

# Cultural knowledge and language fluency: Insight from two Puerto Rican learners of Japanese

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## **Abstract:**

The major objective of the present study is to demonstrate how cultural knowledge affects language fluency. Two beginning-level Puerto Rican learners of Japanese, one with a high score on fluency, and one with a lower one, were given a test to assess their knowledge on some aspects of the Japanese culture. It was hypothesized that the one with higher fluency would get a higher score on the test. However, both learners did equally poorly on the culture test, which seemingly suggests no link between cultural knowledge and language fluency. Closer look of the results reveals that the strength of the fluent learner on the culture test widely diverges from that of the other. It is indicated that understanding certain aspects of the culture is more influential on the learners' fluency than other aspects.

## **Introduction**

The World-View Problem raises a question: "Does culture influence language or does language influence culture?" (Eastman, 1975, p.74). Many scholars and researchers have tried to answer this question. Although the answer to the question has not uniformly been agreed upon, language and culture without doubt have been seen as two elements deeply related. In cross-cultural communication, it is likely to encounter a breakdown of communication without appropriate knowledge of the other culture.

Tyler (1995) presents an instance of such miscommunication. She videotaped a tutoring session of computer programming between a Korean graduate student and an American undergraduate student. After the session, they were asked to comment on each other. The videotaped session and their comments showed that they were unable to communicate well with each other due to the ignorance of each other's cultural values.

House (1996) examines the effects of explicit instructions for the use of routines on second language learners' fluency in the target language. The results support for her hypothesis that the instructions do affect the learners' fluency. Routines can be viewed as linguistic elements that are

tightly connected with the culture in which the language is spoken, and thus, they are culture-specific. She concludes that explicitly teaching culture-specific elements helps learners develop their fluency.

Both studies provide evidence that knowing cultural aspects of a target language plays a role in smoother communication with native speakers of the language. More studies pursuing the clarification of the issue are desirable since their pedagogical implications would be profound for classroom practitioners.

### Method

The present research aims to investigate whether or not language learners' cultural knowledge plays a role in their fluency of the target language. "Cultural knowledge" in this study is defined as knowledge of cultural appropriateness and "fluency" as the ability to carry out conversations without making native speakers uncomfortable.

The participants in this research are fifteen undergraduate students enrolled in a Japanese course at University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez. They are all native speakers of Spanish, and they range from intermediate to near native speakers of English. They have been studying Japanese as a foreign language for three semesters. There are only a few Japanese people in the city, and access to Japanese goods and foods is highly limited. Out of the fifteen learners, two were selected for a comparison because one (S1) was rated as 2 (rather weak), and the other (S2) as 5 (excellent) for "delivery," one of the evaluation criteria for the oral interview conducted during a semester as a midterm exam. Eleven students were rated either as 3 (average) or 4 (good). Two students did not take the interview. For the criterion of "delivery," the learners were judged according to their performance on gestures, fluency, responding timing, and cultural appropriateness. Table 1 provides the reported background information of S1 and S2.

**Table 1. The Background Information of the Two Learners**

	S1 (rather weak)	S2 (excellent)
1. Sex	M	F
2. Age	21	22
3. Motivation	Medium	Strong
4. Hours /week listening to Japanese for the course	less than 1 hour	3-4 hours
5. Audio-visual input outside the classroom	No	No
6. Have read about Japan? How many times?	Yes, 3 times	Yes, 3 times
7. Contact with Japanese people	No	No

As seen in the table, S1 and S2 share much background information, except for sex, motivation, and hours of listening to Japanese as part of their homework for the course. Motivation and diligence seem to make one learner more successful than the other.

The data for the study were collected through an oral interview and a questionnaire. The oral interview was a structured interview with a predetermined list of questions and was tape-recorded. In order to measure their fluency, the following criteria were adopted.

