

Japanese Communication —

Undeveloped Verbal Skills

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1. Introduction

In the United States of America, Democratic Presidential contenders, including Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton debated who should be their party's presidential candidate for more than a year. The American people judged these debates to help determine who should get their vote. This illustrates that speech communication is a primary means for determining the direction and future of the American state and is one of the means for the attainment of "truth."

Japanese people, on the other hand, are unskillful at and place little emphasis on persuasive speech communication. This is because they live in a "high context society" (Hall, 1976) and are expected to perform "sasshi," or indirect communication from mind to mind, and tend to avoid proper argument. They avert explicit and precise speech communication, emphasizing and developing harmony and empathy. This is exacerbated by the present education system that does not seem to work properly to foster students' language skills. Since argumentative speech is still considered an adverse element even among Japanese politicians and leaders, many Japanese are devoid of verbally active problem-solving skills.

However, in this highly advanced information society and, in what has become a turbulent era, Japan might be in danger of being left behind provided that it remains armed with inadequate communication skills, unable to compete with their Western counterparts. The author believes Japan should immediately improve the country's collective communicative abilities in order to better confront the many looming challenges it faces.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to illustrate the communicative incompetence prevailing in Japanese society, particularly in the political world, to explain its root causes, and to discuss the problems involved in the educational world. The author further hopes that this paper will provide insight into this classic yet unresolved issue and provide possible solutions for it so that Japan will be able to cast off its communicative incompetence.

2. Communication Incompetence in the Japanese Political World

In all countries of the world, politicians should be able to address the public policy concerns of their constituents with persuasive speech. However, eloquent politicians rarely show up in Japan. Instead, Japanese politicians are, if anything, prone to political gaffes, expecting a largely uncritical public to offer no criticism to them and to understand their “true” meanings despite their lack of verbal skills.

2.1. Eclipsing Reliance on Politicians’ Words

The year 2007 alone was marked by many Japanese political and diplomatic blunders that later caused serious problems. For instance, former Agricultural Minister Toshikatsu Matsuoka explained a 29 million yen (nearly US\$240,000) utility bill for his parliamentary office, a place where rent, electricity and water are free of charge, with the following incomprehensible gibberish, “We’ve installed, ‘nantoka’ [Whatchamacallit], rejuvenated water in our plumbing” (Sekiguchi, 2007).

In another instance, former Defense Minister, Fumio Kyuma, upset many people when he remarked that the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki “could not be helped” (*The Japan Times* 3 Jul. 2007). Earlier, former Health and Welfare Minister, Hakuo Yanagisawa enraged women throughout the country when he asserted, “The number of women aged between 15 and 50 is fixed. Because the number of child-bearing machines and equipment is fixed, all we can ask for is for them to do their best per head” (*The Japan Times* 6 Feb. 2007). They were joined later by Taro Aso, who was once seen as a candidate to replace former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, angered the public by saying “even Alzheimer patients could tell the difference between Japanese rice prices on the domestic and Chinese markets” (*The Japan Times* 1 Aug. 2007).

In the sphere of nonverbal communication, former Agriculture Minister Tokuhiko Akagi invited an unintended imbroglio and jolted the feelings of the public and fellow politicians by appearing at a press conference with large bandages plastered over his face. “Akagi’s puzzling appearance and subsequent refusal to explain his state, did little to improve his standing, although he eventually admitted he had suffered from a follicle-related rash” (*The Asahi Shimbun* 18 Jul. 2007).

While political gaffes are not peculiar to Japan, Japanese politicians rarely provide acceptable excuses and appear poor at backing off, correcting and apologizing for them. The Japanese public has resigned itself to this state of affairs and rarely expects accountability for political mismanagement.

2.2. Procrastinating Processing Capabilities

Japan has never undergone any drastic reform without the advent of great turbulence, such as war, natural catastrophe or revolution. Sakaiya (2002) points out that “Japan cannot work on full-fledged socioeconomic reforms without such external pressures as exerted by the defeat in the Second World War and the coming of the Black Ships.” (Black Ships are a reference to the forced opening of Japan at the end of the Edo period by Admiral Matthew Calbraith Perry’s fleet of American ships.)

Faced with such dilemmas as the North Korean abduction issue, pension problems, the financial collapse of national and local governments, the international condemnation of its whaling and fishery industry, the use of military power under Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, and many other imminent problems, Japanese politicians merely procrastinate. When they do take action, their efforts and explanations are often incomprehensible to most of the Japanese people.

