

From Knowledge to Practice: Intercultural Skills in Poland-Japan Collaboration

by Anna Wysokińska-Zajchowska

When we think about today's market, it is easy to see that companies - especially those operating at scale - are no longer confined to a single country or organizational model. Intercultural collaboration has become a reality. A particularly relevant example is the economic relationship between Poland and Japan, which has become an increasingly important component of broader bilateral relations, combining advanced technology with distinct approaches to communication and work organization. As this cooperation continues to develop, the ability to build relationships based on mutual understanding becomes ever more important.

Challenges often emerge, especially in the early stages of contact. While Japan plays a central role in this discussion, it is important to note that similar issues arise wherever different cultural contexts meet. These challenges do not stem from language barriers - there are now many ways to address those - nor from technological differences. Instead, they are rooted in cultural differences that shape both communication and organizational practices. While this article focuses on intercultural communication, it is also worth noting that companies - particularly smaller ones - face additional challenges such as distance, cost, and regulatory complexity.

Everyday professional situations that may initially seem straightforward often reveal these differences. The way meetings are conducted, decisions are made, problems are communicated, or responsibilities are defined can lead to tension when expectations are not aligned. In many cases, behaviors that appear obvious to one side are interpreted differently by the other, resulting in misunderstandings, delays, or friction in cooperation. In the context of Polish-Japanese collaboration, these differences may relate to how disagreement is expressed, how decisions are made, or how concerns are communicated - often indirectly. What one side perceives as professionalism may be interpreted by the other as a lack of engagement or excessive directness. In practice, this means that the quality of communication becomes one of the key factors shaping economic relations between Poland and Japan. It seems evident that cooperation with Japan should be handled by individuals with the appropriate competencies - those who are able to avoid interpreting situations solely through the lens of their own cultural background. Universities seek to prepare students for such challenges; however, they often rely on simplified and highly illustrative examples.

One of the most frequently cited examples in Polish academic settings is the story of silence in negotiations between Poland and Japan. In one version, a Polish company presents an offer to which the Japanese side responds with silence. This silence is interpreted as a lack of acceptance, prompting the Polish side to quickly revise the terms, ultimately leading to a failed negotiation. The story appears in many variations and is difficult to verify, yet its persistent presence in academic teaching reflects how strongly rooted the belief is that understanding different communication codes

is essential. Regardless of its factual accuracy, it serves an important educational function by illustrating that a lack of cultural awareness can lead to flawed decisions - even when both sides possess strong technical and business expertise. In my experience, however, such examples - while memorable - do not fully capture the complexity of real situations and may contribute to a tendency to rely on oversimplified, single-scenario thinking. This points to a broader issue. The education of future experts often focuses on vivid, easy to remember examples, while overlooking more subtle, everyday communication dynamics. Yet these are the factors that most strongly influence the quality of cooperation and remain the most difficult to identify. Research on intercultural communication shows that in cultures such as Japan, a significant portion of meaning is conveyed indirectly through context, relationships, and nonverbal cues whereas European cultures tend to place greater emphasis on direct and explicit communication. As a result, misunderstandings often arise not from what has been said, but from what remains unsaid or is misinterpreted.

Communication challenges do not arise solely from differences in customs or social norms; they are rooted in deeper, culturally embedded ways of perceiving reality. Each culture develops its own interpretive frameworks that shape what is considered obvious, appropriate, or professional. To move beyond these frameworks, it is necessary first to become aware of them and to move past the simplified division between "us" and "them." It is therefore not surprising that individuals in the same situation may assign entirely different meanings to the same behaviors, often without realizing it. This phenomenon occurs even within a single culture and becomes even more pronounced in intercultural contexts. Polish-Japanese relations provide a particularly relevant example, as they bring together more direct, task-oriented communication with a more contextual and relationship-oriented approach. As a result, incorrect assumptions, oversimplifications, and judgments may arise, appearing unjustified or unclear from the other party's perspective.

While universities provide students with tools to learn about Japan, from my perspective they still do not sufficiently prepare them to function in real professional environments. Study programs focus primarily on language, culture, politics, and economics, which provide a valuable foundation. At the same time, current models of education do not always fully address the needs of business practice. As a result, the process of developing professionals capable of operating effectively in intercultural environments becomes prolonged. In my view, the key challenge is not the lack of intercultural competencies themselves, but rather how they are understood and the absence of their systematic development in relation to real workplace conditions and business processes.

The level of these competencies has a direct impact on the quality of international cooperation. Business

communication literature increasingly emphasizes that its shortcomings are not merely relational issues but have measurable economic consequences they lead to delays, duplicated work, and, at the organizational level, significant financial losses. In international teams, including Polish-Japanese collaboration, these costs are further amplified, as they result not only from communication errors but also from differences in interpretation.

In a production environment, a lack of understanding of how a given culture operates can lead to delays in decision-making, unclear responsibilities and in extreme cases, to significant contractual penalties or even the termination of cooperation. Misalignment reduces coordination, lowers efficiency, and makes it more difficult to achieve intended goals. Over time, it also leads to a decline in trust and a deterioration in the quality of business relationships. At the same time, the growing economic cooperation between Poland and Japan shows that these competencies are being developed in practice often outside formal education systems, through professional experience and collaboration between companies.

The presence of numerous Japanese investments in Poland further demonstrates that effective cooperation is not only possible but is already developing dynamically. However, its success depends on the deliberate development of intercultural competencies, which allow differences to become a source of advantage rather than a barrier in international cooperation.

Intercultural competencies should not be understood merely as knowledge of cultural differences or general communication principles. At their core, they involve the development of cultural awareness that enables accurate interpretation of behavior and the ability to adapt one's actions to a specific professional context. In this sense, they are not an addition to technical expertise but a key component of operational effectiveness and the stability of cooperation. Ultimately, they determine whether cultural differences lead to misunderstandings and losses or become the foundation of sustainable economic relations between Poland and Japan.

About the author:

Anna Wysokińska-Zajchowska, PhD, specializes in Japanese culture and philosophy. She collaborates with the Foundation for the Promotion of Science and Culture: Kokoroe. She is the author of academic publications in the fields of philosophy, cultural studies, and communication. Her current work focuses on the practical aspects of communication and cooperation between Poland and Japan.