1. Whether they provide appropriate echo-questions
2. Whether they use appropriate hesitation noises
3. Whether they use appropriate acceptance/agreement noises
4. Whether they use appropriate ritual expressions
5. Whether they create natural pauses
6. Whether they use appropriate speech styles
7. Whether they use appropriate gestures while they speak

Each piece of positive evidence for 1 to 4 gained the learners a point while each piece of negative evidence for 5 to 7 caused them to lose a point. The total scores were used for a comparison.

The questionnaire served as a culture test to measure the learners' cultural knowledge. It consisted of 19 questions asking for the following aspects of the Japanese culture.

1. Humbleness/Politeness
2. Nonverbal behaviors
3. Confrontation
4. Customer service
5. Silence
6. Punctuality
7. Diligence
8. Directions
9. Greetings
10. Security

These aspects were selected mainly from the discussions in Jorden and Noda (1987), the textbook used for the course, as well as from Malandro, et al. (1989). Each test item was carefully constructed so as not to merely determine if the students were keeping up with reading the textbook. Each item provided a likely situation in Japan and four alternative behaviors in the situation. The learners were asked to choose the closest behavior they would do. They were also instructed to imagine that they had a good command of Japanese, all the situations took place in Japan, and the people involved were all Japanese. Prior to implementation, the test was piloted with 10 native speakers of Japanese including a few who had never been outside of Japan. All the test items achieved more than 63% agreement among the native speakers on the "correct" alternatives. Sample questions are given below.

- (1) When your colleague compliments you on your computer skills, you will
- say “thank you.”
  - say nothing.
  - smile.
  - politely contradict him/her.
- (2) There are noisy friends in a large class when a professor is about to talk. You will
- tell them to be quiet.
  - show them your annoyance by a facial expression.
  - ignore them and listen to the professor.
  - tell them that they annoyed you after the class.
- (3) It is raining, and you do not have an umbrella. Your boss offers you one. You will
- refuse it with gratitude.
  - refuse it with an apology.
  - accept it with gratitude.
  - accept it with an apology.

## Results

The scores of fluency of S1 and S2 are presented in Table 2. The study employed two raters for the interview: the author herself (rater 1) and another native speaker of Japanese (rater 2). The rating done by rater 2 is given in the parentheses. Rater 1 was the interviewer and observed the learners' gestures while rater 2 evaluated their performance through an audio tape and therefore was unable to judge their gestures, which explains the N/As in the table.

**Table 2. The Scores of Fluency**

		S1 (rather weak)	S2 (excellent)
Elapsed time		12 min.	5 min.
Positive evidence	1. echo-questions	0 (0)	3 (4)
	2. hesitation noises	1 (6)	14 (15)
	3. acceptance/agreement noises	0 (0)	4 (5)
	4. ritual expressions	0 (0)	1 (1)
	Subtotal (plus)	+1 (+6)	+22 (+25)
Negative evidence	5. natural pauses	26 (31)	4 (3)
	6. speech styles	1 (6)	0 (1)
	7. gestures	2 (N/A)	0 (N/A)
	Subtotal (minus)	-29 (-37)	-4 (-4)
Total		-28 (-31)	+18 (+21)

It was obvious that many times S1 did not comprehend the interviewer's questions. When he did not understand them, he either created unnatural long pauses (26 times according to rater 1, 31 times according to rater 2, including "no answer") or said "Sumimasen?" ("Excuse me?") (7 times). Unfortunately, both behaviors were judged against being fluent. It should be noted that "Sumimasen?" ("Excuse me?") is not normally used to ask for a repetition. On the other hand, S2 used echo-questions and hesitation noises (17 times according to rater 1, 19 times according to rater 2) when she did not immediately understand the interviewer's questions. Some of the examples are given below.

- (4) Interviewer: Eeto, hana to zassi, arimashita ka?  
(“Well, were there flowers and a magazine?”)  
S2: Hai, zassi..., **zassi desu ka?**  
(“Yes, you mean a magazine...magazine?”)
- (5) Interviewer: Anoo, hana wa arimasita ka?  
(“Well, were there flowers?”)  
S2: **Eeto**, hana wa arimasen nee.  
(Uh, I'm afraid there aren't.)

