

APEC's ECONOMIES AND THE LANGUAGE GAP: UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

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The creation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum meant that the perspective of Mexican entrepreneurs widened since possibilities were enormous. However, even though APEC is mainly focused on building a dynamic and harmonious Asia – Pacific community, there was certain reluctance on the part of Mexican entrepreneurs to invest on Asia because of a numerous diversity of reasons, such as economic or political issues, administrative, fiscal, and cultural, among others. For this presentation, the focus will be on culture and language differences since APEC's economies are multi-diverse and there are some challenges that should be addressed looking forward to mutual understanding as well as achieving it in the near future.

Asian and Mexican entrepreneurs are “kept apart not only by a mutual inability to communicate, but by a different way of life.”¹ The major function of language is precisely that: communicating, to exchange information, and its accomplishment “implies a process that comprises a series of successive stages.”² There are several theories that might work for the purpose of achieving an effective communication among different cultures; one of them is the theory of intercultural communication, a kind of communication that exists in the moment that “two persons, who perceived themselves as part of different cultures, have tried to communicate.”³

Intercultural communication is divided into four different subject areas:

¹ De Mente, Boye. *How Business is Done in Japan*, p. 27

² Gómez Fernández, Diego. “El proceso comunicativo: una revisión”, p. 788 – 789.

³ Rodrigo Alsina, Miguel. *Comunicación intercultural*, p. 19 (own translation).

1. Interpersonal Communication. "Among people with different sociocultural systems and/or communication among the members of different subsystems [...] within the same sociocultural system."⁴
2. Cross-cultural Communication. "Comparison between the forms of interpersonal communication of different cultures."⁵
3. International Communication. "International Relations studies on mass media."⁶
4. Compared Mass Communication. "It is focused on the differential treatment of the information of one event in different media of different countries and on the effects that the same type of program has in each country."⁷

Therefore, APEC's creation not only meant more opportunities for investors, it also meant a whole new way of communicating in which culture is deeply involved and, lets not forget, the kind of information that is being exchanged; evidently "the more elements in common the different cultures have, the more easy their communication will be."⁸ The focus then, will lie on Cross-Cultural Communication, which requires a new communicative competence and a certain level of knowledge when it comes to the culture one is trying to communicate with, for example gestures and ways of behavior, it is not enough to know the words in the foreign language; acknowledging one's own culture is also part of the process. Cultural differences derive from language but "the tendency to place the accent on the difference"⁹ has to be countered to achieve the enhancement of business relations between Asia and Mexico.

⁴ Rodrigo Alsina, Miguel. *Comunicación intercultural*, p. 25 (own translation).

⁵ Rodrigo Alsina, Miguel. *Comunicación intercultural*, p. 25 (own translation).

⁶ Rodrigo Alsina, Miguel. *Comunicación intercultural*, p. 25 (own translation).

⁷ Rodrigo Alsina, Miguel. *Comunicación intercultural*, p. 25 (own translation).

⁸ Rodrigo Alsina, Miguel. *Comunicación intercultural*, p. 77 (own translation).

⁹ Rodrigo Alsina, Miguel. *Comunicación intercultural*, p. 65 (own translation).

One of the countries in which business was successful between Asia and Mexico is Japan with Kidzania, “the company’s most successful franchise [where] some 900,000 visitors on average have been pouring”¹⁰ and which, according to the “Nikkei Asian Review” magazine, “is one of very few Mexican companies to have a presence, usually alongside Cemex.”¹¹ Kidzania focused on children’s entertainment: it is a theme park in which children are able to play and act like they are adults within a safe and educational environment that provides a first encounter with what it means to live in the kind of society they will experience when they grow up. According to Xavier López Ancona its creator, the model is very careful so that “the experiences offered [...] are as formative as possible.”¹² This place works sponsored by major national and international companies; López Ancona, along a group of investors, originally opened their first branch office at Mexico, nowadays there is a Kidzania in over 20 countries worldwide and it is the third, located in Tokyo, Japan, the one where the focus will be on.

In Japan, Kidzania opened during 2006 and it meant the beginning of a major expansion, a successful case in what refers not only to investing in Asia, but also in what refers to achieving an effective process of communication among Mexicans and Japanese in order to reaching their common objectives and to follow an entirely Mexican business model.

