Evaluation of complaint handling routines:
Japanese criteria

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Summary

This study attempts to illustrate what criteria the Japanese subjects employ when they evaluate a dialogue of complaint-handling in business settings. Modifying the method of the preceding study (Shaw, Gillaerts, Verckens, Shinohara, and Jacobs 2003), we surveyed 50 Japanese subjects' written and oral evaluation of four complaint-handling dialogues and found five significant elements as the criteria: 1. length; 2. apology; 3.listening attitude; 4. offer of repair; and 5. promotional expressions. These not only explain the characteristic results of the Japanese in the preceding study but provide a concrete standard for an optimal model for complaint-handling in Japanese business culture.

1. Introduction

Complaint handling is one of the important areas in business interactions and accordingly many pertinent studies have been conducted in the field of business pragmatics. The result of those studies led to the recommendations of what kind of dialogues should be used for the training of receptionists/representatives. The recommendations, however, are not uniform and often contradict. This is largely due to the differences in cultures the researchers belong to, as well as to their personal beliefs and preferences.

Among the attempts to pursue universal validity in such various and contradicting recommendations, is the study of Shaw, Gillaerts, Verckens, Shinohara, and Jacobs (2003). This study attempted to illustrate which features could be validated universal and which are peculiar to each culture, and also to what extent such "culture-specific" features are uniform within each culture. In this pursuit, the study surveyed which model of the four complaint-handling dialogues the subjects preferred in four different countries. Although the result of the study showed the features were generally observed as a modest tendency rather than as distinct uniformity, the implications are stimulating.

This research (Shaw et al 2003) pointed out two features as peculiar to Japan. They were 1. the

high degree of uniformity in preference, i.e. which model the subjects think is the best, and 2. the meaning or the conceptual domain of "sincerity." What causes these differences? Culture? Or language -- the level of English competence as a result of foreign language acquisition?

Aim

This study seeks for the answers to the above question. The study modifies the method of the preceding study (Shaw et al 2003) in the manner that reaches more qualitative data. By this, the study attempts to illustrate what criteria the subjects employ when they evaluate the dialogue of complaint handling in business settings.

2. Methods

50 students were presented with four dialogues written in English and asked to evaluate the dialogues. Two types of evaluations were carried out; in some sections, they were asked to choose the best parameter describing each dialogue, and in others, to record their judgments.

2.1 Subjects

All of the subjects were Japanese and their native language was Japanese. They were college students majoring in English language. Their average age was 18.5. Their English abilities were limited, with the average TOEIC score of 339.

2.2 Materials

2.2.1 Dialogues

We used the same four dialogues used in the investigation by Shaw, Gillaerts, Verckens, Shinohara, and Jacobs (2003). The dialogues were complaints made in international situations, from a company personnel in Japan to another company in Denmark in this case. The dialogues were in English and no translation was offered.

Dialogue A was the shortest (33 words) and five pieces of information were included as shown in the chart below. Dialogue B was the second longest (120 words) with fourteen bits of information. Dialogue C was the third longest (64 words) with ten pieces of information. Dialogue D was the longest (130 words) with sixteen bits of information.

		A	B	C	D
words		33	120	64	130
move 1	non-commital apology		＋	＋	＋
	thanks for complaint ＋ explanation		＋		
	request for details			＋	＋

	firm promotion (firm name)				+
2	concern		+	+	+
	firm promotion (firm name + *we*)		+		
	Request for details				+
3	bald name recap request	+		+	
	face-saving recap request		+		+
	we + some replacement offer		+	+	+
	company name + *we* + some replacement offer		+		+
	company name + *we* + elaborate replacement offer		+		
	some action promise			+	+
	thanks for complaint + explanation				+
	repeated action promise				+
	need for report		+		+
4	thanks for information	+	+	+	+
	bald address request	+		+	
	address 'check'		+		+
5	thanks + address check	+		+	
6	thanks for information	+	+	+	+
	bald recap request	+			
	details request		+	+	+
	promise		+		+

Characteristics of the four dialogues   (adapted from the study by Shaw et al. 2003)

2.2.2 Evaluation questions

The same evaluation questions were used again, but with one alternation and with Japanese translations this time (appendix). There were seven questions for each dialogue; three multiple choice questions (one out of three or four alternatives), and four open-ended questions which were to be answered in a tape-recording. Also, the subjects were asked to choose the best model for receiving a complaint in Japan after completing all of the questions.

