

Communication

Working With Japanese: 'Taihen Desu Ne'

By YUMIKO WATANABE

Take One: Gloria, a brash American businesswoman, talks a mile a minute to Tommy, her taciturn Japanese colleague, asking him to translate an English document into Japanese for her. Tommy, sitting beside her, does not appear to react to Gloria's speedy and slangy English. Not unexpectedly, Tommy misunderstands her instructions, and an hour later, Gloria sighs hopelessly after receiving another English version — and not the Japanese version she wanted — of the document from Tommy.

After watching the above videotaped scene, a group of foreign corporate employees working in the Japanese branch offices of big multi-national companies such as IBM and Kodak, discuss why the American woman failed to get her message across to her Japanese colleague and what she could have done to avoid the misunderstanding.

This was a scene from the "Working With Japanese" seminar, an intensive two-day intercultural communications course sponsored by Fuji Xerox Co., Ltd. The growing number of foreign companies doing business with Japan or opening branch offices here in recent years has resulted in an increasing demand for such seminars.

Seven enthusiastic foreign businesspeople, comprised of four Americans and three Europeans working closely with Japanese on a daily basis, attended the seminar recently in Tokyo. Their goal: to learn how to avoid potentially costly misunderstandings like that shown in the video, which stem from unfamiliarity with another culture.

Discussion

During the discussion they discovered that Japanese people take it for granted that it is mainly the speaker's responsibility to make himself or herself understood, whereas in the West the onus would be more on the listener to comprehend what the speaker is saying. Thus Gloria wrongly assumed that Tommy would interrupt her if he was not following what she was saying, and kept talking without giving time for Tommy to interact.

She should have also paid more attention to Tommy's non-verbal forms of communication, such as facial expressions, and so realized that he didn't understand what she wanted him to do. To more effectively communicate with the Japanese, she should have avoided using slang and business jargon, too.

After more discussion, the foreign businesspeople in Japan were shown the video "Take Two," the revised and improved version of the same conversation between Gloria and Tommy.

This was the fifth of the "Working With Japanese"

seminars, the first of which took place in December 1984. Forty businesspeople, mostly executives and managers, from North America, Europe and Asia, have taken part in the seminars, and they've all given high marks to the program, says Kenichi Takemura of the Education Business Division of Fuji Xerox.

Bicultural

At the ¥120,000-a-person course, a pair of bilingual and "bicultural" instructors, one American and one Japanese, from the Intercultural Relations Institute, of Redwood, Calif., emphasized how important it is to be able to understand other cultures, instead of judging others' behaviors from one's own values. "If you're bilingual but not bicultural, you aren't very successful," American instructor Doug Lipp told his students. Lipp partly bases his teaching approach on his experiences in working in the personnel section of a U.S.-Japan joint venture for several years in Japan.

The seminar included a brief summary of Japanese history; emphasis in the Japanese culture on form and ritual (how something is done); as opposed to content (what is done); an explanation of differences between Japanese and Western styles of communication; and a comparison between Japanese and Western styles of decision-making, leadership, motivating, conflict resolving, and negotiating in the business world.

Those taking part were encouraged to find answers to questions commonly asked by foreigners doing business in Japan, such as "Why can't they get down to business?" and "Why does it take so long to work things out?"

At the same time, foreign businessmen and businesswomen learned how important it is when doing business in this society of *amae* (dependency) to: make *doryoku* (efforts) no matter what the result will be; acknowledge the Japanese people's *honne* (real feelings) and *tatemae* (official stance); demonstrate your *kikkubari* (delivery of sensitivity beyond what is obvious) to show that you care; and get involved in *nemawashi* (informal, advance negotiations) when a general consensus is reached before *hon-kaigi* (main meeting).

Practice Session

Between lectures those attending the seminar were given a chance to put theory into practice. Each person conducted a role-play simulation with a Japanese instructor in front of a video camera. Then the instructors and the class went over the "performance," which is aimed at developing skills, and comments were made.

There was also emphasis on practical skills such as how to exchange *meishi* (business cards), a ritual essential in meeting people on business in this country. The businesspeople

also practiced some "lubricant" expressions in Japanese, like "*taihen desu ne*" (How awful; I feel sorry.) and "*ganbatte kudasai*" (Keep up the good work!), which are useful in building relationships with Japanese.

During the 15-hour course, the seminar often turned into a form of group therapy, in which the corporate workers from overseas exchanged observations on their personal problems and frustrations in dealing with Japanese. Most of them had arrived in Japan within the past year, and are exposed to the workplace where the majority are Japanese. Because of their limited Japanese language ability, they speak English with their co-workers all the time. The looked to the instructors for advice on how to behave at work.

