

The Practice of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) in Japanese Companies Communication

Dina Dwi Astartia

School of Post Graduates, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia

Email: dina.astartia@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Japanese are known to have a very unique work culture. One of the characteristics of Japanese work culture is detail oriented, paying attention even to small things and details. This study aims to clarify how the practice of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) between superiors to subordinates in the communication frame in Japanese companies in Indonesia. The methods in this study are case study, literature studies, focus group discussion, and interview of 25 workers of Japanese Company in Indonesia, with various position from staff to manager. The results show that the practice of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) implemented between superiors to subordinates communication can affect to work performance. The results also show the benefits and obstacles while the respondents implemented *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) at work. The findings of the study have some pedagogical implications, as an effort to improve communication skill from graduates of Japanese language education study programs in society, especially into Japanese companies or institutions that use Japanese language as a communication way.

Keywords: *Communication, culture, kikubari (attentiveness), mekubari (watchfulness).*

1. INTRODUCTION

Human wisdom can be seen from the person's ability to communicate using a language as a tool to convey thoughts (Masinambow, 1985). Koetjaraningrat in Chaer and Agustina (2010) states that one of the elements of culture is language. It is a part of a culture that has a function as a communication system to establish cooperation, politeness and community survival (Nababan, 1984).

Intelligence is related to sharpness of thinking, wise in attitude, and the power of sensitivity of the heart to produce good actions. It contains things related to sharp intellect, dexterous and elegant policies and actions. In other words, a person's intelligence in general is not only seen in terms of achievements in the form of numbers or positions, but can also be seen from the language acts he does when he conveys his thoughts with the aim of cooperating or interacting with the surrounding community in social life.

This relates to politeness in language which is closely related to the selection of language codes, social norms,

and cultural systems that apply in society (Chaer & Agustina, 2010). This illustrates that only people who are intelligent, knowledgeable, and sensitive to things related to the surrounding context can act politely or ethically. The language act is the result of the sharpness of the mind and the sensitivity of the heart in understanding the environment so that it can produce an ethical or beautiful attitude.

Geertz in Yayuk (2016) states that the system of language use that underlies language politeness can be called "polite language" or honorifics. These honorifics are commonly expressed by personal pronouns, greeting systems, use of titles and so on. In some languages, differences in social level are one of the determinants of one's language politeness. Thus, polite language plays an important role in communicating to achieve certain goals. This politeness of language is not simply obtained by someone as an adult through the world of formal education. Education in the family environment that raised him since childhood is one of the determinants for the growth and development of his polite language. Likewise in the family environment, after someone enters the social world in the realm of work, polite language,

communication skills, including sensitivity and attention to small things will have a big impact on fluency in the world of work. In other words, a person is said to be intelligent, one of which is determined by the politeness of language that is owned when speaking, because when speaking a person requires thoughts, sensitivity, feelings and actions that are in line with prevailing socio-cultural norms.

The present study attempts to investigate communication soft skills for prospective graduates of Japanese Language Education Study Programs who in social life plunge into Japanese companies and institutions that use Japanese as a communication tool. This study is expected to find out the practice or implementation of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) between superiors to subordinates and vice versa between subordinates to superiors in the communication frame in Japanese companies in Indonesia.

Previous study has raised the theme of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) in the nursing work environment between superiors and subordinates in Japan hospitals (Hashiguchi, Shida, & Muya, 2018). From the results of interviews with 14 nurse managers at leading hospitals in Japan, it clarifies the behavioral characteristics of how nurse managers perform *Hairyō* (Consideration) or consideration of their subordinates that affect the recognition of their subordinates, and this *Hairyō* (Consideration) must be practiced by observing, and assessing subordinates or the work environment. Fourteen nurse managers tried *Hairyō* or consideration through caring attitudes that affect the recognition of their subordinates to individuals and groups with targets and achieve part goals while expressing their views on nursing.

