

Chapter Four - Formal vs. Informal

I. Reading

He's sitting on the desk!

I clearly remember one of the very first classes that I taught in Japan; I walked in, set my books down, introduced myself, and sat on the desktop of one of the desks in the front row. (Of course, no one was sitting in the front row!) I heard a student's gasp from somewhere in the back of the room. Obviously, I had already done something wrong. "What could it be?" I wondered. Now, of course, I understand that sitting on a desk is considered improper behavior for anyone in Japan, let alone a teacher, but I also understand that this action is also a gesture of friendliness and welcome in my own culture. I begin almost all my classes at the start of the year by doing this same thing - sitting on a desk, intentionally. I then explain why, and what it means in my culture.

In Chapter Three we discussed the different ideas about hierarchy held by Japanese and Westerners, and this is one way a western teacher can try to be polite - by not going to the front of the class to stand behind a podium, but instead "coming down" to the level of the students. (See Chapter Ten for more about the school environment.) The other important thing happening here is the (western) teacher's effort to make the situation more informal. For westerners, less formal is almost always a good thing. While Japanese can find comfort in a formal structure that frees them from the burden of having to think about who is who and what will happen next, too much formality can be uncomfortable to a Westerner in many situations. In order to speak, to work, or to learn, Westerners think it's absolutely necessary to be relaxed, and too much formality makes it impossible to relax.

First names first

A very clear example of the westerner's preference for informality is the use of people's first names. Westerners, and especially North Americans, will try to get on a "first-name basis" as quickly as possible when meeting someone new. In the United States, patients often call their doctors and dentists by their first names. I always encourage my students to use my first name, and I use theirs from the very first day. In American culture, that kind of informality is a way of being polite. Insisting on the use of titles or honorifics (Mr., Ms., Dr., etc.) can be misunderstood in various ways. Using the title for someone else might be interpreted as a sign of dislike, as a sign of wishing to keep a relationship from becoming too close. Insisting on its use for oneself could be misunderstood as a sign that one thinks a bit too highly of oneself. (Example: "Please call me PROFESSOR Johnson.") Doing away with honorifics also makes it easier to forget differences in rank. (See Chapter Three.) Contrast this behavior with the Japanese use of *-sensei*, *-san*, *-sama*, *-kun*, etc. These markers not only help people remember where everyone is in the hierarchy, but they also formalize the relationship, providing rules of behavior that are easy to follow.

Note that the British differ slightly from Americans in this regard. The British are much less likely to use a person's first name in conversation. In fact, the British will tend to be more formal than Americans in many situations and contexts. Similarly, the use of just a person's last name is much more common in England. In the U.S., calling a person by his last name is considered quite rude. The only contexts in which one might hear this use of last names are sports teams, law enforcement, or the military. Remember, Japan has an Emperor, England has a Queen, but the U.S. has a President. Theoretically, anyone born in the U.S. can grow up to be

President.

Help yourself!

Another great contrast in formal-informal behaviors is the way Japanese and Westerners treat guests. When one visits a typical Japanese home, one is greeted in the 玄関 (*genkan*) by the family with formal bows and formal greetings. One is taken to the living room and seated in the position of honor. Tea and very delicate, attractive cookies, cakes, or sweets are set before you...with more formal bows as the person serving enters and leaves the room. Contrast this with a very typically American, “Hey, Hiro, you’re early! I’m just getting out of the shower... help yourself to a beer and put on some tunes. There’re chips on the table if you’re hungry. I’ll be right there.”

It’s important to understand that *both* of these hosts are being *polite*. That is, they are trying to make their guests comfortable. The Japanese host presents the guest with a formal pattern of behavior so that the guest knows exactly what to do (and say), helping him relax, while simultaneously honoring the guest by treating him as a person of high rank. The American host is trying to act as *informally* as possible, ensuring that his guest feels equal and “at home.” There are even expressions that underscore this feeling: “Make yourself at home!” or “*Mi casa es su casa* (Spanish).” Japanese guests and Western guests have very different expectations and different things will make them feel comfortable or uncomfortable. A good host will know these differences and act accordingly.

What’s with the suit, Taro?

Clothes are another area where the different ideas about formality can be seen easily. Whether it’s a date or a party, one of the great social fears of Westerners is being “overdressed.” Just as it’s a *faux pas* (French: つまずきます) to show too much effort in the way a guest is treated, it can be equally embarrassing to show too much effort in one’s clothes or appearance. Most Westerners visiting Japan are struck by how “dressed up” so many people are. Take a look at tourists at a temple or shrine; it won’t be long before you see them trying to sneak a photograph of a young Japanese girl wearing high heels for her day of walking on gravel pathways of the temple grounds. You’ll know if they’re American by their casual attire - jeans or shorts, sneakers, and t-shirts.



In work situations in Japan, as well, one will see many more people wearing business suits and uniforms than almost anywhere else in the world. Similarly, the work environment in Japanese companies is usually quite a bit more formal than one will find overseas. Again, in Japan, unless things are formal, one might be suspected of not being “serious” enough. In America, the feeling is that if one can’t relax, one can’t do his best work. Naturally, this makes for very different work environments, something we will study in Chapter Nine.



II. Comprehension Questions

If you have a difficult time answering these questions, read the passage again. If you can't find the answer, make a note of your question and ask the teacher for an explanation in your next class.

1. Why might a Western teacher sit on a desk in class?
2. What can you say about Japanese and Western ideas about formality and informality?
3. How do Japanese and Western hosts treat their guests differently? Why?
4. What does it mean to treat a guest "politely"?
5. In the U.S., many companies have a tradition of "Casual Fridays." Can you guess what this might mean?

III. Thinking

New words and expressions

What are the main points in this chapter?

General summary of main points.

List some examples from your own life or observations that support these points:

List some examples from your own life or observations that do not support these points:

Your reactions and opinions: