

L2 Japanese learners’ perception of lingua franca interactions in a virtual “third” space

Mitsuko Takei
Hiroshima Shudo University
Mitsuaki Shimojo
University at Buffalo, The State University of New York
Miho Fujiwara
Willamette University

Abstract

This study explores how L2 Japanese learners in North American universities perceive their online contact experience with other L2 learners and L1 speakers residing in Japan. Their perceptions are examined from the perspective of Japanese as a lingua franca and the virtual nature of the interactions, via follow-up surveys and interviews, as part of the Japan-US Online Conversation Project. A reflexive thematic analysis of the survey/interview data reveals the learners’ perceived behaviors as lingua franca users and their mixed perception of virtual other L2 and L1 speaker contacts, which hints at characteristics of “thirdness.” The results are discussed to present insights for future virtual exchange activities with L1 speakers.

1. Introduction

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

The population and diversity of the 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, which comprise people primarily from China, Vietnam, and Korea (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2021). This reality 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 in that it focuses on mutual intelligibility, where linguistic, sociolinguistic, empathic, and strategic adjustments are expected to ensure successful communication.

In Japan, L1 students have the opportunity to interact interculturally with international students from partner universities overseas. Such interactions happen in “intercultural collaborative learning (ICL)” or *kokusai kyoshu* courses in many Japanese universities (Suematsu, Akiba & Yonezawa, 2019). In ICL courses, domestic and international students work together on a given task using a lingua franca. JLF is typically used as the language of instruction and class interaction, in addition to an ELF-mediated course option. Overseas learners of the Japanese language are seen in foreign language classrooms at secondary and higher education levels. According to the Japan Foundation (2022), there are about 3.79 million learners of Japanese overseas, including 0.18 million in North America alone. L2 Japanese learners in North American universities have the opportunity to use their target language (Japanese) with their peers from different L1 backgrounds and with L1 Japanese speakers (e.g., Japanese international students), where JLF comes into play.

In 2020 and 2021, however, JLF contact opportunities in academic contexts for North America and Japan were restricted owing to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Practitioners in language education earnestly investigated virtual spaces to realize such contact situations, often dubbed as “virtual exchange (VE),” which was already an established language learning and intercultural communication practice before the pandemic (O’Dowd, 2016). In the literature, virtual spaces have often been discussed vis-à-vis their thirdness. Since Bhabha (1994) developed the concept in his postcolonial theory, thirdness has been theorized in various disciplines, such as “third culture” in foreign language education (Kramsch, 1993) and as “third place” in urban sociology (Oldenburg, 1999). Dooly (2011) investigated the online interaction discourse and identity constructed in a virtual third space. Markiewicz (2019) argued for a “virtual third place” with the emerging technology that creates a new kind of communication in the virtual space.

However, previous studies on lingua franca and VE, have not always been conducted together, especially from the perspective of their roles in forming the notion of thirdness. Thus, this study explores how learners of Japanese as a foreign language in US universities perceive their virtual contact experience with L1 speakers in Japan and with other learners of Japanese in the US. Based on our survey and interview results, we propose the basic meaning of thirdness as “being

out of my comfort zone” and “feeling a sense of in-betweenness.” The results also indicate that thirdness is not a static state; rather, it exists on a continuum. Certain situations are “more third” based on a combination of attributing factors. The survey and interview were designed to investigate the learners’ perception of the “lingua franca” and “virtuality” of the interactions.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 first reviews the relevant literature on lingua franca, VE and thirdness, and presents the research questions based on the literature reviews. Section 3 presents an overview of the current study, the Japan-US Online Conversation Project (*Nichibei daigaku kaiwa purojekuto* in Japanese), conducted in 2020 and 2021 between universities in Japan and the US. Section 4 explains the methods of analyses. Section 5 presents the findings derived from the results, and Section 6 discusses directions for future research.

2. Background

2.1 Lingua Franca

Historically, the term “lingua franca” was used to refer to a contact language for trade developed to bridge language barriers for merchants in the Mediterranean between the 14th and 19th centuries (Brosch, 2015). Since then, many languages have served as the lingua franca and have systematically been used to make communication possible between people who do not share the same L1 in regions or contexts, such as diplomacy, business, culture, and science. The language that takes on the role depends on factors such as sociopolitical, sociocultural, and socioeconomic power.

More recently, “lingua franca” has become associated first and foremost with English. The prominent role of English is a global phenomenon connected to the wide spread of its L2 speakers and international use in communication across cultures. Thus, ELF has emerged as a fertile research field in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics since the late 1990s (Konakahara & Tsuchiya, 2020), leading to numerous publications and presentations made in the 21st century. The widely used definitions of ELF include “English as it is used as a contact language among speakers from different first languages” (Jenkins, 2009, p.143) and “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” (Seidlhofer, 2011, p.7, emphasis deleted). In these definitions, L1 speakers are not excluded, although some ELF studies have focused on L2 speakers from Kachru’s “Outer and

Expanding Circles” (Jenkins, 2015). We take the stance that a lingua franca is the chosen language used between individuals who do not share the same L1. Thus, L1 speakers are included as interlocutors.

Attempts have been made to apply the “lingua franca” concept to Japanese language education. For instance, Ikeda & Bysouth (2013) investigated Japanese and English as lingua francas in terms of choices made by international students in the Japanese university context. Aoyama, Akashi, & Li (2020) provided a comprehensive account of JLF in multilingual and multicultural contexts, focusing on the diversifying reality of JLF speakers in and outside Japan. From cognitive and psychological perspectives, Yamada (2021) analyzed L1 Japanese speakers’ behaviors when using JLF in Japanese-medium instruction courses.

Relevant to the scope of our study is the L1-L2 negotiation aspect of lingua franca. Aoyama (2020) argued for a post-native-speakerism, following ELF research, and focused on meaning negotiation accomplished by L1 and L2 speakers simultaneously beyond L1 norms in a multilingual environment (p. 187). The current study considers L1 and L2 speakers as lingua franca users and pays attention to their meaning-negotiation process through modifications and adjustments in JLF interactions, which has been under-discussed in the literature in relation to the notion of “thirdness” that will be discussed later in Subsection 2.3.

2.2 Virtual Exchange (VE)

O’Dowd (2018, 2021) defined VE as “the engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interaction and collaboration with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of coursework and under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators” and presented several categories of VE initiatives and approaches. The first category comprises three administrative types: (1) practitioner-led (or specific subject), (2) institution-led (or syllabus-shared), and (3) outsourced (service-provider) (O’Dowd, 2017, 2018). Practitioners, institutions, and service providers are vital stakeholders who are responsible for program/project management. Type (1), for instance, is a bottom-up practitioner-driven approach that is “developed by teachers who believe passionately in the underlying principles and aims of Virtual Exchange” (O’Dowd, 2017, p. 21) for their classes, and is usually conducted on a small scale.

The second category is drawn up from a foreign language education perspective as articulated by Gutiérrez & O’Dowd (2021): (1) bilingual-bicultural exchanges and (2) lingua franca approaches. A typical and long-standing practice of type (1) is e-tandem, which involves two individuals who assist each other in L2 learning through the other’s L1 proficiency by interacting online regularly. Type (2), in contrast, has recently gained interest as an opportunity to engage in intercultural collaboration using a shared language. ELF is the prime vehicle, given the global language landscape, but other lingua francas are locally possible, such as a German lingua franca case study in the European context reported by Kohn & Hoffstaedter (2017).

The current study employs a practitioner-driven VE practice managed by researchers in the US and Japan, involving JLF interactions with and without L1 speakers as a venue for pedagogy and research.

2.3 Thirdness

As Bhabha (1990, 1994) developed his influential concept of the “third space” in his postcolonial theory, numerous interpretations were made around the metaphoric notion of thirdness under such terms as third space, place, or culture, as was extensively examined in MacDonald (2019) through an empirical corpus approach. Oldenburg’s (1999) notion of “third place” is a neutral place where social life happens apart from the home (“first place”) and the workplace (“second place”). In contrast with all three physical spaces that Oldenburg defined, Markiewicz (2019) proposed “virtual third places” in response to a growing interest in and need for virtual communities in the digital era, which eliminates the inequality of economic resources and time available to individuals. Kramsch’s (1993, 2009) third place or third culture is a symbolic place for L2 learning between the L1 and new cultures; she claimed that it is mainly located in the language classroom. In contemporary language and intercultural education studies, there is a tendency to presuppose the existence of a “first” and “second,” and to attend to in-betweenness and hybridity (Xiaowei Zhou & Pilcher, 2019a, b).

Attributes associated with the conceptualization of thirdness vary across researchers and can entail positive and negative connotations. Bhabha’s original interpretation of “third space” is associated with tenseness and uncomfortableness. McKinley, Dunworth, Grimshaw, & Iwaniec (2018) challenged Bhabha’s characterization by identifying what contributes to constructing a safe, supportive, and comfortable third space through interviews and classroom observations.

Kramersch's third place associated with a classroom is a safe and intermediate place for meaning negotiation. Helm, Guth, & Farrah (2012) defined "third space" as a fluid, dialogic space. Reljanovic Glimäng (2022) adapted the notion of safe (hegemonic) and brave (non-hegemonic) spaces to describe varying levels of critical intercultural awareness.

Among those metaphorical interpretations of "thirdness" discussed in the literature, we attend to two commonly shared assumptions: (1) in-betweenness and hybridity and (2) various attributes associated with the notion, whether positive or negative. These assumptions are also relevant to the "lingua franca" nature of its meaning-negotiation process. The current study investigates how virtual JLF interactions affect L2 learners' views and perceptions of space, and attempts to identify the contributing factors in shaping their views.

2.4 Scope of study

While lingua franca and VE are two major language learning and intercultural communication research strands in recent years, these have often been studied separately. This study combines these essential areas relevant to L2 Japanese learning and utilizes the notion of thirdness to describe learners' perception of lingua franca interactions.

As Kumagai & Kato (2014) pointed out in their telecollaboration research, there has been a tendency for the stereotypic dichotomy between a native language versus a nonnative (target) language and between cultural information givers versus takers. We argue that framing the target language as a lingua franca can create a common ground for speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, regardless of their "firstness" or "secondness," in the speakers' interaction and negotiation of new meanings. Furthermore, VE provides a platform for geographically dispersed speakers to go beyond "home" or "abroad" to communicate and collaborate using virtual communication technologies. This process can lead to the emergence of a shared (or third) linguacultural identity and a new (or third) linguacultural space by developing a sense of in-betweenness or hybridity. A third space can also be a space outside of "my space" or "my comfort zone" that can foster greater motivation and challenges for learners of the target language.

Given these notions of lingua franca and virtuality outlined above, the following research questions guide this study:

RQ1: Do L2 learners of the Japanese language perceive “thirdness” in lingua franca interactions with or without L1 speakers? If so, what affects the perception of “thirdness”? [lingua franca nature]

RQ2: Do L2 learners perceive “thirdness” in virtual contact experiences? If so, what affects the perception of “thirdness”? [virtuality nature]

The first question addresses the linguistic element of the communicative situations dealt with in this study. The question also assumes two different aspects of lingua franca situations depending on the presence or absence of L1 Japanese speakers. Conversely, the second question addresses the virtuality nature of the situation in which the speakers participated in the conversation sessions via Zoom.

