

Remote “Virtual” Contact Situations:
Findings from the Post-Conversation Survey and Interview
遠隔バーチャル接触場面－事後アンケート・インタビューの結果から

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1. Introduction

Virtual exchange (VE) is receiving considerable attention owing to the rapidly shifting landscape of information and communications technology (O’Dowd, 2016) and an immediate need to reshape intercultural exchanges at a crucial juncture for higher education. In particular, many VE attempts have been made and reported in the context of language education.

An example of such attempt is that an online conversation project between universities in Japan and the United States (*Nichibei daigaku kaiwa purojekuto* in Japanese) was conducted virtually from October through December 2020, a phase heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This project was facilitated by the collaboration of three co-researchers from Hiroshima Shudo University (HSU) in Japan, Willamette University (WU), and University at Buffalo, The State University of New York (UB) in the US, with a strong belief in the VE potential.

The project aims to provide students in geographically dispersed locations with opportunities for intercultural contact by utilizing cutting-edge online meeting/community platforms to promote authentic and meaningful interactions via Japanese as a lingua franca (JLF). Simultaneously, the project enabled teacher–researchers to collect local JLF interaction data for later linguistic analysis. The interaction data were obtained from three different group types: (i) second-language (L2) or third-language (L3) learners and first-language (L1) speakers of Japanese, (ii) L2 learners with various L1, and (iii) L1 speakers. Post-conversation surveys and semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of the follow-up reflection activities for the participants and awareness research.

This study serves as a secondary part of the three-part project report that comprises the (1) project rationale and design, (2) survey and interview analysis, and (3) interaction data analysis. For part (1), Takei, Fujiwara, and Shimojo (2021, in press) described the conceptual, theoretical, and pedagogical underpinnings of the project in detail, and they presented the project design. In part (2), the current study intends to explicate the awareness invoked in the project participants’ interaction that was reflected through the survey and interview. The findings presented in part (2) will be analyzed against the actual linguistic and sociolinguistic behaviors observed in the data, in a forthcoming paper(s), as part (3).

2. Project Outline

The project rationale, design, and structure of the project have been presented in complete detail in Takei, Fujiwara, and Shimojo (2021, in press). This section briefly

reviews the project structure, supplemented with additional logistical information for readers' convenience.

2.1 Participants

The student-participants of this project were voluntarily recruited by three teacher-researchers at each university. Therefore, they were familiar faces, which is in line with the local learner corpus approach (Seidlhofer, 2002). After explaining the project details, they were asked to sign the informed consent form to use the audio-visually recorded conversation and follow-up interview data and transcripts for future research. Consequently, the project participants are 10 HSU undergraduate students (L1 speakers of Japanese), 9 WU undergraduate students, and 6 UB undergraduate and graduate students (L2 or L3 learners of Japanese). Before the sessions, 15 participants from UB and WU took the simple performance-oriented test (SPOT), developed at Tsukuba University, to objectively assess their Japanese proficiency levels, ranging from intermediate to advanced. The list of participants is presented in Table 1, which includes four L3 learners of Japanese. However, for simplicity, they are hereinafter referred to as L2 learners.

Table 1: List of participants

Participant Code	L1	L2	L3	SPOT90 Level
UB-01	Chinese	English	Japanese	advanced
UB-02	Chinese	English	Japanese	intermediate
UB-03	English	Japanese	-	intermediate
UB-04	English	Japanese	-	intermediate
UB-05	English	Japanese	-	intermediate
UB-06	Chinese	English	Japanese	intermediate
WU-01	English	Spanish	Japanese	advanced
WU-02	English	Japanese	-	intermediate
WU-03	English	Japanese	-	intermediate
WU-04	English	Japanese	-	intermediate
WU-05	English	Japanese	-	intermediate
WU-06	English	Japanese	-	intermediate
WU-07	English	Japanese	-	intermediate
WU-08	English	Japanese	-	intermediate
WU-09	English	Japanese	-	intermediate
HSU-01	Japanese	English	-	N/A
HSU-02	Japanese	English	-	N/A
HSU-03	Japanese	English	-	N/A
HSU-04	Japanese	English	-	N/A
HSU-05	Japanese	English	-	N/A
HSU-06	Japanese	English	-	N/A
HSU-07	Japanese	English	-	N/A
HSU-08	Japanese	English	-	N/A
HSU-09	Japanese	English	-	N/A
HSU-10	Japanese	English	-	N/A

