

Examining Potential Sources of Miscommunication between Japan and the West: Using Grice to Bridge the Sociolinguistic Gap for Japanese EFL Learners

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to shed light on some issues that Japanese EFL speakers sometimes experience when communicating across cultures. These issues often stem from a lack of sociolinguistic competence in English. Revisiting the long-standing debate regarding the universality of Grice's theory of conversation, this paper argues that Grice's maxims of conversations do not apply universally and independently of culture. With the intention of informing EFL pedagogy in Japan, the writer demonstrates how Grice's theory of conversation can serve as a useful framework for intercultural analyses. In considering the thought processes and ideologies involved in interpreting each of Grice's four maxims across cultures, this paper highlights some of the fundamental issues underpinning cross-cultural misunderstandings between Japanese EFL speakers and native speakers of English (NESs). By identifying some of the specific reasons for pragmalinguistic failure, this article helps language educators, as well as cross-cultural communication trainers involved with Japanese people, deal with these issues. To this end, it is suggested that ELT professionals begin by incorporating targeted awareness-raising strategies in their contexts and then follow up by providing students/trainees with opportunities to develop better product-oriented conversational management techniques.

Keywords: EFL pedagogy, Grice, intercultural communication (IC), Japanese, miscommunication, pragmatic failure, sociolinguistics

Introduction

The general aim of this paper is to inform EFL pedagogy in Japan by highlighting potential sources of misunderstanding of Japanese EFL speakers in intercultural encounters. First, in specifying an area of weakness among Japanese EFL/ESL learners (JEFL/ESLs hereafter), this section begins by examining the concept commonly known as communicative competence. In SLA, communicative competence most often refers to Hymes's (1971) seminal article outlining the skills thought to define L2 ability. This concept was further developed by Canale and Swain (1980), whose definition of communicative competence has become canonical in the field of Applied Linguistics. Canale and Swain (1980) define communicative competence in terms of four components: grammatical competence (i.e., words and rules), sociolinguistic competence (i.e., appropriateness), discourse competence (i.e., cohesion and coherence) and strategic competence (i.e., appropriate use of communication strategies).

While the general failure of English language education in Japan is well known and continues to generate a lot of discussion (Lockley, Hirschel & Slobodniuk, 2012), most analysts agree that oral skills are what Japanese EFL learners have the greatest trouble with (Ellis, 1991; Farooq, 2005; Helgesen, 1987; Hughes, 1999; Okushi, 1990; Matsumoto, 1994; Yano, 2001; Reesor, 2002; Roger, 2008; Takanashi, 2004). For instance, Ellis (1991) and Okushi (1990) have noted that regular Japanese high school and/or university graduates are seriously incompetent in their English skills, particularly where sociolinguistic competence is concerned. Farooq (2005, p. 27) describes JEFLs as having "extreme difficulties in interacting with native speakers in real-life situations even at a survival level". The term "false beginner" is often used to describe JEFLs in current course books and/or teacher instructional manuals designed for university classes (Helgesen, Brown & Mandeville, 2007; Martin, 2003). According to Peaty (1987, p. 4), JEFL university students are "prototype false beginners", because they have a background in English based on their study of grammar and translation in junior and senior high school, but have very little, if any, communicative abilities.

It is not difficult to fathom how people from different cultures, who may have a high degree of grammatical proficiency in English, will, at times, still have trouble communicating in English. Knapp and Knapp-Potthoff (1987, p. 8) shed light on the process underpinning this difficulty by describing "intercultural communication as taking place whenever participants introduce different knowledge into the interaction which is specific to their respective sociocultural group". In other words, interactants in intracultural encounters are

thought to implicitly share the same ground rules of communication and meaning of signals (O’Keeffe, 2004), whereas interactants in intercultural encounters are likely to experience a degree of uncertainty and ambiguity concerning the meaning of signals and the ground rules by which communication will occur (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001; Gudykunst, Nishida & Chua, 1986; Gudykunst, Yang & Nishida, 1985). In oral/aural exchanges, the meanings of utterances are negotiated jointly by speaker and listener; thus, it is always necessary for the receiver to draw inferences about the intentions of the sender (Scollon & Scollon, 1995). Despite the great interest in intercultural (mis)communication, a great majority of intercultural analyses seem to be anecdotal and lacking in a theoretical foundation. Thus, concerning the former, one of the aims here is to extend beyond anecdotal observations and stereotypical representations by providing empirical data as evidence of support or refutation. Further, concerning the latter, this paper has adopted the ideas first proposed in Nunn’s (2003) article, in which he demonstrated the benefits of using Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle as a theoretical basis for analyzing intercultural communication (hereafter IC). Specific to the writer’s teaching context, this paper uses a Gricean framework for intercultural analyses in order to identify some potential sources of miscommunication experienced by JEFL learners.

Grice’s Theory of Conversation

A General Summary

Much of the literature involved in developing politeness theory by scholars such as Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983) stems from Grice’s (1967, 1975, 1989) well-known theory of conversation. The assumption of Grice’s theory rests on the notion that people are intrinsically cooperative in order to construct meaningful conversations. This assumption is known as the Cooperative Principle (CP). Examining the components that make up Grice’s (1975) CP, and considering how members of different cultures may interpret these components differently, may shed some light on some of the misunderstandings in IC caused by different communication styles. As stated in Grice’s (1975, p. 45) seminal work, Logic and Conversation, interactants tend to “make [their] conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which [they] are engaged”. Grice further suggests that there are a number of conversational rules, or maxims, that regulate conversation by way of enforcing compliance with the cooperative principle. Taken from Grice’s (1975, pp. 45-47) work, these maxims, and submaxims within, are divided into four

categories (i.e., quantity, manner, quality, and relation) and presented as follows:

In the category of quantity, there are the following two maxims:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange), and
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The category of manner involves the super maxim *be perspicuous* and the following four maxims:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression,
2. Avoid ambiguity,
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity), and
4. Be orderly.

The category of quality has one main maxim and two submaxims (a and b) as follows:

1. Make your contribution one that is true,
 - a. Do not say what you believe to be false, and
 - b. Do not say anything for which you lack evidence.

The category of relation has one maxim:

1. Make your contribution relevant and timely.

Before a discussion can ensue regarding how Gricean theory can inform intercultural analyses, it is necessary to address the ongoing debate regarding the universality of Grice's (1967, 1975, 1989) theory of conversation.

Differing Interpretations

Some researchers have questioned the feasibility that the maxims can apply universally and independently of culture, style and genre (Keenan, 1976), and others have focused their attacks on the universality of Grice's CP in the context of politeness (Churchill, 1978; Mura,

1983). Demonstrating a context in which Grice's CP is not adhered to, Keenan's (1976) study showed that the people he observed in Madagascar tended not to give information when required, which intentionally and systematically violates Grice's quantity maxim. According to Keenan (1976), Malagasy speakers tend to be reluctant to share information because of the risk of losing face by committing oneself to the truth of the information, as well as the fact that having information is a form of prestige in their culture. Other researchers, however, have staunchly defended Grice's CP, on the grounds that many linguists continue to misunderstand what Grice was trying to do (Horn, 2004; Levinson, 1983, 2000; Nunn, 2003). As Nunn (2003) rightfully pointed out, Grice (1989, p. 26) himself makes no explicit claims of universality, using typically modest language to refer to a "first approximation of a general principle" and a "rough general principle" in describing his theory. Grice (1989, p. 26) is equally cautious in choosing his words so as not to overstate the case for cooperation in his theory as he suggests "each participant recognizes in them [talk exchanges], to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction". By advancing only for the existence of some general principle as this, it is apparent that Grice is adopting what he believes to be the appropriate degree of certainty for a conversational principle (Nunn, 2003).

