

English Communication in “World Skills International Restaurant Service Competition”: How Japanese Competitors Can Excel in the World

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Abstract

WorldSkills International, otherwise known as the World Skills Olympics, is held every other year and is participated in by 51 member countries in more than 45 categories. The Japanese team has participated three times in the restaurant service competition since 2005 in Helsinki, but has yet to produce favorable results. In the restaurant service competition, communication skill is one of the essential abilities to be judged on. This paper reports on the competitor selection process and the training regime for the latest competition held in Calgary in 2009, and raises proposals for English communication training for future competitions.

Introduction

The 40th WorldSkill International was held from 1st to 7th September 2009, in Calgary, Canada. Despite enthusiastic commitment from the Japan restaurant service team, no medals have been awarded to Japan yet (Table 1). The restaurant service competition is categorized as social and personal care. According to the WorldSkills International official website, not only is a professional knowledge of international cuisine and beverages required, the waiter/waitress needs to have a complete command of serving rules and know the preparation of special dishes and drinks at the guests' table. This paper reports on the 40th restaurant service competition highlighting the competitor selection process and the training regime for the latest competition held in Calgary in 2009, and also considers prospective strategic approaches in the restaurant service competition to excel in future events.

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Table-1 The results of Japanese competitors in WorldSkills

City held (year)	Result / Number of participants
Helsinki (2005)	15th/16
Shizuoka (2007)	8th/21
Calgary (2009)	20th/25

Source: Japan Vocational Ability Development Association. “JAVADA News” 31 (2005) : 2; 54 (2007): 2; 77 (2009): 2

WorldSkills International states that the official languages are English, French and German. Following the language rule, the official documentation is published in these three languages. However, the actual situation is that English is the most used language. Even native French and German speakers use English during the meetings. For example, a day before the competition starts, all participants gather at the restaurant service competition site and introduce themselves in front of the other participants. Despite the three official language rule, every participant spoke in English and no participant tried to introduce themselves in their own language in the past three competitions. Not only during the meetings, the ability to speak English is crucial in competing well.

Competitor Selection Procedure

The competitor for Japan was chosen at the Japan Skill Olympic in Makuhari, Chiba on 1st November, 2008. My responsibility at the competition was to prepare the English communication test and to conduct it on the competition day. English tests are not usually conducted at domestic restaurant service competitions in Japan. However, this competition at Makuhari was held for the purpose of selecting the competitor for WorldSkills International 2009. In the Helsinki and Calgary competitions, communication between kitchen staff and the competitors was held in English, therefore, a certain level of English was essential. In Makuhari, the English communication test was regarded as one of the extra tasks added to the regular service skills.

The prepared test at the Makuhari competition consisted of writing and speaking parts. The writing part was to answer the questions outlined in Table 2. This test aimed to check if the competitors had a certain level of basic English knowledge. Regarding the questions from Q1 through to Q4, the competitors were instructed that full sentences were not required in answering the questions. Also, they were informed not to be concerned about spelling errors.

Table-2 Skills Olympic Japan 2008 English writing Test

- Q1. Have you ever taken any internationally or domestically recognized English tests?
- Q2. Give the ingredients of a glass of Martini.
- Q3. Briefly, when you see a nervous or unhappy customer, is there anything specific you try to do for them?
- Q4. What is the most important aspect of restaurant service?
- Q5. Mark each question either True or False.
- (a) Eye contact has little impact on communication. ()
- (b) Customer feedback rarely provides information necessary to do a better job.()
- (c) It really isn't important to remember customers' names and faces. ()
- Q6. Fill in the blanks with an appropriate word.
- (a) Our flight has been delayed () of a technical problem
- (b) The company has been successful both domestically () abroad.
- (c) Visitors must sign in at either the front desk () the main office.

The interviews were conducted as the speaking part of the English communication test, which made the competitors nervous (Table 3). This was in a group setting, therefore, each competitor had an opportunity to listen to others. It is obvious that listening to other interviewees is quite nerve-racking and vice versa. However, it is essential for the competitors to have enough strength to tackle their nervousness. They need to be aware that on the day of the WorldSkills, not only will there be the service skills judges but also an enormous number of spectators and the press, because restaurant service is one of the most popular competition categories in WorldSkills among the visitors. Therefore, the competitor needs to concentrate on not being distracted by others.

In the marking criteria of the WorldSkill restaurant service competition, the competitors were marked on their communication skills with the guests, which included nonverbal aspects, such as posture and eye contact. Therefore, the marking criteria of the speaking test for the competitor selection procedure encompassed both these elements.

Table-3 Sample Interview Questions

Specific

1. Do you enjoy table flower arranging? What do you keep in mind when you arrange?
2. Describe your usual workplace attire.
3. How do you first greet your customers when they arrive?
4. Which cocktail do you like making most of all?
5. Which fruit is the most difficult for carving?

General

6. What time did you arrive today? What form of transportation did you take?
7. What did you do yesterday?
8. What is today's date?
9. In which city will the next WorldSkills Olympic take place?
10. What do you do in your spare time?

Training

After detailed marking by the service experts, a 21-year-old female was chosen as the competitor for Japan. She had a TOEIC score of 500 points. She had experience of staying and studying in the United States for several months as an exchange student when she was in high school. Because she did not have a problem with everyday conversation, the training was mainly focused on professional communication. After the competitor was chosen as the representative for Japan, she was hired as a waitress at a French restaurant, Chez Matsuo in Tokyo. This restaurant is one of the finest restaurants in Tokyo, and is well known to have hosted the royal family as well as high-ranking non-Japanese guests from around the world. Therefore, Chez Matsuo was an ideal work place for the Japanese competitor to learn of the global standard for restaurant service.

