

# **An Analysis of Language and Intercultural Competence in Japanese Expatriate Adjustment to Foreign Postings**

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## **Abstract**

Research in the area of expatriate adjustment for nearly three decades has concentrated on the adjustment experiences of Western expatriates and has suggested effective management practices for host country employees (see, for example, Du-Babcock, 2000). This paper attempts to broaden this area of research by focusing on how expatriates from Japan adjust to their overseas assignments.

The current study investigates how cultural distance and -language competence (host-country and English) impact Japanese expatriate's adjustment to their overseas assignments. The data were collected in two multinational corporations headquartered in Japan. The objectives are to examine how (a) language (host-country language and English) competence affects the Japanese expatriate working in postings outside of the country origin during their overseas assignments and (b) culture affects expatriate adjustment of overseas assignments.

## **Introduction**

Globalization has created new business opportunities for multinational corporations (MNCs) (Black et al., 1999). To facilitate market expansion and manage their subsidiaries, MNCs use expatriation strategies (Selmer, 1995). Expatriation has often been viewed as an effective way to establish effective communication and maintain knowledge sharing between headquarters and subsidiaries in MNCs (Bennett, Aston, & Colquhoun, 2000; Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012). Harvey and Moeller (2009) found that in 2008 more than 850,000 subsidiaries of multinational corporations (MNCs) were operating globally. Furthermore, 65 percent of MNCs surveyed in a Brookfield Global Relocation Services survey (2012) were expecting expatriate manager numbers to rise steadily over the next decade. Expatriate managers continue to be a valued means for promoting corporate ideology to operations in foreign subsidiaries, and thereby having a direct impact on organizational performance.

While the past 25 years of research on expatriate adjustment has led to thorough and insightful theories regarding impacts of culture and intercultural competence on Western-focused expatriate adjustment, little research has specifically examined issues of adjustment of Asian expatriates (see Du-Babcock & Xu, 2011; Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012). Of factors that are likely to affect expatriate adjustment, differences in culture, communication styles, and language are identified as important (e.g., Dowling & Welch, 2004; Peltokorpi, 2010; Welch, Welch, & Piekkari, 2005). Rao and Hashimoto (1996) examined how culture affected Japanese expatriates' communicating with local Canadian employees. Studies by Peltokorpi (2007, 2010) also showed that differences in communication

styles and cultural values created barriers between expatriates and local employees in subsidiaries (see also Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012).

Another stream of literature advocates that a shared foreign language may not guarantee error-free understanding because cultural values manifested through communication styles tend to act as barriers to decoding explicit and implicit messages (Henderson, 2005). Cultural values consequently have an intervening influence on message encoding and decoding between interlocutors. An individual's ability and willingness to communicate through linguistic boundaries is related to the individual's language proficiency. For example, second-language speakers are found to contribute fewer ideas, take less active roles in communicative interactions, change and simplify the content, and ignore difficult-to-express subjects (Du-Babcock, 1999, 2006a, 2013; Du-Babcock & Tanaka, 2013; Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari, & Santti, 2005). Although culture and language can have a different influence on intercultural communication, most international management scholars continue to examine these aspects independently (Peltokorpi, 2010).

Scholars (e.g., Peltokorpi, 2010; Welch et al., 2005) proposed that language is sufficiently important in its own right to warrant a more focused treatment. The separation of language from culture has enabled researchers to demonstrate the strong, consistent influence of language on a wide range of issues in MNCs, such as intercultural communication (Peltokorpi, 2007), information flows (Goodall & Roberts, 2003), knowledge transfer (M'akel'a, Kalla, & Piekkari, 2007), social identity (Lauring, 2008), power and advancement (San Antonio, 1987), and power and language policy decisions (Tanaka, 2008; Vaara et al., 2005, Charles et al., 2005).

In related expatriate research, low host-country language proficiency is found to have a negative influence on cross-cultural adjustment (Peltokorpi, 2008; Selmer, 2006; Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012), job satisfaction (Parker & McEvoy, 1993), and intentions to complete expatriate assignments (Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999). All these studies clearly show that languages matter.

Although the importance of language has been acknowledged in intercultural business communication (see, for example, Babcock & Du-Babcock, 2001; Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996, 2007a; Du-Babcock, 2007b), it has been weakly integrated in intercultural business communication and cross-cultural competence literature (Peltokorpi, 2010). Intercultural business communication research shows, for example, that common sources of miscommunication in Western subsidiaries in Asia are differences in status sensitivity (Stage, 1999) and face-saving behavior (Park, Hwang, & Harrison, 1996). In cross-cultural competence literature, expatriates' cultural adaptations are expected to facilitate intercultural interactions in foreign subsidiaries (Clausen, 2010; Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012). Study by Clausen (2010) on Danish-Japanese corporate relations suggests that Danish business people with higher levels of cross-cultural competence are able to move beyond generic stereotypes and gain a more elaborate awareness of their partners and to be effective in their intercultural encounters.

While culture and language often influence intercultural communication, researchers have focused on national cultures for two reasons. First, due to the strong influence of cross-cultural research, languages have often been overlooked because interlocutors are assumed to be either fully bilingual or share a common language (Babcock & Du-Babcock, 2001; Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996). The use of English as lingua franca in international business has been offered as another reason why language has remained a peripheral issue in international management literature (Du-Babcock, 2013; Harzing & Feely, 2008; Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 1999/1997). Language differences also have been regarded as a minor functional problem that easily can be solved by translators, translation software, or linguistically competent employees (Welch et al., 2005). The cross-disciplinary nature of the subject combined with

limited cross-fertilization of ideas beyond disciplinary boundaries also may explain the little research on language (Harzing & Feely, 2008).

