

“ROAD-BLOCKS” ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE HIGHWAY

An examination of major barriers, both linguistic and
cross-cultural, which impede the progress of
English language learners in Japan

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Introduction

For decades, the image most frequently associated with learning a foreign language has been that of the ‘plateau’; i. e. the idea that the learner has a burst of progress in which he/she absorbs substantial pieces of new language knowledge, only to have this followed by a ‘learning plateau’, a period in which the student seems to bog down, to cease to make any real progress for some time. It has always been assumed that with time, effort, and consolidation, the plateau would automatically lead into another climb, another learning surge in which new knowledge is again taken in stride. This repeated sequence of climb/plateau may well be an over-optimistic representation of the learning process in the sense that it suggests that more or less automatic progress will be made, as long as enough time and effort is expended during the ‘plateau’ delays.

A more realistic image of the foreign language learning process is that of a long straight highway with a series of road-blocks acting as checks on progress. The barriers in the elementary and intermediate stages are linguistic while in the more advanced stages they become cross-cultural. In reality, many Japanese learners of English will rapidly clear the early hurdles before coming to a grinding halt at certain key listening road-blocks. At this point, many students, in

fact, make a 'U-turn' and their working knowledge of English is frozen at that point. There is no automatic progress. Time and effort alone are not enough. Insight and awareness are the keys to by-passing problematic barriers.

In this paper, I will examine in detail several significant barriers which block the progress of many Japanese learners of English. The first set of barriers are linguistic and centre on particular listening difficulties. The second set of barriers are cross-cultural and focus on areas of social behaviour in which there is a wide divergence in Japanese custom and Western custom.

Key Linguistic Road-Blocks

(1) Weak Forms and the "Schwa vowel"

The key skill of listening has always presented a major hurdle for Japanese students of English. There are several important factors which make listening so difficult.

1. "In the morning I get up at seven o'clock and have breakfast with my friends".

Most Japanese students would find this 15-word sentence very easy to understand in written form. However, when spoken at normal native-speaker speed, with a complex sound code involving linking, stress and intonation, even a simple utterance like this can become incomprehensible. A native-speaker would say this in either one or two breaths (i. e. either with no break or with a single break after "o'clock"), with all of the words linked in speech. The Japanese listener would not hear 15 distinct words, but rather something resembling either one or two extended words. In addition, only six key words would receive stress (morning, get up, seven, breakfast, friends), while the other words are uttered in a very rapid and weak form. The intonation of English continually moves up and down, a "music" which contrasts sharply with the relatively flat intonation of Japanese.

We can see clearly the influence of 'weak forms' in the following example:

2. (a) "It was too difficult for them to leave"
- (b) "It wɒz tu: difɪkəlt fɔ: ðəm tu: li:v"
- (c) "It wəz tu: difɪkəlt fə ðəm tə li:v"

In 2(b) we see the strong 'dictionary' form of each lexical item. Japanese students first learn English through their eyes, through the visual code, so when they see words on paper it is this 'dictionary' form which is signalled. However, nobody speaks English in this way. In 2(c) we see the normal spoken form of this sentence. In English, content words which carry the message are typically in strong form while structure/function words (e. g. articles, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, pronouns, conjunctions, etc.) are typically in weak form. In 2(c) we see that four of the structure words convert to the weak "schwa vowel". Many foreign learners of English assume wrongly that using weak forms is somehow casual or careless, but, of course, it is the accepted standard form; indeed if we used all strong forms in speaking we would sound very "foreign" and even aggressive. It is a sad fact that many teachers of English, both Japanese and native-speaker, make the mistake of using too many strong forms and in consequence, are teaching a false model of the language; they do this only to be kind, hoping to make things clearer and easier to understand for their students, but, long-term, this style of teaching can be very damaging.

