

## **Cross-Cultural Social Skills Instruction and Indirect Expressions: Psychoeducation in Japan's High-Context Culture**

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### Abstract

In recent years, the number of international students in Japan has been increasing. They suffer from understanding indirect expressions in communication with Japanese people. In this study, we implemented and assessed the impacts of a novel instructional program aimed at teaching social skills in a high-context culture characterized by the frequent use of indirect expressions. We conducted two experiments with students in Japan. Experiment 1 included semi-structured interviews with international students in Japan. Interview analysis revealed that it is difficult to learn to use and understand the intent behind indirect expressions without having first-hand experience communicating with Japanese people who use indirect language, particularly regarding “*sassuru*” – expressions that allow for multiple interpretations. Experiment 1 highlights the presence of problems that cannot be solved simply by learning Japanese and the challenges of adapting to communication styles characterized by the frequent use of indirect expressions in high-context cultures. Based on Experiment 1, we provided social skills instruction to an experimental group of international students as a teaching intervention. Next, participants in the experimental group and control group (who had not received the social skills instruction) completed questionnaires before and after the experiment. Data analysis verified that the intervention participants (1) developed more awareness of, and interest in, the Japanese culture; (2) became more confident in their interpretation of expressions with multiple meanings and of silence; and (3) became more accepting of ambiguous expressions because they had developed greater understanding. Conversely, the control group participants did not experience similar notable changes.

*Keywords:* cross-cultural comparison, indirect expressions, social skills, international students, Japan

Recent years have seen an increase in the number of international students, and this trend has attracted considerable attention. However, this upsurge makes it difficult for educators to address their problems individually; thus, a broader approach to international education is needed. Additionally, recent research has highlighted inadequacies in international education, and several studies have examined the problems encountered by students pursuing education in foreign countries (Tanaka, 2000). For example, international students living in Japan may have difficulty adapting to many cultural differences, especially regarding various aspects of communication, such as the use of “indirect expressions.” In Japanese culture, people commonly use – and prefer to use – indirect expressions in conversations to avoid conflict (Takeuchi, Imahori, & Matsumoto, 2001).

International students in Japan often find it difficult to understand these indirect expressions, and this situation can lead to additional misunderstandings and further hinder communication. In 1987, Moyer identified “ambiguity” related to some types of expressions as a factor that contributes to stress in the daily lives of many international students (Moyer, 1987). Tanaka and Fujihara (1992) also pointed to difficulty understanding the meaning of certain expressions as a source of confusion for international students in Japan. Hofstede (1996) identified the difference in “direct” and “indirect” communication between the cultures of the United States and Japan as a contributing factor to culture shock for those adapting to life. Takahashi (1991) also argued that one of the factors in cross-cultural maladjustment is the difference in communication style, namely, “indirect expressions.” Notably, for many sojourners, these differences in communication can be a greater source of difficulty than differences in values (Shimoda & Tanaka, 2005). For example, foreigners in Japan have reported that, in their communication with locals, even determining whether their responses mean “yes” or “no” is a major source of frustration (Nakano, Okunishi, & Tanaka, 2015). Researchers have actively accumulated knowledge about the experiences of international students in Japan since the number of international students there increased in the 1990s. According to the “Intercultural Education Scheme” (Shiratsuchi & Tanaka, 2016), the difficulties and dissatisfactions related to communication have not changed over the past 20 years. A relatively new study (Nakano, S., Tanaka, T., & Simic-Yamashita, M. (2017)) that examined intercultural difficulties among international students in Japan also noted difficulties in understanding indirect expressions.

Kleinberg and Hall (1979) classified culture into two parts: high-context and low-context, and there have been many related studies, such as those examining indirect expressions. “High-context culture” means people communicate based on inherent understanding. In contrast in “low context cultures,” communication is expected to be direct, precise, and explicit. According to Hall (1976) and Gudykunst and Ting-Toomy (1988), communication in the United States is primarily “low-context,” whereas communication in Asia, including China, Japan, and Korea, is primarily “high-context.” Relatedly, Hasegawa and Gudykunst (1998) compared silence in Japan and America and identified the differences between clear and tacit communications.

