

Kobe College Entrance Examination in English  
(総合型選抜入試)

October 3, 2020

You might have noticed over the past ten years that the supermarkets have gradually started charging you when they give you a plastic bag. The cost is often low—only a few cents—but those bags used to be free. In some places in the world, plastic bags are even being banned. People are no longer able to receive a plastic bag in which to carry the things they buy. Why is this happening?

These stores are often following new government regulations, or the stores' own regulations, to reduce the use of plastic bags because they are bad for the environment. Plastic takes a long time to break down—possibly hundreds of years. Also, plastic bags end up in the ocean and on land, which can harm animals and look ugly.

People who support the ban of plastic bags say it is an obvious, good policy. They say that reducing the use of plastic bags will save the lives of many ocean animals and it will reduce the amount of garbage humans produce. However, there have been some arguments against banning plastic bags. Some have pointed out that plastic bags are a relatively minor environmental problem. For example, they barely impact climate change. Also, people claim that modern plastic bags break down faster than many other plastic items, possibly in only two decades. Finally, a study in Ireland showed that when plastic bags were taxed (not even banned), people began using plastic garbage bags for shopping, which were even worse for the environment.

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It has often been said that Japanese people are not always clear in their communication styles. Whether they are speaking, writing, listening, or reading, they seem to allow for, and perhaps even enjoy, unclear expressions and suggestions more than English speakers do. This difference may be the result of different views in the two cultures about who is responsible for successful communication. English speakers, by and large, see the writer or speaker as being primarily responsible for making clear and well-organized statements; if there is a failure in communication, it is because the speaker or writer has not been clear enough, not because the listener or reader has not tried hard enough to understand. In Japan, on the other hand, there is a different way of looking at the communication process. In Japan, it is generally thought to be the responsibility of the listener or reader to understand what the speaker or author intended to say.

This difference may be illustrated by an episode. An American woman was taking a taxi to the Ginza Tokyu Hotel. The taxi driver mistakenly took her to the Ginza Daiichi Hotel. Being from a speaker-responsible culture, she said, “I’m sorry, I should have spoken more clearly.” The taxi driver demonstrated his listener-responsible background when he replied, “No, I should have listened more carefully.”

These different views about who is responsible for successful communication have significant effects on how we speak and write. In English, speakers and writers are expected to express themselves more clearly to avoid misunderstanding than they are in Japanese.