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## Lost in Translation: Strategies Japanese Language Learners Use in Communicating Culturally Specific L1 Expressions in English

Communicating in a second language could be seen as a process requiring the deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural meanings. If this is the case, how do second language (L2) learners express cultural meanings of their first language (L1) expressions that do not have semantically equivalent L2 expressions? Twenty-nine Japanese students learning English as a second language in the US were asked to translate Japanese cultural expressions that do not have equivalent English expressions. This study found that the students either (a) entirely eliminated the expression from the statement, (b) replaced the expression with an English expression commonly used in a similar context, but with a different meaning, or (c) literally translated the expression into an English expression that made little sense. The study suggests the importance of helping L2 learners develop this bicultural capability to convey rich cultural meanings of L1-specific expressions in L2-based communication.

### Introduction

Successful intercultural communication using a new language depends on the degree to which culturally unique meanings, values, and intentions are effectively communicated. In such an attempt, one particular challenge for L2 learners is that many L1 expressions commonly used in L1 communication do not have linguistically and semantically equivalent L2 expressions. This creates a dilemma for L2 learners: If L2 learners use literal translations of L1-specific expressions in L2 communication, they may be inappropriate or unintelligible under the new sociolinguistic norm. If they suppress the intended cultural expressions in the L2-speaking environment, culturally valued communication scripts and perspectives that they have internalized in their home culture would be withheld within the context of intercultural communication (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988).

For L2 learners, one way to resolve this dilemma would be to find a way to translate cultural meanings in L1-specific expressions to sociolinguistically appropriate L2 expressions that approximate the original meanings. In the studies

of translation, it is commonly agreed that this is possible by deconstructing and reconstructing the meanings of the original expressions using the new language in ways that fit the sociolinguistic norms and discourse patterns of the new language, even though some structural and stylistic characteristics of the original expressions may be sacrificed (Aixelá, 1996; Bassnett, 1991; Gentzler, 1993). In fact, there have been many successful attempts to achieve translation equivalency in this way when translating texts in literature (Baker, 1992), diagnostic interviews (Bravo, Woodbury-Fariña, Canino, & Rubio-Stipec, 1993), and standardized psychometric instruments (Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973; Son, Song, & Lim, 2006). This is not to say that second and foreign language learning should be reduced to merely translating written L1 expressions. Simply being able to translate L1 expressions into L2 expressions would not ensure successful intercultural communication. However, we assume that the ability to express cultural meanings of a wide variety of L1 expressions in L2 constitutes an essential component of learning L2 for the purpose of intercultural communication.

Researchers conceptualize translation equivalency in terms of multiple categories (Baker, 1992; Koller, 1989; Schäffner & Herting, 1994; Witte, 1994). First, for *structural equivalence*, the words and expressions in their translations are chosen so that they are direct and structurally equivalent translations of the original sentences. As discussed before, this is extremely difficult to achieve when translating culture-specific expressions that do not have direct corresponding expressions in the target language. To deal with this, *functional equivalence* could be aimed for so that the translations convey various speech acts and achieve desirable effects within established discourse frameworks in their respective sociolinguistic contexts. This could require L2 learners' "pragmatic awareness" of the use of the target language based on extensive exposure to authentic language use in the target environment (Schauer, 2006). Finally, *semantic equivalence* could be aimed for in order to communicate intended meanings. Achieving this would require L2 learners to negotiate their epistemological assumptions considering the sociolinguistic differences of the two languages, which are intertwined with each other (Schäffner & Herting, 1994; Witte, 1994).

It should be noted here that contemporary societies are subject to heterogeneous and dynamically evolving cultural perspectives. The dynamic interaction within these cultures creates possibilities of a different understanding that L2 learners may have constructed about the sociolinguistic norms of L2 communication (Beebe, 1985; Ellis, 1994). Depending on cultural and linguistic experiences, L2 learners must function under personally and socially constructed sociolinguistic expectations and communication scripts. In this sense, translation could be seen as a problem-solving activity characterized by high cognitive demands where L2 learners employ different strategies and processes for communicating cultural meanings, values, and intentions (Lörscher, 1991). This leads us to inquire into the kinds of strategies L2 learners use when expressing their L1-specific expressions using the second language.