In short, Grice's maxims can be seen to encompass the basic set of assumptions underlying verbal exchanges; however, this is not to imply that these maxims are regularly followed in every verbal exchange as critics have sometimes thought. Grice (1975) did not prescribe these maxims as laws governing conversation; rather, Grice (1975) fully expected people to flout, violate, infringe, and opt out of the maxims. In fact, the instances when the maxims are not followed were of particular interest to Grice (1975), as they are useful for analyzing and interpreting conversation, and often generate inferences beyond the semantic content of the sentences uttered, which Grice (1975) called conversational implicatures. Grice's (1975) maxims provide the foundation to Brown and Levinson's (1983) theory of politeness because, similar to Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983), "the theorists understand that deliberately broken maxims can implicate more information than what is actually being said" (Lindblom, 2001, p. 1614). The widespread and longstanding application of Grice's theory of conversation in the research and in EFL course and resource books is evidence of its value (Nolasco & Arthur, 1987). For the purposes of this paper, using a Gricean framework to assess potential ideological differences of individuals across cultures seems to be an effective way to uncover potential sources of intercultural miscommunication and negative perceptions. In other words, while these maxims may very well be universal on some levels,

their interpretation may be influenced by culture as well as other variables such as personality, context, age, gender, etc.

Understanding the Finer Points of Grice's Theory

To demonstrate how a Gricean framework can inform this intercultural analysis, it is necessary to take into account various concepts underpinning the main issues in this analysis. As the writer discussed above, not all discourse encompasses Grice's (1975) CP as deceit, long-windedness, irrelevance, obscurity, taciturnity are all, for good or ill, part of natural communication. Some of the terms used to describe instances when Grice's CP is not followed include the actions known as violating a maxim, flouting a maxim, and creating a conversational implicature. Regarding the first, violating a maxim refers to when a speaker intentionally does not follow a maxim. This can occur in the form of a major violation or as a minor violation. A major violation would be evident when the speaker openly opts out from the operation of the maxim and the CP, such as when the speaker deliberately and secretly subverts the maxim and the CP, for some usually selfish end such as trying to deceive the listener (i.e., covertly violating the first maxim of quality), or when the speaker intentionally dominates the conversation, persistently violates the first maxim of quantity, and repudiation of the CP along with it. A minor violation of a maxim, on the other hand, would entail the speaker attempting to maintain the CP by coming out and telling the listener they are violating a maxim and why, as the following examples *I don't know if this is relevant, but...* and *this is just what I heard in passing, so I can't really vouch for the quality* demonstrate (Gartsman & Hughes, 2007). In these examples, the speaker is seen to have minor violations of the relation maxim and the quality maxim respectively.

In contrast to violating a maxim, the action of flouting a maxim refers to instances when the speaker is clearly and deliberately not following a maxim in order to imply something beyond what they have uttered. A common example of this would be what Bouton (1994) refers to as *Pope Questions* (Pope Q) to convey (rather sarcastically) the reply of *course*. That is, if one person asked another if he/she liked sushi and the other person responded with "*Is the pope catholic?*" (or another variant such as "*Is the sky blue?*" or "*Do fish swim?*"), the conversational implicature would be "*Yes, of course, I love sushi*". In this example, the Pope Q blatantly flouts the maxim of relevance, yet (assuming he/she were proficient in English) the person posing the original question "*Do you like sushi?*" would understand that the obvious answer to the question "*Is the pope catholic?*" (i.e., of course) becomes the answer to their original question "*Do you like sushi?*" In this way, the listener

recognizes the speaker's intention and tries to draw the implied meaning, or conversational implicature, out of the utterance. For such flouting to be interpreted as such and the subsequent conversational implicature to be drawn, the speaker and the listener, apart from being cooperative, must share similar cultural and linguistic norms.

Intercultural encounters often involve interactants who do not share tacit knowledge that would enable them to achieve a higher level of understanding and communication, so it may be especially difficult for listeners to interpret the implied meanings that the speaker intended. When these norms are not shared, the misunderstanding of utterances may arise if taken at face value. Utterances in conversations, and the inferences that are sometimes made through conversational implicature, can easily be misconstrued by a conversational participant as their interlocutor not being cooperative. Besides the difficulties associated with recognizing such inferences in intercultural exchanges, misunderstandings across cultures can occur in other more obvious ways. For instance, as Murray (2011) points out, culture or context may cause the instinctive suspension of Gricean maxims, such as not talking about something taboo in a particular culture, or not being brief in the context of preparing a legal document. Intercultural misunderstandings are examples of pragmatic failure, which Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986) define more specifically as a communication problem that occurs whenever two conversational participants fail to understand each other's intentions. While such miscommunication can even occur between interactants who share similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986) assert that it is much more likely to occur in conversations involving participants from different origins and languages. In the same way, models of intercultural communicative competence commonly assume people from different cultural backgrounds may have differing expectations about communication that serve as a framework for interpreting, responding to, and evaluating verbal and nonverbal communication (Spitzberg, 2000).

Using a Gricean framework to identify sources of miscommunication across cultures

Part 1: Potentially Different Interpretations of Grice's Maxim of Quantity

As introduced above, the category of quantity consists of the following two maxims: make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange), and do not make your contribution more informative than is required. In these maxims of quantity, the phrase "as is required" seems open to interpretation as too much and/or too little would seem to be relative concepts. In other words, what is enough for an introverted person may not be enough for an extroverted person. In the same way, an English speaking person

may have different ideas from a Japanese person regarding what enough means. Nonetheless, it is not the writer's intention to propagate the shy Japanese stereotype here. Rather, recognizing that individual interpretations will vary, the writer seeks to examine possible culture-related ideologies that might also influence this phenomenon.

There is a wealth of literature describing JEFLL speaker/learners' disposition towards taciturn behavior (Anderson, 1993; Ellis, 1991; Greer, 2000; Nozaki, 1993; Townsend & Danling, 1998); however, much of it is anecdotal, cast in an essentialist light and has been challenged by some scholars. For instance, in his book *Japan's Modern Myth*, Miller (1982) refutes the idea that silence plays a distinctive role in the social life of Japanese. Miller (1982) contends that Japanese people are no more silent than other cultural groups, and this myth only serves to perpetuate the Japanese image of themselves as a mysterious, unique, undecipherable and hence profound culture. According to Anderson (1993), some Japanese people do talk, and sometimes they talk a lot, but the contexts in which they speak are culturally sanctioned and do not correspond to the cultural codes of the West. Thus, when thought of in this way, the notion of Japanese silence may simply be a form of Western ethnocentrism in some respects and may have more to do with speakers not being familiar with other people's differing social and cultural codes for speaking. Barnlund (1989, p. 143) describes how in the Western world, speech is often thought to be associated with the cultured, while "silence seems to be considered neutral at best, and at worst, as a symptom of social inadequateness or even emotional illness". Indeed, the French still use the word *sauvage* to mean not only *savage* but also *unsociable* or someone who does not have the skills and/or willingness to partake in the art of discourse (Yamada, 1997). Similarly, the following well-known quote by the German novelist Thomas Mann (cited in Yamada 1997, p. 17) exemplifies the degree to which some Westerners are thought to value speech: "Speech is civilization itself. The word, even the most contradictory, preserves contact – it is silence which isolates". This is consistent with the way in which the silence of Native Americans has been interpreted in the literature. While early depictions by scholars in the literature, as well as those held by the general population, attributed the Native Americans' failure to communicate as savagery, later studies conducted by anthropologists and linguists were more sympathetic as they portrayed the Native Americans as victims of the modern world (McDermott, 1987). Still, even in these later studies, their silence symbolized death, handicap, or the absence of civilization, while any ability to speak up signaled progress (Yamada, 1997). In the United States, a great deal of the research conducted in this area seems to treat silence as a symptom of pathology relating to shyness, which leads to

communicative failure and a deteriorating relationship, rather than a sign of growth (Barnlund, 1989; Hendersen, Zimbardo & Carducci, 1999). The position adopted in this paper is that perceptions of silence (and shyness) will likely differ among individuals, as well as across cultures. Moreover, the views stated above, which describe the Western negative view of silence, seem too general, simplistic and convenient to be satisfied with. As Bruneau (1973) warned long ago, the role of silence in complex cultures is profound and needs to be studied in much greater depth to be truly understood.