The third example illustrates clearly how a simple utterance, spoken at normal speed, with links and weak forms, converts to something highly complex and difficult for the student to "catch":

3. [Q: "How many students came to the meeting yesterday?"]
- (a) "There were ten of them"
- (b) "ðə wə ten əv ðəm"

Here, only the key content word "ten" carries direct resemblance to the written/dictionary form which dominates the Japanese stu-

dent's expectations. All other words convert to the weak form with the schwa vowel; they are spoken in a weak/unclear form which is difficult for the listener to pick up. Thus something very simple on paper, through the eyes, becomes something highly complex through the ears.

At this point it is possible to think in terms of two distinct forms of the target language: ENGLISH I AND ENGLISH II. Japanese students typically learn the written form, ENGLISH I (dominated by vocabulary and grammar), and only after some months or even years, they meet the native-speaker spoken form, ENGLISH II. This staggered sequence is a major road-block in the learning process. Many learning problems are caused as a direct result of interference from ENGLISH I on ENGLISH II; the dictionary/strong form is already well-established before the weak form (spoken) is introduced, and the consequences are universally negative.

It is worth taking a closer look at the schwa vowel, a sound which dominates spoken English, and a sound which is a "nightmare" for Japanese learners of English. There are 44 sounds in English, including 20 vowel/diphthong sounds but it is the schwa vowel which is ever-present. It is ironic that the most dominant sound in the language should actually be its weakest and least clear vowel sound. The schwa vowel is produced in the centre of the mouth, midway between close and open, midway between front and back, and it is lax, i. e. articulated without much energy. It is too weak to be focussed and never occurs in a stressed syllable.

So, here we have a sound which dominates spoken English. It could be argued that if the Japanese learner cannot readily recognise this weakest of vowels and produce it consistently, then that learner will never master spoken English. In an ideal language learning world, the Japanese learner would be introduced to ENGLISH I and ENGLISH II simultaneously from day one and would spend the first two months of his course in an "immersion" type focus on recognition and

production of the schwa vowel.

(2) **Rhythm**

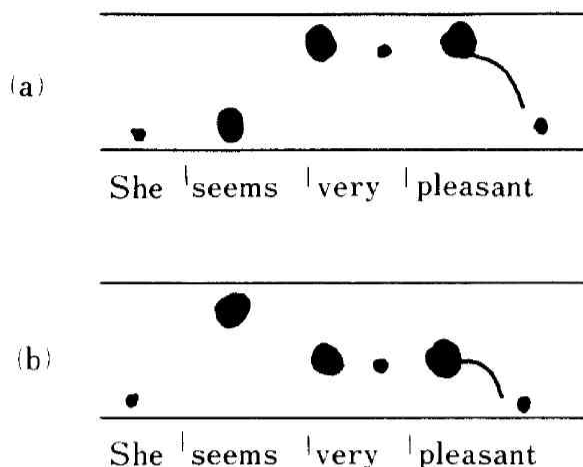
There is a second major listening "road-block" for Japanese learners of English. Spoken English has a characteristic rhythm which is a key element in the information structure of the speaker's message. Many learners make the mistake of assuming that rhythm is just something "musical" added to the basic sequence of consonants and vowels, assuming that it is a marginal rather than integral factor in the communication. Familiarity with the English rhythm system and its impact on information focus is, in fact, an essential part of learning how to communicate effectively in the language.

4. (a)//Harry saw all of it//
(b)//hæri sɔ: ɔ:l əv it//

In 4(b) we have a rhythm unit with three stress groups (a. hæri b. sɔ: c. ɔ:l əv it). Each of the three stress groups within the rhythm unit is allotted the same amount of time, no matter how many syllables it possesses. So, for example, the single syllable in b (sɔ:) is given the same time as the three syllables in c (ɔ:l əv it). English syllables are therefore not equal in duration. There is an alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables; the stressed syllables (in this example; hæ / sɔ:/ ɔ:l /) occur at regular intervals while any unstressed syllables are 'reduced' and squeezed in between them to keep a regular rhythm. This rhythm pattern is very different from Japanese where unstressed syllables are not reduced to fit between stressed syllables. In Japanese a word with four syllables will be twice as long (in terms of time) as a word with two syllables.

