

Japanese as a Lingua Franca Interaction
 for L1 and L2 Speakers in Virtual Contact Situations
 リンガフランカとしての日本語によるインターアクション
 —第一・第二言語話者によるバーチャル接触場面をめぐって—

Mitsuko Takei, Hiroshima Shudo University
 Mitsuaki Shimojo, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York
 竹井光子, 広島修道大学
 下條光明, ニューヨーク州立バッファロー大学

1. Introduction

English as a lingua franca (ELF) is well recognized within recent foreign language education research and pedagogy (Konakahara and Tsuchiya, 2020). Likewise, Japanese as a lingua franca (JLF) is a promising research area in a different context. However, unlike ELF interactions, which take place globally, JLF interactions occur in specific communities and contexts with and without first language (L1) Japanese speakers.

The population and diversity of second language (L2) Japanese speakers in multilingual/multicultural communities inside Japan have rapidly expanded. However, English is not necessarily a lingua franca in these communities. These communities are made up of persons primarily from China, Vietnam, and Korea, according to the Immigration Services Agency of Japan (2021). This has resulted in the emergence of “Plain Japanese” or *Yasashii Nihongo* to reduce the communication gap between Japanese citizens and foreign residents (Iori, 2016). Plain Japanese is similar in principle to JLF.

Furthermore, Japanese learners overseas are established at secondary and higher education levels, primarily due to the recent popularity of Japanese subcultures and traditional cultures. In particular, L2 Japanese learners in North American universities have the opportunity to use their target language (Japanese) with their peers who have different L1 backgrounds, including other Asian languages, and with L1 Japanese speakers (e.g., Japanese international students). In Japan, domestic L1 students have the opportunity to interact interculturally in JLF with international students from partner universities overseas. “*Kokusai kyoshu*” is often dubbed intercultural collaborative learning courses in many universities in Japan (Suematsu, Akiba & Yonezawa, 2019). Here, JLF is typically used as the language of instruction and class interaction, with ELF-mediated options on the other end. These lingua franca interactions focus on mutual intelligibility, where linguistic, sociolinguistic, empathic, and strategic adjustments are expected to ensure successful communication.

This study reports on the second round of the online conversation project between universities in Japan and the United States (*Nichibei daigaku kaiwa purojekuto* in Japanese) conducted in the fall of 2021. The report focuses on how L1 speakers and L2 learners perceive their JLF interactions based on the post-conversation survey and interview described in section 3.

2. Project Overview

The first round of the project took place in 2020. The second round was enhanced to further explore the virtuality nature (reported in Shimojo, Fujiwara, and Takei, 2022) with particular reference to the lingua franca aspect. The project details are discussed in

Takei, Fujiwara, and Shimojo (2021a, b). This section presents a brief overview of the project and the refinements made from the first round.

Student participants were newly recruited for the second round by three teacher-researchers at one university in Japan (HSU) and two universities in the US (UB and WU). They included six L1 speakers and seven L2 learners, with proficiency levels ranging from lower- to upper-intermediate, assessed by the simple performance-oriented test (SPOT).

As in the first round, the project was structured into three segments: (1) warm-up casual gathering on Remo, (2) core conversation sessions on Zoom, and (3) follow-up reflective surveys using Google Forms and interviews on Zoom. In the core segment, the participants were assigned two task-based conversation sessions wherein three students engaged in a 10-minute discussion on a given topic. The assigned task was to develop three ideas for possible online intercultural exchange activities in this pandemic-affected period of immobility. This was the same task as the first round for consistency. There were three types of groups to which the participants were assigned: (i) L1 speaker group, (ii) L2 learner group, and (iii) L1/L2 mixed group. Groups (ii) and (iii) are equivalent to *third-party language* contact situations and *partner language* contact situations, respectively, based on Fan's (1994) terms. A group of three was an original and basic unit; however, we included three pairs of participants due to unavailability of some participants. The resulting pairs and groups are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Conversation session groupings

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
L1 group #1	HSU1	HSU2	HSU3
L1 group #2	HSU4	HSU5	HSU6
L2 group #1	UB1	UB2	-
L2 group #2	UB3	WU1	WU4*
L2 group #3	UB4	WU2	WU3
L1/L2 group #1	HSU1	UB2	WU2
L1/L2 group #2	HSU4	UB1	WU1
L1/L2 group #3	HSU2	UB3	-
L1/L2 group #4	HSU5	UB4	-
L1/L2 group #5	HSU3	HSU6	WU3

*WU4, who could only attend the L2 group session, was excluded from the interview.

