

# POLITENESS AND SILENCE IN JAPANESE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract.** Intercultural communication is frequently examined within formal educational, institutional, or workplace contexts, while everyday intercultural encounters during travel remain comparatively underexplored. This paper presents an autoethnographic reflection on intercultural communication experiences during a short visit to Japan, focusing on how cultural norms and communicative practices shape social interaction in public and service-oriented spaces. Drawing on personal observations, reflective journaling, and interpretive analysis, the study examines how silence, politeness, indirectness, and non-verbal communication mediate meaning-making between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Guided by intercultural communication frameworks and politeness theory, the paper explores how culturally embedded practices such as bowing, queuing etiquette, minimal verbal exchanges, and technology-assisted communication influence interactional expectations and perceptions. The analysis demonstrates that effective intercultural communication extends beyond linguistic proficiency and requires sensitivity toward implicit social cues, contextual appropriateness, and culturally preferred interactional styles. The findings further highlight the role of adaptive communicative strategies and reflective awareness in reducing misunderstanding and promoting respectful engagement across cultures. In addition, the study underscores the pedagogical value of travel-based autoethnography in fostering intercultural competence, critical self-reflection, and context-aware communication practices in English as a lingua franca settings within increasingly globalised and technology-mediated societies.

**Keywords:** *autoethnography, intercultural communication, politeness, Japan, technology-mediated communication*

## Introduction

Global travel increasingly places individuals in contact with unfamiliar linguistic and cultural environments, making intercultural communication a routine aspect of everyday life (Aljarelah, 2024). Szabo (2025) stated that while much research has focused on intercultural interaction in professional, educational, or migratory contexts, less attention has been given to informal, everyday encounters experienced by short-term visitors. Yet such encounters often involve complex negotiations of meaning, politeness, and cultural norms (Rai, 2025). Japan presents a particularly rich context for examining intercultural communication. Often characterised as a high-context culture, Japanese communication practices emphasise indirectness, harmony, and non-verbal cues (Hall and Swaine, 1976). For tourists from different cultural backgrounds, these practices may initially appear unfamiliar or ambiguous, requiring heightened sensitivity and adaptability. Beyond linguistic differences, intercultural encounters are also shaped by deeply embedded cultural expectations regarding appropriate behaviour, turn-taking, and expressions of respect. In high-context societies such as Japan, meaning is frequently conveyed through silence, shared understanding, and subtle contextual cues rather than explicit verbalisation. Silence, for instance, may function not as a

communicative breakdown but as a meaningful and socially appropriate response, reflecting politeness, attentiveness, or respect.

Similarly, indirectness in communication can serve to maintain interpersonal harmony and avoid potential conflict. For short-term tourists unfamiliar with these norms, such communicative practices may be misinterpreted, leading to uncertainty or communicative discomfort (Gan, 2025). In addition to cultural norms, the increasing reliance on digital technologies has transformed how individuals navigate intercultural communication. Mobile translation applications, navigation tools, and digital platforms now mediate many interactions, particularly in contexts where language barriers are present. These technologies can facilitate communication by providing immediate linguistic support; however, they may also reshape interactional dynamics, potentially reducing opportunities for direct engagement or altering the authenticity of communicative exchanges. Yu and Meng (2026) believed that the intersection between traditional communication practices and technology-mediated interaction thus presents an important area of inquiry, particularly in travel contexts where both elements are highly salient. This study adopts an autoethnographic approach to explore intercultural communication as experienced during a holiday visit to Japan in November. Autoethnography allows for a thorough examination of personal experience while situating it within broader cultural and theoretical frameworks. Through reflexive analysis, the study captures the researcher's evolving understanding of communication practices encountered in everyday settings. The focus is placed on routine interactions in public spaces such as transportation systems, shops, and restaurants, where spontaneous and unstructured communication frequently occurs. The guiding question shape the inquiry: How are silence, politeness, and indirect communication experienced in everyday intercultural encounters in Japan? By foregrounding lived experience and reflexive analysis, this study seeks to contribute to intercultural communication research by highlighting the significance of micro-level interactions in shaping cross-cultural understanding. Furthermore, it underscores the pedagogical value of travel-based reflection, particularly in language education and intercultural competence development. Such insights are especially relevant for educators and learners in English language contexts, where developing sensitivity to diverse communicative norms is increasingly essential in a globalised world.