Even though previous studies examine how the practice of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) in communication, limited studies investigate the practices from superior's and subordinate's point of views. Therefore, in order to fill the gap, the author seeks to investigate the practice of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) in Japanese Companies communication in Indonesia. This study focuses on investigate the following questions: How are the practices (implementation) of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) carried out in Japanese companies in Indonesia? What are the benefits of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) in Japanese companies in Indonesia? What are the obstacles faced when practicing *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) in Japanese companies in Indonesia? The study only discusses the practice of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) between superiors to subordinates and vice versa, from subordinate's point of view in a

communication frame in Japanese companies in Indonesia.

2. METHOD

A qualitative descriptive method was used in this study. Data were collected from case study, literature studies, focus group discussion, and interview. The study involved 25 participants (7 male and 18 female) having more than 10 years of working experiences at Japanese companies in Indonesia. Seven were superiors (2 male and 5 female) and 18 subordinates (5 male and 13 female). They were the alumni of Japanese Language Education in one public university. Data were collected in one month, from early May to early August 2021.

The study used focus group discussion and interview based on topic the practice of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) in Japanese companies to collect the data. The interview questions are expected to show the percentage of *Mekubari* and *Kikubari* implementation, benefit and obstacles faced while implemented *Mekubari* and *Kikubari* by 25 workers. Focus groups elicit qualitative data to explore emic understandings (Fukushima, 2019). Focus groups allow the researcher to interact directly with respondents. This provides opportunities for the clarification of responses, for follow-up questions, and for the probing of responses (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness)

This study found some characteristics of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) practices in Japanese companies in Indonesia

3.1.1 *Mekubari* (Watchfulness)

Mekubari literally means attention / observing (Watchfulness). The origin of the word *Mekubari* is “*me o kubaru*” which is used as an idiom “*Mekubari*” which means paying attention to various things, Ogata (2019). In *Mekubari* capability, it requires a wide field of view and attention to every detail.

Looking around with Sensitivity

Ogata (2019) mentioned a concrete example of *Mekubari*'s practice is when we are in a restaurant, the waiter swiftly comes over to see us enter and sit in the restaurant. The maid said “*Irasshaimase. Kochira wa menyuu de gozaimasu* (Welcome. This is the menu.)”. While waiting for the guest to choose the menu, the waiter looked around to see if there were other guests who were ready to order. That is the sensitivity that called *Mekubari*.

A Wide Field of View

Another sample of the *Mekubari* case experienced by a secretary at work is when the director returns to the office after returning from *Genba Kengaku* or Factory Visit, the author sees the director covered in sweat.

- (1) Secretary: *Otsukaresama desu. Oshibori, douzo.*
(Thanks for the hard work. Cold towel please)
Director: *Doumo!* (Thanks)

See Carefully

The next case sample, during lunch break, Mr. Y (Manager) used to smoke in the meeting room. After seeing Mr. Y lit a cigarette, the secretary immediately prepared a cup of black coffee without sugar and an ashtray with a small glass filled with water to extinguish the cigarette without being ordered beforehand because it has become a habit pattern.

- (2) Secretary: *"Buchou, kohi to haizara, douzo"*
(Manager, please have the coffee and ashtray).
Manager: *Oh, Doumo!* (O, Thanks)

Ogata (2019) adds that people who are good at *Mekubari*'s abilities can observe and look around carefully. If you only look at one side, eating it cannot be called *Mekubari*. For example, when someone is less focused, daydreaming or even too focused on one side, their vision becomes so narrow that they cannot see carefully. From the explanations, the known characteristics from *Mekubari* are: Looking around with sensitivity; A wide field of View; and See Carefully. As seen in sample (1) and (2), *Mekubari* ability need awareness to know the habits of the interlocutors.