We added these translations because of the observations made in the former investigation by Shaw et al. (2003) revealed that some of the evaluation alternatives have different range of meanings when translated literally. The researchers pointed out that, " "Insincere" is regarded as a cover term which would cover "rude" and "uninterested" as well as its general English meanings." This fact might have had some affect on the results in the former study, in which, for example, Japanese

subjects showed significant difference in choosing "uninterested" and "insincere" dialogues compared with the subjects from other countries. We therefore decided to translate the questions and alternatives so that we can convey the different meanings more clearly. We included both the original English evaluation questions and alternatives and their Japanese translations on the questionnaire.

We also added an alternative choice for Question 3; "What do you think of receptionist's responses in this dialogue?" "Good" was added in addition with the original alternatives "Too polite", "OK", and "Rather rude". The reason for this addition was to know how the subjects really felt about the responses in each dialogue. "OK" seemed to cover all the impressions other than unfavorable ones; "too polite" and "rather rude". By including "Good", we hoped to distinguish the favorable responses into two categories; desirable ones and acceptable ones.

3 Results

3.1 Familiarity

### 3.1.1 Comparison between 2002 results and 2003 results
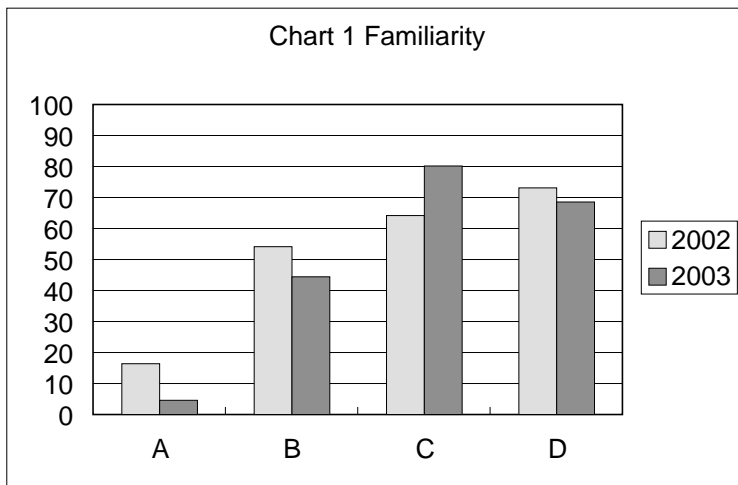
Rate of subjects who answered the dialogue is "possible" in Japan

There were some differences between the result of 2002 by Shaw, et al. and that of 2003. First, the order of familiarity has changed; from DCBA of 2002 to CDBA of 2003. Second, the rate of familiarity for B has decreased, from 54%(2002) to 44%(2003). Third, the familiarity rate for A became much smaller form 16% to 4%. The change may be caused by the addition of the translation for evaluation terms as we discuss later in "For future study".
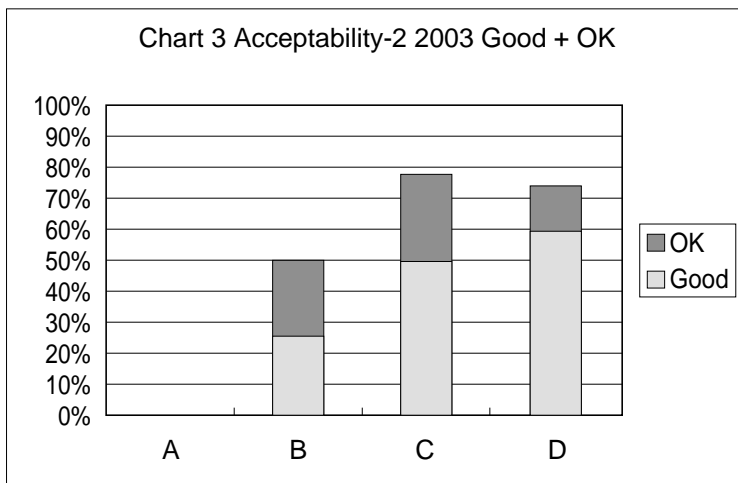
3.2 Acceptability

