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Michael Handford says the inverted world map at his university office is a metaphor for dealing with intercultural communication, in which things are at first confusing but start to make sense once you receive proper orientation. KRIS KOSAKA PHOTOS

Professor finds meaning in silence

Expert on specialized communications says creativity with language outweighs grammar rules

By KRIS KOSAKA

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In Japanese there's a word for it, that prolonged silence that cuts into a conversation, bringing discomfort and interrupting flow: *shiin.* We've all experienced that dead-air tension, but surprisingly there are different levels of comfort with silence, depending on the language being spoken.

According to Michael Handford, 41, a professor of linguistics and a consultant in international communications, Spanish communicators in general can tolerate one to two seconds of silence, English speakers three to four seconds, and Japanese

speakers five to six seconds. Handford makes it a point to know about these silences and to help his students and customers in intercultural communications break through potential blocks.

Michael Handford poses in front of ginkgo trees at the Hongo campus of the University of Tokyo in Bunkyo Ward.

"What I find with Japanese speakers is that they often miss the chance to join a discussion, because they are used to a longer silence," Handford explains. "A lot of foreign students say, 'Oh, Japanese students don't talk much,' but it is not as simple as that."

Handford, an associate professor at the University of Tokyo's graduate school, specializing in English for specific purposes through the civil engineering department, strives to open his students' minds — and mouths — to successful communications. "We discuss intercultural communication, professional communication, presentation skills. About 50 percent of the postgraduates are foreign students, from a range of countries, and there are a lot of cultural differences — body language, levels of politeness, directness, even how you make a cup of tea."

Handford sees students from other departments, as well as people from a variety of industries through his consultancy work, and the more experience he gains the more he sees creativity in communication, and the necessity to encourage that creativity as opposed to emphasizing correct grammar.

"Grammar is just one part of language," Handford attests, disagreeing with other linguists who preach that conversation comes with perfect grammar. "It is important not to look at language as right or wrong, or correct or incorrect, but rather in terms of successful communication. Am I achieving my goals, am I getting this other person to like me, am I communicating my message clearly? If you are doing these things, you are communicating well, much more important than if you can ask, 'Did I use the present-perfect correctly or should I have used the past-perfect?' "

Handford's own past led him toward teaching English as a foreign language. "I had been teaching in England during my summer vacations from university, (the London School of Economics, studying philosophy) and I had decided early on that I wanted to be a TEFL teacher. I really liked language, I enjoyed working with people and I wanted the experience of living abroad."

After graduating in 1993, Handford got a job with one of the big language schools and headed for Japan.

After teaching for six years, Handford made a home in Japan, got married and decided to make the study and teaching of language his life's work. He returned to the U.K.'s Nottingham University in 2000 to start work on a master's and doctorate in applied linguistics. While researching at Nottingham, Handford became fascinated by the creativity involved in language, specifically in business.

"My research post required me to record a million words of business meetings. I had no idea what was involved, but I thought it sounded interesting. It turned out to be a nightmare, convincing dozens of companies to let me inside with a microphone to record their meetings."

Handford was able to cajole more than 25 companies in England, Germany, Ireland and Japan, and he used the recordings from more than 50 meetings as the empirical basis of his thesis research.

Handford heard about an opening at the University of Tokyo, and he successfully applied as an associate professor, provided he finish his thesis in three years. Returning to Japan in December 2004, Handford welcomed the chance to both teach and consult while completing his Ph.D. in the required time.

2004 also saw the publication of Handford's first book, "Discursive Strategies in Workplace Meetings," written in Japanese with fellow business consultant Hiro Tanaka, a professor at Meisei University in Tokyo. The success of their book, along with the growing trend among Japanese companies to expand toward international markets, has led to more consultancy work within Japan.

Although some companies ask for general advice on English communications, others have a specific issue to be addressed. For example, Handford and Tanaka are advising an engineering firm where the company president requires the engineers themselves to make sales presentations overseas.

"In some countries this is not so unusual, but in Japan, traditionally, an engineer is an engineer and salespeople sell. We trained the staff to break down those walls and accept that they could do a good sales presentation, focusing on their specialized knowledge of the products," Handford says.

"We provided strategies to improve presentations or to enhance communication during meetings, for example, to clarify and to summarize.

Because of the differences in accepted silences between cultures, we also worked on different strategies to block interruptions and carry on with your intended point."

The strategy proved effective. Over a few years, the company's international sales jumped by move than 300 percent.

Although Handford appreciates the improved sales for his clients, he believes true intercultural communication goes beyond the bottom line. "The idea of *kaizen,* of cutting corners without cutting quality, is a great Japanese business ideal. The Japanese way of taking care, long-term, of your employees, instead of judging always by the bottom line, also seems more relevant in today's knowledge-based economics."

Still, some cultural aspects in Japan continue to surprise Handford, despite his more than 12 years of living and working here.

"I gave my students a questionnaire: 'You are a company boss and you have two employees. One accomplishes a certain amount of work in eight hours, while the other employee takes 10 hours to complete the same amount. Which employee would you prefer for your company?' To me it was a no-brainer: take the eight-hour worker, give him two hours off. They are more motivated, they have a better work-life balance. But half of my Japanese students choose the 10-hour employee, saying it was important to put in long hours for the company."

Handford believes it is important not to underestimate these cultural differences, as each country has something to offer. "It isn't enough to stop at awareness of cultural differences, as just awareness leads to stereotypes. We also need to respect that those different signals or practices have meaning and value in the other culture, and to see them as valid solutions to problems within that culture."

Sometimes a perceived problem can even lead to an advantage in intercultural communications. "Back to Japan's longer silences, I've spoken to Japanese companies about how this silence can be an advantage. In business negotiations, a long silence often makes the other side feel nervous, so staying silent can actually force the other side to offer something."

Looking toward Japan's move into international markets, Handford sees the incentive-based programs within companies to support English education as the method most likely to succeed. "When you are looking at language and communication, stress is a big issue. If you are stressed about communicating, you will do it badly, so the more support you can offer people who need to perform in communication, the better."

Handford cites Daiwa Housing as one company focused on incentives for its employees learning English, such as pay increases based on scores for the Test of English for International Communication or the chance to study overseas for especially high test results.

Ultimately, however, Handford hopes his students and Japan itself will see language beyond a test score.

"We've all met that talkative *obasama* who knows about 200 words of English but who can hold a great conversation, using body language, drawing pictures — but who would score zero on TOEIC. We've all met someone who did score 800 or higher but who cannot hold a simple conversation.

"In business, it's related to synergy, people working in diverse teams, the idea that you get more from the team than you get individually. Communication should be thought of in the same way, something creative, collaboratively creating meaning together, not merely following patterns."

The answer, according to Handford, lies in early language education. "A lot comes down to universities in Japan, because they have an enormous influence on how English is taught because of how they test it. The current methods of teaching started because of the needs of the industrial revolution, where companies required employees to read or translate long written materials. That model is not relevant anymore.

"I'm not saying grammar is not important, but oral presentations, listening skills, active communication, creative writing, e-mail writing, skills that fit today's world are also important: If universities tested these skills, students would learn English for the modern world of communication."

Handford's new book, "The Language of Business Meetings," from Cambridge University Press, delves further into his linguistic research, but he strives to keep his door open first for his students, despite the interruptions to his research or even during an interview.

As Handford asserts, "developing relationships through language is a key in communication."

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