However, even among Asian countries, which are considered a high-context culture compared to America, Japanese culture is unique in its indirect expressions. For example, Ko, Chao, and Dong (2000) conducted a study contrasting verbal communication in Japan and China. They examined indirect expressions and the related strategy points used to avoid direct statements and questions in conversation, such as euphemisms, rhetorical questions, and omissions, used in conversation. Although the results showed that the two cultures share some common strategies and frequency of use of indirect expressions, especially in the context of requests, invitations, and rejection, Chinese involves lower-context communication than Japanese and

emphasizes the rightful persuasiveness of assertion. While Japanese speakers convey the surrounding information but not conclusions. In other words, in Japanese, speakers expect conversation partners to deduce the speaker's implied conclusions; thus, they do not have to state them overtly.

These differences in communication styles can hinder cross-cultural adaptation. In other words, learning processes, such as acquiring new skills and understanding cultural standards and proper behaviors, are essential for cross-cultural adaptation. Some methods have been developed to approach this topic from different points of view, including “cognition,” “emotion,” and “behavior.” For instance, some of these methods include (1) role-plays to improve students' awareness of their own and other cultures, (2) culture assimilators to help students understand the differences in causal attributions of various incidents, and (3) simulations to provide students with experiences of different-culture situations (Yaping, 2003).

If behavioral instruction using the role-plays is carried out after cognitive instruction, students can grasp the meaning or function of behavior and thus improve their cognitive understanding (Tanaka, 2000). Furnham (1983) and Furnham and Bochner (1982) mentioned that the difficulties foreigners experience are related to a lack of social skills, and the more they develop social skills in the host country, the less hardship they experience. Social skills education uses role-play to promote cultural understanding in terms of both knowledge and behavior; because psychological knowledge and skill are used, it is one of the methods used in psychoeducation. Teaching in Japanese education is mostly centered on knowledge. Therefore, receiving behavioral instruction after cognitive instruction might help students better understand Japanese expressions. Regarding psychoeducation, a cross-cultural psycho-educational program for international students in Japan was conducted with the goal of enhancing cross-cultural contact, which supports psychological, sociocultural, and cross-cultural adjustment for international students (Tanaka, 2012). The process by which behavioral instruction is carried out after cognitive instruction is an important educational feature.

International students who cannot understand indirect expressions must master the conventions related to the use of indirect expressions in conversations in Japanese. Regarding how skills are learned, there are many studies on role-play scenarios such as “asking directions,” “visiting a professor,” and so on (e.g., Tanaka & Nakashima, 2006), but indirect expressions are often treated as only one part of this instruction. In comparison, there is only limited research on Japanese indirect expressions that are not well understood by international students.

The available research on how skills are learned includes several different skill-learning scenarios. Although some literature addresses indirect expressions, skills-learning research focusing on indirect expression is limited. Neither skills instruction nor indirect expression has been studied adequately. Thus, the aim of this study was to create and assess a training program that can be further developed to improve cross-cultural adaptation among future international students in Japan. We expect that, after participating in the skills training developed in this study, students will demonstrate a greater understanding of Japanese culture and more confidence and motivation to interact with Japanese hosts after participating in the social skill training. Although this is a very small study, it is intended to provide content and suggestions, so the program can be further developed and evaluated for use on a bigger scale in a broader context.

## Methodology

Participants were collected using the snowball technique. They are international students at the same university. They were asked to participate in this study after being informed that they would be invited to attend a session to learn about communication specific to Japanese culture. They were also promised that the results of the experiment would not be used for any purpose other than the research and that anonymity and privacy would be ensured. After carefully explaining these points in writing and orally, I obtained written consent to cooperate in the research. This research plan was approved by the Ethics Committee of the second author's university. All collaborators cooperated with me until the end of the experiment. First, we conducted a group interview in a 60-minute session at the classroom on the university on campus in Japan to survey international students about problems encountered in communicating in a high-context culture. Social skills training is one aspect of psychoeducation that comprises psychological knowledge and technological skills (Takana, 2000). Interviews were recorded with a voice recorder, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using the KJ method-Type (Kawakita, 1996). The KJ method was invented by Jiro Kawakita, a cultural anthropologist, to summarize data, and KJ is named after the inventor's initials.

Based on the results of that survey, we tested a social skills training focused on behavioral culture-related instruction using an experimental group that received the training and a control group that did not (Experiment 2). Participants in Experiment 1 were asked to participate as an experimental group in Experiment 2. The training focused on indirect expression to help students studying in high-context cultures improve their understanding and use of the communication style therein. In high-context cultures, people use vague expressions from which some of the meaning can be inferred because it is not entirely expressed in words. Conversely, when a person wants to assert something in a conversation, they must do so without hurting or insulting others by avoiding words that may reflect a rude attitude. The educational method of this research will be the key to creating good relationships with people in both low-context and high-context cultures without misunderstandings.