3. Project overview

The Japan-US Online Conversation Project is a two-year project that was conducted during the period when the world was heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictions on international inbound and outbound exchanges and in-person interactions. It was initially created in response to the pedagogical and scholarly demand for intercultural and interactional opportunities for students, in place of visitor sessions in the US and ICL courses in Japan, both of which are usually made possible in person via physical mobility between partner universities.

The first round took place in September to November of 2020. The project rationale and design were discussed in detail by Takei, Fujiwara, & Shimojo (2021a, b). The second round was conducted in September to November of 2021, after being enhanced to further explore the virtual nature (reported in Takei & Shimojo, 2022), with emphasis on the lingua franca aspect. This section presents a brief overview of the project. The refinements made for the second round are also specified.

The participants were newly recruited for the second round by three practitioner researchers at one university in Japan (JP) and two universities in the US (US). They included six L1 speakers residing in Japan and seven L2 learners of Japanese, with proficiency levels ranging from lower- to upper-intermediate, assessed by the simple performance-oriented test (SPOT) developed by Tsukuba University. In this context, both Japanese and English can be lingua francas.

Japanese is not “the only option,” as in Seidlhofer’s (2011) definition, yet it is “the communicative medium of choice” for the project objective. This choice intends to raise L1 awareness of Japanese students as part of intercultural communicative competence (Byrom, 1997), which manifests its reciprocity in the monolingual exchange (Takei, 2023). As in the first round, the project was structured into three segments: (1) warm-up casual gathering sessions on a virtual event platform called Remo, (2) core conversation sessions in JLF on Zoom, and (3) follow-up sessions with reflective surveys using Google Forms and semi-structured interviews via Zoom.

In the warm-up sessions, voluntary participants attended three gatherings via Remo, mainly to familiarize themselves with virtual interaction environments and with each other. Based on the availability at the event times, some students participated in three exchange gatherings, whereas others attended once, twice, or none. In the core segments, the participants were assigned two task-based conversation sessions wherein three students engaged in a 10-minute discussion on a given topic. The task was to develop three ideas for possible online intercultural exchange activities in this pandemic-affected period of immobility; it was chosen to ensure thematic neutrality and eliminate cultural information giver/taker effects. Participants were assigned to one of three types of groups, namely the L1 speaker, L2 learner, and L1-L2 mixed groups. The latter two groups are equivalent to *third-party language* contact situations and *partner language* contact situations, respectively, based on Fan’s (1994) terms in the framework of Language Management Theory. A group of three was an original and basic unit. However, we included three pairs of participants owing to the unavailability of some participants. For the L2 and L1-L2 group types, participants from two US universities were mixed wherever possible. The resulting pairs and groups are shown in Table 1. A unique code was given to each participant throughout the 2020 and 2021 projects.

Table 1
Conversation session groupings

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
L1 group #1	JP03	JP11	JP12
L1 group #2	JP13	JP14	JP15
L2 group #1	US16	US17	-
L2 group #2	US18	US20	US23*
L2 group #3	US19	US21	US22
L1-L2 group #1	JP14	US17	US21
L1-L2 group #2	JP03	US16	US20
L1-L2 group #3	JP13	US18	-
L1-L2 group #4	JP11	US19	-
L1-L2 group #5	JP15	JP12	US22

*US23, who could only attend the L2 group session, was excluded from the interview.

Each conversation session began with a brief introduction by a practitioner-researcher, followed by a 10-minute discussion and presentation. The session concluded with a short wrap-up and questions/comments by the practitioner-researcher to create a quasi-project-based learning course setting. Japanese was encouraged for use as the contact language, but the use of other languages (i.e., English) was not explicitly prohibited and was left to the participant's choice. The session was audio-visually recorded on Zoom. A total of 181-minute recordings of the 10-group conversations were collected. The audio data were transcribed verbatim, with silence and overlapping marked. The conversation data were intended for linguistic analysis of spoken interactions, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

In the follow-up sessions, participants responded to a post-conversation survey via Google Forms twice after each conversation session to reflect on their behavior and awareness. Then, they were invited to the follow-up interview via Zoom, conducted by a practitioner-researcher at their university. The post-conversation survey and interview were considered opportunities for the participants' retrospective self-reflection and self-assessment using a multiple-choice questionnaire and verbalizing their thoughts and feelings to facilitate further learning, as suggested by O'Dowd (2020), who noted that VE activities should include "ample opportunities for guided reflection of the intercultural encounters" (p. 487). These follow-up activities explicate the participants' attitudes, awareness, and behaviors, as perceived in the JLF interaction, in a virtual context. Thus, we collected 13 sets of survey answers and 258-minute recordings of interviews with 13 participants listed in Table 1. The audio data were transcribed verbatim and qualitatively analyzed using NVivo.

All participants were given the project details beforehand and asked to sign informed consent forms on using recorded data for research, which they agreed to do. The institutional review board at the three universities reviewed and approved the human-subject research-project plan.

4. Methods

In the first round in 2020, we employed a concurrent mixed methods approach, in which quantitative and qualitative data ($n=25$) were collected through post-conversation surveys and

interviews. The quantitative data provided information on how the participants perceived their behaviors in the interaction. The qualitative results offered more nuanced information on how and why they consciously behaved and how they observed others' behavior, leading to smooth or awkward communication (Takei, Fujiwara, & Shimojo, 2021).