This study explored this issue by asking a group of Japanese students study-

ing English in the US to translate Japanese-specific expressions into English. This population was chosen because traditional Japanese culture is known to share a cultural epistemology (i.e., how people perceive and understand reality in the particular culture) characterized by an interdependent view of the self, a high-context communication style, and a collectivist understanding of society that is distinctively different from traditional Western culture (Hall, 1959, 1976; Lebra, 1976). There are many Japanese cultural expressions that are difficult to communicate using English expressions. For instance, Kitayama (1998) points out that finding a semantically equivalent American English translation for “*Konnichiwa*,” a commonly used greeting in Japanese, is difficult because of the difference in sociolinguistic norms. The literal translation of “*Konnichiwa*” is “Today is?,” but this literal translation cannot serve as a sociolinguistically appropriate greeting in American English. A common translation often used is “How are you?,” but it is problematic because it makes the person focus on the psychological condition of self rather than on external conditions. However, saying “*Konnichiwa*” in Japanese conversations involves the expectation to decenter one’s perception from self toward external conditions shared by the participants in the communication, and therefore, a socioculturally appropriate response to “*Konnichiwa*” is to refer to external conditions, such as the weather (e.g., “*Iti otenki desune.*” = “Isn’t the weather very nice?”). For the same reason, “I’m fine (*Genki desu*),” a common response to “How are you?,” cannot be a socioculturally appropriate response to “*Konnichiwa*” since its focus is on self-condition. According to Kitayama (1998), this discrepancy in the way attention is typically directed in daily conversations originates in culturally shared communication scripts and epistemology regarding the way people view the relationship between self and sociophysical situations. Similarly, Yamada (1997) points out that many Japanese daily expressions such as “*Hai* (yes),” “*Iie* (no),” and “*Maido arigatoo gozaimasu* (Thanks for shopping with us)” are often conveyed with the primary purpose of enhancing group dynamics or relationships with others, rather than making decisions guided by self-interest or acting from the field of independence.

This phenomenon is not limited to the discrepancy between Japanese and American English. Wierzbicka (1994) also points out a similar discrepancy between Polish and Australian English expressions in which literal expressions of some cultural expressions on emotion in Polish cannot convey the culturally specific nuances in Australian English. Wierzbicka attributes this to “different ways of behaving, different styles of interactions, different modes of communication, and different personality structures” (1994, p. 190). Similarly, Beaven and Álvarez (2004) report that British English speakers learning Spanish were asked to translate the cultural meaning of the Spanish expression “*Sol y sombra*,” whose literal translation is “Sun and shadow.” However, they struggled to translate the cultural expression into semantically equivalent British English expressions because they needed to negotiate the cultural meaning of the expression as they simultaneously used their understanding of both British English and Spanish sociolinguistic norms to craft a translation such as “Dazzling yet obscure.” As we can see in these examples, translating L1 expressions into

L2 expressions requires overcoming the gap between different sociolinguistic and sociocultural discourses and assumptions (Schäffner & Herting, 1994; Witte, 1994).

These discussions point to the need to investigate how L2 learners cope with the need to express the meanings of L1-specific phrases and expressions that are commonly communicated in their original culture in L2 communication. Without understanding this issue, L2 educators cannot truly deliver rich language instruction for L2 learners, particularly for those who came to the new culture but are not willing to throw away the culturally valued communication scripts and perspectives that they have internalized in their original culture.

### **Research Questions**

How do L2 learners express (or fail to express) the cultural meanings of their L1-specific expressions using the L2, and what kinds of strategies do they use? And in such attempts, what kinds of difficulties do they encounter in overcoming (or failing to overcome) the differences in the sociolinguistic demands between the two languages?

### **Method**

#### ***Participants***

The participants are a group of adult Japanese students whose native language is Japanese, and who are taking or have taken English as a Second Language courses at universities and English-language schools in the greater San Diego area with temporary student visas. We contacted several schools in the area and asked them to collaborate with us to recruit the participants. Each participant was given a small cash compensation (\$20) for participating in the study. The cash compensation was necessary to motivate the students to participate in the study as their primary concern was to be fluent in English rather than to participate in university research. A total of 29 students were recruited for this study (9 males, 20 females, mean age = 25.8). The students were all graduates of Japanese high schools who were temporarily living in the US to learn English for developing intercultural communicative skills or to obtain an undergraduate or graduate degree in the US. The mean score of the participants' TOEFL scores was 480.2, indicating that they were at the intermediate level as American English learners. The uneven ratio of females to males reflects the female dominance of Japanese students studying in the US (Institute of International Education, 2006). The mean duration of their stay in the US was 8.2 months. Since all of them lived in off-campus apartments or housing in the local community and they had had ample opportunities outside their classes to socialize with their American friends and host families, it is reasonable to assume that they were exposed to English communication with native English speakers outside their schoolwork and had constructed some knowledge about the sociolinguistic discourse and expectations in English-based communication. The intermediate-level students living in the US were chosen as participants for this study based on the assumptions that they were furnished with a basic understanding of English grammar and vocabulary but were struggling

to make use of L1 lexis, discourse, and pragmatic routines in L2-based communication and were developing their own strategies to deal with this issue in the intercultural context.

