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JAPANESE CULTURE AS ELEMENT OF INTERCULTURAL SPACE. ADAPTATION PROCESS OF POLISH STUDENTS IN JAPAN

Abstract

This article introduces a definition of intercultural communication, understood as an important skill in creating social bonds in times of globalization. Mutual understanding in an intercultural space is based, among other things, on language, a point which the author underlines by using the Japanese language as an example. Moreover, she points out how the Japanese belief in ethnocentrism and the main cultural differences in fields such as nonverbal communication are considered problematic in facilitating outsiders both to understand Japanese society and to function within it. The analysis is based on the author's own research focused on students attending a course at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland on the cultural adaptation process in Japan, including reflections on the usefulness of the Japanese language in this process.

Keywords: intercultural communication, intercultural space, Japanese language, cultural adaptation

INTERCULTURAL SPACES – THEORETICAL REMARKS

It has long been known that people have traveled and continue to travel for various reasons, thus becoming participants in intercultural spaces. From a European perspective, Japan is a culturally different country, while its inhabitants seem to be still partially closed to establishing contact with “strangers”. In such a formal and traditional cultural space, proper

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functioning becomes a challenge. Therefore, the aim of the work is to present those challenges that every foreigner must face, with an emphasis on the importance and usefulness of the Japanese language in the cultural adaptation process in Japan. The beginning of the work characterizes the relationship between language and culture and defines intercultural communication, a phenomenon which plays an essential part in understanding the role of the Japanese language in this article. The second part presents the specific nature of Japanese society and language, taking into account those elements that may pose the greatest challenges to foreigners. Such assumptions have been confirmed by the theories of Japanese researchers who have described the fact that a foreigner will usually find it difficult to adapt to such a homogeneous society, especially from a linguistic perspective. The third part is devoted to a brief characterization of the rise of Japanese Studies in Poland, followed by the citation and discussion of in-depth interviews with students attending a course at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland who shared their thoughts and the difficulties that had occurred during their year-long scholarships in Japan. These interviews allowed one to observe the individual processes of a given student's adaptation to the Japanese environment. For the purposes of this study and in line with my understanding, the most accurate definition of cultural adaptation is to adopt in some basic spheres, namely those generally related to work, patterns of behavior, and norms that are dominant in the host environment, while maintaining one's own values and patterns of behavior (Budyta-Budzyńska, 2009, p. 46). Cultural adaptation occurs when, without the feeling of dissonance and discomfort, outsiders adopt the norms and values which operate in the new environment. This issue is believed to play an important role in being aware of cultural differences as a source of serious problems occurring in an intercultural space, and in understanding the importance of languages that help us not only to communicate in problematic situations, but also to understand confusing differences and to explore the mentality of its users more thoroughly.

The processes occurring in the modern world, such as globalization and migration, have contributed to the overlapping of spaces and to the growth of intercultural spaces that exist practically everywhere to varying degrees (Korporowicz, 2011, p. 136). An intercultural space can be understood as a symbolic context of interactions of people and groups from different cultural backgrounds, which brings about cultural diversity and hybridization. Due to the growing expanse of intercultural spaces,

appropriate cultural competences are needed to function properly in the modern world. An extremely important competence nowadays is the ability to conduct intercultural communication. Commonly, communication is understood as interaction between two active parties (Korporowicz, 1996, p. 16). Therefore, communication understood as interaction is characterized by reciprocity, exchange, interdependence, subjectivity, intentionality, and authorship. As Marek Szopski points out, the culture we live in determines the way we communicate, while the way we communicate modifies our culture.

Consequently, communication adaptation is undoubtedly an important skill in adapting our behavior to a given situation and the people with whom we communicate. According to Robert Duran, such communication adaptability requires both cognitive and behavioral agility (Gudykunst, 2002, p. 167). Furthermore, as Geert Hofstede states, intercultural communication is a process of information exchange (Hofstede, 2000, p. 46). Indeed, it is the act of communication and understanding between representatives of different cultures using information encoded in language, gestures, fluctuations, or creativity (Boćwińska-Kiluk, Muszyńska & Nikitorowicz, 2014, p. 140). Intercultural communication requires crossing borders on spatial, mental, cultural, and environmental grounds (Korporowicz, 2011, p. 141). In cases of any inability to accomplish this during the communication process, many misunderstandings or cultural conflicts may occur. Without a doubt, intercultural communication must not be affected by one's prejudices. Both sides should have a clear intention not to let their own cultural backgrounds hinder the possibility of understanding one another (Bouchet, 2012, p. 27).