In the second round, a slightly different method was employed. Survey questions were revised considering the results in the first round. The interviews were more semi-structured than those in the first round, and three interviewers followed guidelines for interview questions based on the results. Therefore, it was a survey-result-based interview approach. After the first round, several questions were added to, replaced, or slightly rephrased in the original list of 20 items obtained from Yoshida (2014). These changes were made to elaborate on this study's focus on lingua franca and virtuality. A set of 25-item questions was prepared for the second round and is presented in Table 2 below. 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 two additional questions concerning the virtuality nature of the interaction:

1. Where did you feel this conversation took place? Choose one that you think is the closest to your feelings. [Options: US, Japan, both, neither, other (specify)]
2. Why do you think so? Describe this in your own words.

The options for Question 1 may appear too straightforward, but we regard physical space perception as a key element of thirdness and attend to its perception change between the two situations with and without L1 speakers.

The participants were asked to answer the same survey twice after the L1 (for Japanese students) or L2 group session (for US students) and after the L1-L2 mixed group session. They were invited to a semi-structured follow-up interview via Zoom. The practitioner-researcher at their university conducted the interview in Japanese for Japanese students and in English for US participants to allow them to express their thoughts more freely. The survey results were compared individually, and the changes in the selected scales between both sessions were highlighted and used as part of the interview questions.

This study analyzed 106 minutes' worth of recorded interviews in English with seven L2 participants (four from one US university and three from the other), as shown in Table 1. The 152-minute interviews in Japanese with six L1 participants (from Japan) were analyzed and used for

comparison wherever applicable. The audio data were transcribed verbatim and managed using a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) method developed by Braun & Clark (2006, 2012, 2019, 2021) with NVivo, as in the first round.

5. Results

5.1 Survey questions

The seven L2 participants completed the same questionnaire twice after L2-only and L1-L2 mix sessions. Table 2 shows the L2 learner results in the post-L2 and post-L1-L2 sessions, with the average point (on a 5-point Likert scale) for each question item in both situations.

Table 2
L2 learners' post-L2 and L1-L2 session survey results (n=7)

Questions	L2	L1-L2
Q1. I was able to speak well in the conversation.	3.71	3.57
Q2. I found online Zoom conversation harder than in-person conversation.	3.00	2.71
Q3. I tried to continue the conversation.	4.29	3.57
Q4. I tried to speak slowly so that the others could easily understand.	3.57	3.71
Q5. I chose simple vocabulary so that the others could easily understand.	3.86	4.14
Q6. I tried to speak grammatically correctly so that the others could easily understand.	4.29	4.14
Q7. I tried to listen more than speak and to elicit the others' opinions and thoughts.	3.57	4.43
Q8. I created a relaxed atmosphere.	3.14	3.43
Q9. I actively asked questions to get information about the others.	3.14	3.29
Q10. I tried to agree with the others' opinions.	4.43	4.57
Q11. I asked/verified when I didn't understand what the other person was saying.	2.57	2.43
Q12. I tried to entertain the others.	3.00	3.00
Q13. I tried to nod and give responses (aizuchi) when the other person was talking.	4.71	4.71
Q14. I asked when I didn't understand the word(s) that the others used.	2.43	2.29
Q15. I corrected when the others' vocabulary was incorrect.	1.57	1.71
Q16. I tried to understand the others' feelings.	4.00	4.14
Q17. I chose a topic that the others might be familiar with.	4.14	4.29
Q18. I listened to the end even when the others had difficulty expressing their thoughts.	4.43	4.43
Q19. I tried to help when the others had difficulty expressing their thoughts.	2.86	2.57
Q20. I asked for help when I had difficulty expressing my thoughts.	2.00	2.57
Q21. I tried to avoid using buzzwords, slang, or dialects.	4.14	3.86
Q22. I provided more information than I got from the others.	2.57	2.14
Q23. I respected the others' opinions.	4.86	4.86
Q24. I tried to help communication using gestures and facial expressions.	4.14	4.29
Q25. I tried to lead the conversation.	3.14	2.57

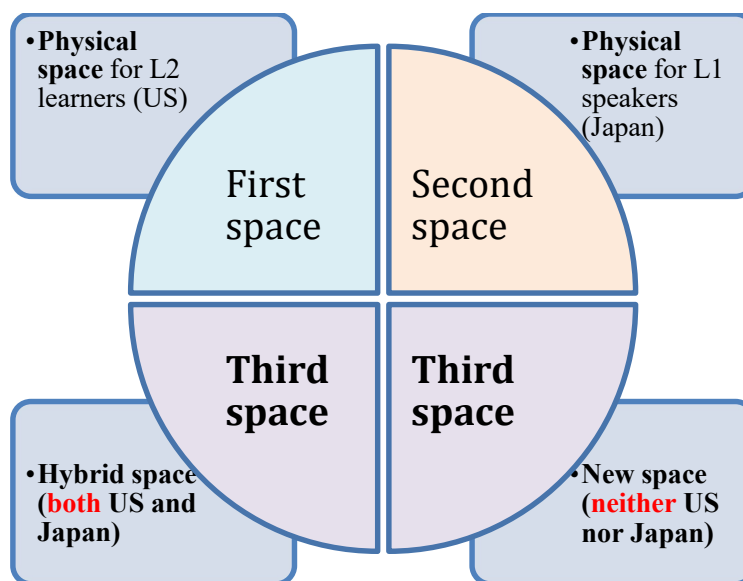
Judging from the items with a score of 4 or higher in both situations (indicated in bold), L2 learners paid attention to their grammar for better understanding (Q6). They nodded or responded verbally

while listening (Q13) and listened patiently until the end (Q18). They also attempted to understand other participants' feelings (Q16). They respected (Q23) and agreed with others' opinions (Q10). For smooth communication, they used gestures and facial expressions (Q24) and chose a familiar topic (Q17). These results are consistent with the first-round L2 learner results presented in Takei, Fujiwara, & Shimojo (2021a). The paired-sample *t*-test was run to determine the differences between both situations in the L2 group. The results showed no significant difference ($p=0.933$). This implies that L2 learners do not perceive their behaviors differently according to the situation type (with/without L1 speakers), which was also found in the first-round data. However, there were some individual differences.

