

Reflective Essay: Intercultural Business Communication Challenges Between the UK and Japan



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Working effectively across cultures requires more than speaking a common language; it involves recognising how values, expectations, and communication norms shape business interaction (Szkudlarek et al., 2020). In this reflective essay, I examine intercultural communication challenges that British professionals may encounter when collaborating with Japanese partners, focusing on how misunderstandings emerge, how they affect decision-making and teamwork, and what practical adjustments can reduce friction. This reflection progresses through a detailed consideration of intercultural business situations, my personal responses to them, an evaluation of their effectiveness, and a critical analysis of the underlying causes of communication breakdown. These experiences are interpreted through established intercultural communication frameworks, including Hall's high- and low-context communication, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, and Trompenaars' model of cultural difference, which are widely used to analyse international business interactions (Browaeys and Price, 2019; Ho, 2020; Lin and Lou, 2024). These frameworks are applied as interpretive tools rather than fixed cultural stereotypes, recognising that communication practices are also shaped by organisational norms, industry context and generational differences within national cultures (Szkudlarek et al., 2020; Mahadevan, 2023).

The first incident concerns a negotiation meeting in Tokyo where indirect responses created ambiguity about commitment. The second incident focuses on communication within a joint UK–Japan project team, where differences in feedback norms and meeting participation affected collaboration. For each case, I identify what I learned and translate it into specific behavioural strategies and recommendations for future UK–Japan business interactions.

In a negotiation meeting in Tokyo, I presented a proposal on behalf of a British company to potential Japanese clients. The meeting was an early-stage discussion aimed at clarifying scope and timelines. To progress efficiently, I asked direct questions such as whether a specific deadline was acceptable and whether we could confirm deliverables during the meeting. In response, several Japanese managers paused before replying and used phrases such as “we will do our best” and “we will consider it,” without offering an explicit yes or no. The meeting ended politely and cordially, yet no firm decision was confirmed. I left with the impression that we had reached informal agreement, whereas their closing remarks suggested the proposal would be reviewed internally before any commitment.

At the time, I felt confused and slightly frustrated because, in a UK business context, I would expect stakeholders to provide clearer answers even when they disagree. As the ambiguity continued, I became more anxious about leaving without a concrete outcome, which made me inclined to ask further direct questions. Simultaneously, I worried that my approach might have created discomfort for the Japanese managers by pressuring them to respond publicly in a way that could threaten harmony or face. Although the Japanese team appeared attentive and respectful, the absence of explicit commitment felt puzzling and left me uncertain about what the meeting had achieved.

Reflecting on the meeting, some aspects of the interaction were effective, while others were clearly problematic. On the positive side, the atmosphere remained respectful and relationship-oriented, which is important in Japanese business contexts. The Japanese team

demonstrated interest by engaging politely and requesting further information. However, from a communication effectiveness perspective, the meeting did not achieve its primary objective of clarifying commitment and timelines. I interpreted indirect and polite responses as tentative agreement, whereas the Japanese side likely viewed the meeting as an exploratory stage rather than a decision-making forum. My emphasis on direct clarification, although efficient from a British perspective, may have reduced mutual understanding by placing pressure on my counterparts to respond publicly.

This misunderstanding can be explained through several intercultural communication frameworks. Hall's high- and low-context theory helps to explain why indirect expressions and silence in Japanese business communication may convey meaning that is not immediately explicit to British counterparts (Ho, 2020; Broeder, 2025). In addition, Hofstede's concept of uncertainty avoidance highlights the preference in Japanese organisations for cautious decision-making and internal consensus before commitment, which contrasts with more direct British expectations of clarity and speed (Browaeys and Price, 2019; Lin and Lou, 2024).

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions further illuminate this situation. Japan's relatively high uncertainty avoidance encourages cautious decision-making and extensive internal consultation before commitment (Lin and Lou, 2024). In addition, higher power distance means that meeting participants may lack the authority to make binding decisions without senior approval (Browaeys and Price, 2019). My expectation of immediate clarity therefore underestimated the organisational constraints shaping Japanese business communication.

Trompenaars' model also provides insight. British business culture tends to be more universalist and task-oriented, prioritising efficiency and contractual clarity, whereas Japanese culture places greater emphasis on particularism and diffuse relationships, where trust precedes concrete commitments (Browaeys and Price, 2019). My focus on deadlines may therefore have appeared premature.