In Japan, as such a formal and tradition-centered country, proper intercultural communication and adaptation is a difficult and slow process for every foreigner, especially when it comes to staying for a longer period. As quoted above, intercultural communication is a process of decoding another person's intent, which is why it appears to be a real challenge in a country where the differences are visible in every field, at every step. Although all such cultural barriers are caused by Japan's historical background, complicated system of etiquette, different mentality, the Japanese language becomes a source of understanding between those who use it.

When language is used in the context of communication, it is connected with culture in many ways. First of all, language expresses cultural reality and allows us to share experiences. Not only does it express them,

but also creates experience through the language itself. Language is a system of signs, with speakers identifying themselves and others through their use of language – thus, they view their language as a symbol of their social identity (Kramsch, 1998, p. 3). Since the 1990's, large sections of linguistics – including anthropological linguistics, sociolinguistics, or research into intercultural communication – have gradually emphasized the association between language and culture. This has caused research to focus even more on how cultural differences express themselves and are created via various forms of linguistic discourse (Risage, 2006, p. 1). Yoshitaka Miike terms the way to facilitate dialogue among civilizations as “centricity”, which he defines as one being engaged in learning from, not about, cultures if one wishes to broaden and deepen the understanding of culture-specific thought and action (Miike, 2008, p. 68). The Polish sociologist, Jerzy Smolicz, claimed that although a language can form a bridge connecting everyone who speaks it, for those who do not know it, becomes an annoying and burdensome obstacle (Smolicz, 1999, p. 144). Accordingly, from the perspective of its supporters, language is culture and culture is language. Thus, in the case of such a formalized country as Japan, the use of the Japanese language appears to be a bridge for foreigners to achieve cultural adaptation, a phenomenon I am going to present by employing the example of the experience Polish students from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków gained of Japan.

JAPANESE CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

In this section, I plan to provide the reader with basic facts concerning Japanese culture and language which have an impact on communication with foreigners. The perfect point of departure is the work of Etō Jun, an influential writer of the *Nihonjinron* ethnocentric intellectual movement. As early as in the 1970's, he maintained that because the Japanese people are one of the most homogeneous nations, they are able to deduce each other's feelings from facial expressions, eye movements, and the slightest gestures, and their deductions are not mistaken. On the other hand, when the Japanese meet a completely different person (namely a Westerner), their first reaction is one of shock (Kowner, 2004, p. 135).

It should be stressed that Etō's thesis constitutes a moot point. Most contemporary scholars doubt whether the relationship between

homogeneity and an ability to interpret nonverbal communication is as simple as Etō claims. However, even Etō's critics agree that culture has an impact on nonverbal communication.

Let us take the example of eye contact – one of the important sources of information in the communication process. It is noteworthy that looking into one's eyes is considered rude and arrogant behavior in Japanese culture. In addition, touch – one of the most intimate senses – is also negatively perceived in Japan. According to the scale of acceptance of physical contact, Japan is closest to the “do not touch me” option (Szopski, 2005, p. 106). Consequently, Japan is classified as a non-contact culture, which means it is not natural to maintain eye contact during a conversation or embrace people of the same sex. In non-contact cultures in general, such activities are prohibited. Nonverbal communication is also a key factor in the intercultural relations process. The common feature of Japanese people is not displaying emotion on their faces, i.e. maintaining an expressionless face. To foreigners this may appear as an obstacle during the conversation – thus, one may wonder “Is he/she listening to me?”, “Am I being clear?”

However, silence for the Japanese is not identified with a state of nervousness or discomfort. The Japanese are often silent, a phenomenon which has many reasons that should be read from the context of the situation. On the other hand, nonverbal communication seems very misleading to foreigners. One of the most frequently asked questions by foreigners is: why do the Japanese smile so often? A Japanese woman's normal response to a question concerning directions in English is to laugh and nod her head. Laughter in Japan is not only a reaction to something funny but also a way of showing misunderstanding or masking a sense of shame. This is connected with the fact that in every situation, even in a situation of conflict, embarrassment, or unpleasant news, Japanese people try to maintain cordial relations and avoid the risk of misunderstanding. Establishing and maintaining social relationships have a crucial significance in Japanese society. In addition, the Japanese rely mainly on indirect communication.