### *Procedure*

The data were collected through several sessions with the students in which one of the coauthors served as the investigator. When the participants met with the investigator, the investigator explained the purpose of this study, which was to understand how they communicated several Japanese dialogues in English. Then they were shown four Japanese dialogues printed on a sheet and asked to translate the Japanese dialogues into English. They were instructed to write the best possible translation that they would use in L2-based communication for each of the four dialogues. During the translation, they were allowed to use a Japanese-English dictionary in case they were unsure about relevant English words, which could prevent the participants from providing a translation based solely on their lack of understanding of particular English words; however, only a small number (14%) of the students actually used their dictionaries.

The following section describes the Japanese dialogues that were given to the students. These dialogues include the use of Japanese-specific expressions commonly observed in everyday scripts in Japanese-based communication. The Japanese-specific expressions are not mere idiomatic expressions, but expressions that involve cultural values and epistemology commonly assumed in Japanese communication. Since no previous study using this type of instrument exists, the authors developed these four dialogues by first asking a sample of Japanese students and professionals living in the US for Japanese cultural expressions involving Japanese values and epistemology that they most struggle with in their attempts to express these in English. Then the authors, both bilingual in English and Japanese and native speakers of Japanese (the first author) and English (the second author), brainstormed the choices of cultural expressions in these statements and codeveloped the dialogues.

Each of the dialogues consists of two statements between two hypothetical participants in everyday contexts. The first statement (A) contains expressions whose equivalent English expression could be readily found in dictionaries and English textbooks. The students can translate the meanings of these expressions by literally corresponding the Japanese expressions with the equivalent English terms following the rules of English grammar. In contrast, the second statement (B) involves an expression that does not have an equivalent English expression (underlined). Simply replacing the words with corresponding English words according to English grammatical rules will not convey the rich cultural meanings and nuances involved in these cultural expressions. The authors contacted three independent bilingual speakers of Japanese and American English and obtained 100% agreement in the above distinction; that is, only the second statement (B) contained Japanese-specific expressions that do not have direct English translations, while the first statement (A) did not contain Japanese-specific expressions.

Each of the following Japanese dialogues is followed by a literal English

translation. Because of the difference between the first statement (A) and second statement (B) described above, literal English translations of A almost perfectly convey the meaning of the Japanese statement, while literal English translations of B do not convey the meanings of the cultural expressions.

### Dialogue #1

A: 今日は誕生プレゼント本当にありがとうございました。

(*Kyou wa tanjou purezento hontouni arigatou gozaimashita.*)

B: つまらないものですがこんなものでも喜んでいただけると嬉しいです。

(*Tsumaranai mono desu ga konna mono demo yorokonde itadakeru to ureshii desu.*)

#### Literal Translation

A: Thank you very much for your birthday present today.

B: It's such a worthless thing, but I'm glad you like it.

In Japanese cultural discourse, it is commonly expected that when giving a present the giver of the gift would say “*Tsumaranai mono desu ga*” (“It’s such a worthless thing”) as a literal translation since *tsumaranai* means “worthless”, indicating a sense of regret for being unable to provide a more important and meaningful gift to the receiver (Matsumoto & Okamoto, 2003). Here, the culturally originated expression incorporates the cultural assumption that the giving of a gift should involve a sense of humbleness in the attempt to reserve judgment and respect for the receiver’s perspective on the value of the gift. Needless to say, it is not easy to find an equivalent American English expression that conveys these cultural nuances.

### Dialogue #2

A: 今後の会議では代表でプレゼンテーションしていただけますか？

(*Kondono kaigidewa daihyoude purezenteshon shite itadakemasuka?*)

B: その件については、前に申し上げたとおり田中さんがおられるので遠慮しておきます。

(*Sono ken ni tsuite wa maeni moushiagetatouri tanakasangga orarerunode enryo shiteokimasu.*)

#### Literal Translation

A: Would you give a presentation as our representative in the next meeting?