This study explored how learners of “Japanese as a foreign language” in the US perceived their virtual contact experience with L1 speakers in Japan and other learners of Japanese in the US. Thus, the participants were asked to spatially locate the conversation by choosing among (i) the US, (ii) Japan, (iii) both, (iv) neither, or (v) other (with room for specification). They were asked to explain their choice in their own words. Inspired by several metaphorical conceptualizations of “thirdness” in the literature, as seen in Section 2, this study chose to approach the notion by asking the participants about their perceived locations, assuming that it would reflect their mindset toward intercultural interactions. The different choices of “space” can be classified according to firstness, secondness, and thirdness vis-à-vis their physical location, as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Types of spaces: First, second, and third spaces



The US and Japan were the first (where they were physically located) and second (where their target language was used as a common language) spaces, respectively, for L2 learners. The third space was either a hybrid space that combined the first and second (i.e., both) or a new (i.e., neither) space, in that it was neither the first nor the second.

The results from the L1 speakers are presented as a baseline for comparison. All six L1 speakers indicated that they felt that the conversation took place in Japan, claiming that in L1-L2 mixed sessions, they felt as if the US students were in Japan as exchange students or visitors and as if the conversation were taking place in their classrooms. Their perception of “space” was the first space, the same as their physical location in Japan. Their response was consistent across both situations, irrespective of whether they were with L2 speakers from the US. In contrast, the L2 learners responded differently. Table 3 shows each of the seven participants for each choice in the two situations.

Table 3
Participants' perceived space choice for the two sessions

First session (L2 only)	Second session (L1-L2)	Participants
Japan	Japan	US19
US	Japan	US20
US	Both	US21, US22
Japan	Both	US17
Both	Both	US18
Other (Internet)	Neither	US16

In both L2-only and L1-L2 sessions, they provided mixed responses. The choice of “other” in the L2-only session and “neither” in the L1-L2 session came from the same participant (US16 in Table 1). US16 claimed that “conversations over Zoom seem to take place in a strange space that is neither here nor there, such is the nature of conversations on the Internet.” One participant (US19) consistently chose “Japan” in both sessions owing to the naturalness she felt during her conversations. Another participant (US18) consistently chose “both” in both sessions owing to the conversation topics involving Japanese and American aspects. In the remaining four responses, the choices shifted from “US” to “Japan” (US20), from “US” to “both” (US21, US22), and from “Japan” to “both” (US17). The shift to “both” may imply that hybridity is added to their perception of space. None of them chose their physical space in the US for the second session with L1 speakers.

5.2 Interviews

RTA (Braun & Clark, 2006, 2012, 2019, 2020) was conducted separately for two datasets: interviews with L1 speakers and L2 learners. Adhering to the RTA principle of using a researcher’s subjectivity as a resource in data analyses, the first author played the role of an interpreter. Following the RTA’s six-step guidelines, the data items were labeled with initial “codes,” which were collated and developed into potential “themes” that were relevant to the research questions. The current study focuses solely on L2 data. The L1 participant interview results can be found in Takei, Fujiwara, & Shimojo (2021a).

Table 4 presents the RTA results relevant to RQ1, which concerns L2 learners’ perception of the lingua franca nature. Each code will be explicated with L2 participants’ comments.

Table 4
RTA result with themes and codes for RQ1

Themes	Codes	Description
(A) Peer learner presence	Proficiency	Similar levels for better understanding
	Nervousness	Peer pressure around making mistakes
(B) L1 speaker presence	Proficiency	Target language model
	Authenticity	Authentic use of reactive tokens and speech style
	Adjustment	Awareness of L1 linguistic and strategic adjustments
	Nervousness	Fast-pace and fluency
	Leadership	Dominance and control

There are two themes that are particularly relevant to the RQ1 from the L2 learner interview data: Peer learner and L1 speaker presence. On the 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. The following comment exemplifies this:

[US20] “...even though we were from different universities, we were at the same level of Japanese, I think, or close enough to the same level, so it was fairly easy to communicate in Japanese with the exception of certain vocabulary terms that we didn’t know yet, or that might not have been taught in universities.”

On the other hand, they recognized the benefit of L1 speaker presence in that they could learn from the target language model, such as the authentic use of *aizuchi* (reactive tokens) and when to use polite and casual speech styles.

[US22] “I noticed there was more ‘aizuchi’ with the native speakers, and I think that that kind of helped me personally. I feel like what I was saying was being heard and was important in the conversation. And I know that this is also just a cultural difference, but it helped make conversations smoother and easier.”

[US22] “Sometimes I would imitate like the manner of speaking, like for example, whether or not they consistently use like casual versus formal speech or if there are any mannerisms like bowing on screen or in terms of like how much people are speaking or in terms of what we are talking about. I think that it was easier to kind of learn more about how language and mannerisms interact through those conversations.”

They were aware and appreciative of L1 speakers’ linguistic and strategic adjustments for enhancing effective communication.

[US19] “I think my partner [L1 speaker] like really tried to help me understand what they were saying, and I know that when I was speaking, I kind of tried to keep it at like a level I know I’m more comfortable speaking at, so that whatever like I was thinking could come out like clearly, even if it were like a more simpler way of speaking.”