This is connected with Edward Hall's division into high and low context cultures (Szopski, 2005, p. 105). Japan belongs to the high context cultures which means that direct speech is identified with rudeness and immaturity. In Japanese society, it is practically impossible to hear the word “no”. Instead, Japanese people use words such as: “maybe”, “it may be uncomfortable”, “it may be difficult to do”, “yes, but...”. However, if the Japanese say “yes”, it does not really mean an acceptance, rather a polite version of

saying “no” (Gesteland, 2012, p. 42). The reason for choosing words carefully is not a fear of misunderstanding, but a fear of offending another person and way of avoiding being directly rude.

As it follows from the above, Japanese culture is well known for its politeness, a phenomenon which also refers to the Japanese language. Here I mean *Keigo*, literally a respectful language register that is mandatory to use in many social situations. The main aim is to emphasize social distance or similarity in rank (Huszczka, 1980, p. 176). It is a very extensive language, possessing its own special complicated vocabulary, terms, and grammatical forms that express various levels of respectful, humble, and polite speech. It can be concluded that using respectful language improperly could unconsciously cause the impression of rudeness while speaking Japanese. Thus, for Japanese learners the relationship between Japanese language and culture is taken for granted. They do not exist separately and the complex cultural norms make the learning process additionally difficult (Kramsch, 1998, p. 10).

Even without the rules of politeness, the Japanese language is considered to be one of the most difficult languages in the world. It has four alphabets including kanji – logographic Chinese characters that are used in the Japanese writing system. The exact number of kanji is unclear. Although the Japanese government has defined a list of about 2,000 basic kanji, it is believed that a reasonably educated person is expected to know about 4,000 of them. Moreover, there are some specific characteristics such as omissions of the person in the predicate, no distinction between masculine and feminine, unclear use of the plural form, no verb conjugation, and complicated grammar forms. The Japanese language and its difficulty appear to be a real challenge for foreigners. The uniqueness of the Japanese language sometimes restricts effective communication. This refers to specific grammar structures completely opposite to other foreign languages. Japanese shapes a particular way of thinking and looking at the world. Many researchers have examined this case as one constituting a linguistic community.

For a foreigner who does not speak a language, being in a society that seems beyond comprehension becomes stressful in itself. In addition, when the language barrier begins to bother one gradually, some other sorts of negative feelings can appear, such as loneliness, rejection, and the fear that someone may be talking about us or to us without realizing it. For those, who do not speak the Japanese language, functioning in this unique

society can be full of misunderstandings and difficulties. For instance, this includes the already mentioned mysterious Chinese characters – kanji – which excite tourists' curiosity and which are obviously visible at every turn in Japan. Unfortunately, without understanding their meanings living there becomes troublesome. This starts to cause anxiety even in simple situations, such as shopping or using public transportation.

To sum up this section, the Japanese people are convinced that the uniqueness of their culture is manifested in their language. Therefore, they believe, no one except ethnic Japanese can master their language completely. In other words, only in Japan can people speak Japanese fluently. A Japanese doctor, Tsunoda Tadanobu, even put forward medical arguments that the speech of a person from the West and Japan is biologically different, since it depends on the left (Japanese) and right (European) hemisphere of the brain (Stanlaw, 2004, p. 274). Harumi Befu, like Etō, in *Nationalism and Nihonjinron* emphasized the role of homogeneity in society and the assumption that Japan is culturally homogeneous (Befu, 1993, p. 109). The same opinion is shared by Ishida Eiichiro, a Japanese anthropologist, who claims that despite various disadvantageous moments in the history of Japan, such as the presence of other cultures in the era of westernization, Japan has remained pure and homogeneous. This statement underlines the continuity of Japanese blood from ancestors who have always lived on the Japanese archipelago and who are proof of the purity of blood in society. Thanks to these ancestors, the Japanese are able to speak fluent Japanese and practice their culture properly. Some Japanese linguists question the ability of foreigners to speak Japanese, arguing that, traditionally in Japan, foreigners do not speak Japanese and never should. For instance, the linguist Suzuki Takao stated that as foreigners cannot speak Japanese perfectly, the Japanese feel very uncomfortable when they meet a foreigner (Kowner, 2004, p. 136). However, the case study which I present below rejects some of the above-mentioned beliefs.