Of language factors that are likely to influence expatriate's adaptation, host-language competence has been increasingly recognized in expatriate studies as important in facilitating expatriate adjustment (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002; Graf, 2004; Peltokorpi, 2010; Selmer, 2006; Xia & Feng, 2009; Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012). Selmer (2006) noted that the Chinese language ability of Western expatriates had a positive association with adjustment factors (see also Du-Babcock, 2000). Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999) also reflected on the importance of language competence in the expatriates' role, stating that, "In the host country, the expatriates become the interface, through language, between headquarters and the local subsidiary" (p.386). All these studies suggest that expatriates should make effort to learn one foreign language, with priority given to the language of the host country or to English (as lingua franca) in order to perform at a satisfactory level on their overseas assignments (Selmer, 2006; Xia & Feng, 2009).

In view of the trend that an increasingly large number of MNCs in Asia have expanded their global markets and operations at high speed and on a large scale and that Asia has increasingly played an important role in international business, this pilot empirical study collected and analyzed a series of in-depth interviews on how Japanese expatriates adapted to their overseas assignments in the US and Hong Kong. The study attempts to examine the effects of language and culture on Japanese expatriate adjustment during the overseas assignments. As noted by Hofstede (2001), Japan and Hong Kong share a similar cultural orientation as collectivistic societies with varying degree of English-language proficiency where English is spoken as a foreign (Japan) and second language (Hong Kong). Language and culture are two important lens through which to view expatriate adaptation to a new culture. Given the shared cultural background of Japan and Hong Kong, one would expect that Japanese expatriates adjust better to life and work in Hong Kong than in Western countries, such as US. Hence, the purpose of this study is to examine the adjustment of Japanese expatriates in Hong Kong and in the US. The definition of expatriates in this respect refers to an employee of an organization who is sent on a temporary work assignment in another country from their home country for a period of three- to- five years. The present study seeks to explain how expatriates adapt to two contrasting cultural backgrounds. While Hong Kong is categorized as collectivist society which has closer cultural distance, the US is an individualistic society with larger cultural distance.

In examining the impact of language and culture, the current study attempts to explore the integration of the language-based communication zones theory (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996, 2001, 2007a) and expatriate's overseas adjustment (Du-Babcock, 2000; Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012). Drawing on the language-based communication zones theory (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996) and expatriate's overseas adaptation, the purposes of this study consequently are to address the following research questions: (1) How does language competence (i.e., host- country language and English) affects the Japanese expatriate's overseas adaptation; (b) how cultural competencies influence intercultural communication in foreign subsidiaries; and (3) What tactics, if any, does the Japanese expatriate use to facilitate intercultural communication in foreign subsidiaries?

### **Review of Literature**

To facilitate the qualitative analysis, factors that are likely to be major determinants in influencing expatriates' overseas assignment are reviewed.

## Factors in Expatriate Adjustment to Overseas Assignments

Extensive research has examined expatriate adjustment over the past three decades. Since the late 1970s, approximately 600 articles dealing with expatriate adjustment have been published. Various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology have identified factors contributing to the success of an international assignment. Classic studies include research by Adler (1975, 1987), Black (1988), Mendenhall and Oddou (1985), and Ward, Okura, Kennedy, and Kojima (1998). These researchers used process theories to describe variations in adjustment to another culture. Other studies of expatriate effectiveness (e.g., Barna, 1983; Weissman & Furnham, 1987) identify stressors and explain acculturation strategies for reducing stress in adapting to a new culture. Not until recently have researchers begun to explore expatriate effectiveness from the perspective of cultural adjustment factors. This stream of research has examined the relationships of the interactions between expatriates and host country nationals and effectiveness (e.g., Caligiuri, 1997; Earley & Gibson, 2002; Kraimer et al, 2001; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001).

Literature on expatriate adjustment (e.g., Aycan, 1997; Black, 1988; Feldman & Thomas, 1992) has shown that expatriate adjustment to a host country is a multi-dimensional process. Black (1988) specifies three domains: adjustment to work, adjustment to the general environment, and adjustment to social interaction with host nationals. These three dimensions of adjustment have been supported by empirical studies (Black & Stephens, 1989; Black et. al, 1999; McEvoy & Parker, 1995). Other research into the factor of interaction with host nationals (e.g., Black & Stephen, 1989; Caligiuri, 2000; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; McEvoy & Parker, 1995; Selmer, 2006) has also confirmed that expatriates who develop close relationships with host country nationals (HCNs) are generally better adjusted and more productive in their international assignments. Bell and Harrison (1996) noted that interacting with HCNs is a means of ameliorating culture shock among expatriates. Aycan (1997) explains that expatriates' interaction with others in the new culture enables them to learn about appropriate behavior in both work and non-work contexts, which enhances the expatriates' understanding of the HCNs and facilitates their adjustment.

Selmer (2006) examined the relationship between Chinese language ability and adjustment among Western business expatriates assigned to China. The results show that there is a strong positive relationship for social interaction adjustment and a weak relationship between language and work adjustment. Marschan-Piekkari and her associates have explored human resource management responses of multinationals to deal with the common corporate language issue (e.g., Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Marschan, 1996; Marschan, et al., 1997; Marschan-Piekkari, et al., 1999; 2001). Emerging literature (e.g., Hayet, 2000; Hong, 1996; Lein & Sisco, 1999; Panella, 1998) has addressed corporate language training in general, and as part of expatriate preparations in particular. These studies examine how language ability benefits expatriate adjustment in an environment that is culturally and socially different. Chi and Yeh's (2006) study examined the impact of socio-cultural factors on Taiwanese expatriates' adjustment when they lived in the U.S. The results reveal that English-language proficiency, international experience, establishing relationships, and willingness to communicate were determining factors in expatriate adjustment.

In sum, in the previous studies of expatriate adjustment, researchers sought to determine the most important adjustment factors influencing on-the-job adjustment. Mendall and Oddou's (1985) research identified four variables that affect the success of expatriate adjustment. Lee (2005)

offered a rigorous test of Black, Mendenhall and Oddou's model (1991) representing a more comprehensive on-the-job adjustment framework and reveals that job satisfaction was the most important of indicator of successful expatriate adjustment. Of the range of identified factors in adjustment, job satisfaction and relationships with host-country nationals (HCNs) are key factors influencing expatriate adjustment. Job satisfaction represents adjustment to work, and relationships with HCNs represent the other two domains; namely, adjustment to the general environment and adjustment to interacting with HCNs.

