptions in greater detail and consider the communication challenges that this type of conversation presents to Japanese speakers.

#### Problem - oriented

For many Americans, practical in their approach to situations, conversation is often mainly a way to get things done. Staying on the topic at hand is important to bring speedy action on an issue. Also important is the discussion of various alternatives for solving a particular problem.

In communication, the American mentality is practical, favoring beliefs, resolutions, and intentions as the content of messages . . . . Emotions definitely take a secondary role to logical and factual strategies. (Stewart and Bennett, 151)

Grice has mentioned the need to be relevant, in other words giving the right kind and amount of useful information necessary for a particular discussion. For some Japanese students, giving an opinion on possible solutions to a problem is quite difficult. Problems are often too uncomfortable to discuss openly. Such open discussion might jeopardize the harmony of the existing situation. Take the example of many Japanese students who experience problems with roommates in American universities, but avoid discussing them with anyone until the situation has

become quite serious.

### Direct

Many Americans prefer a conversation style that gets to the point rather quickly. (Stewart and Bennett, 1991; Sakamoto and Naotsuka, 1982; Hall and Hall, 1987; Condon, 1984) Talking in circles is seen as a negative pattern by many Americans, who favor a more linear style. Grice too, with his maxim to be brief and concise, criticizes roundabout, repetitious conversations. For Grice, the violation of the brevity maxim means that the speaker may have some other intention than truthful sharing of information. Sometimes the American virtue of directness is interpreted as a lack of aesthetic subtlety by people from other cultures. The issue of silence enters in here, too. Speaking up and sharing ideas is admirable in the United States, something children are trained to do. John Condon, linguist and communications expert with long experience living in Japan, clearly sums up the different uses of silence in American and Japanese conversation.

Americans usually associate silence in social situations with something negative-tension, hostility, awkwardness, or shyness.

Speaking too much is associated in Japan with immaturity or a kind of empty-headedness. . . . Silences, on the other hand, have many meanings in a Japanese setting . . . . Not speaking can sometimes convey respect for the person who has spoken or for the ideas expressed. Silence can be a medium that the parties share, a means of unifying, in contrast to words which separate. (1984, 40)

Sometimes overgeneralizations characterize all American conversations as direct and all Japanese conversations as indirect. This negates the role that different individuals and current circumstances play. The key, according to one of the subjects interviewed by Condon, is that directness in Japanese conversation is only appropriate "within our group". (1984, 44) Otherwise, more ambiguity and vagueness might be used. Americans generally will

opt for words, while some Japanese may favor non-verbal communication. (Hall, 1987; Barnlund, 1989) Some challenges that Japanese speakers may face include maintaining direct eye contact with Americans, and speaking up and using expressions like “I don’t know” or “I don’t understand” instead of remaining silent when confused or uncomfortable. Also difficult may be delivering refusals or bad news.

### Explicit

How much we say versus how much we leave unsaid in our conversations varies across cultures and across situations. American anthropologist Edward T. Hall has offered the idea of low-context and high-context societies to explain some of the differences in how we share information.

Context refers to the fact that when people communicate they take for granted how much the listener knows about the subject under discussion. In low-context communication, the listener knows very little and so must be told practically everything. In high-context communication, the listener is already ‘contexted’, and so does not need to be told very much. (1987, 158)

With individuals and societies alike, the larger amount of commonly shared information people have, the less they need to openly say or explain. Hall offers examples of high context cultures as “Japanese, Arab, and Mediterranean peoples who have extensive information networks among family, friends, colleagues, and clients, and who are involved in close personal relationships...” (1987, 8) Daily contact in an office with many desks grouped together would be an example of this high context. Many projects become not only common knowledge, but also at times the responsibility of the whole group or team. Strong, extended families, such as those in Italy and in many Arab countries, where cousins and siblings grow up together, also create a high level of shared knowledge. Furthermore, in countries where the educational ministry sets forth a standard nationally implemented curriculum, one can expect most high school students or junior high school students to have studied the same

basic courses.