ADAPTATION OF POLISH STUDENTS IN JAPAN

The origins of Japanese Studies in Poland date back to 1919 when the first Japanese language course at the University of Warsaw was established. Until 1987, Warsaw was the only city where students could undertake studies of the Japanese language. The next step was opening a Department of

Japanese Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, and then at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Jędrasiak, 2019, p. 13). Consequently, new educational opportunities emerged and annual scholarships to Japan for Polish students were granted. The first five students qualified for Japanese scholarships in 1990. On the other hand, Japanese people who were also interested in Eastern Europe, gradually undertook learning Slavic languages. This was associated not only with growing curiosity but also with emerging trade and investment opportunities in the new Europe. In Japan, learning the Polish language became possible from 1966 at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies. Nevertheless, there are many more Poles studying Japanese culture and language than Japanese people studying Polish. Today, according to the website of the Japanese Embassy in Poland, there are fifty-nine language schools which provide Japanese language courses. In Kraków alone, there are four of them, namely: Everest Language School, Ichigo Japanese Business and Culture Center, Manggha Museum of Japanese Art and Technology, and Sunstar Japanese Language School.

This section presents the results of research which was a part of my bachelor's degree thesis concerning Japanese society. I focused on the problem of the cultural adaptation of Polish students in contemporary Japan. This thesis aimed to indicate problems that foreigners must face while adapting to Japanese society, including communication problems. Moreover, this study shows how foreigners perceive Japan before and after their arrival in this land and what aspects may constitute the greatest challenges to the adaptation process. I conducted in-depth interviews with ten students (nine women, one man) of the Jagiellonian University, who studied in Japan for one year before returning to Poland. The sample included students who were partially prepared for an encounter with Japanese culture due to the field of study they had undertaken (Japanese Studies program and Far Eastern Studies program with a specialization in Japan). In order to recruit participants, I used the so-called snowball method, namely establishing a chain of people who recruit new interviewees from among their acquaintances. Additionally, faculty members and the International Relations Office of the Jagiellonian University helped me make contact with Polish students based in Japan. As a result, I interviewed students staying in small towns (Koganei, Hirakata), as well as in larger cities (Tsukuba, Kumamoto, Kanazawa) and large urban conglomerations, such as Sendai including the capital of Japan, Tokyo. I decided to employ a qualitative research design, more precisely the in-depth interview method. Using open-ended

questions allows one to ask interviewees about their individual observations and personal feelings that a survey would not capture well enough. The interview consisted of eighteen open-ended questions from a previously prepared script. The three main issues I tried to capture in my research were:

1. How did the process of adapting to Japanese society proceed?
2. Which emotions accompanied the process?
3. What were the main difficulties of the process?

All the students, due to the fact that their courses prepared them in various ways (culturally, historically, linguistically) for a possible trip to Japan, were – as they claimed – well-oriented regarding the country and the specific nature of its society. They all unequivocally stated that their knowledge was very good, they were aware of cultural differences of the country they were going to, and, what was especially important, their level of Japanese communication skills was at least intermediate. Two respondents defined themselves as being at the highest level of advancement according to the Japanese language proficiency level for foreigners called JLPT (Japanese-Language Proficiency Test). All the interviewees lived in various Japanese cities for one year and, as the research shows, the places where they studied had a big impact on the communication process. However, it should be added, most students did not have a choice of which university to attend. Two students were afraid to live in such big and technologically advanced places such as Tokyo, while another admitted that she had avoided studying in Tokyo on purpose in order to prevent stressful situations or possible misunderstandings in communication. Eventually, however, the respondents declared that communicating in Japanese was much easier in the biggest cities where people seemed to be more open to foreigners and intercultural experiences than in smaller places where communication, even in English, was more demanding. What is remarkable is that two students who decided to live in Tokyo claimed that, despite Tokyo being complicated to live in from a foreigner's point of view, the Japanese language made it much easier and less stressful. They suggested that before going for a longer stay, especially to Tokyo, it is better to be aware of some of the barriers, such as dealing with important matters in offices, something which becomes difficult, especially if you do not know Japanese.