In cross-cultural adaptation research, there is a hypothesis that increasing social skills promotes cross-cultural adaptation (Okunishi & Tanaka, 2011). According to this hypothesis, acquiring social skills achieve the formation of interpersonal relationships with host people and contributes to the promotion of cross-cultural adaptation. This study is based on this hypothesis. In other words, we conducted social skills training and examined its effects.

### Experiment 1 – Interview

#### Purpose

We conducted a survey via interviews with international students in Japan to examine expressions they found difficult to understand when communicating with people in Japanese.

#### Methodology

##### *Participants and Study Period*

Seven foreign students in Japan were recruited using the snowball technique. Data for this experiment were collected in January 2011 and January 2012. The entire study (including both

experiments) was supported by KAKENHI (Grant-in-Aid for Challenging Exploratory Research NO. 15H0345617, representative Tomoko TANAKA).

### ***Procedure***

We conducted a semi-structured interview using the following questions: (1) Have you experienced the use of indirect expressions in Japan? (2) Are there any unique expressions in your country? (3) Are there any Japanese expressions that you have questions about? (4) Are there any Japanese expressions that you want to learn? The interview was conducted in Japanese (although some English words were also used) because all participants speak and understand Japanese fluently.

### ***Analysis***

We analyzed informants' comments according to the KJ method (Kawakita, 1996). Their responses and comments were sorted by their units of meaning. First, we extracted segments of the transcribed narratives corresponding to points in the interviews. Then, all information was written on individual cards. The cards were carefully read. Cards containing similar content were grouped together. The contents are summarized in Table 1 for each question.

### **Results and Discussion**

Seven international students participated in this 60-minute session. The participants included two male and five female international students aged between 21 and 26 ( $M = 23.5$ ,  $SD = 2.2$ ). They were from East Asia, and their level of Japanese language was advanced.

The average time of their stay in Japan was 3.0 years ( $SD = 2.0$ ). The largest number is students from China, the second is Korean, and the third is Taiwanese (JASSO, 2018). International students from East Asia account for over 50% of the total. In this study, we decided to investigate East Asian students because of the largest number in Japan. However, because indirect representation is difficult, not only for students from East Asia but also for students from other countries, we believe the results of this research could also be utilized with students from other regions.

Table 1 shows the interview questions and responses (Table 1). All participants reported that they had experienced indirect expressions in Japan. As typical examples of indirect expressions, they identified “next time” [indirect refusal with vague promising about the next time], “indirect refusal,” and “ambiguous message.” In the list of questionable expressions, the participants included examples of indirect refusal and cases of receiving an apology from someone who had apparently done no harm.

Another example in the same category is difficulty in the interpretation of “*kekko-desu*.” The participants often did not know how they should interpret and respond to such ambiguous expressions.

In the list of Japanese expressions that they wanted to learn more about, the participants included some examples of indirect expressions and some examples of expressions allowing multiple interpretations, such as “*sumimasen*” and “*kekko-desu*” mentioned in Item (3). These responses from the participants indicate the presence of problems that cannot be solved simply by learning the Japanese language. Underlying these problems was difficulty with “*sassuru*,”

the meaning from the situational context. For example, Participant B remarked, “It is not difficult to learn the language, but it is to learn indirect expressions.” Similarly, Participant E remarked, “*Iidesu*” is an ambiguous expression because it can be interpreted either as yes or no.” These are typical characteristics of communication in a high-context culture. It seems that international students in Japan experience difficulties in adapting to communication styles typical of a high-context culture characterized by the frequent use of indirect expressions. The results of this study were used to identify essential skills, and this information was used to inform the skills instruction presented in Experiment 2.

**Table 1**

*Answers Given in the Interview Survey*

|                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Q1<br>Did you experience the use of indirect expressions in Japan? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I experienced “indirect refusal.” (A) (D) (E) (F)</li> <li>• Japanese used “<i>Tatema</i>.” (B)</li> <li>• “<i>Kangaesasetekudasai</i>.” (C)</li> <li>• Nothing. (G)</li> </ul> |
| Q2<br>Are there any unique expressions in your country?            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Japanese language is not very difficult (D)</li> <li>• Studying indirect expressions is difficult. (E)</li> </ul>                                                               |
| Q3<br>Do you have questions about any Japanese expressions?        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “<i>Kekkoudesu</i>” ... is it “Yes” or “No”? (A)</li> <li>• “<i>Keigo</i>” (B)</li> <li>• “<i>Iidesu</i>” (E)</li> </ul>                                                        |
| Q4<br>Are there any Japanese expressions that you want to learn?   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I think “<i>Sumimasen</i>” is very useful. (B)</li> <li>• “<i>Gomennnasai</i>.” (C)</li> <li>• I want to use Japanese expressions properly. (F)</li> </ul>                      |