Moreover, in English, the speaker uses stress and pitch change in the form of intonation patterns to "shape" his message and to reflect his/her attitude to what is being said.

5. [“What’s John’s new girlfriend like?”]



In this example we can see the effect of intonation on information structure. In (a) ‘seems’ is unmarked and the interpretation would be positive (I think she IS very pleasant). However, in (b) ‘seems’ is marked as significant by a jump in pitch; this indicates that the speaker considers it important and wishes to emphasise the ‘seeming’ or ‘appearance’ element in the message. We would normally interpret (b) in a rather negative way (She seems to be pleasant BUT in reality she may not be). In Japanese, intonation is not normally used to highlight information structure. Learning how to interpret and employ the intricacies of the English rhythm system usually proves to be a formidable task for Japanese learners of English, and (as with weak forms and the schwa vowel) it is invariably a neglected part of the language learning syllabus¹⁾.

Cross-Cultural “Road-Blocks”

Even if the learner of the foreign language had complete mastery of listening and speaking skills, of intonation, gesture and eye contact i. e. if he/she were “mechanically” perfect in productive and receptive skills, there would still be no guarantee of smooth and appropriate communication in the foreign language. As the learner moves beyond

the basic levels of knowledge in the foreign language, he/she begins to meet a second series of road-blocks, cross-cultural barriers which can have a dramatic impact on successful communication, especially as the learner reaches a more advanced stage. An inability to overcome these cross-cultural barriers limits the learner to a superficial level of communication and, in the worst case, leads to 'stereotyping'.

A language reflects its own culture. The 'nature' and use of each language, inside the framework of its own culture, is unique; the language reflects the mood and 'flavour' of the culture. In the following contrast of Japanese and English we can see fundamental differences in the way the two languages are used, differences which are heavily influenced by the cultural framework of each language:

JAPANESE LANGUAGE

- Japanese is an indirect, 'mood' language, with much of its complex message beneath the surface of the words
- it is frequently ambiguous; personal expressions of opinion and emotion are largely absent, and YES/NO is avoided
- the speaker usually does not commit himself/herself clearly; the speaker carefully observes the listener and can 'then' adjust' the tone of the message to maintain a smooth atmosphere (as the verb is placed at the end of the sentence):
 - ".....desu"
 - ".....desuyo"
 - ".....desho"
- not using pronouns blurs divisions between individuals so that the exact implication of an utterance is often unclear, and people frequently say what they are expected to say, so that communication can sometimes be ritualistic.

(1) **Status of the Female**

In general, women defer to men in Japan (*'dansonjohi'*), while in U.S.A. for example, there is broad equality between the sexes. This very basic difference can cause serious inteference in terms of normal discussion. So, a typically reserved Japanese girl who never expresses her opinion and always agrees with everything (especially with men present) may well be considered as boring or insincere. An American girl, used to free expression and open argument, could face serious problems in Japan since she would usually be seen as too independent and over-aggressive.

(2) **Silence and the Smile**

In Japan, periods of silence (*'ma'*) during a conversation help to keep the atmosphere calm, to reduce pressure and relieve heavy emotions. However, similar periods of silence in U.S.A. would lead directly to tension and confusion ("Why has he stopped talking? Did I say something wrong?")

In the same way, the smile is often used in Japan to reduce tension, to avoid confrontation, and to 'mask' emotions. In the West, however, you would normally only smile if you were pleased or amused. A Westerner would probably find repeated smiling rather uncomfortable, and the atmosphere would soon become tense.

(3) **Humour**

In the West, it is considered quite socially acceptable to tell jokes about ethnic groups (e. g. Irish jokes, Jewish jokes, etc.), about your family and friends, and even about yourself. In fact, laughing at jokes is one of the most common and popular forms of social activity. Such jokes would be rather offensive to Japanese; in Japan you do not tell jokes about other people because you would be concerned about hurting someone's feelings and thereby disturbing the social harmony. Jokes about other people are seen as socially 'dangerous' in Japan, potentially impolite and unkind.