In the next question I wanted to encourage students to share their experiences connected with committing cross-cultural *faux pas*. Of the ten

people involved, four declared that they had not experienced any incidents due to cultural differences or a lack of knowledge of Japanese etiquette. The others, although they knew a lot about the culture before leaving, as they previously stated, gave the following examples:

I had the option to get the internship at my university, but you had to be selected from a large group of people, so the interviews were in Japanese or English if someone wasn't well prepared. When entering a room in Japan, one should knock, wait for them to say "please, come in", enter, bow, and wait for them to say "please, sit down". I entered the room, bowed, said "good morning", and instead of waiting for them to say "please, sit down", I turned around to put my bag down. After the interview, the supervisor pointed out that I should not turn my back when I enter the room. (Interview 1)

Another respondent, in turn, shared such experience:

At the end of my stay in Japan, I was working at the hostel at the reception. I waited for a guest to leave their luggage so I could stow it away. The manager looked at me and then told me to go to the kitchen to get something. When the guest left, he pointed out to me that I should not stand over the client this way, because it makes him feel confused and uncomfortable. I was standing over him and he was under pressure. I was just waiting because it was my job. He honestly told me what a mistake I made, he was very open and aware in explaining my mistake. (Interview 2)

The quoted excerpts prove that it is quite easy to make a mistake in such a formalized society, even for those who have a lot of knowledge about Japan. The rest of the respondents who experienced "cultural mishaps" stated that the Japanese do not usually tell you that something was wrong. Although their common reaction to a foreigner's blunders is laughter, generally speaking they are very understanding towards them. According to the experience of some, occasionally the Japanese would not let anyone know anything was wrong regarding such blunders, as one respondent said: "perhaps because the Japanese were nice and polite enough that they didn't make clear that I had made such a blunder" (Interview 3).

The observations about how Polish students felt among Japanese students are also of interest. Only one respondent admitted that she had studied at an international university where English was the main spoken language, which might be why local students seemed to be friendly and

open to foreigners. However, the remaining nine people agreed on one point: they had all felt alienated. Although the respondents shared various positive examples from their student life, in the end, they all came to similar conclusions:

1. I attended very few classes that regular Japanese students attended. I stayed with a group of other students from abroad, but when we all gathered, I did not attract much attention and I felt a bit invisible. (Interview 4)
2. I certainly felt I was standing out a bit, but no one expressed it outright either. Nobody was talking to me, they totally ignored me. When I told one girl that she had a nice pencil case, she only thanked me, she was so intimidated that she did not continue the conversation. I got the impression that Japanese students are very passive. (Interview 2)
3. I felt a bit alienated, but after all, it is a completely different country, a different language and it was a bit like that I was a stranger here, but the students did not let me feel it. (Interview 5)
4. I felt a bit alienated because Japanese students do not like foreigners too much, but on the other hand, foreigners are also afraid of contact with Japanese people and I think it is because of the language barrier on both sides. (Interview 3)

The intensity of contact depended on the city and the university program, which were either aimed at classes with foreigners or with Japanese students. The size of the city in most cases (but not all) confirmed the thesis that in smaller cities people were more reserved, while students in Tokyo, having had frequent contact with foreigners, were open. However, this thesis is contradicted by the stories of two female students from the same city, namely Tsukuba (where a lot of foreigners study), as both of them stated that their contact with Japanese people in this city was negligible. Indeed, one of them had much better contact with foreigners, and not with the Japanese, as they were reserved and did not integrate with foreigners.

Only a few students did not experience culture shock in Japan. Those who did gave various examples, both positive and negative, that, interestingly, they did not notice that until they had arrived back in Poland. One of the respondents was very confused when she was at the interview and her employer never met her eyes in conversation. The others complained about feelings or opinions not being expressed openly, having to endure a bureaucratic approach to reported problems, an unusual approach to

relationships, i.e. not showing any sensibility in a group. The work culture, part of which was the attention to detail and focusing on things that a European would not, was also shocking for Polish students. They underlined that treating work as something very important, saying things so as not to cause an argument, and keeping one's true opinions to oneself is, while typical behavior for Japanese people, very confusing for outsiders. Apart from negative aspects, the respondents showed positive feelings especially when juxtaposing Japan with Poland: everyone is very polite and helpful, "sometimes to the point of absurdity" (Interview 3), as one student claimed, everything is tidy, well-organized, especially in public institutions where it is noticeable that the client is treated as someone important at the very first moment they appear.