3.2.1 Comparison between 2002 results and 2003 results

Chart 2 Acceptability-1
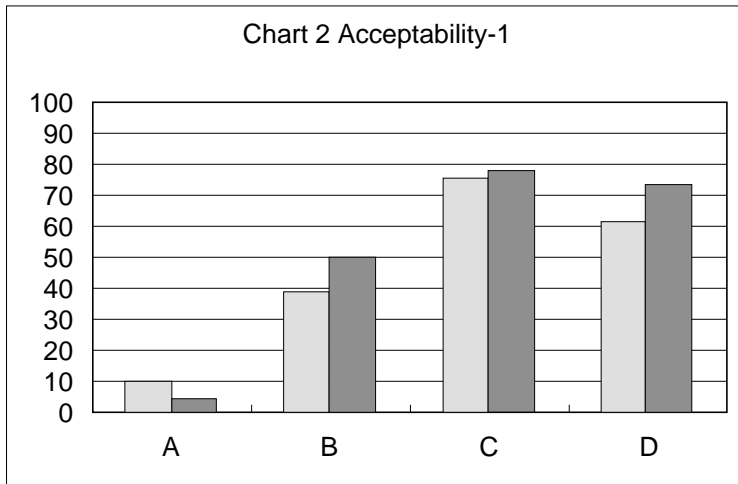
The rate of subjects who chose favorable alternatives ("OK" for 2002, "Good" "OK" for 2003)

The order of acceptability was the same in both studies; CDBA.

3.2.2 2003 results

Chart 3 Acceptability-2 2003 Good + OK

The rate for "OK" and "Good" for each dialogue

This result seems to indicate that although dialogue C was the most "acceptable" ("OK" + "Good") one, dialogue D was considered to be more desirable for many of the subjects.

Chart 4 Acceptability-3
2003 too polite rather rude
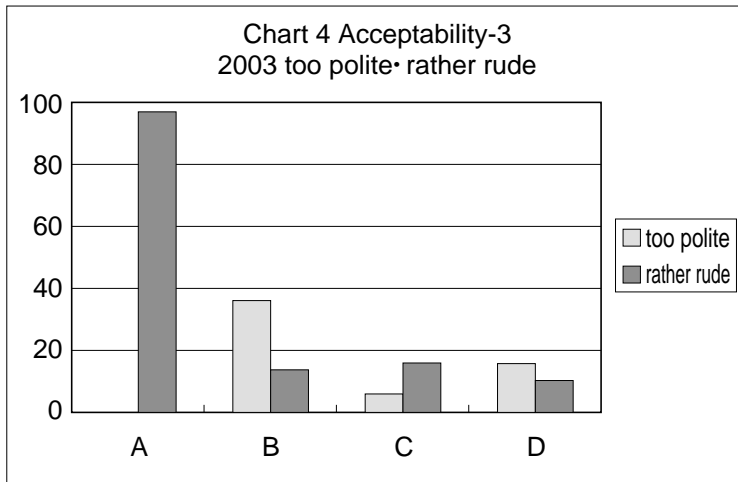
The rate for "Too polite" and "rather rude" for each dialogue

These results showed that dialogue C was considered "rather rude" by 16% of the subjects while it was rated most acceptable as indicated above. Dialogue D was rated second most "acceptable", but the rate of "rather rude" was lower in D than in C.

3.2.3   Results and recorded comments for each dialogue

A: Most subjects (96%) chose "rather rude" for this dialogue.

Reasons for "rather rude" appeared in the comments

　　1. Rec responded only with "yes" and too short.

　　2. no apology.

　　3. inappropriate listening attitude (recap request)

　　4. no offer of repair

B: 50% of the subjects felt this dialogue was acceptable ("good" and "OK") while 36% thought it was "too polite" and 14% "rather rude".

Reasons for "Good" and "OK"

　　1. apology

　　2. offer of repair

　　3. appropriate way of talking

　　4. promotional expressions sounded professional

Reasons for "rather rude"

　　1. promotional expressions sounded like excuses

　　2. too long

Reasons for "too polite"

    1. exaggerated expressions including promotion

    2. too long and promotional

It is interesting that the reasons for "rather rude" and "too polite" were basically the same, undesirable promotional expressions and long conversations.

C: 66% felt it was acceptable, 6% "too polite" and 16% "rather rude".