## ***Literature review***

### ***Intercultural communication and high-context cultures***

Intercultural communication involves interaction between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, where shared assumptions about meaning cannot be taken for granted. Halls (1976) distinction between high-context and low-context cultures is particularly relevant to the Japanese context. In high-context cultures, meaning is often conveyed implicitly through context, shared understanding, and non-verbal behaviour rather than explicit verbal expression. In contrast, low-context cultures tend to prioritise clarity, directness, and explicit information exchange. This fundamental difference can create challenges in intercultural encounters, particularly for individuals who are unfamiliar with interpreting implicit cues or managing communicative ambiguity. Japanese communication practices have been widely associated with values such as harmony (*wa*), respect, and social order. These values shape interactional norms, including avoidance of direct confrontation, careful attention to hierarchy, and

sensitivity to others' feelings. Ye (2024) in her research has noted that communication in Japan often relies on situational awareness, relational context, and an understanding of shared social expectations. Non-verbal elements such as eye contact, pauses, and body language play a significant role in conveying meaning. As a result, silence may function as an active communicative strategy rather than a passive absence of speech (Sato, 2024). For intercultural interlocutors, particularly those from low-context cultures, interpreting such silence requires a shift from message-focused communication to context-sensitive interpretation.

### ***Politeness and pragmatics***

Politeness theory, particularly the work of Brown and Levinson (1987), provides a useful lens for understanding how speakers manage face in interaction. Politeness strategies aim to minimise face-threatening acts and maintain social harmony (Shen et al., 2023). Within this framework, individuals employ positive politeness (to build rapport) and negative politeness (to respect autonomy), depending on the social context. However, the universality of this model has been debated, particularly in relation to non-Western contexts where cultural norms of politeness may differ significantly. According to Harumi and Bao (2025), in Japanese contexts, politeness is often enacted through indirectness, honorifics, silence, and non-verbal gestures rather than explicit verbal mitigation alone. The use of honorific language (keigo) reflects hierarchical relationships and social distance, requiring speakers to make continuous adjustments based on status, age, and situational context. Furthermore, Soomro and Aqdas (2023) believed that politeness is not merely a linguistic feature but a broader socio-cultural practice embedded in daily interaction. The emphasis on maintaining harmony often leads to the avoidance of direct refusals or disagreement, which may instead be expressed through ambiguity or hesitation. Concepts such as *tatemae* (public façade) and *honne* (private feelings) further illustrate how communicative behaviour is shaped by social expectations rather than personal expression. These dual layers of communication highlight the complexity of interpreting meaning in Japanese interactions, as what is said may not fully reflect what is intended (Sato, 2024). For intercultural communicators, understanding this distinction is crucial to avoiding misinterpretation and developing pragmatic competence.

### ***Silence as communication***

Silence has been increasingly recognised in intercultural communication research as a meaningful and culturally embedded communicative resource (Shahwan, 2025). According to Nakano et al. (2022), in high-context cultures such as Japan, silence can signal respect, agreement, contemplation, or emotional sensitivity. Rather than indicating disengagement, silence may demonstrate attentiveness and relational awareness (Sato, 2024). This contrasts with many low-context cultures, where silence may be perceived negatively, often associated with uncertainty or lack of participation. Harumi (2024) suggests that culturally appropriate use of silence requires an understanding of timing, relational dynamics, and situational context. For instance, pauses in conversation may allow interlocutors to process information or avoid interrupting others. In service encounters, silence may accompany efficient, non-intrusive interaction, reflecting professionalism and respect for personal space. For

short-term tourists, these patterns can initially be disorienting, as expectations of continuous verbal interaction may not be met.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study adopts a qualitative autoethnographic design, positioning the researcher as both participant and observer. The approach is particularly suitable for examining informal, transient interactions that are difficult to capture through traditional data collection methods (Chand, 2025). Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach that uses personal experience as a primary source of data to understand cultural phenomena (Cooper and Lilyea, 2022). By combining autobiography and ethnography, autoethnography allows researchers to connect individual experiences to broader social and cultural frameworks. Reflexivity, transparency, and theoretical engagement are central to establishing credibility in autoethnographic work. Data for this study consist of reflective recollections of everyday experiences during a holiday visit to Japan. These include interactions in public transportation, retail settings, dining establishments, and tourist spaces. Reflections are based on memory, informal mental notes, and post-travel reflection rather than systematic fieldnotes. A thematic analysis was conducted by identifying recurring patterns across reflections. Experiences were first described in detail and then interpreted through relevant theoretical lenses. Ethical considerations were addressed by avoiding identifiable individuals or sensitive situations.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Silence as communication***

One of the most striking aspects of public interaction in Japan was the pervasive presence of silence. On trains and buses, silence was not merely the absence of speech but a shared communicative norm. Passengers refrained from phone conversations, spoke softly if necessary, and respected the collective quiet. From an outsider's perspective, this silence initially felt unusual, even uncomfortable. However, it gradually became apparent that silence functioned as a form of politeness, signalling respect for others' personal space. Rather than indicating disengagement, silence communicated consideration and social awareness. This observation aligns with the notion of high-context communication, as proposed by Halls (1976), where meaning is embedded in context rather than explicitly verbalised. Silence, in this sense, becomes a culturally appropriate response that reflects attentiveness and restraint. In several instances, such as waiting in queues or navigating crowded train platforms, silence appeared to facilitate social order and efficiency. The absence of verbal interaction reduced potential disruption, allowing individuals to coexist harmoniously within shared spaces. Over time, the researcher's perception of silence shifted from discomfort to appreciation. What was initially interpreted as social distance came to be understood as a form of collective respect. This transformation highlights the importance of intercultural adaptation, where individuals learn to reinterpret communicative behaviours through culturally informed lenses. Silence, therefore, should not be viewed as a communicative void but as a meaningful and functional component of interaction within the Japanese context.