We observed two types of nervousness. Some learners were nervous about making mistakes in front of their peer learners (i.e., peer pressure).

[US22] “I felt like there was more pressure to be – like I think that it was – like if I made a mistake, I thought I would be more embarrassed in front of other Japanese learners rather than in front of the native speakers, which sounds weird because you would expect it to be the other way round, but I feel like some people are really serious about things like that and it makes it more difficult.”

Others were nervous about L1 speakers’ fast-paced utterances and native fluency and felt that L1 speakers controlled the interaction, which led to discomfort.

[US21] “I remember that I felt a little stressed because when I was speaking with the Japanese students, many of them were speaking very quickly, and that kind of confused me and made me like stressed. ...he kind of control – kind of led the conversation.”

The pros and cons of L1 and other L2 presence are enumerated in their JLF interaction experiences.

With respect to RQ2 concerning L2 learners’ perception of the virtuality nature, the survey result with mixed responses was presented in Subsection 5.1. The RTA results are summarized in Table 5 to identify the factors that affected such mixed perceptions of space.

Table 5
RTA result with themes and codes for RQ2

Themes	Codes	Description
(C) Language	Language choice	Use of target language (L2) and L1
	Fluency	Fluency in L2
(D) Activity type	Participant	Presence of an L1 speaker of the target language
	Topic/content	L1/L2 language/culture topics
	Setting	Virtual classroom unlike a physical one
	Authenticity	Authenticity of L2 language/culture
(E) Mindset	Nervousness	Nervous about speaking L2 with L1 and/or other L2 speakers
	Naturalness	(Un)natural flow of interactions
(F) Mode	Virtuality	Online/Internet interactions
	Physicality	Awareness of physical location

We identified the four themes that affected the participants' perception of the "location" where they felt the conversation occurred. These themes were (C) language, (D) activity type, (E) mindset, and (F) mode. Each theme contained several codes that are presented below, along with relevant participants' comments. Language comprises two codes: language choice (using Japanese as L2 and English as L1) and fluency in L2.

[US20] "I think that kind of came with the earlier question that's kind of saying – as sometimes, we didn't know the right vocabulary in Japanese, so we used English. Meanwhile, in the second conversation, that didn't really happen like we were able to use Japanese the entire time, I think. And so, I think that part mostly influenced my answers for that question."

[US18] "Had my Japanese been a little more proficient, you could say 'both' [Japan and the US]. I definitely say the second conversation was more Japanese than it was the first session. So, if there was a scale, the second session would be much closer to being authentic in Japanese than the first one."

The type of activity comprises participants (presence of L1 speakers of the target language), L1/L2 language and culture topics, setting (lack of classroom atmosphere), and authenticity of the target language and culture.

[US16] "I think like just hearing natural, casual, conversational speak being used and seeing how people of our age like commonly casually interact with each other in Japanese, being able to practice that kind of thing outside of class."

The mindset concerns nervousness around speaking L2 with L1 and L2 speakers, and the naturalness or unnaturalness of the interaction.

[US21] "In the second conversation, it felt more like both [Japan and the US] because I had the same nervous feeling of like when I go to Japan, and I'm like 'oh, I don't understand what's going on.' like I can hear the gist, I know what they are talking about, but I didn't get all the specifics..."

Mode comprises virtuality (online interaction) and physicality (awareness of their physical location).

[US16] "It's been kind of weird since we started having classes on Zoom. I started feeling this way like if you don't feel like you're in a classroom, but you also don't feel like you're at home. You feel like you're in this weird in-between space, like in the online space, like you're just on the Internet. So, asking where your conversation takes place, if it feels like it was in Japan or America, I suppose I've never been to Japan, so I don't know what a conversation would feel

like there, but this just sort of feels like another one of those in-between spaces that you go to when you talk to someone online.”

[US21] “May be the ‘both’ [Japan and the US], because still physically, I kind of feel like in America, but I needed to speak Japanese, and it felt like if I didn’t say it right, they would be confused, and I didn’t have any support. It’s just me doing it.”

5.3 Summary

Regarding RQ1, two themes (peer learner presence and L1 speaker presence) were identified, as shown in Table 4 above. Both positive and negative feelings were expressed toward the two types of interlocutors in JLF interactions. The nervousness expressed here can be regarded as the challenge of being out of one’s comfort zone or space. Linguistic and strategic adjustments are the essence of lingua franca interactions. Awareness of such L1 behaviors helps create a sense of L1-L2 in-betweenness or hybridity. These perceptions, in our assumption, are associated with thirdness.

Regarding RQ2, four themes were identified, as presented in Table 5. Thirdness is perceived by L2 participants in virtual interactions through various aspects (i.e., language, activity type, mindset, and mode). Many of these, such as the occasional switch to English, decreased authenticity, and in-betweenness are also closely related to the nature of lingua franca that involves both L1 and L2 speakers and their negotiations and adjustments to their interactions.

Overall, the results support our predictions. However, the mixed perceptions of the L2 learners observed in this study also show that the research questions are mutually related because thirdness is affected by two intertwined natures: the lingua franca nature of interaction and the virtuality of contact experiences. Depending on individual speakers and contexts, the perception was affected by various factors, such as the participant, language, activity type, mindset, and interaction modality. Thus, thirdness was the result of hybridity or ambivalence around first and second spaces (which also depicts the in-betweenness of the lingua franca nature), and affected by the interface between conflicting attributes. This is illustrated with the two L2 learner examples provided below.