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

3. Post-conversation Survey and Interview

Participants first responded to a post-conversation survey on Google Forms twice after each one of the two conversation sessions to reflect on their behavior and awareness. Then they were invited to the follow-up interview on Zoom, conducted by the respective teacher-researcher at their university. The post-conversation survey and interview were

opportunities for the participants' retrospective self-reflection and self-assessment by using a multiple-choice questionnaire and verbalizing their thoughts and feelings to facilitate further learning. These follow-up activities also explicate the participants' attitudes, awareness, and behaviors perceived in the JLF interaction in a virtual context.

Survey questions for the second round were revised in light of the first-round analysis results. The interviews were more semi-structured than those in the first round, and three interviewers were provided guidelines for interview questions based on the survey analysis results.

After the first round, several questions were added, replaced, or slightly rephrased from the original 20-item questions obtained from Yoshida (2014). These changes were made to elaborate this study's focus on virtuality and its lingua franca nature. A set of 25-item questions was prepared for the second round and is provided in the Appendix. The participants answered the questions using a 5-point Likert scale with the following descriptors: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. The questionnaire was constructed using Google Forms.

The participants were asked to answer the same survey twice after the L1 group session (for Japanese students) or L2 group session (for US students) and after the L1/L2 mixed group session. They were then invited to a semi-structured follow-up interview via the Zoom platform. The interview was conducted in Japanese for HSU students and in English for WU/UB participants. The survey results were compared individually, and the changes in selected scales between the two sessions were highlighted and used as part of the interview questions.

This study analyzed a total of 258-minute recordings of interviews with 13 participants, as shown in Table 1. The audio data were transcribed verbatim and managed using a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) method developed by Braun and Clark (2006, 2012, 2019, 2020) with NVivo, as in the first round.

4. Analysis Results

The RTA was conducted separately for two datasets: interviews with L1 speakers and L2 learners. Following the RTA guidelines, the data items were labeled with initial "codes." Further, these codes were collated and developed into potential "themes."

There are two themes that are particularly relevant from the L2 learner interview data: (1) peer learner presence and (2) L1 speaker presence. On one hand, L2 learners found it easier and more comfortable to interact with peer learners because their proficiency levels were similar and they could understand each other better. On the other hand, they recognized the benefit of L1 speaker presence in that they could learn from the target language model, such as authentic use of *aizuchi* (reactive tokens) and when to use polite and casual speech styles. They were aware and appreciative of L1 speakers' linguistic and strategic adjustments for effective communication. Interestingly, we observed two types of nervousness expressed. Some learners were nervous about making mistakes in front of their peer learners (peer pressure), while others were nervous about L1 speakers' fast-paced utterances and native fluency and felt that the L1 speakers were controlling the interaction.

In L1 speaker interview data, two primary themes were identified: (1) adjustments made and (2) difficulties experienced during the JLF interaction. L1 speakers tried to make adjustments in their use of *aizuchi* and speech styles and toward Plain Japanese. Here, most of the L1 participants have knowledge of the high frequency of *aizuchi* in L1 Japanese and

the principles of Plain Japanese. Therefore, they tried to apply their knowledge to practice. However, they also struggled to simplify language as well as adjust speaking rate and vocabulary choice. As L1 speakers, they felt responsible for leading the conversation to move communication forward; however, they simultaneously struggled with dilemmas related to dominating the conversation. In accordance with this, maintaining conversation with the right amount of leading and listening was a challenge significantly faced by the speakers. They also struggled with knowing and being aware of when to correct the L2 speakers' vocabulary choices and grammatical errors. They usually prioritized mutual intelligibility by using the "let it pass" principle or asking for clarification when they spotted guessable errors. They also felt that the interaction should be a language-learning opportunity for L2 learners; however, they found it challenging to decipher when and how to correct errors without creating awkwardness and embarrassment.

5. Discussion

This study, developed from the previous round, has attempted to focus on the lingua franca characteristics of L1-L2 interactions, where both L1 and L2 speakers were situated at home and mutually contributing participants of the task-based interaction.