On the other end of the spectrum, “low context people include the Americans and the Germans, Swiss, Scandinavians, and other northern Europeans.” (Hall, 1987, 8) Executives in private offices without much daily contact with many workers illustrate this low context. Typically one would associate a more nuclear family orientation with these cultures and more emphasis on the individual. In a country like the United States high school education may vary quite a lot depending on the funding for the school district or, as Schlesinger pointed out, on the type of curriculum that is implemented.

Grice, in his description of the “cooperative principle” of conversation, mentions the need to be clear and unambiguous. Grice says that it is the sender’s responsibility to communicate clearly. These aspects are very much culturally determined. Even within one culture, the “American” culture, people share varying amounts of previous knowledge about topics, issues, and problems at hand. Another example of explicitness is the fact that Americans are often very clear about their motivation for doing something; they feel the need to explain why they do things. For people from different cultures, the challenge to be explicit is sometimes staggering. Quite often, misunderstandings arise because someone took something for granted, assuming that it didn’t need to be “spelled out”. When Americans spell things out in great detail, others may feel patronized. (Sakamoto, 1982) Japanese speakers then may find it difficult to judge the amount of information necessary in an explanation or conversation. They may feel it unnecessary to give the how and why of their actions in words, expecting Americans to understand from the context, or from some written information that has been shared.

### Informal

Another prominent aspect of the American communicative style is its informality. An often-mentioned illustration of this is first names. “I’m

Robert Smith; call me Bob.” Many other cultures view this quick use of first names as a superficial attempt at creating a closer social network or context. (Hall, 1987) Americans do often avoid formal forms of direct address, such as Mister or Doctor, unless they are talking to strangers, or the elderly. One exception might be the case of Professor or Dean; these terms are often used by university students when talking about their instructors. Only if the instructor gives permission, will students use first names. This sometimes poses a challenge to foreign students who hear many people using first names, and assume that it is acceptable in all cases. Or an equally challenging task is for students to use the first name of a person perhaps 30 or 40 years their senior. (Althen, 1988, 129) It is a custom that depends on the preference of the person to whom one is speaking. And an informal “Hi!” does not necessarily mean a very friendly, intimate relationship. (Althen, 1988, 78-79)

Another basic use of informality is in greetings, especially among young people. Some Japanese students, often modest and respectful, are seen as rather stiff and formal if the only common greeting they use with friends is “How are you?” Many foreign students are often confused when American students greet them. In order to feel part of the group, Japanese students must learn to respond appropriately to greetings such as “How ya doin?”, “What’s up?”, “What’s goin’ on?”, “How’s it goin’?”, or “What’s the word?” Even the use of contractions such as “isn’t”, “can’t”, and “won’t” create a more informal atmosphere. Japanese students, along with many other foreign students, have told the author that they hesitate to use these forms, sometimes because they are afraid their pronunciation of these reduced forms will not be understood, and on other occasions because it just sounds incorrect to them.

In 1972, some commonly held ideas about the formality or informality of expression and other communicative characteristics of American and Japanese cultures were reinforced in a study done by Dean C. Barnlund at International Christian University in Tokyo. This particular sample involved a self-disclosure form given to 122 Japanese college students and 42