*Note:* A–G means participants

## Experiment 2 – Social Skills Instruction

### Purpose

In this study, based on the results of Experiment 1, social skills instruction aimed at international students was carried out, with a focus on indirect expressions, and the effectiveness of this instruction was investigated. The control group was not given social skills instruction. Pre- and post-intervention ratings were obtained to assess change in cultural adjustment.

### Methodology

#### *Participants and Study Period*

The control group was given questionnaires assessing changes in their cultural adjustment experiences. One month after the first session, they completed the questionnaire again. Experimental group data were collected from November 2012 through January 2013; control group data were collected from November through December 2012.

## ***Procedures***

Each participant completed a 60 min session. Before the session, we described cultural assimilation and indirect expressions issues to the participants, provided explanations, and conducted a skills-learning session focused on indirect expressions following Tanaka and Nakashima's method (2006). There were three topics of skills instruction: "indirect refusal (Session 1)," "interpretation of an ambiguous word (Session 2)," and "silence (Session 3)." The sessions consisted of the following eight parts: (1) explanation of topics, (2) interpretation, (3) checking answers, (4) explanation of Japanese behavior, (5) model play by native Japanese people, (6) role-play, (7) feedback, and (8) summary. We used video cameras to record and give feedback. In each session, participants evaluated their own use of indirect expressions. All participants took part in and completed all eight sessions. In addition, the control group did not participate in any language sessions.

The content of the sessions consisted of (1) cultural assimilation, (2) pre-session ratings (5-point scale from 1 = *disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), (3) skills training, and (4) post-session ratings (with the same 5-point scale). The data were collected after each session.

## ***Participant Characteristics***

We asked all the participants (in both groups) to provide information about their personal experiences. Specifically, they provided details about their age, home country, Japanese language level, years of stay in Japan, Japanese language use frequency, and interactions with Japanese people.

## ***Ratings of Learning in the Session***

After each skills-learning session, we asked participants to evaluate themselves on whether they could use the skills well in the session and to rate their awareness of indirect expressions, as well as other questions, using a 5-point scale (1 = *disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*), based on the methods of Shimoda and Tanaka (2007). The skills-learning questionnaire was conducted in Japanese.

## ***Ratings of Attitudes Toward Japanese Culture***

Before and after each session, we asked participants to evaluate themselves on their awareness of Japanese culture and interaction with Japanese people with the scale of Nakashima and Tanaka (2008). Nine evaluation items were answered using a 5-point scale (1 = *disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The questionnaire regarding attitudes toward Japanese culture was conducted in Japanese. Data were analyzed using *t*-tests.

## ***Results***

In the experimental group, 8 participants included one male and seven female international students aged between mid-20 and over 30 ( $M = 23.5$ ;  $SD = 2.2$ ) (see Table 2). In the control group, 8 international students participated in this survey, aged between their early 20s to 30 or older ( $M = 24.3$ ;  $SD = 2.0$ ; Table 3). No confounding factors could interfere with the study results, as all participants (from both groups) were enrolled in the same Japanese language class, and none were participating in any club or organized activity that included Japanese people.



**Table 2**  
*Characteristics of Experimental Group Participants*

|                                                  | <u>Groups A–D</u> |             |             |              |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
|                                                  | A                 | B           | C           | D            |
| Age                                              | Early 20s         | Early 20s   | Late 20s    | Over 30      |
| Home country                                     | China             | China       | Taiwan      | Taiwan       |
| Gender                                           | Male              | Female      | Female      | Female       |
| Japanese level                                   | Upper             | Upper       | Upper       | Upper        |
| Years of stay in Japan                           | 2 months          | 2 months    | 32 months   | 8 months     |
| Number of hours per day you converse in Japanese | 2 hr              | 3–4 hr      | 1 hr        | 4 hr         |
| Number of Japanese friends                       | 7 friends         | 6 friends   | 10 friends  | 10 friends   |
|                                                  | <u>Groups E–H</u> |             |             |              |
|                                                  | E                 | F           | G           | H            |
| Age                                              | Early 20s         | Early 20s   | Late 20s    | Mid 10s      |
| Home country                                     | Taiwan            | China       | China       | Korea        |
| Gender                                           | Female            | Female      | Female      | Female       |
| Japanese level                                   | Upper Level       | Upper Level | Upper Level | Upper Level  |
| Years of stay in Japan                           | 9 months          | 2 months    | 3 months    | 18 months    |
| Hours per day you converse in Japanese           | 1 hr              | 4 hr        | 3 hr        | All day      |
| Number of Japanese friends                       | 30 friends        | 2 friends   | 30 friends  | > 10 friends |