2.3 Structure

The project was multidimensional and was structured into three segments: warm-up, core, and follow-up. Task-based conversation sessions formed the core preceded by certain warm-up/introduction activities and followed by certain follow-up/reflection

activities. Core conversation sessions and follow-up activities were mainly intended for research purposes. However, we consider all activities, including the research components, as pedagogically oriented.

The participants were assigned two task-based conversation sessions wherein three students engaged in a 10-min discussion on a given topic on Zoom. The assigned task was to develop three ideas for possible online intercultural exchange activities in this pandemic-affected period of immobility. At the beginning of each session, they were instructed to take notes and verbally present their ideas after the discussion. The roles of the note-taker, discussion-leader, and presenter were voluntarily selected among the group members, and not pre-assigned by the teacher–researchers.

The grouping was based on three types of situations: (i) *partner language* contact situations (for HSU/WU/UB students, hereafter PCS) and (ii) *third-party language* contact situations (for WU/UB students, hereafter TCS) following Fan’s (1994) typology of contact situations, and (iii) *native language* situations (for HSU students, hereafter NS). Situations (i) and (ii) exhibit JLF interactions. A group of three was an original and basic unit; however, some cases landed with a group of two, or four due to scheduling difficulties. The resulting groups are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Conversation session groupings for the three types of situations

	Group code	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
(i) partner language contact situations	PCS 1	HSU-07	HSU-08	WU-02	WU-07
	PCS 2	HSU-07	HSU-10	UB-06	WU-03
	PCS 3	HSU-09	UB-03	WU-04	-
	PCS 4	HSU-05	WU-01	WU-09	-
	PCS 5	HSU-01	UB-02	WU-08	-
	PCS 6	HSU-02	UB-05	WU-05	-
	PCS 7	HSU-04	UB-04	WU-06	-
	PCS 8	HSU-03	UB-01	-	-
(ii) third-party language contact situations	TCS 1	UB-01	UB-04	WU-01	-
	TCS 2	UB-06	UB-08	WU-09	-
	TCS 3	UB-02	WU-04	WU-05	-
	TCS 4	UB-05	WU-02	WU-07	-
	TCS 5	UB-03	WU-03	-	-
(iii) native situations	NS 1	HSU-01	HSU-02	HSU-03	-
	NS 2	HSU-04	HSU-05	HSU-06	-

Each conversation session began with a brief introduction by a teacher–researcher, followed by a 10-min discussion and a presentation. It was concluded with a short wrap-up and questions/comments made by the teacher–researcher, which aimed to create a quasi-project-based learning course setting. The entire session was audio-visually recorded on Zoom.

After each conversation session, the participants were requested to respond to a survey to reflect on their behavior and awareness. They were also invited to the semi-structured follow-up interview on Zoom, given by the respective teacher–researcher at their university.

3. Post-conversation Survey and Interview

From a pedagogical perspective, the post-conversation survey and interview were regarded as opportunities for the participants' retrospective self-reflection and self-assessment through a multiple-choice questionnaire and verbalizing their thoughts and feelings to facilitate further learning. In contrast, from a research perspective, these follow-up activities were intended to explicate the participants' attitudes, awareness, and behaviors, perceived in the JLF interaction in a virtual context.

For research purposes, we used a concurrent mixed methods approach in which both quantitative and qualitative data were collected via post-conversation surveys and interviews, respectively. The quantitative data aimed to provide information on how the participants perceived their behavior in the interaction. In contrast, the qualitative results were intended for more nuanced information on how and why they consciously behave and how they observe others' behavior leading to either a smooth or awkward communication. The quantitative analysis results have been compared with the qualitative data for further discussion.