The interview with the L2 learners revealed the pros and cons of peer L2 learner presence and L1 speaker presence. There were mixed perceptions toward the presence of L1 and L2 speakers and individual differences in those perceptions. In other words, easiness and nervousness, or comfort and pressure, could impact positively or negatively on their interactions. Dealing effectively with those emotions will help motivate further learning of the target language. Occasional interaction with L1 speakers through virtual or in-person intercultural exchanges is an excellent opportunity for authentic target language exposure and overcoming nervousness experiences. Contact with unfamiliar peer learners beyond regular Japanese classrooms, preferably from another institution, can also serve as a stimulating experience with a good mixture of comfortableness and nervousness.

For L1 speakers, JLF interaction with L2 learners has the potential to facilitate their first language awareness and overall communication skills while enjoying and struggling in the interaction. Reflecting on both the adjustments they successfully made and the difficulties they experienced will lead to a better understanding of successful communication in their native language and in their second/foreign language; English for most of them. Many L1 participants had prior practical knowledge of Plain Japanese through related coursework. Therefore, it was a valuable opportunity to put knowledge into practice. Furthermore, balancing L1 responsibility and leadership is another critical aspect of contact situations involving cultural and personal differences.

6. Future Directions

The principle of mutual intelligibility shared by JLF and Plain Japanese is a crucial concept for this study. However, consideration of the L1 and L2 interview results directs our attention to a new question: How do L1 speakers and L2 learners perceive Plain Japanese in terms of its authenticity, naturalness, communicativeness, and simplicity? Plain Japanese started as a life-saving information medium in disasters and has developed into a social-life support system in expanding multicultural communities in Japan. What impact do we see when it is introduced into an educational context, especially when L2 learners

value nativelikeness as the target language model? This question remains to be explored in depth in our future interaction research.

Acknowledgment

JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP20K00717 supports this study.

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3* (2), 77-101.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, vol. 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 11*(4), 589-597.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18* (3), 328-352.
- Fan, S. K. C. (1994). Contact situations and language management. *Multilingua - Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication, 13* (3), 237-252.
- Immigration Services Agency of Japan (2021). https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/publications/press/13_00017.html [accessed on September 1, 2022]
- Iori, I. (2016). *Yasashii Nihongo: Tabunka Kyousei Shakai e (Plain Japanese: Towards multicultural symbiosis societies)*. Iwanami Shoten.
- Konakahara, M., & Tsuchiya, K. (Eds.). (2020). *English as a lingua franca in Japan : towards multilingual practices*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shimojo, M., Miho Fujiwara, M. & Takei, M. (2022). Significance and potentials of L2 Japanese learners' contact with L1 speakers in a virtual "third" space. Presented at the AATJ Spring Conference 2022.
- Suematsu, K., Akiba, H., & Yonezawa, Y. (Eds.) (2019). *Kokusai kyoushu: Bunka tayousei o ikashita jugyou jissen eno apurochi (Intercultural collaborative learning: Approaches to practices utilizing cultural diversity)*. Toshindo Publishing.
- Takei, M., Fujiwara, M., & Shimojo, M. (2021a). Online conversation project between universities in Japan and the US: Its rationale and design for integrating research and pedagogy. *Studies in the Humanities and Sciences, 62* (2), 1-23. Hiroshima Shudo University.
- Takei, M., Fujiwara, M., & Shimojo, M. (2021b). Remote "virtual" contact situations: Findings from the post-conversation survey and interview. In *Proceedings of CAJLE 2021*, 186-195.
- Yoshida, M. (2014). *A study of questions concerning conversation construction by native Japanese speakers and learners of Japanese* [in Japanese]. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Tsukuba University.

Appendix

Post-conversation survey questions modified from Yoshida (2014) and translated by the authors.

1. I was able to speak well in the conversation.
2. I found online Zoom conversation harder than in-person conversation.
3. I tried to continue the conversation.
4. I tried to speak slowly so that the others could easily understand.
5. I chose simple vocabulary so that the others could easily understand.
6. I tried to speak grammatically correctly so that the others could easily understand.
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 didn'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.
15. I corrected when the others' vocabulary was incorrect.
16. I tried to understand the others' feeling.
17. I chose a topic that the others might be familiar with.
18. I listened to the end even when the others had difficulty expressing their thoughts.
19. I tried to help when the others had difficulty expressing their thoughts.
20. I asked for help when I had difficulty expressing my thoughts.
21. I tried to avoid using buzzwords, slang or dialects.
22. I provided more information than I got from the others.
23. I respected the others' opinions.
24. I tried to help communication using gestures and facial expressions.
25. I tried to lead the conversation.