“Japanese politicians do not have a tradition of drawing widespread public support to create new programs. They begin with ‘nemawashi’ or consensus-building, and then submit a policy after preparing for bills that have less resistance, usually for those with vested interests” (Suzuki, 2006: 55). It is already past time, then, that Japan should confront these more difficult yet unavoidable tasks.

Without the ability to provide a clear explanation in plain Japanese, it is doubtful that politicians will be able to coax the people into understanding, supporting and/or opposing specific policies. Language, therefore, should become a more powerful tool in order to communicate with the public.

3. Japanese Communication—Root Problems

Speech plays a less significant role in Japan than in other countries. “Unlike most other nations, Japan is a highly homogeneous society, where nonverbal forms of communication can be easily developed and conveniently used in various situations” (Honna, 1992: 226). The Japanese people live in what is categorized as a high context culture. In low-context communication, the listener knows very little and must be told practically everything. In high-context communication, however, the listener relies upon similar experiences and expectations, from which inferences are drawn. The Japanese people take it for granted that they share much in common (language, diet, clothing, religions, etc.) and feel there is no need to speak logically, explicitly and precisely. In this sense, feelings of harmony and homogeneity outplay transmissions of messages.

The Japanese people also have to deal with the concept of “kotodama,” or the belief derived from animism that words have “souls” and the power to affect reality. This

belief often regulates how Japanese communicate with each other and is one of the factors that prevent open verbal communication in Japanese society.

3.1. Spellbinding Kotodama—Restricting Adverse Predictions

In every language, there seem to be certain “unmentionables”—words of such strong affective connotations that they cannot be used in polite discourse. As an example, in American English, people ask where the restroom is, although they have no intention of resting. “Powder room” is another euphemism for the same facility known as a “toilet,” which itself was a euphemism in an earlier time. “Polite ladies and gentlemen of the Nineteenth Century would not bring themselves to say “breast,” “leg,” or “thigh”—not even when referring to chicken—so the terms “white meat” and “dark meat” were substituted (Hayakawa, 1990: 46). Any society, reflecting its own cultures, politics, etc., has its own reasons for restricting certain vocabulary and producing “taboo” words.

From time immemorial, “Japanese people have believed in kotodama, which literally refers to the spiritual power of words to affect reality” (Toyoda, 1989). Therefore, there are certain words that should not be carelessly uttered. One of the earliest descriptions of kotodama can be found in the *Manyōshū*, the earliest extant collection of Japanese poetry written in the 7th and 8th Centuries. Japan is called “*kotodama no sakiwau kuni*,” a land blessed with kotodama.

3.2. Taboo Words—Restricting Unlucky Vocabularies

“Kotoage” is the aspect of kotodama that allows words to manifest and cause consequences. A person applying the rules of kotoage, therefore, would not tell someone to avoid accidents for fear of causing one. He or she would also refrain from saying, “Do not get involved in a car accident.” The speaker would simply say, “Drive safely.”

Also, “taboo” words affect family communication in daily life. To help them avoid failure during times preceding educational tests and entrance exams, students, their family members, friends and teachers avoid using sentences with words such as “drop” or “slip” whenever possible, as these words could be associated with Japanese expressions for failure. This occurs even outside the context of school or test taking. For instance, even if the roads were full of ice and slippery, one would simply tell an examinee to be careful without further elaboration.

Kotodama can even affect reporting by the country’s media. For instance, when Japan participates in world sporting events, the media often refrains from giving accurate assessments of its national teams and athletes. Under the “rules” of kotoage, if

a reporter were to mention unfavorable odds for Japanese athletes, the reporter could be blamed for any poor results.

In the run up to the 2006 Turin Winter Olympics, Japan's mass media made only the rosiest of predictions, claiming, on average, that Japanese athletes would win 17 medals during the games. This far outstripped the predictions of overseas' mass media. According to the news release (*the Kyodo News Service* 2 Feb. 2006), for instance, "Sports Illustrated predicted that Japan would get two bronze medals while the American Press Association predicted Japan would win only one. In reality, women's figure skater, Shizuka Arakawa, won the gold medal in her sport and it was the only medal by a Japanese athlete. The American media's predictions, therefore, were far more accurate than their Japanese counterparts.

Though most predictions made by the Japanese media, even their far more conservative guesses, were wildly inaccurate, they were understandable if one applies the Japanese principles of "kotodama." If the Japanese media had spoken the facts about Japanese athletic prowess, the belief in kotodama dictates that the words themselves could have magically caused Japanese athletes to fail. The fact that these same "magic words" did not create better results for the winter athletes of Japan was of little consequence afterward.