Moreover, while agreeing with Andersen (1993, p. 102) above that the “the Japanese are silent” stereotype is far from the truth, there does appear to be some legitimacy to the idea that Japanese culture may value taciturnity over verbosity in some ways as demonstrated by the long list of famous Japanese proverbs to that effect, some of which include the following: *Chinmoku wa kin nari* (Silence is golden), *Kuchi wa wazawai no moto* (The mouth is the source of the calamity), *Kuchi ni mitsu ari, hara ni ken ari* (Honey in the mouth, dagger in the heart). In modern times, some of these proverbs have been rewritten with irreverent twists and used by TV personalities, such as *Oshaberi wa kuchi no onara* (talkative is a mouth’s fart), and *Tori no nakaneba utaremaji* (if the bird had not sung, it would not have been shot). The first proverb above *Silence is golden* implies a general positive impression of silence, which is also evidenced in the Japanese ideographic Kanji symbol for the word *ma*, (間, pause or space). This symbol is drawn to represent the sun shining through the gates, illustrating how implied communication can shine through silence. The idea that implicit communication is desirable in Japanese is central to the cultural concept known as *Haragei* (literally belly art). For now, the purpose is to communicate that *ma*, or silence in Japanese conversation, is more than just a pause or empty space; rather, it is an important element that helps construct communication. The other four proverbs above encompass the widespread view that the Japanese may be somewhat skeptical of talk (Kenna & Lacy, 1994; Townsend & Danling, 1998). Relating this to the discussion of the Japanese cultural concept *wa* (i.e., striving for group harmony), these proverbs communicate the idea that words have the power to hurt people and, thus, potentially disrupt group harmony. Consequently, some scholars have explained Japanese silence as an effect of *wa* in which Japanese people avoid talking to limit the chances of hurting someone’s feelings because it is safer to adopt a listener’s role (Elwood, 2001; Matsumoto & Boyè Lafayette, 2000; Yamada, 1997). With these points in mind, it is important to note that despite the many contrastive studies that quote proverbs as support (Lebra, 1987; Nonaka, 1996; Scollon & Scollon, 2001), any conclusions derived

from the meaning of a proverb should be treated with great caution as there often exist numerous proverbs displaying entirely opposing values (as shown by Rose, 1996 and Susser, 1998).

A Look at Some of the Studies in this Area

While a good portion of the descriptions portraying the Japanese as valuing taciturnity over verbosity seem to have been anecdotal, there are numerous empirical studies which seem to support the notion that some Japanese may be more comfortable with silence than citizens of some Western nations such as the United States. For instance, in a contrastive study comparing the communication styles of Japanese and American businessmen, Yamada (1997) reported an average rate of silence of 5.15 seconds per minute in the Japanese meeting and only .74 seconds in the American meeting, and the longest pause in the Japanese meeting was 8.5 seconds and only 4.6 seconds in the American meeting. There seems to be a strong belief that the long pauses and brief utterances commonly found in Japanese may negatively transfer to the L2, as several studies involving the intercultural analyses of communication styles have shown: the JEFLL speakers in these studies spoke less than NESs, did not elaborate as much, and were less likely to engage in small talk (Cutrone, 2005; Hill, 1990; Sato, 2008). This may be contrary to what some cross-cultural interlocutors might hope to encounter in an English conversation as the importance of making small talk, taking the initiative to speak, and elaboration towards making a positive impression have been documented by several sources (Cutrone, 2005; McCarthy, 2003; McCroskey, 1992; Ross 1994; Sato, 2008; Stubbe, 1998; Yashima, 2002). When fundamental behaviors are not shared and/or do not conform to one's expectations, there is a danger that those behaviors may be negatively perceived, lead to stereotyping, and in the worst case scenario, be misinterpreted as transgressions against one's value system (Armour, 2001, 2004; Chapman & Hartley, 2000).

How Do Differences in Quantity of Speech Affect Individuals' Perceptions across Cultures?

Some insights towards answering this question can be found in studies administered by Cutrone (2005) and Sato (2008). First, Cutrone (2005) examined listener responses and their effect on IC in eight dyadic casual conversations in English between Japanese and British participants. In follow-up interviews with the participants, Cutrone (2005) found evidence to suggest that listening behavior which was not shared between cultures may have contributed to negative perceptions across cultures. In relation to potential differences in communication styles concerning the maxim of quantity, the data revealed that the British participants spoke more than double the amount of the Japanese participants, with each group uttering 1985 and 887 words respectively. Although many of the British participants anticipated and accepted

that they would be responsible for carrying the conversation (as they were more proficient in English), the following excerpts from the qualitative data seem to imply that it may have detracted from their enjoyment of the conversation:

Victoria: Her reactions made me feel like she didn't want to speak, be put on the spot as she seemed content to just let me take it, (the primary speakership in the conversation) but I get tired after a while ya know.

William: If I didn't ask him direct questions he probably would just continue nodding. I felt as though he didn't really want to speak. Maybe he was nervous.

Elizabeth: Of course I'd love for her to have spoken more but I don't think it's in her nature to do so. She seems much more comfortable in a listener's role.

Charles: Well in a real life situation, like if I was in a bar or something, I doubt that I'd try so hard to keep the conversation going. (Cutrone, 2005, p. 267)

Many of these sentiments were echoed in Sato's (2008) study, which investigated the oral communication problems and strategies of a group of 32 intermediate JEFL learners. In this study, Sato (2008) video-recorded face-to-face oral proficiency interviews between a learner and a native-English speaker (NES) interlocutor-assessor. From the interview data, Sato (2008) found that the JEFL learners tended to provide minimal responses and were not prone to elaboration. Although there was some cross-learner difference, the Japanese learners generally tended to provide short answers with solely factual information and did not show much, if any, awareness of the need for elaboration. From the subsequent verbal report sessions with the NES assessor, as well as the feedback provided from two additional NES co-raters, Sato (2008) reported that these under-elaborated or minimal responses gave the NESs the impression that these learners were uncooperative participants. As suggested in the research, such minimal responses could undermine interpersonal relationships as they may be perceived as an unwillingness to communicate and/or may even tire or bore the interlocutor (Andersen, 1994; Gumperz, 1995; Sato, 2008). Accordingly, the NES assessor in this study commented that brief answers, even those that may have been linguistically correct, would be graded down under test conditions as such responses would exhibit a lack of sociopragmatic awareness.

Possible Explanations of Ideological Differences across Cultures

In an attempt to explain some of the misunderstandings involving JEFL speakers, several IC researchers (such as Andersen, 1994, Ishii & Bruneau, 1994; Koreo, 1988) have taken somewhat of an essentialist approach drawing on the distinction between collectivist and individualistic cultures proposed by Hofstede (1991), high context and low context

communication posited by Hall (1981), and differing religious traditions by Yamada (1997). The first to be discussed is the influential work of the anthropologist E. T. Hall (1981), who is considered one of the founders of IC study. In his book Beyond Culture, Hall (1981) presents a broad-based theory that describes a continuum ranging from what he called a High Context Culture to a Low Context Culture, terms he used to describe cultural differences between societies. In an archetypal sense, a high context culture refers to societies or groups in which members have close connections over a long period of time, and many aspects of cultural behavior are not made explicit because most members base their behavior on years of interaction with each other. From a communication standpoint, talking is seen to be less valuable as members tend to rely heavily on the context for the interpretation of their messages, with the meaning being partly implied instead of put into words. On the other end of the spectrum, a typical low context culture refers to societies where people tend to have many connections but of shorter duration or for some specific reason. In these societies, cultural behavior and beliefs may need to be spelled out explicitly so that those coming into the cultural environment know how to behave appropriately. Communication is generally thought to be goal-oriented, and members tend to assign great value to talking and communicate mostly through verbal language rather than tacit understanding. According to Copeland and Griggs (1985) and Diez Prados (1998), Japanese society is among the higher context cultures, whereas American society, in contrast, is among the lower context cultures.

