

# Visualize it!

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“What’s going on?” said a recent visitor from abroad when we went to the local convenience store. For those who don’t speak Japanese, a trip to the corner store can be a mind-boggling experience.

It starts when you enter the store and everyone looks up and shouts. Don’t worry; they are only saying, “Welcome.”

As you get in line to pay, you notice that a lot of talking is going on between the customers and cashiers. Upon closer examination, however, you realize that the customer is simply listening. What is the cashier saying? Is there a problem? Did someone forget their wallet?

It turns out the cashier is giving a play-by-play account of what is happening. Roughly translated, an example of a typical cashier monologue looks like this. “Thank you for deciding to buy something.” “That comes to 800 yen, please.” “I am receiving 5,000 yen.” “I am giving back your change.” “First, the bills. Please confirm while I count them out. One, two, three and four thousand.” “Now I am giving back the coins. 200 yen.” “Thank you and please come back!”

This is quite a big difference between customer service in Japan and in many Western countries. Whereas corner store clerks in many Western countries say little more than the price and “thank you”, in Japan, convenience store clerks will often narrate everything in minute detail.

Does this have a purpose? Isn’t it tiring for the clerk? Don’t customers in a hurry find it time-consuming? Actually, when you think about it, there are several benefits to this ‘cashier narration’. Not only does this put the customer at ease, but by explaining everything there is less chance of a mistake or a misunderstanding. The customer is informed of the amount of his change and therefore can speak up, if he feels there has been a miscalculation. As well, the cashier is confirming that the amount of money received and the change given are agreed upon.

Having lived in Japan for some time now, I have become used to this extra ‘verbalization’ as I like to call it. Sometimes I even feel a bit disappointed when I walk into a store and am not enthusiastically welcomed. I cannot speak for Japanese natives, but as a non-native, this play-by-play narration helps me understand what is going on. It is somewhat comforting to have extra confirmation.

Recently I have begun to think about the importance of confirming meaning for non-native speakers of a language. How can we apply the principles of ‘verbalization’ to the EFL classroom? For some non-native speakers, too much ‘verbalization’ can inhibit understanding. If, however, we think of the purpose of the play-by-play account at the store, we see that the convenience store clerk is adding words to actions to avoid misunderstanding and put the customer at ease.

In lessons, to achieve the same purpose, I do the opposite; i.e. I add actions to my words. Instead of ‘verbalization’, I practice ‘visualization’. By adding a gesture or visual clue to what we say, we can help students confirm what they hear.

One of the biggest obstacles to communication in a foreign language is a lack of confidence. Students often doubt their ability and question themselves about what they think they heard. “Did the teacher just ask me my name or my friend’s name?” “Does the teacher want me to tell him the day or the date?”

Ask a class to stand up, for example, and you will see hesitation in their faces. The students understand the command, but no one wants to execute it, just in case they are wrong. Add a gesture, and you see a look of relief on the students’ faces as they confidently stand up.

The trick is to ensure there is a slight time lag between the verbal and visual or else the students will never have to listen, but simply follow the gestures.

To sum up, provide extra support, but don’t let your actions speak louder than words.