Similarly, but far more consequential, during the Second World War, no media, military personnel nor citizen could make public remarks that Japan would lose to America and its allied forces. Instead, the Japanese news media "blurred the lines between wishes and facts" to create the illusion that Japan was winning (Izawa, 2004:100). Thus, kotodama, then as now, impeded the standards of accurate journalism.

More recently in 2007, a small controversy occurred when some Cabinet members continued their personal conversations even after then-Prime Minister Abe Shinzo entered the Cabinet room. The General Manager of the Liberal Democratic Party at that time, Hidenao Nakagawa, said "verbally" that the Cabinet members should be more respectful of the Prime Minister. Toranosuke Katayama, a former secretary general of the upper house, cut off debate by saying that the Cabinet should reach an understanding through "heart-to-heart communication," and not "practice kotoage" (*TV Asahi, Hodo Station* 20 Feb. 2007, translated by the author of this paper). In other words, he insisted that an understanding should be reached without discussion.

This is a significant example of a politician's preference for nonverbal communication, even in the face of a political problem. Because of this tendency, Japanese politicians often avoid expressing negative or unfavorable opinions. However, Japanese politicians, unable to speak freely, also find it difficult to address or make

progress on issues important to the public.

3.3. Lucky and Unlucky Word Sounds — Controlling Actions

Behavioral patterns can be controlled by cultures, religions, superstitions or individual belief. It should be noted that in Japan, what some people do, eat, bring and wear are controlled by words associated with ominous or lucky meanings. Many people throughout the world, including those in English speaking countries, use the concept of lucky and unlucky numbers, which many people use to influence their actions. Japanese also choose numbers whose sounds, when pronounced, have a great association with other words.

The unlucky numbers 4 and 9, for instance, are pronounced “shi” and “ku” in Japanese and are homonyms for words meaning “death” and “suffering.” Therefore, words containing these sounds are avoided on certain occasions, such as the day of a wedding or upon visiting a friend or family member at a hospital. According to the *Dictionary of Shinto*, for example, one should never bring the flower, cyclamen, to a patient since its first syllable in Japanese is “shi” and the next is “ku”, and would augur ill omens for recovery (Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics, 2007: 384).

A Japanese New Year’s meal, however, contains sacred, lucky foods based on their arbitrary relationships with sounds similar to those of happiness, longevity and good health. Likewise, since sea bream (“tai” in Japanese) rhymes with the word “medetai” (auspicious), it is regarded as a good luck fish in Japan and is often served on special occasions such as weddings.

While these older examples could simply be dismissed as ancient superstitions still practiced out of a sense of Japanese tradition, the power of kotodama continues to influence actions even today. Recently, KitKat, a chocolate snack merchandized by NESTLE Company, and Lotte’s Xylitol Chewing Gum have become popular with young people. They choose these products, in part, based on their perceived “word power.” When they participate in sporting events, for instance, they often eat KitKat because its brand name sounds similar to a Japanese phrase meaning “to surely win.” (Older people might prefer “katsudon” or pork cutlet in a bowl for the same reason.) Also, when students take an entrance examination, many chew Xylitol as that product sounds like the Japanese phrase meaning “to surely pass.”

3.4. Sasshi Communication—Restricting Direct Verbal Communication

Japan grew from an agrarian society to a modernized industrial nation; however, the underlying notion of group orientation still lives on. Japanese people, when it comes to

speaking directly to interlocutors, are cautious not to make them feel uncomfortable. Japanese rarely offer strong opinions to people involved, preferring to remain ambiguous and using non-verbal strategies called “*sasshi*,” in Japanese.

When the author took Japanese homestay students to visit American families, he encountered situations where his students became flustered by situations of miscommunication with their American hosts. As they would at home, the students tried to determine the opinions and volitions of the Americans based on *sasshi*, and therefore, did not express themselves explicitly. The Americans, however, expected the students to voice clear-cut intentions.

When asked by a host mother about dinner, a student remarked, “Anything will be fine.” Afterward, he felt that his host felt disheartened with this limited answer. His answer in Japan would indicate that he hoped that the host would practice appropriate hospitality, perhaps expecting everyday fare. By Japanese standards, what he said was most humble and modest and was used in hopes of maintaining a preferable relationship with the host. In other words, he did not want to be perceived as being pushy or as a heavy burden to the host. On the other hand, the host needed to keep asking questions in hopes of clarifying what might actually please her guest.