### **Factors in Intercultural Competence**

Intercultural competence often is identified as critical for success in international tasks (Graf, 2004), as well as for expatriate adjustment (Gao, 2008). Two views exist on the role of a foreign language on intercultural competence. While one argues that competence refers to knowledge (Chomsky, 1965; Philips, 1983), the other insists that competence refers to performance (Spitzberg, 2000; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, 2002). Chen and Starosta (2008) argue that these two perspectives complement each other and can be integrated to form a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural competence. Accordingly, intercultural competence consists of knowledge (cognitive ability), felt degree of importance (attitude), and behavioral skills (performance). In other words, intercultural competence is the ability that expatriates possess in order to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations as result of their individual's knowledge, attitude, and skills.

The literature suggests that the knowledge aspect of intercultural competence includes three subsets: knowledge or cultural self-awareness of home and host cultures (Byram, 1997; Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012), knowledge about a corporation (Harris, 2002; O'Hair, Friedrich, & Dixon, 2002; Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012) and knowledge of the professions (Swanson & Holton, 2001). Corporate knowledge relates to how individuals behave in a competent way in specific situations, such as what actions to perform, why certain actions should be performed, and to whom certain actions are appropriate in an organization (Goldkunh & Braf, 2001). In other words, corporate knowledge includes the "how" of social interaction among colleagues (Spitzberg, 2000). Professional knowledge concerns professional issues and relates to the experience, expertise, and problem-solving skills required in a profession (Swanson & Holton, 2001). Punnett (2009) noted that professional knowledge may be most valued by MNCs, and thus, professional knowledge usually ranks as the top criterion in selecting expatriates. The attitude factor refers to the "ability to relativize one's self and value others, and includes curiosity and openness that individuals are willing to accept risk and to move beyond their comfort zone (Deardoref, 2009). Skills address the processing of knowledge (Deardoref, 2009) through observation, listening, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, and relating.

Two studies have examined how cultures (national and corporate) affect the success of expatriate adjustment from the Chinese perspective. Cao (2008) studied how culture influences post-merger performance and addressed the role of national and organizational cultures of the expatriates from acquired firms in the shaping of organizational communication behaviors in Chinese mergers and acquisitions. Xu (2007, 2010) observed that a lack of intercultural communication competence and inadequate English competence affect information processing within the organization, cause misunderstanding, and even lead to conflicts between headquarters and subsidiaries.

### **English as Corporate Lingua Franca and English-language Competence**

Of all the languages in the world, for business purposes English is regarded as the lingua franca (Crystal, 2003; Chew, 2009) or referred as BELF (see for example, Louhiala-Sahuinen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005). Companies increasingly choose English as their corporate language in a multiple-language environment (Charles, 2007; Nickerson, 2002). Lenovo, a Chinese MNC, announced that English was chosen as its corporate working language after it purchased the PC unit of IBM (Chen, 2004). Likewise, Uniqlo announced that English would become corporate official language in 2012. Although a common corporate language may mask a wide range of continuing language problems (Marschan-Piekkari et al., 1999), English will probably continue to be the primary option as a corporate language for Chinese or other Asian multinationals for the near future, due to the serious shortage of employees who can speak foreign languages other than English (Xia & Feng, 2009).

The importance of language competence has been increasingly recognized in expatriate studies. Xu (2009) suggests that English competence affects Chinese expatriate adjustment in their overseas assignments. Other research suggests that English as the default language in international business has an effect on overall management systems, and in particular, the organizational communication systems of Chinese multinationals. Luo and Shenkar (2006) argue that a language system should be designed to align with organizational strategy so as to enhance organizational communication efficacy in MNCs. Marschan, et al. (1997) point out that language should be a consideration in multinational management, at a strategic level, so that directives, technical information, policies and other communications related to strategic implementation can be efficiently and effectively circulated to the subsidiaries and thereby facilitate the integration of host-country culture and home culture. All these studies suggest that the importance of the expatriate's language competence be emphasized by the multinationals (Feely & Harzing, 2003; Wright, Kumagai, & Bonney, 2001), as expatriates become the interface, through language, between headquarters and the local subsidiary" (Marschan-Piekkari, et al., 1999, p.386).

### **Culture and Language Influence Intercultural Communication**

Languages traditionally have been either neglected or considered as a subordinate part of cultural values in international management literature (Babcock & Du-Babcock, 2001; Harzing & Feely, 2008; Marschan-Piekkari, et al., 1999; Peltokorpi, 2007; Van der Born & Peltokorpi, 2010). The focus has predominately been on cultural values, defined as a "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 9). Welch et al. (2005) noted that the emerging stream of literature on language in multinational corporations (MNCs) tends to neglect cultural values. Consequently, little is known about the combined influence of cultural values and languages on intercultural communication in MNCs.

Du-Babcock's (2000) study was the first attempt to examine the influence of language and cultural competence on expatriate's overseas adjustment. She conducted empirical research focusing on Western expatriates' adjustment in Taiwan and developed a model showing the relationship between language competence and expatriate adjustment process. The model shows that expatriates with varying language proficiencies required different adjustment time.

In response to the calls for context-specific research in MNCs (Luo & Shenkar, 2006) by focusing on the overseas adjustment of mainland Chinese expatriates, Xu and Du-Babcock's study (2012)

explores the impact of Chinese expatriates' language and intercultural competence on adaptation in foreign subsidiaries. The findings suggest that intercultural competence were partially correlated with overall adjustment. The results also show the perception gap in that while Chinese respondents' self-rated corporate knowledge and professional knowledge was high, the ratings of the local staff respondents did not agree.

Based on the review of the related literature, two research questions are put forth. These two research questions are:

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between language competence (host-or English-language competence; general and genre language proficiency) and expatriate adjustments?

Research Question 2: What is the impact of the cultural distance and the expatriate overseas adjustments?

