

## Kindness Not So Kind

Something was wrong. I, myself, was glowing with satisfaction. I had tried my best and spoken to them in perfect English. Yet as I saw their expressions, it was clear they were deeply dissatisfied. English was my strongest skill, wasn't it? Weren't they happy with my explanation?

I had been looking forward to this event at school, with a club I belong to that collaborates with people outside the school. It was an event where Waseda University's international students mainly from other Asian countries join workshops at our school festival.

As I was introducing Japanese anime and we used words like '*otaku*' and '*oshi-men*,' which were difficult to define in English. For instance, '*otaku*' can be used to describe someone who is a geek, or those who are addicted to pop culture; it does not have a single interpretation. The students asked me, "How do Japanese people describe *otaku*?" and I explained it in English to them because translating to English would be less troublesome for non-Japanese speakers. Yet, when I spoke, instead of nods of understanding, it was like a balloon deflating, the atmosphere sank.

A few weeks later, I had another opportunity to talk with them. Through our discussion, I understood their strong passion for learning Japanese. Suddenly, a thought struck my mind. The students left their home country to learn Japanese, and they already had some background

knowledge of Japanese culture. Maybe they wanted to learn how to describe it in Japanese, and that was the reason why they asked me the question. They were expecting to get the answer from me in Japanese but instead, I used English just to show off my skills. Reflecting on my past attitude, I felt ashamed of myself for having grasped this opportunity for communication in such a limited way.

After my experience with International students, I was unsure of my communication process. Should I speak to foreigners in Japanese every time? Or was my experience a rare case? What helped me establish my new method of communication was an opportunity to take a lecture on ‘*yasashii-Nihongo*’. The professor explained how using Japanese in a kind or simpler manner could be useful in many situations such as in case of emergencies and at hospitals. She also mentioned that, to my surprise, foreigners wished to be spoken to in Japanese in some cases. At this point, I was certain of a hidden ignorance in myself. The kindness I gave, was not very kind at all. I had always thought speaking English must be the best solution for non-Japanese speakers, but this lecture taught me that it is not always the best answer. I finally realized my faults, and was ready to move to the next step.

My experiences have changed the way I think about communication. Sympathizing with the feelings of others and considering their needs are essential for building mutually satisfying communication. Last summer, I participated in a study trip in Thailand with local partnership

schools, and I was planning on using English as a common tool. However, the Thai students wished to be spoken to in Japanese to improve their skills. As a response, I spoke to them in Japanese very slowly so they could understand. Some of them spoke back to me in Japanese, with a sparkle in their eyes. This is the true satisfaction of communication, I thought, this is kindness. After the trip, I wrote New Year's cards to them using simple Japanese next to my drawing. When it arrived, the students wrote back in Japanese as well! Their sentences had some mistakes, but I felt their hard work and warmth from their cards. Kindly using Japanese made our bond closer than before. By thinking and feeling on the same level, we were able to overcome the gap and come to a true, mutual understanding.

Communication only truly succeeds when you consider the needs of others. I will become the person who can have the heart to think, to feel in someone else's shoes, and can communicate in a way that fits each person's needs. Sometimes, making things easier is unkind, sometimes making things a bit harder is kinder. (693 words)