The Japanese way of communication puts a heavy responsibility on the listener’s ability to guess or read the atmosphere of a situation, whilst the American way relies on the speaker’s explicit verbal explanation for clarification. “Japanese outgoing communication is diffident communication, while incoming communication is *sasshi* communication” (Ishii, 1987). This unique Japanese form of communication, therefore, faces difficulties in many international settings.

3.5. Harmony—Restricting Individual Self-Assertion

“*Tsurezuregusa*” or *Essays in Idleness*, is a collection of Japanese essays written by the monk, Yoshida Kenko, sometime between 1330 and 1332, in which he said that even a person well versed in matters should shut his mouth and never talk until asked. This way of thinking still penetrates today’s Japanese mind.

In present-day Japan, a popular Japanese buzzword is “K.Y.” which stands for “*kuki yomenai*.” It is used to refer to a person who is incapable of “reading the atmosphere” and who fails to agree with or abide by a group decision. It also further illustrates that Japanese people prefer to seek harmony rather than debate.

Instead of clarifying differences among group members, the emphasis on harmony has instilled in Japanese a willingness to flow with the tide. Once a group delineates orientation, every member tries to keep up with the others to establish a homogenized

model. Hence, “eloquence is viewed as indiscreet talkativeness and regarded as a sign of immodesty. Further, self-assertion or self-revelation is frowned on as immodest and insensitive. It was still believed that mutual human understanding and the communication of ideas are harmoniously achieved precisely because of the existence of conventions based on traditional—and to that extent conservative—esthetic sense” (Yasuda, 1992:45).

3.6. Japanese Language Structure—Restricting Smooth Discussion

Characteristics of the Japanese language include special rules for the use of personal pronouns (‘I,’ ‘you,’ ‘he’ etc.), the use of honorifics and separate expressions for men and women. When you think and speak in Japanese, rather than in a Western language, you always bear in mind how to employ those characteristics appropriately (Kaganoi, 2006).

Unlike most western languages, Japanese has an extensive grammatical system to express politeness and formality. Most relationships are not equal in Japanese society. The differences in social position are determined by a variety of factors including job, age, experience, or even psychological state (e.g., a person asking a favor tends to do so politely).

Depending on the level of relationships with interlocutors, speakers have to keep the use of personal pronouns under careful control. The person in lower standing is expected to use a polite form of speech, whereas one of higher standing might use a more neutral form.

Therefore, based on these relationships and on the settings where communication takes place, Japanese ways of thinking and addressing others vary. Hence, even skilled Japanese speakers find it difficult to express their opinions in public.

4. Communication Education—Long-Lingering Challenges

A principal contributor to the Meiji Restoration, Fukuzawa Yukichi, was influential in establishing a new order in politics, societal norms and the education system. He was a strong advocate of speech training and believed the “new” Japan could function properly only if people expressed their opinions orally on matters of state (Klof and Ishii, 1995: 7). Fukuzawa proposed these changes more than a century ago; however, his lofty ambitions have not been met.

4.1. National Language Education — Little Emphasis on Verbal Communication

The country’s social demands are reflected in “The Course of Study.” It is the most

important document produced by the Ministry of Education, the sole authority that establishes national standards of school curricula. Therefore, “the Ministry of Education revises The Course of Study almost every ten years in order to prevent it from becoming outdated” (Wada, 1994: 8).

As far back as 1989, the ministry’s high school standards highlighted the need to develop communication abilities. As of 2008, the latest revisions reinforce the same idea. Wada said that “the fundamental principle is to produce students capable of coping with rapid changes leading Japan toward the development of a more international society. In order to produce students equipped with such abilities, greater emphasis must be placed on the development of communicative competence and the cultivation of international perspectives” (1994: 9).

High school teachers of Japanese are obligated to teach dialogue, group discussion and debate under the official guidelines. However, many teachers choose not to follow them. Only a small percentage of teachers introduce communication exercises in homeroom activities or integrated study periods.

Inoue (2007), a professor emeritus of Japanese language education, pointed out the delay in innovative changes to Japanese language education and called for the promotion of changes in the consciousness of teachers of Japanese. Despite rapidly changing times, international circumstances and even school textbooks, he says teachers seem to resist these changes. Even if textbooks place greater emphasis upon teaching communication skills, he adds, these textbooks are useless if the teachers are unwilling to focus on them.