The above examples show that Japan seems to be a country of contrasts. There are many disconcerting but also positive things that are not easy to experience in Poland. Therefore, respondents were asked if they had ever thought they wanted to leave Japan during their stay. The answers were divided, five out of ten people replied that they had no such thoughts, not even "for a second". However, two of the remaining five respondents, shortened their stay. After asking additional questions, although it turned out that one of them had come back for personal reasons, the other respondent explicitly associated the problem with their difficulty in adapting to the environment.

I had such thoughts many times and that is why I shortened my stay by one and a half months, maybe two. It was related to the problem of adaptation and a longing for literally everything. At the end, these thoughts were very intense, I crossed off the days on the calendar because I couldn't stand it, although the beginning was really ok. The last four months I really wanted to come back. (Interview 6)

As the respondent continues, after her return she did not want to talk or think about Japan. These thoughts, as she says, have since passed and she now wants to return to Japan, but for a temporary stay such as sight-seeing, not to live or work. Although another respondent described all her feelings about Japan as positive, she admitted that she did not would like to live in Japan because of the cultural differences encountered.

The respondents were also asked to indicate their feelings after returning to Poland. Among them we can distinguish:

1. **Relief** – the respondent admitted that the last three weeks in Japan were hard, working in Japanese society is hard, everyone speaks Japanese and no one speaks English.

2. **Frustration** connected with returning to normal life. The respondent admitted that she wanted to have even more experiences. However, there was a **sense of satisfaction** that she had had the opportunity for self-development in a foreign country.

3. **Happiness** in returning to Poland, but at the same time **regret** that it was necessary to leave.

4. **Depression** due to returning to Poland, **sadness** that it was over, **feelings of deep hopelessness, apathy**.

6. **A willingness to return to Japan** – the respondent stated that because of the culture shock she had experienced, she wanted to return there. Moreover, she saw also Japan as having many advantages: good food, the kindness of information services, a beautiful natural world and culture.

At the end of the interview, I asked respondents for advice they would give people who are not interested in Japanese culture but who are going to visit Japan – five of them pointed out exactly the same: to learn basic Japanese words or polite phrases. It certainly shows the importance of the Japanese language in Japan. Some of their advice was, I would say, powerful, for instance: “Give up, such a person will find it difficult to live in Japan, especially when he or she doesn’t know the Japanese language” (Interview 7).

Some advice was repeated often:

- Six people stressed the importance of being polite in Japan, which is manifested by: caring for what is common to all, respect for someone else’s time – the obligation to standing in queues for trains, buses etc., thinking about the other person when dealing with them, as Japanese communication relies largely on the fact that people do not directly convey what they think and do not patronize others.
- Five people advised exactly the same, namely: to learn basic Japanese words or polite phrases, because English in Japan is at a very poor level.
- Three people pointed out that before leaving it is necessary to read some information about Japanese culture and the behavior of Japanese people – the culture is very different and will not be to everyone’s taste.

Other pieces of advice from respondents were: look around carefully, because it is easy to get lost, repay those who help you but do not thank them by giving money, as you will offend the Japanese; when visiting someone, prepare a well-wrapped gift and present it to the head of the family, namely the father; be careful to take off your shoes if there is such a requirement; be careful with shopping, as it is hard to find the right size in clothes, especially if you are tall; do not talk / do not call while on public transport as it is customary to be silent on the subway.

It is easily noticeable that the students were aware of all the commands and prohibitions prevailing in Japan. The average Pole, as well as any other foreigner who does not know the local etiquette and language, can easily make a mistake which may offend Japanese people. Being unaware of the above rules becomes a serious obstacle in allowing foreigners to function properly in their society, while the lack of awareness of Japanese etiquette may prevent a closer relationship being formed with the Japanese. Following this, requests for advice from Polish students always resulted in similar answers which remarked the importance of relationships with others.