Another theory put forward to explain the Japanese use of silence involves their seeming collectivistic orientation (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Triandis et al., 1988). Referring to the work of Hofstede (1991), some researchers argue that cultural differences in beliefs about talk are due to the individualism-collectivism dichotomy, as shown in the following excerpt:

Individualists have a choice among many groups...to which they do belong, and usually belong to these groups because they volunteer. Collectivists...are born into a few groups and are more or less stuck with them. So, the collectivists do not have to go out of their way and exert themselves to be accepted. Hence, the individualists often speak more, try to control the situation verbally, and do not value silence. (Triandis, 1988, p. 61)

Triandis's (1988) assessment seems to be consistent with the concept of *wa* in Japanese culture whereby members of a group do not usually wish to stand out from their group, and, thus, will not frequently perform actions that will cause this to happen such as initiating talk and/or volunteering answers in class. In subsequent work, Triandis (1994) describes how norms are very powerful regulators of behavior in collectivist cultures as the threat of ostracism is an especially powerful source of fear. As an example, he describes the

oft-heard plight of Japanese returnees. After spending some time abroad, they are often criticized when they return home for non-Japanese behaviors such as being too outspoken and uncooperative (Triandis, 1994). This is evidenced by the fact that the term used for individualism in Japanese, *kojinshugi* also has negative connotations which imply selfishness (Ito, 1989).

Furthermore, as Yamada (1997) contends, Judeo-Christian principles may have played a role in spreading the modern day importance given to speech vis-à-vis silence in the United States. The following New Testament verse uttered by John (1:1) seems to point to this origin: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God”. In this verse, John is equating words with God, and by doing that, he, thus, seems to be elevating speech to the highest position of power and eminence (Yamada, 1997). By the eighteenth century, religion competed with science for prestige, and this affected the way people thought of speech. Lexicographers began to see the deification of words as unacademic, and words, although believed to be backed by God, were then thought to be created by humankind in a science of language. As such, science implied exactness; thus, a greater emphasis was not only put on speech but on clear and precise speech. Accordingly, the desire to speak, and particularly the ability to express one’s feelings clearly and explicitly, are thought to be a virtue in American society (McCarthy, 2003, McCroskey, 1992).

In Japan, however, a completely different picture developed from the two influential religions, Buddhism and Taoism as well as from the principles of Confucianism, together contributing the belief that silence is sacred. A central theme to understanding this is to examine how it relates to the concept of emptiness. In Buddhism, one of the main objectives is to realize the emptiness of words. This is evidenced by the fact that Buddhist practitioners, who attend the *okyoo* (i.e., a Japanese pronunciation and rendition of the sutras originally chanted in Sanskrit), do not seek to understand or interpret the meaning in *okyoo* because the point is to realize the emptiness of the chants. Conversely, participants of Judeo-Christian services may not always understand the sermon in a service they are attending, but it is generally desired to do so. Similarly, in Taoism, forgetting language and remaining speechless is advocated as the ideal way (tao) to emptiness. The Confucian code of conduct aims to guide group members through compatible relationships and smooth interaction. The function of talk, in turn, is to act as a social lubricant, and straight forward speech is generally discouraged as saying whatever you felt was viewed as socially inappropriate (i.e., tactless and blunt). Consequently, from this convergence of religious ideas developed a belief that explicit talk with definite meanings was often undesirable, and since talk always presents the

opportunity of being overly explicit, Japanese began to approach talk as a communicative medium that warrants suspicion and caution (Yamada, 1997).

Another reason put forward to explain the silence sometimes found in conversations including JEFLL speakers involves the concept of face. That is, the use of silence by JEFLL/ESL speakers in conversations is sometimes the result of rule-conflict in English and Japanese conversations. For instance, when confronted with questions which they cannot answer (for any number of reasons), they may resort to silence as a face-saving measure. They do this because saying *I don't know X* does not connote the same things to a Japanese person that it might to a NES. Noguchi (1987) provides us with a useful example when he describes a common scenario of a Japanese speaker (called Mr. Suzuki) who is proficient in English conversing with a visiting American business man (called Mr. Jones) who speaks no Japanese. During a conversation that includes other members, Mr. Jones asks Mr. Suzuki what his occupation is and Mr. Suzuki discovers that he cannot answer the question because he does not remember the words *quality control*. Instead of answering *I don't know X* or *I don't know how to say X*, a long silence ensues with everyone growing more uncomfortable with every passing moment until Mr. Jones changes the topic. Noguchi (1987) describes the possible interplay in the thought process of Mr. Suzuki:

From his Japanese language experience, he knows the conversational rule that if an appropriate question is addressed to him, he must provide an appropriate answer in the next speaking turn. Yet, try as he might, he can not (sic) recollect the needed English words. At the same time, he realizes that he cannot admit this lapse of memory in front of the group, for he fears his Japanese friends and Mr. Jones may belittle his intelligence or, perhaps, even begin to think that he really does no work at all on his job. Thus, the face-protecting rule takes effect on Mr. Suzuki. (Noguchi, 1987, p. 22)

This example seems to indicate that, in Japanese, *I don't know X* often presupposes that the speaker lacks knowledge of X because of a lack of intelligence or lack of interest in X. In contrast, the expression *I don't know X* in English seems to carry the presupposition that the speaker lacks knowledge of X but does not presuppose that the speaker lacks the intelligence to acquire knowledge of X. Further, the expression is neutral with regards to the speaker's interest in X as a topic. The dynamics of rule-conflict in English and Japanese conversations leading to uncomfortable silences as shown by the example above are common in EFL teachers' everyday interactions with their Japanese learners (Blanche, 1987; Cutrone, 2005).

While the explanations above offer some interesting insights into how and why different cultures may perceive talk the way they do, it is somewhat difficult to generalize this to the Japanese communication style as it does not account for the tremendous situational variability in Japanese society as discussed in several sections above. In addition to one's

personality and willingness to communicate, the contextual variables of the conversation, which involve the status and familiarity of one's interlocutor(s), where they are speaking, and what purpose the communication serves, are among the many variables that will also influence the amount an individual speaks. For example, regarding individual differences, one person may feel more comfortable talking a lot at home but not at work, whereas another person may be quiet at home and talkative at work. Relating to the group dynamics and the status of the interlocutor(s), Gudykunst and Nishida (1994) describe how when there is an older person with higher status present in a situation, it is often up to them to initiate speech, and should they choose not to speak, then silence would be the appropriate behavior for the others present.

Part 2: Potentially Different Interpretations of Grice's Maxim of Manner

The fundamental nature of the maxim of manner is clearly encapsulated in Grice's (1975, p. 46) super maxim "be perspicuous", which he then divides into the following four submaxims: avoid obscurity of expression, avoid ambiguity, be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity), and be orderly. As the previous section alludes to, the degree to which any of the aforementioned submaxims are followed and/or preferred is open to interpretation, and individual preferences regarding the degree of ambiguity vis-à-vis clarity in communication will vary. In this section, the author discusses how potential culture-specific ideologies might also influence this phenomenon. There exists a great deal of literature claiming that Japanese speakers are ambiguous communicators, who tend to avoid direct, plain statements in favor of more suggestive, indirect comments in their L1 and in English (Hill, 1990; Kenna & Lacy, 1994; Loveday, 1982; Matsumoto & Boyè Lafayette, 2000). Further, as Haugh (2003) points out, this common view is held by both Japanese and non-Japanese linguists in works ranging from IC handbooks (Kitao & Kitao, 1989; McClure, 2000; Yamada, 1997), to academic papers (Akasu & Asao, 1993; Clancy, 1986; Doi, 1996; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1993; Nakai, 1999; Nittono, 1999), to dissertations (Books, 1995; Day, 1996; Iwata, 1999; Sato, 2008). Some of the oft-cited examples of Japanese indirectness and vagueness, according to Haugh (2003), involve phenomena such as the common omission of elements of Japanese utterances that would be made explicit in English (Akasu & Asao, 1993; Donahue, 1998), the common use of indexicals in Japanese such as *are* and *sore* (in English, that) in place of the topic of a subject (Akasu & Asao, 1993), the frequent use of hedges as *toumo kedo ...* (I think that ...) to convey hesitancy and uncertainty (Okabe, 1993; Sasasagawa, 1996), the tendency to use understatements rather than overstatements such as *tabun* (maybe/probably) rather than *zettai*

(definitely), and the use of opaque formulaic utterances such as *chotto yoji ga arimasu* in reply to an invitation to go out together (in English, this may be translated as “Sorry I can’t, I have some business to take care of”).