## Japanese Cultural Profile

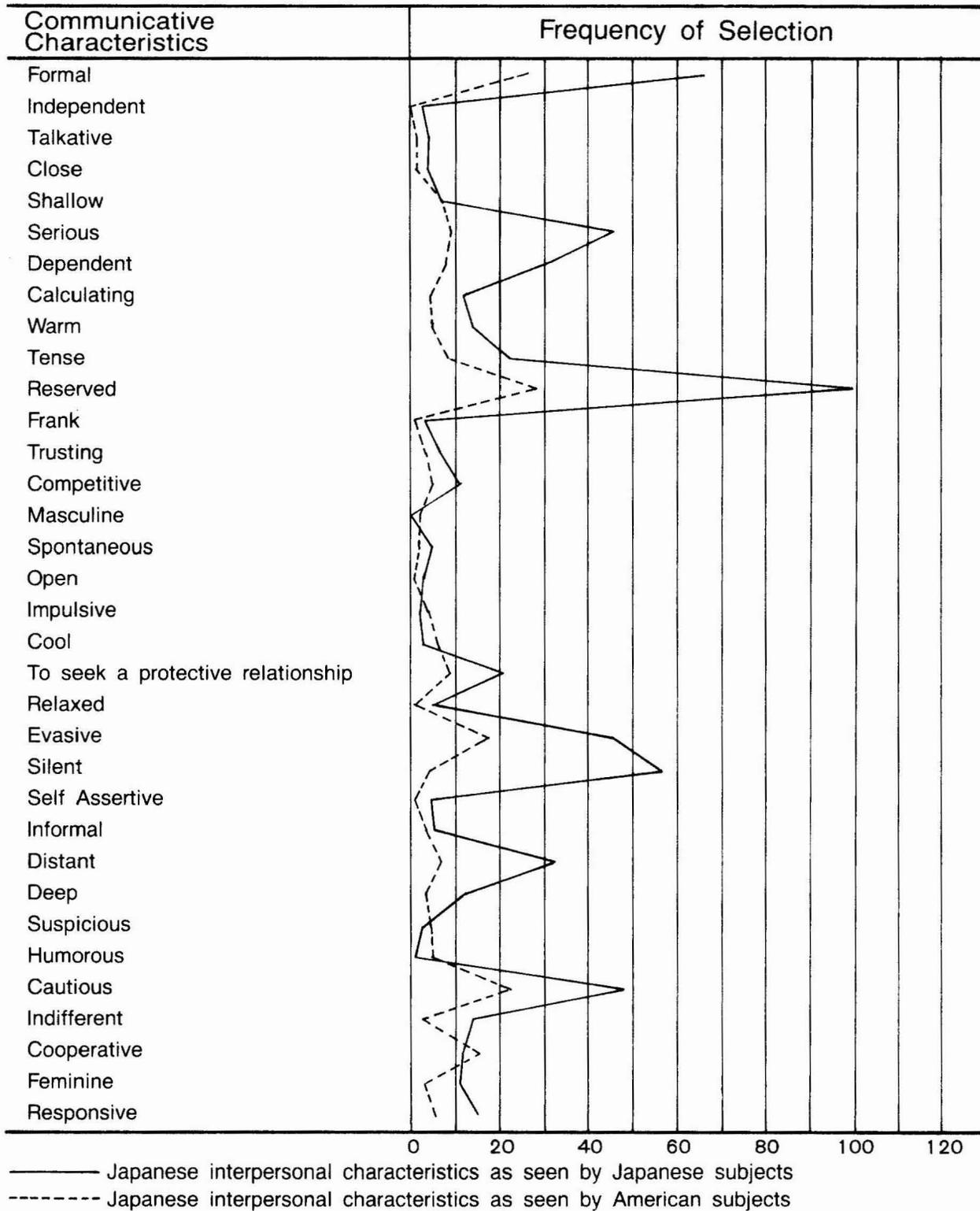