3.1.2. Kikubari (Attentiveness)

Almost in line with *Mekubari*, *Kikubari* literally means attention (Attentiveness). The origin of the word *Kikubari* is "*ki o kubaru*" which is used as an idiom "*Kikubari*" which means to think ahead, Ogata (2019). *Kikubari* is "to act before another person does what another person wants us to do." One person must look around and the other person must be attentive. *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) only thought in our hearts, not aiming at the other party.

Fukushima (2015) states that attentiveness, altruism and helping behavior may have something in common, as empathy motivates willingness to demonstrate attentiveness.

Reading the Atmosphere

Attentiveness means paying attention to others by reading the atmosphere in a situation and anticipating or inferring the other party's feelings, needs and wants through a potential recipient's verbal and non-verbal cues. A pre-emptive response, which can take the form of

an offer, may subsequently arise. Through a pre-emptive response, attentiveness is manifested (Fukushima, 2015). A demonstrator of attentiveness thinks of the other party, except for cases of reflexive attentiveness, which benefits the demonstrator (Fukushima, 2011).

Response Off-records Request

Fukushima (2019) also explains attentiveness was initially investigated as one type of response to off-record requests, although the term 'solicitousness' was then employed in the same sense as attentiveness. Thus, attentiveness is related to indirectness and off-record requests. Sifianou in Fukushima (2019) offers examples of off-record requests. Let us take a look at the following (between friends):

- A: Are you going to the university tomorrow?
B: Yes. What time shall I pick you up?

Since the receiver has given a lift to the person asking the question on many occasions, it is natural to interpret the question in this case as a request and to make the offer immediately Sifianou in Fukushima (2019) The receiver showed her eagerness to be of help without having been directly asked.

Appreciative Attention

Moreover, Uchitani (2020) explained that *Kikubari* is a Japanese word that describes the act of paying appreciative attention to the people around you without expecting anything in return. *Kikubari* brings a subtle smile to the hearts of both the giver and the receiver. It is a thoughtful gesture of giving and sharing the energy of love and compassion. This is one of the beautiful Japanese values that Uchitani cherish and practice. It is all about sharing love and compassion to people around ourselves and things around us. The Japanese Tea ceremony is one of the finest examples of *Kikubari*.

Besides that, Uchitani (2020) mentioned the examples of *Kikubari* as below:

- a. If your colleague looks tired, distressed, bring a cup of tea/coffee, without any words.
- b. Keep the room warm (or cool) before your guests arrive.
- c. Keep the tea cup warm with hot water before serving.
- d. Arrange some flower for the room.
- e. Offer a seat to the elderly, etc.

From the various explanations above, the author can conclude that *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) is one of Japanese culture which is the art of paying attention to others by reading the atmosphere or condition of the other party without expecting anything in return, and also without instruction from the receiver (interlocutors). *Kikubari* is the important soft skill of communication because that

skill can affect to work performance not only individually but also as a team.

The following are the results from a sample of respondents which the authors summarize randomly, that show the implementation of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) at work environment.

Data 1

ER, female, 32 years old. Senior staff of an automotive company, Karawang. Data 1 practiced *Mekubari* when translating divisional meetings.

Data 1 said, “It was a new experience yesterday when translating a meeting, you should say “*hokori ga ippai (full of dust)*” but Data 1 said “*nokori ga ippai (full of leftovers)*”. There, our sensitivity sees the expression of a confused Japanese person, then immediately corrects it and do the solution immediately, it is mean to do apologizes so that there is no fatal problem.”

Data 2

AS, female, 33 years old, PIC of the *Kumiai* at a Japanese outsourcing company. She expressed her experience as follows.

Kikubari: when *daihyou* (boss) suddenly said “*atsukunai desuka?*” I immediately lowered the temperature of the air conditioner... and vice versa, but if he said ‘*samukunai desuka*’, the AC must be turned up.