### **Theoretical Framework**

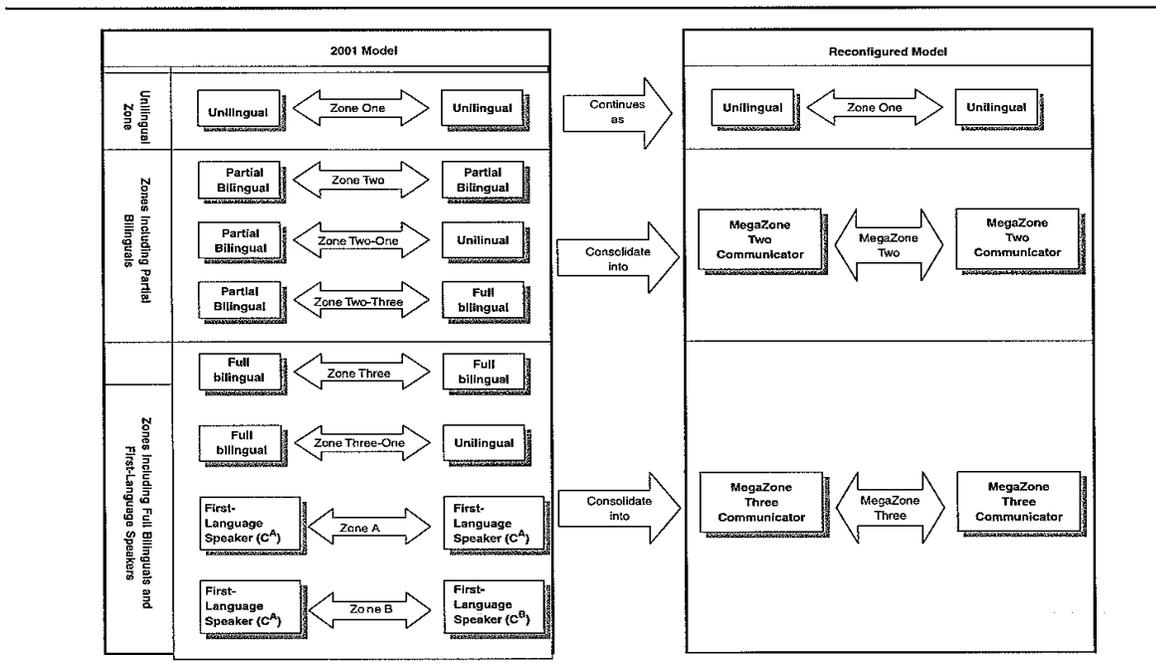
The current empirical research examines the integrative factors of languages and culture and its impact on the Japanese expatriates' overseas adaptation in MNC's foreign subsidiaries. In analyzing the combined influence of language and culture, I integrate two established theoretical framework; namely, language-based communication zones theory (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996, 2001, 2007a, 2007b) and expatriate's overseas adjustment model (Du-Babcock, 2000; Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012). Du-Babcock and Babcock's theoretical development of the language-based communication zones model (1996, 2001, 2007a; 2007b) including intercultural communication corridors (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 2006b) has aimed at studying language competence and its relationship to intercultural communication, and the differences in first- and second-language communication at decision-making meetings in MNCs.

Over a 15-year period, Du-Babcock and her co-researcher have progressively defined the language competence variables more completely and described the adjustment of language patterns that occurs in the different language zones that describe and categorize possible language matches in any intercultural communication environment. The language-based communication zones theory, originating from a description of interactions between Western expatriates and Taiwanese local employees (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996), categorizes expatriates based on their host-country language proficiency into Zone One (with basic language skills), Zone Two (with intermediate language skills), and Zone Three (with nearly native-like fluent language skills). In each of these three zones, expatriates interact either directly or through intermediaries or link-pins with local employees having different levels of foreign-language or English-language proficiency, from bilingual managers to front-line employees with limited or no foreign-language skills (English in most cases). In 2001, a more fully developed zones model was developed to complement the earlier model so as to describe other communicators besides expatriates, and to identify eight language-based communication zones (Babcock & Du-Babcock, 2001). In 2007, Du-Babcock and Babcock reconsolidated the zones into three language-based communication zones to encompass all the sub-patterns (see Figure 1 for the development of the zones model, p. 348). To expand and refine the previously established conceptual framework, the 2007 study drew on genre theory and created three genre categories. Consequently, this reconfigured model categorizes genre-specific language patterns in relation to professional genres (specialized languages spoken by professionals) within a discipline (see Bhatia, 2004), commercial genres (organizational- and company-specific language used to describe information exchange and commercial transactions), and relational genres (verbal and nonverbal communication used to "create the social

fabric of a group by promoting relationships between and among group members/ language communicators”).

According to the language-based communication zones theoretical framework, Zone One expatriates with insufficient host-country language proficiency are able to communicate only simple messages directly with local employees due to the lack of general or genre language proficiency. These Zone One expatriates have to deliver complicated messages indirectly through language link-pins who relay the messages from one language to another. Because of their position in organizational hierarchy, these language link-pins often are local mid-level managers (for details on language link-pins, please refer to Du-Babcock, 1996). Translating and delivering messages up and down the hierarchies, local mid-level managers with language-link-pin roles are able to filter information flows to their own advantage, especially in vertical collectivist countries, where interactions beyond immediate supervisors are infrequent (Peltokorpi, 2007).

Partially bilingual or multilingual Zone- Two expatriates, due to their intermediate host-country language proficiency, are able to engage in more effective intercultural communication and rely less on language link-pins (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996). These Zone-Two expatriates can choose to refrain from using the host-country language in certain situations, for example, due to reduced rhetorical skills, cognitive strain, information loss, and face and status concerns (Corder, 1983; Gudykunst, 1986). Although Zone-Two expatriates still needed to rely on language link-pins for complicated, interactive messages, they were able to choose direct communication channels that correspond to their host-country language and cultural proficiency. Despite the advantages provided by their linguistic competency, these Zone-Two expatriates may need to make behavioral adaptations because increased interactions in the host-country language can be accompanied by pressure for these expatriates to adopt host culture norms (Babcock & Du-Babcock, 2001).