**Table 3**  
*Characteristics of Control Group Participants*

|                                            | <u>Groups A–D</u> |             |             |              |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
|                                            | A                 | B           | C           | D            |
| Age                                        | Late 20s          | Late 20s    | Over 30     | Late 20s     |
| Home country                               | Korea             | Taiwan      | China       | China        |
| Gender                                     | Male              | Female      | Female      | Female       |
| Japanese level                             | Beginner          | Beginner    | Beginner    | Beginner     |
| Stay length in Japan                       | 1 month           | 25 months   | 24 months   | 1 month      |
| Hours per day<br>conversing in<br>Japanese | 0 hr              | 0.5 hr      | ≤ 3 hr      | 4 hr         |
| Number of<br>Japanese friends              | 5 friends         | Many        | Few         | 5 friends    |
|                                            | <u>Groups E–H</u> |             |             |              |
|                                            | E                 | F           | G           | H            |
| Age                                        | Late 20s          | Early 20s   | Late 20s    | Mid-20s      |
| Home country                               | Taiwan            | China       | China       | Korea        |
| Gender                                     | Female            | Female      | Female      | Female       |
| Japanese level                             | Beginner          | Upper Level | Upper Level | Upper Level  |
| Stay length in Japan                       | 2 months          | 2 months    | 3 months    | 18 months    |
| Hours per day<br>conversing in<br>Japanese | 1 hr              | 4 hr        | 3 hr        | All day      |
| Number of<br>Japanese friends              | 5 friends         | 2 friends   | 30 friends  | > 10 friends |

### Participants' Ratings of Learning in the Sessions

After each skill-learning session, ratings were obtained on how well students thought they had mastered the skills covered in sessions 1 through 3 (“indirect refusal,” “interpretation of an ambiguous word,” and “silence”). We used ANOVA to test the ratings on skills-learning from Session 1 through Session 3 in the experimental group and examine the changes across the three sessions. However, no significant differences were found in any of the items;  $F(2, 21) = 3.47, p = .90$  ( $p > 0.05$ ).

### Attitudes Toward Japanese Culture

In the experimental group, before and after the sessions, I asked the participants to evaluate themselves on their awareness of Japanese culture and their interaction with Japanese people

(Table 4). The result of the *t*-test indicated significant increases in the following five question items (significance set at  $p < .05$ ).

Q7 “I have enough self-confidence to communicate with Japanese people”:  $t(14) = 2.36, p = 0.03$ .

Q10 “When I communicate with other people, I talk ambiguously”:  $t(14) = 3.30, p = 0.01$ .

Q16 “I can understand what other people want to say, even if they don’t give a clear answer to me”:  $t(14) = 2.15, p = 0.04$ .

Q18 “I understand why silence is used in conversations”:  $t(14) = 3.13, p = 0.01$ .

Q11 It was a reverse item, “When I communicate with other people, I don’t like the silence,” and was significantly decreased:  $t(14) = 2.25, p = 0.04$ .

Because the sample for the *t*-test was small, Table 5 summarizes how ratings increased, decreased, or did not change by group (experimental and control) and among individual participants. Table 5 represents the number of informants. Items Q2, Q7, Q10, Q11, Q16, and Q18 received increased ratings from at least four out of eight participants. These items are confidence in communicating with Japanese people and understanding ambiguity/silence in high-context cultures.

While there was no clear perception of improvement in the acquisition of the skills themselves, the results indicate an increase in confidence in communicating with the Japanese and understanding the use of ambiguity and silence in high-context cultures. Although three items (Q11, Q17, and Q19) were given higher ratings by four of the eight participants, no items were rated more highly by five or more participants. Moreover, the *t*-test results did not reveal statistically significant pre-post differences for any items.

We also used *t*-tests to examine differences between the experimental and control groups before and after the session. The results showed that the control group scored the following five items significantly higher than the experimental group in the pre-session evaluation (significance set at  $p < .05$ ).