Mekubari: look around if the lights indicate that the humidifier needs to be filled immediately with water. Likewise, the coffee machine”

Data 3

PR, male, 31 years old staff. Unlike Data 1 and Data 2, Data 3, answered that he had practiced *Mekubari*, but never practiced *Kikubari*, because he admitted that he was less sensitive. Data 3 preferred to do what his superiors ordered clearly. “I did *Mekubari* when I saw *Shachou*’s expression and when asked ‘*kore wa mondai to omowanai?*’ (don’t you think is it going to be problem?) he was thinking hard what is wrong even though sometimes the Japanese just want to just let it go. For *Kikubari*, I’ve never done it before, it’s more like pretending I don’t know because I prefer to do things when I’m told to do it directly by my superiors”.

Table 1. Interview result (Implementation of *Mekubari* and *Kikubari*)

Category	Subordinates	Superior	Total (%)
<i>Mekubari</i>	18	7	25 (100%)
<i>Kikubari</i>	17	7	24 (96%)

Data 4

YS, male, 35 years old. Section Head. Data 4 did the *Mekubari* when the subordinate was busy and offered help. “*Tetsudaimashouka?*” (May I help?) and also did *Kikubari* when take a break in rest room, by offering the cigarettes or lighter to Japanese expat who usually smoke.

From the results of focus group discussion and interview with 25 respondents, it is known that 96% (24:25) of the respondents have implemented *Mekubari*, and 100% (25:25) of the total respondents have implemented *Kikubari* in their work environment. 1 respondent is known not implemented the *Mekubari* (as seen in Data 3).

3.2. Benefits of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) And *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) in Japanese companies Communication in Indonesia

The findings revealed some in the practice of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) including to improve employee performance evaluation, streamline communication and avoiding miscommunication between superiors and subordinates, spreading *omoiyari* (compassion) for fellow workers, improve teamwork, find the root of the problem quickly, and increase work motivation. These findings are in line with the study of Hashiguchi, Shida, and Muya (2018). The known benefits in the practice of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) Japanese companies in Indonesia are to improve motivation and teamwork that can affect to work motivation and performance. Thus, sensitive, and careful perspective is the key to the success of *Mekubari*’s soft skills. It is also important to know each character of the interlocutor, the likes and dislikes of the interlocutor, *Mekubari*’s sensitivity will be honed as one’s experience increases.

3.3. Obstacles faced when practicing *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) in Japanese companies in Indonesia

According to focus group and interview, there were obstacles faced when practicing *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) in Japanese companies in Indonesia. *Kikubari* and *Mekubari* will cause conflict or the other person will feel uncomfortable because their business is being interfered. In indirect speech, when responding with *Kikubari* if the meaning is not understood, it is prone to multiple interpretations and miscommunication. It is also difficult to distinguish between *Mekubari*, *Kikubari*, and *gomasuri* (being sycophants to the boss or superior for certain purposes).

According to Fukushima (2019) attentiveness was initially investigated as one type of response to off-record requests, although the term ‘solicitousness’ was then

employed in the same sense as attentiveness. Thus, attentiveness is related to indirectness and off-record requests. In this study, indirect speech, when responding with *Kikubari*, if the meaning is not understood by the interlocutors, it is prone to multiple interpretations and miscommunication (as seen in Data 1).

4. CONCLUSION

As the conclusion of this study, the practice of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) in Japanese companies in Indonesia, is a soft skill that has an important role for smooth communication and increasing employee motivation. Almost all (96%) respondents have implemented *Mekubari* and all (100%) respondents have implemented *Kikubari*. Those implementations are affected to the work performance. Although it is known that there are obstacles, but the benefits of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) can be seen to have a good impact on workers as seen from the correlation analysis at Table 3, it shows the positive correlation when *Mekubari* and *Kikubari* skills are implemented, work motivation and performance will also increase. The work ethic in Japanese companies in the form of sensitivity, attention to detail, and a sense of caring for each other is in the practice of *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness). From this study, it can be concluded that communication skills in *Mekubari* (Watchfulness) and *Kikubari* (Attentiveness) can increase along with increasing experience, by the time.

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