

Gentlemen,
I've conducted a survey of all the Japanese TAs, where they each self-assessed their own language ability.

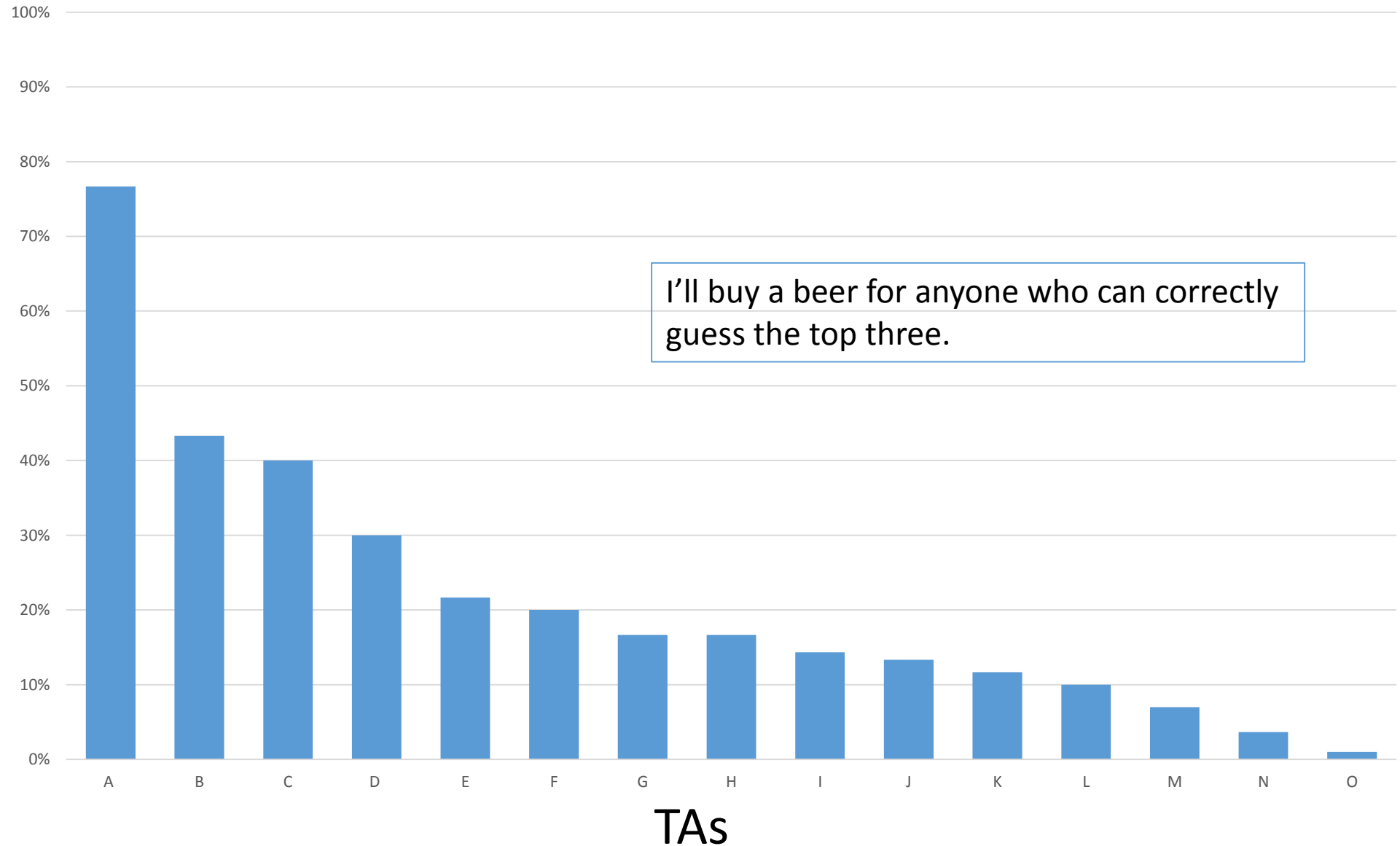
I asked them three questions:

1. How much of what they want to say in English can they say?
2. How much do they understand of what is said to them in English?
3. And how much do they understand when listening to two English speakers discussing something?

