

Intercultural Communicative Competence:
The challenges and implications of teaching Japanese politeness strategies
to Swedish learners of Japanese

Teaching communicative competence is extremely important in language instruction. One can avoid embarrassing situations and conflicts caused by misunderstandings if she/he understands the differences in intercultural pragmatics. Politeness discourse varies in complexity according to social distance, relative power between the speakers, and situations. The data I have collected during the past 6 years indicates that Swedish learners of Japanese often do not see the necessity of learning the polite/honorific discourse and often view these negatively as Swedish society is one of the most egalitarian in the world. As a consequence, Swedish students often fail to utilize appropriate politeness strategies when speaking in Japanese. However, it is important to point out to foreign language learners that cultural and social norms are not interchangeable and that one must adapt to the language one is using and the culture one is in. Thus Swedish Learners of Japanese should consider politeness discourse as a part of the rules of the language rather than something that can be modified based on one's opinion.

The current study investigates the differences in politeness strategies between Swedish and Japanese discourse. Student surveys and analysis of students' errors have revealed clear differences in the use of politeness strategies in Swedish and in Japanese context. While the politeness, respect, and formality are closely intertwined in Japanese; the Swedes perceive respect and politeness as separate matters. It is also found that while the Japanese are inclined to using verbal politeness strategies, the Swedes express their respect more through non-verbal actions or behaviors. Various Japanese and Swedish utterances have also been examined to determine the Discourse Politeness Default suggested by Usami (2006) in order to systematize the politeness strategies in ways similar to grammatical rules.

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