**Figure 1. Language-Based Communication Zones and the Reconfigured MegaZone Models**

Source: Du-Babcock, B., & Babcock, R. (2007). *Journal of Business Communication* at <http://jcb.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/44/4/340>, p. 348

Zone-Three expatriates with nearly native-like fluency in host-country language or English were able to conduct all intercultural interactions without relying on language intermediaries or engaging in language simplification strategies (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996). Whether Zone-Three expatriates decided to rely on language intermediaries, their motivations were often independent of language proficiency constraints (Babcock & Du-Babcock, 2001). Language link-pins can be used due to face and status concerns, and possible low intercultural competency. While fluency in the host-country language may create confusion among local employees who consider expatriates members as out-groups, Zone-Three expatriates are expected to have a better chance of penetrating language and cultural barriers than those in Zone One and Zone Two.

### **Research Method**

The present study is an exploratory research based on an epistemological position, qualitative method. The choice of qualitative method (through the use of semi-structured interviews) relates to the lack of current knowledge of the combined influence of expatriates' different host-country language and cultural competencies on intercultural communication in MNCs. In the absence of such knowledge, quantitative method, such as a questionnaire survey, is difficult to apply (Yin, 1994). Semi-structured interviews also were considered the most suitable way to collect data since they allow the researcher to understand the phenomenon from the individual perspective of those who are involved in it (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

#### **Qualitative Data Collection by Face-to-Face Interviews**

Involved in the current study was a consumer electronics and a Marine Insurance corporation headquartered in Japan. Two Japanese expatriates were identified and a series of interviews were conducted. The objectifying interview approach (Redding, 1990) was employed in which interviewers engaged in interactive dialogs with the interviewees. Du-Babcock has used this method to collect the data for her zones models (1996; 2001; 2006a; 2007a; 2007b) and for research into expatriate adjustment and communication (2000). The ethnographic approach is well suited for "describing and analyzing human interaction in dynamic and complex surroundings" (Lauring, 2008, p. 239). The in-depth interviews also allowed researchers to examine the nuances that was usually lacking for the quantitative data. The qualitative data arranged by the co-researcher were collected by recording interviews so as to collect a rich, dense, and comprehensive data set which gives detailed, first-hand, and multi-dimensional qualitative data. Individual and company names cannot be revealed because the interviewees were assured full confidentiality.

#### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

The analysis of qualitative data is based on the data derived from interview transcripts. Interviews were conducted in English and transcribed verbatim in English. The data were subject to interaction analysis by using Nivo10, a tool that analyzes text-based qualitative data. The software can be used not only for "code and retrieve" analysis, but also to combine qualitative and quantitative data. The analysis will code and categorize data by researcher-identified thematic iterations.

The interviews were categorized into language and culture-based challenges and tactics through a two-step coding system (Lee, 1999) and data reduction process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). That is, the

interview data were first coded into broad categories describing language and culture- based challenges and tactics.

### **Findings and Interpretation**

In this section, I first examine how language proficiency (e.g., host-country language, English) affects overseas adaptation. I second investigate whether the similarities of language system enhance communication efficacy even though the Zone One expatriate who possessed limited host-country language proficiency. Third, I investigate how cultural factor affects the Japanese expatriates' overseas adaptation and how culture distance facilitate or hinder the success of the overseas adaptation.

#### **Language as a Determinant in Overseas Adaptation**

Du-Babcock's research (under CityU Strategic Research Grant #7002647) examining the impact of English-language proficiency on Chinese expatriates' adjustment to overseas assignments reveal that Chinese expatriates with a higher level of general and professional English-language proficiency have better adjustment to their overseas assignments. That is, expatriates with high general and professional English language proficiency are likely to have better relations with local employees and better cope with stress. The result also suggests that expatriates with higher general English-language proficiency are likely to effectively bridge the communication between the headquarters and its subsidiaries (for details, also see Du-Babcock & Xu, 2011; Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012).

#### **Host-country Language Proficiency and its Impact on Expatriate Adaptation**

Proficiency in the host-country language allows expatriates to form social networks, solve workplace problems, and acquire skills that enhance their job satisfaction (Naumann, 1993; Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012). Expatriates with insufficient host-country language proficiency or English- language proficiency are likely to be categorized as out-group members (Du-Babcock& Babcock, 1996; Peltokorpi, 2007; Toh & Denisi, 2007). According to the interviewee, he felt that he was usually excluded from communication networks (particularly, social network) due to the natural tendency of his Hong Kong local employees were likely to interact in Cantonese, native language of the Hong Kong local employees. In this connection, "a lack of host-country language skills isolated me at the workplace and this in turn led to lower-quality relationships" as commented by the Japanese expatriate.

The Japanese expatriate faced language barriers in communicating with the Hong Kong locals because he was not able to speak Cantonese and most local employees did not speak Japanese. Worst still, most Hong Kong local employees, except mid-level managers did not have sufficient proficiency in English. The Japanese expatriate commented that most of his Hong Kong local employees were graduates of the Associate Degree (two years of college degree which is equivalent to community college degree in the US) and their English-language proficiency generally was lower than four-year college graduates. Although Hong Kong was British colony for over 150 years until the return of sovereignty to China in 1997, the use of English in conversations with the Hong Kong local employees can be problematic due to the social sanction in the use of English (for detail, see Du-Babcock, 1999). Additionally, second-language speakers tend to contribute fewer ideas, play less active roles in communicative interactions, and avoid direct interactions due to "face" concerns (Du-Babcock, 1999; Ting-Toomey, 2007).