Q7 “I have enough self-confidence to communicate with Japanese people”:  $t(14) = 2.36, p = 0.03$

Q10 “When I communicate with other people, I talk ambiguously”:  $t(14) = 3.30, p = 0.01$

Q11 “When I communicate with other people, I don’t like the silence”:  $t(14) = 2.25, p = 0.04$

Q16 “I can understand what other people want to say, even if they don’t give a clear answer to me”:  $t(14) = 2.15, p = 0.04$

Q18 “I understand why silence is used in conversations”:  $t(14) = 3.13, p = 0.01$ .

However, post-session evaluations showed no significant differences between the experimental and control groups. This result may be due to the experimental group’s increased understanding

and confidence in Japanese cultural communication. It also reflects the fact that the control group's evaluations did not change.

**Table 4**

*Results of Pre-Post Ratings of Attitude Toward Japanese Culture (Experimental Group)*

| Questions                                                                                  |      | Participants |     |     |     |     |     |     |     | M   | SD  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|--------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
|                                                                                            |      | A            | B   | C   | D   | E   | F   | G   | H   |     |     |
| (1) I understand realistic ways for one to cope with Japanese cultural features.           | pre  | 2            | 2   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 1.9 | 0.3 |
|                                                                                            | post | 2            | 3   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 4   | 2   | 2   | 2.8 | 0.8 |
| (2) I understand the ways of the Japanese culture and can apply parts of it properly.      | pre  | 3            | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 1.9 | 0.6 |
|                                                                                            | post | 2            | 3   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 2   | 2.6 | 0.7 |
| (3) I have mastered ways to cope with Japanese cultural features.                          | pre  | 2            | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2.0 | 0.0 |
|                                                                                            | post | 2            | 3   | 3   | 2   | 2   | 4   | 2   | 2   | 2.5 | 0.7 |
| (4) I understand the Japanese cultural way of proper thinking and cope without confusion.  | pre  | 2            | 2   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 3   | 2   | 2   | 2.5 | 0.5 |
|                                                                                            | post | 2            | 3   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 4   | 3   | 2   | 2.9 | 0.8 |
| (5) I would like to communicate with Japanese citizens on campus and locally.              | pre  | 1            | 2   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1.3 | 0.4 |
|                                                                                            | post | 1            | 4   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1.5 | 1.0 |
| (6) I have friends who can communicate using the Japanese language.                        | pre  | 2            | 3   | 2   | 4   | 1   | 3   | 3   | 1   | 2.4 | 1.0 |
|                                                                                            | post | 3            | 4   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 1   | 2.6 | 1.0 |
| (7) I have enough self-confidence to communicate with Japanese people.                     | pre  | 2            | 3   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 2.1 | 0.8 |
|                                                                                            | post | 3            | 3   | 3   | 3   | 1   | 3   | 3   | 2   | 2.6 | 0.7 |
| (8) Communication with Japanese people is difficult for me*.                               | pre  | 3            | 4   | 3   | 2   | 2   | 4   | 3   | 3   | 3.0 | 0.7 |
|                                                                                            | post | 2            | 2   | 3   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 2   | 2.4 | 0.5 |
| (9) I would like to share a close relationship with Japanese persons.                      | pre  | 1            | 1   | 1   | 3   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1.4 | 0.7 |
|                                                                                            | post | 1            | 2   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1.5 | 0.5 |
| (10) When I communicate with other people, I talk ambiguously.                             | pre  | 2            | 2   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 1   | 2.6 | 1.0 |
|                                                                                            | post | 4            | 3   | 4   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 4   | 3.9 | 0.6 |
| (11) When I communicate with other people, I don't like silence*.                          | pre  | 2            | 5   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 2.5 | 1.1 |
|                                                                                            | post | 1            | 2   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 1.6 | 0.5 |
| (12) When I communicate with other people, I am modest.                                    | pre  | 3            | 4   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 2.8 | 0.7 |
|                                                                                            | post | 3            | 3   | 2   | 5   | 2   | 4   | 1   | 3   | 2.9 | 1.2 |
| (13) I'm good at expressing my thoughts using non-verbal expressions.                      | pre  | 1            | 2   | 4   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1.8 | 1.0 |
|                                                                                            | post | 1            | 2   | 3   | 4   | 1   | 5   | 2   | 2   | 2.9 | 1.4 |
| (14) I say directly "I can't agree with you" if I cannot agree*.                           | pre  | 4            | 4   | 2   | 4   | 2   | 5   | 2   | 4   | 3.4 | 1.1 |
|                                                                                            | post | 4            | 4   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 3.3 | 0.9 |
| (15) I can understand what other people want to say even if they use indirect expression.  | pre  | 2            | 2   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2.0 | 0.5 |
|                                                                                            | post | 2            | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 2.1 | 0.3 |
| (16) I can understand what other people want to say, even if they don't say it clearly.    | pre  | 1            | 2   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1.8 | 0.7 |
|                                                                                            | post | 1            | 2   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2.6 | 0.7 |
| (17) I can understand ambiguous or indirect expressions.                                   | pre  | 2            | 2   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 2.0 | 0.5 |
|                                                                                            | post | 2            | 3   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2.4 | 0.5 |
| (18) I understand why silence is used in conversations.                                    | pre  | 1            | 2   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1.5 | 0.5 |
|                                                                                            | post | 1            | 2   | 4   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 3   | 3   | 2.7 | 0.7 |
| (19) I know that there are many means of expression around the world.                      | pre  | 1            | 3   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 2   | 2   | 1.6 | 0.7 |
|                                                                                            | post | 1            | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 1.3 | 0.5 |
| (20) I change how I express things based on the culture to which the other person belongs. | pre  | 1            | 2   | 2   | 4   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 2   | 2.3 | 0.8 |
|                                                                                            | post | 1            | 2   | 2   | 2   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 2   | 2.4 | 0.7 |
|                                                                                            |      | A            | B   | C   | D   | E   | F   | G   | H   |     |     |
| M                                                                                          | pre  | 1.9          | 2.5 | 2.2 | 2.3 | 1.9 | 2.1 | 2.2 | 2.0 |     |     |
|                                                                                            | post | 2.2          | 2.9 | 2.5 | 2.8 | 2.0 | 3.0 | 2.5 | 2.0 |     |     |
| SD                                                                                         | pre  | 0.8          | 1.0 | 0.7 | 1.1 | 0.6 | 1.1 | 0.7 | 0.8 |     |     |
|                                                                                            | post | 0.9          | 0.6 | 0.9 | 1.2 | 0.6 | 1.2 | 1.0 | 0.8 |     |     |