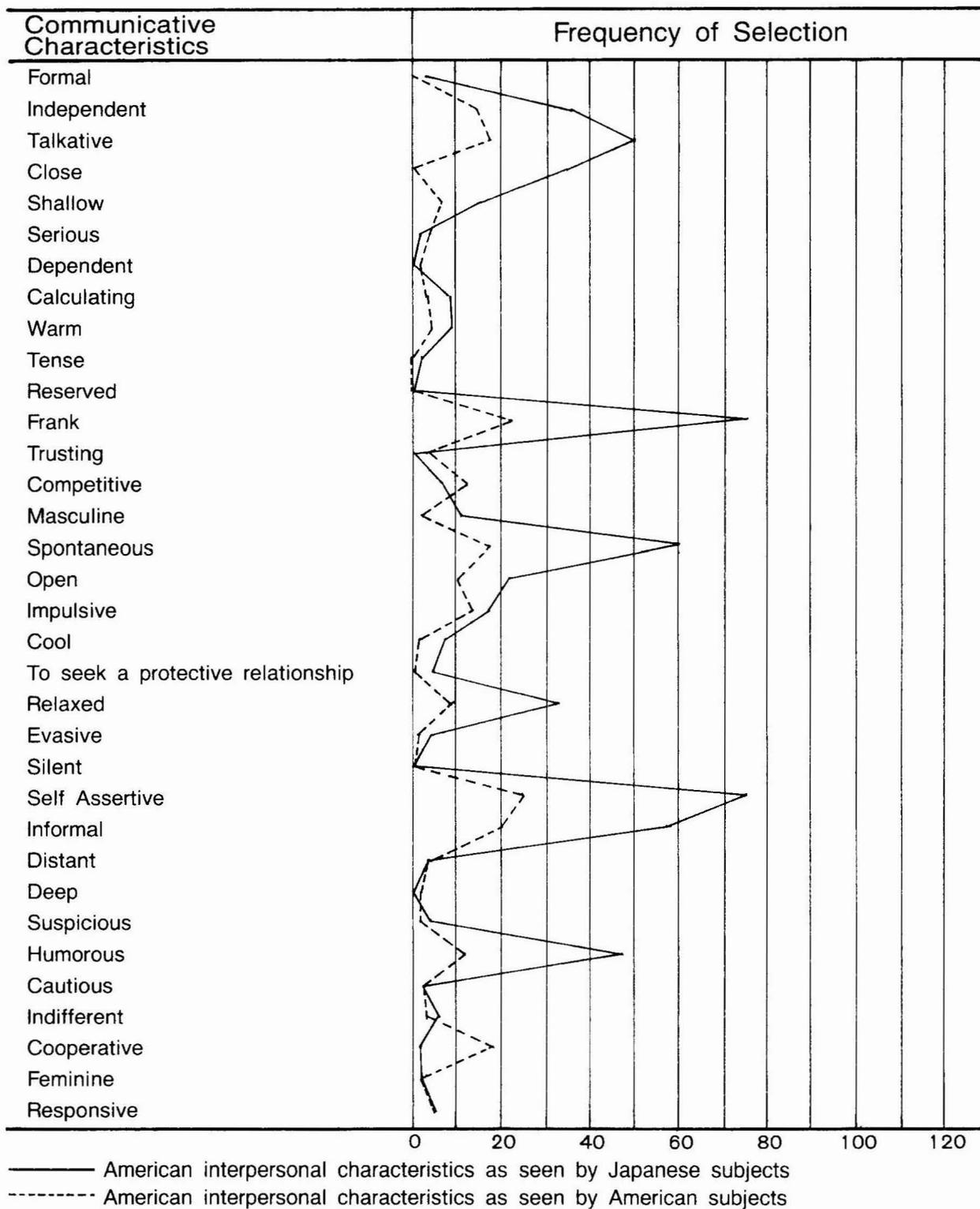