#### **The Japanese Expatriate with Zone- One Host-Country Language Ability**

The persistent barrier to intercultural organizational communication for the Japanese expatriate with Zone-One communication ability was the absence of speaking host-country's native languages. Due to

limited language proficiency in host- country language, namely, Cantonese, the Japanese expatriate was not able to speak Cantonese and communicate with Hong Kong local employees in using Cantonese. The linguistic barriers can be illustrated in comments, such as, “My interactions with [Hong Kong local] employees are limited because I do not speak Cantonese and my personnel speak varying degree of English,” and “Although mid-level managers communicate well, the front-line staff’s ability to speak English is inadequate.” According to the Japanese expatriate, he did not make efforts in studying Cantonese because of the busy work schedule and uncertainty about the length of his stay in Hong Kong. Another reason is that Hong Kong local employees were able to use English to communicate with him more than what he could communicate with the locals using employees’ native language, Cantonese.

### **Strategy of Using Language Link-pins to Counter the Deficiency of Host-Language Proficiency**

Although the Japanese expatriate possessed Zone-One communication ability in the host-country language, local managers usually served as language link-pins by providing simultaneous interpretations so as to facilitate information flows in important meetings. In particular, at the brain storming meetings, the Japanese expatriate would allow Hong Kong subordinates to use their native languages, and the local managers relayed the essence of the discussion to the Japanese expatriate. A more common practice was that the Japanese expatriate spoke first in English and then language link-pin, normally local managers, translated his messages partially on the spot or had follow- up meetings with local employees in which these local managers with higher English- language proficiency explained the messages in more detail (see, also Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996, Du-Babcock, 2007b). The Japanese expatriate further commented that English-language meetings are “more for presenting information than for dialogues.” Follow-up meetings without his presence were told to be more efficient because Hong Kong locals were able to interact in their native language without language-related constraints.

The description of the link-pin communication strategy is congruent with Du-Babcock & Babcock’s (1996, 2007b) language-based communication zones framework. However, the Japanese expatriate further commented his observation of the use of language link-pins. While he felt the use of language link-pins could be benevolent between him and local employees, the expatriate also suspects that Hong Kong local managers with roles of language link-pins filtered or sometimes blocked information flows for their own benefit. Having said that, the Japanese executive further commented that “The tendency to communicate indirectly and make extensive use of link-pins in delicate communication transactions facilitated information filtering (see, also Gudykunst, 1986). He continued commented that “being a Zone One expatriate not being able to communicate directly with my local employees, I from time to time need to rely primarily on power-based tactics to circumvent local managers as information nodes.”

### **Communication in Using English, Shared Language**

Due to a lack of speaking each other’s language, the Japanese expatriate chose to communicate with Hong Kong locals in using shared language which was English. The expatriate commented, “. . . mid-level managers in Hong Kong subsidiary who are able to speak good English became ‘my right and left arms’. The Japanese expatriate’s comments is in line with Du-Babcock and Babcock’s (1996) study in that the US expatriates commented that “the primary language link-pins along with the secretary link-pins acted as the “ears and eyes” of the expatriates (p. 146).

### **Japanese Expatriate with Zone Three English- Communication Proficiency**

In comparing to Zone One communication with limited or low Cantonese-language proficiency, when English is used as a medium of communication, the language match between the Japanese expatriate and Hong Kong local employees would be categorized as MegaZone Three in that the Japanese

expatriate possessed full fluency of English proficiency and Hong Kong local employees possessing varying degree of English proficiency ranging from intermediate to nearly full fluency. When English was used, the Zone-Three Japanese expatriate had more frequent interactions and relied less on language link-pins to communicate with local employees. According to the Japanese expatriate he would occasionally use Cantonese in informal interactions or a start-up meeting in order to establish trustful settings and avoid making language-related blunders in public (see, also Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996). Perhaps because English was the shared language or company's lingua franca, local employees were explained to be reserved during intercultural interactions.

Due to the limitation of the host-language proficiency, the meetings often were conducted in English. To enhance communication efficiency, the Japanese expatriate sought to speak at least a few sentences in Cantonese during meetings or use logographic Kanji characters in his English presentation or meeting documents to enhance information flow and communication efficacy. Due to the lack of equivalent vocabulary in English and Cantonese, the biggest challenge for Hong Kong local employees was professional terminology in the field of marine insurance. Because of the limited English-language skills of the local front-line staff, the Japanese expatriate often had to clarify complicated, unclear matters either by relying on local managers to restate the main points in Cantonese or vice versa. As commented by the Japanese expatriate, "If I sensed that there are issues that the Hong Kong local employees do not understand, I stopped the meeting and asked employees to explain the issue again in Cantonese in a simpler way, and then asked local managers to relay the message or asked secretary after the meeting." This communication strategy enabled local employees to communicate in their native language and the Japanese expatriate gained a more accurate understanding of discussions and the nuance of the issues.

### **Strategies to Enhance Communication Efficacy**

As shared by the Japanese expatriate, to enhance the communication efficacy, three commonly used strategies are: use of simplified English; use of language link-pins; and use of logographic Kanji characters. Although host-language proficiency can be a barrier between Japanese expatriate and the Hong Kong local employees, the Japanese expatriate shared his strategy in enhancing communication efficacy and information flow. The use of English, the shared language, as lingua franca put the Japanese expatriate into a MegaZone Three communication match in that the Zone Three-Two language match between the Japanese expatriate possess nearly native-like English language proficiency (Zone Three) and Hong Kong local managers with intermediate level of English-language proficiency (Zone Two). The language match can be Zone Three-One where the communication between the Zone Three Japanese expatriate possessing nearly native-like English language proficiency (Zone Three) and Hong Kong local front line employees with basic level of English-language proficiency (Zone One). Using English as a medium of communication puts the Japanese expatriate in an advantageous situation. The Japanese expatriate commented that "I normally would use of simplified English and visual aids to emphasize key points. I also make good use the language similarity between Cantonese characters and Japanese kanji (logographic characters) in that I would show the message in Japanese fax to Hong Kong employees with additional information in English and logographic kanji characters that local employees can understand. To ensure the local employees were fully informed, "I write and send a message to all employees every month about what is happening in the company. In so doing, my messages in meetings through mid-level managers would not get filtered." "Although the majority of the local employees may not fully understand the messages, these processes were an effort to increase awareness of organizational changes and to circumvent information filtering," as commented by the Japanese expatriate.