As published in an important newspaper in Mexico, López Ancona said:

“It is an enterprise that was created as a mere children’s entertainment center and as time goes by it has become a world class business model [which process involves] looking for a business associate in order to know more precisely which are the preferences and customs of a region, how the law

¹⁰ <http://www.cnbc.com/id/39902936>

¹¹ <http://asia.nikkei.com/magazine/20160414-MEXICO-ASIA/On-the-Cover/KidZania-pushes-an-Asia-first-investment-strategy>

¹² <http://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/finanzas/81085.html>

operates, and also that the interested investors know the information about the contacts of the commercial partners that will be involved in the project.

[...] They look for experienced business associates in what refers to entertainment in order to guarantee a thorough work and who are aware of the latest about education”¹³ in their countries since that aspect varies significantly.

The newspaper mentions some of the most important aspects to take into account when speaking about bilateral business relations, it not only involved a different language, but “it is [also] a culture that comprises a 360 degrees change, not only in what refers to education, but also in they way to conduct business”¹⁴, the model and the people involved is absolutely open about learning the way of thinking and needs of the people that will visit Kidzania, they learn the culture. Businessmen tend to think that their activity only needs the foreign language, but there are also values and beliefs, for example: “As group-oriented people, most Japanese find it difficult or impossible to act as individuals”¹⁵, and that, certainly does not happen in Mexico, it is significantly different. “Because of racial homogeneity and centuries of geographical and cultural isolation from the West, the Japanese are “foreign conscious” [...] They are acutely conscious of all racial and cultural differences and find it impossible to accept an outsider.”¹⁶

Mexicans are absolutely different, there is a noticeable acceptance of the foreign, perhaps there is a little reluctance at first but is not a severe problem and, because of that difference in behavior, if businessmen do not take into account that fact and achieve an effective communication model that notices and, more importantly, respects the differences, then there might be serious trouble or absolute reluctance to even try to take advantage of the possibilities that have opened and, when “they do get

¹³ <http://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/finanzas/81085.html>

¹⁴ <http://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/finanzas/81085.html>

¹⁵ How Business is Done in Japan, p. 24

¹⁶ How Business is Done in Japan, p. 25

together [...], except where the few English-speaking [or even Spanish] Japanese are concerned, all they can do is shake hands, smile and offer each other drinks.”¹⁷ Another very common problem is the way in which foreign managers call their Japanese employees: “the only practical solution [if not the best,] is for the [manager] to systematically survey his Japanese staff [...] They will discover that most Japanese do have a personal name which they prefer to be called”¹⁸, this is related to the custom of adding “San” to the last name that Japanese have which, when used by their foreign managers, feels as awkward for them as it does for their managers. The latter relates, again, to the biggest “day-to-day problem facing the foreign businessman in Japan [which is] the language barrier [...] Being unable to communicate with each other freely, misunderstandings and suspicions are not only magnified but are created where none existed”¹⁹, moreover, “less than five percent of the people regularly employed as interpreters in Japan could be ranked as first-rate”, according to Boye Lafayette de Mente.

In conclusion a new model of global intercultural communication is slowly generating and there are several elements that may be noticed and that should be implemented in order to begin forming healthier human relations and, therefore, more successful business experiences: “Intercultural training and education are presented to us as a fundamental medium in order to achieve an ethnorelative²⁰ perception of

¹⁷ How Business is Done in Japan, p. 27

¹⁸ How Business is Done in Japan, p. 28

¹⁹ How Business is Done in Japan, p. 71

²⁰ “...refers to a person who is comfortable with many standards and customs and who can adapt his/her behavior and judgments to many interpersonal settings.”
(https://www.caee.org/sites/default/files/A%20Model%20for%20Personal%20Change_0.pdf)

cultural diversity, as well as a critical and a vindicating attitude facing the way in which what happens around us is being built.”²¹

Some of the elements of the model mentioned above, which is also a process, are:

- Learning the language
- Learning the culture
- Respecting the differences
- Acknowledging the fact that we are living in a global world that is slowly needing (and at the same time creating) new ways of doing business according to that fact

²¹ <http://www.observatoriodosmedios.org/mediateca/observatorio/xornadas/200802/artigo02.pdf>