4.2. School education — Restricting Active Participation

Class sizes in Japan are generally large, oral expression is rare and few teachers are familiar with speech training methods. Mimori (2002: 26) states that Japanese language teaching places greater emphasis on the memorization of “kanji” (Chinese characters) and reading skills. Her analysis of teachers concludes that their skills come up short when teaching speech, writing and group discussion. Their students, she notes, often confusingly employ a trial-and-error approach when dealing with these matters. Further, as they progress to higher levels, they receive less time and fewer opportunities to perform debate and oral presentation exercises due to the emphasis placed on the preparation for high school and college entrance examinations.

Other regular classes also lack two-way communication and tend to be lecture-based. Hence, Japanese students are rarely if ever granted opportunities to enhance their communicative competence. Because of this, Matsumoto argues, “Japan’s education

will accomplish little unless it cuts off its over-reliance on a hitherto existing teacher-centered, knowledge-focused lesson management style with its overuse of rote memorization that prioritizes efficiency” (2000: 3). This teacher-dominated management style with its strong emphasis on test preparation offers little time for students’ questions and is often blamed for Japanese students’ reticence. Students, many have observed, are afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates and seldom speak during classes.

Further, Japanese society itself discourages its citizens from expressing their opinions. Japanese proverbs and idioms inform the public that “the nail that sticks up gets hammered down,” and that “silence is wisdom when speaking is folly.” Students trying to live up to the expectations of supervisors, classroom teachers and society have little reason to speak out.

5. Possible Solutions

Communication style is a reflection of national character; therefore, it is doubtful that Japan needs the direct introduction of Western-style oral communication and rhetorical education. However, to some extent, Japan should learn from Western culture, especially its emphasis on the dialectic process and argumentation, which acts as a driving force that promotes the development of civilization.

Public speaking and writing exercises are implemented at every opportunity during classes in Western schools. “Effective verbal communication results from competence and skill. Competence comes from knowledge and understanding. It is a cognitive quality and is the consequence of studying the oral communication process. Skill results from mastering the expressive behaviors used in speaking and listening. It is a psychomotor quality and it is achieved by practicing oral communicative behaviors under the guidance of expert instructors and by applying these behaviors in real situations” (Klof and Ishii, 1995: 8).

5.1. Teaching Japanese as a Communication Tool

An important factor in the development of language curricula was the emergence of the communicative approach to language teaching as a replacement for the structural-situational and audio-lingual methods.

Communicative Language Teaching is a broad approach that resulted from a focus on communication as the organizing principle for teaching languages rather than grammatical systems (Richards, 2005: 215). The focus of teaching is authentic communication; extensive use is made of pair and group activities that involve the

negotiation of meaning and information sharing. Fluent verbal communication is the main priority.

While many of Japan's language teachers, no doubt, have been influenced greatly by the communicative approach, there is, seemingly, one exception, those involved in Japanese national language education. No teaching guidelines or Japanese language textbooks have fought back against this trend, and few teachers of Japanese have embraced the idea of communicative lessons even though it is believed that learner-centered classes would foster various skills, including communication, team-work and leadership.

5.2. Learning from Foreign Language Instruction

Careful attention has not been paid to speech writing and oral presentation in Japanese language education for various reasons. One is that Japanese students, as native speakers, are believed to be fluent, thus, "strangely, in Japan, from kindergarten through graduate school, language training such as writing methods and listening comprehension are not provided. How to read and speak is not taught, either. As a result, even college graduates are poor at writing and speaking" (Nettle and Sakurai, 2000: 140).

Another reason dates back to the 1950s at a time when many in the Japanese educational community decided to reject many of the postwar educational reforms fostered during the American military occupation after World War II.

For a brief period in the 1950s, Japanese students used two different authorized high school textbooks of Japanese in their classes, one for literature and one for language studies. Teachers also had class periods for teaching speech. However, a few years later, Japanese teachers rejected these methods as American experimentalism and returned to prewar educational orthodoxy (Kada, 2004). Afterwards, the literature and language books were merged back into one and speech classes were mostly dropped. By contrast, Japanese teachers of English as a foreign language, under the Course of Study guidelines, teach oral communication. Even writing instruction, it is suggested, should be integrated with listening, speaking and reading activities.

The author believes that teachers of Japanese language instruction, like their EFL counterparts, should place more emphasis on "situational" and "functional" syllabi. The guidelines for foreign language textbooks in Japan's public junior high schools says that, when conducting language activities, the following language-use situations and functions of language should be taken into account:

The following is taken from the “Treatment of the Contents” for English subject at Junior High School (Ministry of Education, 2003).