Reasons for "Good" and "OK"

    1. apology

    2. offer of repair

    3. appropriate way of talking

    4. brief and clear

Reasons for "rather rude"

    1. too short

    2. lack of politeness in talking

Many chose this dialogue acceptable because of the briefness while some felt it was too short and rude for the same fact. The length of the talk seems to affect the acceptability, but the ideal length may differ form one person to another.

Reasons for "too polite"

    1. unnatural way of speech

    2. too many apologetic expressions

D: 74% felt this dialogue acceptable, 16% "too polite" and 10% "rather rude".

Reasons for "Good" and "OK"

    1. apology

    2. gratitude

    3. offer of repair

    4. appropriate way of talking

    5. enough length

    6. promotional expressions sounded professional

Reasons for "too polite"

    1. too long

    2. too many apologetic expressions

    3. too promotional

Reasons for "rather rude"

    1. too long

2. too promotional

3. not enough apology

3.3 Reasons for acceptability/unacceptability

A: No one chose "OK" or "artificial", and "insincere" and "uninterested" shared the answers almost evenly; 52% and 48%.

Reasons for "Insincere" and "uninterested" were basically the same.

1. "yes" only responses and too short.

2. no apology.

3. inappropriate listening attitude (recap request)

4. no offer of repair

This result shows that "insincere" and "uninterested" cover rather similar concepts, and the similarity seemed to have given the subjects difficulty in choosing one alternative to the other. Some commented that they chose one ("artificial" or "uninterested") after comparing the meanings of the two alternatives even though they felt like choosing both. For example, one said, "I think this response may be considered as "insincere" by some, but because the Rec said "thank you", I don't think it doesn't go so far as "insincere". So I chose "uninterested"."

B: More than half (52%) answered "OK", while 34% considered it "artificial", 12% felt it "insincere", and 2% thought it was "uninterested". We can see that about half of the people have good impression on this dialogue, and the other half does not.

Reasons for "OK"

1. apology

2. expression of gratitude

3. offer of repair

4. appropriate way of speech

5. appropriate length

6. appropriate listening attitude

7. promotional expressions (professional)

Reasons for "artificial"

1. too long

2. exaggerated expressions

3. too many apologetic expressions

4. too much explanation

Reasons for "insincere"

    1. too promotional

    2. inappropriate offer of repair (sounded like excuses)

    3. inappropriate listening attitude

C: While 56% chose "OK", the rest chose the negative alternatives; "insincere", 14%, "uninterested", 14%, and "artificial", 10%. Although the rate of negative responses was almost the same as that of Dialogue B, the diversity was different.

Reasons for "OK"

    1. apology

    2. offer of repair

    3. appropriate way of speech

    4. appropriate length

Reasons for "insincere"

    1. too short

    2. no apology

    3. not enough politeness

Reasons for "uninterested"

    1. too short and simple responses

    2. not detailed enough explanation

Reasons for "artificial"

    1. exaggerated expressions

    2. not enough politeness

D: 70% evaluated this dialogue "OK", which was the highest among the four. No one felt it as "uninterested", 20% felt "artificial", and 10% "insincere".

Reasons for "OK"

    1. apology

    2. expression of gratitude

    3. offer of repair

    4. appropriate way of speech

    5. appropriate length

    6. appropriate listening attitude

    7. promotional expressions (professional)

Reasons for "artificial"

    1. too long

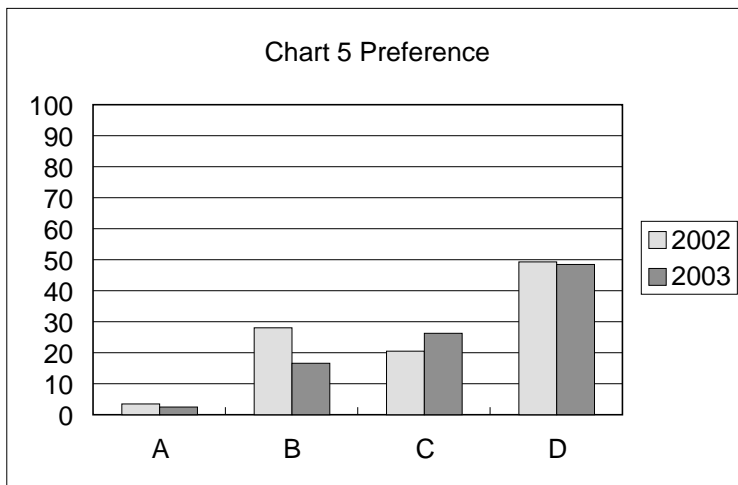   2. too promotional

3. too polite

Reasons for "insincere"

1. No apology

2. too promotional

3. inappropriate listening attitude

3.4 Preference

3.4.1 Comparison between 2002 results and 2003 results

Chart 5 Preference

Although we did not add any questions to ask the reasons for their choices, this result corresponds to the rate of "good" in Acceptability and that of "OK" in Reasons of Acceptability.