### *Politeness beyond language*

Politeness in Japan was frequently enacted through non-verbal means. Bowing, subtle gestures, and attentive body orientation often replaced verbal expressions of courtesy. Service encounters, even when conducted with minimal spoken language, were marked by smooth coordination and mutual understanding. Indirectness was also evident in responses to requests. Assistance was offered generously, yet refusals or limitations were communicated subtly, often through hesitation or alternative suggestions. These practices align with face-saving strategies that prioritise harmony over directness. From the perspective of politeness theory, as developed by Brown and Levinson (1987), such interactions demonstrate the use of negative politeness strategies aimed at minimising imposition and respecting social boundaries. However, the Japanese context extends beyond purely linguistic strategies, incorporating embodied and situational practices that convey respect and attentiveness. For example, prolonged eye contact was often avoided, while physical gestures such as bowing conveyed sincerity and acknowledgment without the need for extensive verbalisation. In retail and dining settings, politeness was highly ritualised, creating a predictable and reassuring interactional structure. Staff members anticipated customer needs, often responding before requests were fully articulated. This anticipatory behaviour reflects a culturally embedded orientation towards empathy and social harmony. For the researcher, these experiences underscored that politeness is not solely dependent on language proficiency but is deeply rooted in cultural norms and shared expectations.

### *Navigating language barriers*

Despite limited shared language, communication breakdowns were rare. Gestures, visual cues, and simplified expressions facilitated interaction. Interestingly, the absence of fluent English did not appear to hinder politeness or efficiency; instead, both parties adapted their communicative behaviour to the situation. This experience challenges the assumption that linguistic proficiency alone determines communicative success. Cultural awareness and willingness to adapt emerged as equally important components of intercultural competence. In many instances, communication was achieved through multimodal strategies. Pointing to menus, using maps, demonstrating actions, or repeating key words enabled mutual understanding. These strategies highlight the dynamic nature of communication, where meaning is co-constructed through available resources rather than dependent on a shared linguistic system. Such interactions also revealed a high degree of patience and cooperation, as interlocutors worked collaboratively to overcome potential misunderstandings. Furthermore, moments of communicative difficulty often led to increased creativity and engagement. Rather than causing frustration, these situations fostered a sense of shared effort and mutual respect. The researcher observed that interlocutors frequently adjusted their speech rate, simplified vocabulary, or incorporated gestures to enhance comprehension. These adaptive behaviours illustrate the role of interactional flexibility in successful intercultural communication.

A key outcome of this autoethnographic inquiry is the researcher's evolving understanding of intercultural communication. Initial experiences of uncertainty, discomfort, and ambiguity gradually gave way to increased confidence and cultural sensitivity. This process of adaptation involved not only learning to interpret unfamiliar communicative practices but also adjusting one's own behaviour to align with local

norms. The findings suggest that effective intercultural communication requires more than linguistic competence; it demands openness, reflexivity, and a willingness to embrace difference. Everyday interactions, though seemingly mundane, provide valuable opportunities for developing these competencies. Through engagement with silence, indirectness, and technology-mediated communication, the researcher gained deeper insight into the complexity of meaning-making across cultures. Collectively, these findings reinforce the importance of viewing intercultural communication as a dynamic, context-dependent process shaped by cultural norms, individual agency, and technological affordances. They also highlight the pedagogical potential of travel experiences in fostering intercultural awareness, particularly for language learners and educators seeking to navigate increasingly globalised communication environments. The findings illustrate how intercultural communication in Japan extends beyond spoken language to include silence, non-verbal cues, and technological mediation. These observations support existing literature on high-context communication and politeness while offering experiential insights into how such practices are enacted in everyday settings. In line with the high-context communication framework proposed by Halls (1976), meaning in Japanese interactions is often embedded within context, shared understanding, and implicit cues rather than explicit verbalisation. The present findings reinforce this perspective by demonstrating how silence, in particular, operates as a socially meaningful and culturally appropriate communicative resource.

