

***Communicating in a Foreign Land:  
Reggie Pawle Explores Feeling Unheard***

Communication is one of those human universals – everyone does it. However, there is no universal way to communicate. The style of communication varies greatly from culture to culture. And even within a specific culture individuals have their own personal ways of communicating. Successful communication is one of life's basic challenges. For anyone living in a foreign country, expatriate psychological challenges in communication arise. Some of the factors associated with these challenges are:

*Arbitrary factor* – A very common response for people in a foreign land is to view the local customs as being arbitrary. Customs and their related behaviors are learned. And most of this learning is done by behaving in the ways of one's culture without thinking about whether these ways make sense or not. When outsiders ask why, they usually don't get satisfactory answers. This common perception of arbitrariness can result in judgmentalness, which interferes with communication. Respect for different ways and honesty for oneself are essential for cross-cultural communication.

*Stress factor* - A natural response to being in an unfamiliar land is stress. People trying to communicate with people whose ways are different often get frustrated and feel threatened. John told me his story of being sick, going to a hospital, not being able to communicate with the doctor, and leaving the hospital not being sure if he had received the proper treatment or not. Upon leaving John had this meltdown type of experience, feeling very scared and that he had to leave Japan. Being able to tolerate such experiences is a psychological ability foreigners need.

*Effort factor* - Situations such as John's story happen to foreigners in smaller ways regularly. Communication requires more effort of a person than what would be required in their native environment. Psychologically a person has to be willing to make this effort even when they don't feel like it. This can be very tiring. I have heard many stories of people delaying doing simple things, like going to the post office, because of the extra effort involved in having to speak Japanese. Naturally it gets easier as a person learns the local language and customs. However, even Japanese-speaking foreigners report having to pay attention to communication in ways that they don't in their native cultures.

*Surprise factor* – The unexpected is an integral part of a foreigner's experience. It can be both stimulating and frustrating. Either way, it happens, demanding both preparedness and flexibility. Many foreigners discount the need for preparedness, saying they can always rely on a Japanese person when needed. However, this is not always possible. An example is Stan, an English teacher, who married an English speaking Japanese woman, and never learned Japanese. They had one son. When their marriage went bad, the son sided with his mother in the dispute and refused to speak English. Stan said to me, "I have lost my son." Regarding flexibility, cultivating this characteristic will help the foreigner through many of the surprises that come their way. Having the attitude that one is living in a personal growth laboratory is I believe a healthy one.

*Trust factor* – One of the purposes of communication is understanding. This, however, is often not easily accomplished. For many reasons understanding can be

difficult. One reason may be that people may not want to be honest and disguise their meaning and intent. Japanese has two words that mean social face (*tatemae*) and inner true heart (*honne*). Americans have the expressions “double-faced” and “two-faced” to refer to this situation. The challenge for foreigners is to be able to contact with a Japanese person’s inner heart. Being able to trust is very important. The foreigner to do this must make extra effort to get to know the other’s heart. Doug’s explanation was that he “loved beauty.” He entered a marriage on the basis of his fantasies of a beautiful Japanese woman. However, as he gradually discovered his wife’s inner heart, it wasn’t very beautiful – but he was stuck.

*Intimacy factor* – Communication is one of the primary ways that people are intimate with each other. Of course intimacy is more difficult if the communication means are unfamiliar. Moreover, people in different cultures have different ideas of what being intimate with another is all about. People from Western countries often understand intimacy as sharing deep inner thoughts and feelings. However, people from Asian countries often think of intimacy as being able to be dependent on another. Susan tried to become good friends with Akiko by sharing her stresses and struggles. Akiko thought Susan was being dependent inappropriately and responded by avoiding Susan. For foreigners communicating requires great sensitivity. What is communicated may not be interpreted according to the foreigner’s intention.

Becoming familiar with the many different cultural styles of communication will ease the difficulty of these psychological factors associated with cross-cultural communication. A good resource is the Society for Intercultural Education, Training, and Research ([www.sietar-japan.org](http://www.sietar-japan.org)). For publications, the Intercultural Press ([www.interculturalpress.com](http://www.interculturalpress.com)) is recommended. For difficulties with these or other psychological factors, the best therapy is to communicate! Talk, with both expats and Japanese, and talk more. Withdrawal will compound any other psychological issue. For great difficulties a psychotherapist who is familiar with cross-cultural issues is recommended. Consult International Mental Health Professionals Japan ([www.imphj.org](http://www.imphj.org)) or Reggie Pawle, Ph.D., 075-724-1356, [reggiepawle@yahoo.com](mailto:reggiepawle@yahoo.com).