The first case is an L1-L2 session participant (US21) who was joined by an L1 speaker of Japanese and another L2 learner. This participant indicated that she felt that the conversation took place in Japan and the US (i.e., a hybrid space). She expressed such attributes in the interview. The

L1 speaker's presence and nervousness (around not understanding the specifics of the conversation) signaled second space, whereas her awareness of physicality (by recognizing her computer being in English and sitting in her dorm room) signaled the first or "my space." At the same time, awareness of virtuality (of being on Zoom) signaled a third or new space. Thus, these conflicting attributes pointed to different spaces and constituted the hybridity of space for this participant.

The second example is another L2 participant in the L1-L2 setting (US22), who indicated that the conversation took place in both locations. This participant felt that the "L1 speaker's presence" and her "non-fluency" that interrupted the conversation contributed to secondness. "Authentic and natural interaction" was considered the second space. She claimed that "the presence of the L1 speaker" made the interaction more authentic, which made it feel like the second space, but it was "less natural," which made it feel more like a new space, because of her "insufficient language comprehension." "Less sense of regular classroom tasks" signaled a third or new space. Again, these attributes constituted the hybridity of space for the participant. This participant did not express awareness of physicality, which is the first or "my space," unlike the first example above.

6. Discussions, implications, and limitations

This study focused on the lingua franca characteristics and virtuality nature of online L1-L2 interactions, where both L1 and L2 speakers were situated at home and as mutually contributing participants of the task-based discussion. The interview with the L2 learners revealed the pros and cons of peer L2 learner and L1 speaker presence in JLF interactions. There were mixed perceptions of the presence of L1 and L2 speakers and individual differences in the perceptions. Ease and nervousness, or comfort and pressure, could positively or negatively impact their interactions. Dealing effectively with those emotions can help motivate further learning of the target language. Occasional interactions with L1 speakers through virtual or in-person intercultural exchanges serve as an excellent opportunity for authentic target language exposure and overcoming experiences of nervousness. Contact with unfamiliar peer learners beyond regular Japanese classrooms, preferably from another institution, can serve as a stimulating experience with a good mix of comfort and nervousness.

A virtual intercultural exchange may contribute toward constructing a “third space” for L2 learners with greater authenticity and naturalness, facilitating a more intense use of L2 and controlled nervousness. The traditional sense of communicative competence has been criticized because it models itself on educated native speakers and takes their communicative competence as the ultimate goal of foreign language learning. In this context, “third space” hybridity helps one not to deviate from “the social identity and competencies that learners have already developed in their own culture” and not to neglect “the communicative needs of nonnative speakers” (Gilmore 2011, p. 813). Finally, the notion of “third space” hybridity would give us a new understanding of intercultural communicative competence, focusing on the ability to communicate successfully with speakers from other unfamiliar cultures (Byram, 1997), possibly in a hybrid space.

This study investigated the lingua franca and virtuality nature of online interactions by analyzing L2 Japanese learners’ perceptions as drawn from the post-conversation survey and interview results in a small-scale experimental project. Both research questions were addressed based on the preliminary insights that await further in-depth exploration.

As a lingua franca study, this research endeavor was based on a limited combination of participants with L1 speakers of Japanese and L2 learners with the same L1 (English), given the project setting of the Japan-US collaborative partnership. Greater diversity in participants would facilitate a greater sense of lingua franca.

Notes

* This study was partially based on two presentations made at AATJ 2022 and CAJLE 2022 by the authors, who are grateful to the audiences for their helpful feedback. We also thank the two anonymous reviewers and editors for their thoughtful comments that considerably helped improve our manuscript. JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP20K00717 supports the project that led to this study.

* In our earlier work, native (NS), third-party language contact (TCS), and partner language contact (PCS) situations were used following the terms used in the framework of Language Management Theory (Fan, 1994) to describe three situation types. They were replaced by L1, L2, and L1-L2 situations. The change was made to avoid using the word “native” by adhering to the principle expressed by the Council of Europe (2018, 2020) in CEFR. We intend to cohere in the view of a contact language or lingua franca. Here, L2 inherently includes L3 or even L4 cases. We do not intend to distinguish among them.

References

Aoyama, R. (2020). Ringa furanka to shiteno nihongo no kako to mirai [Past and future of Japanese as a lingua franca]. In R. Aoyama, T. Akashi, & S. Li (Eds.), *Japanese as a lingua franca:*

- Rethinking Japanese language education for multilingual and multicultural contexts* [in Japanese] (pp. 171-194). Tokyo: Akashi Shoten.
- Aoyama, R., Akashi, T., & Li, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Ringa furanka to shiten no nihongo: tagengo tabunka kyosei no tameno nihonngo kyoiku o saikousuru* [Japanese as a lingua franca: Rethinking Japanese language education for multilingual and multicultural contexts]. Tokyo: Akashi Shoten.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1990). The third space. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 207-221). London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2), 77-101. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- 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). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589-597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676x.2019.1628806>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328-352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>
- Brosch, C. (2015). On the conceptual history of the term lingua franca. *Apples - Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 9(1), 71-85. <https://doi.org/10.17011/apples/2015090104>
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Council of Europe (2018). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume with new descriptors*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.
- Council of Europe (2020). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment – Companion volume*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.