B: I will refrain from it because there is Mr. Tanaka, as I informed you before.

Here, the response declines the request in a culturally and linguistically odd manner because *enryo* is literally translated as “refrain from” or “hesitate” ac-

cording to some English-Japanese dictionaries (see Hasegawa, Momozawa, Horiuchi, & Yamamura, 1986; Kondo & Takano, 2001). In Japanese culture, *enryo* is often regarded as an important cultural concept that implies a sense of reservation and hesitation that is often used to decline an offer because of the shared emphasis on modesty in social relationships (Peak, 1989). American English does not have a word or expression that is equivalent to *enryo*.

### Dialogue #3

- A: 今日は夕方から会社の人と夕食会なんです。  
(*Kyou wa yuugata kara kaisha no hito to yuushoku kai nan desu.*)  
B: そうですか、頑張ってください。  
(*Sou desu ka. Gambatte kudasai.*)

#### Literal Translation

- A: I am going to a dinner party with my colleagues this evening.  
B: Really? Please work hard.

Again, there is no semantically equivalent expression in American English for *gambatte*, whose literal translation is “work hard,” “do one’s best,” or “hold out,” as suggested in English-Japanese dictionaries (see Hasegawa et al., 1986; Kondo & Takano, 2001; Peterson & Omizo, 2004). In the Japanese corporate culture, a dinner party is typically recognized as an arena for team building, exchanging ideas, and ensuring professional relationships (Picken, 1987). However, in mainstream North American culture, a dinner party with colleagues is mainly perceived as an informal event focusing on enjoyment and relaxation rather than as an event for working hard (or doing one’s best). As a result, saying “*Gambatte kudasai* (Please work hard)” to the person going to a dinner party is not usually perceived as being a socioculturally appropriate response in American English contexts, although this might not be extremely inappropriate in some non-American English-speaking contexts.

### Dialogue #4

- A: ここにあった使いさしのノート、昨日誰かが全部捨てたみたいです。  
(*Koko ni atta tsukaisashino nouto, kinou dareka ga zenbu suteta mitai desu.*)  
B: 誰がそんなもったいないことをしたんでしょう？まだ使えたのに。  
(*Dare ga sonna mottainai koto o shitan deshō. Mada tsukaeta no ni.*)

#### Literal Translation

- A: Someone seems to have thrown away the half-used notebooks that were here yesterday.  
B: Who wasted them? We could have still used them.



This response does not convey the rich cultural meaning associated with *mottainai*, which involves a sense of shame or regret for being unecological, wasteful, and lavish. In fact, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Wangari Muta Maathai, advocates the use of this culturally unique expression in world languages to promote the idea of recycling energy and world resources (Canavera, 2006; Maathai, 2005). If *mottainai* becomes a popular expression around the world, we could use the word as a loan word in English (e.g., “Who did such a *mottainai* thing?”), which is a common approach often used in code switching by bilinguals. Until then, it is necessary to find a way to express the cultural meaning using an English expression situated within its appropriate context and discourse patterns.

In this study, the Japanese students individually translated these dialogues printed on the form. Again, they had no problems understanding the cultural meanings and nuances of the Japanese-specific expressions or the everyday contexts of these Japanese dialogues. After they completed the translation task, they completed a questionnaire, piloted and developed for this study, asking them to explain any difficulty they might have encountered in each of these translation tasks. The students were asked to write the responses in Japanese so that they would not have any difficulty in expressing themselves. All the students completed the translation task and filled out the questionnaire within an hour.

## Results

The first step of the data analysis examined the students' overall performance in the translation task to see if the students actually had a higher level of difficulty in translating Statement B compared to Statement A using the translation and back-translation method (Bravo et al., 1993; Brislin et al., 1973). In this method, translated sentences were first translated back into the original language by an independent, bilingual person. Then a group of independent bilingual speakers compared the original sentences and the back-translated sentences and determined the semantic equivalences between the two sentences. In this study, two independent bilinguals back-translated 20 randomly chosen translations, and then a group of two other independent bilinguals determined the equivalence between the original sentence and the back-translated sentence as a bilingual committee. Using this translation and back-translation method, 90% of the translations of Statement A given by the students were considered to be equivalent by the bilingual committee, while 50% of the translations of Statement B were considered equivalent, indicating a significantly higher proportion of the students had more difficulty in translating Statement B.