The research questions that we aimed to investigate in the post-conversation survey and interview analyses are as follows:

- RQ1. How do L1/L2 speakers of the Japanese language consciously behave in the interaction?
- RQ2. Do they behave differently with respect to different situations?

3.1. Survey Method

After each conversation session, the project participants were requested to answer a follow-up questionnaire to reflect on their behavior and awareness. The two sets of 20-item questions for L1 speakers and L2 learners were obtained from Yoshida (2014) and translated by the authors. The list has been provided in the Appendix. For HSU students, the questions were given in original Japanese. The questions were constructed in a manner that questioned how they consciously behave or make adjustments to facilitate a smooth conversation. The participants answered the Google Forms questions on a 5-point Likert scale using the following descriptors: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. The results were statistically analyzed.

3.2 Survey Analysis Results

The 19 participants (out of 25) completed the same questionnaire twice, after a TCS or NS session and a PCS session. Mainly due to scheduling difficulties, only 14 (out of 15) L2 learners and 5 (out of 10) L1 speakers participated in the two different situation types, who were further considered for the analysis. The post-TCS, post-NS, and post-PCS questionnaire results were analyzed using SPSS Statistics 27 for descriptive statistics values, and *t*-tests to compare post-TCS/NS and post-PCS, and L1 speakers and L2 learners.

We first analyzed the L2 learners' data ($n=14$). Figure 1 shows the L2 learner results in the post-TCS (conversation among L2 learners) and the post-PCS (conversation among L2 learners and L1 speakers), with the average point (on a 5-point Likert scale) for each question item in the two situations. Judging from the items with a score of 4 or higher in both situations, L2 learners preferred to listen more than to speak (Q7), nod and provide responses while listening (Q13), and listen patiently until the end (Q17). They also attempted to understand the other participants' feelings (Q15), respected (Q20), and agreed

with others' opinions (Q10). These results of self-reflection on their behaviors in the interaction can be characterized based on their listenership as responsive, patient, and sympathetic listeners.

The paired-samples *t*-test was run to determine the differences between the two types of situations in this group. The results showed no significant difference ($p < .05$) in any of the 20-item questions. This implies that L2 learners do not behave differently according to situation types (with/without L1 speakers).

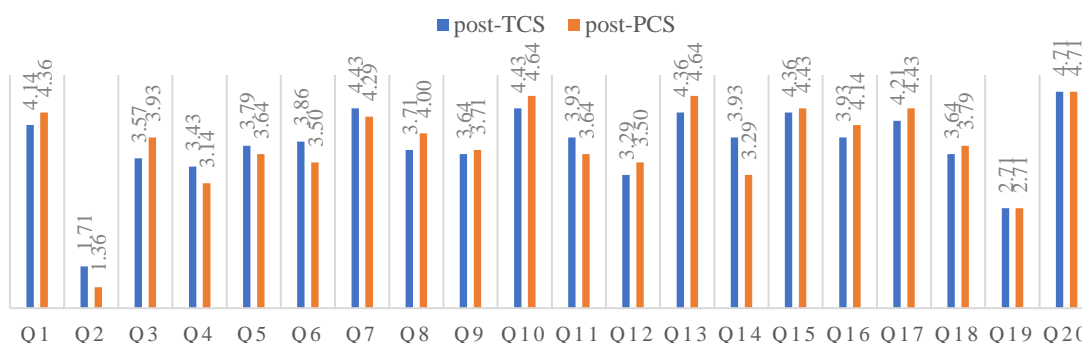


Figure 1: L2 learners' post-TCS/PCS questionnaire result ($n=14$)

Now, let us move on L1 speakers' results ($n=5$) in the post-NS (conversation among L1 speakers) and post-PCS (conversation among L1 speakers and L2 learners), as shown in Figure 2. Similar to the L2 learner data, we attended to the items with an average point of 4 or higher in both situations. Similar to L2 learners, L1 speakers preferred to listen to others until the end, while giving verbal (Q13) and non-verbal responses (Q17). They attempted to respect and agree with others' opinions. In contrast to L2 learners, L1 speakers can be characterized based on their conscious role in continuing the conversation (Q3).