When the course is finished, a *gaijin* businessperson is expected to go back to the office with newly-acquired knowledge of Japanese business styles and communication skills, and so be able to work more efficiently with Japanese colleagues.

The response of the participants to the program was positive for the most part.

"I learned a lot from this

seminar," says Ernst Notz, general manager of Winterthur Swiss Insurance Company, which started business in Japan last year. "At the office I am the only *gaijin*, and I have to manage all the Japanese staff. I have confronted a lot of problems. I found that when you learn about the difference between each other's cultural backgrounds and get used to each other, it's easier to solve problems," he said.

"I will try not to speak fast, will be more patient in trying to get things done in Japan and will not evaluate the behavior of Japanese according to my cultural values," said another participant of the seminar, Esperanza Matiz, originally from Colombia, who has been working for the Bank of America here for the past year. She said her boss had suggested that she attend this program.

Japanese Way

Fuji Xerox launched the program to let foreign people know more about Japan, says Takemura. "There are countless numbers of books on Western culture sold at bookstores in Japan. For years, Japanese businesspeople have earnestly been studying Western ways of thinking and business styles.

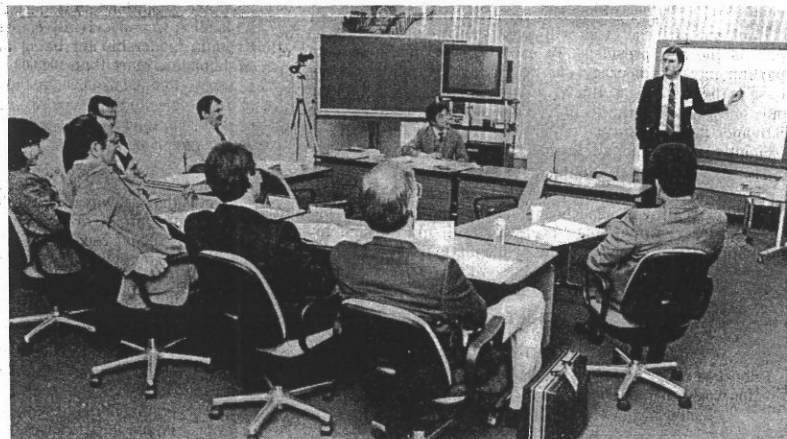
We wanted foreigners to learn the Japanese way, too," he said.

Some Japanese may still find it hard to accept that foreign businesspeople are taking the trouble to learn Japanese customs rather than relying on their Japanese counterparts to adopt Western attitudes. However, now that Japan has achieved a leading position in the world of business and technology, this is becoming more of a reality.

Says one of the graduates of the recent seminar, Birger Dyrberg, of ASEA Industry and Electronics, who lives in Sweden and visits Japan four or five times a year: "In the business world, customers are always right. We learned this especially from our own experience of trying to sell our goods to Japanese firms like Hitachi and Mitsubishi. At first we tried to sell our products just as we made them. And it didn't work.

"Then we made modifications to our products according to our customers' needs, and only then were we successful. Likewise, I think when doing business in Japan, we should learn and follow Japanese business style."

The next "Working With Japanese" seminar is scheduled to take place in April, with the maximum number of attendees set at 10, according to Fuji Xerox.



A small group of foreign businesspeople enthusiastically study intercultural communication at the "Working With Japanese" seminar in Tokyo Feb. 25. They are hoping to learn to work more effectively with their Japanese colleagues.

1,315 Young Tourists Visit Japan Under 'Working Holiday' Arrangement

A total of 1,315 young tourists from Australia and New Zealand have visited Japan between 1981 and 1985 under the "working holiday" program and most of them teach English to earn money while in Japan, according to a Justice Ministry survey released Feb. 16.

Those having working holiday visas can stay in Japan for six months, compared with three months for other tourists, and they are renewable up to 12 months.

The survey found 766 out of the total 1,291 Australians and 24 New Zealanders had their tourist visas renewed in the five-year period.

Of these, 708 found temporary jobs in Japan with 574 of them teaching English, according to the survey.

It said 22 others got secretarial jobs, 21 worked as translators or proofreaders and 18 were employed by restaurants and other eating establishments.

They worked 18 hours weekly on the average for an average monthly salary of ¥170,000.

Fourteen of the 708 tourists made more than ¥300,000 a month, according to the survey.

It found hourly English teaching wages ranged from ¥1,000 to ¥10,000.

Places of their employment concentrated in the Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya regions, according to the survey.

Japan started the working holiday program with Australia in 1980 and with New Zealand in 1985 for people aged between 18 and 25 to give them opportunities of cultural exchanges at the grass-roots level.

The survey showed the 1,315 tourists were almost equally divided between men and women.

In the same five-year period, about 6,000 Japanese youths visited Australia and New Zealand, Justice Ministry officials said.