However, attributing this breakdown solely to national culture would be overly simplistic. As this was an early-stage negotiation, organisational procedures and consensus-based decision-making may have played a significant role regardless of cultural background. Industry norms and generational differences may also influence communication style, particularly in internationally exposed firms. Recognising such intra-cultural variation avoids stereotyping and supports a more nuanced analysis.

From this reflection, I concluded that the communication difficulties did not stem from negative intentions, but from mismatched expectations about how agreement is communicated. I learned that interpreting indirect Japanese responses through a British low-context lens led me to overestimate consensus and underestimate the importance of internal decision-making processes. More broadly, I realised that effective intercultural communication requires patience and comfort with ambiguity.

Based on this reflection, my action plan when working with Japanese partners is to use open-ended questions that invite reflection rather than immediate commitment, and to allow silence without attempting to fill it. I will clarify approval processes early and follow up meetings with written summaries to avoid misinterpretation. These actions will help align expectations, preserve harmony, and support more effective UK–Japan collaboration.

A second situation that deepened my understanding of intercultural communication occurred within a joint UK–Japan project team, where everyday email exchanges, meeting participation and feedback practices revealed contrasting expectations of clarity, hierarchy and face. These emails were polite by British standards but very concise. Responses from Japan were sometimes delayed and written in extremely formal, apologetic language, even when the issue was minor.

In one meeting, I gave what I considered constructive feedback to a Japanese junior colleague by suggesting that his report could be improved with more customer analysis. I made this comment in front of the team. Afterwards, I noticed he became much quieter and avoided taking initiative. A senior Japanese manager later explained that public criticism, however mild, could cause loss of face and discourage the individual.

I also observed that British team members were comfortable speaking up in meetings and even challenging me, whereas Japanese members rarely voiced concerns or disagreements in group settings. Yet in private, some of them shared thoughtful insights and raised issues that had not been mentioned in meetings.

Reflecting on my feelings at the time, this situation made me reconsider how I interpreted these communication patterns. Initially, I interpreted this behaviour as passivity or lack of confidence. I was frustrated that problems were not raised sooner and that people did not volunteer their ideas. After learning more about Japanese workplace culture, I felt a mixture of relief and regret. I realised I had unintentionally put colleagues under pressure and that my communication style had made honest dialogue more difficult for them.

Evaluating this experience, the collaboration was partially effective but communicatively inefficient. While the team ultimately achieved its project goals, this outcome required additional time and emotional effort that could have been reduced through greater intercultural awareness. British team members benefited from open discussion and rapid problem-solving, whereas Japanese colleagues contributed diligence and attention to detail. However, communication norms limited the timely expression of concerns, particularly in group settings. My public feedback, although intended as constructive, negatively affected

participation and confidence, suggesting that my communication approach did not sufficiently account for cultural expectations around face and hierarchy.

These communication challenges can be understood through differences in context, hierarchy and feedback norms. From Hall's perspective, Japanese workplace communication tends to be high-context, relying on implicit understanding and situational cues, while British communication is more low-context and explicit (Ho, 2020). This helps explain why Japanese team members were reluctant to raise concerns in group meetings but felt more comfortable sharing insights privately.

Hierarchy and collectivism also played a central role. Japanese workplace culture emphasises respect for seniority and group harmony, making public disagreement or criticism particularly sensitive (Dujarric, 2025). My public feedback to a junior colleague, though intended as constructive, risked causing loss of face and reduced psychological safety. This contrasts with British norms, where open feedback is often encouraged.

Trompenaars' framework further highlights differences in emotional restraint. Although both cultures are often described as emotionally neutral, Japanese professionals experience strong pressure to regulate emotion in order to preserve harmony (Merkin, 2018). Silence or withdrawal may therefore indicate discomfort rather than disengagement.

However, cultural background alone does not fully explain these dynamics. Organisational culture, leadership style, and individual personality also influence participation. Internationally experienced employees may communicate more directly regardless of nationality. Recognising such intra-cultural variation avoids stereotyping and supports more adaptive leadership.

Building on these reflections, several strategies emerge that can help British companies communicate more effectively with Japanese partners. Drawing on these reflections and relevant theory, I identify several strategies that British companies can adopt when working with Japanese partners. From this reflection, I concluded that limited participation and silence did not indicate disengagement, but culturally shaped strategies to maintain harmony and respect hierarchy. I also recognised that my default British communication style unintentionally restricted knowledge sharing within the team.