A Look at Some of the Studies in this Area

Various researchers have attempted to attribute vagueness and indirectness to traditional Japanese values such as the importance of preserving harmony (*wa*) and group orientation (*shuudan shugi*) (Nakane, 1970; Morita & Ishihara, 1989), or to the highly contextualized nature of Japanese communication (Arima, 1989; Ikegami, 1989) and seeming preference for non-verbal communication (Haga, 1998). Although the perception of Japanese as indirect and vague speakers seems to be widespread, there are a number of problems with this view. First, much of this description comes from anecdotal accounts and has not received convincing empirical support. Regarding some of the studies that have been conducted in this area, the results appear to have been influenced by the specific speech act under investigation and how the data is collected (i.e., naturally occurring data vis-à-vis discourse completion tests). While various studies have found Japanese to be more indirect and vague performing speech acts such as requesting and complimenting (Barnlund & Araki, 1985; Takahasahi, 1987), an equal number of studies have produced contrary results in reporting that Japanese can be more direct in some requesting, complaining, and conflict situations than NESs (Rose, 1992; Sato & Okamoto, 1999; Spees, 1994). In light of the evidence to date, the assumption that Japanese and JEFLL speakers are more vague and indirect than NESs appears to be questionable. Thus, the perceptions of Japanese communication shared by many people, which include Japanese, non-Japanese, and academics in both groups, seem to be based on factors other than objective, empirical evidence (Haugh, 2003). Whether these views are driven by a lack of understanding of Japanese L1 and/or misunderstanding of Japanese people is not certain; however, it is evident that these perceptions do exist and thus may influence intercultural encounters between NESs and Japanese. Hence, the next step in this analysis is to describe some of the studies on Japanese and non-Japanese perceptions of Japanese communication and consider how these perceptions might influence IC.

Relating degrees of ambiguity to culture-specific views on politeness, Nisugi (1974) surveyed 250 Japanese native speakers regarding the terms they would choose to describe the Japanese language. 76 percent of the participants responded that *teineina* (polite) was an appropriate adjective for Japanese, and 73 percent responded that *amaina* (vague and indirect) was also an appropriate term. Nisugi (1974) also surveyed 20 NESs and found that 90 percent of them believed Japanese language to be vague and indirect, and 79 percent of

them also considered Japanese to be a polite language. Although Nisugi's (1974) sample of non-Japanese was small, her findings were supported by studies conducted by Haugh (1998), Iwata (1999) and Sasagawa (1996), who also found that the majority of their NESs respondents perceived Japanese communication to be vague and indirect. Iwata's (1999) study, which more specifically involved the perceptions of business communication across cultures between Japanese and North Americans, revealed that the North American respondents in her study generally perceived the Japanese participants to be more indirect and nonverbal in their communicative patterns. Additionally, the findings demonstrated that the Japanese participants also consider themselves to be more indirect and vague than the North Americans; however, this view was not held as strongly as it was by the North American participants. Sasagawa (1996) surveyed 89 foreign students in Japan and found that 64 percent of them believed that Japanese often do not clearly express what they want to say. A smaller group of 55 foreign students were also asked if they thought there were many vague and indirect expressions in Japanese, and 76 percent of the respondents agreed that there were.

How Do Cross-Cultural Perceptions Concerning Manner of Speech Affect JEFLs in IC?

From the studies presented above, it appears that, although the empirical data does not necessarily support it, both Japanese and non-Japanese respondents believed Japanese communication to be generally ambiguous, vague and indirect. This then begs the question as to what extent these perceptions might affect JEFL speakers' intercultural encounters. While behaviors different from what one would expect in their own culture might be viewed negatively across cultures, it is also possible for negative perceptions to stem from preconceived notions of the other culture. Recognizing the inextricable link between expectations and perceptions in conversations, Guest (2002, p. 159) describes the perils of perpetuating stereotypes involving "the direct-talking American, who appears boorish and unsophisticated to his or her Asian hosts, while that same American is perplexed by the vague, indirect forms of speech used by the Asian interlocutor, and thus ascribes a certain 'sneakiness' or 'inscrutability' to his or her counterparts". While there exists a great deal of unsubstantiated literature making similar claims, the author was not able to locate any strong empirical evidence supporting the notion that perceptions of Japanese ambiguity negatively affects IC.

Nishiyama (1995) administered a public opinion survey in the US on American perceptions of Japanese people. The results of Nishiyama's survey (1995), which, at first glance, appear to indirectly support the above mentioned stereotype, in fact, only produce

more questions and misunderstandings. One of the questions asked the respondent to choose the animal that seemed to best characterize Japanese people. The largest percentage of American respondents selected a fox. When this was reported in the Japanese media, a great many Japanese people were shocked and upset as a fox in Japan is associated with the image in Japanese folklore of an eerie, distrustful, and phantom animal. This image seems to be in sharp contrast with the American idea of a fox as a small, quick, and clever animal that possesses the astuteness to outrun and outmaneuver the hounds and hunters chasing it.

In another study, Graham (1990) examined Japanese-American business encounters and whether behavioral differences affected perceptions across cultures. The 12 Japanese participants surveyed in the study admitted that they found the Americans' openness and directness uncomfortable to some degree. Similarly, in a survey of 1346 Japanese people, Chung (1999) found that 79 percent of respondents believed that saying things plainly or directly (*hakkiri iu koto*) is impolite (*bushitsuke*). Interestingly, contrary to the explanation of ambiguity and indirectness occurring as a by-product of the Japanese desire to avoid conflict and promote harmony (*wa*), Chung (1999) found that 60 percent of the respondents felt that the use of expressions to avoid making clear judgments reflects a recent movement in Japanese society towards a passive approach to life, where one desires a peaceful and uneventful life (*kotonakare shugi*). In a somewhat different study, Yoshida et al. (2003) examined the perceptions that 486 Japanese students had of their classmates who had returned after having spent a prolonged amount of time living in a native English speaking country (i.e., returnees). Consistent with the results of similar studies such as Minoura (1988), one of the findings of Yoshida et al. (2003) was that the Japanese respondents perceived their returnee classmates as being too direct and individualistic. Interestingly, these were among the many instances in which the non-returnees held similar perceptions to the ones the returnees held of themselves.

Possible Explanations from a Japanese Perspective

While it is not possible to arrive at any clear-cut conclusions, some Japanese cultural concepts can help shed light on this area. For instance, the idea that implicit communication is desirable in Japanese society is central to the cultural concept known as *haragei*. *Haragei* is comprised of the kanji symbols *gei* (芸, acting) and *hara* (腹, guts), which combine to mean in literal terms - acting on guts alone. This represents the idea of communication without the use of direct words. According to McCreary (1986, p. 45), "the many formalities, conventions, and common standards developed in a society that gives priority to harmonious

relations makes it easy to understand what is in the mind of the Japanese people". In other words, tacit understanding or *haragei* is made possible by the vertical relationships, the need for harmony, and the homogeneity found in Japanese society. Within a Vygotskian (1962) perspective, which places emphasis on culture and society shaping cognitive development and, thus, language use, *haragei* would seem to be a form of other-regulating behavior as knowledge of the other determines the strategy to be employed. Two commonly used referents of *haragei* which help shed light on what this term means are *ishin denshin* (intuitive sense) and *sasshi* (surmise or guess). The phrase *ishin-denshin* is translated literally as *what the mind thinks, the heart transmits*, and refers to the oft-essentialist descriptions of Japanese appearing to be using mental telepathy when they converse. Similarly, *sasshi* refers to the highly valued skill in Japanese society of being able to implicitly deduce the meaning of subtle messages.

Part 3: Potentially Different Interpretations of Grice's Maxim of Quality

The maxim of quality contains the supermaxim: make your contribution one that is true, which encompasses the following two submaxims: do not say what you believe to be false, and do not say anything for which you lack evidence. While violations of the quality maxim can result in using contradictions, irony, metaphors, and rhetorical questions, they may also be construed as exaggerations, deception and dishonesty. Similar to the discussions involving the maxims of quantity and manner above, the degree to which these maxims are followed are open to interpretation and are likely to differ according to each individual's personality as well as the specific contextual factors involved in each conversation. This section will consider whether culture-specific ideologies also influence this phenomenon.

