

## Assertive Communication in Japanese English Learners

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**Abstract** Assertiveness is regarded the most effective manner of communication in recent times. It is especially powerful in dealing with difficult situations. It can be applicable both in professional settings and everyday life. Tremendous numbers of self-help books are published in the world and the numerous workshops are always popular in English speaking countries, such as in the U.S. and U.K. This phenomenon suggests that assertive communication is not an easy and quick concept to acquire for even native English speakers. In this multi-cultural world, English is widely recognized as the global tool of communication. Then, how can Japanese English learners communicate more assertively in English? Specific approaches should be taken for them to acquire assertiveness when communicating. In this article, the proposal of assertive English learning approach is suggested.

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## 1 . Introduction

Human beings are social animals. It is inevitable to face others and communicate with each other on a daily basis. We can all agree that different people have different opinions and perspective. Hence, people are faced with difficult situations from time to time.

Assertive communication was introduced as the communication method in order to maintain a good relationship with others. According to Hartley (1999) , the history goes back to the 1950s when a number of therapists started to devise ways of helping individual patients who had serious problems in expressing themselves and standing up for their rights.

In this rapidly growing world, people interact more with each other than ever before. Inevitably, people face different cultures and different societies. Consequently, the necessity to communicate in the second language arises. The recognition of assertiveness would benefit Japanese who learn English to communicate more effectively. I would like to consider the approach to acquire assertiveness focusing on Japanese people learning English as their second language.

## 2 . Current Japanese society

### 2 . 1 Trend of English as the first language

English learners are increasing in number every year. English language schools are mushrooming throughout Japan. The purposes of learning English are varied, such as getting a

job, enjoying songs and movies, or traveling. In October 2006, a new mobile phone scheme, which enables the holders to keep the same telephone number even when changing mobile phone networks, was introduced in Japan. The advertisements and the news termed this scheme '*bango* (number in Japanese) portability *seido* (scheme)'; a phrase consisting of a combination of Japanese and English words. This is an example of how English words are currently flooded in Japan.

One major automobile company introduced 'English as the first language' in its office and several companies followed it. English tests, such as TOEIC and TOEFL are widely recognized. Several companies use them as the employees' promotional measure.

Not only for adults, but children are also well absorbed in English. In my neighborhood in Tokyo, English speaking nurseries are very popular. I often encounter Japanese toddlers walking in line after Western looking teachers giving all the instructions in English.

### 2 . 2 Cultural background

People with different cultural backgrounds are anticipated to have communication styles that differ accordingly. Scollon (2001) states that the discourse pattern between the West and Asia are regarded different. She argues that American and other western businessmen favor the idea of "five Ws and one H"; what, who, where, when, why and how. They get the topic out onto the conversational floor right away so that you know what you are discussing. Details

will follow as they are needed. I believe that such difference makes the Japanese more difficult to be assertive compared to the western counterpart. She presents that the Asian structure could be sketched out as :

Because *A*, and because *B*, and because *C*, therefore *D*

This pattern of introducing the topic is not direct and tends to confuse the listeners about what the speaker wants to say.

In a traditional Japanese culture, assertiveness is sometimes regarded or mistaken as aggressiveness. Direct expressions, even if they are logical and clear, are not always welcome. Generally Japanese people try to avoid saying 'no' , and prefer to use more subtle expressions. For example, "I will try to do it with my best effort." – this is a typical negative answer to a difficult question to avoid saying 'no'. "It is difficult at the moment, but I will try to do something in the future." represent the above expression. Of course, the way of communication is different, but being direct is the first approach towards assertive communication.

The unwillingness to say 'no' by the Japanese has come from the Japanese collectiveness culture. Uniqueness and individuality are not considered as virtue in this culture. This belief is changing with the modernization of society, but the Japanese old saying "deru kui wa utareru (the nail which stands out is hit)" still stands.

### 2. 3 Gender difference

Women used to be expected not to be

assertive in Japan. They were supposed to be a "passive" communicator, which I will explain later on. The gender equality is getting gradually better accepted in Japan, however, traditionally Japanese woman are raised up being modest and reserved, with a goal to become a well-mannered wife.

This traditional concept still remains a barrier for women to be assertive. Politically correct words and sexual harassment issues influence the equality in Japanese society, but still, 'being cute' in Japanese translation not only indicates the appearance, but also suggests obedient manner, and is still regarded as many young girls' goal to this day.

However, this is not only a Japanese phenomenon ; the western world also has the same aspect. Many assertive training books were published specifically for women in western countries. Hargies *et al.* (1994) state that written material and self-help texts specifically designed for women and the popularity of women's assertive training programs is a form of evidence that females feel that they need more help in this field. Gray (1993) suggests the idea of difference in communication styles in his popular book ; *The Martian* (men) and *Venusian* (women) languages had the same words, but the way they were used gave different meanings. The reason is they inhabited different worlds before. He mainly focuses on men and women's relationships in everyday life, but in professional setting his view towards the difference will be helpful for mutual understandings.