In the next step of the data analyses, the students' translations and their responses about the difficulty they encountered during the translation process were examined to determine any meaningful patterns used in their strategies to decode the culturally specific Japanese expressions in the second part of the dialogue (Statement B). Conceptualizing and reconceptualizing different translations along with the comments given by the students led us to believe that their strategies fall into the following four categories. Table 1 lists the examples

**Table 1**  
**Examples of Translations\***

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Dialogue #1</i>	<i>Dialogue #2</i>	<i>Dialogue #3</i>	<i>Dialogue #4</i>
Elimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm glad that you looks happy by my present.</li> <li>• You make me happy, if you like my present.</li> <li>• I would be glad if you have fun with this.</li> </ul>	NA	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who did it? We can still use them.</li> <li>• Who did that? That's still useful.</li> <li>• Who did throw it away? If we had it, I could use that.</li> </ul>
Conformation	NA	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• OK, good luck!</li> <li>• Are you? Have a good time.</li> <li>• OK, have a good dinner.</li> </ul>	NA
Literal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm very glad you received that no good thing.</li> <li>• This is not good things, but I glad you are happy.</li> <li>• I wish you like it which is not so special.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In this case, I don't want that, because Mr. Tanaka is there, I told you that before.</li> <li>• I told that Mr. Tanaka will do that. I don't do this time.</li> <li>• Before I said, I don't do that, because there is Mr. Tanaka.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That's right. To do try your best!!</li> <li>• Really, you can do it.</li> <li>• I got it. Do your best.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who did such the waste of thing? We were still able to use the notes.</li> <li>• It's a wasteful!! Those notebook could use yet.</li> <li>• Who did such a stupid thing? We could use them more.</li> </ul>
Bicultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm not sure you like it or not, but I hope you like it.</li> <li>• This gift is nothing special, however, I hope you will like it from me.</li> <li>• I don't know if you like this or not, but I hope you enjoy my present.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As I mentioned before, I think Mr. Tanaka is a more proper person for this.</li> <li>• I'm afraid to tell you but as I told you before that Mr. Tanaka is best person to do that.</li> <li>• About the meeting, I'm afraid of saying this, but I can't accept the offer. As I said, I think Mr. Tanaka is the best person.</li> </ul>	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I feel pity that somebody threw away that material. This is because that material could still utilize somehow.</li> <li>• I can't believe it. How did waste such as that? It would be able to use it yet. I would be possible use it yet.</li> </ul>

*\*Translations of the second part of the dialogue (Statement B)*

of translations for each category. The student translations in the table are the actual translations that include occasional grammatical errors.

The first type of strategy is the *elimination strategy*, in which the students completely eliminated the L1-specific expression from the statement. For instance, 1 student translated the response in the first dialogue about giving a gift in the following way, "I'm glad you like it." This translation completely omitted *tsumaranai mono desu ga*, which involves a sense of humility and a sense of reservation from judging the value of the gift with respect to the point of view of the receiver. Among the students who used this strategy, 2 students explained their reasoning behind this omission in the following way:

I just ignored it. I could not simply put the expression into English since this expression is unique to the Japanese language. (*Originally in Japanese*)

I suspect that the reason why it is difficult for me to express this in English is that English speakers do not have such a feeling. So I decided not to translate it into an English expression. (*Originally in Japanese*)

These comments indicate that the students eliminated the L1-specific expression based on their belief that the cultural meaning could not be expressed in English or English speakers would be unable to understand it. Many students who used this strategy attributed their translations to their belief of the lack of corresponding English words or to the absence of native English speakers' mental sets connoted by these cultural expressions.

The second strategy that the students used in the translation task was the *conformation strategy*, in which the students substituted the Japanese-specific expressions with commonly used American English expressions that do not include the cultural meanings of the original expressions. For instance, most of the students translated the response in the second dialogue ("*Gambatte*" = "Work hard," "Hold on," etc.) as "Good luck," "Take it easy," or "Please have fun." However, these expressions convey a very different cultural meaning from *gambatte*. A student who used this strategy provided a rationale for her translation in the following way:

It was very hard to choose the translation since the Japanese expression could mean different things depending on the situation. I just chose the expression that seems most appropriate in the context. (*Originally in Japanese*)

As with the elimination strategy, using this strategy sacrifices the essential cultural meanings and epistemology associated with the original L1 expressions. By conforming to what they view as the sociolinguistic norms of the L2-based communication, they suppress the cultural meaning and epistemology that they internalized in their original culture.