A Look at the Research in this area, and Some Initial Explanation of Communication Styles

While there have not been many empirical investigations conducted in this area concerning Japanese behavior, one study that did investigate it was by Imai (1981). Imai assessed how Japanese businessmen respond to requests that they cannot or will not fulfill. As Nishiyama (1995) points out, there are many ways of saying *no* in Japanese without actually using the word and conveying the negative connotation that seems to go with it in Japanese society. Imai (1981) reported that a common strategy among the Japanese businessmen he surveyed was to use a number of the alternatives to the explicit word *no*, including answers which sound fairly similar to those deemed deceptive by Information Manipulation Theory (IMT), which, in brief, views deception as arising from covert violations of one or more of Grice's (1989) four maxims. One example from Imai's (1981) study occurred when some of the

Japanese participants said *yes* and followed with long explanations, which may be equated to violating the maxims of quality and quantity. Other responses included using vague or ambiguous replies (non-observance of the manner maxim), avoiding the question, and changing the subject (on-observance of the relevance manner). In this way, IMT suggests that deceptive messages function deceptively because they violate the principles that govern conversational exchanges (McCornack, 1992).

In another study, Nishiyama (1994) discusses deception in a cultural framework from an organizational perspective. Nishiyama (1994) examined the tactics and behaviors of Japanese negotiators and found a number of strategies and behaviors that her Japanese participants considered everyday business practice in Japan, yet may be interpreted as deceptive by American business people. Such commonly misunderstood messages may stem from the distinction between Japanese cultural concepts known as *tatemae* and *honne*. *Tatemae* (i.e., the public self) refers to the principle by which one is bound to the group vis-à-vis one's ranking in the vertical order of society, whereas *honne* (i.e., the private self), on the other hand, refers to one's true or inner wishes and desires. One example of *tatemae* in action would be if a Japanese person outwardly expressed agreement and support to a statement made by an older person (or a person of seeming higher status such as a superior at work) that they, in fact, did not agree with at all.

A study conducted by Robinson (1992), may help shed some further light in this area. In this study on 12 JESL learners' refusals in English, one of the methodological problems that arose was that several of the JESL respondents had a particularly difficult time issuing refusals and tended to accept requests rather than refuse them. Robinson (1992) attributed this to the nature of Japanese society, which he contends raises children, and especially girls, to say *yes*, or at least not say *no*. In an earlier study of the development of communication styles in children, Johnson and Johnson (1975) report that American children are socialized to speak the truth, to be honest. Miller (1994, p. 37) supports this claim by characterizing Americans as "forthright, direct, and clear". In a study comparing the American and Japanese communication styles, Okabe (1983, p. 36) concluded that "Americans' tendency to use explicit words is the most noteworthy characteristic of their communication style".

Further Explanations of Ideological Differences, and Potential Effect on IC

Although many claims given above have been cast in an essentialist light and only seem to include scant empirical support, they continue to influence perceptions. For instance, Kenna and Lacy (1994) summarize the American concept of truth as an absolute entity that is not dependent on circumstances. In other words, a fact is either true or false, and what is true for

one person is likely true for everyone. In Japanese society, conversely, Kenna and Lacy (1994) contend that truth is relative and largely dependent on the situation and the parties involved. Further, the idea of communicating truth would seem to be given a much higher priority in American society than it might in Japanese society. As has been documented by several sources (Hill, 1990; Loveday, 1982; Matsumoto & Boyè Lafayette, 2000), maintaining harmony and protecting face are thought to be much more important virtues than truthfulness, clarity and directness in Japanese culture. This last claim was supported by Cutrone's (2005, pp. 265-266) study, in which some of the JEFL interviewees admitted that they sometimes avoid giving their opinions and/or conveying the truth in an effort to preserve harmony and ensure smooth communication as in the following excerpts:

Masami: I didn't have such a case here, but usually I wouldn't tell someone if I disagree (with) their opinion because I don't want to lose nice atmosphere. This is Japanese culture. Do you know *omoiyari*?

Masahiro: I couldn't show I didn't understand because it's the Japanese mind. If I show, he loses his face, and I too lose my face.

The non-observance of the maxim of quality here is clearly not a violation in which the participants are purposefully lying and deceiving for selfish gains. Rather, these non-observances fit into the category of suspending a maxim, which, according to Murray (2011), occurs when a person does not observe a maxim due to various cultural or contextual factors. In the case of Cutrone's (2005) study, the JEFL respondents, who feigned understanding and agreement in the intercultural conversations, attributed this type of behavior to a cultural norm which stresses being polite, keeping conversations harmonious and avoiding confrontations. Nonetheless, while the JEFLs' intentions may have been good, feigning understanding and agreement appear to be in contrast to what some of the British participants desired of their JEFL interlocutors as shown in the following utterances:

Victoria: Honestly I think she's just agreeing with everything I say no matter how she feels which is too bad because I'd like to hear her opinion; it would do heaps to stimulate the conversation.

Charles: I don't know why they (Japanese EFL speakers) just can't give their opinions. You (referring to all people) can disagree without hurting people.

Berenice: In Japan, shopkeepers on the street always nod and act like they understand but they really don't, and then we try to buy something and it's like did we miss something.

(Cutrone, 2005, p. 268)

The responses above suggest that one strategy that some Japanese may use to mitigate

potential face threatening acts such as disagreeing is to hide their true feelings and, in some cases, simply convey the sentiments they believe their interlocutor desires. The final excerpts given in each of the cultural sets above by Masahiro and Berenice respectively touch upon another issue that has been presented in the literature regarding ELT in the Japanese context. Blanche (1987) and Cutrone (2005) are among the many researchers to demonstrate instances when intercultural miscommunication occurred due to differing ways of showing understanding. It appears that there may be rule-conflict processes at work that might hinder a JEFL speaker from showing that they do not understand. The example given above by Noguchi (1987) in which Mr. Suzuki had a particularly difficult time showing that he did not understand is a case in point.

Other attempts to explain the Japanese concept of truth relate to some of the cultural concepts mentioned above. For instance, situational variability, and particularly the dichotomy between the private self and the public self, can play an important role in a Japanese person's life. According to Doi (1986), this notion of the Japanese shifting self may be at the crux of some intercultural misunderstandings with Americans. Doi (1986) suggests that in American society it is thought to be important for these two selves to remain consistent; when the private self deviates from the public self, an individual might be considered to be a hypocrite. In Japanese society, however, being polite and preserving harmony is given a much higher priority, and an individual's actual feelings pertaining to an action are thought to be less important (Doi, 1986; Triandis, 1989). Lapinsky and Levine (2000) summarize these sentiments by stating that in collectivist cultures, there is not as strong an emphasis on maintaining consistency between what one feels and what one says, whereas in individualist cultures consistency between thoughts and actions is believed to be extremely important. This is not to conclude, however, that individualists always maintain consistency between thoughts and actions, but that there seems to be a greater emphasis placed on consistency by those from individualistic cultures.

Part 4: Understanding the Maxim of Relevance

The maxim of relevance is stated by Grice (1975, p. 46) as “make your contribution relevant and timely”. Adherence to this maxim prevents random, incoherent conversations lacking continuity. The precise role of this maxim and its significance in relation to the other maxims continues to be a source of great discussion. In terms of adhering to the CP, the maxim of relevance may be the most difficult and far-reaching maxim to infringe (i.e., it can only be done through unintentional failure to provide relative information due to inferior language

ability, cognitive disorder, physical problems and mistakes/slips). If any of the other maxims are not observed in these ways, it can be argued that communication of some kind can still go on. While the example of the Pope Question (*Is the pope catholic?*) above has shown how the maxim of relevance can be flouted to create a conversational implicature, it is not likely that the CP would be upheld at the point where the maxim of relevance is infringed. For instance, a reply of “*Obama will be re-elected*” to the question “*Do you like sushi?*”, would not make any sense and would, thus, severely impede the progress of the conversation.