Figure 1 (Source: Barnlund, *Public and Private Self in Japan and the States*, 1989, 53 and 51.)

### American Cultural Profile



Figuer 2 (Source: Barnlund, *Public and Private Self in Japan and the States*, 1989, 53 and 51.)

American college students who were familiar with both cultures because they were taking classes in Japan. Students were directed to choose the five words that “best describe what Americans are like in talking with each other”, and do the same for Japanese speakers. (Barnlund, 1989, 50) Figures 1 and 2 show the profiles of characteristics that each group chose to describe both American and Japanese cultures. In general, the self-evaluation of characteristics was mirrored by the other group.

Figure 1 shows that both Americans and Japanese felt that characteristics such as self-assertive, frank, spontaneous, talkative and independent described the American communicative style. These all seem to reflect the focus on the individual and an informal way of speaking. Figure 2 gives the profile for the Japanese communicative style, and highlights quite a different set of descriptors, the antithesis of informality.

The most often chosen descriptors were: reserved, formal, cautious, serious, silent, and evasive. No wonder an informal style of communication jars some Japanese speakers. These subjects were college students, and their ideas may not reflect the total population of either group. On the other hand, for the purposes of this paper, which is to show the challenges that face Japanese students, the results are germane to the discussion.

It would be interesting to see, twenty years later, if Japanese university students would still choose the same descriptors. Have there been any significant changes in how students feel about the way they communicate? Three possible causes for change come to mind. First, the American influence on Japanese music, sports, television, and fashion, might encourage more informality in some situations, especially when travelling overseas, if all of these aspects of popular culture seem familiar. Another catalyst is increased overseas experience for high school and even junior high school students: class or club trips, AFS programs, homestays, years spent with parents who were transferred to overseas locations, and private vacations. And finally, and perhaps more significant, could be a shift in how Japanese university students speak their own language. Parents, professors, and students themselves comment about how the style of speaking has become

more relaxed. Female students use language formerly exclusively used by males and students sometimes use very informal forms with elders. It is beyond the scope of this paper to propose any analysis of specific linguistic features that may show increased informality in the Japanese spoken today by Japanese university students. Such research could, however, shed light on how these speakers now feel about using informal language at home and when interacting with Americans. An updated communicative style study such as the one Barnard did also might reveal several changed perceptions about communicative style.

### Personal

The final characteristic of the American communicative style to be discussed here is the personal nature of conversation. Stewart and Bennett observe that

Americans tend to rely on their personal experience for knowledge of the world, and their communication patterns are weighted in that direction. Upon first meetings Americans typically sift through a number of topics until they find an experience they have in common. (158-9) The basis of relationship, for Americans is commonality of action and experience, not commonality of thinking. (159)

Some people may think it strange that Americans talk so much about rather trivial things such as weather, sports, hobbies, travelling, or what they did last weekend. This does not mean that Americans do not have serious, philosophical or political discussions. It is, however, not the preferred starting point for striking up a conversation. (Althen, 1988, 22-23)

The research done by Barnlund at International Christian University in the 1970's also dealt with the issue of self-disclosure; to whom do Americans and Japanese reveal their lives and which topics are discussed with different people. The summary of topics that Americans and Japanese had disclosed to strangers, fathers, mothers, same sex friends, opposite sex friends, and