The third type of responses used the *literal strategy*, in which the students literally replaced the Japanese expressions with the corresponding English

words, but because of the literal nature of the translations, their translations do not convey the rich meanings involved in the original expressions. The students who used this strategy did not give up translating the cultural expressions, unlike the students who used the elimination or conformation strategies, but they adhered to the ways of expressing the cultural meanings and epistemology that they internalized in their original culture. For instance, 1 student literally translated the response in the fourth dialogue (involving *enryo*, the sense of modesty) as “This is not good, but if you like it. I feel thank you.” In the posttask questionnaire, a student who used this strategy gave the following explanation:

In my everyday life here, there were many situations where I could not find how to express indirect expressions in Japanese. Especially, there were many situations where I wanted to say “*Gambatte*,” but I did not know how to put it into an appropriate expression in English. (*Originally in Japanese*)

Here, he was aware that there might be some effective ways to express the cultural meaning and nuance of the Japanese expression into English, but he did not know how to do so or if it were possible at all. As a result, he literally replaced the Japanese words with corresponding English words, knowing that the translation might not convey the important cultural meaning behind the expressions. All the students who used this strategy were aware of the limitation of their translations.

What should be noted is that this strategy involved many cases in which the students replaced the L1 expressions with simpler, corresponding L2 words that sounded appropriate as an L2 expression, but that did not convey the cultural meaning of the original expression. For instance, many students literally translated “*enryo shite okimasu*” to “I cannot do that (because there is Mr. Tanaka).” This type of translation was coded as a literal translation since the student did not eliminate the entire statement but reduced the expression into a literal, low-risk expression (e.g., a mere refusal of the request) that did not involve the key cultural meaning of the expression (e.g., the sense of modesty). With this strategy, they could pragmatically convey the main intention (e.g., declining the offer) in the L2 speaking environment, but this type of literal translation sacrifices the essential cultural meaning and epistemology involved in the cultural expression. Also, this could make the pragmatic meaning of the English statement incoherent as a whole (e.g., “What does your decision have to do with Mr. Tanaka?”). A student who used this type of literal translation strategy said,

I could not find a good expression (for “*enryo*”), so I just translated it into “No, I can’t.” I did it thinking this would work well in the United States where people say, “Yes” or “No” clearly. (*Originally in Japanese*)

Here, she was aware of the literal nature of her translation, but she chose to use the strategy believing that it would work well in the L2 context. However, her English sentence did not make sense since American English speakers who are not familiar with the Japanese expression could be confused about the reason

for the refusal (i.e., “Why can’t she?”). In other words, the literal strategy that she used did not fit into the pragmatic meaning of the entire sentence, and therefore, could cause a pragmalinguistic failure, that is, the failure to convey the intended pragmatic meaning in the L2.

Finally, a small number of the students used the *bicultural transformation strategy*, in which the students bridged different contextual and epistemological demands of the two languages in conveying the cultural meanings successfully. The students who used this strategy were able to transform the original Japanese sentences in ways that are understandable and appropriate in the sociolinguistic norm of English-based communication while approximating the original cultural meanings. For instance, one student translated the response in the first dialogue as “This gift is nothing special, however, I hope you will like it from me.” Though not perfect, this translation conveys not only the respect for the receiver’s perspective as a culturally originated meaning but also the speaker’s intention to be appropriate in an English-speaking context. The sentence structure of the translation deviated from the original sentence structure, but a substantial part of the meaning of the original expression was preserved in a sociolinguistically appropriate English statement. The following are the rationales provided by 2 students who attempted bicultural translations.

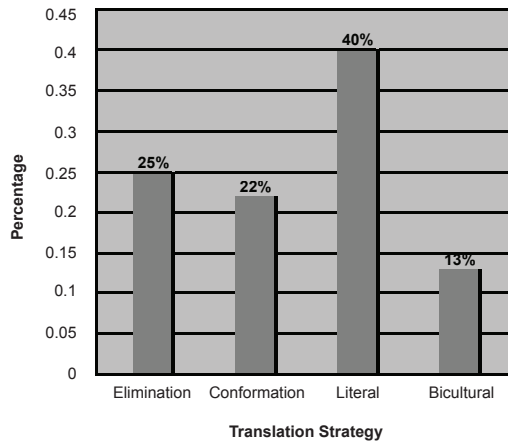
In this translation, I tried to get a holistic picture first, and tried not to limit my view on each word or phrase. Even if the meanings of the words were slightly different, I did my best to translate the expression so that the meanings conveyed by the whole expression would be equivalent. (*Originally in Japanese*)

