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JSPS Short Term Award: Research Experience in Japan

I spent two very rewarding months pursuing my project *The Silences of Japanese Second Language Learners* whilst based in the Department of Psychology at Fukuyama University, Hiroshima Prefecture. My research consisted of an inter-disciplinary investigation which employed a multi-modal approach to data collection (qualitative and quantitative) in order to identify the various forms and functions of Japanese learner silence. Concentrating in particular on the psychological and emotional aspects of students' silent behaviour, my study explored themes relating to how anxiety, embarrassment and hyper-sensitivity to others profoundly affect how learners behave in public settings.

My host researcher was Professor Atsuko Aono who is Head of Psychology and Associate Dean of the Faculty of Human Cultures and Sciences at the university. I cannot stress enough how important it is to cultivate and maintain a good working relationship with your host researcher as this person is the key to whether your stay in Japan will be successful or not. It pays to seek out a host who is prepared to commit to regular contact time and who is willing to introduce you to other researchers and the all-important office staff within the university. I am under no illusion that if it had not been for my host's organisational abilities and status within her institution, my time in Japan would not have been so nearly as fruitful. Professor Aono was able to open doors that would otherwise have remained firmly closed to an outsider such as myself and was therefore instrumental in helping me gain access to research sites/participants, and also to navigate institutional procedures. Bureaucracy in Japanese universities tends to be opaque and rather procrustean. Dealing with it calls for a calm, polite persistence.

Part of my project involved data collection in the form of stimulated recalls and semi-structured interview sessions. I would advise anybody thinking of undertaking similar qualitative methods to carefully consider how best to counter the phenomenon of *tatamae* answers amongst Japanese interviewees. (*Tatamae* relates to one's officially stated position as opposed to one's true, innermost beliefs.) The prevalence of *tatamae* thinking means that qualitative researchers need to be very conscious of how to increase interviewer-interviewee rapport whilst diminishing perceived power disparities. Such things as dress, interview setting, seating arrangements, and the language of the interview all need to be carefully considered within the Japanese context.

This leads me on nicely to my final point concerning language. Do not expect English to be widely spoken at your institution – more often this is attributable to a lack of confidence in using a foreign language rather than any lack of ability. It is certainly not necessary to be fluent in Japanese in order to be an effective researcher, although some understanding of the language lends a distinct advantage. Socio-linguistic ability is perhaps even more important than lexico-grammatical competence when interacting with colleagues, particularly as communication patterns operate on multiple hierarchical levels dependent on the social context and participants present. For example, knowing when to speak and when not to speak is a valuable skill to have in a Japanese working environment. At the very least I would recommend learning the various *aisatsu* (ritualised greetings/leave-takings) used in the workplace. *Aisatsu* often allude to interdependence between speakers and are the oil that make human relations in Japan run smoothly. A willingness to make a fool of yourself by mangling the Japanese language is also a really good way of breaking the ice and can tempt people to open up and try out their English on you!

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