## Summary of Topic, Target, and Level of Disclosure

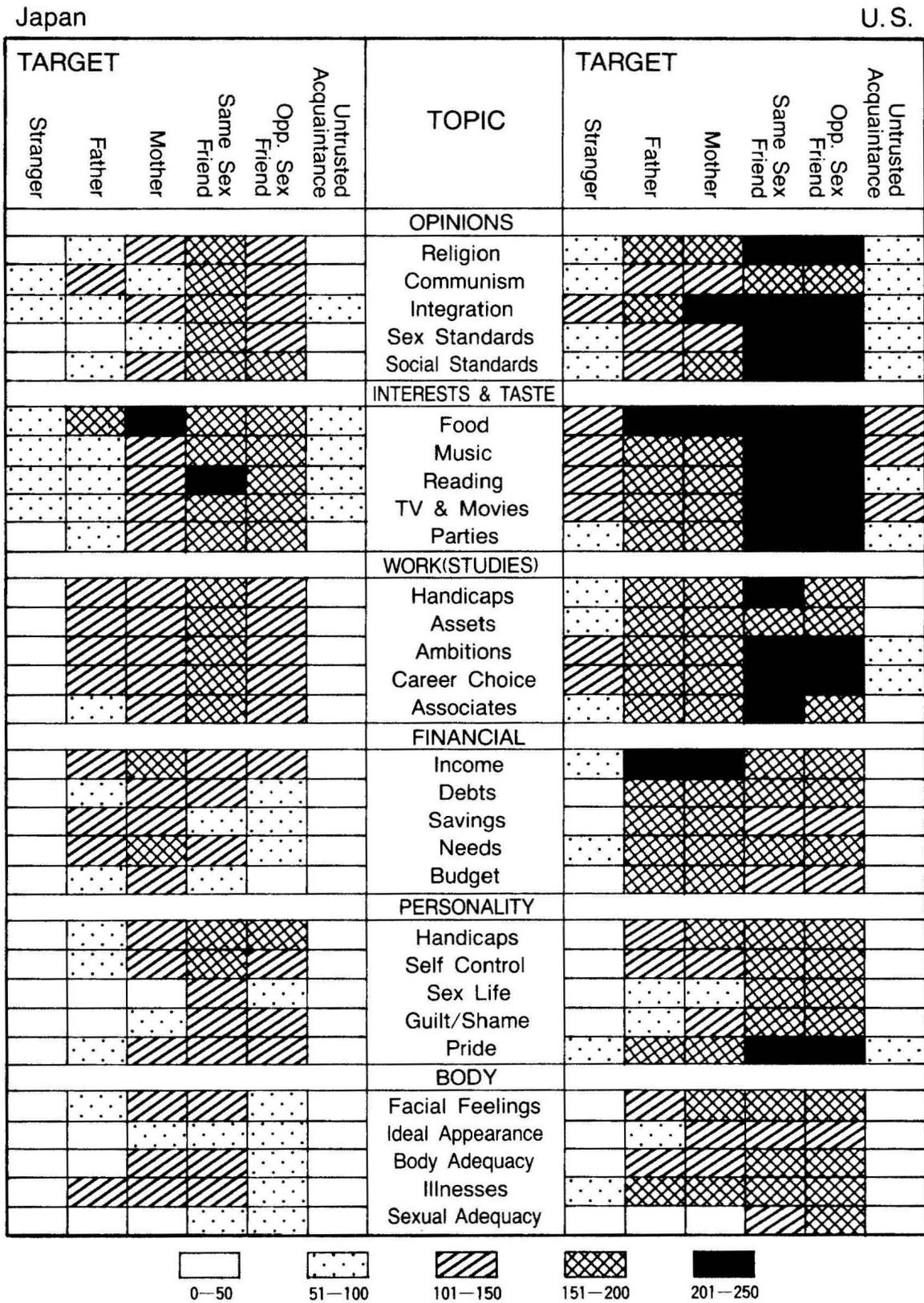


Figure 3 (Source: Barnlund, *Public and Private Self in Japan and the States*, 1989, 88.)

untrusted acquaintances is shown in Figure 3 below.

The questionnaire that the 120 Japanese and 120 American college students completed asked for level of communication about the 30 different topics. The scale that was used allowed respondents to choose 0 if they had said nothing about the topic to the person in question; 1 if they had only talked generally about the topic; and 2 if they had given full details about a particular topic. The numbers were then multiplied by 100 to simplify the display. (Barnlund, 1989, 71-83)

What can we learn about how much personal information American college students shared with various people from this study? Americans were much more comfortable talking about many different topics, even with strangers. For both Japanese and American students, interests and tastes were the most comfortable topics of conversations. This was followed by work or studies. Both American and Japanese students chose virtually the same target persons when revealing more information about themselves. Opinions were given much less frequently by the Japanese students. One factor that Barnard points out in the discussion of his study is that there is considerable individual variation in the self-disclosure questionnaires. For example, for some students, finances or ambitions were very private, for others very public. It would seem that the past experiences of the person and the subcultures of individual families or economic class or geographical area could explain why they felt more or less comfortable revealing this information. In general then, Japanese students can expect many Americans, even perfect strangers they may encounter on a bus or a plane, to talk to them about different topics. At least, appropriate subject matter seems to be similar across cultures.