I know that there are so many possible translations to approximate the meaning of unique expressions. It was not easy to determine which one I should use to best convey the cultural meanings of the Japanese expressions. (*Originally in Japanese*)

These rationales indicate that the students negotiated the correspondence between the word meanings and the “big picture” of the cultural meaning involved in the context of the original dialogue. In other words, the bicultural translations involved metacognitively executing epistemological and linguistic transformations of the meaning expressed in the cultural expressions. From here, it could be inferred that performing bicultural translations requires: (a) a deep knowledge about the sociolinguistic demands and repertoire of L2 communication, (b) a willingness to deviate from the linguistic structure of the original statement to preserve the cultural meanings of the original expression, and (c) metacognitive, epistemological, and linguistic competence to deconstruct the meaning of the cultural expressions and approximate them using English words.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of times each strategy was used across the four dialogues. There was no significant grammatical error that made the stu-

**Figure 1**  
**Percentages of Translation Strategies**



*\*Translation strategies for the second part of the dialogue (Statement B)*

dents' strategy indistinguishable except for one response, which was disqualified for not having a translation. The interrater reliability of these classifications between the first and the second authors was 95%. With an independent bilingual Japanese person whom we hired and trained for the reliability check, the interrater reliability was 89% with the first author and 95% with the second author, indicating the acceptable level of stability and conceptual soundness of these categorizations.

### **Discussion**

The study indicates that a large majority of the Japanese students struggled to translate L1-specific expressions that have no L2 equivalent expressions. The students employed different strategies to deal with the need to translate the L1-specific expressions: Some of them completely eliminated the cultural expressions or replaced them with commonly used English expressions with different meanings, while others used literal translations even though they were aware of the limitations of their translations. What is striking is the fact that many of the intermediate-level L2 learners living in the intercultural context did not attempt to express the rich cultural meanings involved in the L1-specific expressions. Even if they did, they often failed to convey the cultural meanings of the original expressions, as seen in the literal translations. Only a small number of the students were able to deconstruct and reconstruct the rich cultural meanings involved in the L1-specific expressions. In L2-based intercultural communication, what is lost seems to be the L2 learners' cultural epistemology and meanings internalized in their original culture.

Among the strategies that the students employed, the elimination and the conformation strategies could be seen as part of an avoidance strategy that L2 learners are known to employ in L2 communication from a sociopragmatic

point of view (Dornyei, 1995; Ellis, 1994; Schachter, 1974; Seliger, 1989). Based on this view, it could be assumed that the students attempted to avoid the risk of providing sociolinguistically inappropriate L2 phrases by suppressing the culturally valued communication scripts that had been internalized in their original culture, which could significantly impoverish their L2-based communication. Other students did not employ such avoidance strategies, but many of them ended up providing literal translations, failing to bridge the different sociolinguistic demands between the two languages.

Considering the students' comments on the bicultural translations, it seems that the degree to which L2 learners could translate the cultural meanings in L1-specific expressions into L2 expressions depends on the L2 learners' cognitive ability to deconstruct the cultural meanings inherent in the L1 expressions and reconstruct them into L2 expressions. Baker (1992) calls this process "cultural substitution" in the context of literary translation, in which translators substitute semantically complex culturally specific expressions with semantically similar expressions considering the sociolinguistic demands of the new language. As discussed before, a variety of translation theories in the literature suggest that this requires "unpacking" the cultural meanings of the original expressions and reconstructing the semantics of the original expression in ways that capture the essence of the cultural meanings, even if this may sacrifice the structural equivalence of the original sentences (Bassnett, 1991; Bell, 1991; Gentzler, 1993). In this study, only a small share (13%) of L2 learners were capable of conducting such epistemological transformations in the translation task.