\*Reverse items

**Table 5**  
*Increased, Decreased, and Unchanged Ratings*

| Questionnaire items | Experimental group<br>(n = 8) |   |   | Control group<br>(n = 8) |   |   |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|---|---|--------------------------|---|---|
|                     | ↑                             | → | ↓ | ↑                        | → | ↓ |
| (1)                 | 3                             | 5 | 0 | 0                        | 5 | 3 |
| (2)                 | 5                             | 2 | 1 | 1                        | 3 | 4 |
| (3)                 | 3                             | 5 | 0 | 2                        | 3 | 3 |
| (4)                 | 4                             | 3 | 1 | 2                        | 2 | 4 |
| (5)                 | 1                             | 7 | 0 | 2                        | 3 | 3 |
| (6)                 | 4                             | 3 | 1 | 2                        | 5 | 1 |
| (7)                 | 4                             | 4 | 0 | 3                        | 1 | 4 |
| (8)                 | 1                             | 2 | 5 | 1                        | 6 | 1 |
| (9)                 | 2                             | 4 | 1 | 2                        | 4 | 2 |
| (10)                | 7                             | 1 | 0 | 3                        | 4 | 1 |
| (11)*               | 0                             | 3 | 5 | 4                        | 2 | 2 |
| (12)                | 3                             | 3 | 2 | 2                        | 4 | 2 |
| (13)                | 3                             | 4 | 0 | 2                        | 3 | 3 |
| (14)                | 1                             | 5 | 2 | 1                        | 4 | 3 |
| (15)                | 2                             | 5 | 1 | 1                        | 5 | 2 |
| (16)                | 4                             | 4 | 0 | 3                        | 4 | 3 |
| (17)                | 3                             | 5 | 0 | 4                        | 0 | 3 |
| (18)                | 6                             | 2 | 0 | 0                        | 1 | 6 |
| (19)                | 0                             | 6 | 2 | 4                        | 3 | 1 |
| (20)                | 2                             | 5 | 1 | 2                        | 5 | 1 |

*Note:* Questionnaire items are identical to those in Table 4.