The Japanese expatriate also tried to increase information flows by using his multilingual secretary as language link-pin. Perhaps because of the secretary's "frequent interaction with local employees, she

was able to provide important information and nuances to me,” said the Japanese expatriate. He further elaborated that “Occasionally, this information flow was facilitated by Japanese language, and I was very astonished with the true story of some incidents due to language nuances, and I was able to make sense of it.”

Although language barrier can be a detrimental attribution to communication failure, the Japanese expatriate brought up a very interesting point that reflects the language environment in Hong Kong business and organization environment. He attributed the success of the communication flow results in two factors. The factor is because of the code-mixing and switching phenomenon in Hong Kong, and the second factor can be the use of logographic kanji (Japanese characters). Code-switching and code mixing are very common phenomena in Hong Kong where people interject English vocabulary or sentences in their native-language conversation. Although the local employees with lower English-language proficiency may not be able to express viewpoints in complete English sentences, the Japanese expatriate was able to understand the essence of the viewpoints and ask secretary to elaborate after the meeting. Use of code-mixing and switching provided benefits to the Japanese expatriate. For example, Hong Kong local employees were able to interact with the Japanese expatriate without exposing themselves to potentially face-threatening situations (Brown & Levison, 1987) caused by their inadequate English-language proficiency.

### **Culture as a Determining Factor**

Past research has shown that many expatriates experience serious problems on their international assignments (e.g., Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Du-Babcock, 2000; Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012). Expatriates, highly committed to headquarters’ organizational culture, may overlook the impact of the cultural difference onto the host country operation. Consequently, while transferring required headquarters’ organizational values and practices these overseas expatriates may have resulted in potential cultural conflicts with host country nationals. Harzing (2002) noted that the predominant reason for such problems is not the technical incompetence of the managers, but the difficulties of the overseas adjustment of expatriates (Stening & Hammer, 1992; Tung, 1993; Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012). Difficulties in cross-cultural adaptation can seriously inhibit expatriate job performance, leading to a failure in overseas assignments (Adler, 1991; Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Jun, Lee, & Gentry, 1997).

**Cultural Difference** may impede and complicate interpersonal relations between expatriates and local personnel (Adler, 1991; Kogut & Singh, 1988; McEvoy & Parker, 1995; Peltokorpi, 2010). People with different cultural backgrounds have different frames of reference (Lachman, Nedd, & Hining, 1994) in that a set of patterned meanings or the collective mental programming (Hofstede, 2001) that is shared by a specific group of people. Consequently, the frames of reference determine and regulate whether the behavioral patterns would be acceptable or not. In-depth knowledge of host-country culture would enable the expatriates to process correctly various non-verbal signals and thus avoid many problems resulting from cultural and behavioral differences (Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012). Such advantages, however, would not be available to expatriates with little knowledge of the host-country culture, particularly, the large cultural distance between the two countries. Cultural distance describes differences between any two countries with respect to the level of development, education, business and everyday language, cultural values, and the extent of connections between these countries (Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). Expatriates, working under an unfamiliar behavioral and wider cultural distance, would encounter serious challenges in understanding local behaviors and in interpreting various signals that local personnel implicitly or explicitly convey. These difficulties would inhibit effective organizational communications and would eventually impede job performance of expatriates.

Researchers have examined how cultural differences between the host and home countries directly influence cross-cultural adjustment of the individual expatriate (e.g., Selmer, 2006; Selmer & Luring, 2009; Xu & Du-Babcock, 2012). Although **cultural distance** has received considerable attention in the literature on international business strategy and marketing communication, systematic research on multiple facets of cultural distance is still scarce in the literature on expatriates. In so doing, I decompose cultural distance from the qualitative perspective to examine how the cultural distance affects the overseas adaptation of the Japanese expatriate in Hong Kong.

As commented by the Japanese expatriate, “the wider the cultural distance, the more likely the cross-cultural adjustment problems are increased” and this may eventually lead to managerial inefficacy. Shenkar (2001) noted that “closing distance mechanisms” in the expatriate context and lower cultural distance can be positively related with expatriate job satisfaction. Cultural distance that acts as markers of social identity make it challenging for expatriates to develop social ties with host-country local employees; consequently, influence expatriate’s networks in foreign subsidiary (see, for example, Toh & Denisi, 2007).

Although Hong Kong and Japan share similar cultural background as described by Hofstede (2001), varying degree of culture differences exist. The Japanese expatriate discovered that behaviors that are acceptable in Japan are not considered appropriate in Hong Kong. For example, Hong Kong being British colony for over 150 years carried with the combination of West and East aspects of the cultural orientation. Consequently, people in Hong Kong societies perceive that work relations are determined largely by job descriptions and task-related responsibilities (Maurer & Li, 2006) more than that of in Japan which seniority and relations are primary concern. As these boundaries are much clearer in Hong Kong, the Japanese expatriate needed to maintain social relationships with Hong Kong local employees so as to be regarded as effective superiors.

Other major cultural differences in adapting to Hong Kong culture is the development of the personal relationship. As commented by the Japanese manager, Hong Kong and Japanese people value personal relationship, but they are different in some ways. In the Japanese high-context culture, personal relationships are valued higher than formal contracts; therefore, communication styles are indirect and objectives, tasks, regulations, and performance evaluations are ambiguous (Hofstede, 2001; Lincoln & Kalleberg, 1990). In contrast, Hong Kong being influenced by British, low-context culture orientation, Hong Kong local employees sometimes came across being direct and task oriented from the eyes of the Japanese expatriates. Such differences are likely to increase misunderstandings and complicate work relationships between the Japanese expatriate and the Hong Kong local employees, as commented by the Japanese expatriates.