Service skill training was conducted under the instruction of Japan's restaurant service expert, who already had experience of acting as an expert at the 39th WorldSkills International in Shizuoka. In each category, an expert is chosen from the participating country. The experts have the role of training the competitors and also to participate in the category meetings to discuss details of the modules before the competition. Experts in WorldSkills International are defined as follows in the WorldSkills International rules.

6.4.1 Definition

A person with experience in a skill, trade or technology representing a member in the skill competition related to their expertise.

Source: "OD03 Competition Rules v3.0 EN." worldskills.org. 1 June 2009. [WorldSkills International Official Document](#).

<<http://www.worldskills.org/>

[index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=240&Itemid=454Document](#). >

Along with the service training, English communication training was scheduled approximately

once a week focusing on speaking and listening. Restaurant Service Basics (Dahmer 2002) was chosen as the textbook to follow. Topics included;

- approaching the guests
- taking orders
- appropriate topics of conversation
- answering questions
- making suggestions
- placing orders in the kitchen

As a supplement to the text, The Restaurant Server’s Guide (Martin 1987) was introduced. By using this workbook, active thinking was encouraged in order to answer the questions in the text. Apart from going through the textbooks, self-introduction practice was emphasized. At the first meeting, the competitors introduce themselves as stated earlier in this paper. This self-introduction is quite influential in terms of self-presentation. Giving a good impression to the experts of different nationalities is not easy, however, it is important to socialize with the experts and the competitors during the four-day competition. The competitors do not need to be fluent in English. However, she/he needs to be clear and accurate. In addition to that, it is desirable to have something more in which to excel compared with the others. For example, the competitor could give a tiny taste of a unique impression which would remain in the experts’ minds.

Competition

The competition was held over four days. The competitors were divided into four groups and went through each module every day. The following Table 4 is the Japanese competitor’s schedule at the competition.

Table-4 Competition Task (2009 Calgary)

Day	Module	Task
Day 1 (2 Sep.)	Bar Service	Aperitif and Canape service for Banquets
		Fine dining cocktail making
		Espresso coffee service and Fruit mise en place
		Coffee service for Casual dining
		Fruit Carving

Day 2 (3 Sep.)	Casual Dining	Decanting
		Smoked Salmon Carving
		A la carte service for 1st sitting
		Caeser salad
		A la carte service for 2nd sitting
Day 3 (4 Sep.)	Banquet Dining	Tablecloth laying for guest table & napkin folding
		Banquet dining service
Day 4 (5 Sep.)	Fine Dining (Gueridon)	Napkin folding
		Fine dining service

The strategic view for future competitions

Simulative training

From the point of view of English communication, two proposals are suggested for future training. First, more training should be held in a simulative setting in English. For example, communication with the guests and the kitchen staff could be introduced in the training. Knowing the past three Japanese competitors in Helsinki, Shizuoka and Calgary, these Japanese competitors had wonderful talent and potential, however, they would have maximized their ability if they had more opportunities to be trained in simulative settings. Before the competition, the past Japanese competitors looked confident and they stated that they were mentally strong. In reality, the competitors commented after the competitions that they got tremendously nervous encountering the English speaking environment. Hence, it is crucial that communication training in simulative settings be introduced. In all four modules, the competitor should have simulative training to deal with English speaking guests. In each module, the atmosphere of the restaurant is varied. For example, the bar module and the fine dining module are differentiated not only in the service skills, but also in the communication style with the guests, a fact that which the competitors should be aware of.

In addition to practicing speaking with the guests, communication training with English speaking kitchen staff is necessary. The next competition venue will be in London, therefore, the language in the kitchen will be in English without doubt. Communication towards kitchen staff will not be judged, however, it is important to have a good flow in the kitchen for a good service to be provided.

Assertiveness Training

The second proposal is that the competitors should be trained to have more assertiveness in English. Assertive communication is regarded as the most effective communication style in recent years. It is

especially very effective when used in dealing with difficult situations. Japanese speakers tend to be passive in their verbal approach (Kawamoto 2007). It is essential to be assertive to compete in the multinational environment.

In communication, being assertive is different from being aggressive. According to Stubbs (1985), assertive communication involves protecting your life-space and rights while respecting those of others. In the WorldSkills competition there is a briefing period every morning. It is the last opportunity for the competitors to learn details before the competition begins. Of course, questions are encouraged, but it is not easy to pose questions in a second language. Here, the use of ‘active listening’ skills in assertive communication is suggested, if the competitors feel intimidated. Chiamonte and Adria state that listening can be activated by paraphrasing, re-wording or stating in a different way, instead of addressing the question directly. The competitors can clarify the speaker’s intention to understand fully.

Another application of assertiveness is the ‘broken record’ approach in speaking. Clinical-experimental psychologist, Smith (1975) suggests this method to change one’s behavior in response to manipulation in order to enforce one’s assertive rights. The process is always coming back to what you want to say, therefore, it is named the ‘broken record’ approach. The procedure is as follows (Kawamoto 2007):

- Ask; Be direct, specific and brief
- Listen; Listen actively to their response and show that you are listening
- Field; Acknowledge their point of view
- Repeat the request again

There was one incident at the WorldSkills in Calgary when a competitor found that a plate was not clean, and the competitor tried to report it to a nearby judge immediately. Either the judge could not hear the competitor’s remark or did not understand fully what the competitor wanted to say. In consequence, the plate was not exchanged or cleaned. Failing to report properly resulted in the competitor losing points from the judges. With assertiveness training, the competitor will gain the skills necessary to assertively communicate with the judges.

I have suggested two proposals for the next WorldSkills International restaurant service competition in this paper: simulative training and assertiveness training in English communication. Both aspects of training are essential to be practiced along with service skill training.

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