Here are the results, with the names removed.

TA English self-assessment

Aggregate score of the three questions



Is “communication” important?

Is it important like a pump, or an exhaust fan, or turbine?

If any of these things were shown to be *less than fifty percent* of their rated output, performing *less than half* of what they are meant to, would there be the slightest hesitation to do something about it?

A competent engineer would fix it or replace it long before it got that bad.

15 out of 16 of your TAs are at less than 50% effective English proficiency.

Could you do your job with their English?

Why would you ask them to?

Here's three reasons it's important.

1. Safety
2. Project Management
3. Team Building

1. Safety

Under Australian WHS legislation employers (or PCBUs) have a duty to provide “Safety Information” to employees (as well as training, instruction and supervision). In several jurisdictions the law specifies that it must be in the employee’s language. A single breach is punishable by fines of \$140,000 (Victoria 2018)

Safety information includes:

- the company’s health and safety policy and procedures
- Inductions
- Prestart meetings
- Directions from riggers and supervisors
- any hazards in the workplace
- procedures for safe operation, use, maintenance or replacement of protective equipment
- injury and incident reporting procedures
- emergency and first aid procedures
- safety signs and symbols.

1. Safety

So if you want to manage risk, the question is NOT

*“Do I think they understand this safety induction/
prestart meeting?”*

The question should be

*“Could I prove to a judge that reasonably practicable
steps were taken to ensure they understood?”*

2. Project Management

Management is *mostly* communication.

- Reading policies, emails, contracts, specifications and reports.
- Speaking or explaining verbally, over the phone to groups of workers, colleagues and customer representatives
- Motivating, apologising, defusing and analyzing complex situations.

Even among English speakers, failure to communicate can easily lead to manning levels being too high or too low, material and measuring equipment arriving too soon or too late.

Imagine the potential for clocking up a whole shift of outage costs, PS opportunity costs and LD due to not clearly understanding what a TA was trying to tell you. I've seen it happen. Many times.

Never mind that hundreds of thousands of dollars can hang on a nuanced and detailed discussion about whether to repair now or order spares for the next outage.

3. Team Building

Yes you're all engineers and you all know your stuff and sometimes days go by without a problem in the world.

But if things do go wrong you don't just need effective communication, you need a team of people who have already formed the habit of relying on each others' insights, and of sharing their own.

I have been working with you guys for over a decade now and I know of your struggle to get the Japanese to open up, keep you in the loop, and treat you as the first line of consultation in any technical problem.

Not just so that you can develop local expertise, but so *YOU* can manage the outage, the customer and the suppliers.

But the TAs are sent here with no expectation of language support and they hate it.

So they withdraw, they sit in their shell, and they talk among themselves and rely on head office.

They become resigned to the fact that they will not get to know you, they way they know each other. Is that a team?

It is a bad situation and it needs to change.
So read on!

Six “DON’Ts”

And

Best Practice X 6

No. 1. DON'T

DON'T assume the Japanese understand just because they nod and smile when you speak.

No. 1. DON'T

Japanese TAs are under enormous pressure from their company to perform in English. There is a pile of psychological and political baggage that makes it extremely hard for them to admit when they can't.

Especially if they started off cruising - understanding the introductions and small talk – when the grammar becomes more complex, the concepts more abstract, they can't then call for help without losing face.

So they leap on that fraction of your speech that they *do* catch, the lowest common denominator between you both, send affirming signals with their face and body language, and no matter how great you think things are going, effectively that is the only discussion you're having.