**Insider-outsider mentality** is another challenging cultural difference. The Japanese expatriate further explained that in Japan culture is manifested in strict behavioral norms that are founded on the gender-based differentiation of occupations, close reliance on immediate superiors, and superior-subordinate relationships (Peltokorpi, 2008). Collectivism in Japan is displayed in group-oriented behavior and conformity to group norms (Nakane, 1972). There is a tendency among the Japanese to show the ‘right’ attitudes, behavioral patterns, and values in order to fit into the group. Such group identities support a distinction between in-group members, who receive preferential treatment, and out-group members, who are treated indifferently or are even discriminated against (Napier & Taylor, 1995).

Although the in-group and out-group mentality may affect the interpersonal relations between the Japanese expatriate and Hong Kong local employees, it also comes along with its advantage. The Japanese expatriate commented that “While I am gaining acceptance by the Hong Kong locals, I would

also be expected to comply with the Hong Kong cultural norm.” In other words, the linguistically and culturally proficient expatriates may have to comply with local behavioral values and norms and be subject to harsher criticism when engaging in culturally incongruent behavior (see also Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996). The Japanese expatriate further commented that “When my Hong Kong local employees cannot explain the nuances of the issues, they always said that “you are not a “*zjiren*” (in-group) because you are a “*wairen*” (outsider), so whatever cultural blunders you make can be “forgiven”. In other words, “. . . Despite these challenges, the Hong Kong local employees can “tolerate” or “understand” my cultural blunders, partly because the Hong Kong locals believe that [outsiders] in general can never be fully able to understand the Hong Kong local culture. “This categorization put me (the Japanese expatriate) as out-group member”, explained by the Japanese expatriate.

While knowing the host-country culture is important to overseas adaptation, the Japanese expatriate further explained the importance of maintaining his status as an outsider strategically may provide him benefits. As explained, “not being an insider makes it possible (for me) to do things that Hong Kong people cannot do.” For instance, “I can be “ruder” and more direct, and ask things that the Hong Kong would normally not ask.” The Japanese expatriate acknowledged that the benefits given by his status as an outsider and his field knowledge, he would be able to use a mix of power-based and culturally congruent tactics to increase information flow or for some other purposes in their subsidiaries.

### **Conclusion**

The present study integrates Du-Babcock’s two theoretical framework in exploring the combined influence of language (English and host-country language) and culture on the overseas adaptation of Japanese expatriates in foreign subsidiaries. Drawing on the language-based communication zones theoretical framework (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996, 2001, 2007), the study examines the importance of language proficiency (host-language and English competency) on the Japanese expatriate’s overseas adaptation. The study also investigates how cultural distance affects the efficacy of overseas adaptation.

Findings show that the language and culture-related challenges were different for the Japanese expatriate when interacted in Zone One, Zone Two, or Zone Three communication environment. For example, the inadequate host-country language proficiency forced the Zone-One Japanese expatriates to interact with local employees through language link-pins and thereby limiting the expatriate’s access to informal information networks. The interviews also show that cultural competence was comparatively less critical for efficient intercultural communication in the current study. For example, The Japanese expatriate with insufficient Cantonese-language proficiency was able to acknowledge and behave in a culturally congruent manner. The findings suggest that the expatriates’ host-country language skills accompanied by expectations of culturally congruent behavior can be the critical factor to the success of the overseas assignments. Linguistically proficient expatriates may have to comply with local behavioral values and norms and be subject to harsher criticism when engaging in culturally incongruent behavior.

The findings confirm the three communication zones theory (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996). In contrast to the three communication zones theory where language link-pins are described as benevolent intermediaries between expatriates and local employees, Hong Kong local managers with roles as language link-pins in this study were found to filter and block information flows for their own benefit. Observed by the Japanese expatriates, the tendency of Hong Kong local employees to communicate indirectly and make extensive use of language link-pins in delicate

communication transactions (Gudykunst, 1986) facilitated information filtering. Hong Kong middle managers' control over information made it challenging, especially for Zone One Japanese expatriate, to gain information and control in local operations. To ensure the communication efficacy, the Japanese expatriate relied primarily on power-based tactics to increase intercultural information flows.

### **Implications**

The present study contributes to the international business and expatriate communication literature on language and culture, and expatriate overseas adjustment in three ways. First, the study contributes empirical qualitative data to the body of research knowledge about Japanese expatriate adjustment that will be valuable for researchers in general, and Asian expatriate adjustment in particular. Significantly, the study focuses on Japanese expatriates' adjustment, which means it will have relevance for Asian organizations' selection and preparation of expatriates for sending out to foreign postings. Thirdly, the results of the study have an impact on the education and training of business professionals who will become employees in MNCs that need appropriately skilled candidates to send abroad.

The current research has implication for both researchers and practitioners. For researchers, although expatriate adjustment has been widely researched, the current study reveals that there still exists a need for more empirical research into the combined culture-and language-related factors that are likely to facilitate or impede expatriate adjustment. The study also ascertains and describes how language competence (host-country language competence or English-language competence) affects expatriates from Asian countries (Japan, Taiwan, and Mainland China) to their overseas adjustments.

As for culture, the existing culture theories and constructs have been based on the accepted notion that expatriates would encounter serious challenges in understanding and communicating with local behaviors when working under an unfamiliar behavioral and wider cultural distance. Consequently, these difficulties would inhibit effective organizational communications and eventually impede their job performance. The current research examines how Japanese expatriates adapt to contrasting cultural backgrounds. While the Japanese expatriates coming from the cultural society that is categorized as collectivist society which has closer cultural distance when they were posted in the countries that share similar cultural background (e.g., Hong Kong) as compared to when they were posted in the countries (e.g., US) which is an individualistic society with larger cultural distance. Consequently, the findings of the current research suggest that culture distance and host-country or English-language competence affects the Japanese expatriates' overseas adjustments.

In sum, the practical significance of the present contributes to the theoretical knowledge about expatriate overseas adjustment. This research also contributes to the emerging body of literature on language and intercultural competence in global business contexts. Particularly, the research shows how language and intercultural competence can enhance the global operations of multinationals from Asia.

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