As a result, unnatural pauses were much fewer in her performance (4 times according to rater 1, 3 times according to rater 2). Also, she never used "Sumimasen?" to ask for a repetition; instead, she used "Moo itido itte kudasai" ("Could you say that again?"), which is a more appropriate way of asking people to repeat what they have said.

Another difference was found in the use of acceptance/agreement noises. S1 did not use any expressions of these throughout the interview whereas S2 properly did so (4 times according to rater 1, 5 times according to rater 2), as shown in (6) and (7).

- (6) Interviewer: Iya, takusii ga ii desu yo.  
(“No, you should take a taxi.”)  
S2: **A, soo desu ka.** Zyaa, takusii de itte kimasu.  
(“O.K. Then, I'll take a taxi.”)
- (7) Interviewer: Tyoodo, iti zikan gurai desita nee.  
(“It took about an hour, didn't it?”)  
S2: **Ee, soo desu ne.**  
(“Yes, I guess so.”)

It is also worthwhile mentioning about the elapsed times. It took 12 minutes to interview S1 while it took only five minutes to interview S2. They were each given a role to play. They were assigned different roles; however, both roles entail equivalent degrees of length and difficulty. The fact that S2 did not need as much time as S1 did indicates that the communication between S2 and the interviewer was smoother.

Table 3 shows the two learners' scores on the culture test.

**Table 3. The Scores of the Culture Test**

	S1 (rather weak)	S2 (excellent)
1. Humbleness/Politeness (N=4)	2	3
2. Nonverbal behaviors (N=4)	0	2
3. Confrontation (N=3)	2	0
4. Customer service (N=2)	1	0
5. Silence (N=1)	0	1
6. Punctuality (N=1)	1	1
7. Diligence (N=1)	1	0
8. Directions (N=1)	1	0
9. Greetings (N=1)	0	1
10. Security (N=1)	0	0
Total (N=19)	8	8

The results from the culture test demonstrates that S2, who was rated much more fluent in the interview, knew about the appropriateness of the target culture no better than S1. Out of the 15 students who took this test, they were both ranked as 12, indicating that they both did poorly on the test. Although they ended up with the exact same score, it is interesting that the ways they answered the questions were very different. Those cultural aspects that S1 was not aware of are almost always those that S2 had a good grasp of, and vice versa. It may safely be said that certain cultural aspects are more influential on language fluency than others. Humbleness/politeness and nonverbal behaviors might be among such influential aspects with respect to the current case study involving Japanese as a target language.

### Conclusions

In this study, two Puerto Rican learners of Japanese were compared for their cultural knowledge of the target language. It was hypothesized that the learner with higher fluency would demonstrate evidence for more knowledge on the appropriateness of the Japanese culture than the less fluent one. However, both learners performed equally poorly on the culture test, but they did so quite differently: The fluent learner did better on the questions regarding humbleness/politeness, nonverbal behaviors, silence, and greetings whereas the less fluent one did better on the questions asking about confrontation, customer service, diligence, and directions. It is likely that certain cultural aspects are more influential in improving language fluency than certain others. It is hoped to provide some insight into what cultural knowledge could be essential in developing Japanese fluency.

The study entails a number of limitations, including the number of the subjects, their

Japanese proficiency level, and the questions in the culture test. Future investigation should employ many more participants, preferably advanced learners since they are freer of extraneous factors for breakdowns in communication, such as listening comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary control. Tyler (1995), in fact, argues that cultural knowledge comes to play a bigger role in language fluency with increasing levels of proficiency. The culture test should also be elaborated to cover a greater variety of cultural aspects. More definite answers to the issue of cultural knowledge and language fluency will definitely contribute to better classroom instructions and activities.

## References

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