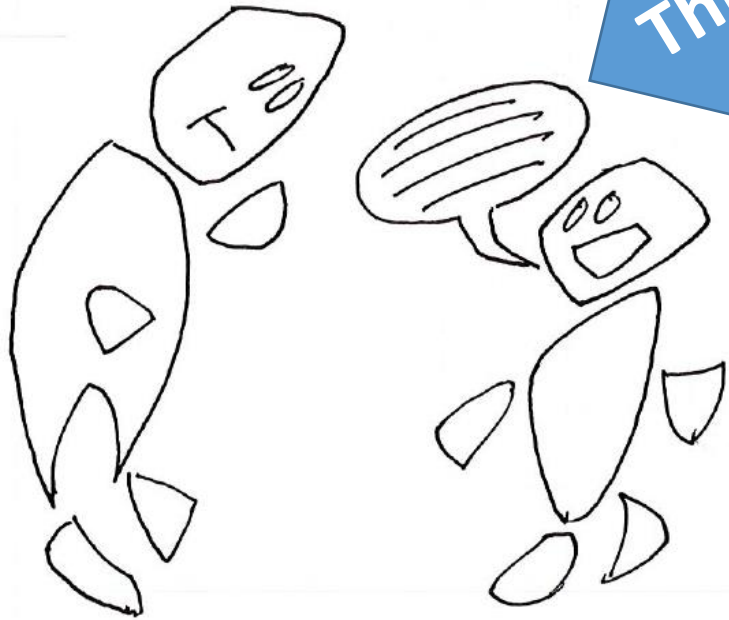
The rest is them play-acting and dying inside, and you talking to yourself.

As interpreters we get to hear about this. I have had more than one TA say to me “Of course we don't understand what they are saying, but it would be rude to say so.”

No. 2. DON'T

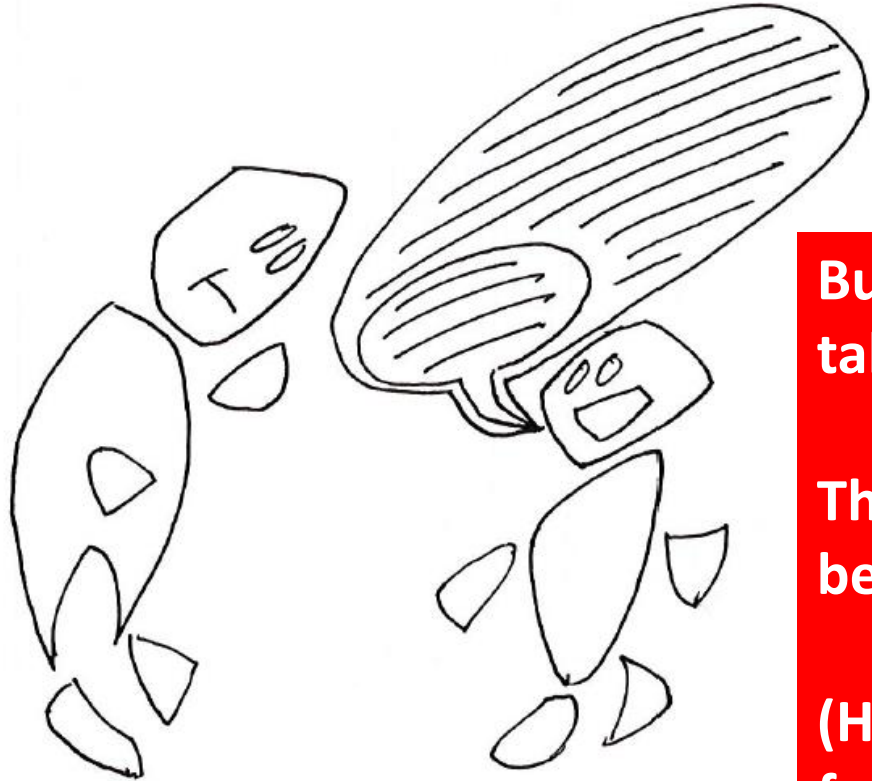
DON'T assume a Japanese can speak all the English they need to do their job, just because you heard them produce some English sentences.

All Japanese learn English at school. They can all say *something* at least. But this is what is happening....



This is what they CAN say in English

People then assume that's all they had to say.



**This is what they
wanted to say**

But they can't, at least without sounding foolish or taking up your time.

This is all the information a Japanese customer would be getting. Why do you settle for less?

(How do we know this? Because they get so frustrated they tell it all to the interpreter just to get it off their chest.)

No. 3. DON'T

DON'T rely on non-translators to translate for their mates.

Every other function in a modern organization is assigned to a person who:

- Displayed aptitude and interest
- Received training and attained competence
- In some cases obtained a license or qualification or authorisation
- Responded to an invitation to perform *that kind of work only*
- Was retained on the understanding that they would be accountable for quality

You don't get electrical work done by someone who "happens to have a screwdriver". You get it done by an electrician, because they have ticked every one of those boxes. That's how you manage risk.

