

# The English Connection

A Korea TESOL Publication

Summer 2023, Volume 27, Issue 2

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# Embracing Peers Through Interpersonal Competence

By Timothy Ang

## The Outburst

A colleague told me about an incident at a recent English teaching conference in Japan. A presenter was in the middle of his talk when suddenly a member of the audience interrupted. The issue was the excessive use of the presenter's Japanese. The title of the talk was on translanguaging, and the presenter switched from English to Japanese during their talk. However, this audience member took a particular dislike to this method of explanation. Several more interruptions continued until the attendee was firmly asked to stop by other members of the audience who had enough of the interruptions.

I found it amusing that, even as language learners and educators, we are not immune to moments of communicative lapses. More importantly, outbursts like this, especially within academic circles, have long-lasting implications. Lashing out can become a scarlet letter, and it may harm your reputation and diminish your contributions. Colleagues may avoid collaborating, and academic institutions may be hesitant to hire you because it brings to light your potential attitudes towards students. When people in positions of teaching lack people skills, it can adversely affect the curriculum and students' learning experience.

It is here that I am reminded of Lave and Wenger's (1991) idea of community of practice (CoP), characterized as a group of individuals having a shared interest in carrying out continual discussions and negotiations in order to engage in collective learning. The collaborative aspect allows individuals to more effectively improve their abilities as well as achieve common goals. Examples of these communities include KoreaTESOL (KOTESOL) and the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT), both stalwart organizations within the global language educator community.

However, like any other construct of society, the individual parts that compose a community are complicated and multi-faceted. Each member has their own feelings, beliefs, with an almost dizzying amount of nuanced identities. These positive and negative emotions play a role in identity formation that allows for instances of self-transformation but also resistance (Zembylas, 2003).

This resistance is due to conflicts of different ideologies and beliefs. These conflicts are exemplified by incidents such as the unfortunate presentation interruption. By looking at the community through this lens, one realizes its vulnerability and the need to take action.

The easy solution would be to suggest a dispassionate approach and eliminate conflict altogether. But you cannot simply remove emotions from an interaction, it is what gives our beliefs purpose. In fact, it is our emotions that turn us into powerful educators, capable of creative ideas and putting up with failures and hardships. Furthermore, Wegner himself has acknowledged that conflict is a part of any CoP (2010). The onus now is to build an environment where communities are exemplified by effectively handling situations of conflict.

## Interpersonal Competence

One means to address conflict in situations and encourage productive self-transformation is through interpersonal skills, colloquially known as "people skills." Being knowledgeable and passionate teachers will not suffice; you can be the smartest person in the room, but you can also be socially inept and isolated. To improve peer-to-peer relationships and for CoPs to flourish, we need to practice these interpersonal skills. I have come up with several interpersonal drivers listed along with examples (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Interpersonal Competence Drivers

Driver	Description	Example
<b>Empathy</b>	Understanding what someone else might be feeling or experiencing, as well as recognizing and appreciating their feelings.	Checking in on coworkers that you haven't talked to in a while. Understanding the current emotional state and well-being of your peers.
<b>Self-Awareness</b>	Often a component of reflective practice, refers to a person's capacity to comprehend their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors and how they affect others.	Realizing that your demeanor and tone of voice when dealing with others may sometimes come off as aggressive, flippant, or distant.
<b>Active Listening</b>	Focusing on the intent of the message, comprehending context, and remembering in a non-judgemental way of what is being said or done.	Paying attention to the feedback of others. Waiting until a colleague has said everything that they had intended during a discussion.
<b>Collaboration</b>	Working with one another on solutions to problems and engaging in projects collectively that have a benefit for the group and the individual.	Offering to substitute for a teacher if they are unable to teach that class, or engaging in active discussion on course materials.
<b>Humility</b>	Keeping ourselves grounded and practicing restraint on our egos.	Giving equal weight to everyone's opinion regardless of the person's background, position, or affiliation.

Going back to the conference incident presents an exercise into interpersonal competence drivers. It is easy to label the interrupter as temperamental, but pigeonholing or snap judgments of someone also results in ignorance. Practicing empathy would have resulted in a less antagonizing stand. Was it the way the presenter was talking that was contentious, was it the content of his message that needed clarification, or was it that the attendee felt very strongly about her opinions? Put even more simply, perhaps she needed to be heard because she was just having a long and stressful day. Practicing empathy offers us additional solutions and realizations.

Indeed, the incident was further addressed days later by one of the conference organizers, stating the need for respecting opinions and exercising humility. However, another solution would have been to offer the offending attendee a chance for her own presentation opportunity, at the current or future conference as a means to share her counterpoints. This way, constructive confrontation and collaboration can coexist, and both sides are allowed to thrive. After all, the goal of any conference is to exchange ideas in the spirit of mutual support and camaraderie.

When collaboration works it is wonderful. This mindset can blossom into new projects, mentorship roles, and joint discoveries of knowledge and research. And it does not always have to be about academic progress, we can also mingle and make new friends along the way. Interpersonal skills should not be underestimated and potential repercussions of their dearth should be taken seriously. Everyone needs to be aware of practicing interpersonal skills as they go about their lives.

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### Conclusion

COVID-19 and the online world have magnified and fueled moments of extreme conflict. Fear and forced isolation have worsened opposing ideological and pedagogical rhetorics. These in turn have eroded our fundamental interpersonal skills. It is the symptom of a bigger underlying problem. We have forgotten how to conduct civil discourse, which makes integrating back into society tumultuous. In addition, we have our own moments of negativity, which make it difficult to approach this issue as it forces us to look at our faults.

But the pandemic has also blessed us with opportunities. A lot of communities have risen and persevered during the pandemic, both online and face-to-face, supporting and helping their members. And now they are at a crossroads, either face a slow institutional death or continue to be productive and inclusive. I hope that this article has reintroduced the importance of interpersonal skills,

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especially as they come into play in maintaining CoPs, holding fruitful conferences, understanding emotions, and creating positive work environments.

The Japanese have a very popular saying: "The nail that sticks out gets hammered." In highly homogenous societies such as Korea and Japan, through our beliefs, identity, and emotions, we are often labeled as nails. How we collaborate but also embrace our differences and confront each other in a productive manner will determine our professional and personal growth. After all, we nails have to stick together.

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