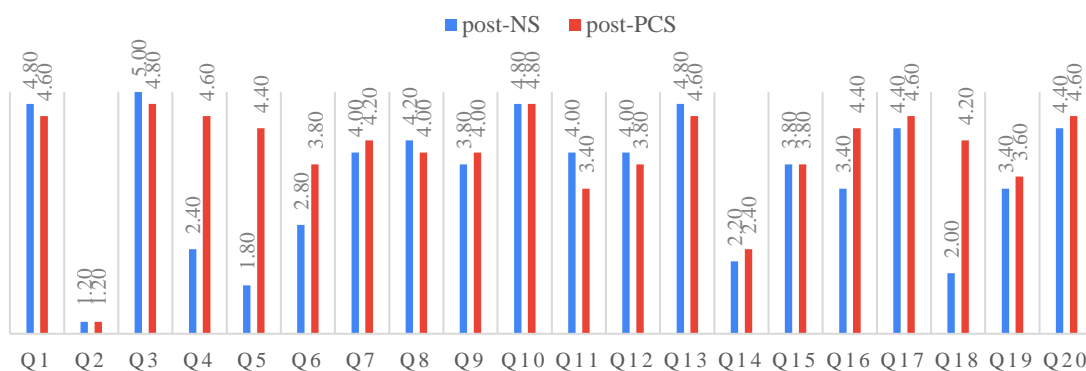


Figure 2: L1 speakers' post-NS/PCS questionnaire result ($n=5$)

According to the paired-samples *t*-test result for this group, there was a significant difference ($p < .05$) with a large effect size (calculated by Cohen's *d*) between the post-NS and post-PCS for the three question items shown in Table 3. In PCS, L1 speakers chose to use simple vocabulary (Q5) while avoiding buzzwords and slang (Q18) and selected a familiar topic (Q16).

Table 3: Comparison of L1 speakers' result in post-NS/PCS ($n=5$)

	Post-NS		Post- PCS		One sample <i>t</i> -test & effect size		
	M	SD	M	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Q5	1.80	1.095	4.40	0.548	-5.099	0.007	-2.280
Q16	3.40	0.548	4.40	0.548	-3.162	0.034	-1.414
Q18	2.00	1.000	4.20	0.447	-5.880	0.004	-2.630

Next, we compared L1 speakers ($n=10$) and L2 learners ($n=15$) in the post-PCS experience. The independent *t*-test was run to investigate the differences in L1 speaker/L2 learner behaviors reflected in the survey. Among the 20 questions, a significant difference ($p<.05$) with a large effect size ($d >0.8$) was found in the three question items. The results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Comparison of L1 speaker ($n=10$) / L2 learner ($n=15$) results in the post-PCS

	Group	M	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Q4	L2	3.20	0.941	-2.769	0.011	-1.130
	L1	4.20	0.789			
Q14	L2	3.40	1.404	3.002	0.006	1.226
	L1	1.80	1.135			
Q15	L2	4.40	0.632	2.972	0.007	1.213
	L1	3.60	0.699			

L1 speakers preferred to speak slowly by adjusting to L2 learners' proficiency levels (Q4), while L2 learners attempted to understand other participants' feelings (Q15). In Q14, two different but conversely related questions were asked of L1 and L2. L2 learners asked for the meaning of an unfamiliar word(s). To a significantly lesser degree, L1 speakers attempted to correct L2 learners' vocabulary errors. The average scores for Q14 in both groups were relatively low.

3.3. Interview Method

Following the survey, the participants were invited to the semi-structured follow-up interview on Zoom by the respective teacher–researcher at their university. The interview was conducted in Japanese for HSU students and in the language of WU/UB participants' choice, that is, either English or Japanese. The questions asked in the interview included the differences that they observed between TCS/NS and PCS, while other questions elaborated from the questionnaire to explore the research questions mentioned previously.