Do not expect that you will have a lot of Japanese friends, but rather foreigners, because it is hard to establish closer friendships with them. (Interview 6)

Focus on relations with the Japanese. (Interview 8)

Get interested. Do not expect people to adjust to you, you are the guest. (Interview 9)

Make friends, be open-minded, try new things. (Interview 10)

Moreover, respondents noted that establishing closer contact with a Japanese person seems difficult, while forming a deeper relationship seems impossible. The thesis has confirmed that the Japanese are open to foreigners up to a certain point – when you want to move to establishing closer contacts, however, they become shy and they do not talk too much about themselves. In a way, this question was related to the final summary question – how the respondents assessed contact between the Japanese and foreigners – and here the answers were very similar, in that it all depended on the nature of the other person.

Although they found themselves in situations where the Japanese were very closed and sometimes terrified in front of foreigners, on the other hand they seemed interested in them, and asked a lot questions about the culture of the students' country of origin, especially when it

comes to young people. Respondents also thought that the Japanese were slowly coming out of their shell and that being more open to the outside world is gradually being imposed on them socially. The respondents' own experiences were varied, with some of them encountering ignored, and some curiosity or even independent initiative. Undoubtedly, according to the analysis of respondents' answers, not everyone, albeit most of them agreed that living there without proper knowledge and being prepared to take the initiative may be hard. By "initiative" I mean being ready to take the first steps, as many times as I heard from respondents, Japanese students were too shy to start conversations with foreign students. As they emphasized, this is connected with their natural character, as well as an unwillingness to talk in the English language.

In view of the above situation, an interesting issue seems to be communication with the Japanese themselves. All ten students agreed with one statement, namely: the Japanese language helped them with socializing in their student life. They underlined many times that the Japanese language supported them in making new friends and in making their student life easier. Some of them, because of the language barrier and communication fears, tried to communicate in English at the beginning of their stay in Japan. Unfortunately, this did not work out well. What is more, the level of English in smaller towns was too low to be able to communicate, which is why they had no choice but to switch to the Japanese language. In addition, my research confirmed the popular observation of foreign researchers that Japanese people avoid contact with foreigners when they have to use the English language. Even though communication in Japanese with Japanese people was stressful for some of them at the beginning, this became the key factor in making new friendships with local people. Apart from this particular barrier, respondents mentioned basic issues that could happen and certainly happen to anyone who speaks a foreign language. These were problems with understanding pronunciation, forgetting words, the speed of speech, or problems in being articulate.

Respondents mentioned that communicating in Japanese facilitates understanding the Japanese mentality and society. What is more, they easily could have found themselves in more formal situations, such as conversations with teachers, older people, mentors, or a friend's family, when situations required the use of *Keigo* to show respect and politeness, which as I mentioned earlier, is a key issue in proper communication in Japanese culture. Even though they mentioned many times that *Keigo* is definitely

the hardest part of learning Japanese, they were ready to use it, despite associating it with stress and fear of offending mentors.

At the end of the interview, I asked the respondents if they would return to study in Japan. Five of them replied “definitely”, three “yes”, one declared that they are ready to study in Japan, but not to live there, while only one declared “probably not”.

CONCLUSION

The effects of closing the country to external influences in Japan’s history are still visible to the present day. Japanese social and linguistic homogeneity, the level of difficulty of the Japanese language, communication barriers, complicated etiquette, and some elements of its culture become an obstacle in adapting to Japanese life. According to the examples pointed out by students, life in Japan seems to be a complicated venture due to language, etiquette, and cultural differences. However, for someone who is respectful and open-minded to new and different experiences, adaptation and understanding “others” would prove to be easier. As the students noted, functioning in Japan for someone who does not know anything about this country can be very demanding. Undoubtedly, it is important to know the specific aspects of Japan that will allow you to get used to this country. Obviously, one of them is the Japanese language. Needless to say, a trip to Japan, particularly for a longer stay, will never be just an ordinary “trip abroad”. It is important to know that Japan demands an appropriate level of knowledge and cultural sensitivity from foreigners.

To sum up, I would like to underline that languages help us with exploring and understanding the world. There are many languages which operate as cultural codes that have to be decoded and Japanese is one of them. The difficulty and uniqueness of the Japanese language are worth overcoming in order to understand fully those who use it in its native setting.

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