4. Discussion

The result described above illustrated what criteria the Japanese subjects employed in evaluating the dialogues. Among many of those criteria the following five were significant: 1. length; 2. apology; 3.listening attitude; 4. offer of repair; and 5. promotional expressions.

4.1. Length

Both Dialogue A and Dialogue B were evaluated negatively, as they were too short or too long respectively. The subjects evaluated Dialogue C rather short and Dialogue D rather long; both were evaluated either negatively or positively, as the subjects often referred to their personal preferences.

As for the length, the dialogue must not be too short, although preceding studies recommend to keep the dialogue 'plain and brief'. Certain degree of lengthiness is excused and the dialogue is evaluated positively. In the case, the subjects judged that lengthiness is for the sake of politeness,

enthusiasm and thoroughness, or it is either necessary or effective for clarification for the solution of the problem.

The certain number of subjects tends to prefer shorter dialogue, however, claiming it is not easy for them to understand English. This needs to be carefully separated from the responses from the native speakers of English who also favored the "plain and brief," in other words short, form.

4.2. Apology

Since there was no apology, Dialogue A was evaluated negatively. Many evaluated Dialogue B both positively and negatively saying it was acceptable though they admitted Dialogue B's apology was exaggerated and others answered the receptionist's apology was too much and gave an negative evaluation. Dialogue C and D were favored because they included an apology. This indicates the Japanese subjects highly evaluate dialogues with an apology. They accept the dialogue with too much apology rather than one with too little of it.

Apologies are a factor which has emerged in this investigation. Preceding studies focused on "thanks" in dialogues but the result of this study clearly indicates "thanks" are not either expected or appropriate in the context of complaint handling in Japan. Rather, apologies are strongly called for.

In Dialogue C and D, the expressions which the subjects judged as an apology may include those not exactly meant to be apology, but rather a non-committal one. Such expressions, however, still raised the evaluation.

Many of the comments on apology were emotional ones. This implies the expressions of apology may have a great impact on the subjects' emotion and their affective aspect of judgment.

4.3. Listening attitude

There were many recap requests, i.e. asking the complainer to repeat what he/she just told the receptionist, and Dialogue A was evaluated negatively. Dialogue B was evaluated rather positively. Both Dialogue C and Dialogue D were evaluated positively. Many comments favorably referred to the listening attitude of the receptionist in Dialogue C asking questions in order to clarify the details of the problem the complainer had.

Listening attitude includes two directions. One is whether the receptionist caught what the complainer said accurately. Accordingly, what matters is how many times the receptionist made recap request and how each of the receptionist's responses was corresponding to the complainer's preceding remark. Frequent recap request and the irrelevant answers of the receptionist lower the evaluation. The other direction of listening attitude is whether the receptionist was actively trying to know about the problem. Many comments favored the receptionist's inquiry about the problem and it revealed that many hoped the receptionist not only listen passively to what the complainer

said, but to take one step further and actively commit to the dialogue.

4.4. Offer of repair

Offer of repair includes both "language/pragmatics" and "action." The subjects highly evaluated dialogues when the receptionist described clearly how he/she or the company would compensate. This however, calls for the factual premise that the contents of offer must satisfy the complainer. This cannot be discussed as simply the matter of pragmatics.

Dialogue A was evaluated negatively since there was no offer of repair. Dialogues B, C, and D were evaluated positively because there were some kinds of offer. The "unconditional exchange policy" in Dialogue C and "the attitude to inquire details of the problem and grope for the solution" in Dialogue D received a high evaluation.

4.5 Promotional expressions

No subject gave comments on Dialogue A on this criterion for the dialogue was short and did not include any promotional expression. Many evaluated Dialogue B negatively, claiming there was too much promotion in the dialogue. There is no comment that evaluated Dialogue C either. It seems reasonable because Dialogue C had been designed to be plain and brief by eliminating promotional expressions as well as other factors. Dialogue D included promotional expressions, but less than Dialogue B. Many gave negative comments on this, while some gave positive ones.