(4) **Logic/Principles**

Westerners aim to be objective in their thinking; they usually have a fixed set of principles which apply universally, i.e. these unchanging principles are used in all situations to guide behaviour and reactions. They have a common sense of right and wrong, and questions of morality are based on a sense of personal guilt: "I should not have cheated in the examination because it is morally wrong to cheat."

Japanese behaviour is centred on group-based rules of human relations (rather than on logic and principles); in this sense Japanese thinking and behaviour is essentially subjective. the Japanese sense of right and wrong is 'local' and flexible (rather than fixed and universal), and it is based on how your behaviour will be viewed by your family, friends and neighbours: "It was wrong to cheat in the examination because I let my family down."

Without a good understanding of this cultural difference, a Japanese might consider 'logical' Westerners to be cold, inflexible and ruthless, having no regard for the human element in a situation. An American might consider typical Japanese behaviour as illogical, unpredictable and pragmatic, having no reliable ideology behind it.

(5) **Complaining**

Complaining is a natural and accepted feature of Western society. People will frequently complain directly and, in some cases, aggressively about bad service or poor performance, expecting in return some kind of explanation, an apology, or perhaps an improvement in the future. In Japanese society, people very rarely make direct complaints, even if they are unhappy with something. Stoic and patient acceptance is considered a routine virtue of Japanese culture and an aggressive complaint would be viewed as a disruptive personal attack on the target of the complaint, as something which might cause permanent damage in terms of harmonious human relationships.

If we want to communicate in the foreign language in a completely natural and appropriate manner, we must adapt to the social framework, the mood, the timing, and the taboos of the target culture. Without this adjustment, the cross-cultural barriers lead to stereotyping and a superficial level of communication. Stereotypes block communication and understanding. Here are some common stereotypes of Japanese and Americans:

JAPANESE VIEW OF TYPICAL AMERICAN

- loud, insensitive, over-emotional
- self-centred, likes to be the focus of attention
- free personal expression often appears boastful
- socially clumsy, “like a bull in a china shop”

—AMERICAN VIEW OF TYPICAL JAPANESE

- passive, inscrutable, humourless, boring
- never risks giving an opinion, so impossible to understand
- always says “yes” but often means “no”

A lack of sensitivity and understanding in terms of the foreign culture leads inevitably to this kind of stereotyping which acts as a major barrier to meaningful communication. In some ways, it is necessary to develop a second personality which can fit smoothly into the target culture. Japanese students who have spent some years studying abroad, often change their personality completely. Especially the Japanese female students, faced with much greater freedom and equality of status in U.S.A. or Europe, usually become much more socially self-confident, expressing their ideas and feelings openly. This ‘second’ personality starts as a kind of acting or role-playing, but, in some cases, the second personality can become more attractive or more relaxing than the original personality, and then it

is no longer acting. There is a danger in this case however, especially if the student cannot reverse the personality change on returning to Japan.

Japanese who come home after some time abroad often experience great difficulty in 'switching off' the second personality. In the worst case, the returnee can become an "outcast", rejected by his/her own society because he/she no longer fits in, no longer behaves in the accepted Japanese manner. Again, this reverse adjustment is especially problematic for female Japanese, who often resent the automatic drop in status when they return.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to point out some of the most significant "road-blocks", both linguistic and cross-cultural, which the Japanese learner of English will face as he works towards mastery of the target language. Without insight and strategy, these barriers will often prove to be insurmountable; there are many learners of English in Japan who simply reach a limit, they come to a stop at a certain level of competence and there is no further progress. In most cases the block occurs with serious listening difficulties in the face of normal speed, native-speaker communication. Since listening precedes speaking, the weakness in reception dictates a corresponding weakness in production. Even those learners who manage to overcome the major listening barriers are then faced with a set of major cross-cultural hurdles. The more advanced learner must learn how to 'moderate' his/her normal thought and behaviour patterns to the framework of the target culture. Without these adjustments, the learner will be incapable of any serious approach to the "in-depth" level of native-speaker communication.

Notes

- 1) For a detailed description of English rhythm, see O'Connor (1980)

and Cruttenden (1986)

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