The interviews were recorded on Zoom. A total of 60-min recorded interviews with all the 25 participants (Table 1) were transcribed verbatim, and the data were managed using Microsoft Excel, with respect to the ethical requirements, including data confidentiality. A reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was conducted in line with the six-step guidelines of Braun and Clark (2006, 2012, 2020). Adhering to the RTA principle of using the researcher's subjectivity as a resource in the data analyses (Braun & Clark, 2019), the first author played the role of the interpreter. An inductive approach to data analysis was adopted; that is, data were open-coded by attending to data-driven meaning. Deductive

analysis was also employed to ensure that the open-coded generated themes were relevant to the research questions and were comparable to the quantitative survey results.

3.4 Interview Analysis Results

The RTA was conducted separately for two datasets: interviews with L2 learners and L1 speakers. Following the phases of familiarizing each dataset by viewing video-recorded interviews and reading the transcripts multiple times, we labeled the data items that may be of relevance to the research questions with initial “codes.” Further, these codes were collated and developed into potential “themes.” Following a recursive review and an attempt to combine the two datasets, we identified four overarching themes: (A) perception of contact, (B) conscious behaviors, (C) struggles, and (D) observation of others. Table 5 presents the codes and their indicative sample extracts from each dataset under these four themes. The statements in Japanese were translated by the authors. Each extract is accompanied by a participant code, as shown in Table 1.

Table 5: Themes, codes, and sample extracts from the data

Themes		Codes	Indicative extracts
(A) perception of contact	L1	enjoyable	It was a fun experience [HSU-09]
	L2	enjoyable valuable	I definitely enjoyed the experience a lot [WU-07]. I liked being able to talk with different people, especially native Japanese speakers, because it is not like a super common opportunity that I get [WU-02].
		natural	I preferred talking with L1 speakers because I could speak more naturally [WU-01].
		easy difficult	I found it easier to talk with L1 speakers [UB-04]. When I was speaking with the Japanese students because I didn't understand as much, I became shier [WU-07].
(B) conscious behaviors	L1	speech style	I tried to use polite forms [HSU-02].
		reactive responses	I tried to be more reactive than usual [HSU-01].
		speed	I consciously speak more slowly [HSU-04].
	L2	leading role	I led a discussion to help them speak up [HSU-05].
(C) struggle	L1	vocabulary choice	It was hard to rephrase unknown words for L2 learners [HSU-08].
	L2	topic choice	It was really hard to explain what was unfamiliar to me [WU-05].
(D) observation of others	L1	enthusiasm	I found L2 learners trying really hard to convey their messages [HSU-04].
	L2	conversation style	I've become more aware of the different ways people speak [WU-07].
		asking questions	They are more inclined to ask a lot of questions about us [WU-04].
		speed	They definitely seemed to be talking slower than they normally would, which I was grateful for [WU-06].

Theme (A) identified how the participants perceived their contact experiences. For L1 speakers, it was overall an enjoyable experience of interacting with L2 learners of Japanese. In addition to being fun, L2 learners regard the experience as valuable and beneficial in a pandemic situation with little mobility and opportunities for L1 contact, which was the underlying main purpose of this entire project. They also highlighted the benefits of interacting with L2 learners from another institution as a refreshing experience outside the regular Japanese-as-a-foreign-language classroom. Interestingly, they had mixed feelings toward L1 contact; some favored its naturalness and found it easier because they realized that L1 speakers understood the conversation regardless of any grammar or vocabulary errors, while others expressed uneasiness in talking to L1 speakers.

Theme (B) entails how the participants consciously behaved in the interaction. L1 participants attempted to use polite forms, rather than casual ones. They were more reactive verbally or non-verbally, spoke more slowly, and led the discussion. L2 participants were also careful about which speech style (formal or casual) they opted to converse with Japanese students. They attempted to use simpler and easier words for their peer L2 learners.

Theme (C) discloses what the participants struggled with in the interaction. L1 participants experienced difficulty in paraphrasing what L2 learners were unable to understand. Meanwhile, L2 participants recognized their lack of vocabulary, mainly when they talked about unfamiliar topics.