One important strategy is to prioritise relationship-building. British firms should accept that in Japan, trust precedes transactions. Investing time in relationship-building—through informal meetings, shared meals and regular visits—signals long-term commitment and reduces perceived risk (Browaeys and Price, 2019). This aligns with Japan's more particularist and diffuse orientation, where business and personal

relationships overlap. As a result of this experience, in future multicultural teams I will adapt my leadership approach by giving critical feedback privately and balancing it with explicit appreciation. I will also encourage participation through smaller group discussions and one-to-one conversations, creating channels that feel psychologically safe for all members.

A second strategy is to adapt directness and questioning style in communication. In negotiations and meetings, British managers should moderate directness. Open questions such as “How do you view this proposal?” invite discussion without forcing explicit opposition. Allowing silence gives Japanese partners space to think and consult internally (Oka, 2023; Nakabayashi, 2021). Learning to interpret softening phrases as possible disagreement helps prevent unrealistic assumptions.

It is also important to use cultural frameworks as guides rather than rigid stereotypes. Hofstede’s and Trompenaars’ models, updated through recent work, can be used to anticipate potential friction points, such as attitudes to hierarchy, time, rules and relationships (Lin and Lou, 2024; Greene, 2024; Browaeys and Price, 2019). However, they should be treated as starting points rather than rigid labels. Actual behaviour depends on industry, organisation and individual personality, so managers must combine these frameworks with observation and dialogue.

Developing cultural intelligence is another essential strategy. Given the complexity of UK–Japan collaboration, developing cultural intelligence is essential. Training programmes that combine conceptual input with simulations and reflection have been shown to improve adaptability and relationship-building in international business (Stoermer, Davies and Froese, 2021; Khan and Hassan, 2023; Skhiri et al., 2025). Encouraging staff to learn basic Japanese phrases, non-verbal norms and key etiquette (such as business card exchange) also demonstrates respect and helps build rapport.

A further strategy is to design communication channels that accommodate both cultures. British companies can support more effective communication by blending synchronous and asynchronous methods. Sharing agendas and documents in advance allows Japanese colleagues to prepare and consult internally. Follow-up emails summarising decisions give them a chance to correct misunderstandings in writing (Shen, 2024). Private one-to-one meetings, anonymous feedback tools or smaller group discussions can encourage those who are reluctant to speak in larger forums.

Finally, encouraging regular team reflection can help identify issues early and improve communication. Embedding structured reflective practices in team routines can help identify and resolve communication issues at an early stage, particularly in multicultural teams where

misunderstandings may otherwise remain unspoken (Szkudlarek et al., 2020). This approach treats intercultural collaboration as an ongoing learning process.

Reflecting on these two situations has deepened my understanding of intercultural business communication between the UK and Japan. The negotiation meeting illustrated how high-context, relationship-oriented Japanese communication can clash with low-context British expectations for clarity and speed. The project team example showed how different norms around hierarchy, feedback and participation can lead to misunderstandings even when everyone is well-intentioned.

By applying Gibbs' Reflective Cycle and drawing on recent literature in cross-cultural management, I have moved from frustration and confusion to a more nuanced appreciation of Japanese business culture. I have learned that effective communication in this context requires patience, cultural intelligence and willingness to adapt. If British companies invest in these capabilities and design their communication practices with Japanese norms in mind, they can transform potential barriers into sources of strength in long-term partnerships.

Based on these reflections, several recommendations can be made for British companies working with Japan.

1. Provide structured training on Japanese business culture and communication for all staff involved in Japanese projects.
2. Pair British and Japanese colleagues in mentoring or buddy schemes to promote mutual learning.
3. Adjust negotiation timelines to allow for consensus-building on the Japanese side rather than expecting immediate decisions.
4. Encourage leaders to adapt their feedback style, giving critical comments privately and balancing them with explicit appreciation.
5. Use multiple communication channels, combining meetings, written summaries and informal conversations to support both low- and high-context preferences.
6. Promote regular reflection within teams so that communication norms can be discussed openly and refined over time.

These steps will not remove all cultural differences, but they can create a more supportive environment in which British and Japanese partners understand each other better and collaborate more effectively.

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