[Examples of Language-Use Situations]

- a. Situations where fixed expressions are often used including greetings, self-introductions, phone calls, shopping, giving directions, traveling, eating; etc.
- b. Situations relevant to students’ lives including home life, learning and activities at school, regional events; etc.

[Examples of Functions of Language]

- a. Deepening thinking and transmitting information including giving opinions, explaining, reporting, presenting, describing; etc.
- b. Instigating action and expressing volition including asking questions, requesting, inviting, offering, confirming, promising, agreeing/disagreeing, accepting/refusing; etc.
- c. Transmitting feelings including expressing gratitude, complaining, praising, apologizing; etc.

*(The latest version of the Course of Study declared in February, 2008 has almost no significant alteration.)

“Treatment of the Contents” for English subject at Senior High School.

[Examples of Language-Use Situations]

(a) Situations for communication on an individual basis:

Phone calls, traveling, shopping, parties, home, school, restaurants, hospitals, interviews, letters, E-mails, etc.

(b) Situations for communication in groups:

Recitations, speeches, presentations, role-plays, discussions, debates, etc.

(c) Situations for communication aimed at a large number of people:

Books, newspapers, magazines, advertisements, posters, radio, television, movies, communication networks, etc.

(d) Situations for creative communication:

Recitations, skits, dramas, in-school broadcasting programs, video-making, compositions, etc.

[Examples of Functions of Language]

(a) Smoothing human relationships:

Addressing, greeting, introducing, showing comprehension and attention, etc.

(b) Transmitting feelings:

Expressing gratitude, welcoming, celebrating, praising, expressing contentment, expressing pleasure, expressing surprise, expressing sympathy, complaining, criticizing, apologizing, expressing regret, expressing disappointment, deploring, expressing anger, etc.

(c) Transmitting information:

Explaining, reporting, describing, giving reasons, etc.

(d) Transmitting ideas and intentions:

Offering, promising, claiming, agreeing, disagreeing, persuading, accepting, refusing, inferring, assuming, concluding, etc.

(e) Instigating action:

Asking questions, requesting, treating, inviting, permitting, advising, suggesting, giving orders, prohibiting, etc.

The Course of study suggests teaching such difficult communication skills as disagreement, persuasion, complaints, criticism, refusals, role-plays, discussions, debates, etc. These are all skills that are helpful in promoting the person-to-person communication that occurs in daily life. Acquisition of these skills in a foreign language course may prove difficult for students. However, if they were taught in conjunction with Japanese language and other subjects, students would be provided with more opportunities to improve in this increasingly vital area.

5.3. Establishing Group Rules to Improve Communication

One possible action to boost verbal communication amongst the Japanese citizenry might include the establishment of a system or set of rules that would encourage the right of free speech and discourage silence during group discussions. At schools, companies, homes or wherever the transfer of ideas and opinions take place, these rules would make it clear that everyone's opinion had value.

How one contributes to these discussions may vary depending upon group size or its purposes. It may be as simple as voicing good opinions at a staff meeting. These active discussions could help foster creative and innovative ideas that, in the long run, would increase productivity and profits. In classrooms, teachers could base grades not simply on test scores and attendance, but also through students' active participation during group conferences or by leading a class discussion.

6. Conclusion

Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were not born eloquent and effective public

speakers. Both received proper training and were provided with many opportunities to hone their craft. The American people, on the other hand, have been trained to judge the quality of political debate and expect politicians to provide understandable policies that can make America a better country.

Can Japan produce its own Obama? While the causes of communicative incompetence among Japanese people have deep roots, solutions to enhance Japanese communication skills, including “teaching Japanese as a communication tool”, “learning from foreign language instruction” and “establishing group rules” that foster open debate, are achievable.

Further, as has been demonstrated, “communication without words” provides few solutions of the country’s current problems. In fact, as this paper points out, it has encouraged political procrastination, and allows Japanese politicians to continually provide ambiguous proposals that foster nothing but confusion.

If Japan is to become a better country, this procrastination is no longer a viable option. The Japanese people must equip themselves with greater speaking skills and more flexible problem-solving and crisis management abilities. Japan should be capable of handling the difficult issues it faces and achieve greater accountability through the power of clear, precise verbal communication.

Hopefully, the Japanese people will learn to argue properly wherever these important debates take place, and that they will demand that their politicians, leaders and those in positions of responsibility speak openheartedly to everyone who wishes to hear.

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