### 3 Features of communication style

Hartley (1999) put 'assertion' in the middle of 'aggression' and 'submission' when he explained assertive behavior as below. \*Figure (1)

The word, 'submission' is sometimes changed as 'passiveness'. They both signify being in a controlled state by other people.

To illustrate assertiveness better, Hargies *et al.* (1994) drew the following. \*Figure (2) This table shows that assertion and nonassertion can be combined with aggression and indirect aggression to form two continua, rather than one, which are coercive and directness.

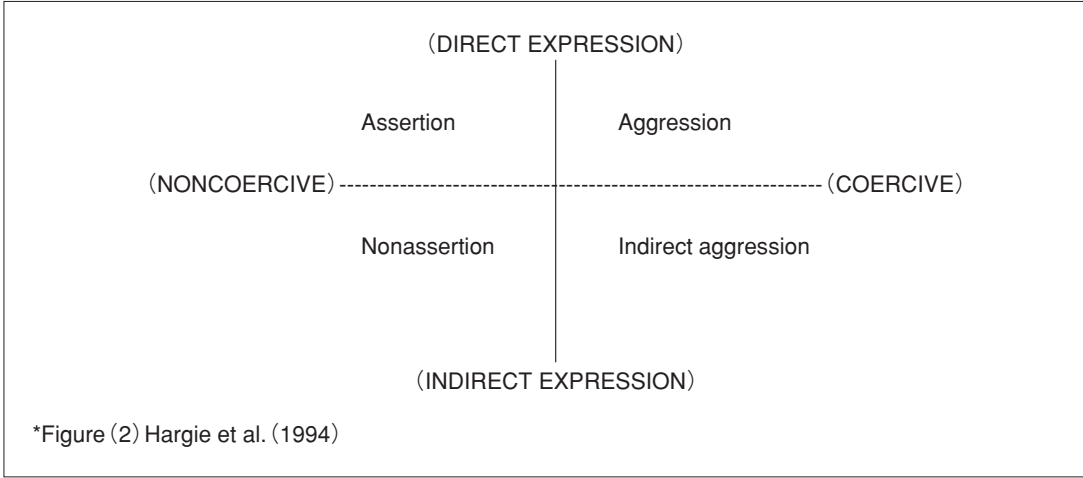
#### 3. 1 Aggressive behavior

Aggressive behavior causes stress to other people. Although the speaker's intention or target can be attained, the relationship can

end up being ruined. This includes threatening. Hartley (1994) suggests that this behavior may well 'win' in the short term but will usually be disliked. In the mean time, they also run the risk of inviting an even more aggressive response.

Second language learners sometimes fail by responding using aggressive behavior. There are two reasons for this. One is the language failure. A more sophisticated way of opinion induction requires advanced language skills. The learners also tend to be more direct in their second language. This is often regarded as rude. Secondly, there is a stereotypical misunderstanding towards native English speakers. When speaking in English, the Japanese learners sometimes try to be too direct because the American are viewed as always frank and straight as a stereotypical view by

Aggression----- Assertion-----Submission  
 \*Figure (1) Hartley et al. (1994)



the Japanese people, consequently they try to assimilate with them.

### 3. 2 Passive behavior

Passive behavior also happens with Japanese English learners. As I have stated before in this article, Japanese people try not to say 'no' in communication. That is why they seem to be passive in communication. Passive individuals look weak and unconfident. Therefore, it is difficult for passive individuals to persuade. Not only that, they can't attain what they aim and their psychological state ends up being depressed and frustrated. Hargie *et al.* (1987) describe this as nonassertion at noncoercive side of the figure. This is the opposite of aggression and is represented by shifty, shaky, fidgety extraneous body activity.

### 3. 3 Indirect behavior

Hargie *et al.* (1987) raise examples of indirect behavior, such as crying, sulking and pouting. It also includes sarcasm, snide, sly-

ness, blackmailing, etc. They may be observed as sneaky, guilty, ashamed or even childish. A person who receives such indirect or manipulative behavior would feel vulnerable, angry, attacked or may even extend to have revengeful feelings. These are not direct approaches at all, but manipulative.

### 3. 4 Assertive behavior

Comparing the above three behaviors, the assertive behavior is the most effective approach in communication. Assertiveness behavior involves protecting your life-space and rights while respecting those of others (Stubbs 1985). He suggests that Japanese people are especially sensitive about 'losing one's face'. They have a strong sensitivity toward 'shame'. In this sense, there is a strong support to apply assertiveness in Japanese English learners. Assertiveness prioritizes each person's personal boundary, so as not to invade other people's boundary. Hargie *et al.* (1987) raised the functions of assertiveness as follows ; \*(3)

1. ensure that their personal rights are not violated;
2. withstand unreasonable requests from others;
3. make reasonable requests of others;
4. deal effectively with unreasonable refusals from others;
5. recognize the personal rights of others;
6. change the behavior of others towards them;
7. avoid unnecessary aggressive conflicts;
8. confidently, and openly, communicate their position on any issue.