It has also been pointed out that the other three maxims can, to varying degrees, be viewed in terms of the maxim of relevance (Talib, 2009). For instance, an undetected lie is thought to violate the maxim of quality, as the speaker is deliberately uttering a falsehood, but in a sense, it may also violate the maxim of relevance, as the same utterance to the listener is an utterance which is propositionally true, and not one that is false. Similarly, as Talib (2009) points out, in a hypothetical situation whereby five units of information are needed by the listener, but four or six units of information are uttered by the speaker, then, either one relevant unit of information is not given, or one irrelevant unit of information is given, which indicates that both the maxims of quantity and relation may have been violated. Sperber and Wilson (1986) further expanded upon Grice’s (1975) principle of relevance in developing what is known as Relevance Theory. This principle, according to Sperber and Wilson, states that the utterance given has to be relevant for it to be understood, and presumes that the receiver will have available the contextual information necessary to derive the meaning of the utterance with minimum effort.

Examining Grice’s Maxim of Relevance across Cultures

While the Gricean (1975) approach recognizes the importance of the maxim of relevance, it does not subsume all the other maxims under it. Similar to the other three maxims discussed above, interpretations as to what is deemed relevant and timely may differ according to each individual’s personality, interests, age, gender, culture and subculture(s), etc. For a JEFLL speaker, it may sometimes be a matter of simply not being proficient enough in L2 English to adequately connect what appear to be disparate thoughts and ideas. So, for instance, if a person were to abruptly change the topic in a conversation and did not utter something like “By the way, ...” or “Changing the topic completely, ...” before starting to discuss the new topic, their sudden topic shift might be perceived as awkward or confusing by the listener(s). While the link between English proficiency and the ability to produce coherent and connected speech seems quite straight forward, the role of Japanese culture, and whether JEFLLs may feel somewhat less pressure to remain on topic in a conversation than other cultures, is

worthy of further exploration.

Possible Explanations of Ideological Differences, and Call for more Research in this Area

Unfortunately, research into whether culture-specific ideologies affect this phenomenon has been scant. Much of the earlier discussion in this area centered on cross-cultural literacy styles and can be traced back to the controversial and oft-cited paper of Kaplan's (1966) graphic depiction of various modes of discourse structure according to exhibited patterns of textual development. According to his theory, linearity is at least a *prima facie* requirement of Anglo rhetorical patterning, whereas circuitry is thought to characterize an East Asian rhetorical pattern. Regarding the latter, this circuitry rhetorical mode seems to involve texts in which the writer avoids a direct delineation of thesis (i.e., statement of topic) in the opening sections of text, and it is left to the reader to extrapolate a position from seemingly unrelated facts or situations in the text. Discourse development seems to follow a pattern of turning and turning in a widening gyre, with the loops revolving around the topic and viewing it from a variety of positions, but never addressing it directly (Brown, 1998). In a similar way, Mulvey (1997) describes Japanese preferred rhetorical strategies as identified by Hinds (1980, 1983, 1984), Mulvey (1992), Ricento (1987) Takemata (1976), and Yutani (1977), among others. The overriding element found in three commonly used rhetorical strategies in Japanese texts involved seeming irrelevance, i.e., texts which seemed to contain a series of seemingly disconnected and semi-connected topics. While such an approach may indeed possess a coherent method of organization in their own way in Japan, students using such strategies in EFL/ESL classes with Western teachers risk having their efforts mistaken for poor organization (Hinds, 1983; Ricento, 1987). While this seems to lend support to the notion that the maxim of relevance may be interpreted differently across cultures, it is clear that more research is necessary to complete the picture, particularly involving how this phenomenon might affect spoken discourse.

In attempting to explain the circuitous rhetorical pattern described above and to draw insights into how the notion of relevance is thought interpreted in the Asiatic tradition, Leki (1991) asserts that rhetoric in the Asiatic tradition seems to have a historical purpose of announcing truth rather than proving it, whereas rhetoric in the Western tradition, conversely, often seems to be designed to convince people towards a certain position. Consequently, in the Asiatic tradition, the speaker/writer arranges the propositions of the announcement in such a way that references to a communal, traditional wisdom encouraging harmonious agreement, while in the Western tradition, much more prominence is placed on the speaker/writer's ability to reason and marshal evidence in order to persuade the

reader/listener towards a certain position. Thus, consistent with the descriptions above, Brown (1998) summarizes the Asian mode of text development as deferential, anecdotal, and circuitous, one which seeks to address an issue by describing the surrounding terrain. Fliegel (1987) concurs and goes on to point out three defining characteristics of this rhetoric: an emphasis on group collectivity, the elicitation of consent, and the avoidance of direct conflict.

Conclusion

From Theory to Practice

In conclusion, this paper has argued that culture-specific interpretations of Grice's maxims do indeed exist. With misunderstanding as the focus of this theoretical analysis, the writer found it useful to examine intercultural conversations using a Gricean framework. That is, intercultural misunderstandings and negative perceptions were often associated with differing interpretations of Grice's (1975) maxims. These findings would seem to question the notion that Grice's (1975) maxims can apply universally and independently of culture. In this way, Grice's (1975) maxims would seem to better serve linguists engaged in cross-cultural research as a tool for analysis rather than a set of norms expected in conversations. If researchers were seeking prescriptive laws to govern intercultural conversations, a good place to start would be with Clyne's (1994, p. 194) culturally sensitive modifications and additions to three of Grice's maxims, as follows (N.B. No revisions were suggested for the maxim of relevance):

Quantity: A single maxim – 'Make your contribution as informative as is required for the purpose of the discourse, within the bounds of the discourse parameters of the given culture.'

Quality: Supermaxim – 'Try to make your contribution one for which you can take responsibility within your own cultural norms.' Maxims (1) 'Do not say what you believe to be in opposition to your cultural norms of truth, harmony, charity, and/or respect.' (2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.'

Manner: The supermaxim can be retained in its original form – 'Be perspicuous.' Maxims (1) 'Do not make it any more difficult to understand than may be dictated by questions of face and authority.' (2) Avoid ambiguity unless it is in the interests of politeness or of maintaining a dignity driven cultural core value, such as harmony, charity or respect.' (3) 'Make your contribution the appropriate length required by the nature and purpose of the exchange and

the discourse parameters of your culture.’ (4) ‘Structure your discourse according to the requirements of your culture.’ (5) ‘In your contribution, take into account anything you know or can predict about the interlocutor’s communication expectations.’

Undoubtedly, Clyne’s (1994) revisions to Grice’s (1975) maxims provide several useful pieces of advice to anyone embarking on international communication; however, from the perspective of Japanese EFL learners, using the original Gricean framework to analyze intercultural encounters seems to be a good way to shed light on the potential origins of pragmalinguistic failure. That is, by understanding why the pragmalinguistic failure is occurring, both teachers and students alike will be in a much better position to prevent and/or deal with the awkward moments that result in intercultural misunderstandings.

Before any practical suggestions can be given however, it is important that EFL teachers understand and respect how potentially sensitive cross-cultural issues can be in the EFL classroom. Accordingly, the writer cautions EFL teachers to never push their learners to communicate in ways that make them feel uncomfortable. It is important to keep in mind that students forge their identities and belief systems through their culture; thus, any attempts by teachers to alter their communicative style or behaviors may be met with resistance and disengagement from the class. Unquestionably, the degree to which learners choose to conform to new communication practices is entirely up to each individual. Still, many JEFs are more than willing to adopt cultural practices different than their own in their efforts to learn English, and those who are reluctant at first often seem to find their way over time as they become more acclimated to the norms of the international community. Since many learners may not have previously considered how differing communication styles can impact IC, raising their awareness of these issues would be a good first step in conversation classes. Ultimately however, to have successful conversational exchanges, learners will have to go beyond the raised-consciousness phase and on to developing more product-oriented conversational management techniques. To these ends, the writer would like to suggest the following two phases of instruction in this area, as advocated by Ellis (1991).