This finding implies the importance of helping L2 learners develop competence to conduct bicultural transformations so that they are able to express cultural meanings of L1-specific expressions in L2. Then the question is what educators could actually do in their ESL/EFL classes to nurture this cognitive ability. One way to support learners to engage in developing bicultural competence could be to have L2 learners discuss the difference between L1 statements that include L1-specific expressions and L2 statements that are translated from these L1 statements using the elimination or conformation strategies. After that, the educator could guide the L2 learners to consider the best way to translate the L1 statements into sociolinguistically appropriate L2 expressions that involve the cultural value and nuances from the L1 expressions. During this process, the instructor could introduce a variety of translations of L1-specific expressions (e.g., "It's a worthless thing, but ..." "This gift is nothing special, but ..." etc., for *"tsumaranai mono desu ga"*) to the students and have them consider which translations best convey the original meanings and nuances of the L1 expressions.

Another possible approach to developing bicultural cognitive ability is to explicitly teach L2 learners about sociolinguistic assumptions shared in their native language and the new cultural contexts and to help them acquire diverse linguistic repertoires that are sociolinguistically appropriate in different L2-speaking contexts. For example, instructors could teach L2 learners about the cultural values and perspectives that underlie L1-specific expressions (e.g.,

the sense of modesty for *enryo*) and have them explore how the L1-specific expressions could be best expressed in English-based discourse through various examples that reflect the cultural values and perspectives with different degrees.

It may also be useful for the educator to focus some of the lessons on L1-specific expressions and help L2 learners translate them in different ways as they deconstruct and reconstruct the semantics and pragmatics of the expressions, followed by an activity to compare and contrast epistemological and cultural assumptions involved in these expressions. Unearthing some of these L1-specific expressions may involve engaging individual or group sessions with students to identify these expressions in their speech or written work and to look for possibilities of conveying these in their L2. For example, educators could have L2 students and native English speakers studying Japanese collaborate on translating L2-specific expressions and discuss how the L2-specific expressions could be best translated into appropriate English expressions.

Last, educators could also have L2 students practice actual L2-based communication using simulation or real-life scenarios, reflect on how they are able (or unable) to express what they want to express, and repractice the scenario by incorporating the expressions that involve L1-specific expressions. For example, they could have L2 students collaborate with native English speakers on translating TV or movie scripts from their country that include culturally specific expressions and codevelop the best translation as they discuss why a certain translation works better than other translations.

Though this study was conducted with a limited sample of L2 learners, that is, a small group of Japanese students learning English in the San Diego area, new studies could investigate how the above teaching innovations could help a wide variety of populations learning L2 in different cultural contexts express cultural meanings of L1-specific expressions in L2 communication.

### Conclusion

In L2-based communication, L2 learners are known to make strategic use of their first language, such as L1 lexis, discourse, and pragmatic routines that they acquired in their original culture (Ellis, 1994; Gass, 1989; Odlin, 1989; Schachter & Rutherford, 1979; Wildner-Bassett, 1994). Therefore, ignoring their mental resources and value systems nurtured in their original culture in L2 education could be a great disadvantage for second or foreign language learners and to the larger goal of authentic international and intercultural communication. This is particularly true for L2 learners who do not intend to eliminate their past and completely assimilate into the mainstream culture, but who intend to be members of the new culture with pride and confidence in themselves and with motivation to communicate their unique perspectives. Even though the students come to a foreign country to learn to communicate in the L2, it does not necessarily mean that they are willing to set aside their culturally nurtured perspectives and value systems in their attempt to communicate in their L2 with authenticity.

To assist the language learner to engage in rich L2-based intercultural communication, therefore, it would be important for us to establish a deep un-



derstanding of how to educate L2 learners to overcome the cross-linguistic differences in communicating their cultural epistemology and values. If L2 learners cannot convey rich cultural meanings in the target language, they could develop a fear of losing an authentic persona in L2-based communication, and intercultural communication could result in a mere exchange of superficial thoughts or simply sharing of a physical space without making any attempts to recognize or understand the various cultural worldviews that can be shared through the language. This is a scenario that we definitely need to avoid.

Promoting an authentic intercultural exchange of different views and understanding of the world must be a priority and an essential goal for our global society. This is particularly important because globalization of our societies results in an increasingly higher number of members living either permanently or temporarily in our communities with little or highly selective inclination to assimilate into the mainstream sociocultural norm while maintaining their cultural values, epistemology, and identity (Alba & Nee, 2005; Gibson, 1988; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). This paper calls for a further investigation into the ways in which educators can provide guidance to L2 learners in bridging the cultural and epistemological gap between the two cultures in their attempts at authentic intercultural communication. Without such attempts, our cross-cultural communication will always be “lost in translation.”

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