\*(3) Hargie et al.

Recognizing functions like above will lead the Japanese learners to use English more assertively. Then, what kind of approach would promote Japanese English learners to acquire assertive communication in English? I will state my idea in the next chapter.

#### 4. Application of assertiveness – Introduction to English learning

After introducing the learners to the efficiency of assertive communication and cultural differences, the combined method of English learning and assertive approach would be useful. Not only learning English skills, the learners can be motivated by its practicality.

##### 4. 1 Application in listening – paraphrasing

Listening is an important skill in communication and poor listening skills lead to misunderstandings. It is not just a hearing test, but there is a necessity to know the speaker's intention fully. Listening is not merely a passive activity and in assertive behavior, listening is considered participation. Often it is considered a passive activity, however, Stubbs (1985) argues it the most under-rated skill involved in face-to-face communication opposing speaking and writing, which are valued as active.

Chiaromonte and Adria (1994) recommend 'active listening' saying that it comprises all types of communication. That is, listening, broadly considered, may include activities of speaking. For example, by 'paraphrasing' (re-wording or stating in a different way)

the listener can clarify the speaker's intention to understand fully. It may be applied to many situations, including business transactions as well as personal and family activities. Chiaromonte and Adria (1994) raise the following examples ;

(1)*statement* : I've decided that the recognition I receive – or don't receive – at work is making my job intolerable. I need a change.

*sample response* : Are you saying you want to quit because your boss doesn't think you're doing a good job ?

(2)*statement* : This department is being run like a fail.

*sample response* : Are you feeling that morale is low because of the type of work we're being assigned or because management is being too heavy-handed in scheduling ?

(3)*statement* : I've met my daily and weekly sales targets for several months now. I don't think I've had a better year.

*sample response* : You're feeling upbeat today, aren't you ?

Thus, in assertive communication listening is an active process and requires participation. Introduction of 'active listening' to English learners will encourage them to clarify the speaker's intention and idea, and avoid focusing on every word. In the mean time, by paraphrasing, the listener can build up the relationship with the speaker.

I believe this active process of listening can be applied for all levels of English learners.

For beginner level, they can respond with short sentences or clarify with short phrases, such as “of course” , “excuse me ? ” or “I think so, too.” They can also be supported by some non-verbal behaviors, such as nodding or shaking of the head. For more advanced learners, more sophisticated manners of paraphrasing can be introduced.

#### 4 . 2 Application in speaking – ‘broken record’

‘Broken record’ is a systematic assertive skill introduced by clinical-experimental psychologist Manuel J. Smith. In his book (1975) he suggests to change one’s behavior in response to manipulation to enforce one’s assertive rights. First, you have to repeat your idea in a calm, consistent and steady voice, refusing to be distracted by the other. No matter how you are agitated by the other, you must stay calm and repeat your idea.

The best chance of getting what you want or need is by asking directly and specifically. If you ask indirectly or drop hints, you run the risk of not being heard or understood and your request may go unheeded as a result. I summarize the procedure as follows ;

Ask ; Be direct, specific and brief

Listen ; Listen actively to their response and show that you are listening

Field ; Acknowledge their point of view.

Repeat the request again.

Smith (1975) named the process as ‘broken record’ , as it is always coming back to what you want to say. It is now simply enough

to repeat the request over and over, but sometimes you must compromise to what others say. Based on what others say, you may change your mind or even give in. However, it is important to be persistent in using the ‘broken record’ skill until you and the other fully understand each other.

This skill is applicable in English teaching in various levels. The setting could be applicable in both everyday life and business settings. Not only in speaking practice, the learners can also explore the listening skill and integrate it to an active listening practice.

#### 5 . Conclusion

English learning is not just a linguistic approach, it also has an aspect of learning the culture. As I have stated, assertiveness is a powerful tool of communication in this modern society considering the significant difference between western and Japanese communication styles. For Japanese English learners to become better communicators, I strongly believe that the English teaching approach with assertive skills is an effective way of learning English.

I suggested two assertive skills to English learning in this paper ; ‘active listening’ and ‘broken record’ , however, there are more skills that can be applicable, such as fogging, negative assertion, self-disclosure and so on. In my future work I intend to attempt at examining how these other assertive skills can be introduced in English teaching.

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[Citation]

Figure (1)

Harley, P. *Interpersonal Communication*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London, UK. Routledge, 1999, p.196 (ISBN 0-415-18710-0)

Figure (2)

Hargie, O. Saunders, C and Dickson, D. *Social Skills in Interpersonal Communication*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London, UK. Routledge, 1994, p.273 (ISBN 0-415-08137-8)

(3)

Hargie, O. Saunders, C and Dickson, D. *Social Skills in Interpersonal Communication*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London, UK. Routledge, 1994, p.273 (ISBN 0-415-08137-8)