No. 4. DON'T

DON'T ask non-English speakers to work in English.

Speaking a second language is exhausting.

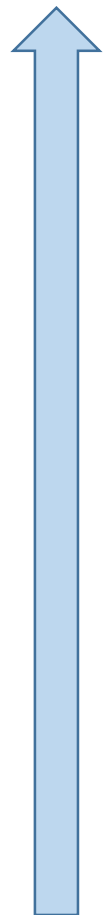
Resources, including cognitive resources, are finite.

It costs a lot of money to bring TAs all the way from Japan. To maximize return on that investment they need to be free to pour 100% of their expertise into the problems of engineering, measurement and advice.

Obliging them to dredge up their high school English, stressing them out and draining away half their brain power just to please their masters back home is very poor use of human resources.

No. 4. DON'T

If this were a language school, or a speech competition, then yes it would be appropriate to measure from zero, and say things like this.

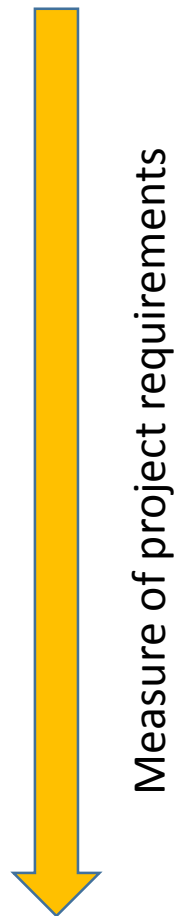


Measure of individual achievement



No. 4. DON'T

But it isn't. It's a multimillion dollar project where accurate and timely communication is a critical element in completing the project safely, on time and within budget. Measuring from spec is the only measurement that matters.



Measure of project requirements

How effective is communication with this person?



No. 5. DON'T

DON'T “wait until they need the interpreter”

Imagine explaining that policy to a judge.

“We had an employee who spoke very little English, so as well as forcing him to speak English, and do his usual job, we also made him responsible for simultaneously gauging whether everyone understood or not.”

It simply doesn't work that way. People are often unaware that they themselves do not understand, let alone other people. Their opinion of communication effectiveness is irrelevant. You need to take responsibility for ensuring that everyone is linguistically present, can hear, say and understand everything they need to, to perform their duties.

No. 6. DON'T ...and now for the big one...

DON'T use baby talk!

Stop using Pidgin English!

If Pidgin was good enough, we'd use it all the time!

*With each other, with our friends and family,
and there is a bloody good reason we don't..*

It's not good enough!

No. 6. DON'T

But it's also not good enough for me to lean on the ALLCAPS like that, I apologise. So here's some linguistics to explain why you shouldn't do this:

People often think it helps if they “simplify” their speech when addressing someone with poor English. They use baby talk.

(They do this because often the only similar prior experience they've had is talking to actual babies.)

(It doesn't help babies either BTW)

Instinctively we feel that “complexity”, or the words themselves are the problem, so we try to “simplify”, and reduce the number of words.

The problem is, this is the exact opposite of what we *should* be doing.

No. 6. DON'T

When people try to simplify their own speech, the first things to go are the definite and indefinite articles:

The indefinite article

“a”

and

The definite article

“the”

So now the Japanese have no idea whether what is being said to them is:

new information

“a gas cylinder”

or

something they are meant to *already know about.*

“the gas cylinder”

This is not helpful, it is confusing.

No. 6. DON'T

Next people like to lop off the pronouns:

“I”

“he”

“you”

“they”

Now the Japanese have no idea who is doing what to whom.

No. 6. DON'T

Next, people tend to strip away the “inflections” and “modifiers”, just leaving the root of the verb. Like this

Monitoring

Monitored

~~Going to~~ monitor

~~Tried to~~ monitor

~~If we~~ monitored

~~If we had~~ monitored

I'm sure you can see how much valuable information is lost.

And now as well as listen to you, they must pedal twice as fast as they struggle to *infer* what you wanted to say.

No. 6. DON'T

Instead of hearing sentences like:

“I think that we should be collecting data today from the feed water pump so that we can have a look at it tomorrow and see if there is a trend.”