Recent studies further highlight the complexity of silence as an active communicative strategy rather than a passive absence of speech. For instance, Harumi and Bao (2025) as well as Harumi (2024) emphasise that silence can function as reflective agency, enabling individuals to process meaning, maintain harmony, and negotiate interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Shahwan (2025) conceptualises silence as a pragmatic tool that conveys intention, politeness, and emotional sensitivity across contexts. The experiences documented in this study align with these perspectives, illustrating how silence in Japanese public spaces contributes to social order, mutual respect, and interactional efficiency. Additionally, Sato (2024) notes that silence among Japanese speakers is often linked to cultural norms surrounding appropriateness and willingness to communicate, further supporting the interpretation of silence as culturally situated behaviour. Politeness, as observed in this study, extends beyond linguistic expression to encompass embodied and context-sensitive practices. The findings resonate with the foundational work of Brown and Levinson (1987), which conceptualises politeness as a strategy for managing face and maintaining social harmony. However, the Japanese context illustrates that politeness is not limited to verbal mitigation strategies but is deeply embedded in non-verbal behaviour, indirectness, and social conventions. Studies by Rai (2025) and Shen et al. (2023) further support this view, highlighting how politeness is shaped by cultural expectations, social hierarchies, and interactional norms. In high-context cultures, indirect expressions and avoidance of confrontation are key mechanisms for preserving interpersonal harmony (Nakano et al., 2022).

Moreover, the distinction between *tatemae* and *honne* underscores the layered nature of communication in Japan, where public expressions may differ from private intentions. This aligns with broader intercultural communication research suggesting that communicative competence involves not only linguistic proficiency but also the ability to interpret implicit meanings and navigate culturally specific norms (Aljarelah, 2024; Soomro and Aqdas, 2023). The findings of this study reinforce the idea that

successful intercultural interaction depends on sensitivity to these nuances, particularly in contexts where meaning is not directly articulated. At a broader level, the study contributes to the understanding of intercultural communication as a dynamic and adaptive process. As noted by Gan (2025), individuals continuously negotiate their identities and communicative behaviours in response to new cultural environments. The experiences documented in this study reflect this adaptive process, where both the researcher and interlocutors adjust their communicative strategies to achieve mutual understanding. Furthermore, the use of an autoethnographic approach, as outlined by Cooper and Lilyea (2022), allows for a reflexive exploration of these experiences, highlighting the value of personal narratives in uncovering nuanced aspects of intercultural interaction. Overall, the discussion underscores that intercultural communication in Japan is shaped by an intricate interplay of silence, politeness, and technology. These elements collectively demonstrate that communication extends beyond language to include cultural practices, social expectations, and contextual interpretation. By situating the findings within existing literature, this study not only confirms established theories but also provides situated insights into how these dynamics are experienced in real-world travel contexts.

## Conclusion

This autoethnographic study highlights how intercultural communication in Japan is shaped by silence and politeness. Through reflective analysis of everyday encounters, this study demonstrates that effective communication often depends less on shared language and more on cultural sensitivity and adaptability. By foregrounding lived experience, the study contributes to intercultural communication research and underscores the value of reflective travel as a site of informal learning. The findings reinforce the notion that communication is a multidimensional process that extends beyond linguistic exchange to include contextual awareness, non-verbal behaviour, and socially embedded norms. In the Japanese context, silence and indirectness emerge not as barriers but as meaningful communicative strategies that sustain harmony and mutual respect. Similarly, politeness is enacted through both verbal and embodied practices, requiring individuals to interpret subtle cues and adjust their behaviour accordingly. These insights suggest that intercultural competence involves the ability to navigate ambiguity, interpret implicit meanings, and respond appropriately within culturally specific contexts.

Furthermore, this study highlights the growing role of technology as a mediator of intercultural communication. While digital tools such as translation applications facilitate interaction and reduce linguistic barriers, they do not replace the need for cultural understanding. Instead, technology functions as a complementary resource that supports communication while still requiring users to engage with contextual and relational aspects of interaction. This underscores the importance of balancing technological reliance with human sensitivity in intercultural encounters. From a pedagogical perspective, the study offers valuable implications for language education and intercultural training. It suggests that developing communicative competence should go beyond grammar and vocabulary to include exposure to real-life interactional norms, such as managing silence, interpreting indirectness, and using non-verbal cues effectively. Incorporating reflective practices, including travel-based or simulated intercultural experiences, can enhance learners' awareness of cultural differences and

prepare them for authentic communication in global contexts. Finally, the autoethnographic approach adopted in this study demonstrates the value of reflexivity in understanding intercultural experiences. By critically examining personal encounters, the research provides nuanced insights into the challenges and adaptations involved in cross-cultural communication. Future research may build on this work by exploring similar experiences across different cultural settings or by integrating multiple participant perspectives to broaden the scope of analysis. Overall, the study affirms that intercultural communication is not merely a linguistic process but a dynamic, context-sensitive practice shaped by culture, technology, and human interaction.

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### **Conflict of interest**

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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