↑: increased; →: unchanged; ↓: decreased;

\*reversed items

## Discussion

The results show that those who participated in the social skills instruction developed more interest in Japanese culture, and their confidence in interpreting ambiguous words or silence increased. As a result, they displayed a positive attitude toward ambiguous expressions, which may reflect an increase in their awareness of the cultural differences resulting from participating in the session. They were able to address their questions about indirect expressions, which led to higher confidence in communication in a high-context culture. Through cognitive instruction, they were able to identify what they did not understand, and with behavioral instruction, they could then apply that learning. Thus, they developed greater understanding of, and satisfaction with, high-context expressions. Charles (2006) explained that there are five meanings of silence: (a) truthfulness, (b) social discretion, (c) embarrassment, (d) defiance, and (e) anger, and these include (a) positive and (b) negative

meanings. However, there are various meanings at the communication level (this research focused on “adjustment”), as Bruneau (1973) pointed out. Cross-cultural research must not only recognize silence but also investigate how to interpret silence in the context of communication.

As for the control group, those who did not participate in the social skills instruction did not develop a greater interest in Japanese culture, and their understanding of ambiguous expressions did not deepen. They tended to use some skills without showing a clear understanding. These results could be because they had not had the same opportunity to notice the differences in culture. Furnham et al., 1986 suggested that it is difficult to solve problems in communication without an opportunity to experience behavioral instruction, which suggests that opportunities that help learners notice cultural differences relate to cross-cultural adaptation. Tanaka (2012) pointed out that cultural instruction at the behavioral level, which supports smooth relationships with people in the host country, is useful for solving problems. Several cross-cultural psychology studies have pointed out differences between cultures (e.g., Matsumoto & Juang, 2004). However, regarding cross-cultural adaptation, given the necessity of examining behavior with an eye toward coping, one can argue that it is important to provide cross-cultural education that includes cultural instruction.

### **General Discussion**

This study involved the implementation of an instructional program aimed at teaching social skills in a high-context culture characterized by the frequent use of indirect expressions. These characteristics were investigated from the viewpoint of cross-cultural adaptation.

The interviews performed in Experiment 1 showed that international students in Japan experience the need to use indirect expressions as well as situations where Japanese people use indirect expressions. The students indicated that they experience difficulties with “*sassuru*”—the meaning of an expression that allows multiple interpretations—or with understanding the true intent of the speaker. The interviews suggested the presence of problems that cannot be solved simply by learning the Japanese language and revealed the difficulty of adapting to communication styles typical of a high-context culture characterized by the frequent use of indirect expressions.

Experiment 2 verified that the participants had developed more awareness of, and interest in, the Japanese culture, had become more confident in the interpretation of expressions with multiple meanings and of silence and had become readier to accept ambiguous expressions because of having developed understanding. However, the members of the control group showed little change in their awareness of and interest in the Japanese culture, and they demonstrated hardly any deepening of understanding of ambiguous expressions. Even though they also used certain social skills, they often did so without a clear understanding of the threads.

Amir (1969), Kleinborg and Hull (1979), and Selltz and Cook (1962) pointed out the effectiveness of having many social interactions in the host country or contact with the host language. Learning the language alone cannot prepare one for smooth communications based on a real understanding of the culture and the history behind various behaviors. Cross-cultural adaptation requires a specific understanding of the host culture (Searle & Ward, 1990). Thus, a two-step cultural instruction program that incorporates elements of psychoeducation and arouses more interest, such as by addressing specific cases and demonstrating practical

solutions in the process of behavioral instruction, may contribute effectively to resolving this problem.

### **Limitations and Implications for Further Research**

The current research addressed issues that were unresolved in earlier research: the assessment of others of the effectiveness of the skills instructions and a comparison with a control group to provide greater objectivity. Nevertheless, future research with larger participant samples is needed to validate our results. Additionally, in a larger study, participants can be further divided into groups according to their level of fluency in Japanese to allow for comparisons of the program's effectiveness between groups. Research including more scenarios and discussing them from the viewpoint of cultural distance would also be valuable. The inclusion of sessions conducted with international students before they arrive in Japan would also benefit further investigations of the effectiveness and implications of the instructional program. Finally, a limitation of this study may have been that number of friends per participant might influence their skills-learning and attitude toward Japanese culture. For example, participant F, who had only two Japanese friends, reported having a lower level of motivation for learning to use social skills (e.g., "my interest in indirect expressions increased" and "I want to know other expressions peculiar to Japan") than participants E and G, whom each had more than 30 Japanese friends (Table 6).

Although participants who have more friends may be more highly motivated to use the skills they have learned, we were unable to verify a correlation between the number of friends and the differences in scores in this study. Further research is needed to investigate that relationship in detail.

### **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank the international students in Japan for their invaluable contributions to these insightful interviews.

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