They have to try and understand pidgin English like:

“Collect data...Feed water pump...today? Tomorrow look trend?”

Would you want to be treated like that?

No. 6. DON'T

Pidgin sacrifices all the detail, nuance and rhetorical effect that we take for granted when working in a professional setting among English speakers.

It is not helpful at all.

If you are thinking “But the Japanese are fine with it!” please re-read slide 11.

Not only do they mislead you, but you are digging the hole deeper, because they are also trying to learn English, and they are not competent to tell if something is correct or not.

Furthermore, you are their teacher. They look up to you and will copy your English believing it is correct, then *you* hear them repeat it, and it affirms your impression that communication is taking place and that they only understand Pidgin! It's a vicious circle.

Enough of my negativity

Let's look at what we can all do to improve this situation.

Some of this will be new, and perhaps you don't see the need, because you "get by OK".

Of course you do! We got by OK until wheels were invented too. But once we understood the advantages of wheels we changed our behaviour. So here some simple tips, some basic linguistics to promote understanding and behavioural change.

Best Practice X 6!

And the first five are important whether an interpreter is present or not.

Best Practice No. 1.

One idea per sentence!

Bad:

“We’re getting a high DP from the polishers, both polishers, which suggests to me that they are clogged, so we propose that we change out the filter cartridges and we will take a couple and analyse them and we will give you a couple, or however many you need, because I assume – and correct me if I’m wrong - that you would also want to try and find out why they are getting clogged, as part of your normal troubleshooting procedure is that correct?”

Good:

“There is a high differential pressure alarm. It is from the polisher filters. I think the filters are clogged. Let’s change the filter cartridges. We will give you one. Please have a look at it.”

Best Practice No. 2.

Context

No matter who is talking to who, a degree of interpolation is always required.

We grab the easy bits, and then our mind works out all the bits in between.

This ratio of what we understand vs what we don't, like S/N, more or less governs how easily understood the whole sentence is.

So let's give them a head start and tell them what it is we are about to tell them. This will enable them to interpolate, like we do.

Set the scene. If they understand the background and what you are trying to achieve, they can make much better guesses about the gaps in their understanding.

Tell them a bit about your feelings. Tell them why you are having this conversation.

For example:

“Mr. Suzuki I'm worried. I'm worried about the polishers. I want to ask you a couple of questions. I need the answer by the end of the day. I need to report to my manager tomorrow. My first question is...”

Best Practice No. 3.

Put it in writing.

People often assume that failure to communicate is failure to *understand*.

But so much of verbal communication fails NOT because of failure to understand, but because of failure to process the *sounds*: Not being able to hear, or make sense of someone's pronunciation.

If you're having difficulties, write it down!

Best Practice No. 4.

A picture tells a thousands words.

Try to always have a notebook or a whiteboard handy. The most difficult things to understand are NOT “technical terms”, they are *complex grammatical structures*. Take this sentence for example:

“The pump started at 1.00 AM, and the signal that the tank was full was sent around 2.00, and it started overflowing some time after that, but before we got the temp alarm – we don’t know – and if we had known how long it takes to reach the overflow, with both units on, we could have started monitoring, but I didn’t get here until 2.45 and we already had an alarm, and that’s when I went down and had a look.”

This would be so much easier to understand with a timeline, showing each event and pointing to where you are talking about.

Best Practice No. 5.