### Learning Successful Interaction Strategies

Faced with the diversity of people in the United States and with a different communicative style for the most part, how can students prepare for these challenges? Cross-cultural trainers, language teachers, and foreign student advisers agree that students need: self-awareness, language skills

and language learning strategies, and nonjudgmental observational skills. (LaBrack and Pusch, 1993; Althen, 1988; Oxford and Crookall, 1989; McCaffery, 1986; Kohls, 1981; and Hall and Hall, 1987) All of these skills need to be exercised with great patience, a sense of humor, and a tolerance for ambiguity. (Althen, 1987, 150)

Self-awareness means knowledge about one's own motivations and experiences as well as general knowledge about one's own culture. What values are important in the home culture? If those values are not shared in the new culture, what will the reaction be? It also means knowing one's limits for handling the stress and uncertainty that are inherent in most cross-cultural experiences dealing with people from different backgrounds. Examining one's preconceptions about another culture is also a part of self-awareness. Cross-cultural trainers LaBrack and Pusch (1993) emphasize the need for students to anticipate the cycle of changes that will happen when going overseas including later reentering one's own culture. Mantle-Bromley (1992) and Garrott (1993) both emphasize the need to see another culture and one's own culture as made up of many subcultures, rather than being limited to broad stereotypes. Foreign student advisers and teachers alike encourage reflection on overseas experiences in the form of a journal or diary. (Althen, 1988; Oxford and Crookall, 1989)

There is an extensive range of strategies that foreign language learners can use, both before going overseas and while there. A comprehensive survey of such strategies gathered by various methods suggests that successful language learners may have some things in common. (Oxford and Crookall, 1989) First, they are active and involved in learning. They also use a variety of strategies to make sense of the new language they are learning: note-taking, reviewing information daily, connecting what they are learning to what they have learned before or to their own language, working with classmates to understand and practice the language, keeping journals, making lists of new expressions and their meanings, finding social outlets through similar interests in sports or music, and copying key sentences or

words as models for sentences about their own experiences, just to name a few. One thing that researchers have found about challenges for these learners is that

Special demands are placed on language learners by new writing systems, sounds, cultural values, and the need for highly 'public' language performance in social settings. Different language learners use different strategies in response to these demands. (Oxford and Crookall, 1989, 414)

This sums up many of the challenges faced by Japanese students going to the United States for study.

Some useful areas of communication skills for students going overseas include initiating conversations, active listening, and non-verbal communication. (McCaffery, 1986, 167) In this author's experience, these ring true, too, for Japanese students. One student after returning to Japan from a stay at an American university said that if he hadn't gone to the States and pushed himself to talk with people, he could never approach strangers in Japan. Active listening skills that involve checking for information and restating opinions seem crucial for the type of explicit, and problem-oriented conversation that Americans have. Understanding differences in non-verbal communication such as the use of silence, or facial gestures can alleviate many misunderstandings.

Finally, observational skills are crucial for students going overseas. Immersion in another culture brings a range of new experiences. Althen (1988) has suggested ten ways to learn more about American culture while in the States. Ask questions and learn local English are the first two and the most important, he says. Sometimes, foreign students hesitate to ask about unusual things they see or hear. The other eight suggestions offer ways to make sense of some situations one might see: take short field trips to places like restaurants, busy intersections, schools, stores, meetings and observe what goes on and how people behave; talk with experienced foreigners; keep

a journal with descriptions of situations and delay judgment about those situations; learn the names of local and institutional VIP's; observe ritual and social interactions; read local newspapers and books about the history and culture of the area; view yourself as a teacher who can share information about your own culture; and reflect on experiences. (Althen, 1988, 157-166) One important reason to be observant is to notice details of a situation that might help explain what people did. What was happening at the time? Who was talking? How did they look? What did they say? What happened later? Was this like any other situation? This type of careful observation may reveal some recurring pattern of behavior among the diverse situations observed.

### Conclusion

The American communicative style, then, is determined by a person's own culture and subcultures as well as by individual personality and motivation. Although many generalized descriptions of this style may apply, it is necessary for Japanese students going overseas to react to each person freshly and be ready to interact. Further research should be done to determine if current changes in overseas exposure, influence of American popular culture and language informality among Japanese university students have any effect on students' ability to communicate more easily in English. With the help of cross-cultural trainers, language instructors, foreign student advisers, friends, and family, a broad range of coping strategies can be developed for successful communication with Americans.

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