

EPISODE 3 TRANSCRIPT

Hello, everyone. I'm Sonia Paul. Welcome to Shizuoka Speaks.

With this podcast, we talk with different people in Shizuoka City about their experiences with languages, culture, and education--all to find out what we can learn about Japan and the world, from their stories and views.

Last week, we discussed learning and ways of teaching English and Japanese. Today? We find out about how the country you come from may influence the way you learn.

Nishigai Sensei and Kobayashi Sensei, the Japanese and English teachers we talked with before, are back with their insight.

Sonia: Have you noticed differences in the way that students from different countries react to the same lesson?

Kobayashi: Good question, but difficult question, I would say...Yeah, we see, kind of, overall trend, based on the culture, definitely. Indonesian students kind of create their own harmony among their pals. Maybe it's because of their religion. You know, most of them are mostly Muslim. They kind of feel each other...which is quite unique to see for me. And for me, Chinese are more individual than I thought and very strong in their opinion.

Nishigai: Vietnamese as well...

Kobayashi: Vietnamese also strong? Mm, that's true. But maybe it's interesting, Even though they are strong, they try to be in groups, don't you think so? Not like Chinese, they are more independent, mm....

Sonia: And you mentioned that a lot of the activities that they like depend on the nationality too. Can you give an example?

Nishigai: Or personality. For example, Indonesians like singing. They have the...how do you say...

Kobayashi: How to say...They were born to be in rhythm. It's kind of natural for them, to kind of dance in rhythm, or dance in songs. They got good rhythm...but not Chinese, not Vietnamese, not Japanese...

Sonia: What about in the way that Japanese students learn? Like, do you think there are specific things in Japanese culture that cause Japanese students to learn a certain way, or to want to learn a certain way, do you think?

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Kobayashi: You know, I realized many East Asians, they like to speak out, even though their grammar is totally broken. They don't really care. And also, Indonesian as well, even though they have little bit grammatical mistakes. But still, they don't really care and they just keep on talking. But, you might notice that Japanese students, they are quite shy and they're more writing or reading-focused. So, for them to brush up for skills, they really have to have a sudden opportunity to speak out more to the discussion and more of listening, which Japanese students are missing now.

But why is that? Why are Japanese students so quiet? And why is silence sometimes preferred to over sound in Japanese culture?

Kobayashi: See, I--gomen--see, I read somewhere that Japan is agriculture-oriented country. So they need to keep harmony among groups to get big crops. They have to harvest this certain time, they have to take crops out in certain time and to get big crops, they have to keep the harmony. So that makes more group-oriented nationality. That's one thing I heard. They have to maintain harmony, so they have to keep quiet, you know.

Hmm. A group-oriented culture. Maybe this has something to do with the Japanese being quiet. But is there anything else?

Of course, every personality is different, and every person has a different learning style. But, research has shown that there are some overall trends within nationalities. And some East Asian countries--specifically, countries with a large Confucian tradition--tend to exhibit certain characteristics that make it seem as if the students from these countries are "quieter" or "shyer."

Let's back up. Confucianism is a philosophy that comes from the Chinese philosopher Confucius. Among many things, it includes ethical, moral, social, and political teachings. And it's greatly impacted traditional Chinese thinking. In turn, China has influenced other countries and territories with this thinking--Vietnam, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia...and yes, Japan.

One of the most important practices in Confucianism is a great respect for elders and an intolerance for shame. In education, this translates into an enormous deference for teachers. And students are less inclined to guess or just try something for fear of making a mistake.

Needless to say, the image of an Asian student simply memorizing facts is not too uncommon in Western pop culture.

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But what about Asians learning in other Asian countries? For example, the Asian students--who are mostly from southeast Asia--who study at Kotoba, the Japanese language institute here in Shizuoka City?

Hakamada Sensei, the principal of the school, gave us her views.

Sonia: Do you think that the cultures of the students and the learning styles in their home countries influence the way they try to learn Japanese?

Hakamada: Oh, well. In some countries, the students should still....sit still. And their attitude is very passive...So, coming to Japan, to our institute, the method is quite different. The teacher--of course, the teacher talks. They have to explain, but the basic thing is just the students should study themselves. So, if they don't have any questions, they cannot get any answers. So...we want the students to take the positive attitude.

Sonia: Yeah, actually, that was another question that I had because in my interviews with different students, they mentioned that in their home countries too, the way they learned was mostly lecture. And here, they often have to express their opinions and discuss more in class. And I wondered if that was particular to this school because I've noticed that in some Japanese schools, it's more similar to that other style of listen to the teacher and then wait until later to ask. So is it just for this school, or is it more of a Japanese style of teaching?

Hakamada: The Japanese style, you know, used to be the same as that, I think. But then gradually, it has been changed, I think. And Japanese people, too...we are not good at...you know, um, being being positive, being active...But then...I am an Asian. So...I feel much easier to be passive, to be told by the teacher what to do, or something like that. Much, maybe much more comfortable if I can stay still and just listen to the teacher. It's much more comfortable and easier, but I don't think it's good, so...the most important thing is to have our own opinions...build up their own opinions is very important for the Asian students. They have no customs to think themselves. This is the most important thing for us, to change their ways of thinking.

"Build up their own opinions." Wait a minute. Doesn't this sound pretty similar to what Susan said about kokoro development in Japanese public schools?

Susan: Not so many students, but some students don't have their opinions. "What do you think," when I ask them, "What do you think," so they can't answer. "I don't know,"

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only "I don't know." But that's the problem. Maybe the educational department thinks that that is the problem, so we have to...grow up their feeling, or thinking.

*So maybe the image of the Asian student memorizing facts doesn't include Japan after all...or at the very least, Japan doesn't **want** it to anymore. And it's working really hard to change that image--not only for Japanese students, but for other students as well.*

But you have to admit--sometimes, in order to learn, you really do have to memorize some things. Take kanji, for instance. Every character has so many little strokes and details. You have to memorize a kanji to know its meaning. Does this mean, then, that students who come from countries that emphasize memorization less have more trouble with learning kanji?

It's a hard question to answer. From Hakamada Sensei's experience? The answer is, unfortunately, yes.

Hakamada: For the students from China and Korea and Taiwan, and um, Myanmar and Vietnam is okay...And um...Indian people are okay. They study hard. They do their best to master kanjis too, but... kanji is a very hard hurdle to get over...Some other countries, they are very, very weak at learning kanjis. No matter how long they stay in Japan, they cannot read kanjis. They cannot write kanjis. But then listening ability is very high, so they can communicate so good, so well.

I feel like Hakamada Sensei has just crushed my soul. And I'm not even a serious Japanese language student!

So imagine if you spent years studying Japanese, or any other language. LONGER And then your teacher, or worse--your school principal--confessed that mastery might just be impossible. How would you feel?

Of course, terrible! But wait--Hakamada Sensei says not to give up just yet...

Hakamada: The most important thing for communication is not the language itself. The most important thing is to try to understand how students live in their own countries, why they want to come to Japan...how they, and we can connect each other, understand each other--this is the most important thing.

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The most important thing for communication is not language. It's understanding.

But is there actual understanding going on? What do the students who come here precisely to learn Japanese have to say about that? And what about foreign or half-Japanese students who come to Japan from another country at a younger age? They have to master kanji and Japanese to survive in a Japanese school...to communicate...and ultimately, to be understood and to understand. But can they do it?

We'll tackle those topics and more in the coming weeks. Thank you to Hakamada Sensei, Nishigai Sensei, and Kobayashi Sensei for sharing their insight. For Shizuoka Speaks, I'm Sonia Paul. Thank you for listening.