(1) The first phase of instruction would involve consciousness-raising activities. Such activities are designed to raise awareness of how conversational behaviors might be perceived (and sometimes misconstrued) across cultures. For instance, concerning the cross-cultural analysis of Grice’s maxim of quantity provided above, there is ample evidence of Japanese

people speaking much less than their interlocutors in intercultural encounters in English, and this tendency to adopt more of a listening role (and failure to take on more of the primary speakership responsibility) has seemingly affected intercultural encounters in a negative way (i.e., miscommunication, stereotyping and negative perceptions across cultures). One of the ways which EFL teachers in Japan can raise their learners' awareness in this area is by having students watch video clips and/or listen to audio excerpts which were specifically chosen (or constructed) to highlight particular features of conversation and, subsequently, engage in deconstruction/discussion activities to become more aware of how different communicative styles might affect IC (N.B. The conversations used in this phase of instruction could easily be modified to highlight issues concerning any of the four maxims). To provide an example that highlights the effects of not speaking enough in a conversation (i.e., concerning the maxim of quantity), a teacher could administer the following two steps:

A: First, the teacher would present two conversations to their students (via audio or video): in the first conversation, one of the conversational participants would be seen carrying the conversation (in terms of taking on most of the primary speakership responsibilities), while the other participant is seen adopting more of a listening role (and relying mostly on providing short listener responses as a way to stay involved in the conversation); in the second conversation, the primary speakership of the conversation would be shown to be much more balanced between the conversational participants.

B. Second, after each conversation, the teacher would engage students in a deconstruction of what they thought happened in the conversation and how it might be perceived by different people, including themselves. Depending on the teacher's context and preferences, this could involve having the students sit in a circle (or in small groups) and discuss the following questions: *What did you think of the conversation? Did you notice any differences in the behaviors of the conversational participants? If so, do you have any guesses to explain why these differences occurred? How do you think the conversational participants perceived these differences? How do you think people in your culture would perceive such behaviors? Etc.*

Ideally, the students would bring up the issue of "how much each person spoke" on their own after watching/listening to the first conversation, which could elicit more specific questions and in-depth discussion of this topic; however, if students do not bring it up on their own, the teacher should be prepared to prompt students with various questions such as: *Did you notice if one conversational participant spoke more than the other? If so, how do you*

think this affected the conversation? Did you think the participant who spoke less was interested in what the other one was saying? Did you think the participant who spoke less was bored by what the other participant was saying? How do you think the person who spoke more felt about the person who spoke less? How do you think the person who spoke less felt about the person who spoke more? Etc.

At some point, teachers should steer students attention away from the recorded conversations and have them reflect more on their own general conversational behavior (in both L1 Japanese and L2 English) by posing the following questions: *Do you behave like any of the participants you observed at times? How do you think others perceive your behavior? How do you think your conversational behavior would be perceived across cultures? Does your communication style change when you speak English? If so, why? How would you change your conversational behavior if you could? Do you behave differently when you are speaking to your teacher, boss, or family? Do you think you act this way because of your personality or the personality of the other speakers? How much influence does the situation have on your listening behavior? Etc.* At the end of this step, it is hoped that the students will have developed a greater appreciation of how certain communicative behaviors might be perceived across cultures. In many cases, this serves to provide JEFLLs with the impetus to want to speak more in their intercultural encounters in English.

(2) In the second phase of instruction, students focus more on developing strategies for application. In other words, continuing with the example above, students move from understanding why they should speak more (in the first phase) to actually learning how to do so (in the second phase). To this end, a teacher could administer the following two steps:

A. First, the teacher would have the students engage in exercises that allow them to carefully analyze the target language and develop strategies to speak more. In this initial skill-building stage, most of the analytical activities would involve written texts (with matching, multiple choice and cloze exercises) and, thus, do not involve the real time-pressure and spontaneity of authentic conversations. Instruction on how to speak more could focus on such conversational management areas as new topic initiation, expansion techniques, agreeing and disagreeing, supporting one's opinions, asking return and follow-up questions, the ability to initiate repair when there is a potential breakdown, etc. For instance, the teaching of expansion techniques could involve presenting students with a sample conversation (or the transcription of the first conversation above in which one participant spoke much more than

the other), such as the one that follows:

John: I really love European art. (silence) I went to the Louvre Museum in Paris last year.

Kenji: Cool.

John: Yeah, I have family in Italy, so I spent some time in Rome as well.

Kenji: I see.

John: I wish there were more art museums in this area.

Kenji: Me too. (silence)

John: Hmm, ok then, well, I guess I should get going; I'll talk to you later.

Kenji: See you later.

Examining this conversation with the class, the teacher shows the class how Kenji might have been able to expand on some of his initial utterance by including a fact, opinion, or question. For instance, rather than just saying “Cool” to John’s initial statement “I really love European art”, Kenji could have responded, “Cool, there’s an exhibit on Spanish art this weekend in Tokyo” (fact), “Me too, I especially love the work of Leonardo da Vinci” (opinion)/ “Oh really, I’m more of an Asian art lover myself” (opinion), or “Cool, who is your favorite artist?” (question). Once students see some examples such as these, the teacher can ask them to rewrite the rest of the conversation by adding a fact, opinion and/or a question to their initial response, as follows:

John: I really love European art.

Kenji: *Me too; in fact, I'm planning to go to Italy next year.*

John:

Kenji:

John:

Kenji:

To prepare students for the next step, teachers should have students complete similar types of language-building exercises and subsequently provide extensive feedback on their work. Further, to give students the best chance to succeed, teachers would be well-advised to begin with easier tasks and gradually progress to more difficult ones as students gain competence and confidence. Hence, each new sub-skill should be introduced separately, and new dimensions and complexities should be added only when students show they are ready to

take the next step.

B. Second, in an effort to apply what they have learned in the first step, the teacher provides students with practice opportunities and feedback. Unlike the first step (which afforded students the time to think things through), this step aims to simulate a real conversation and the constraints that go with it (i.e., spontaneity, real-time pressure, all dimensions of conversation mixed together, etc.). That is, the students would participate in role-plays or conversations (with or without prompts, depending on how much assistance students need) and focus on applying the new conversational techniques they learned in the previous step. The teacher and/or other students should observe the conversations and offer constructive feedback, and the students should change partners/groups and repeat the practice-feedback cycle as many times as possible. Ideally, each of these conversations would be recorded (video is preferred but not necessary) and played back for reference as the teacher and/or peer provides the conversational participants with feedback.

The Importance of Avoiding Cultural Stereotypes

Finally, as the writer alluded to above, the concept of culture, as well as cultural differences, can pose great dilemmas in the classroom, as well as to researchers comparing the communication styles of different groups (see Guest 2006 for an in-depth discussion of this issue). Regarding the latter, a common categorisation of culture is based on nationalities, as evidenced by Hofstede's (1991) oft-quoted study in which he compared the cultural values of citizens from over 50 different countries across four dimensions: Power Distance, Collectivism vis-à-vis Individualism, Femininity vis-à-vis Masculinity and Uncertainty Avoidance. While Hofstede's (1991) study is indeed interesting in that it points out various national differences, it is problematic to view cultures purely from the perspective of nationalities as there is sure to be a wide range of subcultures within any nation. In Japan, this may involve the management subculture in the occupational dimension, the large corporation subculture in the firm-size dimension, the male subculture in the gender dimension, the Osaka subculture in the regional dimension, to name a few. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that individual differences within any group also exist. Certainly, a great deal of individual variation has occurred in the conversational exchanges referred to in this paper, and output has been influenced to varying degrees by the specific contexts of each conversation, the personality and demeanour of the participants, and the chemistry between the participants in the dyadic conversations, as well as seemingly peripheral variables such as

the amount of sleep the participants had the night before and the mood of the participants at the time of the conversations. Thus, while this paper seeks to investigate how Japanese culture could potentially influence JEFLL speakers' performance, it is important to proceed with extreme caution in arriving at any conclusions and/or generalisations where culture is concerned, so as to not fall into the culturist trap of reducing individuals to less than they are (Holliday, Hyde & Kullman, 2004). In other words, it would be imprudent, and a vast overgeneralization, to suggest that all Japanese people (or any group for that matter) adhere to any one set of cultural principles or values; however, it is not a great leap to surmise that cultural influences do indeed affect the behavior of many Japanese people to varying degrees when speaking L2 English. Thus, in taking a cautious approach, it is the writer's modest hope that this paper will help raise awareness in this area and, thus, inform language pedagogy in Japanese EFL classes.

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