The above observation suggests it is not a good policy toward Japanese clients to insert obvious verbal promotion in the complaint handling interactions though it must be tempting to companies. The preceding study (Shaw et al 2003) also pointed out that "less promotional forms are generally less likely to cause offence." The result of this study enhanced it. It seems wiser in interacting with Japanese complainers to attempt more indirect forms of promotion such as improving listening attitude or offer of repair as discussed above, rather than the direct verbal forms.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Recommendation

The series of studies focusing on the complaint handling dialogues have examined various elements in dialogues for verification. These attempts lead to the pursuit of the optimal model. It is necessary to understand the optimal model does not exist as one textualized form. Actualization of the optimal model calls for both universal validation and appropriate cultural sensitivity at the same time. In the interaction with someone unfamiliar, it is required to try the correspondence which he/she considers to be universal on the criteria gained from one's own experience where his/her demography and cultural identity reflects. Then it is also necessary to understand the

culture-specific characteristics of self and the other party, which enables him/her to make proper adjustments flexibly. This research was designed to contribute to the substantial development of the latter.

This understanding forms the foundation of employing the five criteria discussed above in writing training materials for the similar settings. The result of this study shows there was no factor/criterion to the degree on which the evaluation would rise endlessly in proportion. Instead "proper range" exists in about every criterion. The only exception is that promotional expressions are the least of which the subjects favored.

5.2 For future study

This study is extensive to more detailed investigations for the following purposes.

5.2.1 Reexamination of evaluation terms

The meanings or domain of each concept of the evaluation terms, such as insincere and uninterested, call for further clarification. The subjects made the same choice for a variety of reasons while they made different choices for the same reason. While this originates in the linguistic aspect, i.e. the variation in the subjects' degree of English vocabulary, association of concepts respectively peculiar to the culture influences the subjects' response largely and in depth. Further consideration for this point would raise the accuracy of the data.

5.2.2 Reduction of variables

The dialogues used in this study and the preceding one (Shaw et al 2003) were very different from one another. It would also be interesting to examine the five criteria by eliminating all the other variables. The studies to test and specify both proper and acceptable ranges about each of the criterion are to be beneficially applied to practices such as the writing of training materials as mentioned above.

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Appendix

Questionnaire on companies responding to complaints

Below you will find four dialogues in which Sony, a distributor for Audiokon products in Tokyo (＝ Complainer) rings up the Belgian company (＝ Receptionist), which makes high-quality hearing aids, to complain about faults in some of its products. Please read each dialogue and the questions under it and then write your evaluation and comments in the box provided. You will see that the complainer always says the same things; we are interested in what the person who Receives the complaint says.

Notice that the dialogues are stapled in random order: DCBA, or ACDB or ADBC, etc.

ABCD

Which dialogue is the best model for receiving a complaint in Japan?

Dialogue A

Rec   Hullo, Audiokon Sales

Com   This is Hiroshi Tanaka...from Sony in Tokyo, Japan. I'm calling to er make a complaint about some of your products.

Rec   Yes

Com   Em we've had two customers complaining about the poor sound quality in er the aids supplied

Rec   Yes

Com   And er one of our assistants noticed that er a third appliance was not up to standard before it was sold. What do you suggest we do about it?

Rec   Well, er could I get your name one more time please?

Com   Yes. Hiroshi Tanaka...from Sony in Tokyo.

Rec   Thank you very much and the address please?

Com   It's 6-7-35 Kita-Shinagawa,

Rec   yes

Com   Shinagawa, Tokyo, Japan

Rec   Thank you very much

        Now, what was the problem again please?

Evaluation of participant Rec: please mark the appropriate box. Please also dictate any comments you may have on your evaluations or on the dialogues themselves.

Rec

This is how you might expect a complaint dialogue in Japan to go.		
Agree	Disagree	Not sure
Comments		

What do you think of Rec's responses in this dialogue?

Rec

| Too polite | Good | OK | Rather rude |

Comments

_____

If you were making a complaint, what impression would you have of Rec and his company?

Com   Rec

| seems insincere | seems OK | seems uninterested | seems artificial |

Other impression, please specify

Comments

Which dialogue is the best model for receiving a complaint in Japan?

ABCD