- Dooly, M. A. (2011). Crossing the intercultural borders into 3rd space culture(s): Implications for teacher education in the twenty-first century. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 11(4), 319-337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2011.599390>
- Fan, S. K. C. (1994). Contact situations and language management. *Multilingua – Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication*, 13(3), 237-252. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mult.1994.13.3.237>
- Gilmore, A. (2011). “I prefer not text”: Developing Japanese learners’ communicative competence with authentic materials. *Language Learning*, 61(3), 786–819. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2011.00634.x>
- Gutiérrez, B. F., & O’Dowd, R. (2021). Virtual exchange: connecting language learners in online intercultural collaborative learning. In *Innovative language pedagogy report* (pp. 17-22). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2021.50.1230>
- Helm, F., Guth, S., & Farrah, M. (2012). Promoting dialogue or hegemonic practice? Power issues in telecollaboration. *Language Learning & Technology*, 16(2), 103-127. <https://doi.org/10.125/44289>
- Ikeda, K., & Bysouth, D. (2013). Japanese and English as lingua francas: Language choices for international students in contemporary Japan. In H. Haberland, D. Lønsmann, & B. Preisler (Eds.), *Language alternation, language choice and language encounter in international tertiary education* (pp. 31-52). Dordrecht: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6476-7_2
- 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)*. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
- Japan Foundation (2022). Survey Report on Japanese-Language Education Abroad 2021. <https://www.jpf.go.jp/j/about/press/2022/023.html> [accessed on December 20, 2022].
- Jenkins, J. (2009). *World Englishes: A resource book for students*. London: Routledge.
- Jenkins, J. (2015). *Global Englishes: A resource book for students* (3rd edition). London: Routledge.
- Kohn, K., & Hoffstaedter, P. (2017). Learner agency and non-native speaker identity in pedagogical lingua franca conversations: insights from intercultural telecollaboration in

- foreign language education. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 30(5), 351-367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2017.1304966>
- Konakahara, M., & Tsuchiya, K. (Eds.). (2020). *English as a lingua franca in Japan: Towards multilingual practices*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kramersch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Kramersch, C. (2009). Third culture and language education. In V. Cook & L. Wei (Eds.), *Contemporary applied linguistics*, (pp. 233-254). Continuum.
- Kumagai, Y., & Kato, R. (2014). Daisan no kukan toshite no terekoraboreishon: Imi no kyodo kochiku o jitsugen surutame no jikokaiji jikotoshi. [Developing a telecollaborative “third space”: “Self-disclosure” and “self-investment” to achieve co-construction of meanings]. *Gengo Bunka Kyōiku Kenkyū [Studies of Language and Cultural Education]* 12, 148-165.
- MacDonald, M. N. (2019). The discourse of ‘thirdness’ in intercultural studies. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 19(1), 93-109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2019.1544788>
- Markiewicz, E. (2019). Third places in the era of virtual communities. *Studia Periegetica* 4(28), 9-21. <https://doi.org/10.26349/st.per.0028.01>
- McKinley, J., Dunworth, K., Grimshaw, T., & Iwaniec, J. (2018). Developing intercultural competence in a ‘comfortable’ third space: Postgraduate studies in the UK. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 19(1), 9-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2018.1545028>
- O’Dowd, R. (2016). Learning from the past and looking to the future of online intercultural exchange. In R. O’Dowd & T. Lewis (Eds.), *Online intercultural exchange: Policy, pedagogy, practice*. New York: Routledge.
- O’Dowd, R. (2017). Virtual Exchange and internationalising the classroom. *Training Language and Culture*, 1(4), 8-24. <https://doi.org/10.29366/2017tlc.1.4.1>
- O’Dowd, R. (2018). From telecollaboration to virtual exchange: State-of-the-art and the role of UNICollaboration in moving forward. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 1, 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.jve.1>
- O’Dowd, R. (2020). A transnational model of virtual exchange for global citizenship education. *Language Teaching*, 53(4), 477-490. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444819000077>
- O’Dowd, R. (2021). What do students learn in virtual exchange? A qualitative content analysis of learning outcomes across multiple exchanges. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 109, 1-13.

- Oldenburg, R. (1999). *The great good place: Cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
- Reljanovic Glimäng, M. (2022). Safe/brave spaces in virtual exchange on sustainability. *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, 5, 61-81. <https://doi.org/10.21827/jve.5.38369>
- Seidlhofer, B. (2011). *Understanding English as a lingua franca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 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]*. Tokyo: Toshindo Publishing.
- Takei, M. (2023). Potentials and benefits of reciprocal virtual exchange activities for Japanese students: Raising L1 and C1 awareness. *Studies in the Humanities and Sciences*, 63(2), 39-53. <http://doi.org/10.15097/00003341>
- Takei, M., Fujiwara, M., & Shimojo, M. (2021a). Online conversation project between universities in Japan and the U.S.: Its rationale and design for integrating research and pedagogy. *Studies in the Humanities and Sciences*, 62 (1), 1-23. Hiroshima Shudo University. <https://doi.org/10.15097/00003075>
- 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. Canadian Association for Japanese Language Education.
- Takei, M., & Shimojo, M. (2022). Japanese as a lingua franca interaction for L1 and L2 speakers in virtual contact situations. In *Proceedings of CAJLE 2022*, 200-205. Canadian Association for Japanese Language Education.
- Xiaowei Zhou, V., & Pilcher, N. (2019a). Revisiting the ‘third space’ in language and intercultural studies. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 19(1), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2018.1553363>
- Xiaowei Zhou, V., & Pilcher, N. (2019b). Tapping the thirdness in the intercultural space of dialogue. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 19(1), 23-37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2018.1545025>
- Yamada, E. (2021). Investigating the roles of first language (L1) speakers in lingua franca communication in multicultural classrooms: A case study of Japanese as a lingua franca (JLF). *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, 10(2), 285-311. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jelf-2021-2057>

Yoshida, M. (2014). *Nihongo bogowasha, gakushusha no kaiwa kochiku ni kakawaru shitumon hyogen no kenkyu* [A study of questions concerning conversation construction by native Japanese speakers and learners of Japanese]. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Tsukuba University.