Theme (D) describes how the participants noticed others' behaviors in the interaction. Some L1 participants determined L2 learners to be enthusiastic about attempting to convey their messages. L2 participants became aware of varied conversation styles depending on the individuals and geographic areas, including dialects. They also noted that L1 speakers tended to ask questions and intentionally slowed down while conversing with L2 learners.

3.5. Mixed-Methods Findings

The mixed-methods approach enabled a comparison between the quantitative and qualitative results and can be correlative and supplementary. Among the results of the quantitative analysis, L1 speakers' adjustment in their talking speed in PCS was acknowledged by L2 learners. Further, L1 speakers' conscious role in continuing the conversation was perceived by themselves and was also recognized through the tendency to ask questions of L2 participants, as shown in the coded information prior.

L1 participants' careful choice of vocabulary, avoidance of buzzwords and slang, and thoughtful selection of topics were brought to light in the quantitative analysis. However, L1 speakers still struggled to make strategic adjustments and make themselves understood more straightforwardly, while L2 learners realized their lack of vocabulary in such topics beyond their knowledge and interest.

4. Implications, Limitations and Future Directions

This study explored the two research questions. The analyses highlighted several points of interest in RQ1 (how L1/L2 speakers of the Japanese language consciously behave in the interaction). The findings include responsive and patient listenership for both L1 speakers and L2 learners, and a conscious leading role in continuing the conversation for L1 speakers. Regarding RQ2 (whether or not they behave differently according to

situation type), the survey results showed no significant difference in L2 learners' behaviors in TCS and PCS. Meanwhile, L1 speakers behaved significantly differently in PCS, in terms of vocabulary and topic choice, as compared to NS, according to the quantitative analysis.

The mixed-methods approach was used to explain the project participants' awareness of their own and others' behaviors in the interaction. The results brought our attention to some interesting points, which can be analyzed against the actual linguistic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural behaviors observed in the interaction. Some noteworthy linguistic features to explore in future research include communication strategy use (for vocabulary), speech style-shifting, reactive tokens, turn-taking, and leadership behaviors.

Despite some inspiring findings in the analyses, the present study also acquired several limitations as VE interaction research. The analysis results did not indicate any implications for the virtuality nature of intercultural contact. This limitation is primarily due to the failure to plan a meticulous survey/interview design that enabled explicating this specific aspect. The improvement will be made in the second round of the project, which is currently planned for the fall semester of 2021. A virtual (third) space, which is neither home nor abroad, is assumed to positively or negatively impact the interaction therein. The participants were neither domestic nor international nor hosts or guests in intercultural contact. Traditional dyads may not be meaningful or relevant in a virtual context. This needs to be explored in relation to Kramsch's (2009) notion of "thirdness" (or third place) in our future interaction research.

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Appendix

Questions for post-conversation survey obtained from Yoshida (2014) and translated by the authors.

1. I was able to speak well in the conversation.
2. I was distracted by the recording equipment.
3. I tried to continue the conversation.
4. I spoke slowly so that the others could easily understand. [L2]
I spoke slowly to adjust to the non-native speaker's Japanese proficiency level. [L1]
5. I chose simple vocabulary so that the others could easily understand. [L2]
I chose simple vocabulary to adjust to the non-native speaker's Japanese proficiency level. [L1]
6. I spoke grammatically correctly so that the others could easily understand. [L2]
I spoke grammatically correctly to adjust to the non-native speaker's Japanese proficiency level. [L1]
7. I tried to listen more than speak and to elicit the others' opinions and thoughts.
8. I created a relaxed atmosphere.
9. I actively asked questions to get information about the others.
10. I tried to agree with the others' opinions.
11. I asked/verified when I couldn't understand what the other person was saying.
12. I tried to entertain the others.
13. I tried to nod and give responses (*aizuchi*) when the other person was talking.
14. I asked when I didn't understand the word(s) that the others used. [L2]
I corrected when the other party's vocabulary was incorrect. [L1]
15. I tried to understand the others' feeling.
16. I chose a topic that the others might be familiar with.
17. I listened to the end even when the other person had difficulty expressing his/her thoughts.
18. I didn't use buzzwords or slang.
19. I provided more information than I got from the others.
20. I respected the others' opinions.