REPETITION

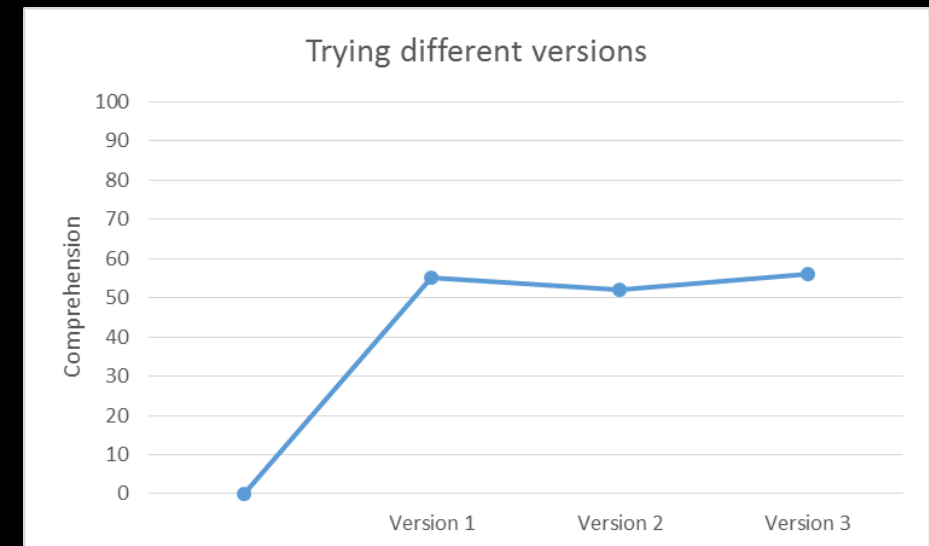
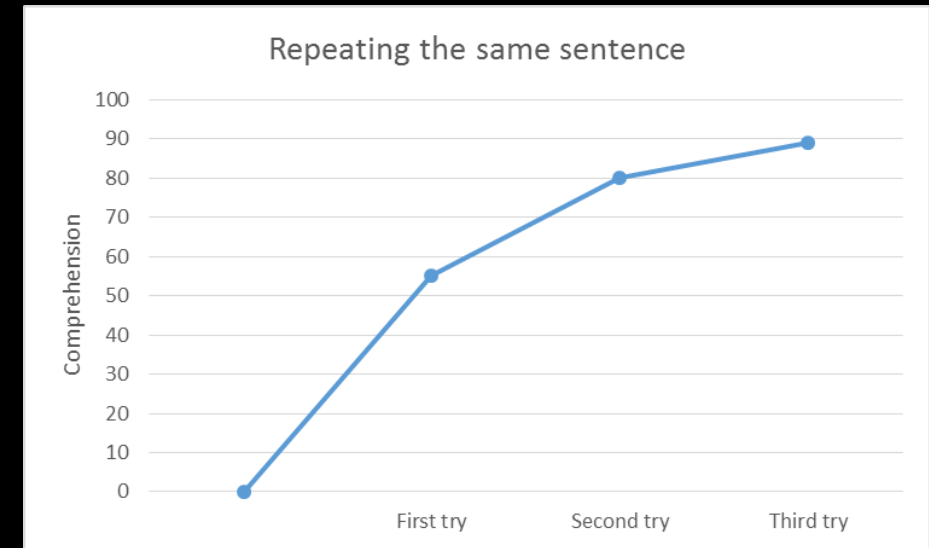
If you say something to a Japanese person, and they don't seem to understand,

DO NOT SAY IT A DIFFERENT WAY!

DO repeat the *exact* same sentence that you said the first time, word-for-word, but THIS TIME take care to leave a space between each word!

*When I was learning Japanese I'd hear a complicated sentence, and get about 40% of what they were saying, and **all I wanted was another crack at it** because I knew that second time round I would build on the 40% and get it up to 60%, and then just once more, the exact same sentence, and I'd get it.*

But people think “Oh he doesn't understand those words, I'll try some others.” and that simply puts them back to square one!



Best Practice No. 5.

Even if repetition doesn't work, if you repeat exactly the same sentence three times, with a space between each word, and they **STILL** don't understand, it doesn't matter. You have still done a wonderful thing:

They can now identify *which* word it is that is holding things up!

You've given them the power of diagnostic tools.

Speaking baby talk does **NOT** help, but this genuinely **DOES**.

They will love you for doing this and it will do more to accelerate both their learning and communication overall than anything else.

And this applies to Filipinos, Indians, everyone.

Best Practice No. 6.

The old timber cutter was persuaded to buy a new-fangled “chainsaw”. Brought it back the next day complaining that he only managed to cut two trees down.

The shop assistant said “Give us a look, maybe something’s wrong” and started it up, and the old bloke leapt back saying “What’s that noise??”

That’s you lot with an interpreter in the room.

I’m banking the cheques regardless, so if I’m sitting right there, for God’s sake use the interpreter!